

Loving Your Spouse

1. Falling in Love

QUESTION: *Can someone really “fall in love”? Each time the chemistry has been there with what seems like a great guy, I’ve gotten burned. I don’t get it. Why?*

ANSWER

Can you really “fall in love”? When someone “falls head over heels” in love, it seems to imply a magical and secret component to their relationship. Yet, the presence of love should not imply the absence of thought.

Many a priest in pre-marital counseling groans when the couple draws a blank at the question, “What do you love about one another?” Serious doubt is indicated if, after much reflection, the answers indicate little depth, such as “because she’s a real fox”, “he’s fun to be with”, or, once to my horror, “because we like the same kind of pizza”. While the couple may look upon the priest as if he or she has callously cast doubt on the love story of the century, nonetheless, a little work now could save a lot of heartache later.

So, after serious thought, many couples are able to trace their attraction to such fine qualities as empathy, selflessness, and a willingness to communicate in an open and honest manner with one another. They are also able to spot areas of needed growth, and to develop a plan that will get their marriage off on the right foot.

But, some people are often “burned” not only because they let their heart rule their head, but also because they look for marriage to heal old wounds from parents or former spouses. We are often attracted to people who are psychologically carbon copies of that parent by whom we never felt accepted. Unconsciously, we hope that if we can make our spouse love us, then maybe we could have gotten our parents to love us. As we have made our one spouse equal two persons, we are willing to endure a fair amount of abuse before we give up trying to win over that person.

If a divorce occurs, amazingly many people fall in love again with a similar type of person. I can remember once having a husband come into therapy with his sixth wife, telling both her and me how unlucky he was to have “gotten stuck with six losers in a row”. That endearing comment earned him another divorce, but therapy thankfully helped him see his continual attraction to the same kind of person, his need to mourn instead of repeat the past, and to come finally to love and accept himself.

Therefore, the point is that no one really falls in love. Those who describe “love at first sight”, followed by a quick marriage, are lucky if it works. With the divorce rate being what it is, consider taking luck out of the process. Look before you leap. Discover what you love about a person, as well as how you can help each other grow. While this may sometimes be hard, it will always be healthy.

Loving Your Spouse

KEY POINTS

- You do not *fall* in love.
- Love is the heart's reaction to the mind's perception.
- Your mind sees not only how you look on the outside, but also who you are on the inside: sensitive, caring, thoughtful, responsible, reliable, etc.
- Too little thought at the beginning leads to too much pain later.

2. What Does “I Love You” Mean?

QUESTION: *Married couples say “I love you” so freely, or perhaps I should say “loosely”. I don’t think many people know what those words really mean. As a priest and a marriage counselor, what would be your explanation?*

ANSWER

Well, if one does not really fall in love, then what really attracts us to someone? What does it mean when someone says, “I love you”? Here are eight points to consider.

1. **MIND & HEART:** Love is an attraction to what is perceived as good. Your mind has to see the worth of a person before your heart can express your affection. Love, therefore, is not a whimsical emotion, but rather a reaction to the depth and majesty of the other. If I asked you if you liked a movie before you even saw it, you would tell me that is impossible. Precisely, that is my point.
2. **THE EYES OF THE OTHER:** To drive my point home, when a person feels insecure, I often ask them why their spouse loves them. Could it be your spouse is just stupid and cannot see what a loser you are? Or, could they see what a nice person is hiding underneath that rough exterior? My facetious comment makes a person see their own value reflected back to them in the eyes of their lover.
3. **A COVENANT:** Love in marriage is not a boring, stagnant, legal contract carved in stone that locks you into a relationship, but rather a living breathing commitment to ongoing growth with one another. Your vow keeps interference out and intensity in, essentially serving as a protective bubble. Burst the bubble by weakening the relationship, letting any third party water down the intensity of your relationship, and that empty feeling is the price you pay.
4. **BRAVE:** Love means having the courage to ask the other person to grow. Perhaps that means learning to argue with sensitivity instead of aggression, or to be humble yourself instead of wearing a mask of superiority.
5. **PATIENT:** If a person is genuinely trying to grow, the speed of that growth is less important. They may be weak where you are strong, and so have to grow according to their time clock, not yours. Remember, your spouse will have to be patient with you too!
6. **KIND:** Growth requires sandpaper and blankets. Sandpaper for the growing edge, but blankets for kindness. If you come across as arrogant and demanding, trying to control and manipulate, all you will get is defensiveness, procrastination, and broken promises. Your spouse does not want a teacher, just a lover.

Loving Your Spouse

7. **FORGIVING**: In this journey prompted by love, all of us make mistakes, say insensitive, sarcastic, and cruel things to win arguments or in retaliation for feeling hurt. What should you do? Punish the other, extracting your pound of flesh? No. The punishment for being selfish is to **be** selfish. Instead, if the person is truly sorry, give them another chance as forgiveness is based less on the person forgiving being nice, and more on the person being forgiven having the potential for change.

8. **DON'T BE ENVIOUS**: If your spouse showers your children, family and friends with love, that is not taking anything away from you. Love is not a quantity, so that you are getting less of the pie. It is a quality. The more your spouse exercises his or her love for others, the better able they become to love you.

3. Finding the Right Person

QUESTION: *A lot of relationships blossom due to the romantic appeal of Valentine's Day. Is that enough to keep a relationship going? I suppose it isn't, but how do you find the right person?*

ANSWER

Even knowing what love is, you may still have a hard time finding the “right” person. It is amazing to me that living in a sophisticated society, one where everyone realizes that hard work in college and on the job is essential for success, that we still cling to the notion that there is a perfect person out there somewhere, and that the fortunes of fate will somehow magically enable you to bump into one another. And, if you luck out and meet a nice person, often people think, “What can go wrong if the chemistry is right?” The answer: Plenty!

Hence, why not take luck out of the process, and begin to decide what is best for *you*, then using your dates to see if Prince Charming or Cinderella actually “measure up”. What does that mean? Here are a few suggestions.

1. **ARE THEY AVAILABLE?** If you are drawn to someone who is either married or separated, trouble abounds. Oh sure, they tell you tales of woe about their miserable, soon-to-be ex-spouse, but all too often, your feelings will be crushed beneath the surprising news that they are going to try to “work it out” with their spouse. So, unless they are free, flee.
2. **ARE THEY MATURE?** If you feel like they are selling a product, don't buy. Look for someone who is reasonably confident in their self-worth, as evidenced by them admitting their flaws, instead of endlessly telling you about how big their job, house, car, or bank account is. If they are talking about how they are going to take care of “poor little you”, that is a sign that they are attracted to you because of your perceived weakness. Once you grow up, you will grow out of them.
3. **WHY ARE YOU IN LOVE?** What qualities of the person attract you? When people are unsure, but respond that “the chemistry is right”, I get the wrong feeling. As I said a little while ago, if someone felt unloved by a parent, they subconsciously are often attracted to someone who has a similar personality, the hidden hope being that if they can get this person to love them in the present, maybe they could have gotten their parent to love them in the past. This often explains why someone puts up with abusive behavior, long after family and friends have advised them to “dump” this person.
4. **WILL THEY WAIT?** Often, men and women feel pressured to have sex, if not on the 1st date, certainly by the 3rd or 4th date, their fear being that the other person will leave them unless they “put out”. Why “sell out” for love? If someone truly is mature and truly loves you, they will wait, realizing that to physically “make love” to someone before you are psychologically “in love” is irrational.
5. **DO YOU LOVE YOURSELF?** To plunge into a relationship too early and too deep is a sign that you may be too insecure, feeling that if you do not act now, all will be lost. Yet, true love is based on your true value, namely, such qualities as your kindness, sensitivity, intelligence, responsibility, and

Loving Your Spouse

commitment. Act in haste because you feel desperate, and you will have to repent in leisure with a painful divorce. So, go slow for a relationship that will last. The point is, you deserve it!

4. Feeding Your Marriage

QUESTION: *My husband and I have been married for 6 years. We met and fell in love during a flight to Florida. It was magical. We were instantly drawn to each other. It just felt right. Now we seem to be drifting apart. If it was so right at the beginning, how could it ever go wrong?*

ANSWER

Once you are happily married, you want to stay that way. If you do not feed your marriage, it will starve to death. The beginning of your relationship was a bit like the wondrous month of April. Flowers are blooming, birds are singing, and love is in the air. But, for love to last, for it to endure beyond April, our heads must guide our hearts. A lasting marriage depends upon the attraction lasting long after the removal of the rose-colored glasses. So, here are just a few hints of how to continually breathe life into your marriage.

1. **TALK:** Couples should talk a minimum of 1 hour per week. While this is easy while dating, it becomes more difficult when you have 3 children continually interrupting you. Nonetheless, you should not put communication on the back burner, for when the last child leaves the nest, you do not want to gaze across the kitchen table at a stranger. So, get creative. Plop a disk in the DVD player for the kids to enjoy, or hire a babysitter and go out, but whatever you do, make room to listen and adjust to the changing goals and dreams of your spouse.
2. **ARGUE:** Did I say argue? Yes. Unless you marry your clone, you are going to have differences that need to be resolved. So, some of your talks may be arguments, where each of you is brave enough to bare your soul, telling the other how you have been hurt, and how you can work together to be more caring. Arguing does not mean yelling or being sarcastic. It means being assertive plus sensitive, assertive to openly reveal what is on your mind, and sensitive to cushion your words so as to lead to empathy instead of defensiveness.
3. **FORGIVE:** We all make mistakes. If after arguing, your spouse apologizes, and then backs that up with changed behavior, do not hold a grudge or seek revenge, but instead realize that forgiveness is the flexibility needed to allow both of you to grow through the inevitable bumps encountered down the road of life. Of course, if your spouse does not apologize, or follows an insincere "I'm sorry" with the same old abusive behavior, then your marriage is in serious trouble and needs counseling.
4. **DATE:** Along with forgetting to talk, married couples often forget to date. Again, the excuse of a busy schedule allows for romance to be squeezed out of the marriage, and, being starved for attention, it begins to die. Dating need not mean spending a bundle at a fancy restaurant. A pizza out or a video in are just fine. Work as hard on your marriage as you do on your career, remembering to keep romance alive with cards, flowers, holding hands, and the hugs and kisses that were the hallmark of your early relationship.

Loving Your Spouse

5. **PRAY**: Many couples get lost in our materialistic culture, which preaches that money buys happiness, compelling them to push each other up an endless, stress-filled ladder towards a goal that is always just out of reach. Knowing what really matters will provide you with the breadcrumbs needed to find your way through the often-confusing forest of life, guiding you to true and lasting happiness.

5. **Warning: Marriage in Trouble!**

QUESTION: *The divorce rate scares me. My wife and I have been married for 10 years, but all our friends are splitting up. What are some of the warning signs of a marriage in trouble?*

ANSWER

Your question is good, but your focus is bad. Let's not only look at what is wrong, but also at what to do to make it right, as "prevention is worth a pound of cure".

Imagine that you have only given lip service to the advice that has been given, a troubled marriage as well as the road to hell being paved with good intentions. Now, being married for 10 years, you begin to sense that your marriage is in trouble. Wanting more than an intuitive sense that things may be going awry, what are some of the warning signs for which you might look?

1. **BEING TOO INDEPENDENT:** It's boring being married to Superman. He doesn't need anyone. As no man is an island, learn to love yourself enough to ask for help.
2. **BEING SELFISH:** Love is not competition. If you do not give, then you will not receive. Unless you feed the emotional needs of your spouse, he or she will starve, and be unwilling to feed you.
3. **BEING JEALOUS:** Love is a quality, not a quantity. The time given by your spouse to your children, parents and friends does not decrease what you get; it only increases his or her ability to love you all the more.
4. **BEING VENGEFUL:** As your goal is intimacy instead of victory, holding grudges or throwing a litany of past mistakes at your spouse only pushes them away from you. Giving them another chance to grow gives *you* another chance to be loved.
5. **BEING SECRETIVE:** The goal is to be one, not two. Not sharing your worries and whereabouts erodes trust. Separating income and bills into "his" and "her" piles leads to separate lives.
6. **NOT TALKING:** Being too busy to talk means a growing chasm filled with alienation and loneliness. Giving a little time to each other now will save you from spending a lot of time and money later with a divorce lawyer.
7. **NOT CHOOSING:** Trying to simultaneously please your mother and your spouse gets you stuck in the middle. Put your spouse first, and they will put you first.
8. **NOT FLEXIBLE:** Rigidly forcing the "same old, same old" down your spouse's throat may win the battle, but you will lose the war. Loosen up, and realize that there are two sides to any argument, and that surprisingly *you* may just be wrong!

Loving Your Spouse

9. **NOT ROMANTIC**: When was the last time that you gave your spouse flowers, took them out to dinner, or told them that you love them? Hold hands, and give each other a hug and kiss. A little effort will give you a big result!
10. **NOT PRAYING**: The old saying “the family that prays together stays together” points to our need for spiritual insight in a world blinded by secularism. Go to church or synagogue, not because you have to, but because it offers you support both personally and as a couple.