

Helping Your Spouse Grow Spiritually

What can you do when you and your spouse don't have the same level of spiritual maturity or interest? The answer doesn't lie in lecturing or manipulating your mate. Instead, consider the following five actions you can take to better understand your spouse and make the concept of spiritual growth more intriguing to him or her.

Be Patient

Whether your spouse is a new Christian, a non-Christian, it's hard not to overreact when he or she doesn't seem to care about the most important thing in your life. But try to remember that God loves your mate even more than you do. He may even be taking your partner on a journey that will ultimately produce a deeper faith.

In any event, be careful. God may *choose* to reach out to your spouse through you, even though He doesn't *need* your help. Sadly, spiritual conflicts are often made worse by a spouse attempting to jump-start a mate's conscience or play the role of the Holy Spirit.

Don't Stand in the Way

While we strive for perfection, your behavior can attract or repel your spouse where spiritual growth is concerned. You're living out what you're experiencing with God. Is it appealing? Is your relationship with Christ making you a more enjoyable person to live with—or just a more religious one? Your mate will benefit from your companionship when you're serious about your devotion to Christ *and* realistic about your struggles, too.

Be Authentic

You should not only share your faith with your spouse, but your concerns as well. It would be hypocritical to pretend you're not worried when a spouse struggles spiritually. But *how* you share may be as important as *what* you share. Very few spouses would react negatively to comments like, "I know you're going to be safe to share this with, but it's still not easy to admit I'm worried about you."

The spouse who struggles with faith issues needs a gentle partner to come home to. **A holier-than-thou approach is sure to deepen the divide**—not only between your partner and yourself, but also between your partner and God (and it can't do much for your own walk with Christ, either). Nobody wants to be smothered, judged or patronized.

When you're honest about your own faith issues, you assure your spouse that it's part of the journey to have questions and doubts. Your transparency can be especially healing if your mate has felt—that spirituality has become a competition in your marriage. This process applies the scriptural idea of comforting others with the same comfort you've received (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Stay Balanced

There's no doubt about the importance of faith. But it's possible to lose a healthy perspective, especially when you feel your mate's Christian commitment is at stake. Even though you believe you can trust God with your partner's spiritual development, you may try to take matters into your own hands.

Sometimes a concerned spouse drops hints or invites others to offer unsolicited counsel to the spiritually indifferent spouse. While well intended, these approaches are manipulative. Others withdraw from a mate and become excessively involved with church or other religious endeavors.

Make no mistake: You can't be too devoted to Christ. Nor should you minimize your faith to accommodate your spouse. But overspiritualization and hyper-religiosity will hinder your efforts as much as falling into the opposite ditch of apathy.

Examine the Reasons

Before you sum up your spouse's struggle as merely a "sin issue," take some time to consider their context. What was his or hers religious experience as a child? Was his/her faith nurtured or hindered? Was his/her parents' faith meaningful or a chore? Has he/she experienced a personal relationship with Christ or mere religion?

The Bible is clear: We're not authorized to judge others (Matthew 7:1). Sometimes in marriage we're prone to judge because of what we know—or *think* we know—about our spouses.

We do know, however, that God cares about our mates. The struggle may take time, and may even challenge our faith. In the meantime, we can trust Him to nurture our spouses and our marriages.

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