



I Do! I Do!

Insider tips to a lasting and happy marriage

By Marnell Jameson

The longer I'm married, the more I realize how much goes into a successful marriage. Even after 14 years, I still stumble onto insights (usually the hard way) that make my marriage work better. So I set out looking for more pearls of wisdom—advice from real people who've made their own marriages happy and successful. My goal was selfish: Get a lifetime of advice to put to good use right now. This is the best of what I learned.

Say magic words beyond “I love you.”

Too often we tell our partners what isn't going well or what wasn't done right, and we don't focus enough on the positive. But my friend Laurie Dubchansky of Los Angeles knows the power of compliments. “After 17 years of ‘I love you’s,’ I know Scott loves me, but when he takes a moment to recognize something I've done well, those remarks take me a lot further,” says the mother of two. One day, for example, Scott noticed that Laurie always takes time to acknowledge salespeople in stores when they do a great job. “He mentioned that in front of the kids, and I felt terrific. He had noticed and brought it into the house,” she says. “That quick minute meant so much to me.”

Want something?

Give it time.

This gem comes from my mother-in-law, Eileen Roth, of Mission Viejo, California, who's been married 44 years. “In the early years of our marriage, I would often say flat out what I wanted and got nowhere.” Then she got creative. She added lead time to her request, turned the demands into suggestions, then repeated her idea a little later or slipped her husband an article on the subject. “This approach made it easier to get what I wanted than if I just made an assertive demand,” she says. Thanks to this method, she and her husband, Ron, recently went to a vacation destination he initially wasn't too keen on. “By the time we got there, he thought it was all his idea,” she says.

Have a good fight now and then.

Tim Ursiny, Ph.D., a psychologist and author of *The Coward's Guide to Conflict*, learned through his marriage of 21 years that it's OK to fight with those you love, and your relationship can be better for it. “I always thought that a marriage with conflict meant the marriage was in trouble,” he says. So for years he and Marla, who live in Wheaton, Illinois, hardly ever fought. But they weren't sharing all they felt. “Then we had a fight; a real doozy. I learned there were things I'd been doing for years that really bothered her. I had no clue! We were both stunned by some of what was said.”

The next day their marriage was better—not just better than the day of the fight, but better than it had been before. They felt more intimate. “We learned that having a good fight, if done correctly, can bring you closer,” he says.

A marriage has seasons.

Sometimes the best seasons come after a winter of discontent. When my husband, Dan, was going through a major career change, he was no fun. I used to say that when he came in the room, the ceiling felt like it had been lowered. At first I tried to talk to him about what he was going through, but he shut me out. That was frustrating until I realized this was his personal struggle. The best thing I could do was to get out of his way and not take the rejection personally. When he eventually reinvented himself in a new job, he was his old wonderful self, only better. He had a new appreciation for the woman who stood back but also stood by. The lesson: Storms pass and marriages are more resilient than you think.

One secret to a good marriage is in the bedroom.

My father said this to me recently, surprising me a little. “Bedroom secrets are secrets,” he explained. “You don’t share them with anyone. Not your kids, not your friends, not your coworkers. They’re just between the two of you.” My dad, who’s been married to Mom 55 years, was confiding that nothing is more private than your relationship with your spouse. One way to honor that and build the bonds between you is through uncompromised discretion.

It’s better to table an argument than to argue at the table.

Usually when our family sits down to dinner, it’s after a long day of work and school. Everyone’s hungry and tired. That can be a recipe for conflict, but the dinner table should be a place to unwind and reconnect, says Carol Ummel Lindquist, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist from Laguna Beach, California, and author of *Happily Married with Kids*. “Don’t let an argument spoil a meal. If a conflict comes up, calmly say, ‘Let’s talk about that after dinner, please,’ and move to a new subject. This also applies to arguments with or between children.” Dan and I find that when we do revisit a sore subject after dinner, we’re in a much more agreeable frame of mind.

Talk when he’s ready.

Men are notorious for not wanting to talk, particularly about problems in the relationship. But Susan K. Perry, Ph.D., and her husband, who live in Los Angeles, have made a deal. “Stephen used to withdraw from arguments, and I would follow him from room to room, which only made him more mad,” recalls Susan, author of *Loving in Flow: How the Happiest Couples Get and Stay That Way*. One day she pushed a touchy topic while her husband was driving because she figured he couldn’t escape. Although he said, “I can’t talk about this right now,” she persisted. Then Stephen, who’s normally mild mannered, started driving too fast, which gave Susan a scare. “He was trying to curb his anger, but I didn’t respect that.”

Now when her husband says, “I don’t want to talk about this right now,” Susan takes it as ironclad. “Our deal is: You can go away and calm down, but I need you to come back and talk when you’re accessible.”

If you’re going to fight, do it after the crisis.

Ann Richards of Summerfield, North Carolina, and her husband, Rendy, have weathered their share of crises during their 22-year marriage and discovered this: “The higher our stress level, the better we get along,” Ann says. “When everything is falling apart, the last thing we want to do is bicker. We stay calm and don’t even change our tone of voice.” Knowing they can count on a calm partner during life’s rough times works as a sort of marital glue. “Once the storm passes, then I can get all over him for leaving the newspapers on the floor.”

Assume goodwill.

Susan Perry’s husband of 20 years used to drive her crazy because he’s so absentminded. Stephen is prone to leaving the light on, the door open, the keys in the car and so on. “Initially it felt like he was doing each of his annoying behaviors purposefully to irritate me or he didn’t care enough about me to make the effort not to do it. I assumed the worst in him.” Eventually, however, she saw it differently. “I chose to see that his obliviousness wasn’t targeted at me, but was a reflection of his personality. I realized I was never going to change him, so rather than get upset, I turned out the lights.” Now she assumes the best in his intentions and those little annoyances fall by the wayside.

Therapy is cheaper than divorce.

Dividing housework is an issue that can create resentment until you and your husband resolve it in a workable way, says Dr. Lindquist. Thus, she frequently prescribes “housekeeper” therapy to her clients, particularly when both partners work outside the home. “I often see young parents: The wife is exhausted and the husband is wondering what happened to their sex life. For them, a housekeeper once a week can work wonders.” People may balk at the expense, but it’s cheaper than the alternatives: marriage counseling or divorce. After 20 years of marriage, housekeepers are still a mainstay. “Neil and I often joke that if we didn’t have the housekeeper to blame stuff on, we’d kill each other.”

Let men be boys—occasionally.

Wendy Schmitt, who’s been married to Ed for 21 years, says one secret to their success is Ed’s monthly fishing trips. For years Wendy, a mother and attorney who lives in San Juan Capistrano, California, resented all the hours Ed spent fishing, especially when she was left home with their three small children. At first she wanted Ed to give up his hobby and be home more. But then she realized fishing was good for his soul. “He comes home a much better person.” Now she enjoys an added bonus. These days Ed often takes the kids with him. That gives Wendy “a great day to myself without having to juggle everyone’s needs.”

Marry a man whose mom raised him right.

When Russ Edwards was young, his father died, leaving his mother to raise three boys on her own. Russ remembers his mother telling them: “Look for things to do. Don’t wait for me to ask.” To this day Russ notices when things need to be done and just does them. “If he sees the kitchen floor needs mopping, he just does it,” says Nancy, his wife of 36 years. Russ is no fool. His advice to men is: “Lovemaking starts in the kitchen. You help there, and you’ll get rewarded in the bedroom.”