

## Family Planning

### Connections: Living Natural Family Planning

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The benefits of NFP extend beyond family planning.

For a newly engaged couple, learning Natural Family Planning (NFP) is informative, interesting, at times a little embarrassing, but always enlightening. Living NFP, on the other hand, is a different story. It is a story about connections, unique and fulfilling. It involves the use of information that we then apply to the reality of everyday married life.

At the beginning of our married life, we used NFP to avoid pregnancy, as the time was not right for it. Currently, we are using NFP to achieve pregnancy. We were delighted to find that the two focuses of NFP have made our young marriage both more focused and more intimate.

Unlike artificial contraception, which usually places full burden of family planning on the woman, NFP promotes shared responsibility of the fertility of both the husband and wife. It lends a spirit of togetherness to a marriage. There's no "Have you taken your pill?" That is, "Are you safe?" In our marriage there's no holding back that precious part of ourselves—our fertility. Rather than a burden to be dealt with, for us it is a blessing to be understood and respected. The complete self-giving says, "I love all of you."

The benefits of NFP extend beyond family planning. We'd heard that often the husband will develop a deeper respect for his wife and the gift of her fertility. In practice, we've found this to be true. A constant awareness of cycles and phases makes it easier to perceive when to be loving and gentle, extra patient and thoughtful, and when to resume physical intimacy.

Unlike a couple using contraception in their marriage, sex is not always an option for two who are living NFP. That's a good thing, contrary to what popular culture might imply. By experiencing times when we cannot engage in physical intimacy, the moments that we can are made all the more poignant and precious. Even when we want to engage, and the chart says "no way, buddy," it lends an element of bittersweet waiting.

After all, consider the alternative: When a woman is on the pill or using some other kind of chemical contraceptive, she's always available for sex. There's no waiting, no longing, just indulging whenever you want. Nice at first, perhaps, but over time spontaneity and passion fade all the more quickly by the frequency of the intimacy. Oftentimes sexual intimacy will become less mutual over time in a contracepting marriage and more mandatory, and thus less rewarding for one or both spouses.

Periodic abstinence in our marriage has opened up broader channels of communication between us. Like many young couples, we both are currently employed. Commuting, daily exercising, paying bills, preparing dinner, outside commitments . . . all are busy but necessary activities in a healthy lifestyle, but collectively tiresome as well. Tired couples find it difficult to talk in the evenings, and would prefer to veg out. We're no different.

But, since NFP holds the key to our family planning, we necessarily discuss personal and intimate topics about our fertility that most couples never broach. These NFP talks are springboards to deeper discourses and more personal dialogue between us. We've both noticed that with time, open and intimate communication is becoming less a difficulty and more a reflex, and we both attribute that in part to NFP. We've found that subjects such as our budget, work, saving for a house, and where we'll spend Christmas are child's play after you can discuss mucus and temperatures with a straight face!

Yes, NFP can be a challenge and a sacrifice at times, and we're not saying it's always easy, but that is part of true love—a bit of sacrifice for the beloved. We find a noble joy in sacrificing ourselves for each other, even in so private a way as withholding intimacy until the time is right; self-sacrifice is an important root element of love, and it builds respect for each other and ourselves. We've also found that a sense of humor helps during the times of no physical intimacy. When the signs of fertility were apparent, we'd jokingly say, "OK, see you in a few days." We've heard some people say they could never follow NFP since they can't have intercourse during the time that they want. We've found that the time of abstinence gives us moments when we can just be together and talk, play tennis, joke, or go out to dinner. It reminds us that we're much more than just physical beings wanting to satisfy a desire.

We're both happy to have learned NFP and to be living it. We know that it is enriching our marriage in our every day life and even in ways we probably won't realize until much later. Knowing that we're building a strong foundation of love, mutual respect and faith gives us confidence in our future. We're best friends who love each other enough to want the best for each other and our marriage.