

Keeping Marriage Alive Through the Years

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One of our great love ballad singers, Kenny Rogers, died this past March. I loved his voice, smooth as silk.

My favorite of his songs is “[Through the Years](#)“, a song I didn’t fully appreciate until I’d been married for quite a while. I occasionally play and sing it at the piano myself during my marriage workshops. I use it to help couples think about how they can keep their love alive and growing through the years. I even made a family video of Barbara’s and my married life together with this song playing in the background. That song alone makes me very grateful for Kenny’s life.



Every marriage at any stage is subject to disengagement and erosion if neglected. Through a lack of attention to their inner life, inattentive couples lose cohesion over the years and gradually drift apart because they lack infusions of bonding and intimacy. **Marriage relationships need regular, intentional care if they are to survive and thrive.** This is especially the case when they have been together for a while.

How can we keep marriage vibrant and flourishing through the years?

Be Intentional

After being together 25 or 30 years or longer, couples can become habituated to each other’s company, and things can get old and cold. You need to take regular, intentional care of the relationship and find areas of renewal, particularly as children leave home and you become less invested in their upbringing.

The drift in later-life marriage is toward a lack of connection and an increase in parallel living. Couples need to find little ways to intentionally connect. **A thoughtful word of appreciation, a note of admiration, sharing activities such as cooking or doing a project together, expressions of gratitude, and seeking one another’s interests and comforts are small ways to care that can pay big dividends of emotional connection.** Family relationships are like plants in a garden. If not tended and constantly cared for, family relationships dwindle and die,

and weeds appear that inundate necessary ingredients that build ties between two individuals.

Practice Rituals



Couples who are intentional about their relationship have special activities they engage in that bring them together often. Some scholars call these activities rituals. Rituals are activities we do with regularity that have specialness and are meaningful. My renown colleague Bill Doherty says there are three kinds of rituals important for couples: connection rituals, love rituals, and celebration rituals.

Connection Rituals

Marriage is lived every day, so everyday benefits from connection rituals. A couple's patterns of their comings and goings, rising in the morning and retiring for the evening, and other similar activities present opportunities for connection. **For example, one couple never lets a day pass without kissing each other goodbye in the morning and hello in the evening. Another couple spends 20 minutes each morning cuddling before getting out of bed. Another couple takes time during each day for stress-reducing, validating conversations.**

Spending intentional time together each week is a powerful way to connect with our spouse. Spend a good amount of time each week strengthening your relationship. Noted marital researcher John Gottman recommends calls these the Six Magic Hours. He observed that of the couples who participated in his Seattle-based workshops,

those who were doing the best in their marriages later on were investing six hours a week in their relationship.

They were doing four things consistently:

1. Learning one thing that is happening in your spouse's life that day.
2. Having a stress-reducing conversation at the end of each day.
3. Doing something special every day to show affection and appreciation.
4. Having a weekly date.



Of course, most of the time was taken up by the weekly date, but each of the other activities became part of the everyday enriching of marriage.

Occasional getaways, planned or serendipitous, can also be delightful. Barbara and I both love American history, so one summer we toured Philadelphia, followed by a quick jaunt to Gettysburg and Hershey, Pennsylvania, taking it all of the historic details at a mature adult speed. We got to take as much time as we wanted and savor the historical places we chose to linger at. After the trip was over, we delighted going through hundreds of photographs together to decide which ones to keep – another ritual of revisiting and retaining fun shared memories.

Love Rituals

Love rituals are centered on developing and maintaining intimacy in our relationships. When couples age into their 50s and 60s, and in the empty-nesting stage of family life, many need to make adaptations to their intimate life. Erectile dysfunction is very common in men of a certain age, but couples can continue their sexual relationship. There are many delightful ways to still keep your romantic life alive, including nonsexual touch and sexual touch. You are empty nesters. Be in one another's nest!

While couples who desire to be informed may consult books, articles, and websites around this topic, choosing those elements that are consistent with their

values, it is usually more effective for couples to tune in to one another in this area. Find out from one another what you want and expect. Older couples may have to plan more for sexual intimacy, as there is less spontaneity and novelty than in the early part of a couple's sexual experience. Do not expect frequency or intensity to be the same over time—that is not realistic.

Couples who choose not to continue a sexual relationship are not unusual. About 20 percent of couples at any age have a nonsexual marriage. However, if you do not make the effort to be intimate, the relationship will likely wear down. Without the bonding hormone oxytocin that is exchanged in hugging, kissing, or intercourse, the relationship can get dull and lifeless. If you are not intentional, your marriage will suffer from the lack of infusion intimacy offers.

Celebration Rituals

Celebration rituals involve “special-person rituals” such as birthdays or special events in partner's life. They are held to show endearment, respect, and love for the person for whom they are for. I recently turned 65 and we were hoping for a getaway to Hawaii to celebrate. But then COVID-19 hit. Barbara asked if I wanted a party. Working together with my adult children, they planned a party which included a backyard Hawaiian-themed gathering with leis and sea-shell necklaces, luau food, and Islander music wafting in the air. Who needs to go to Hawaii with a celebration like that?