

INTRODUCTION

We all want reliable love in our lives. In this, we are no different than people in any other time in history, despite the tatters of failed marriages all around us. Holding this book in your hands proves that you're undaunted. You believe marriage can be, and is still meant to be, forever. This book will help you prepare for a lifetime of married love. You can use it by yourself or together, once you've found that special someone you think may be The One.

The One must be someone to whom you can be deeply committed. The first step is getting to a place where you're ready for marriage and are marriage material yourself. You'll want to take stock of any baggage or issues you may have and need to overcome. Next, this book will help you figure out what kinds of behaviors you think you can or want to overlook or put up with in another.

Our aim is to help you dodge the bullet, avoid trouble, and maximize your chances of success.

And success means having the opportunity to use all the tips from our first book, *101 Tips for a Happier Marriage!* That book inspired us to write this “prequel” because the very first step in having a happy marriage is to marry the right person in the first place.

Unfortunately, marriage discernment faces significant hurdles. Many people have already experienced so much relationship brokenness that they lack the conviction that real and lasting love is possible. Children of divorce don’t want their children to experience what they went through themselves. Oftentimes children of divorce doubt their skills for keeping a marriage going.

To make things worse, we receive many confusing and conflicting signals from society around us. Our culture has dismantled many of the “guardrails” that used to keep people from making huge mistakes. Consequently, plenty of good, decent people are driving off the nearest cliff rather than forming lasting marriages.

We’re here to help.

You can use this book from the time you start dating a potential spouse, right down to your

wedding day. We begin in chapters 1 and 2 by helping you prepare yourself for marriage and search for the right person. You can read these chapters straight through, or you can read one tip per day to give you something constructive to think about and do.

We provide tips on dating and discernment in chapter 3. Once you've found a person you think may be right for you, chapter 4 offers you tips to reflect on privately or with a close friend. Chapters 5 and 6 give you and your potential spouse food for thought and discussion.

Most couples who present themselves for marriage preparation are already living together. Pastors and marriage prep teams struggle with how best to deal with this. If you're seriously involved with someone and thinking of moving in together, we offer considerations especially for you in chapter 7. And in chapter 8 we speak candidly to the reader who has already been cohabiting and who now wants to marry. Finally, chapters 9 and 10 offer more detailed reflection for you as a couple: questions to ask yourselves as you imagine your

life together and questions to discuss as you reflect on your past.

There are two chapters on cohabitation because cohabitation is one of the most significant marriage preparation challenges faced by churches today. We don't tap-dance around it. We deal with it head-on. I (Jennifer) am sorry to say that not all my expertise in this area is "book learning." My husband and I cohabited before our marriage. I can attest that the research I report in this book is true.

The tips on cohabitation are designed to help you see for yourselves some of the issues that commonly arise when cohabiting couples finally get married. No matter what you may have thought when you moved in together, no matter who or what persuaded you that this was a harmless and beneficial thing to do, you have inadvertently taken on a set of risks for yourselves and your future marriage.

If you are cohabiting, we're not here to blame you or anyone else. We want to help you deal honestly with the situation in which you now find yourselves. If your pastor advises you to separate from

each other as part of your marriage preparation, we wholeheartedly endorse this concept.

The Catholic Church has always taught that living in a sexual relationship outside of marriage is morally wrong, as do most other major religious traditions. Since we are both Roman Catholics and Ave Maria Press is a Catholic publisher, you won't be surprised to learn that we agree with this assessment. We want to share with you that the findings of modern studies on the negative effects of cohabitation are consistent with the Church's ancient teaching. We hope you can use this information to your benefit, no matter what your history may be.

The good news is that finding and being a worthy person to marry is indeed possible. Jennifer is a survivor of the sexual revolution and has patched together some right answers from doing many wrong things. Betsy is part of the younger generation of enthusiastic, faithful Catholics who have managed to navigate through the pitfalls of modern life by staying firmly on the Catholic path. Between us, we have a combined forty-five years of very different marriage experience. Let us help you

pick a winner, while at the same time helping form you into the best, most marriage-ready version of yourself.

Your friends,
Jennifer and Betsy

THE SEARCH IS ON

Being Both Optimistic and Realistic

1

Expect some level of imperfection. Marrying a perfect person is impossible because no human is perfect.

However, there likely is a perfect someone *for* you: an equally imperfect fellow human being. Recognizing that you have flaws of your own will make this easier. Not only will you need to put up with someone else's imperfections, but he or she must put up with yours, too.

2

Make yourself worthy of the type of person you wish to marry. What do you need to work on before you're ready to get married? If you want to marry the right person, start planning now to *be* the right person.

What improvements can you make to be the person you want to be—the person who is ready for marriage, the person who will attract someone you want to spend the rest of your life with? If you need help dealing with past issues, disappointments, or baggage, you can consult a trusted friend, a spiritual adviser, or even a therapist. Become the best version of yourself for the sake of your own happiness and for your future marriage.

3

Know what you want in a potential spouse. Make a list of your needs versus wants. Don't cave on the needs, but be willing to budge on the wants.

Make those needs realistic. You don't *need* to marry an astronaut. A particular hair and eye color are not realistic needs either. Instead, think about the kind of personality that will challenge and bring out the best in you. What will help you find someone like this? For example, if you're intellectual and want your future spouse to complement you in this way, don't search for him or her at a dive bar. Or if you're athletic and want your spouse to also enjoy spending time at the gym or hiking outdoors, don't waste time dating a couch potato.

4

At the same time, be open to the unexpected. Allow God to surprise you in any way he wants. Sometimes people discover love when they're not looking for it. Take the pressure off yourself and just let God lead you unwittingly in the right direction.

I (Betsy) attended a wedding in which the best man shared in his toast that the groom had vowed never to marry a teacher; likewise, the bride had previously stated she would never marry a "computer nerd." And yet both had ended up doing exactly that! God has a sense of humor. Be OK with being blindsided by him. He knows what's best for you even better than you know yourself.

5

Relax. No matter how eager you are to get married, no matter how many disappointments you've experienced, panic is not your friend.

Try not to spend every waking moment thinking about getting married, pining for a spouse, dreaming about your wedding day, and naming your future children. Be patient and trust in the Lord. If it's meant to happen, it *will* happen, all in God's good time. Remember the old adage: let go and let God. If he intends for you to get married, your spouse is out there waiting for you.