Building a Marriage That Lasts

A Clinical Guide to Values, Goals, and the Intentional Work That Keeps Couples Connected

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A message from Dr. Cindy Ruelas-Tafolla:

Most couples spend more time planning their wedding than they do building their marriage. And I understand why -- the wedding is an event. The marriage is a practice. It requires something different from a single celebratory day: it requires ongoing attention, honest conversation, shared intention, and the kind of deliberate effort that does not come naturally when life gets busy, complicated, and real.

In clinical practice, I work with individuals and couples navigating everything from communication breakdowns and accumulated resentment to the quiet erosion of connection that happens not dramatically but gradually -- one deprioritized moment at a time. And what I have observed consistently is this: the couples who maintain genuine connection over time are not the ones who never struggle. They are the ones who struggle with intention -- who have some shared sense of what they are building toward, and who treat the relationship itself as something worth actively tending.

This guide covers two foundational elements of that intentional approach: the role of shared core values in building compatibility that lasts beyond infatuation, and the practice of setting concrete, meaningful goals that orient a marriage toward continued growth rather than gradual drift.

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Why Shared Values Are the Foundation of a Lasting Marriage

Early in a relationship, attraction and shared interests do a lot of the heavy lifting. You love the same music. You both want to travel. You have compatible senses of humor. These things matter -- they generate connection and make time together enjoyable.

But interests shift. Circumstances change. The things that initially drew two people together are often not the things that sustain them when life becomes difficult. What sustains a relationship through difficulty -- through financial stress, parenting conflicts, health challenges, loss, and the slow accumulation of life -- is not shared interests. It is shared values.

A clinical distinction: *Core values are the guiding beliefs that direct your decisions, your behavior, and the way you move through the world -- particularly when things get hard. Interests are what you enjoy. Values are who you are. Compatibility built on interests alone will be tested. Compatibility built on shared core values provides the foundation that makes working through the tests genuinely possible.*

Why values conversations are essential -- and often skipped:

Infatuation creates a values bypass	Early romantic attraction floods the brain with dopamine and oxytocin -- producing a state of heightened engagement that makes differences feel minor and similarities feel profound. In this state, people consistently overestimate compatibility and underestimate the importance of the conversations they are not having. Values alignment cannot be assumed. It has to be explored.
Shared values provide navigational tools for conflict	Every couple will disagree. The question is not whether conflict will occur but whether the two people share enough common ground to navigate it without the relationship becoming the casualty. Couples who have articulated what they both hold as non-negotiable have a reference point to return to when disagreement feels destabilizing.
Values gaps produce chronic low-grade resentment	Couples whose values diverge significantly -- on financial priorities, family investment, communication styles, or fundamental questions about how life should be lived -- often do not fight dramatically about those differences. They accumulate a quiet resentment that gradually erodes warmth, trust, and desire. By the time it surfaces in clinical practice, it has often been building for years.
Values evolve -- and the conversation has to keep up	The values you held at 25 may look different at 40. Major life transitions -- parenthood, career shifts, loss, illness -- reliably reorganize what matters most to us. A marriage built on values alignment requires not a single values conversation but an ongoing practice of checking in, updating, and renegotiating as both people continue to grow.

Your Couples Values Inventory -- Knowing Where You Stand

The following areas represent the most clinically significant domains where values alignment or misalignment shapes the health of a marriage. For each area, discuss honestly -- not where you wish you stood, but where you actually do.

Family and connection

How central is family to your daily life and decision-making? What does family mean to each of you -- immediate household, extended family, chosen family? How much emotional investment do you each bring to family relationships, and what expectations do you carry about how your partner should show up there?

Financial values and security

Not simply your income or spending habits -- but your foundational beliefs about money. Is money a tool, a source of security, a means of freedom, or a measure of success? How do you each relate to financial risk, generosity, savings, and material comfort? Financial disagreements are among the most common relationship stressors -- and most of them are rooted in values, not arithmetic.

Communication and conflict

How do you each define healthy communication? What is your relationship to conflict -- do you engage it directly, avoid it, need time to process before you can address it? What does repair look like to each of you after a rupture? Communication is not just a skill -- it is an expression of how safe you feel bringing your full self into the relationship.

Spirituality, religion, and meaning

Whether or not either partner holds formal religious beliefs, the questions of meaning, purpose, and how to orient a life are ones that every marriage eventually encounters. How do you each find meaning? What role, if any, does spiritual practice or community play? How will these questions show up in parenting, in crisis, in the end of life?

Autonomy and togetherness

Every relationship navigates the balance between individual identity and shared life. How much independence does each of you need to feel like yourself? How much togetherness does each of you need to feel connected? When these calibrations are significantly different, one partner consistently feels smothered and the other consistently feels abandoned -- not because of bad intentions, but because of different values around closeness.

Personal growth and ambition

How important is continued personal and professional growth to each of you? Are you both oriented toward expansion -- building, achieving, developing -- or does one of you value stability and presence more than advancement? Neither is right or wrong. But significant divergence on this dimension can produce a chronic sense of being misunderstood by the person who should know you best.

The values area where we are most honestly divergent -- and how we have been navigating that:

A values conversation we have been avoiding -- and what is stopping us from having it:

Building a Marriage With Intention -- 15 Goals Worth Setting

Marriage goals are not aspirational statements on a vision board. They are deliberate, agreed-upon commitments that orient your daily choices, your communication patterns, and your sense of what you are building together. They function as a compass -- giving the relationship a direction to return to when the inevitable storms of life pull it off course.

1 Protect your time together -- on purpose

The relationship that never receives dedicated, undivided attention gradually becomes a roommate arrangement. Regular, intentional time together -- not discussing logistics, not problem-solving, but genuinely connecting -- is the single most consistent predictor of sustained intimacy.

Clinical note: Date nights or dedicated connection time do not have to be elaborate. What they must be is protected -- treated as non-negotiable rather than optional.

2 Practice deliberate gratitude

Couples who consistently express appreciation -- particularly for the small, ordinary things -- maintain significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction than those who reserve recognition for major moments. Gratitude is not just a warm feeling. It is a practice of noticing what is genuinely good in the person you have chosen.

Clinical note: The couples I see in clinical practice who have lost the most ground are almost universally those who have stopped noticing what the other person is doing right.

3 Talk about money regularly and without shame

Financial conflict destroys more marriages than most people realize -- not because of the money itself but because of the values, fears, and unspoken expectations that money represents. Agreeing to have regular, structured conversations about finances -- not just when there is a problem -- removes the shame and urgency that make money conversations so volatile.

Clinical note: Financial transparency and shared financial decision-making are among the most clinically important structural commitments a couple can make.

4 Listen more than you respond

Genuine communication is not two people waiting for their turn to speak. It is the radical act of being fully present with what your partner is actually trying to say -- including the parts that are hard to hear, incomplete, or expressed imperfectly. Setting the goal of listening to understand rather than listening to respond changes the quality of every conversation.

Clinical note: Validation -- the communication of "I hear you and what you feel makes sense" -- is the single most powerful de-escalation tool available in couples communication.

5 Treat every problem as a shared problem

The moment a problem becomes "your problem" or "my problem" rather than "our problem," the relationship begins to compete with the challenge rather than facing it together. Setting the goal of genuine team orientation -- approaching difficulty as something you tackle from the same side -- shifts the entire emotional architecture of how conflict is experienced.

Clinical note: This is one of the most powerful reframes available in couples therapy: the problem is the problem. Not the partner.

6 Choose connection over being right

Every marriage will produce moments where winning an argument costs more than the argument was worth. The goal is not to suppress genuine disagreement -- it is to remember that being right is a short-term satisfaction while maintaining respect and connection is a long-term investment.

Clinical note: In clinical practice, couples who consistently prioritize being right over being connected are among the most at risk for chronic resentment and emotional distance.

7 Protect your partner's dignity -- always, including publicly

How you speak about your partner when they are not in the room reveals what you actually think of them. How you speak about them when others are present shapes how they feel about being your partner. Setting the goal of never speaking disparagingly about your spouse -- to friends, family, or anyone else -- is a commitment to their dignity that compounds over time.

Clinical note: John Gottman's research identifies contempt -- which often begins with public put-downs -- as the single strongest predictor of relationship dissolution.

8 Navigate in-laws with a united front

The marriage relationship is the primary relationship. Extended family plays a meaningful but secondary role -- and when boundaries around that role are not clearly discussed and agreed upon, in-laws become a source of recurring conflict that erodes both trust and intimacy. Agreeing on what the extended family relationship looks like before problems arise is far more effective than trying to negotiate it in the middle of one.

Clinical note: The most common in-law issue in clinical practice is not the in-laws themselves but the partner who has not yet fully transferred primary loyalty to the marriage.

9 Share the labor of building a home

The research on household labor is consistent and clinically significant: perceived unfairness in domestic responsibility produces resentment, reduces intimacy, and is a significant predictor of relationship dissatisfaction -- particularly for women. The goal is not a perfect 50/50 split in every season but an ongoing, honest conversation about what is fair and a shared commitment to revisiting it as circumstances change.

Clinical note: This conversation is about more than chores. It is about whether both partners feel seen and valued.

10 Celebrate each other's wins -- especially the small ones

Life provides setbacks in abundance. The couples who maintain genuine warmth and affection are those who have cultivated a habit of noticing and celebrating the good -- including the ordinary accomplishments that would otherwise pass unremarked. Celebration communicates: I see you. I am proud of you. Your growth matters to me.

Clinical note: Kapitaniak's research on positive sentiment override shows that couples with a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions demonstrate significantly greater resilience during conflict.

11 Make love a daily verb, not a noun

The romantic love that ignites a relationship is largely neurochemical -- driven by novelty, intensity, and the excitement of discovery. The love that sustains a marriage is something different: it is built through daily, deliberate acts of attention, care, and presence. Small gestures -- a text, a touch, an unexpected act of service -- communicate priority in a language that does not require words.

Clinical note: The attachment research is clear: felt security in a relationship is built through consistent, small acts of presence far more than through grand gestures.

12 Forgive with intention -- not resignation

Forgiveness in a healthy marriage is not the suppression of hurt or the pretense that something did not happen. It is the deliberate choice to release the hold that a past harm has on the present, in order to protect the future of the relationship. This requires acknowledgment from the person who caused harm, genuine repair, and the shared commitment to not using past wounds as weapons.

Clinical note: Chronic unforgiveness -- keeping score, returning to old injuries -- is one of the most reliable predictors of relationship deterioration in clinical practice.

13 Champion each other's individual growth

A healthy marriage does not require two people to merge completely. Each partner has individual dreams, interests, and aspirations that deserve encouragement and space -- even when, especially when, they do not directly involve the other person. The goal is to be each other's most enthusiastic supporter in the full project of becoming who you are each meant to be.

Clinical note: Partners who feel supported in their individual growth consistently report higher relationship satisfaction -- because genuine support produces deeper trust and affection.

14 Honor difference without pathologizing it

Two people who share core values will still have different preferences, opinions, communication styles, and ways of experiencing the world. The goal is not to eliminate difference but to create a relationship culture in which difference is met with curiosity rather than criticism -- where "we see this differently" is the beginning of a conversation, not an accusation.

Clinical note: Contempt -- the experience of viewing a partner's differences as character flaws -- is consistently more damaging than the differences themselves.

15 Stay intentional about staying friends

The couples I have seen sustain the deepest connection over the longest time are the ones who have never stopped being genuinely interested in each other. They laugh together. They are curious about each other. They treat their friendship as something worth tending -- not as a casualty of adulthood and responsibility but as the living core of the life they have built.

Clinical note: Gottman's research identifies fondness and admiration -- the friendship dimension of partnership -- as the most protective factor against marital deterioration.

Your Couples Reflection -- Begin the Work Here

Use these write boxes together. Write honestly -- not the answers that sound right, but the ones that are actually true.

The goal we have been most resistant to setting -- and what that resistance is about:

One specific change we are committing to make in the next 30 days:

The core value we share most strongly -- and how we could honor it more intentionally:

The core value where we diverge most -- and what a honest conversation about that looks like:

The kind of marriage we are building -- described in our own words, not borrowed ones:

Every marriage has seasons of ease and seasons of genuine difficulty. The couples who navigate both are the ones who seek support before the crisis rather than only after it.

Dr. Cindy works with individuals and couples navigating communication breakdown, values misalignment, accumulated resentment, life transitions, and the quiet erosion of connection -- using an integrative, trauma-informed approach grounded in over two decades of clinical experience.

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