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# Enhancing Midlife Marriage

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The middle years of marriage are difficult to pinpoint. The time frame included, especially for couples without children, is vague. Despite this, the middle years of marriage are receiving more attention due to increased life expectancy and couples spending more years together after children leave home.

Research has found that marital satisfaction begins to decrease during the early years of marriage and reaches a low point during the middle years. This change in satisfaction is most often related to increased stress during this life stage. Increased work demands, parenting adolescents, empty nesting, caring for aging parents, financial issues, and retirement are just some of the concerns that increase stress during midlife. For most couples, it is a challenge to learn how to manage all the change so that their marriage relationship can continue to grow.

It is important to note that there are also significant benefits for the relationship in the middle years of marriage. Most of today's midlifers enjoy relatively good health. Their children are in adolescence or young adulthood and are becoming less dependent on their parents. This can be an opportunity for couples to pursue their own interests and to spend more time together. Because marriage is a constantly evolving process, couples need to learn new skills as well as sharpen existing ones to navigate the changes of a midlife marriage.

## Strategies for Strengthening Midlife Marriage

A vital and satisfying marriage requires marital maintenance. Here are a few ways to maintain that marriage potential.

**Spend Time Together**—It is ideal for a couple to spend time together when they are at their best (e.g., well rested,

alert, calm). Scheduling time with your spouse may reduce the chance of it being “leftover time.” Make this time together fun by enjoying simple things like a walk, a sunset, or a cup of cappuccino.

**Common Goals and Teamwork**—It is essential to support each other in the achievement of individual and marital goals. Revisit and revise your goals periodically to adapt to changing life events. Use these goals and values to set priorities and make decisions as a team. Strengthening marital teamwork will encourage cooperation rather than competition.

**Communication and Expectations**—Communication is a vital component of a successful relationship. Couples must listen attentively, avoid blame and sarcasm, and validate each other's feelings. Try not to assume that you know your spouse's preferences and opinions. Ask questions to clarify each other's position on issues before decisions are made. Each partner has an obligation to verbalize his or her own expectations to avoid misunderstandings.

**Appreciation and Affection**—Sometimes partners who have been married a long time may unknowingly take each other for granted. Simple expressions of appreciation can be forgotten. Showing appreciation and affection are powerful methods of strengthening a marriage. Love must be shown in words and actions.

**Sexual Fulfillment**—Sexual responsiveness can also contribute to a satisfying marital union. Sexual difficulties at midlife are most often the result of normal physical and emotional changes that reduce desire. There are many ways to compensate and adjust to these diminishing desires. For instance, exercise and good eating habits can enhance sexuality. It is important to communicate with your spouse about how you feel and what you desire.

**Agreement on Gender Roles**—Even if a couple has worked out their gender roles (e.g., who does what) for the early years of marriage, midlife may be a time when partners want to revise their role assignments. Reduced work schedules, new tasks added to the work load, retirement, or caring for aging parents, for example, may require renegotiating roles and responsibilities.

**Commitment to Growth**—Examine your commitment to each other and make a commitment to grow together for the second half of your marriage. Let go of disappointments in each other and look forward to the second half of married life, making it the best it can be!

Most couples have a great deal of unrealized potential in their relationship, but it takes a lifetime of sharing and caring to achieve it. The goal of marital maintenance is to develop, through a process of growth and behavior change, the potential for a mutually satisfying and creative relationship. The potential for a stronger relationship is realized as spouses develop a realistic appreciation of their partner as a person and value each other's contributions to the marriage. Through communication and mutual sharing, couples are well on their way to enriching and strengthening their marriages.

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