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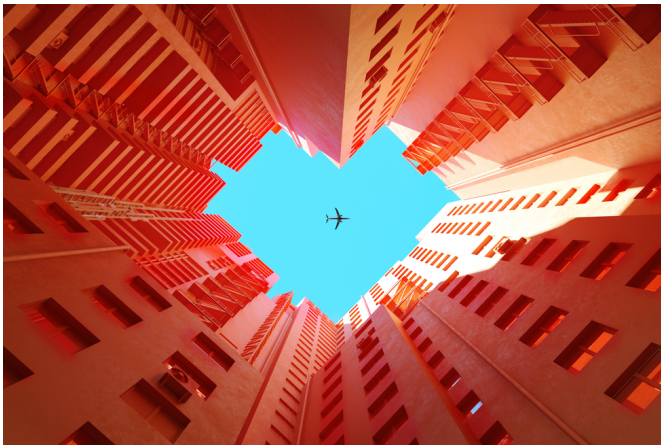


How to Guard Against Relationship Autopilot

What's the point of a long partnership if it doesn't flourish? Here's how to increase the health span of your love life.

By Louisa Kamps | Published: Jun 21, 2023

THE LIFE YOU WANT: **LONGEVITY**



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In a few months, my husband and I will celebrate our 20th anniversary. Hooray for us! Although I wouldn't have guessed at [a couple precarious points](#) in our marriage that we'd make it here, I'm delighted that we have. I'm also proud of us for figuring out how to love each other better, by hook or by crook and occasionally with help from a shrewd [couples therapist](#). But rather than resting on our laurels—particularly since the [divorce](#) rate among adults over 50, our cohort, has doubled over the past three decades—I want to honor our commitment with some continuing relationship education. What does it take to build and maintain the health and vitality of a relationship over time—to have not just a long marriage but a good and strong long marriage? That's what I asked several experts in the field, and here are five wise takeaways:

Remember that you're a couple first and co-parents second

If your hope, as a young couple, is to stand together arm in arm waving goodbye to your children when they leave home, happy to be together and excited for your next chapter, then it is essential to maintain the primacy of

your relationship after you become parents, says [Daphne de Marneffe](#), PhD, a psychologist in the San Francisco Bay Area and the author of [The Rough Patch](#). When couples are falling in love, learning about each other's inner lives with curiosity and vulnerability "is the easiest thing in the world," she says. But married people frequently stop paying close, kind attention to each other after kids arrive, creating a void between them that can fill up quickly with darker thoughts about the relationship. "They're not getting tended to, they're not getting seen or noticed, and they start developing stories like, 'Oh, it turns out you're sort of inconsiderate' or 'You just never know what I need,'" says de Marneffe. Such jaundiced thinking sparks a vicious cycle of partners losing interest in attending to each other's well-being "that can be terminal if people turn away from each other long enough," she says.

Conversely, couples who continue to prioritize their partners—even if it's just by creating enough time and space to discuss their daily challenges during the most demanding years of parenting—are more likely to maintain trust and intimacy. De Marneffe offers this straightforward, doable advice to busy couples who want to stay connected: "Find time during the week when you're not exhausted to just sit together and check in." To get a better picture of what your partner is feeling, de Marneffe suggests asking questions like: *How's it going? How do you feel about the division of labor? How do you feel about our sex life?* Try to avoid blame, and remember that "you are a team of two trying to figure out what you need more of, or less of," she says. Then, after you've touched base, go out on regular dates just to have fun. Every couple has relationship troubles—often centered around sex, money, or stepfamily challenges—but being flexible and able to compartmentalize those issues "is a huge skill, because enjoying each other's company creates a positive feedback loop" that allows couples to be more generous and creative when it is time to return (later!) to solving problems, says de Marneffe.

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Forget perfection—and own up to your imperfections

One of the most helpful mindsets for weathering inevitable setbacks and maintaining the health of a relationship is to understand that "marriage is messy and complicated," says [Harriet Lerner, PhD](#), a psychotherapist and the bestselling author of [Marriage Rules](#). "Life is one thing after another, so it's normal for married people to yo-yo back and forth between conflict and distance." However, being mentally prepared for difficult stretches—and taking responsibility for your own steps in the complex dance of a

partnership—can go a long way toward keeping it alive and well, even when everything's hitting the fan. "Self-focus does not mean self-blame, but rather the capacity to observe and change one's own steps in a pattern that evokes and maintains pain and disconnection," says Lerner.

New moves you might try include listening non-defensively; making a concerted effort to do small things for your partner that they appreciate, such as cooking them their favorite pasta dish or praising them for handling a difficult situation with good humor; and telling them "what you love and admire about them every single day," says Lerner. Don't worry if it feels Pollyanna-ish to point out what you appreciate even when they're being irksome: "The goal is not to put a patina of false brightness over real problems. You need to be able to share your problems and voice your complaints," but your partner won't hear you if they don't feel valued and appreciated, she explains.

And if observing your own behavior leaves you feeling less than proud, by all means, apologize to your partner. This is called accountability, and it's magical. "In my work, I see marriages fail because someone will not apologize. But a heartfelt apology can help free the hurt person from life-draining anger and pain. It validates their sense of reality by affirming that, yes, their feelings make sense. We get it, and we take responsibility for our actions."

Co-create your own culture

Over time, my husband and I have developed several important rituals, including taking a leisurely lakeside walk together once a week. It's our way of going together to the church of nature, you could say. And it's just one example of how couples can thrive by establishing clear, shared principles that capture how they want to experience their marriage and family life or find purpose elsewhere—at work, with friends, or through different cherished hobbies. One reason more older couples are breaking up these days—and why women are more likely than men to initiate later-in-life divorces—is that they've operated for too long according to outdated marital codes inherited from their parents or grandparents, says clinician [Stan Tatkin](#), PsyD, the founder of the PACT Institute, where he has developed a psychobiological approach to couples therapy, and the author of *In Each Other's Care*. "Gray divorce is happening because that generation adhered to old rules—an old culture that was fundamentally unfair. And they get to a certain age and go, 'F-it: I don't need this anymore,'" he says.

But when couples work together to define their own set of principles—commitments to fairness, justice, volunteering, monogamy (or polygamy, whatever rocks your world), regular family dinners, or solo time for you to jam on your guitar while your husband goes fishing, say—they are more likely to function well together and live up to their ideals, including being good parents, says Tatkin. "Just like in any other union, we have to make agreements about how we're going to do business and have a vision of where we're going. Otherwise, under stress, we'll fall back to a one-person psychology where we're liable to take liberties and disrespect each other and not be cooperative," says Tatkin. "It's about putting the couple at the center of the universe. You have to be the leaders of the pack, the engine that drives everything, because everyone you serve depends on you being happy to be together and good at what you do."

Accept and respect core differences

Sometimes the contrasting personality traits that attract people to each other—his risk-averse way of booking complicated travel itineraries months in advance; her ability to throw an impromptu dinner party with a few frozen pizzas—can start to grate after a few years of marriage. “In theory, the personality differences that initially draw many couples together are complementary, but they can become sources of conflict, estrangement, and frustration,” says [Ben Endres](#), PhD, a psychotherapist in Milwaukee who works with couples. However, when couples can recognize and respect, “almost like a therapist or an anthropologist,” that their partners may respond to stress—or think about financial planning, sex, work, or household orderliness—differently than they do, they can deal with their differences much more gracefully. “Strong couples get to a place where they can identify what drives them nuts about each other,” says Endres, but also recognize that these “traits are also part of what they love about them.” Lerner agrees that respecting differences is essential for long-term marital fitness. “It doesn’t mean that we accept unfair treatment from our partner. It’s just to say that differences don’t necessarily mean one person is right and one person is wrong,” she says. “Work on staying emotionally connected to a partner who thinks and feels differently than you do, without needing to convince or otherwise fix them.”

Fight respectfully

Great news, friends: All the therapists I interviewed for this story agreed that arguing well is an important skill to help build healthy, happy long-term relationships. “Often when we talk about fighting, we’re really talking about arguing, which is more about venting or blaming,” says [Jay Shetty](#), a former monk, the host of the health and wellness podcast *On Purpose*, and an author whose latest book is *8 Rules of Love*. Rather than hurling blame, couples need to allow for respectful disagreement, or “teaming up against the problem, instead of against one another,” says Shetty. “Research shows that couples who engage in productive conflict have stronger and more resilient relationships. That’s because they’re not avoiding areas where there’s friction. They’re not hiding their feelings or creating no-fly zones where they can’t talk about certain subjects—behaviors that drive couples apart in the long term. Couples who engage in constructive conflict have a much greater chance of success.”

To help keep disagreements civil and brief—since they have a wily way of fanning out to include everything, including the kitchen sink—Tatkin recommends maintaining eye contact to reduce stress. During a dispute, looking into your partner’s eyes with your own soft eyes (relax your brow, no scowling) can help lower your partner’s blood pressure and the temp between you because “the brain loves a face up close,” he explains.

Another Tatkin strategy is to touch toes lightly with your partner at night. “My wife and I can go to bed angry, but we have to at least touch toes,” he says. Mid-fight, since we’re wired for sensitivity to threat, like all people, we may wonder “whether the relationship will exist tomorrow.” But touching toes under the covers lets you signal to each other that *I may be angry with you, but we’re okay*, says Tatkin. “It’s the *okay* part that allows us to relax, so the stress doesn’t begin to cause wear and tear in our brain and body.” My husband and I have already adopted toe touching, and I’m telling you, it is gold—the tap signals safety and allows us to fall asleep, secure in the knowledge that we’ll get up tomorrow and figure things out. Onward!

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