

Are You Emotionally Literate Enough For Marriage

Written by Richard Marks, PhD

By: Richard Marks, PhD

Couples today continue to marry and research reveals that most people believe marriage is a great ideal. However, the choices people make regarding relationships and the increasing divorce rates makes one wonder why people married in the first place. I am of the opinion that couples need to take a premarital education course that will help them understand their relationship strengths and growth areas from an objective perspective. I have always said that every couple that has come to me for premarital typically has an idealistic view of their relationship. One thing that I have learned after all these years, as well as my own 20 plus years of marriage, the current culture has poor emotional literacy skills. Some might call an emotionally illiterate person a Jerk. I tend to call them uneducated and unskilled in the skills of healthy relationship. Now you might be asking yourself, "What in the world is emotional literacy?" I am glad you asked.

But first, let me help give a clearer picture of where the culture is today. Divorce has well established its consequences in our society and it can be felt economically, legally, relationally, and spiritually. And at this point in history, cohabitation has seen at least a ten fold increase among young couples. And the reason for this is that couples choose cohabitation over marriage because they fear divorce.

The three major world religions all teach against divorce because of its devastating consequences to the couple as well as the children. However, divorce is merely a solution (albeit not a healthy one) to a larger problem. The larger problem is that men and women find it difficult to relate to each other emotionally and relationally in healthy and productive ways that would increase their level of intimacy and connectedness. Emotional relationship skills are poor at best in American homes. Yet, where do we learn these relationship skills? The answer is that we learned them from our parents. Now with half of the past two generations divorcing is it any wonder why young couples today have a problem with relating to each other emotionally. Even spiritual principles taught in the Bible and other religious writings give clues for healthy relating; we find principles for teaching emotional literacy.

Are You Emotionally Literate Enough For Marriage

Written by Richard Marks, PhD

The current culture of emotional illiteracy and immaturity developed from a past few generations where emotions were believed to be signs of weakness; those parents taught their kids the “suck it up and move on” mentality. Yet, that does not even compare to God’s heart. No where in religious writings do we see even a hint of that attitude with the Father or His Son. So, why does the culture continue to perpetuate this attitude today in our marital, parental, and social relationships? I will leave it to you to answer that question. My focus here regards the need to teach emotional literacy to couples before they marry, or even after marriage, in order for them to grow to be healthy, mature adults and to sustain a vital and intimate marital relationship.

What is emotional literacy? Emotional literacy is the ability to be able to connect to another emotionally, to show care, to be able to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. It is the ability to express comfort as we have been comforted. It is the ability to feel with another. It is the ability to come alongside our mates and in that coming alongside of them, they feel valued: that their thoughts, feelings, desires, and hopes are heard and respected. Emotionally literate people care about the feelings of others. Emotionally literate couples are able to express positive and negative feelings and maintain a sense of closeness, oneness, confidence in the relationship and hope.

Here are some other traits of emotionally literate people. One, emotionally literate people are comfortable with the names and manifestations of our basic emotions: fear, anger, love, joy and pain. These people can identify and express them in healthy ways and are able to listen empathetically to them in others.

Second, those with emotional literacy recognize that defensive overreactions are a result of

Are You Emotionally Literate Enough For Marriage

Written by Richard Marks, PhD

emotional issues based on painful memories. Thus, they are able to take responsibility to reduce, control, and change inappropriate responses. Accordingly, they seek forgiveness when they know that their responses were wrong and hurtful.

A third trait of emotionally literate people is that they recognize being emotionally open vs. being emotionally closed. When they feel they are being attacked, threatened, or denied, they are able to evaluate reality by checking out the other persons meaning and intent, rather than assuming and reacting defensively. Defensive reactions are exhibited by rationalizing, explaining, justifying, withdrawing, avoiding, or by simply fighting back.

Emotionally literate people are able to express pain, fear and anger without attacking or blaming. They listen without interjecting self-concerns. Emotionally literate people are able to be slow to anger, quick to HEAR, and slow to SPEAK. Thus, those who are emotionally literate create and maintain emotional safety for others.

Fifth, emotionally literate individuals use anger constructively to assert self, set limits, define boundaries, and effectively solve problems. Anger is not used as an escape mechanism for dealing with hurtful feelings or for hurting others. Accordingly, it is not used as a battering ram to control another and force from them what we desire. Emotionally literate people are able to feel anger and respond with that anger in emotionally mature ways. Emotionally illiterate people respond in immature manners which weaken trust and intimacy in the relationship.

Are You Emotionally Literate Enough For Marriage

Written by Richard Marks, PhD

Lastly, those who are emotionally literate believe in one's own value. They have healthy self images and self value. They recognize that they are not perfect and accept that they have weaknesses and limitations.

Suffice it to say that people who do not exhibit their anger or hurtful feelings through unhealthy behaviors are not emotionally literate. Those who are not able to express comfort and compassion and care for those who are hurting suffer this type of illiteracy. Road rage is a good example of emotional illiteracy. Let us challenge ourselves and train ourselves to be emotionally literate. I conduct workshops and seminars to help people develop emotional literacy. I teach a program called PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills). PAIRS has helped thousands of couples develop relationship skills (communication, problem solving, etc.) develop relational intimacy which led to a healthier, richer, more enriching relationship.