

Arriving at Midlife with Your Marriage Intact

What you do along the way can give you a better chance of getting there safely

By Charles Qualls

Ever hear of young couples "living off of love?" Think a successful marriage is all about a neat checklist of sweet nothings that will deliver you eternal bliss? Unfortunately, many of us do, it seems. The wreckage of crashed relationships leaves a trail that is daunting to younger couples. Divorce and increased cohabitation are two evidences of a society that has grown afraid of committing to the ideal.

Toss in the treacherous going that lies ahead, and many couples find themselves staring at midlife with few resources to draw from. Pressures from family, vocational, emotional and social outlets, to name just a few, come to bear in staggering measure.

Help is available, though. If a couple is open to the work of building and maintaining a solid relationship, they can arrive at the challenging midlife stage better prepared than they think. It starts before the wedding ever takes place, and involves daily nurture. Think you're ready for that?

Signals abound

Rick and Tara arrive for the supper club group, late as usual. The kids have drained the last modicum of their energy along the way. One has called from a frat party needing money, the other wanting last minute transportation to a friend's. Rick's mother gave them a quick scare with her fall on the steps, as she has done a few times already since moving in with them. And, none of that is the real problem.

Rosemary has begun to notice a change in them. At the gathering, she picks up on how they hardly sit next to each other long enough to eat. Their lack

of communication is evident in the forgotten appetizer they were to bring. Tara doesn't seem to mindlessly pat Rick's back during conversation, once a hallmark of her affection for him. And, they don't roll with the punches like they used to. He stresses on her over a small nothing, in front of the group, and is met with an icy glare. Twice lately, Tara has mentioned a cute guy she works with. Rosemary wisely realizes that she's no therapist and figures it's just a tough week. Sadly, though, she doesn't realize that she's pegged some signs of trouble dead-on. Although the marriage isn't necessarily doomed, it is in need of some help.

Counselors agree that more often than not, a relationship doesn't flame out so much as it is allowed to grow weaker over time. Like a slow, enveloping darkness, the partners miss the proactive opportunity to do maintenance along the way. Markers that should have been paid attention to have instead gone unheeded.

Empowering younger couples

How is it that new marriages can be prepared to thrive in the years ahead? It becomes obvious that there is no way to guarantee marital success. The typical couple answers, "because we're in love" when asked why they became engaged. Like a teenager, the engaged relationship often feels bullet proof and immortal. Romantic love seems to be enough.

Around a table with bag lunches, a counselor and a few clergy met in Greensboro, North Carolina to see if faith and marriage could be joined more strongly. With over 450 churches performing about 95% of the total weddings in Guilford County, the

counselor felt that the church held the key to preparing relationships.

The fall 1996 meeting began a series of brainstorming sessions that resulted in a covenant agreement between churches. They agreed to be intentional about equipping couples for a lifetime of marriage, rather than giving in to the pessimism that half of them would eventually divorce no matter what. By mid-1998, over 70 churches had already signed onto the agreement and more would follow. It stipulated a waiting period, the use of a relationship analysis instrument, counseling sessions and enrichment opportunities for each couple, to name a few basics. All in the hopes of providing a support network that can mentor newer marriages. The counselor involved in the group was Robert Herron, Director of the Presbyterian Counseling Center.

In a society that puts increasing value on the worth and fulfillment of the individual, Herron sees a dangerous dilemma: How to find "me" without giving up "us." After a few years, many couples find themselves staring at virtual strangers when alone together. To simply be wed, and then turned out to fend for yourself in marriage is a dangerous start. Efforts like the one in Greensboro, and in other cities, aim to help couples see the issues they'll need to be aware of and then develop the sound practices that help them to maintain their partnership.

Communication and Commitment

"You have to practice it everyday," says Bo Prosser. He believes that communication involves skill and care. Couples have to work across the years in light of the changing realities of who they are individually. In fact, communication and commitment will be the two posts around which all else falls into place. As an associate pastor and head of the Center for Christian

Education in Charlotte, Prosser has been involved in marriage counseling and enrichment endeavors for years. "When I prepare a young couple for marriage, I stress to them that they're not just two people anymore. We're three now. I can't be with them everywhere they go, but they can call me anywhere I am, anytime of the day or night if they get in trouble. They have to know that there are others who will support them, and have gone where they're going before."

Wade Rowatt, Director of the St. Matthews Counseling Center in Louisville, Kentucky agrees. In fact, he says that change within the two persons may be the easiest factor to miss when assessing a marriage relationship. "They have to understand that the person they married at 25 isn't the same anymore at 45." And, neither are they. We change as individuals, but somehow expect our relationship to operate based on the same practices and rules. "Commitment has to be both intellectual and emotional in nature, or it won't be balanced enough to see us through," says Rowatt.

On the days when the romantic side of love and commitment don't seem to be as real, the fact that we once loved a person enough to marry them may need to be the beacon that we follow out of the darkness. Toss in some turbulent life circumstances, such as crisis, and the test is on. At midlife, grief of one variety or another can tug at the marital fabric. Usually the death of the first parent, or even a child, has occurred. Maybe there is disappointment at dreams not realized or opportunities missed. One partner, or both, may question their purpose in life. Commitment can drive the partnership and support that sees them through these challenging times.

No formula, but there are some markers

"Whatever you do, please don't just tell folks that marriage is a polyana

checklist of cute things to do, says a youthful mother of three. Arriving at midlife with two in college and a third completing high school, she's been there. And, she's read a few marriage articles. This Florida couple has experienced health challenges, career disappointments and all that comes with parenting. Their relationship has been rewarding and their children bring them happiness. "I love my husband, but marriage is work. It's not about doing a few certain things and everything working out all right. It's about fostering commitment and health so that you are able to feel the love."

Herron, Rowatt and Prosser believe that there are points along the way that stress relationships in particular. Some of them come surprisingly early, while others arrive later. For couples with adult children, a period that hits about two or three years after the nest empties can be tricky. Suddenly, the couple is alone with each other. If they haven't been staying in touch with each other along the way, it is treacherous to have to become re-acquainted. This person who only resembles your original marriage partner is now your sole roommate (See sidebar for Rowatt's issues to watch). Vulnerability to frustration and affairs springs from unresolved issues in the relationship.

Whatever the challenges, they agree that younger couples who are nurtured in a system of support stand the best chance of having long, fulfilling marriages. Herron advocates the use of the Prepare/Enrich analysis instrument with pre-marital couples, as well as with those who are a few years along. Developed by David Olson, at the University of Minnesota, this inventory consists of over 160 questions completed by both of the marrying partners. Computer scored by Life Innovations, Inc., the resulting customized booklet

guides a trained professional in follow up sessions with the couple. Discussions center on issues like marriage expectations, communication, conflict resolution, financial management and parenting. Exercises to be completed between sessions give a chance to use some of the skills developed. With this focused start, a couple is better prepared to know their strengths and "growth areas." There is a nationwide network of certified professionals who can counsel using Prepare/Enrich. Still, new couples have to be willing to do the work.

Didn't make it to Madison County?

Herron draws on the book, *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller. This 162 week New York Times bestseller portrays a woman dealing with the perceived disappointments of her rural Iowa farm life. With her husband and children gone for a few days, she engages in a brief relationship with a National Geographic photographer (portrayed in the movie version by Clint Eastwood). Along the way, she and her husband have fallen into sloppy communication and very low maintenance of their romance. This guest offers her the chance to leave it all behind and travel the world with him. She chooses to stay, keeping until her death the secret of her torrid affair. The point?

Bob Herron says "the romantic mirage of Madison County poses problems for couples in all stages of life, but particularly those at midlife. Frequently, it is the marriage that is judged defective, rather than the mirage." He proposes that if we are to grow as persons, and in our marriages, we have to give up the simplistic, magical notions. Replacing them with maturing, grounded love and commitment is a doable job even for the newest of couples. Haven't made it to Madison County? "Be happy about it,"

Robert Herron says. "In the real world, which is the only world we have, we don't have to love perfectly at midlife. Love is not a four-day extravaganza. It's a lifelong process of learning."

Sidebar

Wade Rowatt sees these as vital markers for the marriage journey. There are some must-do's, and some are warnings. These come from his years of counseling and research with families. They are not guarantees of success or failure, but are solid indicators.

7 Critical Issues to Invest In Along the Way

- Talk and listen to each other daily. Listen actively, beyond the level of thought. Share feelings, dreams and emotions. The 3 years past empty nest is a vital time for this skill, statistically. Develop it now.
- Spend 30-60 minutes of "couple time" a day with the tv and computer off. Talk, touch and be present.
- Address problems while in their infancy. They grow like a cancer when kept silent. Work especially on disappointments, unmet expectations and power imbalances in the relationship.
- Commitment must be both emotional and intellectual. When the honeymoon stage is over, this will be the staying power. Grief in midlife will challenge the relationship (losses of parents, children, dreams or identity). Partners must stay in touch with the idea that "I wouldn't dare trade my spouse in for another model."
- The flexibility of an oak tree is vital. Partners will change, vocations and circumstances will change beyond our imaginations. We must be able to bend without breaking.
- Tend to each other's romantic needs. Many ask, "When did we stop being lovers and start being friends?" The

answer must be that we never stop being lovers. Little things help to maintain: back rubs, a touch, a smile, doing each other favors without having to be asked. Gifts. Dating regularly.

- The ability to be open in conversation and to face problems comes from a solid faith relationship. Constant renewal that is individual, and yet shared, will be central. This will impact parenting, grief, work decisions, lifestyle and economics.

Heed these warning signs along the way

If even one of these is true of your relationship, give it some attention now. Getting the help of a good pastoral counselor may be the healthy step that keeps your marriage on track.

- Frequent disinterest in what each other is doing/saying
- Sudden, prolonged attraction to a co-worker, friend, or fellow church-member, etc.
- Unexplained, sudden anger at spouse
- Disinterest in sex
- Over-involvement with the children at expense of marriage relationship
- Depression
- Not wanting to be touched by spouse

Sidebar: Resources for Couples

Bridges to Intimacy: Making It Through Midlife With Your Spouse by Robert W. Herron, Ph.D

Yes, your marriage looks rather indestructible in its earliest days. You're humming along in your twenties or thirties. Midlife issues aren't exactly flagged in your Palm Pilot to receive immediate attention today. Guess what? The skills you'll need by midlife aren't just called up on demand. You have to nurture them over time. Starting yesterday.

Bob Herron has provided a road map. It's about investing along the way so that you actually get to know your partner. In fact, you will likely remain just spouses (at best) unless there is some fairly intentional work on healthy habits and values maintenance in your marriage. This paperback is a comfortable read designed to help married people be alert to the pressures, warning signs and health indicators of marriage up the road. It's not designed to conjure up undue stress, but instead to provide a mirror for evaluation and enrichment. Real life stories are used as background for suggestions you can try. Read it and get started on a refreshing journey today. Better yet, grab some other couples and use it to kick off a small group around marriage enrichment.

Other books

Prepare/Enrich version 2000 by David H. Olson, Life Innovations, Inc. 2000
(Must be

Prepare/Enrich certified to be eligible to purchase this resource)
Empowering Couples by David H. Olson, Amy K. Olson, Life Innovations, Inc., 2000

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1995

Husbands and Wives: The Best of Friends by Otis and Deigie Andrews, Nashville:

Lifeway Press, 1994

Adolescents in Crisis : A Guidebook for Parents, Teachers, Ministers, and Counselors

by G. Wade Rowatt, Jr.,
Westminster John Knox Press, 2001

Web resources

<http://www.oates.org>—The Wayne Oates Institute provides pastoral care resources that are helpful, including occasional articles

<http://www.lifeinnovations.com>—The home page for Prepare/Enrich and other products and services provided by David Olson at University of Minnesota.

<http://www.c4ce.org>—Occasional events and resources for marriage enrichment

<http://www.baylor.edu/CFCM>—Baylor University Center for Family & Community Resources run by Diana Garland.

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