

Working Through Religious Differences in Marriage



Have you ever had a conversation with someone that you love and disagreed with them? These conversations can be very uncomfortable, especially about firmly held beliefs. Differences in religious beliefs or spirituality can be a source of pain and discontent if not addressed in a respectful and accepting manner.

According to the Pew Research Center, the religious landscape of the U.S continues to change at a rapid rate. With adults who identify as non-affiliated, atheist, or agnostic increasing yearly, changes and differences in religiosity and spirituality have the potential to negatively impact intimate relationships. This is further complicated because religiosity and spirituality affect more than Sunday worship, such as decisions on parenting, finances, and friendships. Even couples who practice the same religion may not agree on religious or spiritual practices. For example, a couple who belong to the same church may disagree on how often to attend service or engage in church activities. It is important for couples to recognize the pitfalls and potential for hurt when either engaging in a mixed faith relationship or when one partner's beliefs change and are no longer in alignment with

their spouse's beliefs.

There are many mixed faith marriages and relationships that are able to thrive despite having significantly different beliefs. Here are some tips from relationship expert Dr. John Gottman to help you navigate religious differences (or any type of conflict) in intimate relationships.

1. Explore your own relationship with your faith.

There is a difference between identifying with a religion or spiritual practice and how you engage in that faith. Explore your religious or spiritual identity and what that means to you. It is necessary to understand your own faith identity to be able to navigate the differences with your partner. Here are some questions that Gottman recommends to help you with this process of exploration

- Did you grow up in a religious or spiritual household? If so, what was practiced? What was your experience like?
- What brings you peace? What helps you get through tough times?
- What aspects of your religious or spiritual beliefs do you hold onto tightly?
- Which ones are you more flexible with?

2. Acknowledge the difference and what they will mean for your life together.

Recognizing the differences and how they may affect your life together is an important step. Avoidance is not a sustainable option, identify the ways that may affect you so you can make a plan together for how to deal with these differences as a couple.

According to Dr. Gottman, 69% of problems in relationships are perpetual, meaning they are not solvable. While that number sounds high it is reassuring to know that this is normal and includes happily functioning couples. Instead of trying to

change the other person's mind/belief, approach these conversations with curiosity and interest, try to understand your partner's point and realize that this is an opportunity to increase your love for them.

The way that you start a conversation can predict how the rest of the conversation will go or be perceived by your partner. Be intentional in your tone of voice and the words you use to initiate a conversation. Using soft start up techniques such as 'I messages' and positive statements to start conversations allows for your partner to better receive and understand what you are saying.

3. Share stories

Sharing stories is a great way for you and your partner to get to know each other and this aspect of who you are. Stories can share your cultural and religious experiences with them in a way that is not threatening and invites understanding.

4. Participate before negotiating.

It's important to show genuine interest and curiosity in your partners beliefs and practices. Go with them to their religious events services and as they observe rituals. This is not a promise to leave your own beliefs and convert, this is a powerful way to communicate that you value them and are embracing who they are.

5. Make Repairs.

We will inevitably mess up. Don't beat yourself up over mistakes, apologize and move forward. Well used humor (not sarcasm) can help ease these tense moments. The main goal with a repair attempt is to determine what when wrong (not blame our partner) and resume being on the same team to address an issue together instead of treating each other as the issue that needs to be fixed.

6. Therapy is a helpful support.

Talking about faith is deeply personal, it can be hard despite our best efforts. Some differences might seem impossible to

figure out. Seeking the help of a professional can provide relief. Find a therapist who specializes in helping interfaith couples.

It is unlikely that you will change someone else's views, feelings, or beliefs on the topic of religion or spirituality, but you can practice respecting each other's beliefs and purposely refrain from criticizing or attempting to sway them. Dr. Gottman maintains that disagreements provide an opportunity for increased intimacy and connection, and religious differences provide an opportunity for increased respect, understanding, and love.

References

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