NEW RULES FOR A GOOD MARRIAGE
by
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By the time we reach our 15th wedding anniversaries, most of us know how to handle the ups and downs of marriage. Sure, the wedding china may have a few chips, and perhaps we've had one too many spats about who forgot to bring home the milk. But we've also learned to negotiate holidays with the in-laws, wrangle tantrum-throwing kids, and talk each other through blown transmissions and career crossroads.

Now, instead of having our accomplishment acknowledged, it looks like we're in for a whole new set of marital challenges. Friends, family, movies, and talk show hosts warn us of midlife marriage dangers like husbands ditching their wives for younger women or empty-nest syndrome catapulting couples into divorce court. If getting the kids into college didn't force us apart, it seems, then a 20-something blond will.

Well, maybe not. At last count, America's divorce rate had fallen to 36 percent, its lowest level since 1970. That's because, on the whole, most of us like being married, and so do our spouses. And while there are certain challenges inherent in waking up next to the same guy for 5,379 mornings in a row, many so-called "inevitable" marriage pitfalls are really just unexamined old wives' tales. On closer inspection, two facts become clear: There's only a trace of truth in each fable, but there's also the potential to retool them to make your relationship even closer. Here are five of the most enduring myths, plus new rules to replace them.

**Myth:** Never go to bed angry. If you don't hash through every conflict right away, it'll lead to resentment and ultimately blowups.

As marriage folklore goes, the idea that it's imperative to settle every disagreement before day's end is pretty well entrenched. (After all, that's the way some people read that "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath" line from the Bible, as well as how others interpret the pop-psychology dictum "voicing grievances clears the air.") And many of us have accepted the premise that if we don't address disputes at once, all that unresolved
conflict just festers inside us and we'll wake up angrier each day, until someone finally explodes over an uncapped tube of toothpaste.

Ideally, of course, we would all be able to truly forgive every slight and make up before bedtime. But guess what? No one is that perfect. And, in reality, most spouses don't solve problems well when they're mad. In fact, "the idea that it's helpful for couples to air their grievances in the heat of the moment is probably one of the most dangerous marriage myths out there," says John Gottman, Ph.D., professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Washington and author of The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. "Often, nothing gets resolved — the partners just get more and more furious." When people are overwhelmed by emotions like anger, they experience what psychologists call "flooding," a physiological response that leaves their hearts pounding and their concentration shot, to say nothing of their ability to resolve arguments fairly or amicably.

**New rule:** Sleep on it. Conflicts are best dealt with when you have calmed down and are well rested.

Rather than stay up to debate the disagreement du jour, Gottman suggests that couples set aside a moment every night to focus on what's good about their marriage. Then, "no matter what — if you're angry, if he's angry, or if you're both exhausted — kiss good night for six seconds," he advises. "Sure, sometimes you'll be so mad or tired that the kiss will last for six nanoseconds. But it will remind you of your enduring affection, and besides — long kisses often lead to something even better than conversation."

That's not to say that conflicts don't have to be dealt with. To make sure disputes don't get swept under the bedsheets, Gottman recommends having a standing, short "State of Our Union" meeting each week (just not at bedtime). "Take turns telling each other something about your marriage or your partner that you appreciated that week, and then afterward each of you gets to bring up one issue."

**Myth:** One day the two of you will just realize you've grown apart and fallen out of love.
The fable is that some couples just drift apart as their personalities change or their interests diverge. But experts say if you look closely at most happy twosomes, you'll be amazed at how little they actually have in common. She could spend every spare hour crafting, and he might be the world's most ardent sports fan. Yet they've discovered ways to be themselves and together at the same time: That means sometimes she knits on the sofa to keep him company while he watches the Reds battle the Mets. In fact, experts say, shared interests or even similar temperaments are no assurance of marital longevity. "If these factors were truly important," Gottman says, "couples who meet through matchmaking services, which frequently try to pair singles according to hundreds of points of compatibility, would have a better chance of staying married than those who meet randomly. They don't."

**New rule:** A marriage doesn't run on feelings; it thrives because both spouses work hard on it.

"We need to give long-term partners credit for their marriages," says Diane Sollee, M.S.W., director of smartmarriages.com. "These couples have probably worked their way through hundreds of disagreements, illnesses, financial problems, kids' issues, maybe even an affair. They survive because they understand that they are a team, and they work to find ways to come together, whether in a crisis or in good times."

The truth is, we all change constantly, and that's a blessing. "If you sprayed fixative on people during their wedding ceremony," says Sollee, "life would just be too boring." But make sure you and your husband are checking in regularly with each other, and that all the little marital compromises and negotiations are making you both feel happy and involved in each other's evolving lives. That way, you can grow together, rather than apart, and, if anything, feel more in love than ever.

**Myth:** As you both get older, sex will simply stop mattering to you and your husband.

TV sitcoms notwithstanding, the idea that midlife couples settle into sexual hibernation just isn't true. In fact, many report that intimacy improves as the years go by. After all, once they get through their early-relationship
trials and errors, Sollee says, "they find a sexual style that makes them both happy." And for many wives, sex certainly doesn't deteriorate in midlife. On the contrary: In a recent British study, 64 percent of women surveyed attested that after they reached menopause, their sex lives either stayed on course or got even better.

What makes intimacy more satisfying is the comfort married couples develop with talking about what doesn't work for them and perhaps more important what does. In fact, psychologists at Dalhousie University in Canada recently found that partners' communication about what they wanted sexually was linked to their being happy with the sex itself.

**New rule:** There's no reason you won't grow more sexually connected.

Since talking about sex is key to sexual satisfaction itself, make it a priority this weekend regardless of whether you think your sex life is already OK or not. Naturally, even if you both communicate perfectly well about everything else under the sun, it may feel awkward or even embarrassing to suddenly start giving your husband explicit sexual pointers. So ease into the subject. If it occurs to you that you've done it exactly the same way 33 times in a row, you could say, "I can't remember the last time we made love with the lights on, can you?" Sexual reminiscing may not lead to a romantic interlude, but it will get you talking. And the safer each of you feels in expressing what you like and don't like, the easier it is to make adjustments that can ramp up the sexual satisfaction on both sides of the bed.

**Myth:** When the kids leave home, there will be nothing left to keep your marriage together.

Most parents have pangs of sadness when the kids are finally gone, moments when the house seems impossibly quiet or they catch themselves having a lengthy chat with the cat. And some couples really do struggle but many renew their commitment to each other. "With the kids out of the house, marriages can bloom when there is a sense of shared purpose," Gottman says. That communion can sometimes get pushed aside in the daily round of raising a family and making a living. "Some couples may have let that
feeling of togetherness die," he explains. "Then it's not the kids' leaving the nest that somehow makes their marriages seem empty. They've already been empty a long time, and when the children leave home, the couple finally notices."

But for many husbands and wives, "marital satisfaction actually goes up once the kids are gone," says James Bray, Ph.D., a psychologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. After an adjustment period of six to 12 months, spouses often realize that they have more leisure time, more money, and more freedom to reengage with each other. And without children in the house, there's often less cause for conflicts.

**New rule:** Your marriage can flourish in that new freedom.

When your kids move out, keep your life full and your relationship central. Compile lists of what you and your husband can do now that you couldn't before, suggests Bray, whether it's traveling to Tahiti or having sex on the sofa. "Celebrate! You've succeeded in raising independent adults," he says, "and now you have the opportunity to decide what to do next. Will you get more involved in town politics? Learn to tango? Go out to dinner more often?" Whatever it is, make sure it's something you both enjoy as you rediscover each other.

**Myth:** Every guy has a midlife crisis — any day, your spouse will drive off in a new red sports car.

It's true that men sometimes do crazy things when they reach a certain age. You may feel like snickering at some of their attempts to regain their lost youth, like the balding executive who gets a spanking-new Harley — or a much younger girlfriend. Such drastic changes are fortunately far from commonplace outside the soaps, but psychologists say that most of us will go through a period of midlife reevaluation.

**New rule:** It's not a crisis and it's not just for men.

Actually, this period of reexamination is a healthy part of development. As people move into their 40s, 50s, and beyond, their perspectives shift.
Careers may plateau or take off in unexpected new directions. The first serious health problem may come along, or a parent may die and spur you to rethink your priorities. All of these are natural, inevitable transitions, and the best approach to dealing with them is to learn what you can and follow where they lead you. Fortunately, most people do: A recent poll by volunteermatch.org found that more than half of those over 55 are looking forward to starting new chapters in their lives.

More and more the phrase "midlife crisis" is being swapped for "reinvention"; all across America, you can hear men and women talking about their second acts. But rarely do they mean a full-scale life overhaul. More often they're contemplating ways to make more time for what they already love. Men who have done a little woodworking take on a deck redesign; women who have always wanted more time to get in shape sign up for their first triathlon. Not only are these course corrections good for us as individuals, they also seem to invigorate our relationships. People in their 40s and 50s feel they have more control over their work, their finances, and their marriages, reports a multi-university study. Some crisis, huh? Instead of worrying about his issues, focus on whether you're ripe for reinvention yourself. Rediscover your priorities, and above all, don't feel you're being selfish by pursuing your passion: What's good for you is good for your marriage, too.