

STRONG MARRIAGES FOR NAVAJO COUPLES



Activity Book for Couples

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Strong Marriages for Navajo Couples

Couple Activity Book

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- Above all, this project would not have been possible without the 21 Navajo couples who volunteered their time to participate. Their teachings, as illustrated in this workbook, will help others use this resource to strengthen their marriages. *Thank you for telling your stories!*
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Introduction

This activity book was prepared using findings of a research study titled, ***“Strong Marriages in Two Navajo Nation Chapters in the Northern Part of the Navajo Nation.”*** The goal of this study was to learn what makes marriages strong for some Navajo couples within two northern Navajo Nation Chapters. The study was conducted by faculty at Utah State University under direction of the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board.

Twenty-one couples who felt they had strong marriages volunteered to participate in the study. These 42 individuals from two northern Navajo Nation Chapters were interviewed separately and all were asked the same questions. Their responses resulted in five findings that were important for having a strong marriage:

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This activity book describes these five strengths and provides tools that will help couples think about their own relationships. There are also suggested activities designed to help couples develop or strengthen these qualities as they prepare to marry, or work to enhance their marriage relationship. Grandparents and other family members who contribute to the success of the family may also find this workbook helpful. This information is offered to help couples build strong and healthy marriages.

It is important to note that we only interviewed 21 couples from two chapters of the Navajo Nation, and the findings may not be typical of other areas of the Nation. Some interviews were conducted in Navajo and translated into English, and this may also weaken some culturally specific information. For those of you who would like to use this booklet in your couple relationship, we hope that you will use the information that is useful to you.

Working through these activities, couples may identify issues that cannot be resolved without help from an outside person or agency. If that happens, couples are encouraged to contact someone who may be of help. That person may be a medicine man, a clergy person, a counselor, an elder, or someone you trust.

The information in the book, including the tools and activities, were developed directly from the responses of the 21 couples who participated in this study. It is our hope that anyone using this book will find the information helpful.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a vital part of having a strong marriage.



Maintain Communication

Introduction

All 42 individuals who participated in the study told us that *maintaining communication* was a vital part of building a strong marriage. Couples agreed that effective communication between partners was hard work, which did not come easily. To maintain effective communication, couples needed to:

- be open with each other,
- listen to each other,
- be positive, and
- give praise to one another.

These communication skills helped couples make decisions together. When couples did not communicate well, there was stress in their marriage. Individuals in the study mentioned the need for communication multiple times in their interviews. Many stressed that it was the most important skill in building a strong marriage.

“Communication is the number one thing. You shouldn’t be afraid to talk to your spouse about anything.”



Communication Skills

Be open with each other. Openness was a necessary component of effective communication. Being able to talk to one’s spouse about anything was seen as important in being able to communicate effectively. Openness meant being able to talk to one’s spouse about past as well as current issues. Keeping secrets from each other had a negative impact on the marriage relationship. Being open with each other also contributed to trusting one another.

Listen to each other. Listening was another important component of communication. Navajo couples said that if marriage partners did not listen to each other, their marriage would suffer because communication is about both talking and listening. Listening included finding out what the other person really meant when they said something, rather than jumping to conclusions. Gender differences, coming from different backgrounds, and different life experiences, all contributed to how each person interpreted what was said. When couples interpreted discussions differently, misunderstandings arose. Couples said it often took time to learn how to listen and understand what the other person was saying:

“One thing that we discovered, both during the time we were dating, and even after we’d been married for a while, was that sometimes we were both talking about the same thing and we both basically agreed on something, but we were looking at it from different perspectives culturally. When we had time to sit down and talk about it, we realized that we really didn’t disagree.”

Be positive. When couples had difficulties with issues in their marriage, staying positive helped them to work through problems more easily. Couples who worked at having positive feelings toward each other, and talked positively to one another, felt it had a positive impact on their ability to communicate. One man described the importance of staying positive:

“It’s how you think about each other, how you love one another, how you work together, and how you make decisions. That’s all part of having a good marriage, and to have just good thoughts for one another and talk positively to each other makes a strong marriage.”

Give praise to one another. Giving praise to one another contributed to good communication. Praise was viewed as an expression of love and acceptance, and it promoted positive feelings between partners. When each spouse felt accepted and loved they were better able to communicate effectively. Some individuals said that it was difficult for the Navajo people to discuss their feelings with each other, but it was essential to overcome this and praise one’s partner and express one’s love.

Making Decisions

Making decisions together should be part of every marriage, and being effective in making decisions contributes to a strong marriage. Being open with each other, listening to each other, being positive, and giving praise to one another all helped couples communicate effectively, and ultimately helped them make decisions.

Navajo couples described how couples have to make decisions in their marriages concerning material things, their family, and other issues. Important components of effective decision-making within marriage included identifying pros and cons, not forcing decisions, and explaining when there were disagreements. Using these techniques helped couples to better understand each other and avoid misunderstandings.

At times it was necessary for couples to formally sit down and take time to discuss an issue together. Allowing time for each person to have input made it possible to identify more solutions to a problem. It also established mutual respect between partners, and when partners felt respected by each other, they were better able to communicate effectively. Some couples found it helpful to involve the entire family in decision-making. Permitting children to participate in the process of making decisions provided parents with the opportunity to teach good communication skills to their children and put these skills into practice for the entire family.

Maintain Communication

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to maintain communication. Use the questions below to discover the strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

- Mark an “S” (Strength) after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
- Mark an “I” (Improve) after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
- Mark a “NA” (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your marriage. You may also want to discuss ways to improve communication.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. We trust each other enough to share most things about ourselves. _____
2. We take time to really listen to each other so that we understand what the other person is saying. _____
3. We talk about things that require time to both talk and listen to each other. _____
4. Even when we disagree we try to communicate our love for each other. _____
5. We keep a positive attitude even when we face problems. _____
6. We tell each other that we value each other’s strengths and positive attributes. _____
7. We let each other know that we love and accept each other, even if we disagree. _____
8. When we disagree or face major problems, we take the time needed to talk about it and work it out. _____
9. We sometimes include other family members who may help us with decisions or solving problems. _____
10. We recognize and give each other praise for our accomplishments. _____

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9. We sometimes include other family members who may help us with decisions or solving problems. _____
10. We recognize and give each other praise for our accomplishments. _____

Developing Communication Skills

Below are some activities that you might do together to further develop and strengthen your communication skills as a couple. Even when we have a good relationship, we regularly need to work on keeping it good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you as a couple.

1. Schedule time each day to share your thoughts and feelings with each other. Try to set aside 30 minutes twice a week. Go some place where there will be no interruptions and really talk and listen to each other.
2. Develop a habit, through touch or another non-verbal means, to let the other person know they are cared about. If this is new to you, set a goal to do one or two gestures each day. This can be a hug, a touch on the shoulder, or a kiss as you leave or return home. It can also mean you do a task for the other person that you know will be appreciated.
3. Tell the other person that you care about them. This can be giving a compliment, letting the other person know you appreciate something they have done for you, or saying something that lets the other person know they are loved.
4. Write a note to each other focusing on positive qualities you appreciate in each other and then share your notes with each other.
5. As a couple, you may have a major stress or problem that you would like to solve. Talk about ways to reduce that stress or solve the problem and develop a plan to implement the solution. Talk regularly about progress and change the plan if needed.

NURTURE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Nurturing the relationship is a vital part of having a strong marriage.



Nurture Your Relationship

Introduction

Forty-one out of 42 individuals who participated in this study told us that couples need to *nurture your relationship* in order to have a strong and successful marriage. When couples took time to nurture their marriage, they were fortifying their marriage and safeguarding it against times of difficulty. To nurture your relationship, couples needed to:

- be committed,
- focus on each other, and
- learn to enjoy marriage.

“A strong marriage is where two people are committed to each other no matter what comes down the road, good and bad. You have to remain committed.”

Nurturing Skills

Be committed. Couples stressed that being committed strengthened their marriages as they went through good times and bad. When a couple experienced hardships, they had the choice to draw closer together and work through it, or to give up. Couples who remained committed despite difficulties were the couples who built strong marriages.

Each spouse had to make a choice to be committed to the marriage. Specific qualities that individuals used to strengthen their commitment to each other were unselfishness, patience, and understanding.

Being unselfish in a marriage meant putting one’s spouse and family first. When a person was unselfish, the spouse was in a position to understand their partner and meet their needs. This involved doing specific things that appealed to the spouse or accepting them for who they were and not trying to change them.

Patience and understanding helped individuals to meet their spouse’s needs. Patience to look past irritating habits, human weaknesses, and forgive past offenses enhanced the commitment and strengthened marriages. For example, a true sign of commitment was enduring rocky times within the marriage. When things got tough, one person said that it was critical for spouses to “forgive little things that have happened.”

Focus on each other. Another important way for couples to nurture their marriage was to nurture each other as individuals. When a person focused on the needs of his or her spouse, the marriage was stronger. Nurturing each other included respecting each other, supporting each other, and loving each other.

Couples suggested that partners should learn to respect each other and the unique qualities that each person brings to the relationship. A natural result of respect was treating each other well, and this led to a stronger marriage. This was true for both women and men—they should



treat the spouse with respect and respect the spouse's efforts to do the same. When marriage partners had different religious beliefs, respecting each other's beliefs made the marriage stronger. Respect leads to tolerance and acceptance between couples, and this in turn makes a marriage strong.

Supporting each other was described as helping each other through hard times, even if it meant doing things that were not a part of traditional gender roles. Couples who supported each other through times of financial stress, childbirth, medical problems, and mistakes had marriages that were more durable. Encouragement and acceptance were important qualities in supporting each another.

"I think love is the most important thing to have in a marriage, because once you have love, everything else falls into place and you can work through difficulties."

Loving each other is something that comes in the beginning of a relationship, but is something that takes work to maintain. It was also something that couples described as critical to having a strong, happy marriage. Expressing love to each other was important as was remembering why you fell in love in the first place. Doing these things helped couples focus on maintaining their love.

Learn to enjoy marriage. Marriage takes hard work and commitment but couples also need to have fun, laugh, and enjoy time together. Friendship between spouses was an important part of having a strong marriage for Navajo couples. Marriages were strengthened when couples did things together that both spouses enjoyed, like friends do. When the excitement of romance faded, there was still a strong friend relationship to fall back on and maintain the marriage.

Couples also indicated it was important to have a sense of humor and to be able to laugh with each other. Teasing each other lightened up tense situations and restored positive feelings in the marriage. Couples who were having struggles found that finding an activity that they both enjoyed helped them get through those difficulties. A strong marriage was seen as one in which the couple loved to be together.

Nurture Your Relationship

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to think about how well they are nurturing their relationships. Use the questions below to discover strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

- Mark an "S" (for "Strength") after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
- Mark and an "I" (for "Improve") after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
- Mark a "NA" (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your marriage. You may also want to discuss ways to improve how you nurture your relationship.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. To connect with each other we sometimes address each other as "my husband" or "my wife," or another term of endearment or a pet name. _____
2. We work hard to resolve difficulties as quickly as possible. _____
3. We try to think about the other person's needs and put that person first. _____
4. We treat each other with patience and understanding. _____
5. We let each other know on a regular basis that we love each other. _____
6. We respect each other. _____
7. When one of us needs help, we can count on each other for encouragement and support. _____
8. My partner lets me know that I am loved. _____
9. We have fun together as a couple. _____
10. We make sure we set aside time to do things together. _____

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Develop Skills that Nurture Your Relationship

Below are some activities that you might do together to nurture and strengthen your relationship. Even when we have a good relationship, we regularly need to work on keeping it good. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you as a couple.

These activities require communication skills. You may want to go back to the communication section and review what couples had to say about communication before you do these exercises.

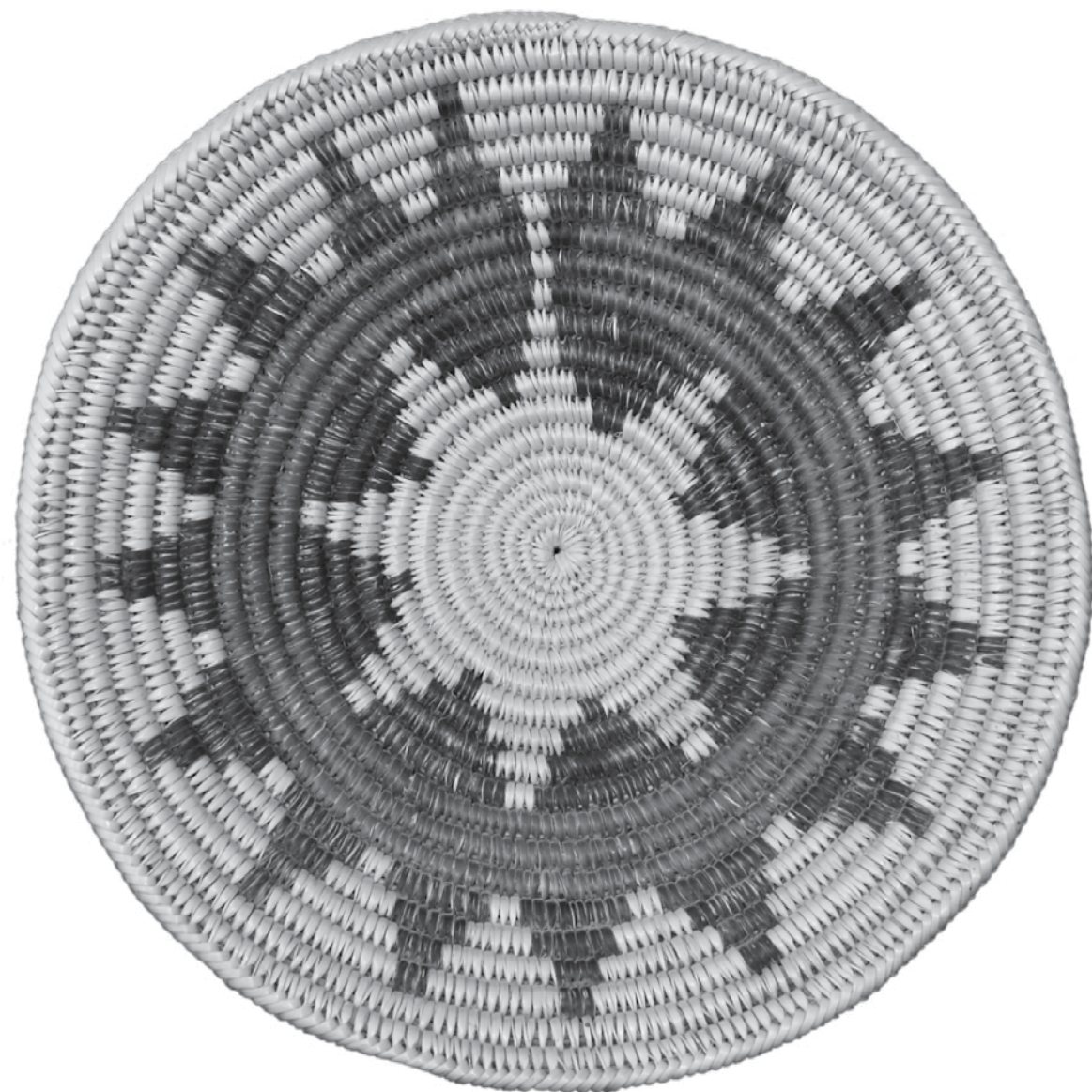
1. Each week, think of a way to do something for your partner that will show you are putting your partner’s needs first.
2. To nurture your love for each other, drive some place together and talk. Take turns telling each other specific ways that you would like to receive love and support.
3. Talk about the day you got married—how you felt, and things you said to each other—to rekindle your marriage.
4. Once a month, do an activity together. Travel together to do the laundry or go to Wal-Mart, take a horseback ride, or do a service project for your in-laws. The goal is to take advantage of your time together to have fun.
5. Do something for each other to show your love. He could chop some wood and bring it inside, or cook something for the family. She could cook his favorite meal, or clean out ashes from the stove.

LEARN ABOUT MARRIAGE

Being open to learning about marriage is a vital part of having a strong marriage.



Learn About Marriage



Introduction

Forty out of the 42 individuals who participated in this study told us that being open to learning about marriage was an important component of a strong marriage. Couples who learned from others and from their own experience had stronger marriages. Navajo couples told us that learning from others such as family members, other couples, spiritual leaders, and counselors were all important ways to gain knowledge and information about what made marriages work. To learn about marriage couples needed to:

- receive advice and counsel from family members,
- observe other couples,
- learn from spiritual resources,
- learn from counselors,
- learn from each other, and
- learn from personal experience.

“We got advice from a lot of people. Probably the one that stands out the most is advice I received from my mom, who said that if you always take care of your wife, she will take care of you.”

Learning Marriage Skills

Receive advice and counsel from family members.

Learning about marriage from family members was an important source of knowledge for Navajo couples. Family members offered advice and also shared traditional stories—stories that taught values and provided guidance in addressing issues in marriage. For example, family members taught couples about traditional roles and responsibilities within the marriage. This is what one woman learned about marriage: *“My mother used to talk to me, and my grandmother used to tell me what your roles are—what your duties are as a wife.”*

Observe other couples. Observing other couples who had difficulties helped couples avoid the same problems in their marriages. At the same time, observing successful marriages also helped couples learn what they could do to have strong marriages. Couples also mentioned that they try to be good examples for their own children in teaching them about having good marriages.

Learn from spiritual resources. Couples reported that using spiritual resources helped them have strong marriages. Couples reported turning to churches, learning from religious leaders, and involving themselves in personal Bible study. Religious teachings provided a set of values and standards to live by, and when couples agreed upon and abided by those values, their marriages were strengthened.

Spirituality also included traditional teachings and ceremonies. When a couple was having struggles in their marriage they had prayers or blessings done, or counseled with a medicine man to give them advice, strength, and direction. One man said, *“The medicine man has very good*

advice. If you go to them they will talk to you and are very compassionate. They're medicine men and that's what they're trained to do."

Learn from counselors. Couples indicated that seeking professional counseling was one way to resolve differences and learn how to have a strong marriage. Through counseling, couples could identify their strengths and weaknesses and learn important skills to build on those strengths and overcome their weaknesses.

Counseling was not necessarily limited to professional counselors. Many Navajo couples received helpful advice from counselors in schools, from elders, and from other trusted people.

Learn from each other. Couples in the study said they learned from each other about how to have strong marriages. They described being open to learning from their spouse who might have had more knowledge or was older and more mature when they got married. According to one woman:

"I think my husband was more ready than I was because I was much younger and he was a little more mature at the time . . . I learned so much from him throughout my many young years after we got married."

Many couples also said that having a strong marriage ultimately meant they needed to solve problems together as a couple. Learning from each other involved having an openness to learn as a couple, and accepting the influence of their spouse throughout married life. One woman concluded, *"You could take all the classes on marriage to be ready for marriage, but I think it's between you and your spouse."*

Learn from personal experience. When asked how he learned how to have a strong marriage, one man simply said, *"I think through experience, that's how I learned."* This statement represented the thoughts and feelings of many Navajo couples in the study. Every person had many experiences in his or her lifetime that taught different lessons, and these lessons were used to strengthen their marriages. Some couples had been married previously and divorced. They learned from mistakes in failed marriages and explained that they did not make the same mistakes in their current marriages. Others who had always been married to the same person also made mistakes, and they tried to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them as time progressed.

Some couples said they learned about marriage through "trial and error." They paid attention to their errors and also made an effort to learn from their mistakes so they would not repeat them. One man concluded, *"Nobody told me how to build a strong marriage. We had to learn by trying*

"I know that when there is a problem that my husband can't help me with, I go to a counselor, or go to someone who has a little more knowledge—just to express how I feel. They maybe could help me in how I could speak to my husband."

Learn about Marriage

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to learn about having a good marriage. Use the questions below to discover strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

- Mark an "S" (for "Strength") after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
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- Mark a "NA" (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your marriage. You may also want to discuss ways to learn more about marriage.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. We accept counsel and guidance from family members. _____
2. We learn from the mistakes of others, so we don't make the same mistakes. _____
3. We're open to learning new things about marriage. _____
4. When we make a mistake in our marriage, we talk about ways we can avoid making the same mistake again. _____
5. We are always working to improve and strengthen our marriage. _____
6. When we can't handle a marriage issue ourselves, we seek help through a counselor, elder, medicine man, or spiritual leader. _____
7. We view learning about marriage as a continual process. _____
8. We respect our spiritual teachings and follow those teachings in our marriage. _____
9. We trust each other enough to share our feelings and learn from each other. _____
10. We try to set a good example for our children so they can learn about how to have a strong marriage. _____

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Learn about Marriage

Below are some activities that you might do together to learn more about marriage. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you as a couple.

These activities require communication skills. You may want to go back to the communication section and review what couples had to say about communication before you do these exercises.

1. You both might want to keep a marriage notebook. Each week list five things you like about your relationship.
2. Continue writing in your marriage notebook each week, and share what you wrote with each other.
3. Talk with each other about family traditions that you experienced growing up, and share stories with each other. Describe ways your parents and grandparents strengthened their relationship. Talk about how traditions can help strengthen your marriage relationship.
4. Use what you've learned about each other's traditions to form new family traditions that are tailored to fit your own family.
5. Plan a time when you can turn off the television, the computer, and maybe even the telephone, and enjoy a quiet evening just being together. Talk about your hopes and dreams for your marriage and your family.

BE PREPARED FOR MARRIAGE

Being prepared for marriage is a vital part of having a strong marriage.



Be Prepared for Marriage

Introduction

Forty out of the 42 individuals who participated in this study told us that being prepared for marriage was an essential part of building a strong and successful marriage. To be prepared, couples needed to:

- be prepared as an individual,
- be prepared educationally and financially, and
- have a plan as a couple.

Marriage Preparation Skills

Be prepared as an individual. Being prepared as an individual was an important part of being prepared for marriage. This included establishing one's self as an independent adult before marriage, knowing and drawing upon both traditional ways and "modern ways," and knowing what one wanted out of life. It was important for them to know what they wanted as individuals, and also what they wanted for their family and marriage. This gave them direction and purpose in their interactions and day to day life. It was important to marry someone who would help them accomplish the things they wanted out of life.

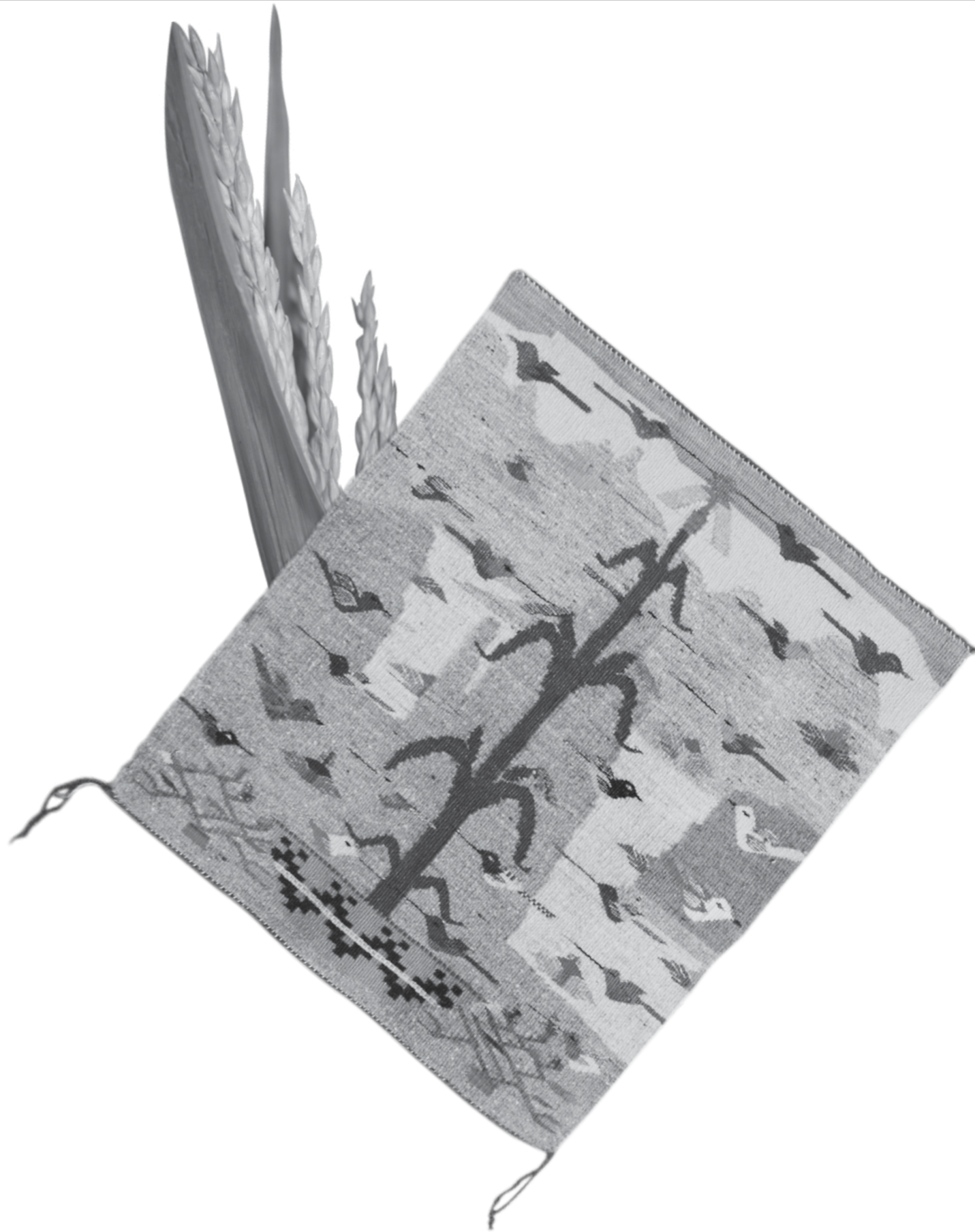
"If they're Indian, they have to understand that way, the Native way. We're in a world where we can't turn back to the old days. But we can take our old teachings into the new world to keep it, to keep us, strong."

Becoming an independent adult and being able to live on one's own was an important preparation for marriage, and demonstrated responsibility. This responsibility created strengths to face future challenges both individually, and in the marriage relationship. Couples felt that it was important for partners to be prepared to take care of themselves when a spouse was not there—and this applied to both men and women.

Individual preparation included having knowledge of both traditional Navajo ways and "modern ways." This knowledge created a reserve that couples could draw upon within their marriage.

Personal preparation also included knowing what one wanted out of life. Making these decisions before marriage helped Navajo couples have stronger marriages. One woman described how she had decided what kind of man she wanted to marry:

"I had already made some choices as to what kind of guy I wanted to marry. I wanted to marry a guy that didn't abuse alcohol. I wanted a guy who was serious about having a family, and had a good belief in God, and just had a really good family base."



Be prepared educationally and financially. Navajo couples said getting an education and establishing one's self financially before marriage helped couples have stronger marriages. This generally included finishing high school and then getting additional training and obtaining a secure job.

Couples said that young people should finish their education before getting married or starting a family. It was also important to continue that education or training beyond high school. This education and training helped couples avoid, as one person said, "going through waiting in line for food stamps, waiting in line for government help."

Couples said individuals who had an education were more likely to get higher paying jobs. When they had good jobs, couples were better able to provide for their families. Individuals who took time to prepare in advance for marriage were able to spend more time strengthening their marriage because they did not have other concerns taking energy away from their marriage relationship.

"Make sure that you finish your education first and then you go and get a good job. From there you can think about having a family . . ."

Have a plan as a couple. Having a plan was important to Navajo couples for many reasons. It gave them a common goal to work toward, and having a common goal brought unity to the marriage. Having goals and plans helped individuals and couples have a sense of control over their lives, and take an active role in shaping their future. Part of having a plan included establishing goals as a couple, making conscious decisions to treat one's spouse with respect, and planning how to deal with conflict when it arose.

"You have to plan together to get things accomplished."

Working toward the same goals made couples stronger, because they were unified. Navajo couples said that learning to agree on decisions was an important part of having a strong marriage, specifically with regard to traditional roles and parenting.

Several Navajo couples said that each person should gain the skills necessary to carry out his or her traditional roles. For women that meant they would clean, cook, and raise the children as part of the role as wife. Men would provide for the family and take care of traditional male roles, such as building a house, or taking care of the family's physical needs. Knowing and fulfilling traditional roles was one way that couples could understand each other and work toward common goals.

Preparing ahead of time for parenthood was also important. Navajo couples emphasized that couples should consider the expense of raising children before rushing into parenthood. Having a plan for one's family helped eliminate financial stress, and in the long run helped parents teach their children financial responsibility. Parents should discuss and agree upon what kind of values they wanted to teach their children and be prepared personally to deal with the demands of parenthood. Those who had children before they were married, or got married because they had children, learned through difficult experience the things others learned through preparation.

Be Prepared for Marriage

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to think about how well prepared they are for marriage, or how they can improve and build on the strengths of their marriage. Use the questions below to discover strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

- Mark an "S" (for "Strength") after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
- Mark and an "I" (for "Improve") after each statement that indicates an area you would like to strengthen in your relationship.
- Mark a "NA" (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your marriage. You may also want to discuss ways to be better prepared for marriage.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. We accept that we each have different ways of doing things. _____
2. We support each other as we pursue an education or a career. _____
3. We respect each other's traditional and modern ways and value qualities that each brings to our marriage. _____
4. We have the courage to keep growing as a couple by learning and laughing together. _____
5. We plan for happiness as a couple. _____
6. We know how to budget our money. _____
7. We talk about our roles as husband and wife and work together. _____
8. Because children are important, we make plans for the children that are, or will become, part of our lives. _____
9. We discuss the teachings we have learned from our elders and others about how to be good parents. _____
10. We support each other in our goals as individuals and as a couple. _____

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Developing Skills in Being Prepared

Below are some activities that you might do together to create goals individually and as a couple as you work to prepare for your future. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you as a couple.

These activities require communication skills. You may want to go back to the communication section and review what couples had to say about communication before you do these exercises.

1. Take time to talk as a couple about things you want to do to grow educationally and professionally, and how you can make these things happen.
2. Identify and share both traditional and modern ways that each of you use to enhance your relationship as a couple.
3. Identify future goals for yourself as a couple, and then talk about each goal one by one. You might want to list some steps to help you accomplish your goals.
4. Talk about your role as parents and about how children will fit into your relationship.
5. Discuss things you have done in the past to become a better partner in your relationship, and find ways to celebrate those things.

HAVE A STRONG FOUNDATION

*A strong foundation is
a vital part of having
a strong marriage.*

*Shikáá'gi hózhó
Shiyaagi hózhó
Shikéédéé' hózhó
Shinaago t'áá altsogóó hózhó
Shizah hahóózqod*

*Hózhó Náhasdlíí'
Hózhó Náhasdlíí'
Hózhó Náhasdlíí'
Hózhó Náhasdlíí'*



Have a Strong Foundation

Introduction

Thirty-two out of 42 individuals who participated in this study told us that building a strong foundation for marriage was crucial for the success of a marriage. Much like the foundation of a house supports the rest of the structure, a strong foundation in marriage will contribute to the overall strength of the marriage. To have a strong foundation, couples need to:

- have strong personal values
- share similar values, and
- have similar goals.

“Just like they say, you have to have a good foundation. It’s just like building a house; make sure that footings are strong. That’s one of the philosophies that my dad usually has: if you have a good foundation, then your marriage is strong.”

Foundation-Building Skills

Have strong personal values. According to Navajo couples who participated in this study, before two people could be strong as a couple, they had to be strong as individuals. Strong individuals had strong values. When each had strong personal values, they brought that strength to the relationship. Strong personal values included having strong spiritual beliefs, strong traditional beliefs, living a good life in general, as well as being secure with one’s self and having self respect. One husband said:

“I think one of the things that I would encourage is to have good, strong values yourself. In Navajo culture they talk about values, about how to live a good life, and how to be good to others—and things along those lines. I think that if they were to follow those values and really live those values and teachings, there are a lot of good things about it.”

Navajo couples who placed a high value on religion found that their marriages were strengthened. The values typically associated with religion were family-oriented and focused on strengthening marriages and families. One woman said that religion provided a strong foundation for their marriage because it “holds us together.” Couples found that when each individual had strong personal values, the couple could deal with challenges that came along.

Have similar values. Couples said marriages were strengthened and there was less conflict in the marriage when couples had similar values. When a person was planning to get married, it was important to carefully consider what characteristics he or she wanted in a spouse, and then get to know that person well. Couples who married someone with similar values had fewer disagreements over value-related issues.

Couples identified religion and traditional values as two important things to discuss before marriage. Organized religion taught families to have good values and positive practices they could use to work out their problems. Faith also played a strong role in strengthening individuals and family relationships.

Talking about traditional beliefs and how couples could make them part of their marriage was also important. Couples said that practices and beliefs unique to the Navajo culture served as a strength to those who followed them. Traditional beliefs passed down through generations made families stronger. One man shared this example:

“Well, I have seen couples, older, elderly couples to this day that are married. They have a strong foundation through maintaining their traditional belief with livestock, and with the cornfield, and the traditional Hogan—I see these people live for a long time. Where people live outside with luxury and all these things, marriages don’t last that long. So I guess, in that instance, you need to practice your traditional, your cultural upbringing for a long marriage.”

Whether couples practiced organized religion or traditional beliefs, they felt that prayer strengthened families. Couples felt that praying together strengthened marriages and families and brought unity to those relationships.

Navajo couples were taught from an early age not to date someone from their own clan. When both partners understood the importance of clan relationships, and talked about it, they recognized that they had shared values. Differing values and beliefs undermined the unity of a marriage and required extra effort to make the marriage work. Couples felt it was important to be sure that partners had similar values.

“I think it’s important to date people that have the same background as you and the same values as you, because those are really hard to reconcile once you get married.”

“Always set your goals and always know the other person and yourself; know what direction you’re going.”

Having strong values, similar values, and similar goals eliminated considerable stress from the marriage. Having a strong sense of what one wanted out of life and sharing that same belief with another individual not only prevented disagreements but created a shared vision that made the marriage stronger. It was important for couples to work out differences before getting married. Having this strong foundation made marriages stronger because it gave couples something to fall back on in times of stress.

Have the same goals. Navajo couples said that couples needed more than similar values, they also needed similar goals. Goals were a way of focusing priorities and putting values into practice, so discussing goals was important to make sure couples were working toward the same things. Couples who had similar cultural backgrounds were more likely to have the same goals. Two people in the study who came from very different backgrounds found it more difficult to have the same goals. Each person established goals based on their background and experience, and it was sometimes difficult for those who married someone from a different race, religion, or ethnicity.

Have a Strong Foundation

Couples who are married, or who are planning to be married, are encouraged to think about strengthening the foundation of their relationship. A strong foundation can also be built during marriage. Use the questions below to discover strengths in your relationship. Two copies are provided so that you can individually answer these questions.

Instructions:

- Mark an “S” (Strength) after each statement that indicates a strength that already exists in your relationship.
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- Mark a “NA” (Not Applicable) if a statement does not apply to you.

After you have answered the questions below, compare your answers as a couple and talk about your answers with each other. Celebrate the strengths in your marriage. You may also want to discuss ways to further strengthen your foundation.

Our Strengths and Areas in which to Improve

1. I know what my partner values and believes. _____
2. We know about each other’s traditional beliefs. _____
3. We support each other and respect each other’s beliefs. _____
4. We have many shared beliefs and values that help us as a couple. _____
5. We have a number of common interests. _____
6. Our shared beliefs hold us together as a couple. _____
7. Observing family rituals and customs is important to us. _____
8. We discuss our goals to make sure we’re working towards the same things. _____
9. We like to be kind to each other. _____
10. We have similar values and those values guide our choices and decisions. _____

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Build a Strong Foundation

Below are some activities that you might do together to build a strong foundation in your relationship and your marriage. Try one or more of these suggested exercises to strengthen your relationship. Modify or expand these suggestions, or use these ideas in any way that works for you as a couple.

These activities require communication skills. You may want to go back to the communication section and review what couples had to say about communication before you do these exercises.

1. Visit a grandparent or a relative to gather traditional stories about your culture, and do a kindness or bring a gift for them.
2. Talk to your parents and grandparents about their beliefs and values. Share these teachings with each other and compare your values.
3. Ask your parents or grandparents about their wedding. Was it a traditional ceremony? How did they bring the horses? Were there gifts exchanged? If they had a church wedding, where was it? Who was there? What happened? Learn more about your family backgrounds and share what you learn with each other.
4. Talk about ways you are similar to each other, and ways you are different. Talk about how you can respect each other’s differences.
5. Talk with a couple that you feel has a strong marriage. Ask the couple what values and beliefs they hold that help them have a strong marriage. Ask them how they were able to develop shared values and beliefs.
6. As a couple, dream about a fun vacation. Where will you go? How will you get there? What will you do? Find out what is really important to both of you. This is a time to learn more about your partner’s interests and values.

