

A LINE ON LIFE

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Recipe for a Happy Marriage *

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Like any recipe, the ingredients for a happy, successful marriage can vary, depending on which pair of cooks you consult. However, they always include "*mutual commitment, concern, love and respect.*"

Possibly the best people to give advice for a successful marriage are those who deal with marital problems all the time – therapists. Unfortunately, the therapists note that couples put off seeking outside help. Often the couples think marital problems are too private to be shared with an outside person. Couples fail to realize that – because therapists don't have a personal stake in the outcomes – they can look at the problems more objectively. Frequently couples don't seek out a therapist, until one person has finally decided to end the relationship.

Therapists emphasize dealing with isolated problems *as they occur* – rather than leaving them to pile up to the point where the relationship seems to be hopelessly doomed. They make the following recommendations:

- **Be committed to the relationship.** Some people believe that a good marriage is determined by "*finding the right mate.*" When problems occur, they think they have the "*wrong partner*" and look for a new one. However, a successful marriage is not determined by finding the right partner, but rather in "*being the right partner.*" Each of us needs to adjust to the hard times that are certain to come – financial problems, job changes, children and even just learning more about each other.
- **Accept each other's shortcomings.** Hurt, conflict and anger occur even in the happiest of marriages. Shortcomings might involve problems in showing appreciation for each other, expressing emotions clearly or just being open to talk with each other. Even with problems, you can "*maintain a positive attitude toward each other.*" You can continue to "*cooperate, compromise and appreciate each other.*"

One therapist came to the following conclusion.

"Complaints by themselves don't mean that a marriage is unhappy. It is when those complaints keep the couple from being positive and supportive of each other that the marriage is in trouble."

- **Don't avoid conflict.** Rather than creating distance between partners, conflicts – if handled correctly – can lead to growth in the marriage. In the words of another

therapist, "*Conflict is actually a sign of ongoing problem-solving, much as a fever is a symptom of the body's battle to overcome an illness.*" Even when in conflict, try to see your partner's side and reach some sort of compromise. If you can't compromise, it helps to agree to keep your differences – but also to respect those differences.

Some people relate that "*all we ever seem to do is argue.*" However – if we have differences – we spend a great deal of time and effort dealing with those differences. In contrast – if partners agree on something – there is no need to discuss it, and the matter is dropped. To rekindle the awareness of the positive aspects of your relationship, it helps to discuss again why you developed it in the first place.

- **Look for the underlying reasons for anger.** Analogous to an iceberg, anger seems to be the visible portion of our emotions. We need to become aware of the submerged feelings lying below the surface anger – like hurt, fear and neglect.
- **Don't assume that you understand.** Just because you love each other, you will not naturally know each other's needs and wants. If you insist on this "*mindreading*," misunderstandings are certain to occur. Open communication of wants and needs is absolutely necessary to having them met. If they are not discussed, they do not go away. The resentment about these unmet needs and desires are temporarily buried – where they grow and fester – until they finally explode in anger.
- **Keep power balanced in a relationship.** Each partner needs a sense of equity, which involves sharing personal authority and power.

"Long, happy marriages take work, work, work."

- **Keep working at your marriage.** Even if the first years have been good, you can't assume that the remaining years will be just as good. It takes a lot of time, attention and effort to maintain a loving relationship. We need to share our experiences – not only the joys but also the sorrows. Marriages may be "*made in heaven*," but they take the dedication and efforts of both partners to maintain them here on earth.

* Adapted from Jane Brody's "Personal Health," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1992, Reprinted in *Themes of the Times*, Prentice Hall, 1993, page 3.