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The 7 Steps to Happily Ever After

What makes love last a lifetime? Affection? Yep. Respect? Sure. But a great marriage is not just about what you have. It's about what you do to make a relationship stronger, safer, more caring and committed. Here's how to make your "forever" fantastic.



Marriage is a home, a refuge against the outside storms. And like any house, it requires a strong, lasting foundation. To build one, every couple needs to take certain steps — seven, to be precise — that turn the two of you into not just *you and me* but *we*. You may not move through all the steps in order, and you may circle back to complete certain steps again (and again and again). But if you make it through them all, you'll be well on your way toward creating a marriage that will be your shelter as long as you both shall live.

Step 1: Find a shared dream for your life together.

It's easy to get caught up in the small stuff of married life: What's for dinner tonight? Whose turn is it to clean the litter box? Did you pay the electric bill? But the best partners never lose sight of the fact that they're working together to achieve the same *big* dreams. "Successful couples quickly

develop a mindfulness of 'us,' of being coupled," says REDBOOK [Love Network expert](#) Jane Greer, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in New York City. "They have a shared vision, saying things like, 'We want to plan to buy a house, we want to take a vacation to such-and-such a place, we like to do X, we think we want to start a family at Y time.'"

This kind of dream-sharing starts early. "Couples love to tell the story of how they met," points out Julie Holland, M.D., a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City and a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine. "It's like telling a fairy tale. But happy couples will go on creating folklore and history, with the meet-cute forming the bedrock of the narrative." As you write and rewrite your love story ("our hardest challenge was X, our dream for retirement is Y"), you continually remind yourselves and each other that you're a team with shared values and goals. And P.S.: When you *share* a dream, you're a heck of a lot more likely to make that dream come true.

Step 2: Ignite (and reignite) a sexual connection.

In any good relationship, sex is way more than just a physical act. It's crucial for the health of your emotional connection, too: It's something only the two of you share; it makes you both feel warm and loved; it draws you back together when you're drifting apart. And did I mention that it's a whole lot of fun?

Striking up those sparks when you first meet is easy. Nurturing a strong, steady flame? That's the hard part. When you've got a mortgage, a potbelly, and a decade or two of togetherness under your belts, it can be hard to muster up the fire you felt when you first got together. That's when it's even more important to protect your sex life and make it a priority. "You have to keep working to create allure and seduction for each other or your sex life will become lackluster," Greer points out. "Who wants the same turkey sandwich over and over? You want it on whole wheat! On toast! As turkey salad! On a roll!" (And now I will imagine my husband covered with Russian dressing. Thanks, Dr. Greer.)

As the years go by, you'll keep revisiting and realigning and reimagining the passion you have for each other. And

if you keep at it, you'll have a sex life that transcends your marriage's lack of newness, the stresses of family and work, the physical changes that come with aging. Now *that's* something worth holding on to.

Step 3: Choose each other as your first family.

For years, you were primarily a member of one family: the one in which you grew up. Then you got married, and suddenly you became the foundation of a new family, one in which husband and wife are the A-team. It can be tough to shift your identity like this, but it's also an important part of building your self-image as a duo (and maybe, eventually, as three or four or...).

For me, making this transition meant stopping the incessant bitching to my mom when I was mad at my husband — my behavior was disloyal, and I had to learn to talk *to* Jonathan, not about him. My friend Lynn tells the story of her mother's reaction to a trip to the Middle East she and her then-boyfriend (now husband) had planned. Her mother hit the roof, calling incessantly to urge Lynn not to go. Eventually, Lynn's boyfriend got on the phone with Mom and explained why they were excited to share this experience. "It was clear then that we were the team," Lynn says now. "Not teaming up *against* my mother, but teaming up together to deal with her issues."

Whatever your challenges — an overprotective mom? an overly critical father-in-law? — you have to outline *together* the boundaries between you and all of the families connected to you. Not only will you feel stronger as a united front but when you stick to your shared rules, all that family baggage will weigh on you a lot less.

Step 4: Learn how to fight right.

I'm embarrassed to think of how I coped with conflict early in my relationship with Jonathan. I stormed out — a lot. I once threw an apple at his head. Hard. (Don't worry, I missed — on purpose.) I had a terrible habit of threatening divorce at the slightest provocation. But eventually I figured that this was pretty moronic. I didn't want out, and I knew that pelting someone with fruit was not a long-term marital strategy.

"Fighting is *the* big problem every couple has to deal with," says Daniel B. Wile, Ph.D., a psychologist and couples therapist in Oakland, CA, and author of [After the Fight](#). That's because fights will always come up, so every couple needs to learn how to fight without tearing each other apart.

Fighting right doesn't just mean not throwing produce; it means staying focused on the issue at hand and respecting each other's perspective. Couples that fight right also find ways to defuse the tension, says Wile — often with humor. "Whenever one of us wants the other to listen up, we mime hitting the TV remote, a thumb pressing down on an invisible mute button," says Nancy, 52, an event producer in San Francisco. "It cracks us up, in part because it must look insane to others." Even if you fight a lot, when you can find a way to turn fights toward the positive — with a smile, a quick apology, an expression of appreciation for the other person — the storm blows away fast, and that's what matters.

Step 5: Find a balance between time for two and time for you.

Jonathan and I both work at home. This frequently leads to murderous impulses. Though I'm typing away in the bedroom and he's talking to his consulting clients in our small home office, most days it really feels like too much intimacy for me.

But that's my bias. When it comes to togetherness, every couple has its own unique sweet spot. "There are couples that are never apart and there are couples that see each other only on weekends," Greer says. With the right balance, neither partner feels slighted or smothered. You have enough non-shared experiences to fire you up and help you maintain a sense of yourself outside the relationship — not to mention give you something to talk about at the dinner table. But you also have enough time together to feel your connection as a strong tie rather than as a loose thread.

Your togetherness needs will also change over time, so you'll have to shift your balance accordingly. "My husband and I spend a lot of time together, but it's almost all family time," says Katie, 40, a mom of two in San Leandro, CA. "We realized a few months ago that we hadn't had a conversation that didn't involve the kids or our to-do lists in ages, so we committed to a weekly date. We were so happy just to go to the movies and hold hands, something we hadn't done in ages. It felt like we were dating again!"

Step 6: Build a best friendship.

Think about the things that make your closest friendships irreplaceable: the trust that comes with true intimacy, the willingness to be vulnerable, the confidence that the friendship can withstand some conflict. Don't those sound like good things to have in your marriage, too?

"Happy couples are each other's haven," says Holland. "They can count on the other person to listen and try to meet their needs." Greer adds, "When you're true friends, you acknowledge and respect what the other person is; you don't try to control or change them. This creates a sense of safety and security when you're together — you know you're valued for who you are and you see the value in your partner."

Then there's the way, when you've been with someone a while, that you become almost a mind reader. You have a shared history and inside jokes. Your guy knows what you'll find funny, you forward him links to articles you know he'll enjoy, and best of all, you two can make eye contact at a given moment and say volumes without opening your mouths. And is there anything more pleasurable than sharing the newspaper with someone? Sitting in companionable silence, absorbed in your respective reading, sipping coffee, occasionally reading something out loud, but mostly just lazing happily together, communing without needing to speak? Ahh....

Step 7: Face down a major challenge together.

You're sailing along through life, and suddenly you hit a huge bump. A serious illness. Unemployment. The loss of a home. A death in the family. How do you cope?

The truth is, you never know how strong your relationship is until it's tested. All too often, the stress of a crisis can pull a couple apart. But the good news is, when you do make it through in one piece, you might just find yourselves tighter than ever.

"What *didn't* happen to us?" says Daryl, 28, a preschool teacher in Harrisburg, PA. "My husband lost his job and took a minimum-wage job he was way overqualified for just to make ends meet. He was offered a better job in a mountain town outside San Diego, so we moved. Then during the California wildfires several years ago, our house burned down and we lost *everything*. We were living in a one-room converted garage with no running water and a newborn. But we found that this chaos somehow brought us even closer together. We took turns losing it. We really kept each other sane."

Hey, marriage is no roll in the hay. It's tough, real work. But the reward, the edifice you build together that will shelter you through years of tough times, is more than worth the effort. The small, friendly cottage you build — decorated with your shared history and stories, filled with color and laughter — will be the warmest and safest retreat you can imagine.

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