

MARRIAGE GEMS



{ *10 Secrets for Marital Success* }

BY LORI LOWE

{ Secret #1: }

LOVE IS A DECISION NOT A FEELING.

To love is to choose.—Joseph Roux

As long as two people make each other happy, that's love, right? Love has lots of definitions. The most common are 1) a deep feeling of affection or attachment, 2) sexual affection or 3) a strong liking or predilection for something.

None of these definitions encompasses what mature love involves. In my interviews with long-time married couples, their view of love is not the fly-by-night romantic view. You might be surprised to learn the romance and affection is still there even for older couples, but there is something much more, something that happened along the way to make the love richer and more permanent.

What these mature couples have developed is a view that love is an action—a decision—not a feeling. The fact that they have been married a long time doesn't mean they didn't face serious obstacles. What it means is that they found a way through the obstacles. They didn't always feel



loving toward one another, but they decided to love anyway. They found that if they led with loving actions, their feelings soon followed. In other words, after they started acting lovingly, they felt more in love.

Anyone who has children knows that children don't always act in ways that deserve love, but good parents decide to love them anyway. You can't say you love your children while you neglect them. Similarly, you can't say you love your spouse if you neglect him or her and refuse to act in a loving manner when your

spouse doesn't "deserve" it. For example, if your spouse is having a bad day, do you contribute to it, or do you provide understanding and encouragement? If you're having an argument, do you sometimes choose to give in, or do you dig in your heels?

The bottom line is that you have to decide whom to love and how to love. Use your behavior and choices to lead your feelings, rather than allowing your daily feelings to determine your behavior. That's mature love.



{ *Secret #2:* }

INCREASE YOUR TOUCHES.

Did you know NBA basketball teams who touched most (high fives, bumps, hugs, etc.) were more successful during a season, and teams that touched the least were on the bottom?

Studies have shown simple touches strengthens the bond between people. Why? Touching releases oxytocin, a hormone that builds trust, while simultaneously reducing stress hormones. Touch is necessary in successful relationships, it's not just a bonus. Unfortunately, Americans are far less apt to touch than those in other cultures.

One study shows that holding the hand of someone you love while experiencing pain (electric shocks) had such a profound effect on the brain, it was similar to receiving a pain medication. Touching helps you physically unload some of your burdens and has a meaningful effect on the body.

Don't keep touch just for the bedroom. Hold your wife's hand as you walk. Hug your mate while he is washing the dishes. Snuggle when



you're watching TV. Massage your partner's back or neck. Touch her arm when you are crossing in the kitchen. Squeeze his leg in the car. Kiss your mate hello and goodbye for about five seconds, rather than giving a quick peck.

Speaking of kisses, they have been shown to reduce stress hormones in both sexes. By kissing and touching more, you'll feel closer together, which also benefits

your sex life.

One kind of touch every couple needs to have plenty of is sexual touch. Studies show couples who have more sex are happier and more bonded. While most of your other needs—a clean house and dinner on the table—can be met by other people, sexual satisfaction is one important area reserved for spouses. Make it a priority. Schedule it on the calendar if needed.



{ *Secret #3:* }

WE ALL MARRIED THE WRONG PERSON.



Couples in crisis often reach the point where they decide they are just two poorly matched people. This precedes the decision to leave the relationship and go in search of that “right person.” Unfortunately, the odds of a successful marriage go down for each attempt at a new marriage. Psychiatrist and author Scott Haltzman, MD, says in truth, they are correct; we all married the wrong person. I was intrigued by this idea, and asked Dr. Haltzman

to explain.

Even if we think we know a person well when we marry them, we are temporarily blinded by our love, which tends to minimize or ignore attributes that would make the relationship complicated or downright difficult. In addition, both individuals bring different expectations to the marriage, and we change individually and as a couple over time. No one gets a guarantee of marrying the right person, says

Dr. Haltzman, so you should assume you married the wrong person. That doesn’t mean your marriage can’t be successful, however.

“Most of us spend a lot of time filtering through possible mates in hopes that we will end up with the right match. Some people believe it’s an issue of finding a soul mate ... the one true partner. Whether or not you enter into marriage believing your partner is THE one, you

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{ Secret #3: }

CONTINUED: WE ALL MARRIED THE WRONG PERSON.

certainly believe he or she is A right person for you,” says Dr. Haltzman.

He explains that if the success of a marriage were based on making the right choice, then those who carefully chose a good match would continue to sustain positive feelings the majority of the time, and over a long period. The theory would be proven correct that choosing well leads to success. “But the divorce rate in and of itself stands as a great testament to the fallacy of that theory,” says Dr. Haltzman. Even the couples who remain married don’t describe themselves as completely happy with each other, he adds, but rather committed to one another.

“If we believe we must find the right person to marry, then the course of our marriage becomes a constant test to see if we were correct in that choice,” says Dr. Haltzman, adding that today’s culture does not support standing by our promises. Instead, he says we receive the repeated message, “You deserve the best.” These attitudes

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contribute to marital dissatisfaction, he says.

Start with the premise when we choose our partner that we aren’t choosing with all the knowledge and information about them, says Dr. Haltzman. “However, outside of the extreme scenarios of domestic violence, chronic substance abuse, or the inability to remain sexually faithful—which are good arguments for marrying the wrong person on a huge scale, and where it is unhealthy or unsafe to remain married—we need to say, “This is the person I chose, and I need to find a way to develop a sense of closeness with this person for who he or she really is and not how I fantasize them to be.””

- **Respect your mate for his/her positive qualities, even when they have some important negative ones.**
- **Be the right person, instead of looking for the right person.**
- **Be a loving person, instead of waiting to get love.**
- **Be considerate instead of waiting to receive consideration.**

Finally, he advises, “Have the attitude that this is the person you are going to spend the rest of your life with, so you must find a way to make it work instead of always looking for the back door.”



{ *Secret #4:* }

BELIEVE IN AND TREASURE ONE ANOTHER.

We have a greater life purpose than finding love (although yes, romantic love is a treasure, to be sure). Love should encourage our life purpose, not hinder it.

Spouses should encourage and support one another to allow you each to fulfill your life's purpose. Without this generosity of spirit, we may over time become resentful or feel unfulfilled despite having found love. This anger or resentment or feeling of failure may lead to drifting apart and a loss of intimacy.

How do you know your partner's dreams? Ask. Study and learn about your spouse's interests, preferences, concerns, fears and goals. Encourage your partner, and think about him/her during your day, focusing on their best qualities. (Yes, you're married, you can even fantasize.) Treasure your spouse for who he or she is, not who you want her to be. Share your true self. Be vulnerable. Allow her into your heart.

Be on your spouse's side, and have



his/her back. Be the one your sweetheart can't wait to come home to. Together, create a vision for your relationship for five, ten, fifteen years down the road.

Celebrate even small successes as you reach your individual or marital

goals. Research shows celebrating during good times is even more important than supporting your loved one during tough times. This is because it shows you understand what is important to them, and you value them.



{ *Secret #5:* }

LISTEN. THEN LISTEN SOME MORE.

Listening will get you much further than talking. When your spouse needs to tell you about something he or she feels is important, try your best to give them your undivided attention. No TV. No phone. No interruptions. Just listen, affirm feelings, and ask probing questions. If you learn to be a better listener, you can more effectively influence those around you.

Beware of how technology can sometimes impede our ability to connect with and hear our partners. Couples who keep TVs out of the bedroom have twice as much sex, according to one study. Also, give the smart phones and computers a break during your quality time.

The following are a few listening techniques from *Just Listen* by psychiatrist Mark Goulston, M.D., that can work when you're at a stalemate:

Be Vulnerable—Especially when things are at their worst, instead of getting aggressive, be vulnerable and share your deepest fears or concerns.

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{ Secret #5: }

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LISTEN. THEN LISTEN SOME MORE.

Encourage your spouse to share feelings as well. This can create a breakthrough connection.

The Empathy Jolt—When you are at odds with your spouse, take a break. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in their shoes. Verbalize the feelings you think you would have.

Reverse Play—When you feel like complaining about someone's behavior, set up a time to talk. Instead of complaining, apologize genuinely for the ways you may be contributing to the problem. Say you are sorry for anything you might have done to offend or disrespect them. This catches people off guard and often motivates them to act graciously.

Create a Transformational Moment—Much of our daily communication involves negotiation, such as who will handle what aspects of a work project, who will pick up the kids or handle dinner. To take your communication to a deeper level and hear what people are truly about, ask them a transformational question. Examples might be: What

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kind of influence did your father have on you? What do you love about your profession? What is something fun or important you and I should do in the next five years?

Be More Interested Than Interesting—Focus all your attention on the person in front of you. Ask probing questions. Don't tell your stories. For example, ask your spouse about a recent work project or how a conflict with a friend was resolved. Then just listen.

Make Your Loved Ones Feel Valued—After people feel heard, they want to feel valued, especially by their loved ones. Many spouses feel they are tolerated more than loved as the years go by. Tell your spouse how they have changed your life for the better. Tell your children how much

you value them in your life.

Power Thank You—Acknowledge a specific action that was helpful to you; note the great effort required. Tell your spouse (publicly if possible) what a difference this action made for you.

Power Apology—A bad apology is probably worse than not apologizing at all. The proper steps include expressing remorse for the specific behavior, showing restitution, rehabilitation (not doing the bad thing any longer) and a request for forgiveness.

Marriage isn't all listening, but be gentle in your communication. When you need to complain or bring up a problem, begin gently using "I" language. And don't forget to listen to your mate's possible solutions.



{ Secret #6: }

ADVERSITY CAN HELP CRYSTALLIZE A MARRIAGE.



During the last two years, I've interviewed happily married couples who improved their marriage through adversity. If you ask around, you'll find nearly every marriage eventually faces adversity. All are changed by it. Some marriages use it as a catalyst for unity or growth, and some are so devastated they do not survive.

Their stories convey that life does not always (or even usually) go as planned. They all had a vision for how their life would go, and the

vision was far easier than the reality. That is not to say that having a plan didn't help some of them get back on track, but we don't control when life veers us off our planned route.

When these couples got married—some more than three decades ago—they didn't plan on having a child with autism, or learning their husband was addicted to drugs. They didn't plan on having a miscarriage or struggling for 12 years with infertility. They didn't plan on being separated

for three years during a war, or suffering from depression or cancer. They didn't plan on periods where the passion leaked out of their relationship. They didn't plan on overcoming infidelity or recovering from stranger rape. They didn't plan on losing their bank accounts and real estate assets in a financial crisis. They didn't plan on their parents not supporting their marriage because of the color of their spouse's skin. They didn't plan on having their own baby die in their arms.

The couples I interviewed experienced all of these things. They didn't just survive; they became great love stories of resilience and hope. I share their stories, their failings, and their near failures, because I think we doubt we could survive given the same obstacles. We think they must be somehow better than us. When we follow their stories, we learn how success is possible.

Thankfully, most of us (we hope) will not experience the level of crisis many of them did. But don't kid

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{ Secret #6: }

CONTINUED: ADVERSITY CAN HELP CRYSTALLIZE A MARRIAGE.

yourself into thinking your marriage will be easy and bump-free, that there will be no valleys next to the hills. Even when things do go right eventually, they often don't go right in our perfect timing.

For many of these couples, the depth of the valleys only heightened their hilltop experiences. For example, the couple who was infertile for 12 years now has three children (one adopted, two born naturally). They don't take any minute of time with their children for granted, and they created a ministry to support other couples struggling with infertility.

The couple who overcame infidelity now teaches other couples how to affair-proof their marriages. They completely rebuilt their marriage into something much stronger than before and have a love and passion most would envy.

Even the couples who lost children said the painful lessons in their lives have taught them immeasurable lessons—and that they wouldn't go back and remove

Even when things do go right eventually, they often don't go right in our perfect timing.

the pain if it removed what they had learned. I was truly amazed by the grace shown by them.

Another lesson coming out of this: When you are tempted to be jealous of an especially unified or loving couple, be aware that they have probably traveled some rough roads together to get there. You have no idea of their journey, so don't be envious of their destination. You also don't know the pain they may be hiding.

All these couples did plan to spend their lives together. That's one plan that worked out—as a result of their

commitment, love and hard work. While they didn't always come together initially, they did become more unified by learning that their spouse understood their suffering better than anyone else. Their bonds were strengthened; their love was heightened.

If you are facing difficulty in your life, share your sorrows and challenges with your mate so he or she can walk through it with you. Consider that this valley, while you would never choose it, may be something that makes you stronger as a person and as a couple.



{ Secret #7: }

HAPPINESS IS NOT THE GOAL OF MARRIAGE.



The happiest people after marriage are the ones who were happy before they married.

The happiest people after marriage are the ones who were happy before they married. What are the things that make you happy? Are you spending enough time on your basic needs, such as exercise and healthy eating? And on the hobbies or activities you love most? If you're unhappy, there's a good chance that you can increase your happiness without even changing your marriage.

Your spouse cannot be your true source of joy, nor can s/he meet all your needs. Many people rely on faith, while others depend on friends and family. Rather than focusing on whether your spouse is doing a good enough job "making you happy," focus on learning to love and to be loved. Live with positivity and gratitude for the things that are going well in your

lives. Focus on what you love in your spouse, not on the things that annoy you.

Love is often self-sacrificial. However, learning to please your mate often creates a virtuous cycle of giving that keeps both spouses satisfied and wanting to give more. Don't just give to receive, but genuinely look out for your partner's best interests.



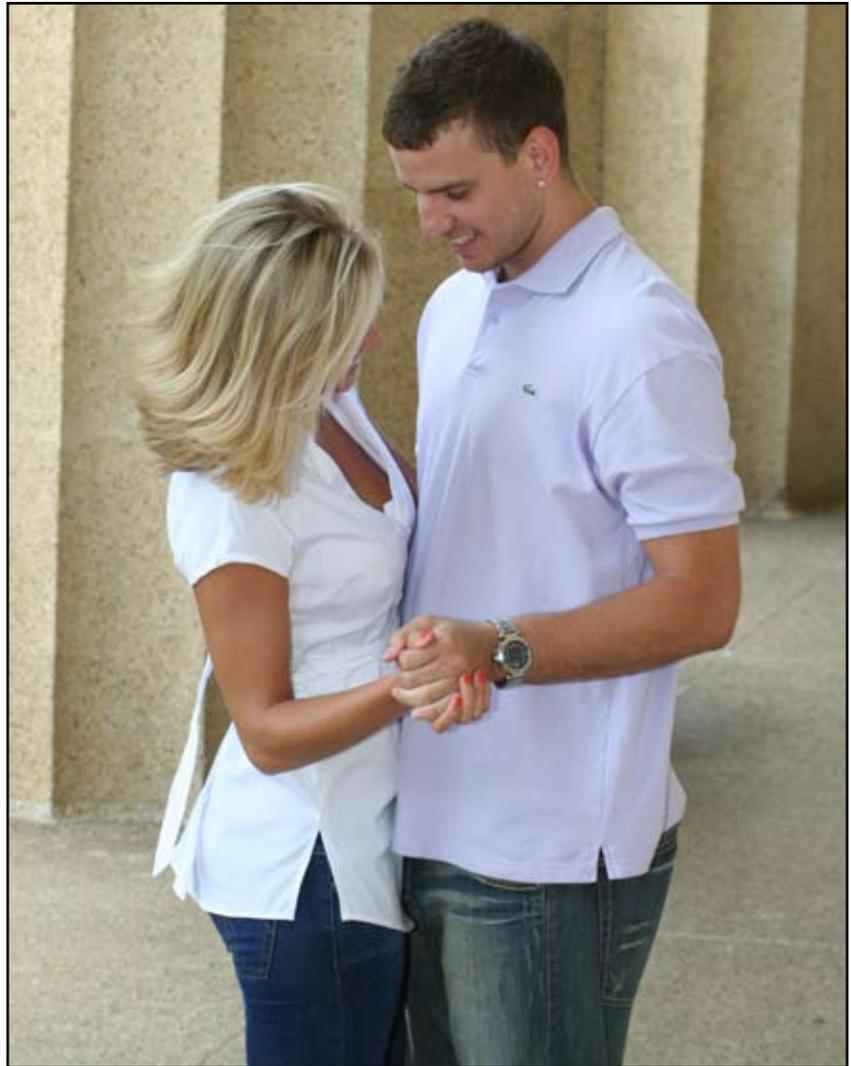
{ *Secret #8:* }

DATE YOUR SPOUSE EVERY DAY.

Rather than a weekly or monthly event, build mystery and energy into your life to make dating your spouse part of your daily lifestyle. Think back to your courtship. Each of you presented your best selves, groomed and dressed as attractively as you could muster. Chances are, you each listened more intently, tried to be funny, and in general were enjoyable to be around.

Try to reclaim that attitude of wanting to keep your partner interested. Treat your appearance as if you were still in the dating phase. Leave thoughtful notes or messages. Make time for going out, and when you do, look for activities during which you can be active and close to one another. Plan occasional surprises or exciting activities to give your bonding hormones a jolt. Don't forget to flirt like you did when you were dating.

Praise your partner publicly and privately, and speak well of him or her to others. Ask interesting questions of your mate, and really listen to them, as if you were hearing their stories for the first time. A woman who literally wrote the book on being "the other woman" explains that what attracts married men most isn't sexy lingerie (although I'm sure that doesn't hurt), but someone who will truly listen to them.



{ *Secret #9:* }

VALUE YOUR MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY, AND ALLOW THEM TO BALANCE ONE ANOTHER.

In today's fast-paced, two-career families, traditional roles may not apply in your home. On the other hand, you may have very traditional roles. Whatever your situation, it's important to continue to value your masculinity and femininity. He needs to be respected and treated as your hero; she needs to be romanced and to feel loved and prioritized.

Be vocal (in a positive way) about your needs in the bedroom, so that you both have a sexually satisfying relationship. Take advantage of the strengths you bring to the relationship, and adjust your roles and responsibilities in the home so that both spouses feel loved and appreciated.

Ask your partner about when he or she feels most loved and how you can best express love. Then share your thoughts as well. Never lose sight of the fact that men and women are unique in the way they



communicate, and even in how they experience events. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt that his/her

motives are good, and that you may not always see things the same way. That's what keeps things interesting.



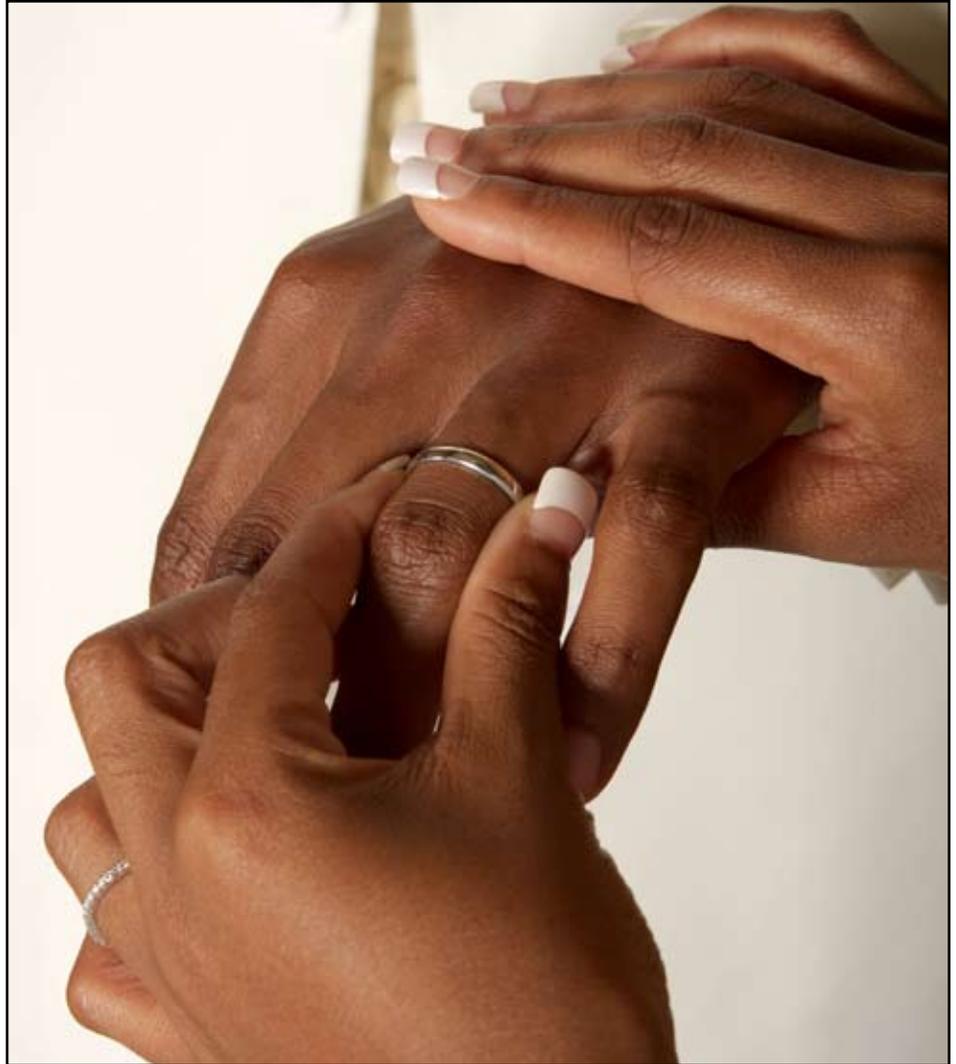
{ Secret #10: }

REMEMBER YOUR PROMISE.

Life will not be perfect with your spouse. Every relationship has strengths and weaknesses, and approximately 70% of couple conflicts will never be fully resolved. Focus on the positive and not the negative. Have fun. Laugh. Surround yourself with great influences and good role models. And remember the promise you made to each other on your wedding day.

“I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them – it was that promise.”

Thornton Wilder, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Pulitzer Prize-winning Drama in 1942





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Lori Lowe is a journalist who provides research-based marriage tips at www.LifeGems4Marriage.com.

You can find her on Twitter @LoriLowe.

Lori has been married for 15 years to a pilot who keeps her grounded. She and her husband live in Indianapolis with their two young children, one crazy cat and two aquatic frogs. Lori is currently writing a book profiling couples who used adversity to improve their marriages.

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