

Recipe for a Happy Marriage

In the movie *City Slickers*, Daniel Stern's character, the henpecked husband Phil, described the best day of his life as his wedding day. He talked about how beautiful his wife looked, the warm smiles that came from his friends, and the way his usually unexpressive father winked at him. He said that it made him feel like a real man and it was the best day of his life. Then, when asked about the worst day of his life, he said, "Every day since is a tie."

It seems that relationships often change after the "I do's" are spoken.

Nearly everyone aspires to and fully expects to have a wonderful and long life with their spouse. Couples typically invite all their friends and family members to witness the celebration. They stand before the clergy or a judge and publicly vow to be committed to and love their spouse "until death do us part." Then they symbolically seal this bold and legal proclamation with the eternal circle of a wedding ring and a passionate kiss.

It is very sobering that nearly half of these folks eventually get divorced. Many others simply limp along for years with unhappy marriages filled with conflicts and resentments.

Yet, there are also those exceptional marriages that remain bursting with love and happiness and pleasure. In fact, many couples actually do end up living "happily ever after." What accounts for the difference? What are some of the ingredients in

the recipe for a happy marriage? Surely good marriages are based on something more than just dumb luck. In the following, some of the ideas that appear to strengthen and sustain good marriages will be explored.

Marry the right person

It's a lovely romantic notion that there is a single perfect soul mate out there for everyone, and if fate allows, the two of you will magically find each other. It's also a rather silly notion. In truth, there are many wonderful men and women "out there" who could potentially be a great spouse for you. Your job is to find just one. This may well be the most important decision you ever make in your life.

I advise making two lists. The first list is "How do I feel about this person?" Here you consider your feelings of passion and love. Does that guy or gal make your heart skip a beat? Do they add positive energy to your life? Do you really love them? But beware because it is easy to have strong feelings of love toward someone who will be a lousy spouse. You could develop strong loving feelings toward someone who is abusive, addicted to drugs, unfaithful, irresponsible with money, or mentally ill. That special attraction and love toward your spouse is essential, but it's certainly not enough.

So I strongly suggest constructing a second list. List number two is, "What are the qualities I want in my spouse?" This checklist is far more logical and practical and may include things like:

- Good with money
- Trustworthy

- Comes from a welcoming family
- Shares my religious values
- Handles conflict easily
- Loves children

Here you should think about the character and behavior and background of your potential lifetime partner. Of course, you can put whatever is important to you on the list, even more superficial things like:

- Follows a vegetarian diet
- Is neat and clean
- Is always on time
- Embraces my Libertarian politics.

When you choose your spouse, it is important to avoid what I call a “fixer-upper.” For the most part, what you see is what you get. Most people reveal their qualities over time (a good reason to have an extended courtship) and most people don’t change dramatically after they recite wedding vows. So, it is important to recognize the weaknesses, annoying habits, eccentricities, and character flaws in your partner because those things will all be invited into your marriage.

Oftentimes partners grow to loath each other over habits that were obvious prior to the marriage. Men with violent tempers generally don’t become mild mannered after the marriage. A ring on a finger does not turn an overly emotional woman into someone who’s laid back. If you are dating someone who abuses alcohol or drugs, has a spotty employment record, or is overly attached to mommy, don’t expect them to change after the honeymoon. In

psychology, we like to say that the past is the best predictor of the future. So, choose your spouse with great care.

Find someone who enjoys some of the same things you do because shared activities are a great way to enhance your relationship. And while it is important to have some shared interests and activities, it also is good to have some that you don't share. You will remain individuals, so if one of you really enjoys ballet and the other football, that's just fine. Encourage and support your spouse for having some different hobbies and activities. And allow your spouse to respectfully dislike some of the things that you enjoy.

Embrace commitment

Marriage is a solemn promise of faithfulness to your partner. It is not a promise made with the contingency that all bets are off if you find yourself feeling less lovingly toward your spouse. Yet, many point to that "loss of love" as a justification for divorce. "We just grew apart," is a familiar refrain. But at its best, marriage is an earnest pledge to stay loyal to the relationship, no matter what happens. The marriage vow almost always contains language such as, "I will love and respect you for better for worse, in sickness and in health, in wealth and poverty, until one of us dies." Good marital relationships start with a mutual promise to nurture and maintain the love bond and to make repairs when needed. The option to cut and run is taken off the table so that problems can be addressed and mutual love can be rekindled.

Of course, infidelity is the surest way to destroy a marriage. So, there is great wisdom in simply never placing yourself in situations

where temptation could lead to an impulsive and fateful decision. Couples should regularly reaffirm their strong commitment to each other.

Be More Than Friends

I sometimes hear folks talk about husbands and wives being “best friends.” While there is something nice about that sentiment, I believe that in great marriages, your partner is far more than your best friend; your partner should be your most intimate human connection. You sleep with your spouse, probably have children together, likely bury your parents together, and hopefully grow old together. So, find a spouse who is more than just your best friend; find a spouse who is your most favorite person.

Accept reality

All marital relationships are complex and occasionally messy. Marriages are dynamic and ever changing and adapting. The initial lust we feel toward our spouse invariably wanes with time and age, and that is normal and expected. Marital relationships get complicated by jobs, children, finances, extended families, illness, and much more. This means that there will be an ebb and flow to your relationship and even the greatest marriages have less-than-wonderful times. Trust that the relationship can weather some darker seasons.

No matter who you marry, that person will not be perfect. We all have our little quirks and irritating habits and most of these are resistant to change. My advice is to not let minor things become major problems. Don't let perfect become the enemy of very

good. If you endlessly harp about relatively insignificant things, you're being a nag. Take a deep breath and chant the mantra, "It's not a big deal", over minor annoyances.

Praise and recognition of desirable behavior remains the most powerful tool for encouraging that behavior. Rather than focusing on the things that you want your partner to change, attend to the things he or she does that you appreciate. Compliment the ordinary, recognize improvements, say, "Thank you" often. Regularly take inventory of the nice things you may be taking for granted, and then acknowledge them.

Practice frequent nonsexual intimacy

While a healthy sexual relationship with your spouse is important, there is something you should engage in much more frequently. I call it nonsexual intimacy. What I mean by that is things like hugging and touching in a nonsexual manner, sharing common interests and activities, verbally expressing feelings and love, showing mutual respect, and giving compliments. Being exceptionally nice and polite to each other is something you should practice every single day.

Develop habits around kissing each other goodbye, hugging often, holding hands, saying "I love you" and taking time to talk and listen. Celebrate special days (or even better, random days) with love notes or simple gifts. Offer back rubs or foot massages without the expectation of it leading to hanky panky. Do extra chores or errands to assist your weary spouse. I believe that intimacy, not sex, is the most important ingredient to making a marriage flourish.

Many couples start out doing this early in their marriage, but as time goes on, they stop “being nice.” Niceties should not end after the proverbial “honeymoon period.” We’ve all seen those cute elderly couples who tenderly show each other respect and affection in their senior years. That should be your goal.

Stop waiting for change

Something that many of us do in our marital relationships is keep track of and regularly review a mental list of the things that our spouse should change. Early in my career, when I was forced to do marriage counseling, couples would invariably come in with a laundry list of the habits and annoyances of their spouse that they hoped therapy would fix. It was only with some reluctance that they would acknowledge that there may be a few minor things they too should change, but they would only commit to changing themselves if their partner changed first.

This notion of “I’ll change if you do first” is a recipe for relationship stagnation. Lawyers call this notion *quid pro quo*. I do for you if you do for me. It may work to craft political deals, but it does not have a place in strong loving marriages. Instead, adopt the notion “I love my spouse enough to do nice things without the expectation of something in return.” This idea of showing love through actions that have no strings attached is one of the best foundations for a strong relationship.

The fact of the matter is that most of us are already acutely aware of the little things we do or don’t do that annoy our partner, as well as the little things they appreciate. Use that knowledge to guide

your behavior and it will improve your marriage. I often remind folks of the obvious axiom that the best way to get someone to treat you nicer is to treat them nicer.

Market your spouse

In the age of social media, over-sharing has become epidemic. This becomes a particularly bad idea when you are sharing complaints about your spouse. Even talking with family members or your best friends about spousal conflicts or problems is likely to impede your marital relationship. Keep in mind that your friends are usually biased and will nearly always take your side and agree with you. Their confirmation should not be viewed as validation of your righteousness. And keep in mind that those with whom you share dirt about your partner will have long memories for the negative things you say.

A better idea is to recognize and tout your partner's strengths, successes, and kindness. My beautiful wife was an awesome cook, incredible mother, and a truly fun person to be around, and everyone who knew me, knew how much I revered her. I made it clear that marrying Nancy was like winning the relationship lottery. But I chose not to share the little things that irritated me about her, like how she was unable to go to Walgreens without buying at least one bottle of nail polish and a tube of lipstick. And if we ever had a "fight," we only discussed it with each other. My "princess" wasn't perfect, but I usually talked about her as if she was.

Share finances

The number one source of conflict in marriage is money. Who controls the money and how you make financial decisions is an important topic to discuss prior to and during marriage. Some couples decide that one partner is far more skilled at such things as investments and budgeting. That's fine, but finances usually work best when they are a shared venture with both partners having input and awareness. There are many ways to work this out, but joint accounts and mutual decision making speaks to a union, while separate money and nondisclosed expenses suggest otherwise.

Here's a tip that has worked well for many couples. First, agree upon a budget so that you have a clear plan of how to spend your money. Then, once every week or two, sit down together and pay the bills, review on-line payments, and examine credit card statements. That way you both see where your money is going. And have an agreement that neither of you spends more than a specified amount without first consulting the other.

Share Domestic Chores

It is very common for couples to argue about domestic chores. One spouse may feel that they are doing the bulk of the work, while their spouse is not carrying his or her weight. There is no magical formula for how to divide these tasks, but it should be done in a way that is agreeable to both parties. Traditionally, women did more of the household chores because they often did not have careers outside of the home. But that is no longer the case, so dividing chores by gender is an outdated notion. Regardless of work schedules, it is important that both spouses

share in the care of the home and children. The sharing does not have to be equal, but it should be fair and acceptable to both.

Resolve Conflicts

Occasional squabbles in marriage are unavoidable and every couple needs to find ways to manage conflict. The key is learning how to handle problems through nonaggressive negotiation. Here are a few tips.

First of all, communication should be respectful so avoid the use of profanity and yelling. Try to remember that how you express yourself is often more important than the content of what you say. Secondly, learn to listen. The mistake many of us make is that we talk too much and then plan our counter-attack while our partner is speaking, rather than genuinely listening to what they are saying. It's often helpful to have the listener summarize what their partner said before responding. Thirdly, stay focused on the issue at hand without bringing up previous wrongdoings. This is sometimes known as "gunny sacking," or saving up a history of past transgressions and "emptying the bag" during a fight. Avoid the use of words like "always" and "never" and stay attentive to the specific issue at hand. Finally, learn to give in and compromise. Conflicts should not become competitions with winners and losers. If you are determined to win every argument, expect to have an unhappy spouse. Unless the issues are central to your basic principles, don't treat every argument as "the hill I'm willing to die on." The real goal of conflict is to reach a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution.

If you are one of those people who find it difficult to apologize, you need to change your behavior. Those who readily apologize are usually deeply appreciated by their spouse. The same is true with forgiveness. Some embrace a refusal to forgive as a virtue, at the expense of making themselves miserable by regularly reminding themselves of their partners' perceived misbehavior. Forgiveness frees you from holding on to your anger and hurt.

Believe in resurrection

Once upon a time you fell in love and choose each other as that one special person to marry. "Life happens" after the nuptial and that can lead to a real deterioration in our relationships. But I believe that most couples can find a way to resurrect their marriage.

Think back to the love and desire that was present when you married. Make a mutual commitment to rediscover those feelings by spending time together, renewing your vows, or seeking professional counseling. And never stop having date nights and honeymoons. Know that the passion you once felt can truly be recaptured.

Understand the importance of little things

It is amazing how "little things" can have a big effect on marital quality. I learned that doing inconsiderate little things like putting my socks inside out in the hamper and leaving shaving debris in my sink, really irritated my wife. And once I realized this, I mostly stopped doing it. And I so appreciated how my wife organized my sock drawer by color, from blue to brown to black, due to my dim

color vision. And she always filled my car with gas when she used it. Small thoughtful behaviors send large messages of love.

From time to time, discuss the little things you can do to improve your marriage and better support your spouse. Never stop looking for little things to add to your ongoing self-improvement plan.

Have a Healthy Sexual Relationship

Okay, at last we come to the issue of sexual relations. I saved it for last because it is often overestimated in its importance. Sex is not the central ingredient in a good marriage, but it is like an important spice in a delicate dish. A healthy sexual relationship is essential, but it is not sufficient to insure a great marriage.

At its best, a healthy sexual relationship is an expression of physical intimacy and a reflection of your bond of love. Giving and receiving pleasure through sex can be a beautiful manifestation of a couple's affection. And whether it is spontaneous or scheduled, it is something that usually happens regularly in good marriages. Many find that a good sexual relationship relieves stress, increases feelings of affection, and even aids sleep.

View your sex life as an important part of your intimacy and avoid withholding sex as a tool of manipulation. It is not unusual that one partner (oftentimes the man) desires sex more frequently than the other. My flip advice to a nagging husband is that many women find that seeing a man doing household chores or childcare makes them feel more sexually attracted to him. Harping and complaining about it does the opposite.

Cultivating a good marriage pays countless dividends in terms of health and happiness to you, your spouse, and your family. Staying together through difficult times will strengthen your relationship. Back away from the cliff of divorce. When couples spit up, it often takes a terrible toll on them as individuals and on their children and extended family as well. While it may seem that divorce will lead to new roads to happiness, the reality is that the divorce rate for second marriages is actually higher than for first marriages.

I hope that some of the ideas here will help you in your quest to have a wonderful marital relationship.

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