

25 Secrets to a Great Marriage

by Laurie Israel, Massachusetts divorce attorney

As a practicing divorce attorney and divorce mediator, I've met a number of couples that, if they had been given some good advice (and had remembered that advice) a few years or even months earlier, they would not be divorcing. The following advice is based on my observations as a divorce attorney, a mediator/conflict resolver, and as an experienced, mature married person.

1. Think before you speak. People in marriages tend to have very "hot" buttons causing frequent arguments. One reason for this is that the boundaries that exist at the workplace or with friends and relatives do not exist in a marriage. Much of marital bickering can be lessened or mitigated if you wait before you respond to something that has made you angry. If you think for even five seconds before you respond, the amount of marital bickering will be greatly reduced. It may be better to discuss the difficult issue on another day when the emotions are not so high. You can broach the topic (at that later time) by saying, "Dear, I have some unfinished business to discuss with you. May we discuss it now?"

2. Don't give up. If you ask any married person, he or she will tell you that marriages wax and wane. There are good times, bad times, and even middle times. A marriage is viable if the good outweighs the bad, even by a little bit. Appreciate the good and try to let the bad roll off of you like water from a duck. The more you stick to it, the easier it will get and the more fondness and connection you will feel towards your spouse. You will also feel good about yourself, because you worked very hard to achieve something of value.

3. Give your marriage as much (if not more) focused attention than you give your hobbies. People spend huge amounts of time, money and effort on their off-work interests. But when a marriage is making them feel bad, everybody seems to "throw up their arms" and decide that it's useless to try anymore. Actually, reading books on marriage, conflict resolution, and communication techniques will help your marriage. Getting your spouse to read them is even better, but not necessary, to being able to make huge positive changes in your marriage.

4. Treat your spouse better than you treat anyone else. Did you ever hear the expression "familiarity breeds contempt"? This seems to apply in marriages. As a result, the unfortunate truth is that people tend to treat their spouses worse than strangers. An example of this is the all-too-common behavior of treating the spouse (sometimes ever so subtly) with contempt. Who is this person you are married to now? And who was that wonderful, beautiful perfect person you married so many years ago? Believe it or not, it's the same person. Remember those times and retrain yourself to view your spouse with the utmost respect and treat your spouse accordingly.

5. Have Separate Interests. Make sure you have some private space and give your spouse some too. Marriage entails a lot of togetherness, but just because you're married, you don't need to be joined at the hip. Make sure each of you has time away from the other with friends, family, or alone. Enjoy your separate interests. Having separate time and interests will help vitalize the marriage.

6. Foster and encourage your spouse's dreams and goals. In a successful marriage, one spouse is happy for the other spouse's successes. Good spouses foster the other in achieving their goals. Sometimes goals are scary and need to be carefully evaluated, such as a career change. Do the work together, so that each of you can become satisfied with your own life. Good spouses help each other make the most out of his or her life.

7. Find things you enjoy to do together. A marriage is a partnership. If you both have totally separate interests, you will eventually grow apart. Make time to pursue interests together. These leisure activities and interests will probably change over time. Find shared interests, pursuits, and enjoyment. But remember, you don't need to share all interests.

8. Don't think it's greener on the other side. Most people who leave their marriages for someone else almost always find the same problems on the other side. Many realize where their first marriage went wrong, and how they (and their spouse) could have worked to fix it. With hindsight, many people regret not having worked things out in their first marriage. Remember, when you get divorced, you now have two problems – the problems in your marriage (that you did not solve) and the divorce.

9. Give each other a break. Don't be overcritical of your spouse. Don't carp all the time. The stark realization that comes after the wedding is that you are not the same person. But that's not a bad thing. Try to appreciate your differences. Admittedly, this is hard to do, but try. It's worth it.

10. Don't sweat the little things. As in the world of work, it is important to have priorities. Spouses get angry when criticized over every little thing. Try to prioritize the important things that you want. Carefully pick your battles. Let the other stuff slide. Don't be a nag and complain about every little thing. If you don't like something hold your tongue. Try to roll with the punches.

11. If your spouse loves something (like his/her mother, or football), try find out why, and you'll find you'll love it too. Give your spouse credence and respect your spouse's judgment, interests, affinities, and opinions. If your spouse is drawn to certain people or things, there is probably a good reason. Ask your spouse to explain. It might open up a new world to you.

12. Compliment your spouse every day, at least once. This leads towards a healthy relationship, and it is the right thing to do, because unless your spouse is a total slouch, he or she is doing many good things every day. Thank your spouse for all the wonderful things your spouse does for you and your family. Make sure your spouse knows that you appreciate his or her efforts.

13. Work hard with your spouse to create financial security. One of the beneficial effects of marriage is the creation of a strong economic joint venture. As your financial security builds up, it will be one of the things that allows you to feel good about each other and the world. It will also be a measure of the good work you've both done during your marriage. Financial security is a good thing and provides the foundation of a happy life.

14. Be your spouse's partner. Keep each other informed as to activities you are engaged in, including your work days and what you do at home. The time you spend separately outside in the world every day is very significant. Always talk to each other at the end of the day about

how your respective days have been. Respect and show awareness of and curiosity about your spouse's separate interests.

15. Always assume the best of your spouse. People have misunderstandings and miscommunications. This is true even of people who know each other very well, such as spouses. If you spouse's actions displease you, wait a bit, and then try to find out the motivation. You might well find that the motivation was meant to be constructive and not negative, and that you may have made the wrong interpretation or assumptions about what had been said or done.

16. Give your spouse a treat occasionally. Spouses have different things that make them feel good. If you know something that your spouse likes, give it to them sometimes even if you don't care for it. It can be a small thing: a trip to the movies, a ride to a place your spouse likes to go, or maybe a favorite food bought from the grocery store. Be generous to your spouse, even if it is not in your nature.

17. Don't fight with your spouse about the kids. Disagreements about children can be very corrosive to a marriage. Have your discussions off-line so that your children do not know you disagree. Get professional help if needed as to how to coordinate and respect your different views. Don't let your disagreements about your children destroy your marriage.

18. Don't complain about your spouse to your friends and family. One complaint at a low time in your marriage will resonate with the listener long after the problem or the short-lived spat was resolved. Your family and friends will always see your spouse in the same bad light in which you saw your spouse during this period of conflict. If you need to talk with someone about your marriage, choose an independent professional.

19. Be faithful and do not have an affair. A couple that is unattractive (physically or otherwise) is actually really lucky in a marriage because outside forces will not be as strong. However, if you or your spouse is unlucky enough to be attractive, don't take the bait. It never works out. If you can't resist having an affair, end your marriage first. When you actually think about it, you'll probably find that you can't end your marriage and things will have gotten better.

20. Find ways to enrich your lives. Learn and do new things together. In good marriages the spouses are always changing, growing, and developing new interests. Make sure that some of these changes and new interests are shared jointly, so that you can spend good time together developing as people.

21. Spend time together with mutual friends. Outside friendships pursued by the couple jointly are very good for marital health. The outside friends can be single people, or other couples. It does not matter. The important part is that you and your spouse share these friendships together.

22. Forgive each other. If you hold grudges, you'll never get anywhere in marriage. Every spouse (even you!) makes mistakes and treats the other poorly at time. You must be able to forgive your spouse for the wrongs done to you and move on. Remember that the next time it may be you who needs to be forgiven. Marriage is very long. There are bound to be many bad things to happen between you. Do not hold onto these things. Forgive and move on.

23. Appreciate each other's contributions to the marital venture. Marriages often fail because of perceived differences in the level of contribution of each party. Try to appreciate the other person's contributions, whether financial or keeping the household together. Try not to impose your standards of how things should be accomplished on your spouse. Be appreciative of your spouse's efforts at all times.

24. Be secure in the fact that marriage is forever. Marriage is a safe container for people to work out all their personal issues. Because it does not end (except by death), a person can have the security that any mistakes, personality flaws, misspoken words, can be forgiven. There is something about the alchemy of two people with a "forever" commitment that helps people find peace and satisfaction in life.

25. Don't think that marriage is easy. One of the little-known but most important paradoxes about marriage is that it is an incubator for self-growth and self-awareness. This is a surprise to many, because marriage is supposed to be about the other person, or about the couple, or about "love". Take advantage of your chance to perfect your awareness and ability to enjoy life and relate well to other people. A good marriage will have this effect, and redound to your ability to function well in the world and live at your highest practical and spiritual level. Marriage is not easy. But it's worth it.

If you do all these things, and if, before you break up, you wait at least as long as you have been already married for rough spots to work themselves out, you will have a long, happy marriage.

Laurie Israel is a lawyer who helps clients resolve their disputes with a high level of dignity, integrity and creativity. You can find out more about her work and read her articles on her website: www.laurieisrael.com.