

Marital Bliss: Reality or Suburban Myth?

How to keep your marriage going strong

BY NANCY A. SHENKER

More than 400,000 adults in Westchester County are married. How many of them are still wildly in love with their spouses?

No statistics are readily available, but overheard conversations at the gym, on the train or in the local nail salons may paint a less-than-idyllic picture. In fact, only 52 percent of married people in the U.S. reach their 15th wedding anniversaries.

However, many couples are determined to keep their marriages alive and well. Like diet and exercise, marital health is a discipline that requires commitment, humor, flexibility, introspection and hard work, according to marriage professionals and couples who have passed the 15-year mark.

Working at a Healthy Marriage

"When you fall in love, it's a spontaneous natural experience," asserts Mort Fertel, a Baltimore-based marriage coach and author of the book "Marriage Fitness: 4 Steps to Building and Maintaining Phenomenal Love" and a tip-filled web site called *marriagemax.com*. "But that experience can fade over time. You have to work at keeping a marriage healthy. Sustaining love takes wisdom and discipline."

In fact, his entire approach is based on establishing a series of routines and habits that can bring love and excitement back into a dimming relationship.

One technique he recommends is "talking to your spouse for at least 60 seconds each day about things other than kids or money." He believes that by creating conversations that are loving, fun and frivolous, people can resurrect some of the feelings they had when they were first dating. He is also a strong proponent of a regular date night



"Keep the communication going, be willing to see your partner as an ally, do not use your kids as pawns in arguments and choose your 'venting places' carefully."

Joe Provetto, C.S.W.

for couples, and strict adherence to four basic rules for that activity: "1) Get out of the house; 2) Don't go to the movies or any other place that involves silence; 3) Do not include other couples; and 4) Schedule at least an hour for the evening."

Some Chappaqua residents, who requested anonymity, offer up their own words of wisdom for keeping a marriage alive and well. (See box.) One woman put it quite simply, "You have to just treat your spouse the way you want to be treated. If you always keep that in mind, conflicts don't escalate."

Both Partners Pitch In

Unlike a commitment to lose five pounds or get stronger abs, building a healthy marriage is difficult because it involves two people.

"Partners must be willing to accept 50 percent of what goes on in a marriage as being their own responsibility," Joe Provetto, C.S.W., a psychotherapist based in Westchester and Manhattan, said. "Many couples who have issues with marriage may also have unresolved issues with themselves."

He cites the two major areas of conflict in marriage as being sex and money. "Using either of these as control or power can push a marriage into the danger zone," according to Provetto. He advocates seeking out an external "referee" to help couples work through their issues.

Although confiding in friends and neighbors about marital woes may make a disgruntled spouse feel better, Provetto strongly warns against it. "Those kinds of conversations may simply validate your own point of view. You need to use conversation as a way of learning what each of you is feeling. The definition of love is the willingness to put your partner's needs at the same level as yours."

Can All Marriages be Saved?

Even couples who put the work and effort into a strong and long-term marriage think about “the big D” from time to time. When the tradition of marriage began, life expectancies were much shorter. (The average life expectancy in the U.S. is now 77, which means a fifth of all couples can be married as long as 50 years, according to one recent demographic study.) The increasing length of marriage, the complexities of everyday life and the financial independence of women are all factors contributing to couples’ decisions not to stay together.

Susan Davis, Ph.D, a licensed clinical psychologist in Manhattan (and herself a divorced mother of two) advises couples to first seek out help together and then separately. “Sometimes people marry for reasons that are not psychologically sound, when they were 18, 19 or even 25. Expecting that every situation can be remedied through counseling is simply not realistic,” Davis said.

She does, however, urge couples to take the decision to separate or divorce very seriously. “If children

Like diet and exercise, marital health is a discipline that requires commitment, humor, flexibility, introspection and hard work, according to marriage professionals and couples who have passed the 15-year mark.

are involved,” she continued, “parents should also seek out a child specialist to get a full understanding of the impact and options.”

“The only good divorce is a quick divorce,” said Paul Neuthaler, M.S.W, a Chappaqua resident and family and divorce mediation specialist. Neuthaler, who has himself been married almost 23 years, describes the goal of mediation as developing a “quick, civilized and reasonable

agreement between two parties.” He works with both husband and wife, so that they hear the same things at the same time. The result is a “memorandum of understanding” based on these agreements, which then gets acted on with the help of attorneys. The mediation process can prevent ugly legal battles and encourage couples to talk openly about critical issues with the guidance of a professional.

If a couple is determined to keep a marriage together, they must also commit to the work and energy it takes. Provetto offers up a few guiding principles: “Keep the communication going, be willing to see your partner as an ally, do not use your kids as pawns in arguments and choose your ‘venting places’ carefully.”

“The key to succeeding in marriage is not just finding the right person,” asserted Fertel. “It’s learning to love the person you found.”

NANCY A. SHENKER is a business consultant and freelance writer who lives in Chappaqua. She has been married 21 years, and admits that it’s not always easy. (Her husband agrees!)