

Case 54A

Conversation transcript

You

I am about to get married and I am wondering about my future together with my husband.

What I should reasonable expect from him in terms of meeting my needs for companionship & non-sexual intimacy as well as physical intimacy.

ChatGPT

It is reasonable to expect your husband to be a meaningful source of companionship, affection, emotional safety, and physical closeness - but not to meet every need, read your mind, or always want intimacy at exactly the same time or in the same way you do.

For companionship and non-sexual intimacy, a healthy expectation is that he regularly makes time for you, shows interest in your inner world, offers affection that is not merely a prelude to sex, and treats the relationship as something worth maintaining. That might include conversation, shared activities, cuddling, kissing, holding hands, checking in emotionally, spending intentional time together, and being present when one of you is distressed. You should generally feel that he wants to know you and be known by you.

For physical and sexual intimacy, it is reasonable to hope for a mutually satisfying sex life and to expect openness, consideration, honesty, and willingness to work on differences. It is not reasonable for either spouse to expect sex on demand. Desire naturally fluctuates with stress, health, pregnancy and children, sleep, conflict, hormones, aging, medication, and many other factors. What matters more than perfectly matched desire is whether the two of you can discuss it without coercion, contempt, avoidance, or chronic dismissal.

A useful standard is this: your needs should matter to him even when he cannot always meet them. Likewise, his needs should matter to you. If you say, "I'm feeling lonely and I need more affection and time together," a healthy partner does not necessarily have to produce exactly what you ask for immediately, but he should take the concern seriously and participate in finding a workable solution.

Before marrying, I would want the two of you to have explicit conversations about things people often leave vague: how much one-on-one time you each need; how often you like affection and touch; what makes each of you feel emotionally close; your expectations around sex and initiation; what happens when one partner wants sex and the other does not; privacy and pornography; friendships and time apart; work and household responsibilities; children; money; conflict; and what you will do if intimacy becomes difficult for months rather than days.

One warning sign is not simply having different needs. Differences are extremely common. The more concerning pattern is indifference: one partner repeatedly saying that something important does not matter, mocking the need, refusing to discuss it, or expecting the other person to live indefinitely with chronic loneliness.

You might think of a good marriage not as, “Will he meet all my needs?” but as, “Can we reliably notice each other’s needs, care about them, negotiate differences, and repair things when one of us feels neglected?” That is a much stronger predictor of whether the marriage will feel intimate over time.

If you want, I can also give you a very concrete “reasonable expectations before marriage” checklist for companionship, affection, sex, communication, and conflict - something you could actually discuss together before the wedding.

You

go on

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A useful way to approach this before marriage is to distinguish reasonable expectations from specific preferences. Reasonable expectations are things that support a healthy marriage; preferences are negotiable and will differ between couples.

Here is a practical checklist you can use together:

- **Companionship:** You can reasonably expect regular, intentional time together rather than only coexisting in the same home. That does not mean being together constantly, but it does mean making room for conversation, shared experiences, laughter, errands, meals, dates, or simply being present together.
- **Emotional intimacy:** You can expect him to listen when something matters to you, show curiosity about your thoughts and feelings, share some of his own inner life, and respond with care rather than ridicule, stonewalling, or chronic defensiveness.
- **Non-sexual affection:** It is reasonable to want hugs, kisses, cuddling, hand-holding, affectionate touch, warmth, and physical closeness that is not always tied to sex. If this is especially important to you, it is worth stating clearly rather than assuming he will intuit it.
- **Sexual intimacy:** You can reasonably expect mutual effort toward a satisfying sexual relationship, honest communication about desire, preferences and boundaries, and concern for each other's pleasure and comfort. You cannot reasonably expect a fixed frequency or guaranteed access to sex.
- **Initiation:** Ideally, both of you should feel wanted at least some of the time. If one person always has to initiate and is repeatedly rejected without discussion, resentment can grow. The goal is not a perfect 50/50 split, but enough reciprocity that neither person feels chronically unwanted.
- **Responsiveness to needs:** This is especially important. A spouse does not have to meet every request, but should be willing to hear, “I’m lonely,” “I need more affection,” or “I miss feeling close to you,” and engage with it rather than dismissing it.
- **Autonomy:** Marriage should still leave room for friendships, hobbies, solitude, family relationships, and individual interests. Expecting your husband to become your sole emotional world puts too much pressure on the relationship.

- Conflict and repair: You can expect disagreements. What matters is whether you can disagree without intimidation, cruelty, humiliation, threats, or contempt, and whether both people eventually make an effort to reconnect and repair.
- Changes over time: Neither of you will remain exactly as you are now. Careers, children, illness, stress, aging, grief and family responsibilities can all affect closeness. A strong expectation is not “nothing will change,” but “we will keep talking and adjusting.”

There are also some questions I think are particularly valuable to answer before the wedding. You could each answer them separately and compare:

“How much quality time do I need each week to feel connected?”

“What kinds of affection make me feel loved?”

“How important is sex to me in a marriage?”

“What would I consider an unsatisfying sex life?”

“How do I usually react when I'm sexually rejected?”

“If our levels of desire are very different, how would I want us to handle that?”

“Do I enjoy cuddling and affection even when sex is definitely not going to happen?”

“When I'm upset, do I want comfort, conversation, space, or practical help?”

“What makes me feel neglected in a relationship?”

“What would make me feel controlled or smothered?”

One thing I would pay particular attention to is whether you can talk about these subjects now. You do not need identical answers. In fact, you probably will not have identical answers. But you should be able to have the conversation without one of you becoming punitive, embarrassed, contemptuous, or shutting it down entirely.

And there is a distinction that can save a lot of confusion later: “I have a need” does not automatically mean “my spouse is obligated to satisfy it exactly as I want.” But neither does marriage mean, “Your needs are your problem.” Healthy marriage occupies the middle: your needs are important to me, my needs are important to you, and we figure out what is realistically possible together.

If, for example, you ideally want physical affection every day and he naturally thinks about affection once a week, neither person is necessarily wrong. But that difference becomes important marital information. You would want to know whether he thinks, “Okay, this matters to her; I can make an effort,” or, “That's ridiculous and she should get over it.” The second response is much more concerning than the difference itself.

The same principle applies sexually. A couple can survive a substantial libido mismatch if there is goodwill, honesty and creativity. A much smaller mismatch can become miserable when accompanied by shame, entitlement, avoidance or resentment.

And one final thing: do not judge the likely future of your marriage solely by how affectionate or sexual things are during courtship. Pay close attention to how he responds when you have a need that inconveniences him. That often tells you more about future intimacy than romance at its easiest.

If you want, I can take this one level deeper and explain what a realistically healthy amount of companionship, cuddling, affection and sex might look like in day-to-day married life, including what would count as normal variation versus a genuine problem.

You

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A realistically healthy married life usually has regular connection, not constant connection.

For companionship, many couples do well when they have some meaningful contact most days - talking over dinner, taking a walk, doing something together, or simply sitting close and catching up. You do not need hours of deep conversation every night, but if you routinely feel like roommates who only discuss logistics, that is worth addressing.

For non-sexual affection, daily warmth is a reasonable hope: a hug when you see each other, a kiss goodbye, cuddling on the sofa, touching in passing, holding hands, affectionate words. The exact amount varies a lot, but chronic absence of affectionate touch when one partner clearly needs it can become painful.

For sex, there is no universally "normal" frequency. Healthy couples vary enormously. What matters more is whether both people broadly feel considered, desired, safe, and able to talk about their sex life. A couple having sex once a week can be very happy; another couple may prefer several times a week; another may be content with less. The problem is usually not the number itself but a persistent mismatch that nobody is willing to engage with.

A genuine concern would be patterns like: one partner repeatedly avoids all affection, refuses to discuss intimacy, uses sex as punishment, pressures the other for sex, treats rejection as betrayal, or leaves the other feeling chronically lonely and unwanted for long periods.

A healthier pattern is more like: "We're not always perfectly matched, but we notice when the other person is missing us, and we make adjustments."

One useful question to ask yourself before marriage is: "If his current level of affection, companionship, and sexual interest stayed roughly the same for the next five years, would I be happy enough with it?" Do not marry primarily on the assumption that someone will become significantly more affectionate, communicative, or sexually engaged later.

And I would ask him the mirror question too: "If I stayed roughly as I am now, would you feel fulfilled?"

Those two answers can reveal a great deal.