

Marriage That Lasts a Lifetime

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The engagement parties, the wedding showers, the big day itself, and the honeymoon have all come and gone. They were wonderful, the memories are still fresh, and you want to keep the delight alive as long as you can.

You've heard that relationships change over time, that challenges will present themselves, and that the "spark" won't last forever. Part of you knows all that is true. But you are determined to not let that happen. Here's a recipe for how you can keep your relationship glowing in the first few years of marriage—and beyond.

Commit to yourselves that you will never take your relationship for granted. It's all too easy in the hurly-burly of everyday life, to get caught up in the externals of life such as work, household chores, television, and the internet. Even family and friends can draw attention away from your spouse.

Marriage entails making adjustments, and changing ingrained patterns of behavior can be challenging. A lot of the challenge is about finding the right balance: the balance between together time and alone time, between couple time and time with family and friends, between work and play, between fun time and down time. Finding the right balance often involves setting boundaries, establishing priorities, and making commitments that will increase the odds that certain things actually happen.

You may be wondering: Does this leave any room for spontaneity, or do we have to so regiment our married life together that all the fun gets squeezed out of it? There's a challenge there, too: over-regimenting one's life can be as non-nurturing of your relationship as taking an approach that is too laid back and unstructured.

So here are some concrete steps that will keep your relationship vibrant.

First, commit to scheduling a minimum of fifteen to twenty minutes each day where you sit down with one another just to touch base. A wonderful way to begin this daily check-in time is to share a 'partner appreciation' with each other. A 'partner appreciation' is something you like or admire about your spouse, or something that you appreciate that he or she did. Then you can share how your day went, how you're feeling at the moment, or small points that you'd like to catch up on. However, this is not a time for complaints or big issues. Keep it positive.

Second, engage in mutual physical touch each day. This may sound like a no-brainer and the last thing that you would ever have to think about. "We touch one another all the time!" you might be saying to yourself. Over time, however, anything that initially may have been fresh and spontaneous runs the risk of becoming overly familiar and even routine. At that point you may start paying less attention to one another's physical needs, and what had once seemed so natural and spontaneous begins to fall by the wayside. The antidote is to bring active awareness to engaging each other in physical touch, so that it remains fresh in the moment.

Third, do something fun at least once each week. Yes, you probably are having lots of fun most of the time at this point in your marriage. But beware of the gradual creep of those external pressures such as work, friends, family, or volunteer commitments that can begin to push having fun into the background.

Fourth, structure into your schedule a weekly dialogue time where you sit down together for an extended conversation about a significant issue, a potential or real problem area, or even ways to enhance your relationship. The key to a successful dialogue is to follow a few simple guidelines:

- Only one person talks at a time, and the other person does not interrupt.
- The person who is talking shares his or her feelings, concerns and desires regarding the issue at hand.
- The other person tunes in empathically, listens intently, then verbally acknowledges what the other person has shared. This is to be done without adding any commentary from your own point of view, but do try to “read between the lines” to identify what is implied in what your partner has shared.
- Repeat, perhaps several times, with each person remaining in the same role.
- Change roles so that the other person has a chance to express his or her feelings, concerns, and desires about the issue at hand. It is helpful for the new person expressing to begin by saying what makes sense to you about what your partner has shared.
- The partner’s job now is to tune in empathically, listen intently, and verbally acknowledge what the other person has shared.
- Repeat, and go back and forth as long as necessary until both of you feel well understood.
- When appropriate, aim to come up with a solution that leaves both of you feeling that your concerns and desires have been taken into account, creating a win-win solution. The “secret” here is to commit yourselves to meeting your spouse’s needs as much your own.

This leads to one final recommendation: If you have not already done so, attend a marriage education seminar in order to learn how to communicate and dialogue more effectively. This in turn will enable you to deal with the inevitable issues that come up in any marriage in a manner that minimizes hurt feelings and disappointment and maximizes the satisfaction of being able to deal with issues in a constructive and respectful manner.

Repeat liberally every few years and reap the rewards of a relationship that renews itself through a mutual commitment to enhancing your relationship.

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