You're getting married

What to do before, and after, you say, "I do."

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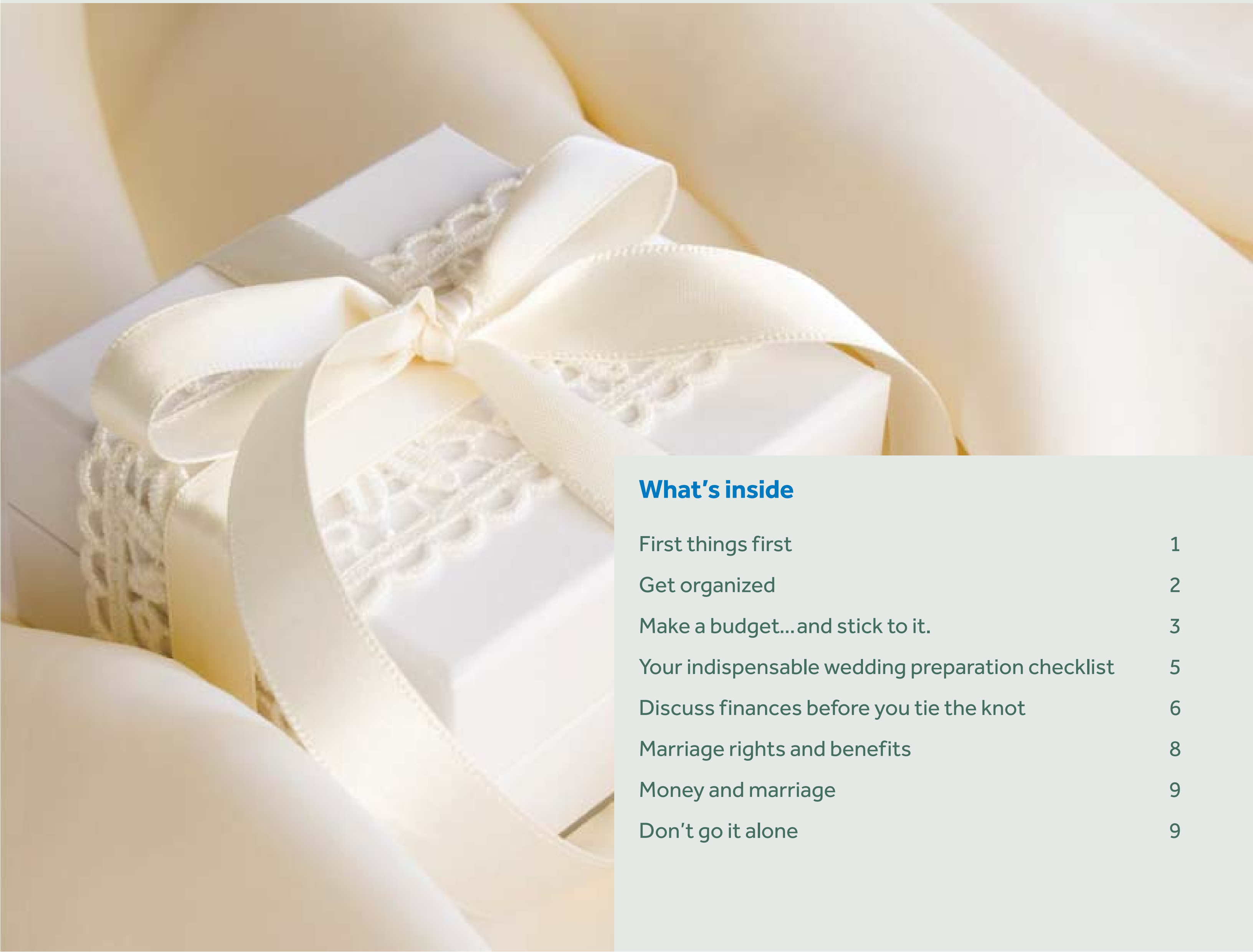
Congratulations on your engagement!

Getting married is one of the most important decisions of your life. Your engagement marks the start of your new life together, and is a time filled with celebration, happiness, and heartfelt wishes for a wonderful future. While it can be one of the most exciting periods of your life, it can also be overwhelming. This guide provides some tips to help you plan for your big day, as well as outline some personal and financial considerations for you and your new spouse.



What's inside

First things first

You've accepted the proposal, and now you're officially engaged. For many, after the first few days or weeks, the glow of a new engagement begins to wear off, and reality sets in—you have to plan a wedding! With so many tasks at hand—from event planning and travel coordination to personal finance—it's no surprise that it can all seem overwhelming. And as a result, planning your special day can sometimes feel more like work than a celebration.

Even though it may feel like all of the details will never be finalized, it is important to realize that everything will fall into place and work out just fine. Consider the following tips to help you approach the wedding planning process with ease, and keep it all in perspective:

- **Enjoy your engagement.** After getting engaged, some couples immediately start planning the wedding. Inevitably, they begin to feel stressed by their seemingly endless task list. Relax, and enjoy being engaged! Take one step at a time, and don't let yourself become overpowered by the planning process.
- **Get some help.** Planning a wedding involves a lot of work. Consider enlisting family and friends to help with some of the details. Or, consider hiring a professional wedding planner to coordinate your big day. In addition to benefiting from a wedding planner's expertise, you will be able to focus on enjoying your engagement! If you want to handle a portion of the arrangements yourself, some wedding planners may also offer à la carte services.
- **Work as a team.** It is important for you and your fiancé to be open-minded and approach the planning process as a team. Talk about your dream day and learn what's most important to each of you. Is a particular location, style, or time of year critical for one of you? Understanding each other's idea of what the ceremony or reception would look like could help to deepen your relationship and develop a new, shared idea.
- **Take care of yourself.** Even though the next few months will be busy, make the time to exercise, eat right, and relax. Not only will you feel and look great for your wedding day, you will also be less stressed in the months leading up to it.
- **It's okay to be nervous.** Getting married is a joyous event. It is also a lifelong commitment, so feeling nervous is not unusual. Accept that what you are feeling is a normal, and healthy, reaction to such a big decision. Confiding in family or a trusted friend can help you work through your feelings.
- **Stay connected.** Under the pressure, stress, and timeline of planning a wedding, it can be easy to drift apart from the person you love the most. Whether scheduled date nights or impromptu activities, make quality time a priority throughout the process of planning your wedding.

Get organized

From food and flowers to finance, coordinating a wedding involves keeping track of many moving parts and a keen attention to detail. With the excitement of a wedding in the air, it's easy to let the details take control and make extravagant —and expensive—decisions. So, soon after becoming engaged, it's important to take a step back and get a handle on what type of celebration you and your fiancé would like to have. Being on the same page will help you to establish joint priorities and create a to-do list, as well as get—and stay—organized.

A little pre-planning can go a long way to making your wedding go smoothly. Understanding some of the key decision points will also help to frame a budget. Discuss the following topics with your fiancé to get started:

- **When would you like to get married?** A typical engagement ranges from six to 18 months. In most cases, the availability of the venue you choose will be instrumental in selecting the actual date of your wedding. Before approaching a venue, consider several factors, such as a season or time of year you both enjoy, or dates that may hold special significance for the both of you.
- **What kind of wedding do you want?** Before you make any formal plans, think about how you want your big day to feel. Have you always envisioned a large, traditional wedding? Or, would you prefer a small, intimate affair? Is a casual setting more your style, or perhaps a black tie event is something you have always dreamed about? Once you decide on the tone of your wedding, it will be easier to select details.
- **What's important to you?** Decide which aspects of your wedding are the most important to you. Does a gourmet menu top the list? Perhaps photos to capture the day are essential. Make a list of everything you want at your wedding, and rank them in order of importance. Knowing your priorities will help you to decide where you want to focus your time and money.
- **Where would you like to be married?** Would you like to be married in your hometown, or where you first met? Or, are you considering a destination wedding? While the location of your wedding is a very personal decision and should reflect what is meaningful to you, consider your guest list and what may be most convenient for the majority to attend.
- **Who should you invite?** One of the first pieces of information that potential venues will request is a preliminary head count, so start making a guest list as soon as possible. Split your list into groups—family, friends, and co-workers—to help stay organized. Categorizing your guest list will also help with the eventual task of coordinating a seating chart at your reception.

Make a budget…and stick to it.

The desire to plan the perfect wedding day, combined with so many possible ways to make it a reality, makes it easy to get carried away. And, while it may not be the most exciting topic associated with planning your wedding, the budget can be the most important. Your wedding budget will affect every choice associated with your wedding, and in turn, every choice you make will affect your budget. Because of that, it is important to talk about how much you can spend before you jump into planning or start making formal arrangements.

A conversation about spending limits is better had earlier than later. Whether to include others in the conversation depends on who may be contributing to the wedding costs. While many couples choose to pay the entire cost of their own wedding, it is still common for each family to cover some of the expenses. If this is the case, it is important that you include them in any budget and planning conversations, and be mindful of their opinions and spending limits.

How much will it all cost?

Answering the all-important question of cost is not as simple as most couples would hope. The total cost of your wedding will depend on a number of factors, such as location, the style of your wedding, and even the date or time of year.

Once these basics are finalized —and before making any specific arrangements—set time for you, your fiancé, and anyone else contributing to your wedding to have an open and respectful discussion about how much you can afford to spend. Consider the following essentials to help you develop a budget that works for you:

- **Draft a guest list.** Because venues generally assess a per person charge, the total number of guests you anticipate will be a critical factor in determining the cost of your wedding. Essentially, more guests mean higher costs. A simple way to control the cost of your affair is to limit the number of guests.
- **Location. Location. Location.** To arrive at a realistic budget, research the average price of weddings in your specific area. The cost of identical services can vary widely from region to region, so something you may consider reasonable in one area may be out-of-reach in another.

Wedding planners recommend that you allocate 40%-50% of your budget to the reception, including the cost of the venue, food, and beverage.

Avoid making expensive arrangements on impulse, and think about each purchase for at least 24 hours. Following this rule-of-thumb will help to control overall wedding costs and allow you the flexibility to build a contingency fund.

- **Research vendor costs.** During the early stages of planning, reach out to vendors, such as a photographer, caterer, florist, and entertainers, to understand their rates. Knowing their cost up front will help you to make accurate decisions about who you ultimately choose to work with, and help shape your wedding budget.
- **Prioritize.** Typically, wedding budgets are broken into categories, such as venue, attire, food, and entertainment. Decide which aspects of your wedding mean the most to you, and allocate your budget, accordingly. For example, if a certain photographer ranks highly with you and your fiancé, make sure you set aside appropriate funds to cover the expense. Be prepared to cut costs in other areas, though, to accommodate your priorities.
- **Start saving.** Once you have estimated an accurate cost, establish a savings plan with your fiancé. Make it a goal to not take a financial loan or charge wedding-related expenses, unless you can pay them off in full.

Interest charges can quickly add hundreds or thousands of dollars to the total cost of your wedding. If funds are a concern, consider a revision to your plans, or moving the date further out to allow you to save more.

Establish a contingency fund

It's a good idea to set up a contingency budget, because things could cost more than you think. Or, an expense may come up that you have not accounted for. When developing your wedding budget, determine how much you would realistically like to spend, and then estimate a maximum number that you could stretch to. Most experts recommend that your contingency fund be approximately 20% of your total budget.

Of course, your goal should be to stay within the wedding budget you have outlined and not dip into your contingency fund. But, if you need to, ensure that accessing this money will not impact your ability to satisfy your regular, recurring expenses, or keep you from saving toward larger financial goals, such as buying a house.

Tips to Help Reduce Wedding Costs	
Avoid "wedding season"	In most regions, the most popular wedding months are from May through October. Weddings scheduled for winter months, like January and February, may be less expensive.
Schedule off-peak times	Talk to your venue or caterer about having your wedding reception at a time other than the traditional evening dinner. Consider a morning brunch or afternoon luncheon. Off-peak days and times may help to alleviate a vendor's peak-time minimum head count requirement.
Look at alternate dining options	Instead of a sit-down dinner, a buffet-style wedding can help to reduce catering and wait staff costs.
Go local	Consider having your reception at a neighborhood park, or a relative's backyard for a more personal event. In addition, a local university's music program can be a low-cost option for entertainment.

Your indispensable wedding preparation checklist

Whatever your budget, you need to carefully consider how and where you are spending your money. As you plan your wedding and honeymoon, use the following checklist to help you keep everything in order and allocate funds. Be sure to stay on top of invoices and receipts, and keep copies of all contracts. It's also a good idea to regularly revisit what you are actually spending against what you intended to spend. This will help to keep your overall budget on track, call your attention to any areas where you may be overspending, and give you the opportunity to determine where you may need to reduce costs. Use the checklist below to help you keep track of all of the details.

Wedding Preparation Checklist
Wedding date:
Wedding party:

Wedding Arrangement	Contact/Details	Estimated Cost	Actual Cost
Ceremony		$	$
Ceremony presider		$	$
Reception venue		$	$
Caterer		$	$
Dress		$	$
Tuxedo		$	$
Florist		$	$
Photographer/videographer		$	$
Music		$	$
Limousine		$	$
Save the date/invitations (including postage)		$	$
Rings		$	$
Marriage license		$	$
Honeymoon		$	$
Other		$	$
	Total	$	$

Discuss finances before you tie the knot

In addition to planning for the start of your married life, you also need to plan your financial life. Marriage is a partnership, and its success, much like that of any other partnership, hinges on factors like openness, trust, respect, and honesty. So, the both of you need to be well-informed and in agreement about all critical aspects of your marriage, especially finances.

Have the "money talk"

Finances can be a difficult topic of conversation, and it can be tough to find the right time and place to talk. Just as couples may schedule special time together for dinners, or joint hobbies, some find it helpful to schedule regular conversations dedicated to money matters. It may not be the most anticipated time together, but being open about your finances can help to establish sound money practices for your marriage, minimize financial conflict, and bring you closer to achieving your joint, long-term goals. Consider the following tips:

- **Communicate often.** Many problems, especially those related to money, stem from a lack of knowledge. It is important that both of you know where you stand financially. It is also helpful to have common short- and long-term financial goals, and agree on how you plan to achieve them.
- **Be honest about financial habits.** It is not uncommon for financial opposites to attract. In fact, couples often find that they have mismatched money styles. One may be a spender, while the other is a saver. This could lead to tension if not openly discussed. Instead of trying to change one another, come together to define joint financial values and habits.
- **Handle debt as a couple.** Make a plan to pay off any existing debt that you may bring into the marriage. Taking the stance that your soon-to-be spouse's debt is something for your spouse to handle on their own may not be productive. Not only does it have the potential to negatively impact your relationship, but paying down debt limits the ability to efficiently save for joint financial goals.
- **Seek assistance.** If the topic of finances, bills, debt, or savings makes either of you uncomfortable or defensive, seek the assistance of a qualified financial professional or counselor to help guide productive conversations. Or, consider enrolling in a financial planning class to learn about saving and investing.

Helpful hint...

If you choose to change your name after marriage, change it in all places, including your credit cards, Social Security card, driver's license, passport, and financial accounts.

Merging finances

There is no single answer to whether or not you should merge your finances after you are married. Different solutions will work for different couples. Unlike years ago, when it was assumed that all accounts would be joint and finances would be completely merged, today is different. Now, it is likely that couples are earning independent incomes and have their own established financial history.

Whether you have joint or separate accounts—or both—is not as important as ensuring that the plan is the right one for your marriage. What you ultimately decide will depend on many factors, such as your current financial situation, your desire for financial independence, and how well your spending and savings' habits align. Consider the following four strategies for sharing financial responsibility.

Strategies for Sharing Finances

Strategy	Who is it good for?	How do you do it?
1. Merge finances	Couples who enter marriage with reasonably similar assets	Establish a joint account to receive all income deposits and pay all expenses, both joint and individual, from this account.
2. Share some, but not all	Couples with relatively equal levels of income and debt	Keep most of your finances separate, except for a single joint account that receives equal contributions for joint expenses. Maintain separate accounts for discretionary spending and individual expenses.
3. Share finances proportionally	Couples earning a disproportionate level of income	Contribute a proportional percentage of income to a joint account and pay all joint expenses from this account.
4. Agree on bill and expense sharing	Couples who do not wish to merge finances	Agree on how bills and expenses should be divided and paid from separate accounts.

After you are married, don't forget to adjust tax withholding from your individual paychecks. Consult the instructions on your Form W-4, or review IRS Publication 919, "How Do I Adjust My Tax Withholding?"

Marriage rights and benefits

Getting married is a big decision that goes beyond making a lifelong commitment. At the moment you say, "I do," your relationship will gain a legal status, and you will receive rights and benefits—both legal and practical—that are not generally afforded to unmarried couples. Some benefits include:

- Estate planning and inheritance benefits.
- The ability to receive Social Security, Medicare, and disability benefits for your spouse.
- The right to make medical decisions if your spouse is unable.
- Tax benefits, when you file jointly.

Filing taxes: Happier returns?

There are certain tax considerations that married couples should be aware of when preparing their tax returns. Speak with your tax or financial professional to help assess your specific situation.

- **Marriage penalty?** Some dual-income couples find that their combined tax bill is larger than it would have been had they filed individually. Where this was more of a concern years ago, tax law changes have eased the possible penalty through changes to the standard deduction. However, couples can still be impacted by the marriage penalty if combined income levels push them to a higher tax bracket.
- **Largest standard deduction.** In the past, the standard deduction had been a primary cause of the marriage penalty. Before Congress passed the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001, the standard deduction for married couples was less than twice the amount for singles. Now, the standard deduction for married couples filing jointly is twice as much as the deduction for singles.
- **Spousal IRA.** An Individual Retirement Account (IRA) allows you to make tax-deductible contributions to a retirement savings account, according to specific annual limits. Because an IRA is an individual account, you can only deduct contributions you make to your own IRA. But, once you are married and meet certain conditions, you can also pay money into your spouse's IRA and apply eligible deductions to your joint tax return.*

*Spousal IRA limits are adjusted for every tax year. Consult your tax and financial professionals for guidance.

Money and marriage

Once you are married, you will be able to settle into being a family and enjoying married life. You will be able to share your hopes and dreams, your home, and your finances. Money and marriage are age-old topics of conversation that can sometimes be the subject of tension, but that doesn't have to be the case.

Many of the exercises that you completed when planning for your wedding—from outlining priorities to setting spending limits—are the same exercises that you should repeat to help lay the groundwork for a successful and happy financial life.

- **Be open.** Make it a point to have regular "finance meetings" in your home to discuss goals, income, and expenses. Work as a team to understand where your money should be allocated and how it is actually being spent. Address any conflicting spending habits early.
- **Establish financial goals.** It is important to be on the same page when it comes to money. Just as you outlined what was important to each of you when you were planning your wedding, openly discuss your financial objectives and what you both want to accomplish.
- **Create a budget.** Outline a monthly budget to help satisfy your living expenses and other financial goals. Strive to build an emergency fund that would cover three to six months of expenses.
- **Develop a savings plan.** There is no better time than now to begin building wealth for your future together. As you develop your monthly budget, allocate a portion of your income to savings or investments. Regularly putting money aside will help you to satisfy your short- and long-term financial goals.
- **Recognize individual financial savvy.** Instead of defaulting to more traditional financial roles, recognize each other's strengths and divide the financial tasks accordingly.

Post-Wedding Checklist		
	Update your beneficiary designations	Review and update your beneficiary designations, including insurance policies, bank accounts, and retirement plans.
	Review your insurance coverage needs	Work with your financial professional to review your insurance policies to ensure that they are appropriate for your new marital status.
	Coordinate workplace benefits	Review the benefit plans available to you and your spouse. Most employers allow you to add your spouse to your plan within 30 days of getting married.
	Update your emergency contact list	Many membership groups and employers require an emergency contact. Update this information to reflect your new spouse.
	Update/Create a will or trust	Estate planning is an important responsibility associated with your new family.

Don't go it alone

Getting married is a big step, and a big change. It means sharing your home, dreams, life, and financial responsibilities. Including a financial professional in your pre- and post-wedding preparations can help you to establish joint financial priorities, get on the same page with money matters, and ensure that your financial plan aligns with your new life as a couple.

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