

Keys to a Lasting Marriage

By Carolyn Gerard, MFT

Do you desire intimacy in your marriage, but don't know how to get it? Have your attempts to solve problems turned into arguments, or worse, the silent treatment? Has the lack of communication left you feeling unappreciated and rejected?

No one ever said a lasting marriage or partnership is easy to maintain. In fact, the following statistics indicate the odds of a couple having a fulfilling marriage in which the mutual attraction and emotional bonds continue to grow stronger are about as favorable as odds were for steerage passengers on the Titanic finding a lifeboat seat.

- In 2004 nearly 26,000 couples obtained a marriage license in San Diego County.
- More than 13,800 couples in San Diego County filed for dissolution of their marriage that same year.
- There is a spike in the divorce rate for couples at the two-year, seven-year and 20-year anniversary dates.
- The divorce rate for second marriages is greater than 60%, higher than for first marriages.

Why Do Marriages Fail?

Research reveals most marriages fail because of financial difficulties, unmet expectations and ineffective communication. It also finds that marriage satisfaction declines after the birth of the first child. Couples who have experienced divorce - whether their own or that of their parents - must evaluate and learn from the past, so they don't mimic or repeat the behavior that can sabotage a marriage.

Ideal first steps in strengthening the marriage bond include taking responsibility for your life, learning from past mistakes and choosing to resolve conflicts with your partner in a manner that builds harmony in your relationship. Here are some tips to safeguard your marriage

- **Prioritize time with your partner.** Keep romance and friendship alive. Set a weekly date night to relax and enjoy one another. Share values, needs and goals with your partner. Discuss your expectations regarding roles, family life, leisure time and finances. Treat your partner with the respect that you give to others. Learn to manage differences before they become barriers to intimacy.
- **Be careful how you "start up" a conversation.** Address sensitive issues with care. When confronting your partner, stop and think about what you're feeling and what you hope to accomplish. Is your intention to improve the relationship or are you trying to win the battle, defend yourself, or get even? If an issue persists more than 30 days, consult a marriage and family therapist to help you work through the impasse. The typical couple experiences six years of unresolved conflict before seeking professional help, usually the last effort before divorce.
- **Pay attention to your partner's bids for connection.** Small talk is often used as a way of checking out your partner's receptivity. Don't take your spouse for granted. Acknowledge your spouse frequently.
- **A marriage succeeds to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife.** A husband's ability to be persuaded by his wife is critical. Research shows women are already conditioned to accepting influence from men. A true partnership occurs only when a husband is able to do so as well.
- **Exit an argument before it gets out of control.** Let go of defensiveness and be conscious of "joining" with your spouse to attack the problems. Attack the problem, not each other. Move from "me" to "we."
- **Remember the "Five to One" Rule.** In a happy marriage, couples make five times as many positive statements to and about each other and their relationship than negative ones. For every criticism you feel you need to tell your partner, think of five positive comments to mention before making the negative comment.

Trust Through Communication

Listen when your partner is speaking. Listen to your spouse's point of view. Try to find the meaning behind the words that are spoken. Listening and being heard are among the greatest gifts you can give to each other. When you have something to say, stop and take a time-out. Identify the feelings you are experiencing and the underlying issue? Is it frustration, insecurity, being misunderstood, feeling abandoned or insulted?

Ask yourself what goal you hope to achieve as a couple? It could be acceptance, more time together, intimacy, mutual respect, reassurance of love or understanding. Try to communicate what you want instead of what is wrong. Avoid criticisms like "All you think about is yourself." Use "I" messages to express your desires as in, "I really miss you and would like to spend more time with you."

Most marriages are worth saving. You can make positive changes to your marriage even if your spouse refuses to cooperate. If past attempts at solving problems have failed, stop and try something different. An experienced marriage and family therapist can help you initiate positive changes so that both partners feel validated and encouraged to cooperate.

About the Author

Carolyn Gerard is a Marriage and Family Therapist, practicing in San Diego. With a practice emphasis in relationship therapy, her specialty includes individual, marital, and parenting issues. Her personal experience in a 25 plus-year marriage with five children (including twins) provides a realistic and practical approach to each counseling session. Learn more about Carolyn Gerard at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/CarolynGerard>