



Long-lasting Marriages: Why Do They Survive?

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I'm an average man, without great deeds except maybe one, and that has been to love my wife.

—Ethan Canin, *We Are Nighttime Travelers*, 1988

Generally speaking, people these days marry later; they have fewer children and reach the empty nest earlier. It isn't unusual for couples to spend 30–40 years together after their last child leaves home.

Despite today's high divorce rate, one out of five first marriages lasts 50 years. Such long-lasting relationships are a contemporary phenomenon. Consider this: At the end of the 19th century, the average length of marriage when one spouse died was about 28 years. Now it's over 43 years!

Never before in history have so many couples been in marriages long enough to experience the variety of life-changing events that later stages of marriage now bring. Most older couples have had no model of how to handle the stresses these late-life changes can bring. However, they are more likely than younger couples to view marriage as a lifetime



commitment that carries responsibilities.

But expectations for marriage have changed. In the past, a married couple expected hard work, many children, and good meals. Today, married couples expect companionship, intimacy, and sharing of feelings. For older people who have lived in a work-ethic, survival-oriented world, these new expectations are not always easy to meet.

Throughout marriage, couples continually adapt to changing roles and expectations. For example, consider all of the changes that occur when a first child is born. Consider how life changes when the last child leaves home.

Role Changes

Change doesn't stop in later life. Common role changes for older people include retirement, a decline in health, the death of friends, and the birth of grand-

children. A common challenge for older couples is to give up previous roles and adapt to new ones. The ease with which that adaptation occurs depends, in part, on how adaptable a person was during the younger years. Inability to adapt to change may lead to feelings of depression.

Retirement is one transition that brings considerable change to the lives of older couples. This change often coincides with a time when the couple is faced with physical changes, income change, and a shrinking social group.

Research has shown that increased "togetherness" is more difficult for wives who did not work outside the home compared with wives who were in the labor force. Women who have retired

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from jobs become more involved with friends and activities after their retirement. Women who have not worked outside the home become less involved after the husband's retirement.

The question that comes to mind is: Why do "traditional" wives appear less happy after retirement? One explanation is that they may resent the extra responsibilities of having their husband around the home. They often cite a loss of privacy. Their expectation of a shared workload around the home often fails to become a reality. By comparison, women who retired from a job do not seem to suffer from too much togetherness. Difficulties experienced after retirement can be overcome by talking over expectations and working out compromises (see FS 322-E, *Communication Strategies for Adult Couples*). Despite the multiple changes in later life, most older couples are happy.

Communication during Conflict

Research focusing on the interaction of older married couples has found both similarities and differences between older couples and middle-aged couples. Compared to middle-aged couples, older couples express less negative emotion to one another when they are in conflict.

Furthermore, when they are discussing a topic of strong disagreement, they tend to express more affection and positive feelings for each other than middle-aged couples. In terms of similarities, both older and middle-aged wives are more emotionally expressive than their husbands. Whether they are talking or listening, wives show more

positive and negative feeling. Husbands, however, exhibit far more defensiveness during conflict than do their wives.

Secrets of Happy Couples

The book *Lucky in Love* by Catherine Johnson reveals secrets of happy couples and how their marriages survive. It's about happy marriages that have stood the test of time. Here's a sampling of what was learned from these couples:

Sex: Happy couples strongly believe in, and steadfastly practice, monogamy.

Money: Happy couples strive for equality in financial matters.

Love: Partners have a great deal of faith in each other, even when they are concerned that the other may be wrong.

Work: Both partners feel that the division of labor, and of authority, is fair.

What Keeps Spouses Attracted to One Another in Long Marriages?

- Trusting and confiding in one another
- Respecting and valuing each other
- Expressing feelings to one another
- Intimacy and closeness
- Mutual sexual satisfaction
- Expressions of understanding and support
- Encouraging independence in one another
- Expression of contentment and appreciation

Practical Suggestions for a Long-lasting Marriage

- Renegotiate your marriage. Rules can always be changed.
- Reevaluate your goals, purposes, and dreams.
- Learn to share feelings and emotions. Share yourself.
- Learn to listen.
- Talk about your sexual relationship. Rediscover each other. Experiment.
- Discuss finances, family, and spiritual beliefs.
- Learn something new together.
- Seek help if you reach an impasse.
- Laugh together. Have fun. Fun is good.

What many studies have found is that a good marriage supports each partner's development in love, in family, and in work. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from couples happily married for many years is that the bad times can pass and the good times return. In the course of a long relationship, partners simply get better at being married.



For More Information

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OSU Extension Publications

- Sharing the Responsibilities of Parent Care: Sibling Relationships in Later Life*, EC 1458-E.
Available only online.
- Grandparenting Today*, EC 1459-E. Available only online.
- Communication Strategies for Adult Couples*, FS 322-E.
Available only online.

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