

**COWBOYS** & *Angels*

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SAMPLE

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# Introduction

I am a husband and a father to two beautiful kids.

I am the author of 7 books on leadership and management, which I have written in collaboration with almost 500 CEOs and Founders of great companies from around the world. If we took the time to calculate the combined years of experience these books represent, we would reach well over 12.000 years.

The value of these books, for anyone interested in leadership and management, is without a doubt immeasurable. What makes me even more proud of these publications is that, as a philanthropist, I have chosen to donate 100% of the profits of these publications to scholarships, helping many students that would not have been able to study for a university degree if it wasn't for a bit of help at a crucial moment in their lives.

I am also an Entrepreneur, having created many companies, some very successful in the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

I am by no means a rich man, and I do have a job. In my day-to-day, I am trusted by many of these companies to help them work more cohesively. I have been called a Management Consultant, an Organizational Therapist, a Mentor, a Business Coach, and a Transformational Expert.

Over the years, working with hundreds of companies and thousands of executives, I often got feedback from people telling me that they could use what I taught them not only to improve their businesses significantly but, in many cases, also to better their family life. People were telling me that I had saved their marriage, that their relationship with their children had changed for the better, that they had been able to solve their differences with their brothers or sisters and that they were talking again, or that they had renewed their relationship with their parents.

I am currently writing a new book on leadership and management, but when someone suggested that I should write a book about helping struggling couples change the dynamics in their marriage for the better, it got me thinking. Would it be possible to apply my experience in helping businesses to support marriages as well?

I then started thinking about why my marriage works as opposed to my previous relationships. I asked myself questions such as: Am I so compatible with my wife that it just “works”? Am I different in any way? Am I doing something differently?

Well, if the comments of the people I work with in a business setting were right, they were doing something different, and that was why their relationships within their family had changed.

I talked to my wife about the idea of writing this book together, and she jumped at the idea. For one, she is a Coach and a Psychologist, and she would be the perfect sparring partner for the project. Furthermore, we both thought it would allow us to work on an incredible project together, which we hoped would help many other couples.

I could not have done much of what I have achieved without her support, much less this book.

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# Part I

## Fairytales

We live in a different world than our parents and even more different than our grandparents. In most parts of the world, people have the freedom to choose whom they want to marry, and society doesn't condemn couples from breaking up or divorcing. Women now have the right to vote, open a bank account, and be economically independent of their spouses. Children can choose what to study, and economic freedom from their parents is achieved much earlier than a few generations ago. With all this freedom and liberty of modern society to create the life we want for ourselves and whom we want to share it with, why is it then that we are not happier?

The reason is that our lives are saturated with information, activities, and senseless expectations. The stresses of modern life make healthy relationships more difficult to achieve and sustain. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, as well as other family members, might live under the same roof but communicate poorly at best.

Most believe that somewhere out there is a marital union in which two people are so in love and well-suited for one another that there's never any conflict, strain, or pain. Our brain might tell us that such an idyllic couple could never exist, but our hearts believe otherwise.

If we are letting ourselves be led by our heart, it is leading us astray. How could there be perfect marriages when there are no perfect people? I am sorry to break it to you, but there is just no “We are perfect for each other.” We might be good for each other, right for each other, or well-suited for each other, but there is no perfection.

I love the age of information in which we live. As I am getting older, I especially like the new technology that can make my wrinkles disappear at the push of a button and make me look 20 years younger, but with it comes lying and deceiving ourselves. We are not as smart, beautiful, balanced, or happy as we portray ourselves in social media.

As far as the perfect marriage, I largely blame the media, which generally portrays marriage as an ideal state in which Prince Charming and Snow White fall in love with each other at first sight, marry

and then just live "happily ever after." This fallacy is fed to us constantly through books, television, movies, and songs and even reaffirmed in our friends' posts. The reason we continue to listen to our hearts when it comes to marriage, instead of our minds, is that the myth is reaffirmed by glamorizing other people's relationships. We like imagining other people's marriages as being idyllic and totally satisfying. In some way, we even need other people's marriages to be perfect, to give us the hope that the perfect couple is out there somewhere, that it is possible. Still, we know that our marriage is full of imperfections that riddle our relationships.

Of course, we instinctively know there are dangers in accepting the myth of the perfect marriage. When a person becomes frustrated for having to work on their imperfect marriage with an imperfect spouse, as opposed to landing in the perfect one, it quickly becomes difficult to work out even the slightest problem, and the next thing we know, they're talking about separating.

Sometimes couples do move apart, and with good reason. Trust and respect might have been lost, but when perfection is the reason, and they try to find it in someone else, it quickly becomes apparent that new or old flaws simply resurface in this new relationship because no one is perfect, and they themselves are not either.

You might say by now that I sold you on the idea of imagining fairytales are just fairytales. So what do we do now? How do we get a loving, wonderful, happily imperfect marriage?

There are no easy answers, but I feel that this book can help. The concepts I present come from the thousands of top executives I have worked with during my life and the personal experiences of my wife and me. We are both divorced but discovered answers through our first marriage, which we learned from and applied successfully in our family. The solutions we have found come from ancient wisdom as well as from very recent things we have been able to map through observation of other couples we have worked with in preparation for this book.

Our aim with this book is that it helps you with this:

- Understand the different roles of a relationship.
- Understand where the conflict really lies.
- Understand the dynamics of good communication.
- Build strong relationships with those around you;



- Show you how to develop new skills to help your marriage.
- Show how husbands and wives can draw closer emotionally, spiritually, financially, and intellectually.
- Show you how to develop new skills to help you build your children's characters.
- Share ancient wisdom and principles that will facilitate a meaningful and happy life.

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# Daily love

Let's go back to the story of Prince Charming and Snow White for a while since this is what everyone is dreaming of. Her evil stepmother tries to kill her, but she escapes and goes to live with a few dwarves in the wood. Eventually, her stepmother finds out that she is not only very much alive but also the most beautiful woman in the world. The stepmother finds her and kills her, but White doesn't quite die. She falls asleep and is placed in a glass coffin by the dwarves in the core of the wilds, where nobody dares to dwell because of the unknown dangers they are afraid to face. Years later, a valiant prince finds the virgin and gives her a true love's kiss that awakens her from her slumber. They get married and live happily ever after – THE END.

Every woman on earth grows up loving this story. They melt at the thought of finding a man willing to put himself in harm's way to save a princess he hardly knows. Every man on earth grows up dreaming of being a hero, fighting evil, and as a reward getting a beautiful virgin to fall in love with him with just a kiss. No second date is needed to get to first base, guys!

Should we believe that this is what love is all about, it should also make sense to us that the guy gets at least to first base as soon as he lays eyes on a pretty young virgin. The woman's role should then really just be to lay down and accept it, having no say in the matter. If we follow through with this logic, this would be just right since any man basically would be doing both a favor. They would then get married and live happily ever after. Does that sound about right? I think that in today's world, the lovely Prince Charming would have a sexual harassment suit on his hands, but let's just leave the legalities out of the picture.

When we put it that way, it is not romantic, is it? I would like you to know that I am a hopeless romantic, but I do wince at the fairy tales because I see the damage this sort of imagery does to the couples me and my wife have worked with.

Here are just a few ways these “happily ever after” stories are harming couples.

## A couple needs two people

In the tale, Prince Charming solves all of Snow White's problems. He finds her, breaks a magical spell, kills the evil stepmother, and takes her to his castle, where she lives happily ever after. It seems

like it's all thanks to Prince Charming. The problem with this is that nobody can make our life “happily ever after.” No matter whom we marry, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, smart or dumb, funny or boring, our life is not going to be perfect, and our marriage is something that we both have to work on. We have to be willing to work on our marriage with a capital “W.”

If we find ourselves unhappy in our marriage, don't blame our spouse. It's not their responsibility to give us happily ever after. We're the ones in control of our life, in modern times even more so, and we're the ones who have responsibility for it. Make the changes we need to make to be happier. If there are things we'd like our spouse to do to help; ask. But remember that our happiness is ultimately up to us.

### More than just sex



The only thing we really know about them is that they are of noble birth and that they are rich. She is a virgin and the most beautiful woman in the world at that. He walks through walls for a girl he doesn't know. They both fall in love pretty easily.

I can easily see the incredible physical attraction, but I just can't make it fit into the category of “love,” however hard I try. They don't know each other. Yet, too often, we expect our spouse to be stunning, charming, and willing to go to absurd lengths for us, just like Snow White or Prince Charming.

Do people really see Prince Charming fixing things around the house? Give the man a break; he was just in it for the kissing part and slaying a dragon should one come around. Do people really see Snow White washing dishes? She was also in it just for the kissing part, which must have felt pretty good. So when the mundane things come around in a couple that doesn't really know each other, how can we know if the person who forced a kiss on the princess really is the man for her and vice versa?

Let's imagine Prince Charming and Snow White a few years down the road. You know, once the effects of the first kiss have worn off a bit. What makes us love the person we have chosen to share our life with even more profound when the breasts are not as perky anymore, we have put on 20 pounds, we've had a few whiffs of morning breath, we are a bit balder, we start wearing flats because our back hurts with the 9-inch heels or the afternoon stroll in the park chatting and holding hands is something we haven't done in months. Add long workdays to that, mortgage payments, a few

screaming kids, and the in-laws to that. Now let us ask ourselves how long we think our marriage will last when the fairy tale ends and the day-to-day starts kicking in. I can tell you this, for sure; we will need much more than sex to be happy in our marriage.

In the short term, for a marriage to be healthy, it needs to perform a bunch of daily tasks like taking care of each other and the house, educating and playing with the children, and working to earn enough to be able to support the family, and rules and discipline that everyone has to abide by.

In the long term, it needs love, intimacy, unity, and empathy to be able to work through problems and the ability to change and adapt as the family has different needs and requirements, and we as well change as persons.

For a family to achieve all those functions, I will describe the four roles that need to be performed. I call them the 4Cs. For one, it needs a Champion to make sure things are done, a Custodian to make sure that the rules are upheld, a Caregiver to safeguard the unity of the family, and a Creator to imagine the bright future and new possibilities a family might have in the future. Any time one or more of these roles is not being performed, the marriage will have difficulties and, in the long run, be the reason for it to crumble. There is a whole chapter about this later in the book.

No one can perform all these roles simultaneously, which is why it takes two “to tango.” Sometimes we find couples where one expects the other to do all the roles; that just doesn't work. Sometimes we even find that the children are performing one or more of the roles, which is why some couples break up when their children leave the nest.

The roles are also, to a certain degree, incompatible, which is why it is not possible for one person to perform them well, simultaneously. Marriage, therefore, needs to be a team in which one is responsible for some things and the other for what is remaining. I honestly believe this to be the reason why opposites attract and that they make the best of teams.

I think that the time-proven idea that it takes two to make a team, is generally understood by both men and women. What needs to be better understood is that a team and a family are similar. Men have a better understanding of sports teams, while women usually have a much better understanding of what is required of a family. The fact that a family and a team at their core are basically the same since there are different specific roles that need to be performed is a great unknown to both men

and women. It was actually a huge eye-opener when I explained it to the couples we worked with in the creation of this book.

To explain the importance of roles in a family team, I usually explain it through the example of a sports team. Imagine a football team where everyone is playing quarterback and nobody is a receiver, a baseball team where everyone is a pitcher, but no one is out on the field, or a soccer team where everyone is an attacker but no one wants to defend, and the goalkeeper is missing entirely. Sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? It may come as a surprise to more than a few that I have often found that in a "family team," one or more of the roles are underdeveloped or completely absent.

The big difference between family- and sports teams is that we have been taught since childhood that there are different roles that need to be performed in a sports team. On the other hand, we have been led to believe that we need to be "the same," wearing matching T-shirts, laughing at the same jokes, and liking the exact same things, to be a healthy couple. Nothing could be as misleading or further from the truth. The challenge is that when we put together people whose roles are different, conflict arises. This conflict is normal, and it should be expected. This is really the gist of it all, expecting conflict, knowing that it is normal, and being aware that the other person's role is different from ours, and that is precisely what makes us stronger.

Reaching this understanding is what leads us to realize that each one of us has different abilities and qualities and that we are both important for the relationship to work. It can also help us to understand how we personally can become better in the areas where we are not so strong and even define responsibilities, just as one would in a sports team. Every member of a sports team trains on a daily basis to be the best one can be. How often do we really train to be better husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, or sisters?

Finally, for this all to be possible, we need to respect each other's ability to perform the role as well as trusting that the other person is doing his/her best effort taking care of their role in the marriage and that they have the best interest of the family in mind.

Believe me, I know it is a lot to take in, but let's work through it together. We hope that you will not only find this book interesting but also helpful in making your family relationships better and your marriage wonderful.

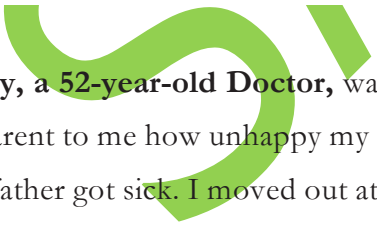
# Families are Changing

For many of us, family, whether biological or chosen, is one of the most important aspects of our lives. They are the ones we rely on for understanding, caring, and support. Because of the importance our family plays in our lives, it will inevitably influence us either positively or negatively. Because of this, it is essential to understand how they shape us, making us happy or unhappy.

To complicate matters, families are a lot different from what they were in our parents' and grandparents' generations, which is why it may seem challenging to learn from them. For one, we are no longer “stuck for life” with the person we married, and splitting up has become not only socially acceptable but also expected. While there used to be one family structure that dominated all others, significant changes in the structure have taken place over the past few decades. We have gone from two-parent household structures to a more eclectic expression of what is “normal” and acceptable. While there, up to the 50s and 60s, was an emphasis on a family including a man and a woman with children; now, families have a much more diverse structure. The definition of what a family is has become something deeply personal, meaning that each unique individual may have their own take on what a family means to them.

It is not surprising that someone accustomed to the traditional definition of a family will have a hard time figuring out what his or her role is in all of this.

I have had many sessions in which one or both persons were saying to me that they just didn't get “it.” I'll describe a few of the different types of conversations that I've had throughout the years:



**Mary, a 52-year-old Doctor,** was telling me in another conversation: “I remember it became apparent to me how unhappy my mother was in her marriage when she moved in with us when my father got sick. I moved out at the age of 18 to go to college. Sure, I had visited on holidays, but there were things about my parent’s marriage I had been too young and naïve to see as a child. During my visits, everything seemed blissful. My dad was who he had always been, and my mom was running around the house, making sure that everything was just right. She was also her old self. Nothing had changed, so everything had to be all right... right? Well, not so much.”. Mary continued to explain: “My mom told me one morning after a long sleepless night of taking care of my dad that she thought it so unfair that she had to take of her husband in his

dying days when he had never taken care of her. She said that she had wanted to divorce him many times but that she just didn't know what to do if she had, especially with four kids. She had not studied any degree, had no money of her own, and the work experience she had was as a secretary, a job she left as soon as she had her first child. Ten years later, and with four kids, who would hire her? She was just scared of what would happen to her and us (children) if she left.". She continued, "It was exactly why she had been so hard on all of us to study and get a degree. I guess she thought that she might not be able to do much about her own life, but at least she could make sure we (her children) did not have to put up with someone like my dad". Mary told me that it had clicked for her that day. She knew why she didn't want to end up like her mother, that until then had seemed content. She wanted her own voice and never quit her job because of a man. She wanted to be part of the decisions that were taken in her home. She wanted her husband to take an equal share of the household chores. And why not? She continued, "I am making more than my husband, and the least I expect is for him to get off the couch and help out. Things have changed, and we should both do our share."

I remember **Mark, a 48-year-old Accountant** saying: "I have three brothers and one sister. You know, when we were kids, our father was the boss. No doubt about it. When he spoke up, we all listened, and when he raised his voice, everyone knew to shut up. If we forgot, it didn't take long for either our dad or our mom to remind us of it. Now that I am the dad, I feel that nobody cares about what I say. I am just another person with an opinion, and that's it. I work my butt off all day, and when I come home at the end of the day, I don't feel anyone respects me. At times there are things I want to be done "my way," and then everyone, even my wife, jumps at me as if I was a crazy dictator or something like that."

**Cristina, a 32-year-old Sales Manager,** and her husband, **John, a 36-year-old IT Consultant,** are another example of what I have seen in many couples, where one feels disconnected from the other. Sharing intimacy, love, care, trust, and understanding is critical for a healthy relationship, but maintaining this in a marriage can be hard at times. At times the most difficult thing is just showing it. Over the years, I have seen many facets of people loving deeply but not "showing it." It is actually a surprisingly common behavioral pattern that people need closeness but at the same time act disconnected from close relationships. I find this especially true in marital relationships.

Some people will long for closeness while protecting their hearts from being hurt. They will cry, get angry and inwardly protest, or become withdrawn and detached when what they actually long for is closeness and being valued. The root of the cause can usually be traced back to a misunderstanding of a difficult time they went through. It definitely can be an earth-shattering event, but it does not need to be. It actually might just be the day-to-day stress of too much to do or just not talking things through. The reaction to this can be that, at some point, one starts feeling that they've lost their spouse's attention and react by retracting into themselves. When this happens, after some time living with a person that has "withdrawn," it is typical for them to lash out with anger and frustration, which leads to more "withdrawal" from one and anger from the other. Suddenly we have one person trying to avoid contact and the other left feeling that they have to pursue the other person to get some sort of reaction. Let me say this; it is a very frustrating situation for both. Wives, who become pursuers, often say something like: "He just doesn't listen to me. He's just not there emotionally. He can't shut me out like that! He's just not there emotionally." The with-drawer, overwhelmed by the pursuer's emotion, feels alienated and helpless in pleasing his or her partner. And so, in protection, pulls away. Husbands, who are often withdrawers, say they are left feeling unable to calm and soothe their wife, therefore, withdraw to find peace. He will say things like: "She is all over me all the time. She will just not let me alone. I just don't know what she wants of me anymore.". Is it possible that they love each other? Most often, very much so, but their way of communicating is not working in their favor.

I think that plain and simple boredom is a severely underrated marital problem. Many times it can stem from wanting or needing to save money, but most often than not, it comes from a lack of ingenuity. As the saying goes, "the best things in life are free." I remember **Liz, a 37-year-old School Teacher**, and **Robert, a 43-year-old Police Officer**, who told me they were just bored with each other. They had comments like "We never do anything new together," "You only want to go shopping, and it costs us a fortune every time," and "You are only worried about money when you want to stay at home watching your football game." I sent them both Camping, not figuratively but literally camping; he said that she would hate it, and she said that he'd never take her. They called back Monday, saying that they had a great time.

Doing new stuff was probably not expected 50 years ago; the honeymoon trip was enough traveling for a lifetime. Fifty years ago, no fire was expected or needed in a relationship to "last" either. They



might not have been happy, but they lasted. Get over it; it's required now. It might take a little imagination, some of the things we try we might not like as much as we thought, and some we might like a whole lot more, but we need to put a little trust in each other. It is really not as much what we do; it is whom we do it with. We just might find something we like and discover something new and exciting about our spouse. It only takes a spark to light a fire.

The last of the common challenges I will mention in this segment is one best illustrated by **Susan, a 39-year-old Registered Nurse**, and her husband, **Daniel, a 57-year-old Marketing Director**. They had been married for almost 15 years when I met them. When they got married, they didn't really think about how their life stages might affect their relationship. Granted, there was a significant age difference in this couple, but growing apart also happens to couples where there is little to no age difference. It would be naïve to think that we stay the same through time. We change with time, and so does our spouse. There is no way around it, and we need to take regular stock of our relationship to ensure that our partner and we grow together and don't grow apart. Try to love and accept the different changes that life brings for both, individually and as a couple.

The biggest tests of relationships often come in the form of challenges like these. Conversations that ask us to be truly vulnerable with each other and to do our best to understand what the other person has to say, even if it's difficult to hear. Talking about things like this doesn't mean we'll be able to resolve the problem immediately; what we are showing each other is that we are trying and that we are making each other part of our decision-making process. We'll demonstrate to each other that our relationship is a priority, even if there are elements of our life together that we are finding challenging. Challenging is perfectly fine.

Opening up is only part of it since there also has to be a willingness to adapt. Life is full of changes. While those changes can be fun, they can also be difficult to face. We are both likely to become different people over the years; years accentuate the good and the bad. We'll get older, we'll look older, our relationship will need to keep up with these changes, and we'll need to face these experiences together.

A big part of feeling challenged by age is feeling like we don't enjoy our spouse as much as we used to. In my experience, many times, this is not true; we just might have forgotten how to have fun together or need to find new ways of having a great time.


What all these personal stories show is that we are witnessing a total reshaping of the understanding of what family relations are all about. It is a cultural shift that has happened at a speed that has no precedence in human history. The speed at which the change is occurring and with which it is affecting every single family is, therefore, also very difficult to adapt to. After thousands of years of a very stable culture and traditions governing our family life, it seems that we are living in a completely different world, a quagmire full of pits and traps, where our compass stopped working, and we lost the map to help us navigate. It sometimes feels like we are set up to fail. On top of that, we are told that we are living amongst extraterrestrials where women are from Venus and men are from Mars”. What ultimately seems to be recommended by every specialist out there is that we need years of couples therapy just to have the slightest chance for us to get through the next few months and what feels like a Ph.D. in parenting. The flip side of not doing it is ruining not only our marriage but also our children’s lives forever, followed by more therapy and lawyers taking all our money.

I will say this, our prospects are not so bleak, but still, there are some myths that we can safely ignore:

SAMMY

# Myths about marriage

## Myth 1: A good marriage is smooth, easy sailing



When we compare the reasons why people got married only a few generations ago to now, it seems great. Gone are the days when people said “I do” because their parents told them to, because their families needed to strengthen relations with another family, because the woman had a hefty dowry or because the man came from a high-status family. Before that, a good enough reason for marriage was just shelter, food production, and protection from violence. Now we get married only if and when we feel like it. Most don't even get married because they lust for someone since that “need” is usually well satisfied a long time before we get hitched. We really do marry for love, and what's not to love about that? It should give us the very best chance of a happily-ever-after marriage. Why is it then so far from the reality of what couples experience? Well, precisely because of our expectations.

People's expectations a few generations ago were really very stable. What came into the marriage really didn't really change much throughout their lives. Think about it, money, social status, respectability, political alliances, sex was a duty, not for pleasure, and having children are stable factors. When this is the foundation for the marriage and what we are expecting going into it, it creates stability. Take love, passion, and even conversation out of the picture, and it even becomes easier.

When the concept of the “romantic marriage” started to take hold in our society, we added much more complicated elements, increasing demands, and higher expectations for what we understand to be a happy couple. Now we want our spouse to be our best friend, trusted confidant, romantic, passionate lover, mother/father of our children (in some cases), provider, negate our masculine or feminine differences, and be the source of all our happiness. There are a lot of conditions that need to be met here. Oh! I forgot a few other “important” requirements, like being the one and only emotional support and fulfilling our existential and spiritual needs as human beings.

There is a lot of room to be disappointed, and when that happens, we quickly start tagging our marriage as “highly dissatisfying.”

I wouldn't recommend going back to the “old” reasons for marrying for any reason, but rather realizing that when we expect something from our spouse, we should be at least equally demanding of ourselves. I really like the representation of a pointing finger, an accusing hand signal like the one shown below. I hope you take a bit of time to look at the below picture of the hand before you continue reading.



What does this hand tell us? What it shows me is, first of all, a pointing finger, reprimanding someone else for something we expected of them, but there are four more fingers on a hand. One of the other fingers, the thumb, is pointing straight up to God, asking him for help. My question is, where are the remaining three fingers pointing? ... I think you've figured it out all by yourself.

Anyway, I will come back to dealing with false expectations later in the book, but for now, I would just like to thank Hollywood for all the business that it has brought family therapists, making us believe that marriage is effortless and that the perfect love for us is out there, somewhere.

Nothing could be further from reality. The truth is that any relationship takes a lot of work, and marriage even more so. It may feel like a fairy tale during the honeymoon period of the romance, but if it survives long-term, a healthy relationship takes effort from both partners. We are not perfect, we all come with baggage and emotional issues, and it sometimes feels like life just has a way of throwing us curve balls when we are at our weakest. There is a reason why we say, “we have to work on a marriage,” because as hard as it may seem, the rewards are just extraordinary.

I will quote Susan Sarandon in her conversation with Richard Jenkins in the movie “Shall We Dance?”

*Susan: All these promises that we make and we break... Why is it that you think people get married?*

*Richard: Passion!*

*Susan: No*

*Richard: It is interesting, though, because I would have taken you as a romantic. Why then?*

*Susan: Because there's a billion people on the planet... so, what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage, you're promising to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things... all of it, all of the time, every day. You're saying, "Your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go unwitnessed because I will be your witness."*

Both my wife and I like romantic movies, and through writing this book, it has gotten us to talk a lot about why we feel that we have a solid marriage. I think that she described it better than anyone during one of our conversations. She said: "To me, it takes four hard but achievable things. The first thing is a lover, someone with whom I feel chemistry and a desire to share physical intimacy. The second thing is a partner, someone with whom I want to plant my roots and create the foundation for my life, within which we build our family, our home, and our finances. The third is a companion, someone with whom I feel safe, share emotional love and, again, intimacy, and can reveal my most vulnerable self. The fourth, which is probably the hardest, is to realize that it is impossible for anyone to meet all of the first three criteria all the time. Most of the time, you are just perfect for me," she said, "and when I really need you, I let you know, and I know that you'll be there for me."

Most couples we have worked with are very focused on the "partner" part of their relationship and immerse themselves in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of work, kids, sleep, and doing it all over the next day. When this happens, it is very easy to slip into a routine and forget about the other factors. Even the most solid couples are bound to experience periods of dissatisfaction in their level of physical or emotional intimacy with their partner. My wife and I do too, sometimes for a variety of reasons, but we make sure that we catch ourselves in it or we let the other person know how we feel. Admitting that we are feeling bored, exhausted, uninspired, and unsexy or sexy but unnoticed is not bad; it is also much more than just for the sake of "surviving"; it's the first step towards solving a problem, together building that trust and intimacy of one or the other having a vulnerable moment.

## Myth 2: “Once we get married, my partner will change”

There is a saying that goes something like this: “Women marry men hoping they will change...”. I will share with you how the saying ends in the next segment.

Many women still want the traditional man’s man. A honk of a guy who can fix things around the house, drives a bike, has a huge truck, is earthy and protective, speaks his mind, stands tall, with strong hands and huge muscles, i.e., the male stereotype ... until married. Then they want that the 2.0 version. The one that has all the feminine features of being sensitive, empathic, and a great listener. Simple enough, right? A guy that protects but doesn't make her feel like she needs protection, one that speaks his mind but not before consulting with her, one that stands tall but not more than her, earthy but sensitive to her needs, strong hands but moisturized and accommodating enough to get rid of the bike and truck in exchange for a family-friendly car. Do you see why some men might be a bit confused?

Sure, we know all of this, but we still want to finetune that person we love. Here is why we should think twice about trying to:

### **It creates emotional distance**

All of us have things we could work on, and letting our spouse know if something is important to us is all right. In fact, it is thoughtful for him/her to adapt, when they know it is important to us. Let’s say, for example, that it annoys us that the toilet seat is left up, the lights are left on all over the house, or clothes are left on the floor; it would be considerate and even expected of him/her to make an effort. Wouldn't we do the same? It doesn't take much, and if it makes our spouse happy, we shouldn’t think too much about it and just do it. On the other hand, if we find ourselves constantly telling our spouse what to do and even trying to change him/her, it will not be long before he/she starts feeling uncomfortable and pulling and resisting, with good reason. This will ultimately push them away and create distance in the relationship.

### **We wouldn’t accept it**

Sometimes it is a good idea to try to step into our spouse’s shoes for a minute. How would we feel if our partner was constantly telling us what and how much we needed to change? Would

our relationship grow stronger if we were told that we should be more like John or Mary, look more like Jim or Nancy or do more like Jack or Lacy? Probably not, right?

Kids don't like to be told what to do, and adults like it even less. When the criticism comes from our doting wife or adoring husband, we take it twice as hard, that is, unless we start developing a thick skin, and then it doesn't really matter anymore. When determining how we should treat our partner, always put ourselves in their shoes. Nobody likes to be told what to do. Think of how it would make us feel to be under constant scrutiny.

### **It's disrespectful**

The presence of respect in a relationship is incredibly important for both partners to feel safe. Respect indicates that we accept and appreciate who they are and love them for it. Putting ourselves on a mission to change our spouse is, therefore, highly disrespectful to them and highly detrimental to our relationship. Many habits are healthy to break, such as smoking, lack of exercise, or overeating but trying to change our partner's personality isn't one of them.

### **We will never be satisfied**

It's natural for us to want the best for our partner. Growing together, changing and maturing, and striving to reach our potential are healthy goals for all couples, but there is a vast difference between encouraging our spouse to be their best self and trying to completely change who they are.

Our spouse can never become our pet project. We are not responsible for any changes they decide to make in their lives. While our love and encouragement may help our partner, we have to remember that their journey to become a better version of themselves is ultimately their own. Either we like the person we're with, or we don't. It's as simple as that.

Our goal should be to strive to treat our spouse with love and respect, enjoying them for who they are now, not who they could be someday.

For better or worse, we married our spouse with all his/her peculiarities, idiosyncrasies, singularities, eccentricities, kinks, bumps, and uniquely wonderful characteristics.

### Myth 3: “My wife will never change”

There is a saying that goes something like this: “Women marry men hoping they will change. Men marry women hoping they will not. So both will inevitably be disappointed.” The quote is actually attributed to Albert Einstein.

Compared to the previous segment about women, men, on the other hand, expect their spouse to be exactly the way she was the very first time they saw her. Although when married, they also expect the 2.0 version. Nowadays, both want to work away from home and have a career. It is for most families around the country also a necessity to have the living standard that we want for our family in an ever more stressful economy, but when she comes home from a long day's work, tending to customers, having endless meetings, negotiating with contractors and suppliers, supporting the boss, managing a team and assist colleagues, she needs to come home to take care of the kids, homework, laundry, cleaning, dinner and still feel sexy, patient, loving, affectionate, passionate and in need to please her husband. Is it possible that some women might be taking on a little too much?

#### **Unrealistic expectations**

My first recommendation is: We should not write our expectations in stone, and never expect less of our spouse; we should expect something different. This will, without a doubt, be wonderful, surprising, and fabulously different from what we originally thought.

Unrealistic expectations are damaging because we set ourselves and our spouse up for failure. When people set unrealistic expectations in their relationships, disappointment sets in, and they start questioning the feelings of their partner. Being in love is a beautiful experience that should continue to surprise us. It is a fantastic journey of mutual discovery, love, and companionship, where we are allowed to expect incredible things, but which we will have to discover along the way.

Forget what we've seen in movies; making a relationship work is not always easy. We have to be willing to go along for the ride. If we are married, we should know that “blissful” is a wonderful general feeling we have about the relationship we have with our wife/husband, but not something that we feel at every single moment in time. We will disagree and argue with our partner. We will sometimes need “space.” At times will even need to avoid speaking to each other for a little while.



But this is where effective communication comes into play. When we are able to communicate well with our spouse, we're able to resolve our issues and go back to being the sweet, loving, and playful couple that we want to be.

## **Change**

My second recommendation is: We should not write our expectations in stone or expect less of our spouse. We should expect something different; expect wonderful, surprising, and fabulously different.

No matter what's going on in our life right now, one thing is certain – it's going to change. Everything changes, whether we're newly married or have been together for many years. We live in a world of change, and as time goes by, we do too. Change is never easy, but it becomes easier when we prepare and accept it, and honestly, how boring would the world be if we never changed? Having everything remain the same, always, forever, and ever would be unbearable. Imagine being stuck in a horrible, never-ending loop in time.

Granted, it takes courage to adapt to change, and resisting change might make us feel secure for a time, but whether we want to or not, sooner or later, we have to change, and we have to discover the beautiful, wonderful, fantastic, and ever so slightly different person every day, we have chosen to share our life with, wrinkles and all. So deal with it.



## **Myth 4: “Greatness in being the same”**

It is hardly surprising that both men and women are at a loss and that the family structure is under stress. We feel we can't catch up to everything that is expected of us. Who does what? Do we both do everything, and what happens when we can't agree? Do we just walk away from it all?

The differences between men and women have always fascinated me. Over the last few years, it has really annoyed me that the “political correctness brigade” suggests that there is no difference between the genders; we really are, in my opinion. The big issue is that we are confusing difference with equality.

Now let me state, for the record, that I believe that men and women are and should be equal and that I recognize that even today, this is not the case in most countries. Women are still paid less than men to do the same job, and women are not given the same opportunities to hold senior positions in companies.

Having cleared that up, we should not confuse being equal with being different. We are different in many ways, and that is precisely what makes a woman and a man, for that matter, splendid, fantastic, unique, and wonderful. Different doesn't mean good or bad; it just means different. Difference is also the reason why we married our spouse and not the neighbor. I believe these differences should be recognized and celebrated.

### **Our spouse as a multiplying factor**

I guess that my chemistry teacher wasn't all that great at making this subject exciting, but then YouTube came along. I once found a video by a Professor at Carleton University who did an experiment for his students to show how elements, when combined, have an incredible effect. He had three balloons on his desk. On the first, he had written oxygen; on the second, acetylene; and on the third, oxyacetylene. When he put a match to the first, he got a pop, and from the second, he got a short flare. The Professor then said, "You have now seen what happens to each of these elements separately. Now let me show you what happens when we combine them." He then went on to put on his earplugs, stating that he recommended everyone cover their ears and got out a long stick with a match on the end. The explosion of the last balloon was incredible.

Was it the oxygen or the acetylene that caused the explosion? Neither or rather, both. Separately, they are cool, but it is when they are combined that they create an incredible effect.

Our marriage works the same way. The key to creating something extraordinary in marriage, just like chemistry, is not adding more of the same, nor is it even multiplying what we have; it's discovering our own exceptional abilities, recognizing our weaknesses, and understanding how someone else's abilities complement our own. The key is really how well we complement each other.

So just admit it; we are not perfect. We all have strengths and weaknesses. What seems to be no big deal to us is difficult for others, and the areas where we struggle, seem effortless to them. That is precisely why we, as talented and incomplete people, need the help of our spouse, and our talented and incomplete spouse needs us. A magical, incredible combination of two different people.

## Myth 5: “Jealousy is an expression of love”

Jealousy is a negative emotional response to not receiving the attention we feel we are entitled to. Sometimes we purposefully confuse protectiveness with possessiveness, but they are not the same.

Jealousy is another “gem” from popular culture and one I personally have a strong aversion towards. They say: Want to know if our partner really loves us? Simple! Just try making them jealous! If they get upset when they see us talking to someone of the opposite sex, it must mean that they really care about us.

Hundreds if not thousands of novels and movies have us convinced that jealousy and possessiveness are acceptable and even desirable qualities in romantic relationships. They show us that if someone is not possessive about us, they must not really care. Wrong! I tell my kids this all the time. I tell them that no one possesses them and that no one is entitled to them. It’s time we recognized that these feelings are unhealthy and that we should view them as huge warning signs of a dysfunctional and even a possibly dangerous relationship. True love is built on mutual respect and trust, and a lack of these values should make us walk away as soon as possible.

Jealousy should not be glamourized or defended by saying it’s a sign of love. It is simply not! It’s a sign of insecurity and reflective of seeing someone else as an object to be possessed. It’s a negative emotion stemming from insecurity, low self-esteem, and anxiety, but never from love. Conversely, if we love the fact someone is possessive about us, it stems from our own debilitating need to be loved and be taken care of, even at the cost of our freedom.

These feelings are not a safe cocoon. It’s a prison where the prisoner has to behave as per the rules and insecurities of the jailor or be punished for it. Remember, in jealousy, there is no space for individuality, trust, or personal growth. Our love for our spouse and our desire to see them “happy” will be turned against us and used as a means to drive us into submissiveness and to force us to bow down to their will. None of this has anything to do with love, and none of it will create harmony or long-term happiness. To truly love is to trust and allow them to blossom at their will.

Since jealousy is so common in relationships, whether or not our partner is doing anything that might justify these feelings, like flirting with someone else or cheating in the relationship, what should we do about it?

First of all, we should not hold the feeling inside, but reacting violently or telling our spouse in an aggressive manner that they should stop doing X or Y isn't constructive either.

- Talking about it immediately is, therefore, not the right time. It's best not to start the conversation in a place of heightened or stressed emotional state.
- Start with some personal introspection considering our own personal reactions to a certain situation. Maybe we are insecure or even lonely. We might even write it down, as this can help us collect our thoughts.
- We should ask ourselves what we can do about it and if we are being mature about the situation. We might consider talking to a good friend or a Coach.
- When we do decide to talk to our spouse about it, we should be calm and honest about how we are feeling. We should make sure it also is the right time for our partner. It will be easy for our partner to become defensive if we start by listing all the things that *they* do that make us jealous. Instead, we should focus on our feelings and concerns rather than coming from a place of blame or accusations.
- Consider using "I" statements rather than "you" statements. We might start off by saying something like, "I want to share some jealous feelings I've been having," rather than, "You're making me so jealous lately!" or "I feel jealous when I see you do X, and I wanted to talk about that" rather than "You make me really jealous when you do X."

Even if we bring up these feelings as sensitively as possible, we should expect that our partner might have their own strong feelings about it. After all, we are telling them that something they are doing, and probably something they enjoy doing, is making us feel bad, and it is understandable that they may feel defensive or upset. Just as we are showing our vulnerabilities, opening up, and allowing our own feelings to surface, we should try to give some space to our partner's feelings as well. Remember, we have chosen the time, and we've had time to digest it; they have not. Give them time.

Working out the ins and outs of our relationship is something that takes time and several conversations. The best we can hope for is that our spouse will be able to hear our feelings and that we will be able to express our own.

These conversations may actually serve as opportunities to go over the “rules” and “boundaries” of the relationship so that feelings of jealousy can be kept at bay. Everyone flirts a little from time to time, knowingly or unconsciously. Sometimes the problem is how, when, and/or with whom. Sometimes the solution is simply that we need to be reassured that our spouse loves us and that we can trust them, regardless of whether we are together or apart. Personally, I have a great relationship with my wife’s ex, but I know for a fact that some of my friends think it is weird. We need to be as clear as possible with our spouse and know that it is something that both can live with.

Keep in mind that the feeling of care is all about the one we love, while the feeling of jealousy is all about us, as in “I.”



### Myth 6: “Arguments never happen in good relationships”

It was my mom who once told me, “A house where there is never any argument is a house where there is no one home.” There are times when we need to acknowledge our differences of opinion, and this will eventually lead us to end up arguing. And that’s absolutely okay! However, unfortunately, people love to believe that happy couples are those who never argue and often address them as an example to others. It’s high time we get real and break that marriage myth. Because if we really never ever had an argument with our spouse, chances are one or both of us are scared to lose our partner to the difference in opinions. It’s only natural to have our own perspective on things that could differ from our spouse's.

There are two ways for a couple never to fight or argue. One stems from submissiveness, avoiding arguing at any cost; the other is not caring and ignoring the real problems and therefore pretending to be the “perfectly boring, sorry, happy couple.”

Thinking that arguing is bad is an unrealistic expectation that could ruin our relationship. So, where does this conflict come from? Simply from change, new things happen to us all the time, to which

we have to adapt. Adapting to this change also means making decisions about what to do about it and what not to do about it. Now personalities, roles, and interests come into play. One might want a fixed dinner time, the other flexible; one might want to be frugal, the other likes to live it up a little, one might want kids, the other might also want kids, but not right now, the number of pillows on the bed, where to go on vacation or at which in-laws to spend the next Christmas, and so we argue.

It can be hard to break free from the illusion that the perfect prince or princess, the perfect soul mate who matched us perfectly and with whom we would live in a blissful state of total harmony, is still out there waiting for us. So when things get a bit complicated, what should we do? Should we just keep searching until we find that perfect someone? There are certainly enough examples of people getting married and divorced half a dozen times. They must really be trying, or is it maybe that they are not trying hard enough to make any of their marriages work?

These arguments are not bad. They can actually be very constructive since they give us the opportunity to discuss certain things which, in the long run, are healthy for our marriage. This is one of the main points I want to make in this book. I will show how we can resolve conflicts, build stronger family ties and create a healthy family culture! Not in spite of, but because of our differences.

So sit back, chill out and enjoy the ride. Arguing is not a warning that we might not be meant for each other or that something is wrong in our marriage. It only tells us that there is something that we have to work through as a normal stage of growing old together.



### **Myth 7: “Babies can save relationships”**

We've all heard at least one friend say something about everything being “different” once they'll get married or that they are having a baby to "add something new to the marriage." I keep wondering why on earth anyone would ever believe any of those things. Newsflash!!! If believing that marriage can save a relationship is a crazy and stupid idea. Convincing ourselves that a baby will save our marriage is a completely new level of stupidity and stratospherically crazy. Why not go for twins? Since there are two of them, they are bound to have twice the effect. Right? Hey, why not triplets?

The most common reason for which couples want to have a baby is that they think that bringing a child into the world will strengthen their commitment to each other. These couples glow, stating that “our baby is half me, half my sweetie” and that “caring for this adorable tiny human being will only help reconnect” ... “Did you see the ultrasound? Doesn't he/she already look like me?”. I literally tell them: “WOW, what a ride you’re in for! You have no idea”.

According to the American Psychological Association, marital connection actually nosedives after a couple has a baby, and it is not surprising. People have no idea how much work a baby is. It will drive even the calmest and most collected people nuts. They still need to be productive at work; now add the following to the mix sleepless nights, back pain, babies will cry because they feel hungry, unsettled, wet, uncomfortable, just because they need a cuddle, or sometimes for no obvious reason. Have they ever heard of colic? Try 3 to 4 months of loud and mostly nonstop crying. These demands don't go away once a baby grows into a toddler or child; either they simply morph into a Teenager before they know it. Muahahaha... and they thought the baby was bad.

Along those same lines of “strengthening the relationship,” many believe that their significant other will somehow notice them more once they have a child together. Mothers believe that fathers will feel more connected because of the child they share, whereas fathers assume that mothers will suddenly be more attracted to them once they become the “man” of the house.

What only people that have children know is that there is something very primal happening during pregnancy, where hormones create a sense of panic and fear, incredible mood swings, oscillated between pure, unadulterated joy and complete and utter despair, sleep deprivation, and nagging anxiety are just the tip of the iceberg.

Hey, I love my kids unconditionally, they are incredible, and I would have loved to have a few more than I was blessed with. Still, did it help my marriage? Definitely not in the beginning, only as time went on and we were able to adapt. Was it easy? That is not how I would describe it. Does it get easier? No, it’s hard and wonderfully different every day. Would it have broken up my marriage if we weren’t a strong couple? It definitely felt like it a few times, even if I consider my wife and me to have a very solid marriage.

The bottom line is that if our relationship is already struggling, we shouldn’t believe for one second that a baby will save it.

Even the healthiest relationships will still go through the wringer once a new baby is brought into the equation. Before, it was only two people that were struggling; now, they are also exposing the newborn to this negativity. Whether it's arguing in front of the baby or just feeling generally miserable, infants pick up very quickly on how their parents are feeling and will unsettle the calmest child. It is really unfair to everyone, especially the baby. Instead, they should spend time exploring other ways to reconnect.

### Myth 8: “Great couples can read each other’s minds”

That is another classic. We all have that image of an old married couple sitting somewhere and one saying to the other at precisely 4 o'clock in the afternoon, “Wouldn't it be nice now with a cup of tea?” and the other one responding, “Yes, my dear, you read my mind” (Note: They've been doing it for the last 50 years, so chances are that a cup of tea will be nice at that time). Another example might be the same example couple where the husband is getting out of bed, and at that exact time, his wife brings him his slippers, for which he thanks her and says: “Thank you, my dear, you read my mind.” (Note: The man has in 50 years of marriage never remembered to bring his slippers to his bedside and always asked his wife if she would be so kind as to bring them to him, so chances are that this morning is pretty much the same). Even some kids have that ability! I remember one time when the dinner burned, my brother and I just knew to stay as far away from our mom as possible. We actually had the ability to read her mind! (Note: There's really no explaining this one. We're just super smart. Mind-readers, really).

Have we ever heard our spouse say something like, “He/she should know how I am feeling,” “I shouldn't have to tell you what I want. You should already know!” or “You should have known I wanted a \_\_\_\_\_, even if I said I didn't.” Have we ever had an argument with our spouse where we later found out that it was simply the result of a silly misunderstanding?

Well, it is a problem to assume that our spouse knows what we are thinking and knows what we want without us having to tell them. We have all fallen into that trap at some point or another. It is actually quite normal to think that others experience situations the exact same way we do, and therefore if they acted “rationally,” they should react, think or do what we would have done. We might be able to guess, but mindreading is a stretch.



Making the right assumptions is much more likely, especially in mature marriages, because their lives have become so intertwined, and they have been through every possible scenario about a million times. This makes it all the more shocking when our husband or wife fundamentally misunderstands what we are saying. They might think that they were being very clear, just saying nothing. Well, not so much. Even couples that have been together for decades need to communicate.

Working with couples, I frequently hear them say they should not need to tell their spouses things they think they should already know. They say things like: “He/she should already know” or “He/she should have known,” both followed by the tagline: “If he/she doesn’t, it is because he/she doesn't care (anymore).” Believing that the other person is or should be able to read our minds doesn't work in any kind of relationship, let alone in marriages.

So how can we tell if unspoken assumptions or expectations are leading to difficulties in communication with our spouse? Try answering the following questions to see if they apply to your marriage:

- Do many of our conflicts involve misunderstandings related to communication?
- Do we frequently find ourselves thinking, “I shouldn’t have to tell him/her what I want”?
- Do we frequently find ourselves thinking negatively about what he/she is doing?
- Do we frequently feel hurt?

The issues could arguably be present in any marriage that is going through difficulties in their communication, but I believe that they have a different flavor. The reason is because of what is left out of the conversation and involves the other person's ability to read minds. People just can not read minds, and when information is not verbalized, we should not assume that the other person should be aware of it, and we should, therefore, not expect that person to take it into account.

So what do we do if that happens? No matter how long we have been together or what the issue is, they can’t! We should stop expecting our to read our minds! Working on this is something that will pay off.

## Myth 9: “My spouse knows everything about me”

Most times, our spouse “get’s” us, but sometimes they just don’t. The problem is that we can’t be completely sure when that is. This is another example of unmet expectations, but there is a different aspect to it than the mindreading myth. We have a tendency to test each other on our knowledge of one another; for example, will he remember a specific date, or will she buy me the right present for my birthday, my favorite color, our favorite fruit, or to remember to lie asked if what we bought makes us look good. Guys are actually just as “bad” as girls; they just focus on different things.

Early in the relationship, it is a fun game we play, where we are happy when the other person remembers, and we accept it when they are not. It is actually a simple way of getting to know each other’s likes and dislikes, but as time goes on, the same game becomes more serious. We start examining each other. In some cases, it seems like one is the hunter, the other the hunted, just trying to avoid all the traps that are set up. In extreme cases, I have seen that the game seems to be set up so that there is no “right” answer. Instead of playing games, it is essential for both parties to be as open as possible about what they want and need from their spouse.

If we really have the urge to remind our spouse of something or if we want to get a specific reaction from him/her, we shouldn’t be cryptic about it; we have to guide them. Here are a few examples of simple ways of helping us achieve what we want without creating a trap for our spouse:

- Typical question: Do you like my new dress?
  - Reality: Do we really want to know about the dress, or do we want a compliment about how good, slim, younger, rich, or sexy we look?
  - Ask: Doesn't this dress make me look good/slim, younger/rich/sexy?
- Typical question: How do these boots look?
  - Reality: Do we really want to know about the boots, or do we want a compliment about how tall, manly or tough we look?
  - Ask: Don't these boots make me look tall/manly/tough?

- Typical question: Do you like the dinner?
  - Reality: Do we really want to know about the dinner, or do we want our spouse to tell us that he/she appreciates us and that it is wonderful to sit down at talk instead of grabbing a quick dinner in front of the TV?
  - Ask: It took me a couple of hours to get dinner ready, but isn't it nice to sit down at talk?
  
- Typical question: Aren't these tools I bought great?
  - Reality: He/She probably has no clue. Do we really want to know what he/she thinks about the tools, or do we want a compliment about how smart and useful we are or even get appreciated *again* for whatever we fixed a few weeks ago?
  - Ask: I feel great about these new tools that I bought. They will make me even better at fixing things around the house, and I am getting really good at it. Don't you agree? They will help me do things a lot quicker now. Remember the thing I fixed a few weeks ago? Aren't you happy I was able to do that?

Sometimes it might be hard to quit testing and start asking what it is that we really want to know. It's usually because the answers really matter to us. But doing this only keeps our relationship away from the truth.

The best way to overcome this is to face our feelings and, maybe next time, just ask for what we want.

### Myth 10: “Never going to bed angry”

My wife and I have gone to bed angry many times. She is the type of person that finds comfort in taking a bit of time to process the information, prefers that I give her a little space while she is doing it, and even likes to sleep on it. Despite popular belief, this is actually great for our marriage.

We've all heard the phrase: "Never go to bed angry." It's often gifted to young couples before they tie the knot as a time-tested golden nugget of wisdom. What a cliché! Marriage is a dance on roses, only if by that they mean that roses are beautiful, but full of thorns. The idea is not so much to make sure we don't go to bed angry as it is to have a productive discussion or even an argument that brings us closer to a common understanding of what would be best for "us" as a couple.

Sometimes, arguments just don't have a simple solution. They can trigger emotions that take time and space to resolve, and respecting our spouse's way of processing his/her thoughts, feelings, and emotions, acknowledging that it may take someone more time than it takes us, is important. Maybe it is more important to them than it is to us, or maybe they have other things on their mind, and they need to "park" the argument for a while. We can't read their minds, so pushing our spouse or ourselves too hard before we both are ready, is far more dangerous to the well-being of the marriage than going to bed angry. The conversation might not move at the speed that we'd like, but we should remember that nothing has been decided yet, so we should just relax, maybe be concerned or even upset, but not angry.

So if we feel that we are getting nowhere, we are having trouble understanding our spouse's concerns, repeating the same arguments over and over, or we are moving around in circles, we should take a break and wait until a better time when we are both better rested, to see if cooler heads and clearer minds help us see things in a different light.


Going to bed angry doesn't mean that we have to freeze each other out. We can still show each other that we care about each other, even if we don't agree on everything. We can still kiss goodnight, snuggle, and tell our spouse that we love him/her. Having sex in the middle of an argument is actually very exciting and definitely better than make-up sex.

In my experience, the only "but" before taking that break, having sex, or going to sleep, is when people have different approaches to resolving issues before going to sleep. An example I have found in some marriages is that one stays awake, chewing on the argument, long after the other one is placidly sleeping, and a feeling of being hurt and ignored starts to gnaw at their mind.

When this happens, I've recommended the couples that I've worked with do a bit of "clean up" and define what the argument is about, and what they are not about, and verbally reassure each other that we both want to work towards something that we are both happy about. Defining boundaries and confirming our love for one another is always helpful and builds mutual trust. So, it's not the

end of the world if we turn out the lights while an argument remains unresolved. We might actually wake up to find that yesterday's "huge" problem isn't that big of a deal anyway.

## Myth 11: "Together all the time"



The other day one of my friends, who had just gotten married, called me and was very upset. She told me that her spouse had told her that he needed a little space. I told her to grab her golf clubs and to meet me at the club. She was confused, so I told her that there was nothing wrong with having a bit of personal time and that just because she had gotten married, it didn't mean that her husband had to be glued to her hip all the time. Alone time actually makes the times that we are together better.

We need different spaces in our lives, a place to love, a place to care, a place to play, a place to be alone, and a place to be with others, many of which will be with our spouse and others, not to be with him/her. There is nothing "wrong" with that. Over the past couple of years, because of lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing measures, many couples have experienced the disappearance of these spaces. We used to have business trips, sports clubs, outings with friends, and all sorts of other activities that provided the physical separation needed between people in a relationship. Now, most couples are stuck at home together, all day, every day.

But that's only part of the problem. We are also experiencing the disappearance of mental space. This form of space is less tangible but perhaps even more significant. It's a space away from screaming children, daily chores, and our usual surroundings. A calm, quiet space that lets the mind rest.

The loss of physical and mental space is a problem for many reasons, especially because it is essential for love and intimacy. We can't be "on" 100% of the time, so we need a bit of "off" time once in a while.

This reminds me of a Sunday I went to church with my parents. I must have been about 8 years old. I suddenly realized that there was a surprisingly large amount of nannies and au pairs that had come

to mass alone. Maybe there always were, but I had never noticed. I asked my dad if nannies were all very religious. I remember him saying: “No, I think they just need to take a break (from the kids).”

Regardless of how much we love our spouse, our kids, and our family, and how much they love us, we all need space. It has nothing to do with not liking being together; it is about being able to work on ourselves by maintaining our individuality. Having space for ourselves allows us to pay closer attention to our emotions, figure out what our needs are, and work out how we can best take care of them, some by ourselves, some with the support of our spouse. By giving ourselves space to think and process our emotions, we also reduce the likelihood of lashing out at our partners or using other poor communication methods. Overall, space provides us with a window of emotional clarity and a sense of individuality.

In order to create this space in our relationship, we will need to talk to our spouse about it. Discuss with them when, how, and why we may need periods of time to ourselves. By being honest and upfront about it, our partner will know how that everything is OK, and it may serve as a great opportunity for them to talk about the time they also need to do “their” stuff.

Healthy marriages recognize and respect the need for personal time.

## Myth 12: “Passionate never fading”

Passion never fading is both true and false. Time changes everything, us, our spouse, everything around us, and yes, also love. Ideas about “true love” bombard us through stories, songs, and Disney princesses. The message they bring is a promise of ever-lasting romance if only we are able to find that one person who would inspire such feelings in us. We long for love at first sight or Cupid’s arrow to pierce our hearts so that we may experience that magical, although to us, a seemingly elusive feeling we have heard so many others blessed.

The myth of true love is in and of itself ancient. However, in our modern Western society, the myth is no longer a myth but an expectation and expression of ultimate virtue. There’s a widespread belief that the greatest reason to get married is to have this kind of love and, by default, achieve never-ending passion.

Our consumer-oriented modern minds tell us that the proof of true love is passionate love. We know because we have been told so a gazillion times that true love never faded. We also know that if we are truly in love, we should marry that person, and if true love ends, we should leave that person because it was not true love, and if we can find the right person, we will have true love forever.

While sparks of such supposed true love compel people to profess lifelong vows, the problem is that we confuse passion with infatuation. The infatuation stage lasts just about long enough to get married and spills over into the honeymoon, which is about two years. By then, something else should start occurring. We should start, really, to get to know the incredible, fantastic, wonderful, and imperfect person we got married to. We start opening our eyes as we start discovering the most intimate aspects of his personality and the soul of our spouse. This is where we need to fall in love all over again, with real passion.

Intimacy is, by definition, closeness to another. And closeness will inevitably create friction. Imagine two bodies pressed against one another. If there are any wounds, scars, flaws, or other vulnerabilities, they will be felt. When this kind of close contact occurs, we have two options, we can either distance ourselves, or we can care for each other and begin a healing process that enables us to remain intimate with one another.

In order for the marriage to survive, we need this kind of care to start happening. The beauty of marriage is that we have all the time in the world if we let ourselves. Both spouses must pursue this healing process as the alternative will crush the most earnest of commitments. And the sad truth is that many choose to distance themselves far too early, back away, and divorce, only to discover the same flaws and imperfections in another person.

When we are open to experiencing intimacy with another person, we also learn who we are, and this unleashes our greatest potential both as a couple and as individuals.

True love, passionate love, is loving not despite our differences but because of our differences and living in and embracing the reality of the imperfections in ourselves and in our partner. It is a deep acceptance of both ourselves and the other person, an acceptance that drives us toward an amazing mature intimate, passionate marriage. This kind of transformational growth is boundless in its beauty and endless in its possibilities.

### Myth 13: “My spouse should complete me”

Everyone has seen those “half-heart” lockets that people wear as a symbol of their relationship. I have even seen some wear them to show the world that they are looking for that special someone. Regardless of why, it shows the world that we believe in a romance that completes us.

Marriage is, by nature, unifying. The phrase “two become one” is true in many regards; two people come together to create a family, a unit, that didn’t exist before they said their vows. “Two halves make a whole” is technically correct. But when it comes to relationships and dating, these phrases shouldn’t be taken quite so literally.

For as long as I can remember, there has just been something about the phrase “he/she completes me” that nagged me. Something felt unsettling about the idea. Once I decided to start working with couples, I knew I would have to work through the challenges I have with this concept. I thought to myself that my spouse and I just might be wrong and that people seeking “completion” through someone else could be right. Maybe we were not romantic enough, and it was something we had to work on.

Since I couldn’t find a straightforward answer to the question, I sat down with my wife to talk it through, as I usually do when I can’t figure something out, and we started to ask ourselves a series of questions. We asked each other: Do we love each other completely? Yes. Do we see each other with someone else? No. Do we feel better with each other than if we were alone? Yes. Do we then complete each other? The answer was still, for some reason, no. So we went ahead asking ourselves how we were before meeting each other, if we felt complete before we were together (yes), and if we could survive without each other (sad, but yes). The question that was begging to be asked was then: “How could we be complete before meeting each other and complete after meeting each other? That didn’t make much sense”.

What we figured out was that when the subject of incompleteness without a partner shows up in the couples we help, it comes from a place of desperation, where the overshadowing feeling is that we wouldn’t be able to be “enough” alone.

I think that my wife really nailed it when she told me she broke it down for me. She said that to her, I fill a need to feel loved, desired, supported, understood, listened to, cared for, and witnessed, and that



we have a special way of balancing each other. In her mind, I complement her, but I don't complete her.

My wife and I don't have the power to complete one another, but we certainly do complement one another. She complements me in ways I had always hoped another person would. In my areas of weakness, she supports me. When I get worked up, she helps me find peace. When I am successful, she celebrates me. When I fail, she forgives me. If I am honest, our life is not perfect. We are not perfect, so there are times when we are not all that we could be for one another. Sometimes because of anger, frustration, stress, and exhaustion, we are not always putting our best foot forward, but we try.

I now understand, and what I help couples that I work with understand, is that a marriage is created by two perfectly imperfect people, who are perfectly capable alone, who choose to be together because they make each other better.

And to all the single people out there, who are looking for that special someone, don't postpone happiness until you've met the person who makes you better. That is a waste of your precious life. We should live our lives as the independent, happy people we are. Be the best we can be, stand tall, and stand strong, since alone or with our loved one by our side, there is nothing sexier.

#### **Myth 14: “Marriage is the ticket to happiness”**

I hate to break it to you, but neither money nor marriage is the source of long-lasting happiness. It is not surprising that when we get married, we expect that everything good in our lives will get better and that being married will somehow make the bad things disappear. Since these myths and false beliefs, unrealistic though they might be, creates expectations that, when broken, make us feel unhappy, it's important that we shed some light on it. As a romantic concept, it works fine; the problem is when we apply it to every single moment in time during a marriage. It's simply not true that marriage will make us happy, and expecting it will put a tremendous amount of pressure on our spouse and us.

Is marriage capable of making us happy? Most of the time, absolutely! But not without a lot of work from both spouses. Happiness is a habit that each individual in a relationship must take responsibility for and learn to cultivate.

There are three reasons why our spouse cannot be the source of our happiness. First of all, marriage isn't a magical "happy pill." What it is, is an institution or a frame within which we promise, to each other, and in most cases with our family and God as our witness, that we will try. Coming to think of it, I have to admit that I have never heard marriage vows that specifically state that one promises to make the other "happy"; we only expect to live happily-ever-after. Most will say something to the tune of: "I, \_\_\_\_\_, take you, \_\_\_\_\_, to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish always.

Secondly, co-dependent couples just don't work. They are often times represented by two people leaning on each other. Although romantic, this leaning becomes a strain, and we are unable to move. Why? Because if one moves just slightly, chances are the whole thing comes toppling down like a house of cards. I have seen this in many couples where the leaning gradually shifts to pounding one another down, pointing fingers, and blaming the spouse for all of the marital issues. The reality is that to be happy people within a couple, we need to be happy people in and by ourselves.

Lastly, have you ever heard, "We cannot love another if we don't love ourselves first"? It doesn't mean that we have to love ourselves *more* than the other person, but that we do need to love ourselves *before, during, and after* that person is in our life.

Self-esteem describes a person's overall subjective sense of identity, competence, security, and personal worth or value. In other words, self-esteem may be defined as how much we appreciate and like ourselves regardless of the circumstances.

Healthy self-esteem goes to the root of who we are and encompasses every part of our being and every interaction we have with the world around us. It is fundamental for our individual well-being and, therefore, how much happiness we are able to bring to the relationship and how much we ultimately will be able to get from it.

Since self-esteem heavily influences the relationships we develop, and it is, therefore, critical for us to be to pay special attention to ourselves. And while it's wonderful for husbands and wives

to encourage each other as often as possible, we just can't rely on our spouse to develop our self-esteem for us.

*You* and only *you* are responsible for your own happiness.

### Myth 15: "There are no secrets in a relationship"



We have often heard relationship advice along the lines of "tell our spouse everything," "there is no space for secrecy in marriage," and "keep nothing from each other." Overall I would say that I completely agree. I would say that it is a sign of a healthy relationship when partners want to share. It suggests that the couple feel they can trust each other, that they can engage in healthy dialogue, that they are interested in their partner, and wish to understand and be understood as best as possible. Also, I personally find that one of the greater joys in my marriage is having someone whom I can trust with all sorts of things. Trusting her, having someone to confide in, and sharing whatever random little details of my life, without fear of judgment, are some of the things that make relationships beautiful.

Still, do we share everything? Should we consider it a problem if we choose not to share some things? There is a lot of nuance in the answer because while trust is vital to a healthy relationship, that doesn't mean we must sacrifice all privacy to obtain that level of trust. If we're hiding another relationship or a secret fling, that's horribly wrong, and while a healthy relationship has no space for lies and deceit, the truth is that we don't have to share every single detail and all our thoughts. I'm not talking about the bigger, more consequential things here, like if we lost someone in the family, if he/she did something that made us feel uncomfortable, if he/she did something that made us angry or sad, or a crappy day at work. But what about the smaller, less-significant things? An ex who "liked" one of the pictures we uploaded, the barmaid from Starbucks that always puts a heart on our cup, or that one of our old crushes now is single. Do we really want to share these things with our partner?

There is other stuff too. Things that one of our friends told us to get it off his/her chest. Things our spouse can't do anything about, and that just will make him/her feel bad. An example of

something that I would avoid saying would be: “Our ankles really look fat after the flight,” “Our friend is really hot,” “I miss \_\_\_\_\_ about my old relationship,” or “I really didn’t enjoy making love last night.” So if we're not sharing something because it could upset our partner, make him/her insecure, or cause unnecessary friction, it might not be such a bad thing.

Without a doubt, honesty is one of the most important building blocks for any relationship. It's imperative that both spouses have completely transparent communication and the space to share no matter what! But there is definitely room to be smart about what we share, why we share it, and when we share it.

I absolutely think that it is not only normal but completely necessary to have some private thoughts or things in our life that are only ours, and I don't think that it has much to do with deceit or omission. Nine times out of 10, we're going to want to be open with our partner and let them know what we're thinking, feeling, hoping for, and so on. Communication is, after all, one of the most important factors in maintaining a relationship, but that doesn't mean that we should tell our partner everything.



## Myth 16: “Frequency of sex determines a good marriage”

I think we’ve all wondered if there is “enough” sex in our marriage. They wonder how much sex is enough for a married couple or if they are “normal” compared to others. What is enough? Is it once a month, once a week, once a day, or a few times a day? Another question more than a few ask themselves is what the right way is or the intensity with which they should have it. These are all common questions asked by the couples we help.

Another misconception about relationships concerns the frequency with which married couples have sex. Yes, sex is an essential part of healthy romantic relationships. But we cannot call a relationship good or bad based on sexual activity alone.

Sexual needs vary from person to person as well as during different stages of the marriage. There cannot be one standard for defining all sexual activity. It is not the number of times we have sex but

the fulfillment we get with each other that matters. A couple's sex life is intensely private and must be motivated by their mutual satisfaction rather than parameters prescribed by society.

It's risky to cite statistics on sexual satisfaction for a few reasons. This is because much of the data is from self-reported information. We really aren't 100% confident about the accuracy of the results. While it is important to have an initial reference point for different groups of people, it is typically not what someone is really asking.

People actually wish to know if their relationship is healthy. They are wondering if they are enough for their partner or if their partner is indeed enough for them. They are wondering if "too much" or, typically, "too little" sex is an issue in their relationship. Sometimes they are not just wondering. In fact, they are terrified that their relationship is in jeopardy because of this concern.

The question about sexual frequency typically comes when there are one or more other concerns about the relationship that are putting a strain on the marriage. Still, when there is a diminishing frequency of sexual activity, it seems to strain the relationship further. It is common for these couples to blame everything on sex, or lack thereof, and interpret that to be the root of the cause, while in fact, it is rarely so. Lack of sex is typically a manifestation of other things, not the cause. Actually, several studies show that couples who were instructed to double the amount of sex they were having were no happier than they were. Furthermore, they reported less enjoyment of sex. With the law of diminishing returns, there seems to be a downside to too much sex.

The biggest challenge we find with the couples we help is when one of the spouses has a greater need that the other seems to be able to satisfy. For most, it seems to be a quantitative problem, but sometimes it can also be qualitative. For those whose sex lives are challenged, there are steps we can take.

For one, assess our relationship outside of the bedroom. Are we achieving intimacy there? Both physical and emotional intimacy are imperative to our connection. Whatever our way is of showing that we love and desire our spouse, be it intimate time together, listening to each other, a walk in the park, romantic acts, a caress, or jumping into the shower together, work on it. If our only love language is sex, we need to work on this, and should we have a dry spell, merely engaging in sex can get we back in the game. Because intimacy and sex are intertwined, sometimes this is all a couple needs to get back on track.

Staying married is hard enough in the context of today’s challenges and life’s distractions. Those challenges tend to migrate into the bedroom, but guess what? Sex can be a great stress reliever, and it can bring us closer as a couple. There is actually a proper scientific explanation behind the above statement. Sex is responsible for increasing oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, to help us bond and build trust.

Communication about desires and feelings about our sex life in an open, honest and respectful way is imperative. Both partners need to feel heard and satisfied in marriage, and sexual intimacy is part of a successful marital relationship. One person's desires cannot trump another’s.

Instead, it must be a constant discussion during which both parties should feel safe discussing their feelings and desires. If one person feels insecure or concerned by a possible reduction in their partner's sexual interest and, conversely, if something is causing one's sex drive to be lower than usual, they must be able to tell their partner why and explore ways to improve things.

My personal point of view is that sex is not an obligation or a task, or even a necessity. It is just a fun, relaxing, intimate, and exciting way to be with my wife, which we, therefore, do as often as we feel like it, like so many other things we do together.

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