

What Should This Marriage Carry?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Should We Stay Together? How to Ask for the Couples Counseling We Actually Need* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com. Search “should we stay together” on the site to find it.

We expect one person to be attachment figure, closest friend, sexual partner, co-parent, financial partner, recreational companion, intellectual equal, emotional regulator, and source of meaning. For most of human history those needs were spread across a village. This sheet is for couples who are staying, whether by choice or for practical reasons, and who need the marriage to stop being responsible for everything. Separate copies, then compare.

THE LOAD

What we are asking it to carry

For each need we mark whether the marriage currently carries it, whether it carries it well, and whether it should. A need the marriage carries badly and does not have to carry is where resentment comes from.

ELSEWHERE

Where else a need could be met

A book club, a band, a competitive sport, family nearby, friendships that do not include our partner. Not every need belongs to the marriage, and spreading them is not a failure of the marriage.

Which need have I been resenting my partner for not meeting that was never only theirs to meet?

PERMISSIONS

Make it explicit

Renegotiation fails when it stays implied. “You do not need to invite me golfing” is a permission. So is a changed living arrangement, or a changed sexual agreement. We write them down.

COHERENCE

The test of the new arrangement

There is no single arrangement every successful relationship must resemble. The question is whether ours lets the people inside it live with more coherence and less resentment.

A WORKED EXAMPLE, FROM THE ARTICLE

CARRIES WELL

Co-parenting. Managing the house and the money.

CARRIES BADLY

Friendship. Deep conversation. One partner talks logistics; the other needs more.

ELSEWHERE

A weekly dinner with two close friends. A standing phone call with a sibling.

PERMISSION

“Go without me, and do not apologize for it.”

RESULT

Less resentment about what the marriage does not provide, more room for what it does.

What we are asking the marriage to carry

My own copy. For each need, check the first box if the marriage carries it now, the second if it carries it well, the third if I believe it should carry it.

NEED 1 Attachment and calm

Feeling safer and steadier in my partner's presence than alone.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 2 Friendship and conversation

Being each other's company. Talking about more than logistics.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 3 Sex and romance

Desire, affection, being pursued.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 4 Play and adventure

Fun, recreation, novelty, meeting each other outside our roles.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 5 Practical partnership

The house, the money, the schedule, the projects. The farm still has to run.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 6 Co-parenting and family

Raising the children, caring for parents, holding the extended family together.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 7 Meaning and values

A shared sense of what is right and what a life is for.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

NEED 8 Community

Friends, neighbors, and a life larger than the two of us.

☐ Carries it

☐ Carries it well

☐ Should carry it

Elsewhere, permissions, and the new terms

My own copy, then compare.

RESENTMENT

The need I have
been resenting

The need the marriage carries badly that I have been holding my partner responsible for. Was it ever only theirs to meet?

ELSEWHERE

Where else it
could be met

Friends, family, a group, a practice, a place. The specific people or things, not the category.

PERMISSIONS

What I need
explicit
permission for,
and what I can
give

Time, places, people, arrangements. Written down so neither of us has to guess.

I AM ASKING FOR

I CAN GIVE

THE NEW TERMS

Compare copies. Then, in a few lines, what this marriage will be responsible for and what it will not.

WHAT THE MARRIAGE CARRIES:

WHAT EACH OF US WILL MEET ELSEWHERE:

WHAT WE WILL ASK THE COUNSELOR TO HELP WITH:

Staying for practical reasons is still a decision, and it can be made honestly. It does not require pretending the marriage meets every need.