

5 Steps to a Successful Marriage

“It doesn’t take hard work to keep a relationship happy or stable over time,” says Terri Orbuch, Ph.D, psychologist and author of *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*.

According to her research, consistent, small and simple changes create a successful marriage. Below, she outlines the five steps from her book for a happy and healthy marriage, and gives practical suggestions that couples can try right now. These tips are valuable for anyone in a relationship, whether you’ve walked down the aisle or not.

Science-Based Steps

Orbuch’s steps are based on an ongoing long-term study funded by the National Institutes of Health. Since 1986, she’s followed the same 373 couples, which were married that year.

Couples were chosen from marriage licenses from one Midwestern county, and then approached to participate in the study. Demographically, couples matched national norms.

Couples were interviewed together and as individuals, and completed a variety of standardized measures on subjects like well-being and depression. Most couples were interviewed seven times.

Forty-six percent of the couples divorced, which is representative of the national divorce rate. Divorced partners continued to be interviewed individually.

Five Steps to a Great Relationship

1. Expect less and get more from your partner.

Many people assume that conflict is kryptonite to relationships. But it’s actually frustration, Orbuch says. Specifically, frustration forms when a partner’s expectations go unmet, she says.

Happy couples have realistic expectations, both about relationships in general and about their relationship in particular. For instance, in her book, Orbuch busts 10 common couples myths. One myth is that healthy couples don’t have conflict. Conflict is inevitable. In fact, according to Orbuch, “If you aren’t having conflict, you aren’t talking about the important issues in your relationship.”

Practical tip. Have you and your partner separately write your top two expectations for your relationship (i.e., how you think your partner should treat you; your deal breakers). According to Orbuch, this simple activity allows couples to see what’s important to each other. If your partner isn’t aware of your expectations, how can they meet them?

2. Give incentives and rewards.

For the couples in Orbuch’s study, affective affirmation was key to marriage happiness. Affective affirmation is “letting your partner know that they’re special, valued and you don’t take them for granted,” she says.

Couples show affective affirmation through words and actions. It’s as simple as saying “I love you” or “You’re my best friend.” Affirmative behaviors can be anything from turning the coffee pot on in the morning for your partner to sending them a sexy email to filling their tank with gas.

Contrary to popular belief, men need more affective affirmation than women because women “can get it from other people in our lives,” Orbuch speculates.

The key is to give consistent affirmation, she says, “rather than heaps of it at once.”

Practical tip. An affirmation a day can keep a couple happy. Orbuch suggests either saying something affirming to your partner or doing something affirming for them once a day.

3. Have daily briefings for improved communication.

Most couples will say that they communicate. But this communication is commonly what Orbuch calls “maintaining the household,” which includes talks about paying the bills, buying groceries, helping the kids with homework or calling the in-laws.

Instead, meaningful communication means “getting to know your partner’s inner world,” Orbuch says. “When you’re really happy, you know what makes your partner tick and really understand them.”

Practical tip. Practice the 10-minute rule. That involves, “Every single day talking to your partner for at least 10 minutes about something other than four topics: work, family, who’s going to do what around the house or your relationship.” Couples can talk over the phone, by email or in person. The key is to get to know your partner.

Not sure what to ask? Orbuch gives these sample topics: “What have you been most proud of this year?” “If you won the lottery, where would you want to travel to and why?” or “What are your top five movies of all time?”

4. Implement change.

Every relationship gets into a rut, Orbuch says. Implementing change can help, and there are many ways to do that. One way to implement change is to add something new, she says. “The main idea is to mimic your relationship when you first met one another.”

Practical tip. To reduce boredom and keep things fresh, change up your routine. For instance, “Instead of going to the same restaurant, find some new exotic restaurant in the city,” Orbuch suggests. Vacation somewhere new or take a class together.

Another strategy is to “do an arousal-producing activity or [an activity that] gives you a surge of adrenal or excitement. What we find is that if you do that activity with your partner, the arousal or adrenaline produced by that other activity can actually get transferred to your partner or relationship.”

She suggests exercising together, riding a roller coaster or seeing a scary movie.

5. Keep costs low and benefits high.

As Orbuch says, the first four steps focus on adding or bolstering the positives in your relationship. This step focuses on “keeping the costs low.” Based on Orbuch’s study and other literature, a happy couple has a 5 to 1 ratio. That is, they have five positive feelings or experiences to every one negative feeling or experience.

It isn’t that you need to approach your relationship with a calculator. But it’s important to “audit” your relationship regularly and consider the “costs and benefits.”

Many couples assume that there should be a balance between the pros and cons, but Orbuch gives the following description: If you have “the positives in your right hand and the costly behaviors in your left hand, make sure your right goes way down,” so “The positive things really need to outweigh the negatives.”

Orbuch's research also suggests that there are six top costly behaviors: constant fighting, miscommunication, household chores, jealousy, keeping secrets and not getting along with a partner's family.

Practical tip. You can audit your relationship by essentially making a traditional pros and cons list. Take a piece of paper, and draw a line down the middle. "On the left side, write down all the positive emotions and behaviors connected to your partner and relationship. On the right side, jot down all the negative emotions and behaviors associated with your partner and relationship." Again, "Make sure the left side is always much longer in length and quantity than the right side." Ask your partner to do this, too.

In her book, Orbuch offers solutions to the top six costs. For example, if constant fighting is a problem, keep in mind that it's important to find the right time and situation to talk (e.g., a bad time is when you're visiting family, a spouse gets home from work or it's nighttime).

Orbuch also says that it's "OK to go to bed mad." It's a myth that couples should never go to bed angry. "Continuing to stay up at night makes things worse."

It's tough to fight fair when you're irritated, exhausted and angry. Your problem-solving skills slump. It's better to agree to talk things over in the morning "after you've slept on it" and you "see the disagreement in a new light."

In general, Orbuch found that happy couples focus on the positives of their relationships. So it's important to "strengthen what's already going well," she says. This increases a couple's ability to deal with the negative issues in their relationship.

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APA Reference

Tartakovsky, M. (2011). 5 Steps to a Successful Marriage. Psych Central. Retrieved on November 25, 2013, from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/5-steps-to-a-successful-marriage/0006487>