

Truths About Marriage No One Ever Tells You

The top surprises couples face after they say "I do."

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By the time you decide to get hitched, you may think you know your partner well. After all, you're best friends who've agreed to spend the rest of your lives together.

But married life often turns out to be full of unexpected disappointments and joys.

"People are surprised that, even in this most intimate relationship, there's a lot that needs to be discovered," Kim Lundholm-Eades, a marriage and family therapist and co-owner of CenterLife Counseling, says. "There isn't a Spock mind meld that goes on between a couple just because they've gotten married."

Here are some things that you need to know about marriage that you may not have heard yet.

You've got to sweat the small stuff.

University of Michigan social research professor Terri L. Orbuch, author of *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*, says, "Many couples say that what surprised them most about their marriage is that they really have to address the little things that are irritating them, which is the opposite of what you hear in the media about letting the small stuff go." .

For 24 years, Orbuch has followed 373 couples for a long-term study called the Early Years of Marriage Project. In interviews and questionnaires, the couples have reported that small irritations -- like never loading the dishwasher or always being late to the movies -- became big issues if they didn't talk about them.

"It's very important to talk about what's irritating you in a nonthreatening way and to compromise," Orbuch says. "Don't let these things fester."

Families matter more than you think.

Once you've had a few holiday meals with your future in-laws, you may feel that you know how to negotiate your relationship with them. But doing so can be surprisingly hard.

Michelle, 31, a New York writer who's been married for six years, says, "The most difficult part of my marriage has been dealing with our families.. My in-laws desired an instant closeness," she says. "They want so much to treat me like the daughter they never had. But I feel like that would be a bit of a charade for me. Also, I think it may have hurt them at the beginning that I didn't change my name."

But Michelle was pleasantly surprised by her husband's effect on her family. "He acts as a buffer at family dinners, and his presence makes everyone behave better," she says. "My parents really like him and feel comfortable with him."

Some people are most surprised by how much their marriage is like their parents' marriage. Lundholm-Eades says, "Couples often underestimate the role that each individual's family history plays. They vow that their marriage will be different from their parents' marriage and then are surprised and often horrified by the similarities. They may argue about finances, for instance, or make failed assumptions about the division of household chores -- just like their parents did," she says.

There's more juggling than you expect.

David, 36, a financial strategist in New York who has been married for five years, says, "It may seem obvious, but there is twice as much that you go through when you're married -- all the emotional ups and downs, job-related successes and anxieties, medical issues, family commitments, and celebrations and conflicts. Everything doubles."

Then he says, "This sharing is what makes it a deeper relationship. But it's surprising how this doubling is both rewarding and more taxing."

Orbuch says the couples she studied didn't know, when they were first married, that life would get so busy and stressful that sometimes they'd put their relationship on the back burner. "The more roles and responsibilities you take on, the less you can give to any one of them," she says.

The couples told her they learned to make an effort to talk about something other than the kids, work, or maintaining the household. They could reconnect, even if they were stressed, by regularly talking about other important things, such as their feelings, goals, and dreams for the future.

Compliments are key.

Experts say they've been surprised to learn how essential it is to long-term happiness to compliment your spouse and to celebrate his or her achievements.

"Look for opportunities to get excited about your partner's successes," says Stony Brook University social psychology professor Arthur Aron. "It really strengthens the relationship. Research shows it's even more important than supporting your partner when things go badly."

Orbuch says, "We found that it's so significant if you feel your partner frequently makes you feel special, cared for, and loved. You can do this by complimenting your partner, thanking them for helping around the house, or saying simple things like, 'I would still choose you if I had to do it all over again,'" she says.

A good marriage isn't a guarantee of happiness.

After the excitement of setting up house and getting married, Michelle says, she was surprised to feel the same old frustrations.

"I was still unhappy with my job and still had the same stresses and emotional baggage," she says. "I didn't realize that even with a relationship that made me happy, I had to continue working on the other parts of my life. Being in love and having someone's love didn't make my problems go away."

Aron says that people are sometimes dissatisfied with their marriage when the real problem is that they're depressed or have other problems in their life.

If you're unhappy in your relationship, it makes sense to look at how the rest of your life is going. Aron says, "You can always find excuses in what the other person is doing if you're feeling bad."

You'll be surprised what you get through together.

"The fact that we've survived so many challenging situations and somehow move on to others is something that continues to surprise me," Patrick, a 37-year-old Vermont dad who has been married for six years, says. "We've been through some really tough situations, like being in medical school and having a baby at the same time."

Getting through a particularly tough situation together can put things in perspective, says marriage and family therapist David Halper, co-owner of CenterLife Counseling.

"When a big issue like a serious illness arises, couples often realize that their disagreements that seemed so important are really trivial," Halper says. "This renewed perspective can be the catalyst for a more positive, intentional relationship focused on what the couple truly values."

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