

50 Secrets of Blissful Relationships

*What the top 1% of marriages
have in common*

Michael Webb

"Sorry ladies, this gem of a husband is reserved for a long, long time."
The Sunday Portland Oregonian

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Why did I write this book?

I receive a least a dozen phone calls and emails a day from men and women wanting relationship advice. Why do they contact me? I don't have a doctorate in counseling, marriage studies or other similar degree. I don't have a radio call in show. But I do have what most other "relationship experts" don't – a blissful marriage.

I used to hide the fact that I have a terrific relationship. I didn't want to make others feel inferior if their marriage wasn't so joyful. But I realized that by hiding my happiness, I was adding to the misperception that blissful relationships only existed in fairy tales. And that mediocre marriages were the norm and the most couples could strive for.

For at least twenty years I have been a keen observer of relationships. I have seen elements in blissful relationships that I try to instill in my own marriage. I have noticed a lot of traits in unhappy relationships that I make a point not to repeat in my marriage.

God has blessed with me with a wife who is also determined not to have a broken marriage like the ones we witnessed and experienced as children.

Some people believe that by encouraging couples to strive for bliss in their relationships, I am setting them up for certain failure. I think most marriages already fail because that is what they expect. Telling them that marital bliss is possible encourages them to have an even better partnership with their loved one. Relationships rarely exceed beyond ones expectations.

I hope you will be inspired and encouraged by these secrets. There are hundreds of thousands of couples that have blissful relationships. You can too.

With love,
Michael

50 Secrets of Blissful Relationships

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#1 Secrets Aren't for Sharing

I've got a secret and I'm not sharing. Actually, I have a lot of secrets. There are a lot of things that are only known to Athena and me. That keeps us close.

I like it when Athena shares things with me that she doesn't with others. It makes me feel special and unique in her eyes. I tell her things that I don't tell my friends or family.

It's not like these are horrible things we have done that we can't tell others. I just want Athena to feel like she knows me better than anyone else.

Some people can't keep any secrets. They tell their mom or sister or best friend anything and everything. The instant they get pregnant, win an award or get a raise they share it with other people besides their mate. Sometimes they share it with others before they tell their mate. That doesn't build a blissful relationship. It tears it down.

Make your sweetheart feel special. Always share important things with them first. Let some things remain a secret between the two of you for a little while before letting the rest of the world know all about your personal life.

Consider not sharing some things with your father, sibling or best friend. Have a few things that only you and your sweetheart can share. It will keep you close.

#2 Save the Poppies

In Australia there is a phrase "the tall poppy syndrome." It describes the condition when a person is uncomfortable if one flower raises its head too far above the rest. They think it looks unnatural, so what do they do - they cut it down to the level of the other flowers.

Do you have the same habit with your loved ones? Some people have the hardest time letting others take some praise. If our coworker gets a promotion we tease them about what devious things they did to get it. If our brothers and sisters brought home better report cards we discounted the difficulty of the classes they took. We find it hard to accept that some people are going to naturally rise above others. That person might even be a spouse who makes more money, has a better physique, more friends, or is better educated.

We also have this nasty habit of cutting down all the poppies around us if we are feeling particularly low about ourselves. I remember when my sister made a rude comment about my thinning hair so I launched back an equally unkind comment about her thickening waist. We could have acted more maturely and watered each other with kind comments and encouraging remarks, but ignorantly we were tearing up the flower garden so no one could enjoy its beauty.

Do you like to insult (talk trash, 'dis, cut, slice) others? Does it make you feel like your poppy has grown higher? My personal peeve is when spouses spout insults about each other in front of their friends. They think their clever but insulting remarks will make their flower look prettier but in reality your mate's flower is wrapped around yours. If you cut theirs down, yours will be butchered too. Whoever came up with the "sticks and stones" phrase wasn't very bright. Insults are verbal sticks and stones and they can tear up a field of beautiful poppies in no time.

#3

You Might Be Mistaken for a Newlywed if...

Last year Athena and I celebrated our ten-year anniversary. Over the last few years we've had occasion to travel on several press trips with other journalists.

The trips typically lasted from three to five days and the travel writers would do almost everything together: eat, tour, shop and socialize. We got to know each other rather well by the end of the trip.

One of the best compliments Athena and I have received have come at the end of some of these trips when journalists ask us how long we've been married. They often remark that they thought we were newlyweds!

What is it about newlyweds that set them apart from couples who have been married for years? Here is my list of observations.

You might be mistaken for a newlywed if you...

@ Often hold hands in public

@ Display other proper affection in public: wrapping arms around each other, casually kiss, gently stroke another's hair from time to time (I personally don't think making out in public is appropriate whether you are a newlywed or not).

@ Refer to each other with endearing terms like *my bride* or *my handsome husband*

@ Want to be near each other in social occasions, not as far apart as possible

@ Refrain from insulting one another

@ Comment how beautiful, kind, smart, caring, etc. your mate is to others

@ Make each other smile or laugh often

If people don't mistake you for being newlywed, then ask yourself why.

#4

Habits are Hard to Break

My wife and I had a son in April of 2000. Shortly after he was born I had to make several different short business trips as a part of my spokesperson duties.

Each day I was gone I called at least once or twice. It was very tempting to start off the conversation with questions about Ashton: "How is he doing? How has he been sleeping? Is he eating ok? Is he making any funny faces?" Likewise, it would be very natural for me to run and pick him up as soon as I returned home, hold him tight and tell him how much I missed him. I did neither.

I made a very conscious decision that when I called Athena and when I returned home, I would first ask her how her day was, how she was feeling and let her know just how much I missed her. After I made sure it was clear that she was my top concern, then I asked about Ashton or went over to hold him in my arms.

In these exciting first months of parenthood, it would be very easy for me to fall into the habit of paying close attention to my child and brush aside my wife to second place. The problem is, habits are hard to break. What might seem like a momentary change of priorities often becomes the norm for years on out. I've noted many parents who have unknowing neglected the spouse when children come on the scene.

This does not only happen to parents. Men and women let other things become priority over their mate: work, family, friends, household duties, even hobbies. What might seem like a temporary issue that needs our top priority, may soon be permanently elevated above our spouse simply out of habit.

No matter what new exciting event happens in your life, make a conscious decision to express yourself clearly that your mate will come first -- always.

#5

A Well Seasoned Courtship

A woman recently wrote to me asking for advice for her relationship. Her fiancé proposed to her on their third date. She was thrilled at first but now the excitement has dwindled and she wanted some ideas for re-igniting that spark.

My first bit of advice to her was to break off the engagement but continue to date the guy. They jumped in too fast and made a decision based too much on emotions. While it is possible they could end up having a blissful marriage, the odds are against them. Perhaps you often hear of people who "fell in love at first site," married shortly thereafter and are still going strong. Sadly, for every one of those love at first site, blissfully married couples there are hundreds of others whose marriage ended in a bitter divorce.

Like the seasons, people change throughout the year. Woman and men have a noticeable reaction to the climate outdoors and the changes in the seasons. It was probably this very reason many marriage counselors recommend this dating ritual: A relationship should be well-seasoned before there is a commitment to marriage. After witnessing hundreds of courtships, engagements, marriages and divorces, I firmly believe that a couple should at the least date in the Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn before tying the knot.

It is a well-documented statistic that couples that have dated for a year or longer before marriage have a significantly lower rate of divorce than those who married after a short dating period. A year of dating gives time for many emotions to surface and many character traits to be discovered. You may adore someone in the spring, but despise him or her in the winter. Asking someone for his or her hand in marriage on the third date isn't romantic. It's gambling.

#6

Is Your Relationship in Neutral?

Many men have the impression that as long as they are not yelling at their wives, beating them, cheating on them or leaving huge messes around the house, he must be a good husband.

All that means is that he isn't a bad husband. More than likely he is an average husband (which is nothing to brag about).

Instead of not just yelling at his wife, a husband should make an effort to say lots of wonderful things to her. Instead of not beating his wife, he should make certain he often lovingly touches his sweetheart: stroking her hair, lightly kissing her neck, gently massaging her shoulders, kindly rubbing her feet and giving her light kisses on her cheek, nose, ears, forehead and of course, lips.

A man shouldn't only not cheat on his wife, he should passionately seduce her. Not being a total slob isn't bad. Helping your wife with the chores is better. Giving her a whole day or week off from her usual chores and you doing them for her is best.

Men should never settle for being average. If your relationship has been in neutral, it's time you move into first gear.

#7

Read Up on Your Mate

When my wife Athena was pregnant we bought a few books on pregnancy, breast feeding and other related subjects. The books weren't just for her; they were for me as well.

Part of having a blissful relationship is trying to know and understand each other as much as is possible. Athena's body was going through a major transformation. I would never be able to experience it myself but I was able to be sympathetic and encouraging by reading what she was going through. There have been many times I have been able to assist her through the pregnancy and now nursing and raising our son because I took the time to read many books and magazine articles on those subjects.

Some people would find it odd that I can give my wife breastfeeding advice. Athena is the most important person in the world to me and I want to know everything I possibly can about her, lactating breasts and all.

How knowledgeable are you about your mate's profession or degree they are pursuing? Do you know anything about his or her family heritage? Are you able to have a meaningful conversation about her cross-stitch hobby or his interest in rugby? If you are a man, do you fully understand what women experience during PMS or menopause? Ladies, have you read up on male menopause?

Couples with the most problems are often the ones that say "I just don't understand him/her." There is a book in the library for practically every subject so if there is something you don't know or understand about your sweetheart, make it a goal to find out.

#8 Learning to Pack Lightly

Athena and I love to travel. We began traveling on our honeymoon and have been globetrotting ever since. We soon realized that there was a lot of things that we were taking along that we thought would enhance our trip, but in reality, the weight of the unnecessary items put a burden on us. The extra weight limited our enjoyment of our trip.

When we took a two-week tour through Europe, all we carried was a knapsack each. The minimal luggage allowed us to see and do more in two weeks than what many people can do in two months.

I think we all have to ask ourselves what kind of excess baggage are we maintaining in our relationship that might be weighing it down.

Here are just a few superfluous bags that might be keeping your relationship from being truly blissful.

- # Not forgiving your mate of a wrong they did in the past
- # Still worrying over your sweetheart's attachment to old boyfriends/girlfriends
- # Getting all bent out shape over silly little habits that your spouse has
- # Not sharing your emotions for fear of getting hurt or rejected

These are just a few of the bags that people tend to hold onto in their relationships. They want them there "just in case." They want to be able to say "I told you so" or they like to drag out those old dusty bags to use as ammunition in arguments.

But it is hard to really embrace each other when you are juggling two Samsonite suitcases, a laptop computer, a purse, umbrella and a duffel bag.

Come up with your own list of "baggage" that you might have in your relationship. Discuss the list with your significant other and then ceremoniously burn the list to indicate that you are no longer going to carry those heavy bags.

If you haven't experienced the freedom of traveling lightly, physically and in relationships, give it a try. You will wonder why you didn't do it sooner.

#9

Weaving a Relationship

Several months ago I asked some friends who recently had a baby if they had decided what kind of parenting style they were going to use. They gave me a quizzical look and I clarified. I mentioned that there are many different methods of rearing children - ranging from strict disciplinarian to hands off. I wanted to know if they read about or discussed the various methods they would use to raise their baby?

Like many parents, they hadn't given it too much thought. Basically, they were going to raise their child how they remember being raised. Some parents who feel they had a poor upbringing try to raise their children the exact opposite way they were raised. In reality, our friends had no real plan for raising their child.

I see this same approach in relationships and it can be very unhealthy. Just because you turned out "ok" doesn't mean that you were reared wonderfully. And just because your parents never divorced doesn't mean you should mimic their relationship.

If you want to be a great basket weaver how would you go about it? By instinct? By watching those who make ordinary or even awful baskets? If you want to be a top-notch basket weaver you would spend a lot of time watching experts in the field, noting their technique. You would read books on the subject and take some courses. When it came to weaving your basket, you would probably have some ideas and concepts about what you wanted it to look like before you even started.

A relationship is a lot more complex than making baskets. If you want to have a top-notch relationship then you can't simply let nature take its course. You must have a plan. First, you make the decision that you are going to have a blissful relationship and hopefully you can get your mate to agree to the same. You will want to observe couples that have blissful relationships and maybe ask them a lot of questions. You should read books on the subject and perhaps take some courses from experts.

Raising well-behaved, respectful children takes a lot of time, thought and effort. Creating a beautiful basket takes skill, dedication and good teaching. A blissful relationship takes all the above and then some.

#10
Collecting Dust

A few months ago one of my sisters told me about a dilemma she and her boyfriend were having. Her boyfriend's niece was having a birthday party and the invitation expressly said "please, no presents."

My sister couldn't imagine not buying something for their sweet, little niece. Whenever someone has a birthday, she always buys him or her a present. How else will they know that you love them?

I suggested to my sister that there were other ways she could help the niece celebrate becoming one year older. They could take her to the zoo or park. An afternoon at Chuck E Cheese (a children's pizza restaurant) or even a trip to a McDonalds with a Playland would be a great gift.

This little girl's parents probably realized that she already had more toys than she needs or even plays with and one more toy wouldn't make her happier in the long run. In fact, by constantly getting new presents, she receives less satisfaction with what she already has.

We often do the same thing in our adult relationships. The first thing that comes to mind when a birthday, anniversary or special occasion comes around is to BUY something to express your love. We forget that experiences are far more valuable than "expensives" in relationships. We probably don't need another piece of jewelry, CD, book or power tool collecting dust. When you constantly receive new "stuff", you stop appreciating what you already have. What we need are more walks on the beach, picnics under the stars, afternoons by the lake and nights of snuggling on the sofa.

#11

How to Find (or Keep) a Spouse

Back in college I had a bit of a reputation -- a reputation with the ladies. No, it's not what you think. Because I grew up with six sisters I seemed to know quite a bit more about women than most guys so they would often come to me for advice.

I went to a Christian university and many of the men were older students and actually serious about relationships. They weren't just looking for someone to go out with, they wanted to find a wife.

"How will I know if a woman will be a good wife and how do I go about finding her?" was a question I received time and time again.

Here was my advice.

Don't use all your effort on trying to find yourself a woman who will be a good wife. Instead, spend almost all your time molding yourself into a great husband. That's the hard part. Once you are a man who will make a great husband, finding (and keeping) a wife is much less difficult. The same advice goes for women looking for a husband.

It was amazing to me that men who wouldn't brush their teeth or comb their hair were frustrated that they couldn't get women to go out with them. Guys who had little ambition and absolutely no fashion sense couldn't understand why God hadn't "blessed" them with a wife. And the same goes for sour, abrupt women who complain that either they can't keep a man or the man they already have isn't worth keeping.

This is not to say that if you are single it is because you are unworthy. The point is, don't worry too much about finding or keeping someone. Take care of yourself. Learn to be patient and forgiving. Read books, take courses and do all things possible to make yourself the number one potential husband or wife in the world. That's the best way to find and keep a great wife or terrific husband. They will actually search you out.

#12

Fun for All or None at All?

Have you ever had a friend or coworker tell you that they couldn't go to a fun event because their partner had to work, would be out of town or had some sort of conflict and wouldn't be able to make it?

Athena and I are pretty much inseparable. We love to travel, shop, garden, eat, play and work together. But I would find it utterly selfish to make her feel guilty about missing some fun event or opportunity just because I couldn't go too.

Blissful relationships are NOT built on equal opportunity. Athena lets me sleep later in the morning when Ashton wakes her up. I don't make her feel guilty about spending half the day at the pool with friends when I have work to do. I take business trips alone where I am wined and dined and driven around in limousines. Athena sometimes goes to the park or museum without me. We'd be missing out on a whole lot if we decided that we could only have fun together.

Enjoy the perks that your circumstance gives you.

If your sweetheart is offered a meal at the city's finest restaurant, encourage them to take it even if you can't be there to share it. If your boss gives you a free day pass to a spa and resort, go and don't feel guilty that your partner couldn't join you.

Some couples are willing to do this as long as they "equal out" in the end. They rationalize that she can go on an all expense paid three-day ski trip with her company only because last year he went on a golf trip paid by his employer. In a truly loving and blissful relationship you aren't keeping score of these things. You naturally desire more good things for your mate than for yourself. If your partner gets ten times as many perks as you do, be happy for them. If you are the one getting all the cool stuff, be grateful and accept it.

If you wait to do all the fun things only with your sweetheart, both of you will eventually regret it.

#13 Is Your Freezer Full?

When Ashton had been incubating for about seven or eight months in my wife's belly, we bought an upright freezer. I thought it might be a good idea to make some dinners in advance since we had no idea how busy and tired we might be when our son arrived.

Athena and I purchased a pack of aluminum pans. I made twelve large pans of enchiladas and several other meals and put them in our freezer. It's one of the smartest things I have ever done. When Ashton was born and we wanted a "home-cooked" meal we took a pan out of the freezer and after 35 minutes in the oven, we had a tasty dish of enchiladas or some other pre-made meal ready to devour. Our birth/recovery period wasn't nearly as difficult as what most couples describe.

How much "reserves" do you have in your relationship? Are you stocked up and prepared for the more difficult times ahead?

While all marriages face stressful situations, blissful relationships don't really have the same lows as your average partnership. Do you know why? Couples in blissful relationships have their freezer stocked for emergencies. I'm not talking enchiladas here.

If you come upon a difficult period in your relationship and you don't have adequate "reserves" you can end up starving. Hungry couples are edgy, irritable and are prone to arguments. If you don't want your relationship to starve in the future, start beefing up your reserves.

Here are some great ways to stock up your relationship freezer.

- * Attend an organized marriage retreat every year or two
- * Schedule regular time away just for the two of you
- * Read books/magazines/eazines on marriage enrichment and discuss the concepts with your partner
- * Have a weekly date night
- * Find a way to grow spiritually together

Couples who have their reservoirs filled great memories, lots of shared positive experiences, wisdom gained from publications and friends, and constant interaction are able to weather almost any drought that their marriage might face.

So, how full is YOUR freezer?

#14
Love, Marriage and Sex

The other day a friend was sharing with Athena and me that when their first son was born they were so excited at the new adventure that they did some things they later regretted. One of those things was to begin feeding him solid foods when he was only two months old. Practically every authority recommends that you wait until a baby is at least five or six months until they begin eating foods. Their digestive systems aren't typically mature enough to handle solids and you greatly increase a child's chance of having allergies and other problems if you introduce food too soon.

Now here is some advice many of you probably don't want to hear about what you shouldn't do early on in your relationship and I'll probably get a lot of nasty mail because of it. But I don't write on tough issues to be popular. I write it to help people have blissful relationships.

If you want to have a blissful relationship, don't ruin the chances by introducing things into your relationship until you are ready for it.

I'm constantly bewildered when people can't figure out why they keep having failed relationships when they muddle them with physical intimacy. It's fairly common for couples to kiss on their first date, begin caressing soon afterwards and start a sexual relationship within a few weeks or months of knowing each other.

While I'm not going to tell you how long you should wait to begin kissing, hugging and making non-sexual contact, I'm going to boldly state that our bodies and minds are not designed for sexual relationships until marriage. The two go hand and hand and to try to separate them causes a lot of emotional turmoil in our relationships.

The average American has ten sexual partners before they are married. They either think each partner is "the one" or they think sex is so wonderful they don't want to miss out on the opportunity. Sex is indeed wonderful and very special and saving it for the wedding night is treating it as something special. Sharing it with practically everyone you date makes it rather ordinary.

Here are just a few of the emotional problems pre-marital sex can cause:

* When you sleep with someone you aren't married to, they begin to get concerned with how many other people you have slept with.

* If you are willing to have sex with someone you aren't married to, will you feel the same after you are married?

* One has a tendency to compare themselves with their mate's previous conquests. Since sexual relationships were designed for married couples, your mind naturally begins pushing the relationship further along than where you might be.

* You might not even know the person you are sleeping with but you start forming an emotional attachment to them. Many couples who really shouldn't be together are married because a pre-marital sexual relationship "bonded" them together when they wouldn't have bonded without being physically intimate.

I've talked with quite a few people who waited to begin a sexual relationship until they were married and none of them have regretted it. I've chatted with numerous people who began a sexual relationship before the wedding and practically all of them had regrets.

While waiting to have sex until you are married won't guarantee a blissful relationship, it will certainly cause your mate to honor and respect you much more than if you didn't.

Love, marriage and sex -- let's keep them in that order.

#15
The Gift of Freedom

I attended a small, private college back in the late 80s. One of the years a policy of prohibition was introduced. No alcohol was going to be allowed on campus. The reason behind the decision was that a number of students were having problems with alcohol. They couldn't resist the temptation to drink it in excessive amounts.

The policy was not meant to punish students from enjoying a beer or a glass of wine here and there. It was meant to be a measure of love to those students who had little self-control around liquor. Many students, however, simply saw it as one of their "freedoms" being taken away. They cared little that expressing their "freedom" was actually a "curse" to others.

In a truly loving and blissful relationship, we are willing to sacrifice some of our own freedoms for the benefit of our spouse.

Here are a few freedoms you might need to freely give up.

- * Eating tempting desserts or foods in front of someone who is trying to lose weight
- * Smoking near someone who is trying to kick the habit
- * Drinking alcohol in the presence of someone who shouldn't imbibe.
- * Inviting over friends or relatives who give your mate a lot of stress
- * Subscribing to cable if your sweetheart is likely to become a couch potato
- * Enjoying prolonged hugging, kissing and other physical affection if it will cause sexual frustration with your boyfriend/girlfriend
- * Engaging topics of conversation that make your spouse irate
- * Spending lots of time with members of the opposite sex if your partner is prone to severe jealousy

In a blissful relationship, you love your mate more than you love yourself. So giving up freedoms doesn't really seem like sacrifices -- they feel more like gifts.

#16 Your Favorite Customer

When I first ventured into the working world I landed a job that required a great deal of customer service.

There were some valuable lessons I learned on the job that I now use at home.

Those who work in customer service are taught that when a customer has a complaint, that we should first listen to them. We are often tempted to try to solve their "problem" before we even hear them finish telling us why they are upset. If we listen to their whole story, sometimes that in itself satisfies them. They just needed to let off a little steam.

The second step in good customer service is to acknowledge the problem and to be genuinely sorry that everything did not go as they expected. A simple, yet sincere apology satisfies many situations.

Only after we have fully heard the complaint and have acknowledged their suffering can we truly offer them some sort of compensation. In many cases if you ask a customer how they would like the situation remedied, they will offer a solution that is both very fair and will have them very satisfied.

The next time your mate comes to you with a complaint, don't butt in, but fully listen to them. Understand and express sympathy for their hurt feelings. Ask them what you can do for them to make them feel better. If you want your beloved to keep coming back, treat them like they are your number one customer.

#17
Just Say No to Fighting

When I went to Junior High School I said 'no' to drugs. When I went to the marriage alter I said 'no' to fighting.

Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign was a huge success. Kids made a verbal commitment and a mental stance to avoid drugs before they were even of the age to be tempted. When they were introduced to drugs, they knew they could "just say no" and not feel alone.

Drug use among school age children plummeted in the 1980s and many have held up Nancy Reagan's program as the chief reason. People who decide how they are going to cross a bridge before they ever get to it have a much greater chance of not falling in the water.

Why can't we start a "Just Say No to Fighting" campaign? I'll admit, we are against tough odds. It is perfectly acceptable (and often expected) in our modern culture for a husband and wife to fight. Many marriage and relationship counselors even encourage it in the name of "communication."

Yes, it is true. My wife and I have never had a fight. Not in our 125 months of marriage. I don't intend on starting. I made a decision when I was dating Athena that I would never fight with her. I saw firsthand how the curse of fighting destroyed my parents' and dozens of other marriages.

Certainly there are times when emotions get wrinkled, and the natural inclination is to blow your top. I sometimes have to bite my tongue so I don't say something I would later regret (since when is self-control a bad thing?). Having a naturally calm personality has admittedly made it easier for me to think before I speak than it is for some people. But that shouldn't stop anyone from trying.

Unlike many other relationship "experts", I don't see fights or heated arguments as healthy. I just can't imagine how hurting my spouse with verbal and emotional barbs (yes - they do cause serious pain) could ever be encouraged under the guise of "opening up and sharing your feelings." Baloney! I don't need to raise my voice or throw dishes to say I disagree or to explain what I am feeling. Neither does anyone else.

We don't fall for the drug pusher's lies that "everyone's doing it" or "just a little bit won't hurt" and we shouldn't be so gullible to accept the wives tales that everyone fights and that it is a healthy part of relationships.

Fighting is not harmless. It is addictive and if continued, it is likely to cause irreparable damage. It's time to get clean. Go and fight no more.

#18 Is Fighting Fair?

If your child came to you and asked if she could have a fight with her friend down the street would you tell her “sure, just make sure it is a fair fight”? If Iraq and Iran are fighting, do you think it is good as long as they are “fighting fair”?

Most people would say that they should try to talk over their differences and peacefully negotiate instead. So why do so many people say it is ok for couples to fight as long as they have a fair fight? That certainly sends the wrong message even though they might be using the word “fight” in a different way. We should be encouraging couples to negotiate instead of fight.

So, here are some points for negotiating a problem in your relationship.

Wait until your temper is in control. If necessary, exercise, take a walk, work in the garden or do something that will help relieve the tension.

Schedule a time and a place for the “peace talks” to take place. Make sure you have enough uninterrupted time to work through the issue. Pick a location that is peaceful and without distractions. Some people like to go to a restaurant or public place so they will be forced to not yell.

Discuss the issue at hand. Don't wait until you have five or ten things that are upsetting you before you schedule a talk.

The purposes of negotiations aren't to have your mate believe just as you do, but for them to understand your beliefs and feelings. People are different and that can be a good thing.

Use “I” sentences to explain how you feel. For example “I feel hurt and neglected when you spend all Sunday with your golf buddies” instead of saying “you are a bad husband for always playing golf and ignoring me.”

Unlike fighting, in negotiations, no side has to come out “the winner.” Both of you will win with deeper understanding and compassion for each other.

Sometimes it is wise to compromise but other times it can cause resentment. Don't ask your sweetheart to give up golf just because he isn't spending enough time with you. Cut back, yes. Give up, no.

If you find it helpful, write out your peace treaty and sign it.

#19 Why Date Nights?

Tonight Athena and I will be having one of our date nights. We've been dating for over eleven years, ten of those as husband and wife. There is something about "dating" that creates a sense of magic in a relationship. Most people know they should have date nights but don't really think about all the great reasons why they should.

Here are some positive influences a date can have on your relationship whether you are still courting or have been wed for 50 years.

- * You tend to take some extra effort on your appearance, making sure you are crisp and clean for your mate and the public you are going to face. Looking good tends to make you feel good.
- * When you make time for a date, you generally become more relaxed. Too much tension can cause havoc in relationships.
- * Gets you out of a rut. Relationships that rarely try anything new are bound to get stale. A variety of date nights keep things fresh and interesting. Boredom is a common cause for many divorces.
- * Good conversations are difficult to have in five-minute increments. Dates allow you to have an hour or more of uninterrupted time to communicate on a deeper level. Don't make the mistake, however, of trying to resolve conflicts on dates. Date nights shouldn't turn into a weekly gripe session.
- * Experiences you share as a couple naturally draw you closer together. The more things you do together, the more compatible you become.

#20 Great Dates

In the previous essay I touched on the importance of date night (or days). Without special time together, relationships can pull apart or simply become stale. But you simply can't replace doing nothing with doing the exact same thing week after week. The - oh so predictable - dinner and a movie can be all right if mixed up with some other types of dates.

Here are a few suggestions:

- * **Bookstore date:** Go to a bookstore and read poetry and humor books aloud to each other. Try to find your favorite childhood book to share with your sweetheart. Visit the bookstore cafe (or one nearby) for a coffee and a treat.
- * **Library date:** You can do the above and also search the computer system for authors that share your name. (There is a Michael Webb who writes a lot on architecture). On the microfiche find a newspaper from the day each of you were born. Go to the travel section and talk about some places you would like to see someday.
- * **Service date:** Go around your neighborhood and collect food for a food bank, clothes for a shelter or do some other charitable activity together.
- * **Museum date:** Many art museums have wonderful restaurants and cafes. Stroll around the museum and in each room try to guess the piece that your sweetheart would love the most and hate the most. Stay for dinner or dessert.
- * **Zoo date:** Zoos are not just for kids!! I don't know of any person who doesn't enjoy visiting the zoo every once in a while. The same goes for aquariums and wildlife sanctuaries.
- * **Planetarium date:** Most metropolises have planetarium shows. You get to hold hands and perhaps steal a kiss when the lights go down. Some planetariums also offer laser shows set to music on the weekend.
- * **Park date:** A walk in the park. Sitting on the bench. Feeding the ducks or pigeons. Maybe take along a blanket and a picnic. Everyone knows about this date but few actually do it.
- * **Mystery shopping date:** Athena and I regularly go to nice restaurants for FREE. We are paid by companies to evaluate our experience at restaurants and can be reimbursed up to \$125 for a meal. Check out greenandassociates.com and

www.bestmark.com to see if they need people in your area.

I could list dozens more but I'm sure you get the idea. There are many more date night ideas in my books *The RoMANTic's Guide* and my soon to be released book, *300 Creative Dates*.

#21

The Secret of My Success

I constantly get calls, letters and emails from people who wonder how I could possibly do all the romantic things I write about on my website, in my books and in my RoMANtic Tip of the Week ezine.

Many want to know how they can be more romantic or get their significant other to be more caring and affectionate.

Do you want to know my secret?

My secret is Athena. If any of you ever met her, you would realize that it would be difficult to NOT be loving and romantic around her.

There are quite a few traits that make me want to treat Athena like the treasure she is. In this essay, I'll discuss one of the reasons she is so easy to love and pamper. Later on I'll share more.

Not a Nagger

The other day Athena saw my bath towel on the middle of our bedroom floor. She said "you might want to hang up your towel or it won't dry out in time for your shower tomorrow." When my clothes pile up outside of the hamper, she sweetly says "it would really help me out a lot if you put your dirty clothes in the hamper." She was exhausted one morning and when Ashton (then five months old) began to stir. She turned over to me and asked if I wanted to "get up and have a little morning playtime with Ashton". That was a much nicer way of asking me to help her out than saying "Why am I the one who always gets up early to take care of YOUR son. I think it is YOUR turn for a change."

Athena always thinks of nice ways to ask me to help out or to stop doing something irritating. It is far more effective than if she nagged about it.

In most relationships a polite and sincere request gets much greater results than if you yell, nag or complain. While some men and women do respond to incessant nagging, they do so to get you to shut up and are resentful for the way you behaved.

I can't take credit for being a super romantic. Athena's kindness, gentleness and thoughtfulness made me this way.

#22

The Home Field Advantage

Many of us watch the Olympics. During the summer games of 2000 in Sydney, one of the big upsets was Australia's men's relay swim team win over the heavily favored USA team. Time and time again we see how the home team has an advantage. It is not because they are familiar with the field or pool, but it is because of the tremendous support their fans give them.

Athena is my cheerleader. She is always telling me how wonderful I am. She compliments my cooking. She tells me I am so smart. She tells me I'm the cutest guy in the whole world... the best dad... a wonderful provider... a great role model.... and more. I don't think a day goes by when she doesn't praise me in some way. When I am feeling loved, it is much easier to love in return.

Are you a super supporter of what your mate does and says? Do you cheer them on and praise them constantly? Or do they constantly hear boos or silence?

If you want to be loved and romanced by your sweetheart, give them a home field advantage by being their biggest cheerleader.

#23

Don't Get Mad -- Get Rewarded!

If Athena has a fault, I would have to say it is that she doesn't have a built-in clock. She sometimes loses track of time.

I, on the other hand, tend to be very aware of the time and am quite punctual. This trait of hers would be frustrating some times. So we came up with a solution. Whenever Athena is significantly late, I get a present. She rewards me for my patience with a wrapped candy, a silly sticker, homemade cookies, a shoulder massage or some other treat. Now, I don't get too antsy when she is running late, I look forward to my prize instead.

What sort of things does your spouse do that irritates you? Do they (or you) curse, smack your chewing gum, leave wet towels on the bed or leave up the toilet seat?

Instead of getting mad, get rewarded!! The offending party might have to put a quarter or a dollar into the "date night" jar for every offense. The punishment might be relinquishing the remote control for a night or doing one of your chores like loading the dishwasher or taking out the trash. Just come up with a penalty that makes the situation fun for the both of you.

#24

Male Bashing or Men Bragging?

How many faults do I have? Too many!

When Athena and her friends get together and the conversation turns to complaining about things their husbands do or male bashing in general, Athena refuses to participate. It's not that she doesn't have things to contribute, but because she respects me and values our relationship far too much than to air my faults and foibles in front of friends.

Few things are more devastating to a man than to have his wife criticize him in front of friends. We might pretend that we are tough and can handle the intrusion into our privacy, but sharing our defects in front of family and friends really does hurt.

When the "gripe session" gets going, Athena makes it a point to start sharing with her friends some of my good qualities. Usually, it steers the conversation into a positive direction and it helps her friends to also praise their husbands -- which in turn helps them to respect and appreciate them more.

Knowing that Athena refuses to belittle me in front of friends makes me love and respect her even more.

#25
Female Bashing Happens Too

The other day a service man came to our house to do some work. We chatted for a little bit and he made this comment "Yeah, we men have to work hard so our wives can go spend it all."

I regularly hear such stereotypical remarks and don't leave them unchallenged. I told the guy that my wife was great with money and that in a lot of the relationships I know it is the guy who has the spending problem. Motorcycles, powerboats, big screen TVs, bigger houses, huge gas grills and other luxury items are usually purchased by men that help cause money problems.

Here are some other "female-bashing" comments I hear from time to time.

Women drivers!

Women will just nag you to death

All women marry for money first and love second

Women are so illogical

These sorts of remarks are just plain wrong and are abusive. I've seen relationships where women were constantly "put in their place" by such statements. Either the woman gets furiously mad or she believes it and develops a poor self-image of herself.

If you want to be married to a woman who resents you or resents herself, continue with such female bashing statements. If you want to have a blissful relationship, not only will you refuse to make such damaging comments, you'll praise your wife whenever you hear other men make anti-female remarks.

#26

Work Less, Love More

You might be familiar with either my book, *The RoMANTic's Guide* or my ezine, *The RoMANTic Tip of the Week*. Time and time again people tell me my ideas are wonderful but they can't be as romantic as I am because they don't have enough hours in the day.

I have the same amount of time given to me each day as everyone else. It's how I prioritize the time that might be different. Besides my relationship with my Creator, my time spent with Athena is most important to me. More important than my job. More important than the money I make. More important than exercise. More important than my friends or other family. And yes, even more important than Ashton, my darling little son.

Athena and I made the decision a long time ago that we were not going to be keeping up with the proverbial Joneses. We were not going to work more than we had to so we could have the latest fashions, the big electronic toys and impressive cars. Instead, we were going to work less, learn how to spend less and have more time with each other, with our friends and for charitable work. Basically, enjoy life to the fullest.

When I worked in the corporate world I would choose an extra week of unpaid vacation over a new 32 inch television or stereo (we still have the same 20 inch television, stereo and car we purchased over 10 years ago). I don't want Athena to go out and get a job just so we can live in a bigger house or have better furniture only then to have little time to really enjoy either.

I am not against nice items for those who can afford them and don't have to work insane hours to attain them. But I am slightly perplexed at those who work too many hours or have a long daily commute just so they can have "things" not realizing they are losing something that is even more valuable and precious.

#27
To Have and To Hold

Our 7 month old, Ashton, will sometimes start crying for no apparent reason. We check his diaper. Fine. Try to nurse or feed him. Nope. See if his gums hurt. They're fine. Take off or put on clothes. Doesn't matter. Pick him up and hold him. That's the answer.

Over the past 50 years numerous studies have been made regarding babies and human touch. Babies that are held less often tend to be weaker and sicker. Those that receive a lot of cuddling thrive in comparison. With premature babies, physical touch can often make the difference between life and death. Researchers have come to the conclusion is not just a want of a baby, it is a basic need right up there with food.

Over the years, Athena and I have visited a nearby retirement home. We visit with the elderly and listen to their stories. We let them tell us about all the people in their photographs that line their room. What lights their face up more than anything else is when I give them a hug and hold their hand during our visit. They crave physical contact.

I don't think the need for touch disappears when we are no longer infants and suddenly reappears when we are aged. Too often, we suppress that need, thinking it makes us weak or less independent. Some people say "I don't really like to be touched or held." I don't think they were born that way. I believe every human needs lots of hugs and holding of hands.

One of the most common threads of all the blissful relationships I have witnessed is the physical closeness of the couple. Two people who realize the basic need to be held - often. I wasn't a hugging sort of person when I married. But everything that I read and all that I witnessed indicated that I needed to do that if I wanted a blissful relationship. So from day one of our marriage, I gave the formulaic hugs and kisses, not because my heart felt like it, but because my head knew it was right. With months of frequent hugs and cuddles with Athena I began to appreciate the warmth and closeness. Now it is hard to pull us apart.

Hugs, holding hands and lots of cuddles. It's not just for babies and grandparents. And for some relationships it can mean the difference between life and death.

#28
Decision Time

November can be stressful for many couples. It is decision time. I'm not talking about politics. The big decision is whose family to share Thanksgiving with and where do we go for Christmas/Hanukkah?

Couples can feel like silly putty, being stretched in all different directions by well-meaning relatives.

My mom and her husband had planned on a Thanksgiving cruise this year. They told family six months ago. But now, one month before Thanksgiving, my step-dad's nephew has decided to have the WHOLE family over to his house. They are canceling their cruise plans because my step-dad's sister will be "mad" if they don't show up.

Many couples fight and argue over holiday schedules. No one wants their family "mad" at them. To solve the problem with holidays and relatives some couples set up routines. Her family for Thanksgiving. His for Christmas. Easter at her Grandmas. Mother's Day at mine.

Others switch off holidays. Christmas 2000 with his family, 2001 with hers, 2002 on our own.

Let me tell you what works for Athena and me.

We don't have a schedule. We don't play any sort of "fairness" game. We don't care where we celebrated the last holiday. Each holiday is our OWN decision. We might choose to share the holidays with friends instead of family. We pick where we go or who we invite to our house because we want to share the day with them, not because we feel obligated.

I don't care how much crying, pleading and threats of shame I get from either side of the family. When Athena and I got married, we started a new family and we are not going to let it be pulled apart by relatives.

You know, it didn't take long for our parents and grandparents to realize that we would not be manipulated and controlled. Blissful relationships aren't easily bullied. They respect our strong marriage and the decisions we make for our holiday plans. They may not like our choices, but they do respect them.

No couple should forego wonderful holiday plans just because some relative will be "mad" if you don't spend it with them. Don't get me wrong. Spending time with

extended family is important. It is just not an obligation. Where will you go for the holidays? The decision really is YOURS.

In Sickness and in Mental Health

Mental illness is a scary word. In one form or another it is estimated to strike one in five people. A few of years ago it struck me in the form of depression. For nearly nine months I battled the “dark cloud” -- spending most of the day in bed, crying for no real reason and feeling terribly sad most of the time.

Depression can have a devastating effect on a relationship. It can also draw a couple closer together. Here are some tips on surviving depression in your marriage and using it to build a blissful relationship.

IF YOU HAVE DEPRESSION

- * Realize depression is an illness - like a cold, flu or cancer. Having depression does not mean you have a messed up life. Some of the most “together” people can get seriously depressed.
- * Nearly everyone either has had depression or knows someone who does. If you suffer from depression you are not any more of a “loser” than if you have the flu.
- * Depression is rarely an indication of marital happiness. Just because you or your mate is depressed does not mean your marriage is falling apart. I constantly reassured Athena that I was so happy with her and my depression had nothing to do with how I felt about her.
- * Depression can be a serious illness. See a physician and consider taking medication to restore the chemical balance to your body. After months of stubbornly battling depression alone, I finally went to the doctor and within a week I was on the road to recovery.
- * Sometimes a chemical imbalance can be “triggered” by certain factors. Those can be death of a loved one, spouse abuse, having an affair, drug use, loss of a job or other tragic events. Consider the cause of your depression as you plan your recovery.
- * Pray. God can make wonderful things happen from the trials in our lives. My bout with prayer has allowed me to help many friends who have since battled with it.

IF YOUR SPOUSE HAS DEPRESSION

- * Never let your love waiver or fail. Athena let me know she was there for me and would do anything I needed. She made it clear that she loved me even with an illness.
- * Take your mate out and expose him or her to as much sunshine as possible. Take a vacation to a sunny spot if necessary. Sunshine has tremendous therapeutic qualities.
- * Don't play somber music or watch negative television. That can cause someone with depression to feel even sadder. Athena would often change the radio station at friend's homes to more upbeat music for me.
- * Try to avoid friends or family who are complainers. Don't invite over a couple who will fill the evening with negative conversation. If you find yourself in the midst of a conversation that is a downer, be the one to change the subject.
- * Pray for your mate. Never underestimate what God can do.

#30

Is Your Marriage Going Broke?

Have you noticed that newspapers report that personal debt is at an all-time high and so are divorces? Do you think there might be a connection?

In marital surveys, money and sex always come up as the top two reasons for major discord between a husband and wife.

One of the biggest problems facing couples today is the huge amount of debt they bring into their marriage. Not only are there more divorces, couples are calling it quits much earlier in their marriage than ever before.

One sure-fire way to insure a rocky start for a marriage is to have tens of thousands of dollars in debt (from student loans, credit cards or other bills). Even a thousand dollars in debt can cast a dark cloud over your relationship if you don't have the means to quickly repay it.

Consider the rate of suicide during the great depression. The stresses of mounting debt have pushed people to take their own lives and have been a major cause in the death of many, many marriages.

If you want to have a blissful relationship, you will need to get your debt under control (or at least a plan to do so). Otherwise, your debt will physically and psychologically control you.

Here are some tips for getting and staying out of debt.

When you get a paycheck, the first thing you do is set aside money for charity/church. Doesn't seem logical but it works.

Sit down with your partner and discuss all aspects of your family budget. Only when you analyze your spending habits will you fully realize where you are wasting money. It is a great opportunity to talk about your goals and dreams.

Realize that frivolously spending money can be a sign of disrespect for your marriage and mate.

If you would like a bigger diamond ring or a fancier car, ask yourself why.

Take a quick inventory of all the items you own but could really live without. Consider how much you paid for them. What if you didn't buy those items and had all that money in savings instead? Would it make a difference in how you

view your job, your family and your future?

#31
Happy Holidays?

This week a man wrote to me about an article I had written. He was put out that I mentioned Christmas in it. He doesn't celebrate Christmas and thinks there should be no public mention of it.

I used to feel the same way. I was raised in a home that did not celebrate Christmas, Easter, Halloween and several other holidays. Not only did we not celebrate them, we were taught to be condemning of the holidays. We poked fun at the holidays that we didn't keep. We refused to have any part of the celebration for fear of being tainted by it. We insulted friends and relatives who found much joy and love in the holidays they kept. In short we were narrow-minded and unloving. The holidays weren't divisive, we were.

I'm a lot more tolerant and open-minded about other cultures and holidays now. And hopefully I have more blissful relationships because of it. Here are some ways to use holidays to bring you closer to family instead of dividing you.

- * Take the time to read up on holidays that you do not celebrate but other family members do. Find out why the holiday was founded and what are some of the customs.

- * Ask family members why the holiday is special to them. What did they look forward to as a child and what do they like most about it now as an adult.

- * Try to discover a couple of wonderful attributes about a holiday you don't celebrate (like the food and decorations) and focus on those instead of all the things that bother you.

- * If you are invited to a holiday celebration, attend if at all possible. You don't have to "celebrate" it with them if it is against your conscious, but your presence shows that you care enough to try to understand more about their holiday that is so special to them.

- * Realize that boycotting another's holiday is a way of saying "You are inferior to me because my holidays are better than yours are" or "My God doesn't approve of your holidays."

- * If you invite someone to partake in your holiday and they refuse because of their ingrained belief, try not to be offended. Instead, ask to participate in a holiday that they celebrate to show your desire to understand and appreciate their culture.

* Don't make the illogical mistake of condemning a holiday based on its origins. Those who reject holidays based on "pagan" roots might as well throw away their wedding rings, stop eating cake and never wear red again.

* By all means, be extremely cautious of marrying someone who would refuse to participate in holidays you find dear. They will view you as inferior and misguided -- trust me, I know.

#32 Criticism Sandwich

I attended a college that required everyone to belong to a speaking club similar in format to Toastmasters. Many of us groaned at the requirement but after graduating and realizing the edge it gave us, we now appreciate the experience. I especially benefited with all the television and personal appearances I do each year.

Speeches were naturally a central part of the club meeting. At the conclusions of the speaking portion would come the "evaluations." The purpose of the evaluation was not to point out all the negative parts of the speech. It was to showcase the strengths and mention a weakness so that the speaker could continue to polish his or her public speaking ability.

We used the sandwich method. We started off the evaluation with praise. We mentioned one or more points that we admired. It could have been their delivery, insight, appearance or ability to make a complex subject understandable. Then we would follow with a flaw. Perhaps the speaker padded his sentence with umm, you know, or the word "like." Maybe he or she talked too fast or waaay toooooo sloooooowly. Not only did we highlight something that needed to be worked on we tried to provide tools to help him do so. Then we concluded with more praises for the positive things that they shared that night.

When someone only hears a critical remark, it can be a crushing blow to him or her. Blanketed between two fluffy slices of praise, criticism is much easier to stomach. This is a helpful model to use when you want to want to point out to your mate something that is bothering you. Give them a little praise. Then mention the problem and perhaps suggest a solution. The end the conversation with more loving words.

Here's an example:

Honey, you are so sweet for helping with the dishes tonight. Most husbands aren't that loving. I'd kiss you all night but your breath has been a little bit stale lately. I bought you a tongue brush to try out. Cindy said it really helped her. I never imagined you would be so sexy and cute when you got older. I'm so glad you are mine.

It is not easy criticizing your mate. Most of us don't do it to put him or her down, but to help them become an even more beautiful person, inside and out.

The next time you feel the real need to bring out a flaw in your sweetheart, you

might want to do it with a criticism sandwich.

#33

Wanted: Mental Editors

Do you practice mental editing? What is that you ask?

The most common problem we humans get ourselves into is speaking before we think. Our words have separated best friends, divorced once-close couples and have even brought countries to war against each other.

I like to practice what I term “mental editing.” If I have the chance, I try to speak to myself in my head and see how it sounds before I verbalize it to others. Sometimes I simply rearrange words in my head so the thought will be clearer. There are many times I completely erase those sentences before they have the chance to come out of my mouth. After going over it in my head I realized what I was about to say was irrelevant or was going to be something that I would later regret.

Nowadays, we often write our letters on word processor. We have the opportunity to go back and edit what we have written. We change things because when we reread it, it is obvious that perhaps it might be taken the wrong way or may be slightly hurtful or even come across as being arrogant.

If you have the chance, formulate your thoughts in your mental word processor and edit them before you begin to speak -- especially on delicate topics.

#34

What are Friends For?

Before taping an episode of the Mars/Venus talk show a few weeks back I had the opportunity to talk in depth with some of the couples who were on the show because of marital dissatisfaction. Something came up in the conversation that got me thinking.

The couples told me that they didn't have any close friends. For some it was by choice (they said they liked being alone), to others it was because it just didn't happen. When I started thinking about all the blissful relationships I know, every one of them has a broad network of close and intimate friendships.

Here are just a handful of the ways that having a few close friendships can enrich your marriage.

- * **KEEPS YOU INTERESTING.** Friends might invite you to a wine tasting dinner, teach you how to play bridge, suggest a Sunday drive together to a nearby historical site or many other things that you would not have done on your own as a couple. Good friends can bring zest and excitement to a marriage.
- * **HELPS YOU TO OPEN UP.** Some men and women unhealthily bottle up many of their thoughts and feelings. You might have an easier time talking about a certain issue with a friend first before discussing it with your spouse. A friend might also be able to help you improve your marital communication skills.
- * **GIVES MARRIAGE SUPPORT.** If a marriage gets rocky, a good friend can comfort you and help you weather the storm instead of jumping ship. They can point you to the light when all you can see are the dark clouds surrounding you.
- * **GIVES WARNING SIGNALS.** Solid friendships are invaluable in keeping marriages out of trouble waters in the first place. An honest and caring friend will warn you that your marriage is heading for disaster and urge you to make changes before the problems even happen.
- * **IMPROVES YOUR FRIENDSHIP SKILLS.** The most important aspect of a marriage is not sex or romance, but friendship. Having friends outside our marriage can often sharpen the friendship skills within our marriage. However, having other friends should never be a substitute for being your mate's best friend.
- * **PROVIDE ROLE MODELS.** With close friendships (with other couples) you have an opportunity to examine other marriages up close. You can discover

some secrets of their marital happiness and hopefully some parts of your relationship will be an inspiration to them too.

When a Friend is not a Friend

Friends. We all love to have them. Some of our friendships began when we were in grade school. Others are as new as last week. Friends add vibrancy to the fabric that we call life.

It is wonderful to maintain friendships but it is also wise to let some fade away. Some friends are unhealthy influences from the start. Others can become that way as one or both of you change your values for living.

While good friends can bring much joy and aid to your marriage, bad friends can possibly destroy it. How do you know if your friendships are unhealthy? Here are some clues.

A friendship needs to end if that friend doesn't get along with your best friend (your spouse).

You know you have an unhealthy friendship if they entice you to do things you feel you shouldn't be doing. That could be going to bars, smoking, swearing, being unethical at work or spending too much money on unnecessary items.

A bad friend constantly puts down other people and their negativity gets you to be super critical too.

A bad friend encourages you to seek revenge or "make your spouse pay" if they hurt you in some way. They tell you to only care about yourself.

A friendship is unhealthy if a friend doesn't respect your spiritual values and beliefs.

A friend is no friend if they don't give back to the relationship. If you want to improve your marriage, you probably should fade away from friends who are financially, physically and mentally draining.

#36

Advice on Advice

A few years ago I had a friend whom was having problems in his marriage. He confided in a friend and received some advice. Some very bad advice. Advice that would have probably launched his marriage over a proverbial cliff had he followed it. Fortunately, my friend decided to ask some others and me what we thought of the situation and the advice he had been given. He ignored the first piece of advice and is still married because of it.

Because of my career in writing and speaking about relationships, a lot of people seek me out for advice. Here is my advice on asking for advice.

* In a multitude of counselors, there is wisdom. I love this biblical teaching. Don't just accept a friend's advice. Don't take your psychiatrists advice. Don't believe a word I say. Be cautious about what your Pastor might tell you. Don't act on anyone's advice UNTIL you have heard from a few friends, counselors or experts on the subject. Always get a second and possibly third opinion on serious issues.

* If you are seeking marriage advice, talk to someone who has a blissful relationship. I probably wouldn't ask a three time divorced friend for marriage advice just like I wouldn't ask a homeless person for business tips.

* Don't assume that just because someone has a Doctorate that you will get good advice. Educated men and women disagree with each other all the time. Much of their advice is certain to be helpful but keep your mind open for advice that just doesn't "seem right."

* Don't go searching for the answer you want. If everyone tells you that you are a chauvinist pig, then don't keep looking for someone who will say otherwise. Accept their advice and make a change.

* Ask at the right time. If you want to get advice from some friends, make sure you have enough time to fully discuss the issue. One can't give good advice unless they know most or all of the story.

#37
No!

No is a popular word these days in our house with a toddler in the house. We have little problem telling Ashton NO to things that are potentially harmful. That's what loving parents do.

However, many of us are unable to utter that two-letter word to our spouse. We don't want to upset the apple cart. We don't want to go to that concert Tuesday night but if we say no, that will hurt _____'s feelings. We rationalize that if we are always saying yes to our spouse's ideas and desires, then our relationship will be peaceful.

In loving relationships there should be plenty of no's. Being able to say no means you have the courage in what you believe and you have the faith that your honest communication will make your relationship stronger in the long run.

If you don't say NO when you really wanted to, resentment often follows. Here are just a few situations where saying NO helps to build a blissful relationship.

+ No, I don't want to spend my entire vacation with your brother and sister-in-law. I rather spend most of it with only you and the kids.

+ No, I'm not interested in seeing that movie. I had bad dreams for weeks the last time I saw one like that.

+ No, I don't want a new car/cruise/TV/diamond ring. I appreciate the gesture but we are already paying too much in interest on all our debts. How about we spend some of that money paying off some bills instead. That would make me much happier.

+ No, I won't have us in a long distance marriage. We desperately need more time together, not less.

Now notice that a NO response should often be followed up with a reason why you are saying no. Otherwise, you can come across as just being difficult. Learn to say NO. It will keep your relationship out of harm's way.

#38
Giraffe Pancakes

On Saturday Athena asked me if I would like to have pancakes or scones for breakfast. I chose pancakes.

As I read the morning's paper, Athena and Ashton were busy in the kitchen, making a special meal for me. Athena whipped up the batter and Ashton helped her by emptying out the cabinets.

When it was time to sit down for the meal I got a wonderful surprise. Athena made a giraffe pancake for me. She recently learned from my mom that I always asked for my pancakes to be shaped like a giraffe when I was a young boy. My mom isn't that artist so she said she always offered to make a really good sun or moon instead.

I was so delighted at Athena's effort to make a special pancake just for me. Honestly, it looked like more like a horse than a giraffe but I couldn't have been happier.

Blissful relationships don't revolve around grand romantic gestures. Fancy jewelry, exotic fur coats, limousine rides and roses delivered to the office are nice tokens, but anyone with money can try to BUY love. And certainly far too many people purchase these items in order to impress others or as a payoff for being such an insensitive jerk the rest of the time. I'm not trying to put down nice presents, but if they are the sole means of expressing your love then you are missing out on something really special.

When Athena and I were first married I bought her all sorts of things -- jewelry, clothes, cards and trinkets. I thought that the more gifts I gave her and the more money I spent would show her how much I loved her. While she truly appreciated the gifts, I realized later on that what came out of my bank account didn't matter nearly as much as what came out of my heart.

Now I try to express my love to Athena more by my actions than by my purchases. More by my words than by my wallet.

As the saying goes, the little things are what keeps a marriage strong and makes it blissful. Good-bye kisses and welcome home hugs. Calls in the middle of the day. Holding hands during the movie. Dinner at home over candlelight. Walks on the beach. Sharing your dreams. Notes on the bathroom mirror. Baking cookies together and of course... giraffe pancakes.

#39
Conditional Love

I recently received a marriage proposal story for a contest I am running on my website (www.TheRomantic.com). David wrote that he gave a **CONDITIONAL** proposal to his girlfriend. He thought she needed to improve her self esteem so he told her he would marry her if she joined the Army Reserves and successfully completed boot camp.

Conditional love. I'm not sure that there is such a thing in marriage. Pure love is unselfish and giving. Love is not a reward. It is not a bargaining chip.

If we really love someone, then loving actions should naturally take place. In blissful relationships we should **NOT** say:

@ Yes honey, I'll go to that movie you really want to see **IF** you go to the tractor pull with me.

@ I'll make love to you **WHEN** you stop saying negative things about my body.

@ I'll get you something special for your birthday **IF** you buy me what I want for our anniversary.

@ I'll start talking to you again **AFTER** you apologize for what you did.

@ I am no longer cooking for you **UNTIL** you learn to pick your clothes up off the floor.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to do loving things for our spouse if they are being jerks or inconsiderate witches. But, didn't we agree to love, honor and respect each other during difficult times as well as good times?

If we wait until our spouse is being the perfect lady or gentleman before we shower them with love and affection, then I doubt much loving will be going on.

Many people hold back love in order to show their "power" in a relationship. But, the opposite is true. Those who can unconditionally love in the midst of unhappy conditions are the ones who have the most strength.

If you withhold love from your mate, they are likely to resent you and try to continue the downward spiral of unloving actions in the relationship. But, if you love someone when they don't "deserve" it, you'll probably gain a lot of respect from them and in return, they are more likely to love you even more.

A reporter once asked what I thought was the secret of my blissful marriage. There are many attributes but I answered "we are always trying to out-love and out-give each other."

Conditional love. Can it possibly exist?

#40

Thank the In-Laws

(I'm using "wife" in this column for illustration only. The same would apply to husbands.)

Do you like the way your wife is kind to strangers or is especially good with children? Does she have good posture and impeccable manners? Is she frugal with the family income and creates great meals? Are there any other attributes you especially appreciate in your wife? Whether you like it or not, your in-laws may have something to do with it.

Have you ever thanked your mother and father-in-law for some of the great qualities they instilled in your wife? Punctuality, politeness, strong work ethic, honesty, neatness and humility are just a few of the virtues her parents may have taught her. And it is time you thanked them for their part (no matter how small) in molding your wife into the person you love.

This exercise is particularly helpful if you don't have a close relationship with your in-laws. It may help smooth over any friction that has occurred between you and them. All people (including in-laws) have at least one good quality. For you to let them know that you notice and appreciate that quality will go a long way in continuing a blissful marriage with their daughter.

A good time to share this with them would be your wife's birthday or on your anniversary. Your wife's parents were instrumental in rearing and teaching their daughter since the day she was born and each year on your anniversary you remember all the wonderful qualities that made you want to marry her.

#41
More Than a Numbers Game

Do you realize that some people spend more effort picking out a car than they do choosing a mate?

I've known people to spend countless hours researching all different makes and models of cars. They compare the fuel efficiency, crash test studies and customer satisfaction surveys. They might test drive up to twenty different cars to see how comfortable they feel and how they handle on different surfaces. They don't want a car that will "make do." They want one that they will love and cherish for five or ten years.

On the other hand, I've known of men and women who married the first second or third person they dated. While a tiny percentage of those marriages survive, many dissolve before that new car is even paid off.

How can one possibly know that the person they are dating is the "right" one unless they have gotten to know a number of "wrong" ones? How do you know a car is right for you unless you've ridden in a number of different models? People are a lot more complex than automobiles and you can always trade in your car for a different one if you end up hating it.

Some people feel ashamed if they have dated dozens of people and still aren't married. They should feel blessed. When the right one comes along, he or she will be much easier to spot. I had probably dated (most of them only once) close to 150 women before I asked Athena out for our first date. Our small university strongly encouraged everyone to get to know as many people as possible so we the students were all used to friendly dating (see next article on Friends First). Most of the dates with those 200 ladies were very casual: to the movies, out for an ice cream cone, to watch a college sporting event or even to attend a church service on campus. Quite a number of those were group dates where three or four guys went out as a group with three or four women. By the time I met Athena and had several dates with her, there was little doubt that she was the one for me. Had I settled on date number 32, I wouldn't have the blissful marriage I now have.

Is the first guy or girl who says "I love you" your soul mate? Maybe so. But what if date number 12 is really the perfect match for you and you throw away a lifetime of marital bliss because you only dated a handful of people? The more people of the opposite sex you get to know (in a friendship sort of way), the better your chances of finding Mr. or Mrs. Right. It's more than just a numbers game. It's your whole future.

#42 Friends First

First, what dating isn't:

- * A sexual opportunity
- * What you do to impress others
- * A conquest

According to Webster's Dictionary, a date is a scheduled time to meet with another. Sadly, some people treat dating quite dating as one of the three things above. The number one purpose of dating (spending planned time together) is to build a friendship. When you skip the friendship phase in a relationship and immediate jump to the romantic phase, you are begging for trouble.

Every blissful relationship is built on a solid friendship. Not on awesome sex, religious beliefs or common dreams and goals -- all those things can change over time - the only thing you can count on to remain is a strong and loving friendship.

It is very difficult to be lovers first and then try to become friends second. So, how can you date in a way that encourages the building of a friendship first?

- * Save any sort of physical connection (hugging, kissing, holding hands, etc.) until AFTER you have already become close friends and are ready for the next stage. It should be RARE that you make it past the friendship stage.
- * Don't go out for "romantic" dates early on. Dates such as: charming restaurants, lakeside picnics or to the opera.
- * Do go out on "friendship" dates like: bowling, eating pizza, playing tennis and volunteer work.
- * Avoid discussions early in the dating stage like how many children you want, what you are looking for in a husband/wife, deep secrets that you would only tell your closest friends.
- * Use caution in telling your friends if you feel strongly about the person you are dating. (Friends have a way of spreading secrets and ruining relationships). Don't let friends push your relationship beyond a friendship until you know it is time.
- * Do not buy your friend expensive presents or items that can construed as "romantic."

* Don't invite your friend on a weekend getaway (unless it is a group activity).

* Refer to your friend as "friend." Avoid calling them your "boyfriend," "girlfriend," "significant other" or other non-friend title until you have built a really strong friendship and are ready to get more serious in the relationship.

Dating. It is done best as friends first.

#43
Whose Job is It Anyway?

That's man's work.

I received an email awhile back from a guy who was in an unblissful relationship because he and his wife were deeply in debt. He said that he made a decent income yet he was really bad with money. He knew his wife would wisely manage the money but he didn't want to give up the checkbook because handling the family income was a husband's responsibility.

Stereotypes are hard to break. And stereotypes can break a relationship.

I can only think of one task that is exclusive to gender – birthing babies. Everything else is up for grabs. Cleaning toilets. Changing the oil in the car. And even who earns the paycheck and who stays home with the kids.

In a blissful relationship household responsibilities are divided up based on talent, not tradition.

Early in our marriage I handled the day to day finances until I realized that Athena is so much better skilled in that area. I love making investments and planning for our financial future but all the little details of bills, checks, invoices and account balances drive me nuts. I quickly turned over the checkbook to Athena but for several years I still spent days grueling over our annual tax return because I felt it was my (the man's) responsibility. When I finally asked Athena if she would do the taxes one year, I was so grateful to never have to do them again. What took me days to accomplish, she finishes in hours due to her superior organizational and accounting skills.

While Athena doesn't enjoy cooking, it is something that I am good at and love to do (most of the time). Sure, we could try to play by the stereotypical rules and have Athena cursing over every meal or we could do what makes sense, and contribute where we are most talented.

Do you ever find yourself saying "I could clean the house better than she does" or "I could do a better job at painting the house than he does"? Then perhaps it's time to reassess your family responsibilities. Now, that doesn't mean that if someone is super talented, they "get" to do all the work. And while you are at it, make sure your sons and daughters are chipping in on the chores (and not just the ones that are traditional to their gender - duties will only remain stereotyped as long as we keep treating them that way). Their future roommates and spouses will thank you.

A word of caution. Don't permanently shift jobs because you "think" you could do a better job. Perhaps a trial run would be a better idea. If you find out you really aren't cut out to be a stay at home dad or the one in charge of maintaining the lawn, you don't want to be stuck forever in a role you hate.

The Benefit of Doubting

Several years ago a minister from the United States went to visit one of his denomination's congregations in Africa. When he got up to the pulpit to preach he noticed by the style of clothing that members of one of the local tribes sat in the front of the room while those from a different tribe seemed to be forced to sit in the back.

Knowing that there is much tribal animosity in the country, the minister scrapped his notes and began preaching about unity, how we're all one in Christ and how we are to love our spiritual brothers. After the condemning sermon, the visiting minister sat down and the local pastor leaned over to him and stated "Our members sit in different sections out of much love and respect for one another. In our culture, it is our way of showing honor to the visiting tribe by giving them the best seats in the church."

Had the preacher not jumped to conclusions, he would have saved himself from humiliation and from offending the church members. While he might not have had the opportunity to ask why they sat apart before his sermon, he could have certainly done so afterwards.

How often do we make the same mistake in our relationships? How do you think your relationship is affected when you allow yourself to get bent out of shape over what appears to be a rude waiter, a slothful co-worker, an insensitive pastor or an uncaring mate?

Consider the following scenario.

You call your wife at home during your lunch break to ask her what she's making for dinner. She snaps back "I don't know. Gotta run. Talk to you later." and then hangs up.

Instead of going the "Jumping to Conclusions" route, let's play the "Benefit of the Doubt" game.

Could it be that:

1. She is planning a surprise dinner for you and didn't want you to know about it. She got flustered at your call thinking you might be on to her.
2. Little Johnny is throwing up on the persian rug, lunch is burning on the stove and someone is knocking on the door.

3. She has awful cramps, a blistering headache and you woke her up from a much needed nap.
4. She is on the other line with a relative calling from Sri Lanka at \$3 a minute.
5. She is right in the middle of a really good episode of Jerry Springer (if there was such a thing).

When you arrive home you lovingly ask your lovely wife why she hung up on you so quickly. If her answer matches one of your "Benefit of the Doubt" possibilities, you win. If it doesn't match, you still win because you didn't sit in judgment of her all afternoon, brewing over the fact that she was a little curt. And best of all, you open a dialog of communication so hopefully any misunderstanding doesn't happen again.

Athena and I like to play this game when we are out around town. We come up with some great explanations why the Toyota Landcruiser just cut us off in traffic, why the cashier practically ignored us and why our friends didn't return our calls. Most importantly, we try to do the same when we are confronted with potential "Jumping to Conclusion" situations in our relationship.

Sure, we still fall back into our condemning and judgmental ways from time to time. But we are working at it.

If you find yourself regularly getting frustrated, angry or even furious at others, it is possibly because you haven't considered the benefits of doubting.

#45
Column Commitment

This book began as a weekly column. I never wanted to put out just any old writing for the sake of filling space. If I don't think my piece will be insightful, thought provoking or encouraging for most of my readers (I know I can't please all of you all the time), then I'm not happy with it.

Setting a high standard for what I write can make it difficult at times. There have been many weeks where I thought I might not be able to put out an issue. I felt brain dead. Uninspired. The little gray cells (to borrow a phrase of Hercule Poirot) weren't functioning. Sometimes when the column is a bear to write for several weeks in a row and the words aren't naturally flowing it can be very tempting to throw in the towel, to give up and move on to something less challenging.

But nearly a year ago I made a commitment to myself to write at least 100 of these columns. Not only do I have myself to please - I now have a faithful following of tens of thousands to serve - so I do what I can to jump start the brain, to get inspired for another Tuesday column.

Here are some of the things I regularly do to keep my mind working to give me "something to think about" each week.

- * Talk to friends and family about what problems/successes they have in their relationships
- * Read a wide variety of books and magazines
- * Correspond with you, my loyal readers
- * Reflect on my own marriage - what things I think we've done right and what areas could be better
- * Go out and do something fun - it clears the brain and makes way for new thoughts and concepts

Most of you have made commitments in marriage or will make them in the future. We want our marriages to full of interest, inspiration and encouragement. But as soon as things get "boring" or the conversations don't flow as naturally as they used to we can be tempted to throw in the towel.

Perhaps you are content with uninspired conversations and a boring lifestyle. But in a marriage, you no longer have just yourself to please. You made a commitment to faithfully serve your spouse. Every good marriage always needs "something to talk about." If you are finding that it is getting more and more difficult to have meaningful conversations in your relationship, consider using my list above for inspiration or try other things that will keep your discussions fresh

and lively. Yes, the wit, humor and great dialogue can return, but only if you don't give up.

Setting a high standard of having a blissful relationship can be difficult at times. But like writing a column, when you have persevered through the more difficult times and have created something really special, it is worth all the effort.

#46

He Plan, She Plan, We Plan

Before our first anniversary, Athena and I decided that we would take turns planning our yearly celebration. We agreed on a budget, but other than that, we each had free reign over planning the annual event. We also determined that every third year we would plan the anniversary jointly and spend a little more and go somewhere our typical budget would not afford.

On the years we are planning the anniversary alone, we try to keep the details secret until a few days before the event. Of course, if it involves time off from work, we do let our spouse arrange those days off in advance.

Because our anniversary nearly always falls on Memorial Day Weekend, we get to plan for at least a three day celebration. Usually, we are able to get away for the entire time, but if not, we would plan to do something special each day during that long weekend. After all, it is not only the anniversary of our wedding day, but also of our honeymoon.

If your anniversary (or date night) is getting to be like a tired cliché, add some spark to it by taking turns planning a creative, romantic and fun-filled relationship celebration.

#47
Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Some might think that it is the goal of every blissful relationship to be so open with one another that every thought, memory and past experience is shared. While in many cases that might be a terrific goal, for some it could cause irreparable damages.

The mind is an amazing thing. It can remember sights, smells and visions from decades ago. It can be a powerful tool in recollecting wonderful childhood memories, thoughts of an early courtship and other pleasant occasions.

The mind can also be a jail for tormenting thoughts and flashbacks. Think back on survivors of war who after the carnage was over, took their own lives because their minds could not forget and the traumatic images would never go away.

I'm often asked how much of one's past life should be shared with someone you want to marry. While each situation is a little different, when it comes to previous intimate encounters, it is usually best to discuss them in general terms. Yes, you should be honest if you had sexual relationships before you married, but for the sake of the mind that does not forget, it is best to leave out the details. You will have to live with the memories of your past indiscretions but you should not make your mate live with them too.

While you might be curious to know the names, places and situations of your love's prior intimate encounters, in the long run your relationship will be better off keeping that information in the past. I've known many people who have said that once they knew the specific details of their mate's sexual experiences, it took months or years before those thoughts and images no longer dominated his or her mind.

In blissful relationships we don't ask our mate to share memories he or she is trying to forget and neither do we tell our mates those things that will sear unwelcome images into their mind. In some cases it is best to discuss those things, but a trained counselor would be of more help. While God does forgive and forget the all the wrongs things we have done when we ask Him to, we humans have to live with our memories the rest of our lives.

#48
Faith vs. Family

A few weeks ago I was traveling to California to do a television taping. A man sat next to me and we struck up a conversation. When he found out that I wrote and spoke about relationships, he asked me a question that had been on his mind for some time. He wanted to know what advice I would give to someone who wanted to marry a person of a different religious faith. He grew up Jewish and his girlfriend grew up as a Christian.

How important is it that couples share the same religion? Some would have you believe that all religions are equally good - just different strokes for different folks.

But picking a religion is not like going to an ice cream parlor with 32 flavors to choose from. At the ice cream parlor you might go for vanilla while the person you are dating chooses fudge ripple. In ice cream, there is no "correct" choice. By nature of religion, there are many wrong choices.

Here are just a few of the religions and their teachings on eternal life.

Christianity teaches that the only way to eternal life is through believing and accepting the gift that Jesus Christ gave to the world -- being sacrificed so that all might have eternal life.

Islam teaches that Jesus Christ was only a prophet and that to claim he is God is blasphemous. To go to Paradise one must repent of his or her sins and then strive to live a life of goodness.

Judaism believes that Jesus Christ was not the promised Messiah. To worship Jesus Christ is blasphemous. A relationship with God is built by following certain rules and laws as outlined in Old Testament scripture.

Hinduism teaches that one is reborn over and over again and based on good works, one might achieve a higher level each time.

As you can see, all these religions cannot be correct as almost all contradict each other. Therefore, most people who are truly convicted in their religious faith cannot possibly believe that "all spiritual roads lead to heaven/nirvana/paradise."

Even within religions there are subsets of traditions and beliefs. Some groups stay near the core beliefs of the faith while others venture out to the fringes, emphasizing practices and teachings that are not embraced by most in their religion.

So, how does religion affect relationships? If you are convicted that eternal life rests in doing things a certain way, would you not deeply desire for your sweetheart to understand that concept so you could share eternity with them? And if the two of you had children would you want your mate teaching them one way to live their life while you instruct your children to do things much differently?

Just because your sweetheart isn't practicing his or her faith now, it doesn't mean they won't in a year or two. Many men and women suddenly have a yearning to reconnect to the religion of their youth once they have children. Also, tragedies can cause some to suddenly realize that there is an emptiness inside them that can't be filled by material things and they begin a spiritual quest for real meaning in their life.

While tolerance, love, joy, peace and understanding are hallmarks of most of the world's main religions, someone with deep religious convictions must put God/Allah/Buddha etc. first, even before family. A truly dedicated follower would never loosen their religious morals and value just to keep peace in a relationship.

If you are considering dating or marrying (or have already married) someone of a different faith, think about doing these things:

- * Commit to do a formal study into each other's religion. Try to see if the church has some sort of "new believers" class or workbook. "Converting" without fully knowing what you are converting to shows that you really don't care about your spiritual life.
- * Attend several religious services with your sweetheart. You might find the traditions and teachings rewarding or revolting. Better to know sooner than later.
- * Pray to your Creator to guide you to the right spiritual path – not just the one that seems the easiest.
- * If you are intimate with your girlfriend/boyfriend and you curse, get drunk and have a mean streak, don't expect them to think highly of your religion. On the other hand, if you chose to remain pure, and you are gentle, loving, kind and giving, it will be far easier for him or her to be interested in finding out what makes you that way.
- * Discuss in advance what each of you would teach your children about these issues:
 - Who is the Creator?
 - How can they know the One who made them?

- What is their purpose here on earth?
- What happens to people when they die?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world if there is a all-powerful one who can stop it?
- How many good deeds must one do to get to heaven/nirvana/paradise?

A strong faith shared by a couple can be one of the most important elements in building a blissful relationship. But different faiths are powerful enough to destroy families, marriages and even countries.

#49

In-laws or Out-laws?

Love them or hate them, nearly every married person interacts with his or her in-laws on a regular basis.

In-laws have the potential to destroy a perfectly blissful relationship if we let them. They also have the ability to save marriages when the road gets rocky if we seek their advice. How we deal with our extended families is a core element in our quest for a blissful relationship.

All men and women should realize that when they get married, they have created a new family. Your new husband or wife becomes your new family. Everyone else is part of the "extended" family -- which means they should not be as close to you as your spouse. Your mom, dad, sisters and brothers lose their priority and importance in your life. If you are not ready to place them below your mate, then you probably aren't ready to get married.

This is a very difficult concept for many parents to embrace. After all, they spend twenty or so years being the number one person in their child's eye. They sacrificed so much to bring their child to this point in their life. But hopefully, they have reared their offspring to become adults, not to stay as children. Many men and women have to respectfully, but forcefully let their parents know that they are all grown up and that their husband/wife is now their number one priority and center of their life.

Here are some tips on dealing with in-laws.

* When you are first married, DO NOT live with in-laws (unless it is your country's custom). If you cannot afford a place of your own, then why are you getting married now? I can't emphasize this point strongly enough.

* Make a rule that your in-laws cannot just "drop by" the first year or more of your marriage. Better yet, live at least an hour or two away from them so you can work on building your own relationship instead of spending so much time with other family members.

* If you spend more time each week talking with your parents (in person or on the phone) than you do with your spouse, then you know something needs tweaking in your relationship.

* If you and your mate argue or fight, resist the temptation to run home to your parents. You need to learn to solve the problems in your relationship and

running away prolongs the solution. Telling your parents about all your marital problems makes it difficult for them to support your marriage.

* If you need advice on a problem you are having in your relationship, every once in a while talk it over with your in-laws. They will be honored that you came to them for advice and they probably have some good insight into your mate that you could never get from your own parents.

* Remember that every time you bad mouth your in-laws in front of your mate, you are tearing up someone they love.

* Show your in-laws kindness even if they are unkind to you. "Turning the other cheek" will earn you so much respect from your mate and your in-laws.

* You do not have to visit your in-laws every time your spouse goes to visit his family. If they get offended, they need to grow up.

* Send notes and cards to your in-laws from time to time. Sign your name only so they know it is just from you.

* Do not let your parents or your in-laws pressure you into having "grandchildren for them." If and when you have children is NONE OF THEIR BUSINESS. If you need them to "get off your back" tell them that having children is a private matter between you and your spouse and that you will let them know when you are expecting.

* If your parents or in-laws are rude, nasty, hateful and negative, you do not have to visit them. You can't choose your parents but you can choose your family. Just because someone gave birth to you does not give her any right to ruin your day. Don't feel guilty for not visiting extended family that is abusive or demeaning to you, your spouse or children.

* Come up with a good game plan for holidays. (see my article - Decision Time)

* If you are not already engaged, try to spend as much time with the in-laws as possible, especially if your sweetheart is close to his or her family. You need to know what you are getting into.

* Another benefit of getting to know your potential mate's parents is to see what type of person he or she will potentially become in 10, 20 or 30 years. Our parents do pass on their genes to us and like it or not, we often "become like our mother/father."

One final bit of advice for you and your in-laws. Love them, like them or simply respect them. There is no room in a blissful relationship for hate.

#50
A Balanced Relationship Diet

Athena is the most amazing woman (well, I might be a bit biased). What might take the average person one hour to do grocery shopping, she does in two.

Athena isn't filling the cart with just any food. She carefully reads the ingredients of all the packages to make sure what we eat contains nutrition and is not laced with potentially harmful additives. She even goes to stores on the other side of town because they carry food that is more healthy.

Athena goes beyond buying food that is good for us, she helps plan the meals to make sure we are eating a nutritionally balanced diet. She even has a little worksheet on our refrigerator and checks off how many servings of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, dairy/calcium, and protein we have eaten each day. What makes it even more complicated is that our son Ashton, who is one, and Athena, who is breastfeeding, have different nutritional needs than I do.

It is very touching to me that she takes such effort to make sure that Ashton and I are eating a wholesome, nutritious and balanced diet. It is a lot of extra work for Athena to shop and plan meals like she does but she wants us healthy and living together for long, long time. I do too.

Just as our bodies need certain amounts of vitamins and nutrients to remain healthy and alive, our relationships have needs, that if not met, can cause it to get sick and perhaps die.

I've divided the "nutritional" needs of a relationship into four groups.

- * Communication
- * Physical Intimacy
- * Recreation
- * Spiritual Growth

How much effort do you put forth to make sure the needs of your mate are being filled? Now, notice that I did not say YOUR needs. The common advice I see today is "me, me me." "Take care of yourself first because nobody else will." Well, that selfish advice might work for some relationships, but not in blissful ones.

For example, you might only need 10 minutes of physical intimacy each week whereas only 10 minutes for your mate would make them starve. If you aren't

providing the nutritional needs for your spouse, they will either wither away in the relationship or try to find "nutrition" outside of it.

To discover what your needs are individually and as a couple, I would recommend that you two sit down and create a chart to put on your refrigerator or elsewhere. Talk about how much time each week or month both of you need to devote to the four areas above. As the weeks progress, you can take note of how well you are fulfilling your goal and alter your requirements as time goes by.

Take each of the four groups and discuss with your mate the various ways you can fulfill the nutritional requirements in your relationship. There is more than one way to satisfy each category.

Here are just a few to get you started.

Communication - Calling each other from work, emails to each other, love letters, talking in bed before going to sleep

Physical intimacy - holding hands, hugging, foot rubs, passionate intercourse, snuggling on the sofa

Recreation - playing card games, bowling, going out to dinner, gardening, daily walks (also under communication), going to concerts

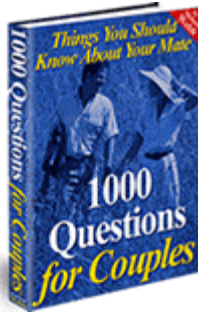
Spiritual Growth - meditating and praying together, attending a small group meeting devoted to spiritual growth, reading a spiritual book together, attending a church, synagogue or mosque

A lot of men and women make the mistake of thinking that their mate's "nutritional " needs can be satisfied by others. They believe friends, coworkers and even children can fulfill all the communication, recreation and spiritual needs when they aren't around. That is like saying man-made vitamins can replace the vitamins that you get out of real food. They can't.

So, that means you should take that evening stroll with your wife even if you are tired. You should be intimate with your mate when they request it nicely. If your mate is attending a house of worship, you should too (whether you get anything out of it isn't the issue). And yes, you should turn off the TV and talk with your spouse even if you say you aren't a "talker" - listening is part of communication too.

If you truly want a thriving and healthy relationship, you need to learn the "nutritional" needs of your mate and do your best to fulfill them.

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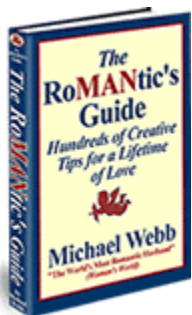
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