

Dr. Sam R. Hamburg, a psychologist in Chicago, is author of *Will Our Love Last?* (Scribner), and is on the adjunct faculty of The Family Institute at Northwestern University.

The Conventional Wisdom and Dr. Phil Are Wrong By Sam R. Hamburg

There is a conventional wisdom about marriage in this country. It was formulated in part by marriage counselors and therapists, and it goes like this: "Marriage is good. So if your marriage is bad that means there is something wrong with you: You don't communicate effectively; you don't handle conflict properly; you aren't committed enough to your marriage; you aren't working hard enough at it; you haven't healed your psychic wounds from childhood."

Now comes Phillip C. McGraw, aka Dr. Phil. In his recent book "Relationship Rescue," he makes additions of his own to this litany of faults: You haven't been "true and right with yourself"; you have lost touch with your "core of consciousness"; you have become a "contaminator in your relationship." Dr. Phil also cautions us against erroneous ideas about marriage that can lead us astray--he calls them "myths"--such as "A great relationship depends on a great meeting of the minds," and "A great relationship requires common interests."

The conventional wisdom is wrong, and Dr. Phil is wrong. What he condemns as "myths" are actually deep and enduring truths.

The conventional wisdom is wrong because there is nothing wrong with many of the individuals who find themselves in unhappy marriages. There certainly has been nothing wrong with many of the hundreds of unhappy couples I have worked with in my 25 years as a marital therapist--including the couples with the most heartbreaking problems. They were effective communicators; indeed some of them were lawyers, teachers, public relations people, even writers. They muddled through conflict about as well or badly as the rest of us do. They were certainly committed to their relationships, having stuck it out over many years of disappointment and frustration. They had worked hard on their relationships--with me, and often with one or two other therapists before me. Most important, as individuals they were mentally healthy, free of childhood wounds, honest with themselves, and well in touch with themselves.

The only problem for these couples was that they had married the wrong person. They had married someone with whom they were not compatible enough for lasting love.

To understand why compatibility is the key rather than communication and the other usual suspects, you first have to recognize that marital problems are not communication problems. They are failures of understanding despite perfectly adequate

communication. We all have experienced something of this in our non-romantic relationships: You're discussing some important issue, say gun control, with someone whose opinion is in opposition to yours. You understand what the other person is saying--you don't have a communication problem. What you don't understand is how that other person could possibly think and feel the way he or she does. And that's because, at least in that one respect, you are too different from each other. Couples who are incompatible are different from each other in many ways and bump up against that failure of understanding despite adequate communication everywhere they turn.

Shared interests and a meeting of the minds are, of course, essential components of compatibility. They are also the foundations of friendship. Dr. Phil counsels unhappy couples to focus on their friendship and rekindle it--and this is where he goes wrong. If the partners don't share interests and don't have a meeting of the minds there will be no friendship to rekindle. Many incompatible couples never had a true friendship--a romance maybe, but not a friendship--as they themselves realize once the romantic phase ends.

Think of your own friends. None of us is able to be friends with just anybody. We must share at least some interests with another person to be friends, otherwise there would be no point in spending time with them.

Now think of your best friends. They are your best friends specifically because you have a meeting of the minds--because you're on the same wavelength. To ask incompatible couples to focus on their "friendship" is like asking them to make an omelette out of Ping-Pong balls.

What Dr. Phil and many others fail to appreciate is that all love between men and women is based on mutual affirmation. In romantic love what is being affirmed is each other's physical-sexual self, and that is so important to us and so powerful that it makes affirming many other aspects of each other virtually automatic. But once the romantic phase ends, as it always does sooner or later, the couple can continue to affirm many aspects of each other only if they are compatible: You can affirm an aspect of someone else only if you understand it, and you can understand it only if you are similar enough to the other person in that respect.

The reasons that so many of us marry the wrong person are clear enough: the social pressure we all feel to get married combined with our sense that our choices are limited, and an insufficient understanding of compatibility. Not only do many of us make this mistake, we're encouraged to by society. Then, when things don't work out, that society tells us it's because we are defective, piling insult upon injury.

The good news is that people have it in their power to choose the right person, as many people do in their second marriage. People can develop an accurate understanding of compatibility, systematically assess their compatibility with a romantic

partner, choose the right person to marry in the first place--and avoid the stigma and agony of having to identify what's "wrong" with them.