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10 Ways To Keep Your Marriage From Failing

Apply these simple tips and watch your marriage flourish in good times and bad.

BY STACY D. PHILLIPS

Some people may think that because I'm a divorce attorney I do not mind when a marriage fails. Nothing could be further from the truth! As I sit across the desk from many heartbroken clients and listen to their reason(s) for the failure of their marriage, my first question to him/her is whether I can help save the marriage. Perhaps counseling is what I recommend or sessions with a trusted other, like a priest, rabbi or minister to explore remedies for salvaging the relationship. I pride myself on having saved some marriages during my 25 years in practice and would very much like to see people work things out, if they can. I also have come to realize that had they tried one or more of the following ten suggestions, some may be able to keep their marriage from hitting the rocks in the first place.

1. Delineate "yours," "mine" and "ours." If you have finances that should be placed in each of the three categories (like you have an inheritance and he has a savings account he accumulated before the marriage, and you also have a checking account to which you both contribute) have an upfront conversation about those assets and what belongs to whom. Moreover, talk about your time away from "together" activities, like he wants to bowl with the guys on Tuesday nights and you want to attend your Yoga class on Wednesday evenings. Respect these important delineations. Doing so will make the relationship stronger.

2. Carve out time to be together. Sure, you're working, attending meetings, keeping the house up, car-pooling, making the kids do their homework, etc; but how important are all those things if your marriage falls apart? Make time to do things together that you *both* enjoy. This could be anything from grocery shopping to taking in a movie. Take regular vacations without the kids—at least a couple of long weekends and, better yet, a couple of long vacations (more than a weekend jaunt). Commit to a weekly date night and make it as unbreakable as that all-important staff meeting at work.

3. Take care of yourself. Spend time every day on your appearance and your physical well being. Work out regularly, eat healthy and stay fit. Not only will your spouse like looking at you, but you'll feel better about yourself.

4. Make sure communication goes both ways. Many relationships fail because of misunderstandings. Effective communication skills are necessary if your relationship is going to survive. If there is a hint or vibe that your spouse is disconnected or you are unhappy about something, do not ignore those signals or feelings. Approach them and suggest an open discussion. You may be frustrated, angry or hurt and so may he or she, but always stay calm and reasonable. Your goal should be to resolve differences and the only viable way of doing so is through open and direct communication.

5. Criticize gently. Don't judge too harshly. If you criticize, do so the same way you would want others to criticize you. Be kind and considerate.

6. Deal as a team with issues involving your children. Yes, a child changes the dynamics of a relationship, but a child does not need to destroy the sanctity of your marriage. Accept the fact that children will have problems and don't be reluctant to get outside help to handle them if that is what it takes to preserve the stability of your marriage.

7. Never stop courting one another. Gifts, compliments and a loving embrace go a long way, especially when they are a surprise to your spouse. Send unexpected greeting cards, slap a Post-It note where you know your mate will find it, keep those flowers coming in a "just because..." way. Treat your spouse with the same courtesies you did when you were dating. A terrific mindset is to pretend you are trying to win your partner all over again.

8. Keep the flame burning. Keep your romance alive despite the chaos and craziness life can present from living in the midst of sheer reality. Resolve to offer up romantic suggestions for your spouse's pleasure, even if only occasionally, like cooking her favorite meal when you know she's had an impossible day or entice him into a bubble bath with you just for the fun of it. Little gestures like these from time-to-time can ensure that the flame you once had can and will burn forever.

9. Spell out your terms of endearment. Call out the expectations for one another in the form of the "terms" of your relationship together and put them in a contract if you like. Unlike a prenuptial agreement, this instrument will simply clarify and document those needs and wants that mean a lot to one another. For example, though he typically runs late, your agreement might specify those times when he agrees not to be late; she may agree to keep her spending at a certain limit, though she typically has little restraint as she traipses through the mall. Discussing these boundaries, as well as your needs and wants can prevent either of you from stepping over the line and causing irritation, ultimately serving as a great way to keep your marriage much healthier. It is often the disappointments (needs and wants, gone unexpressed) that bring down a marriage.

10. Renegotiate your contract: Marriage is like any other contract: its terms and conditions must be reviewed and updated. Your relationship will evolve and your needs and wants right along with it. A good time to review, update or revise your contract with each other—whether it is verbal or written—is just before or after your anniversary. Be mindful, however, not allow such a "contract" to ruin your anniversary or your relationship.

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