

Love and Marriage in the Later Years

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There is an old adage that many of us grew up with: First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage. BUT, what happens after that? What happens when baby is grown and out of the house? What happens to love then? More specifically, what happens to marriage during the later years?

A very common stereotype of older couples is that their relationships are void of any romance or emotion, and especially lacking in sexual intimacy. But despite such beliefs, marriage in the later years is often characterized by greater happiness than in the earlier years. In fact, marital satisfaction tends to be higher following the empty nest. Furthermore, older married couples report that they argue less and have fewer marital conflicts than when compared to younger married couples (Charles & Carstensen, 2002). And while friendship is a more salient characteristic in their lives, physical intimacy is still significant. Many women, for example, report an increase in physical pleasure and satisfaction with their spouse in the later years (Olson & DeFrain, 2006). Additionally, gendered roles, which often serve as a source of strain among couples, tend to decrease in old age with masculine and feminine qualities appearing more equally in aging couples.

However, this does not mean that such successful outcomes did not come without hard work, commitment and practice. In fact, for women, many have reported living years together where they were not "in-love" with their spouse (Charles & Carstensen, 2002). Instead, they report that current marital happiness was more about learning how to resolve conflict, compromise and survive difficult ordeals together. Wilcox and Nock (2006), after surveying over 5000 couples from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH2 [1992-1994]), found that women who share with their husbands a strong commitment to lifelong marriage are much more likely to report that they are happy in their marriages. Shared commitment seems to generate mutual trust and higher levels of emotional investment on the part of husbands -- both factors which promote marital happiness among women.

So how do couples build emotional commitment and work at being in love? Researchers suggest that happily married older adults consistently put effort into strengthening the marriage. This includes making the marriage a priority and not letting parenthood overshadow the marriage. Other suggestions include establishing a network of friendships with other couples who make marriage a priority. Furthermore, working hard at developing a balance between togetherness and independency is essential; this allows for a healthy blend of personal growth and couple intimacy. Successful older couples also report that they continue to express love and concern both physically and verbally. This is in contrast to divorced couples whose marriages tended to be characterized by what Gottman (1994) refers to as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, including criticism (the act of finding fault or judging your partner

unfavorably), contempt (attacking your partner's sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her), defensiveness (seeing oneself as the victim and warding off a perceived attack, such as making excuses and therefore not taking shared responsibility for the problems in a marriage) and stonewalling (withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict). Successful aging couples report that instead, they work hard at increasing effective communication skills.

Older successful married couples also report that they enjoy spending leisure time together and see renewed happiness in their marriage. In fact, studies report that most people adapt quite well to retirement and for those couples that place a high value on intimacy and family relationships, retirement can bring much freedom and time to enjoy one another (Olson & DeFrain, 2006).

However, one of the biggest factors predicting marital bliss in the later years is the level of happiness in the early years (Brubaker, 1991). The quality of the marital relationship shows continuity over the years; couples who did not get along in the beginning are likely to not get along in the later years and those with positive interactions within the marriage are most likely to experience continued happiness in their marriages. I suppose then the key to marital bliss in the later years is to ensure that healthy, consummate love (defined as a balance of commitment, intimacy and passion) is there in the beginning, as opposed to mere romance or infatuation (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988) and that each day of the marriage is used as an opportunity to grow closer. Perhaps a better adage to follow is "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be..." (Robert Browning).

References

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