

Ask an Expert – Working Through Religious Differences in Marriage

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Disagreements with someone you love can be challenging. The conversations can be uncomfortable, especially about firmly held beliefs. Differences in religious beliefs or spirituality can even become 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 United States is rapidly changing. 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 relationships. This is further complicated because these things affect more than Sunday worship, including decisions on parenting, finances, and friendships. Even couples practicing the same religion may not agree on religious or spiritual practices, including how often to attend church service or engage in church activities. It is important for couples to recognize the pitfalls and potential for hurt when engaging in a mixed faith relationship or when one partner's beliefs change, no longer aligning with their spouse's beliefs.

In spite of the challenges that come from significantly different beliefs, there are many mixed-faith marriages and relationships that thrive.

Consider these tips from John Gottman, psychologist, author, and relationship expert, to help navigate religious differences in intimate relationships.

1. Explore your own relationship with your faith

There is a difference between identifying with a religion or spiritual practice and engaging in that faith. Explore your religious or spiritual identity and what that means to you. It

is necessary to understand your own faith identity in order to navigate the differences with your partner. Here are some questions to consider:

- 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 hard times?
- Which aspects of your religious or spiritual beliefs do you hold onto tightly?
- Which aspects do you feel more flexible about?

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

Avoidance is not a sustainable option. It is important to identify the differences that may affect you so you can plan together on how to best manage them as a couple. According to 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 or beliefs, approach these conversations with curiosity and interest, try to understand your partner's point of view, and realize that this is an opportunity to increase your love for them.

The way you start a conversation can predict how the rest of the conversation will go or be perceived. 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 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 better. Share about your cultural and religious experiences 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 partner's beliefs and practices. Go with them to their religious events and services. This is not a promise to leave your own beliefs and convert, but it is a powerful way to communicate that you value them and are embracing who they are.

5. Make Repairs

Mistakes are inevitable. Don't beat yourself up, just apologize and move forward. Well-used humor (not sarcasm) can help ease tense moments. The main goal of making a repair is to determine what went wrong (without

blaming) and resume being on the same team to address an issue instead of treating each other as the issue that needs to be fixed.

6. Consider therapy

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

Gottman maintains that disagreements provide an opportunity for increased intimacy and connection, and religious differences provide an opportunity for increased respect, understanding, and love.

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