



# 20 Questions

FOR DEEPER  
INTIMACY

forBetter<sup>®</sup>



AS A MARRIAGE THERAPIST, I enjoy the privilege of being curious for a living. I spend most of my days asking questions. I've found that a great question is like an intricate key.

The right question can unlock information, insight, context and wisdom. It can open doors to desires and motivations. It can give you access to someone's heart and mind, their hopes and dreams, their expectations and fears.

**How you ask the question is as important as the question you ask.**

I've provided 20 of my favorite questions here. I use them a lot in my practice and in my own relationship. It's much easier for me to ask them at work than at home, but that's because the stakes are higher with my wife.

I want to encourage you to read and consider and (eventually) ask these questions with a commitment to *curiosity*, and *compassion*, and *courage*. **All three.** These questions don't work if you ask them critically or contemptuously.

I promise, however, if you ask them consistently and with care, you *will* experience more **intimate conversation**, more **intimate connection**, and even more **intimate conflict**.

Let me take a quick minute to talk about intimacy: In my office, "intimacy" is often code for "sex." Intimacy is so much more. It's a deep sense of emotional, intellectual, physical and even spiritual connection. These questions are designed to help you chase a more holistic form of intimacy.

Keep this booklet close. Put it on your bedside table, or bookmark it on your phone. Get excited about asking, and feel free to tailor the questions to your specific situation whenever it might be more helpful. Our hope is that by asking, you will get to know yourselves and one another more fully... forBetter.



1

## *What do you think?*

One key to a healthy relationship is for partners to be able to influence one another. The ability to accept influence is essential (especially for men) if you want to build a relationship on mutual regard and respect. It's easy to ask for another point of view or opinion. That doesn't mean that you have to accept or apply it. But it does help to hear it and consider it. Try asking, "What do you think?" the next time you have to consider a dream or make a decision.

## 2

*Is now a good time?*

Too often important moments get missed because they're important to one partner but totally unnoticed by the other. Try asking, "Is now a good time?" — before your next complaint, or bid for attention, or request for sex. It gives your partner an opportunity to say "yes" or "no." If now is not a good time, ask when you should circle back, especially if it's important to you. I've seen tons of couples sidestep misunderstanding and assumption with this one question.





3

*What's one thing I should ask you about later?*

This question belongs at the front of your day. It's a great way to help you stay in touch with what's going on throughout your partner's day. AND it sets you up perfectly with a question to ask later. Maybe he has a big appointment in the afternoon. Maybe she has a call with her mom. Maybe he's listening to an interesting podcast. Maybe she is trying a new skill at the gym. Asking this question in the morning and then following up later in the day is a great way to stay connected and build trust.



## 4

### *What do we both want?*

I love this question, because there is *something* that you both want. You may just have to raise the altitude a bit. Here's what I know for sure: You both want to "stay alive." That's pretty high up the ladder, but it's at least a starting point when you find yourselves grappling with difference. You may want to "stay married" — you may also want to "stay *happily* married." As you come down the ladder your mutual goals will become more specific until they eventually diverge. She may want to vacation in the mountains. He may want to go to the beach. When that happens (and especially when you get stuck) you have to go back up the ladder. You both want to vacation. Let's linger there for a bit so that we can reinforce our mutual desire before we come back down the ladder where you have to decide which kind of vacation to take.

**A DEEPER DIVE:** This question is about more than making a decision, it can also be a great way to break the momentum of a conflict. As you become conscious of your next argument try to pause long enough to ask, "What do we both want?"

## 5

*What color is it?*

Often we have an instinct to ask, “What’s wrong?” or “Are you okay?” The problem with these questions is that they solicit terse answers. I was really struck by the movie *INSIDE OUT* and its portrayal of emotions as different colors. Sadness was blue, fear was green, anger was red. But even red has shades (just like anger): There’s crimson, rose, pink, and scarlet... just as there is rage, frustration, contempt, and embarrassment. There are nuances. Next time you’re in a discussion about feelings, ask, “What color is it?” Ideally the answer will allow both of you to become more aware of the actual feelings that are in play and can open you both up to a more intimate exploration of the emotion itself.



## 6

*How might we re-write our vows?*

I'm pretty sure most couples have no idea what they're committing to when they speak their vows on their wedding day. We utter phrases like "for better and for worse," "in sickness and in health," "for richer and for poorer." What have been the turning points in your relationship? Knowing what you know now, how might you rewrite your vows? If you could go back and restate your commitment, what would you say?





7

*Who was your best friend  
in fourth grade?*

This is another one of my favorite questions, and I'm not sure exactly why. But try asking it sometime, of your spouse, at a dinner party, on a mundane trip to the grocery store, in line at the bank. The question relaxes people and taps into their nostalgic memory. It also gives them access to stories. Fourth grade is a formative time in a person's life. Some social psychologists argue that it's the year when we officially become ourselves. We transition from childish innocence to semi-awareness. This is fertile and sacred ground. It's a gift to ask this question and a privilege to listen to the stories that accompany the answer.

## 8

*If we tell a great story later,  
what will have happened?*

I use this question whenever couples are about to go on vacation. I ask, “If you’re on the plane on the way home, and you look at each other and say, ‘Yay Us! What a great vacation!’ — what will have made that possible?” (It’s also worth asking what would make for a terrible story.) What’s most powerful about this question is asking it in advance. It helps to establish a baseline and get you on the same page. It also gives you a script to follow between now and the time you ultimately “tell the story.”

**A DEEPER DIVE:** Again, you can use this question about conflict. What if you tell a great story about your next fight? If you end up really proud of yourselves, what will have happened? What about your next date night? Or your next trip to Costco?



## 9

### *What does mom/dad mean?*

Not every couple will choose to become parents, but every couple has at least four parents. The notions of “mom” and “dad” are powerful. And even (or especially) when we don’t know what they mean, they shape us. Ask about your parents. Even the absent and ignorant and abusive parents taught you something about adulthood. When you choose to become parents, these lessons sneak up on you and they frame the way you become your own version of mom or dad. Our parents teach us how to become adults — for better or for worse. Use this question to create your own new sense of meaning about the adult you intend to be in your relationship with your spouse and/or your kids.

**A DEEPER DIVE:** You can and should replace “mom” and “dad” with words like “home” and “money” and “sex” and “Saturday” just to help create meaning throughout your relationship.



## 10

*What turns you on/off?*

Research suggests that one characteristic of couples who have the healthiest and happiest sex lives is that they are able to talk about sex. Specifically, they talk about what's working and what's not. You need to know the answer to these questions, but you should NOT ask them in bed. These questions are for the car or the coffee shop. These are *reflective*, not *reactive* questions. They require an abundance of curiosity and compassion and courage, but the question is about intimacy. The question may, in fact, be more intimate than the act.

## 11

*What is your dream?*

Dr. John Gottman likes to tell the story about the ONE THING that can make or break a relationship. I'll not go into the story here, but it's basically about honoring dreams. It can be a vocational dream, a recreational dream, a family dream, even an impossible dream. This is especially an important question for men to ask. Men need to know and honor the dreams of their women. Men have dreams too, of course, but the work of honoring a woman's dream pays special dividends. Minimally, when you know and support one another's dreams, it builds trust and hope into the relationship and helps you press past the harder times.



This is another one of my favorite questions that I often ask in the first session with clients. They come in and complain about how bad the relationship is, and I listen, patiently, until they stop talking. Sometimes, when it seems especially dire, I'll ask, "Why bother? Why not just walk away? Is it really worth it?" Imagine, for a moment, their stunned faces as I call their bluff. But I wait, patiently, for an answer. Even if it's a rhetorical question, ask yourselves why you're working so hard. What's your core motivation? What's keeping you going? Ideally it's LOVE.





# 13

## *What are the rules?*

There's a philosophical difference between finite and infinite games. We're most familiar with finite games, like football. There are two teams vying to outscore one another. The game is bound by white lines, and rules, and a clock. Someone wins and someone loses. In an infinite game — like a marriage — if one person loses, the relationship loses. So the players need to make (and sometimes change) the rules in order to **prolong** the game. Emotionally intelligent couples are adept at knowing and adapting the rules of their relationship. The question isn't about *roles*, it's about *rules*...which constantly change at the discretion of the players of an infinite game (in this case, the couple). The only way to play the game (of marriage) with integrity is when you're clear about the rules.

**A DEEPER DIVE:** Maybe you need to come up with rules about who does the dishes on the weekend. Or how much money it's okay to spend without asking. Or whether or not it's okay to go out with coworkers for Happy Hour. Or what your mutual "safe word" will be when you need to exit a conflict. It almost doesn't matter what the rules are...what matters is that you agree about them.

14

*What's your best story about  
a roller coaster ?*

Did you notice that roller coaster was underlined? That's because whatever is in the blank is irrelevant. Being a deeply connected couple isn't just about knowing the darkest secrets of your heart. It's about exposing and enjoying the cobwebbed corners of your life. Those corners don't have to be interesting or even important. They just have to be investigated.

**A DEEPER DIVE:** Don't underestimate the intimacy of your story about roller coasters, or giraffes, or umbrellas, or a concert, or cigars, or failure, or sex, or... Literally any noun, any verb, can elicit deeper connection and conversation.

## *What's our thing?*

Couples need a “thing,” an activity or a value or a theme that they can rally around and use to reinforce their bond. A few years ago, my wife and I decided to learn how to skydive. For a while, that was our “thing.” Early in our marriage, we decided that “hospitality” would be our thing, so we constantly had people in our home. Take some time to discern your thing. Decide together what you will invest in to help create your identity as a couple. You don’t even have to tell anyone what you come up with, sometimes a secret thing can be quite powerful.





## 16

*What do we do about the money fairy?*

Imagine that tonight, while you're sleeping, a money fairy comes in and sprinkles magic dust on you. Then tomorrow, when you wake up, and without any change in your lifestyle at all, your cash-flow has increased by 20%, what will you do with that extra money? What about if the dust backfired and your cash-flow decreased by 20%, what would you cut out? The answer to these questions reveal a little bit of your priorities and can also help you sharpen your goals.

17

*On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel to me right now?*

I'm a big fan of 1-10 scales if only to help orient a conversation (whether about connection or anger or dinner). Of course these scales are arbitrary, but they do give important information. I often use this particular question at the beginning of a counseling session and over time as a gauge of how the relationship is trending. Let's say he says 6 and she says 8...so the couple averages a 7. It's helpful then to ask a follow up question, "What has to happen in order to drive our number up even just a little bit?" Ideally, the answer yields an actionable step for you to pursue.

*What's it **really** like to be in a relationship with me?*

Use this question to explore the best and worst, the highs and lows, the ins and outs of what it means to be moving through life together. When you explore this question with a curious and compassionate mind, you'll learn what your partner wants to see more of, and you'll also get some insight into your blind spots. In theory, no one knows us better than our spouse. Give them an opportunity to help you become a better partner — just make sure you're in your best frame of mind first.





## 19

*A... or B?*

Play is essential to any relationship and sometimes you need to debate the mundane, especially when the consequences are low and there really isn't a right answer. "Being right" in a relationship is overrated.

So... What is the greatest rock band in history? Were Ross and Rachel actually on a break? Is OJ guilty or innocent? Ginger or Mary Ann? Would you rather have the power of flight or invisibility? The value of these debates is simply the opportunity to enjoy conversation without the relational cost of heavier issues.



20

*Are you trying to ask  
me a question?*

This last question is about a question...likely the question you're not asking. It's very easy to slide into rant, or complaint, or declaration, without really being aware of what you want. When couples lose focus in my office, I become curious about what they want. There's usually an ask in there somewhere and partners need to be able to express their desire and their need. When you're stuck, get curious. Ask a question. Or ask if there's a question that needs to be asked.

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