

MAKING YOUR MARRIAGE WORK¹

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Half of all the couples marrying today will end in divorce. In previous generations it was not surprising to hear that a couple was celebrating their twenty-fifth, thirtieth, or even fiftieth wedding anniversary. Will any of the current generation celebrate these milestones? What can people do to increase the probability of a long and satisfying marital relationship?

Marriage today is far more complex. In the 1950s and earlier, roles for men and women were clearly defined. Each partner knew what was expected of him or her. People referred to men's work and women's work. If each partner filled those explicit expectations, there was a reasonably good chance that the marriage would endure. Even personality styles were prescribed. Men were supposed to be strong, silent, competent, unemotional, problem-solvers, good providers, handy around the house and protectors. Women were supposed to be good cooks, competent housekeepers, seamstresses, social, religious and nurturers. Men and women cut each other a great deal of slack in other areas, so long as each played by the prescribed rules and played their socially defined roles. With the technological evolution, the women's movement and increased life expectancy, came a profound change in these static, traditional roles.

People began to question what they wanted out of marriage. Families relied more upon hired domestic help in the form of housekeepers, caregivers and day care to fulfill many of the customary roles. Marriage began to take on a different meaning and serve a different purpose than was traditionally the case. If we add to this mix the awareness that we simply live longer than in previous generations, it becomes obvious that "until death do us part" means a lot longer than at any time in history. When folks are living well into their 80s and marry in their 20s, the span of time could be over 60 years. It becomes possible for us to consider multiple long-term relationships. People can consider one type of relationship for their childbearing years, and another type of relationship for the years afterwards. We can even consider having more than one family, i.e., raising children with more than one partner.

Despite all of these changes, most people enter marriage carrying with them many of the same beliefs appropriate for the previous traditional marriage. Their consciousness has not caught up with the reality of the times. Hence, when they marry they often find that

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their traditional beliefs are ineffective, leaving them with few guidelines on how to be in a marriage. Today's marriages, more than any time in history, depend upon more upon communication, intimacy, relating, compromise, negotiation and understanding. We must be able to negotiate in the living room and make love in the bedroom, and be skilled at both. Expectations in loving have similarly changed. Since love-making is no longer exclusively for the purpose of procreation, no longer just for a man's pleasure, and it is no longer expected that men be more knowledgeable and experienced than women, then couples expect more from one another, requiring greater communications between them.

Since both sexes are equally able to perform nearly all of the tasks required in a marriage, neither has to depend on the other for these abilities. Even the issue of having children no longer is necessary for marriage. People can choose to have children or not and can have children without having a partner. Even adoption is possible for single individuals. Therefore, the very basis for marriage changes from fulfilling certain functions to fulfilling emotional and psychological needs.

In order to learn more about how people maintain long-term marriages, and what some of the impediments to them might be, psychologists went out into the field to learn more.

Psychologist, Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, co-author of *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*, carried out in-depth interviews with 50 couples who have been married at least nine years, had children together, and independently and who independently regarded their marriage as happy. Dr. Wallerstein identified nine "psychological tasks" as the pillars on which any marital relationship rests. The following are Dr. Wallerstein's nine tasks:

Separate emotionally from one's childhood so as to invest fully in the marriage and, at the same time, to redefine the lines of connection with both families of origin.

Build togetherness based on mutual identification, shared intimacy and an expanded conscience that includes both partners, while at the same time setting boundaries to protect each partner's autonomy.

Establish a rich and pleasurable sexual relationship and to protect it from the incursions of the workplace and family obligations; it is the second part of this task which must not be overlooked or taken for granted.

(for couples with children) Embrace the daunting roles of parenthood and to absorb the impact of Her Majesty the Baby's dramatic entrance into the marriage. At the same time the couple must continue the work of protecting their own privacy.

Confront and master the inevitable crises of life and maintain the strength of the marital bond in the face of adversity and create a safe haven within the marriage for the expression of difference, anger and conflict.

Use humor and laughter to keep things in perspective and to avoid boredom and isolation.

Provide nurturance and comfort to each other, satisfying each partner's need for dependency and offer continuing encouragement and support.

Keep alive the romantic, idealized images of falling in love, while facing the sober realities of the changes wrought by time.

Dr. Wallerstein's tasks are not easy. To accomplish them requires that each spouse be committed to enhancing their marriage and making it work. In addition, they require that each spouse be equally committed to their own personal growth as well as the growth of their partner. The preservation and enhancement of the marriage partnership must be a top priority,

Psychologist Dr. Howard Markman at the University of Denver believes that "Love and commitment to the relationship are necessary for a good marriage, but they are not enough. What are needed, on top of that, are skills in effective communication and how to handle conflict." Dr. Markman, along with Dr. Clifford Notarius of Catholic University of America, studied 135 about-to-be-married couples. **"How you handle conflict is the single most important predictor of whether your marriage will survive,"** according to Dr. Markman. These researchers found that certain behavior patterns usually signaled an impending collapse in the marriage:

- When either partner -- although it is most often the male -- withdraws from conflict.
- The tendency to escalate conflict in the face of disagreement and the inability to stop fights before they get ugly.
- The tendency to invalidate the relationship by hurling insults at each other. Dr. Markman says, **"one 'zinger' counteracts 20 positive acts of kindness."**

You should note that neither Wallerstein nor Markman say that we should avoid conflict. Conflict in marriage is inevitable. How we deal with conflict is the important issue.

In addition to the suggestions already made, the following additional ideas have been culled from the literature on what makes for a successful marriage as well my clinical experience with hundreds of couples.

Be Realistic. Couples often go into marriage with idealistic notions of what marriage is all about. These ideas are handed down from generation to generation or gleaned from popular magazines, TV shows, or simply conjured from their own fantasies of what they would like. Each individual should make clear what their explicit and implicit expectations are and clarify these expectations such that they are clearly understood by one another. Where there are discrepancies, a mutually satisfying compromise must be reached.

Do Not Take One another For Granted. This can be a killer for a relationship. It usually occurs sometime after the honeymoon period. When our partner feels taken for granted, not respected or acknowledged, and feels that others are a higher priority than him/herself, resentment brews. A regular “state of the union” check-in with your spouse as to how s/he is feeling about the relationship can help avert resentment build-up.

Communication Skills. Being able to communicate is one of the greatest assets in any relationship. Being able to articulate our thoughts and being certain that the listener understands what you wish to say take considerable practice. Often we believe we are saying one thing, while the listener is hearing something entirely different. The listener often is responding to either what they believed you to say or their own interpretation. Communication requires both good transmission skills (articulation) and good receptive skills (listening). Without both, communication will be at best difficult. The next time you want to discuss something important with your spouse, follow the following steps:

- *Arrange for a convenient meeting time rather than trying to have a discussion on the fly when it is likely to be interrupted.*
- *Find a “talking stick” (any small object will do). So long as one person is hold the stick, that person also holds the floor. Once the stick is passed, it becomes the other person’s time to talk. This technique prevents interruptions.*
- *Express your point, and then, passing the stick, ask your spouse to repeat what you said so that you can be certain that you were at least heard. If your partner is not able to repeat what you said or you do not feel understood, repeat your point until you are satisfied.*
- *The listener’s job during this exercise is to be certain you understand and communicate that understanding to your spouse before you comment on the content of what you are being told.*
- *Once your partner feels heard, then it becomes your turn to comment and be heard.*
- *Continue this process until resolution, passing the “talking stick” and alternately being in the role of transmitter and receiver.*

This approach, often referred to as “active listening,” once learned can prevent misunderstandings and serve to keep emotions under control. It is difficult to react emotionally if you are truly listening and have to communicate understanding before you get a chance to react.

Regular Meetings. There are two types of meetings that can facilitate communication: a business meeting and a date night. Couples often find that scheduling regular business meetings, just as one would do in a business partnership, to discuss the business of the marriage is helpful and indicates that the marriage is a high priority in their life. Date night is one evening each week set aside for the purpose of emotional connecting. No business matters are discussed. Each partner takes responsibility on alternative weeks for planning the date, just as they might have done during courtship. Dates do not have to be elaborate events. A picnic on the bedroom floor or at the park at sunset can be every bit as romantic as a \$100 dinner.

Keep the Romance Alive. Maintaining the romance in a relationship is vital to the vibrancy of the relationship. Once folks marry they often become quite lax in this department. They allow business, chores, and children to get the way of their romantic life. In a busy life, especially if there are children, it takes considerable effort to maintain romance. But it is worth it. It takes planning, creativity and commitment.

Develop Sexual Skills. People believe that having sex is just “doing what comes naturally.” Believing this is like thinking that world-class ballroom dancers are simply born -- no rehearsals, no practice, no innovation, no experimentation, and no mistakes. No one would believe that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers did not practice in order to be graceful as they appeared on screen. The same holds true for sexual activity in the bedroom. **Good lovers are made, not born.** Many times men and women believe that somehow the man is supposed to “know” what to do and be good at it. Fearing failure, they do only what is tried and true. One of the most common problems that couples have is the lack of innovation. Sex becomes boring. Such predictability can lead to staleness and apathy. Communication about sexuality, and the willingness to experiment will keep the bedroom activities exciting, interesting and fun.

Be Complimentary. It costs nothing to compliment your partner and it sure feels good to receive them. We are often chary about paying compliments to our mates, letting them know that we think they are pretty/handsome, smart, clever, well-dressed, kind, a good parent, etc. We do not have to wait until some occasion when we purchase a greeting card to let our mates know that we think they are special.

Show Appreciation. Another small thing that feels good. Thanking your partner for making dinner or taking out the trash, picking up clothes from the dry-cleaners, and in general letting him/her know that s/he is appreciated can go along way in creating a caring environment. Couples are very quick to criticize one another when chores do not get done, but they are very remiss when it comes to showing appreciation.

As you can see from the foregoing, maintaining a contemporary marriage is no easy task. It requires hard work. To think that a successful marriage -- that is a relationship between two people that is fulfilling, enhancing of one's sense of self-esteem, emotionally gratifying, nurturing, and supportive -- can be achieved by merely living under the same roof without investing effort and time, would be naive thinking. Some individuals believe that marriage should be easy, and if it is not, they think something is wrong.

Marriage, like any other worthwhile endeavor, requires patience and practice. When there is difficulty, it may require outside help. Just as a business may require a consultant, so too might a marriage. Today's marriages are more than just two people living under the same roof. They are complex and dynamic entities that become even more complex as children enter the picture. For then there are additional dynamics that must be incorporated into the mix. Maintaining a marriage is one of our most significant challenges.