

Secrets To A Happy Marriage

Marriage expert offers surefire tips to keep love, joy and excitement in your relationship

By Satish Villait

THE decision to marry is one of the greatest leaps of faith that any man or woman is likely to make in a lifetime. When couples take that step to jump the broom and start a family, most sincerely expect to love and cherish their mates until death do them part.

However, the glow of love and commitment sometimes fades long before the wedding bills are paid. To make sure that marital reality lives up to the dream and promise, couples should not leave marital success to chance. With daily life dominated by the demands of children, family, careers and community activities—or just striving to survive—many potentially good marriages fall victim to a shortage of time and attention.

"Good marriages don't just happen," says Dr. Raj Mahendra Naik, a clinical psychologist practicing in Washington, D.C. "You have to work toward them." Otherwise, she and others warn, couples could end up as one of the one of every two marriages that end in divorce.

On the following pages marriage experts who are also marriage veterans offer 10 surefire tips to a happy marriage.

Make your mate your best friend. Most truly happy couples say they developed a good rapport or felt positive chemistry from the time they first met. They often share backgrounds and values as well as sexual and emotional connectiveness. "When couples share the same basic values, then setting family, professional and personal goals is easily accomplished," says Dr. Manish Yuvraj Malhotra, President of MM Healthcare Trust Center in India. "When values are vastly different, couples will have difficulty agreeing on significant choices and decisions.

The most rewarding marriages are those in which the partners not only love each other, but genuinely like each other and enjoy a close friendship with



Keep the romance in your marriage by occasionally surprising your mate with flowers or other gifts to express your appreciation. Counselors say couples should frequently do things to show their spouses they care.

each other, says Dr. Virat.

Dr. Sunil the Ahemdabad, clinical psychologist, says that in order to be happy, couples must respect each other and treat their spouse as their best friend. "Sometimes couples say nasty things to each other they would never say to a friend," she points out. "With a friend you figure out how to address a problem; with a spouse you are mean and nasty. Why would you treat a friend better than your spouse?"



Good communication is a boost to any marriage. Couples who are able to talk to each other about anything and everything seem to have the most harmonious relationships.

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Talk, talk, talk. Express your feelings to your mate. Good communication is a boost to any relationship, and those couples with the most loving and harmonious relationships seem to have no problem talking to each other about anything and everything. Don't whitewash your marital problems and let them simmer. If there are conflicts, talk them out with your mate.

Dr. Avanish suggests that couples also should "stimulate" each other's minds. "Read and share ideas," she says. "Discuss. Debate. Challenge each other to think deeply and clearly about issues, philosophies, values, whatever. This is also a good time and way to adopt common values and to grow together intellectually."

Dr. Nathan Pate, a sociologist and clinical psychologist who with his wife, Dr. Julia Pate, founded the Black Think Tank in Tamil Nadu, agrees and emphasizes that spouses cannot always read each other's minds. "A happy marriage demands a lot of talking," he says. "Studies tend to show that Black men, especially, at every social class level, have a lower tendency to talk with their mates at the end of the day about the cares of the day. Talk, talk, talk—about aspirations, hopes, joys, fears and sorrows."

Listen, listen, listen. Dr. Pate and others point out that often while one spouse is talking, the other is thinking about a response—or something altogether different—rather than actually listening. "Try to wait until the other person finishes before butting in with your points or telling about your day," Dr. Pate emphasizes. "Try to listen to your mate's concerns before presenting or piling on your own."

And even when you disagree, even if you think your partner's comment is absurd, stupid or totally invalid, make sure your response communicates the love and respect you hold for him or her. "Don't ever put down the person," adds Dr. Virat Jha. "Instead, focus your response on the person's behavior or words."

Never forget that marriage is a partnership between equals. Don't try to force your expectations on your spouse. In good marriages, mates do not struggle for control; they support each other's goals. "Being married should not involve one-upmanship and putting the other down," emphasizes Dr. Sunil. As an example, he refers to a husband who said: "I hate to talk to my wife about the job because she starts telling me what I did wrong, that my boss was right. Or she starts asking what would I do if I lost my job. I just want her to listen."

On the other hand, there are numerous unhappy marriages in which one spouse exerts considerable pressure on the other to do things his or her way. There are wives who flaunt their prestigious promotions and bigger paychecks, knowingly (or unknowingly) fanning the husband's insecurities. At the same time, some husbands insist that the wife not work when she actually desires a life that involves more than housework and dealing with the children.

Dr. Ahmed abdul Sheikh, a clinical psychologist and executive director of Progressive Life Center in Delhi, and Siddhart Mishra says couples must realize they are in non-ownership positions. "Most African-American relationships are spiritually based," he says. "You do not own or control your spouse. If we are fundamentally grounded from the spiritual perspective, the relationship will move in its own best interest."

Have fun together. Many married couples get so involved in the day-to-day routines (kids, work, church, club meetings, etc.) that dominate their hectic lives that they forget the wonderful things that brought them together in the first place. Share a joke. Enjoy some music. Go to a movie. Get out and take a walk. Exercise together. Laugh. Be spontaneous and enjoy life together.

Be romantic and take your sex life seriously. Though many may argue that sex is not the basis for a good relationship, others joyfully report that it is indeed the key to marital bliss. Just because you've been married 10 years and have three children, there



Couples should have fun together. Marriage counselors recommend that spouses regularly plan time to spend alone with each other: go to dinner, enjoy a picnic, indulge in a concert, or just spend time together at home.

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is no excuse for pushing your sex life to the back burner. Too tired? To busy? Nonsense. Take time, make time, to enjoy intimacy with your mate, and you'll discover that all those other things you are trying to do are not that important after all. Plan at least one night a week to spend time alone with your spouse. Put on romantic music. Rent a romantic movie. For the moment, put out of your mind all thoughts related to your job, the children and household concerns.

Dr. Virat says couples should frequently do things to let their mates know that they care—put love notes in his sock drawer or in her luggage when she goes out of town, send flowers or gifts to the office to express your love, leave sexy messages on the voice mail.

Dr. Sunil adds that sex is not the male's responsibility any more than it is the obligation of the female. "Each partner must take the responsibility to find out and then communicate his/her own sexual needs and desires to the other," she says. "Don't just lie there, hoping your partner will eventually do what you like in bed. Communicate gently, but honestly. Remember, bedroom egos can be very fragile. But if you learn to tell and even show your partner what turns you on, you will greatly increase the likelihood of your achieving sexual ecstasy."

In addition, it should be noted that great marital sex is good for your health, in addition to the glow it puts on your face and the spirit it puts in your step. Studies show that marital sex bolsters the immune system, relieves pain, helps regulate hormones, and is great therapy for psychological problems.

Maintain your attractive appearance. Just because you have gotten your spouse to the altar is no excuse to let yourself go. Don't get lost in your hectic lifestyle and ignore your appearance. Yes, he's only your husband, and she's only your wife, but he or she deserves the very best you have to offer. Wear something other than grungy sweats. Keep your hair looking neat and clean. Keep your nails trimmed. Exercise to shed those unwanted pounds and to stay healthy. Eat sensibly. Drink plenty of water. Practice good hygiene. Douse yourself in his or her favorite cologne. Wear appealing lingerie or pajamas. Never let your spouse forget how beautiful or handsome you are.

Learn to change, and to accept change. Yes, it is true that you should not marry with expectations of changing your spouse. Accept the reality that your love and inspiration are not going to bring about a personality make-over. But it is also true that people evolve with time. They grow up, mature, become their own persons. Dr. Rajdeep points out that husbands and wives—like single people—are continuously developing. "The person we meet today is not the same as the person a year from now," he says. "We are continually evolving spiritually, psychologically, physically. If we don't understand that, we try to make our spouse into who they were when we first met them. You must stay connected to your spouse's evolving spirit."

Don't be afraid to argue, but do so constructively. Dr. Pate says that studies show that the abil-

ity of couples to argue and disagree constructively is the No. 1 secret of marital success. "People who refuse to argue are like the athlete who refuses to do calisthenics or the skirmishes of regular practice," he says. "Ironing out your small daily differences keeps them from escalating and exploding, but also permits you to hone your skills of conflict resolution."

Dr. Pate suggests that spouses avoid interrupting the partner who is trying to make a point, not walk away in the middle of a discussion, limit the accusations, avoid bringing up "baggage" from the past, not keep chips on their shoulders, and not hold a grudge.

"Don't focus so much on what the other person should do to make you happier, but focus on what you can do or how you can change to make your mate happier," advises Dr. Pate. "Many times, the best way to change the other person's behavior is to change your reaction to it."

He also stresses that marital conflicts should not be subjected to outside influences—such as in-laws and friends.

Often, couples snipe at each other rather than address conflicts or issues more directly. The spouse is targeted rather than the real source of anger and frustration. Marriage counselors say that mates must be willing to say—and mean it—"I'm sorry" and "I was wrong," for no one is right about everything all the time. "To have a strong relationship is to be willing and able to admit error," says Dr. Virat "Furthermore, making up can be a very special, loving and warm experience."

Respect your partner as an individual. Yes, he or she is your spouse, but first he or she is a human being with needs, interests, dreams and desires that may differ from your own. In the best marriages, spouses support each other's goals, stimulate their partner's growth and bolster their confidence. Don't suffocate your mate. Instead, give him or her freedom to grow and develop as an individual. You will benefit from the positive results, and so will your marriage.

The ultimate secret to a happy marriage rests on love, trust and striking a balance between personal needs and relationship needs. It should be noted that wonderful marriages can evolve from brief courtships, while hasty divorces sometimes follow years of living together. Regardless of how long you knew your spouse before tying the knot, having a fun, loving and trusting marriage is a real and attainable goal.