

The 6-Second Kissing Rule ...

AND OTHER ADVICE TO
TURN A GOOD MARRIAGE
INTO A SPECTACULAR ONE

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS



Married for 30 years, Tony and Cheryl Fall moved into a new home after their daughters, below, left the nest. The move gave the couple new and “fresh” projects to work on together.



When Cheryl and Tony Fall sent their two grown daughters into the world, the girls hauled away truckloads of furniture for their new apartments. Suddenly, the Falls were rattling around in a sparsely furnished, five-bedroom home that often felt like an empty shell.

The couple decided to sell the home where they'd raised their kids and downsize to a townhouse. The move not only meant less yard work and maintenance, it became the foundation for the Falls to create a new stage in their marriage: deeply in-love empty nesters.

"If we had stayed in the house we would've gone a little loony," says Cheryl, 50, of Washougal, Wash., who's been married for 30 years. "It was fresh. We bought new furniture. We picked it out together. We

had projects. We made it ours.”

The words “fresh” and “new” don’t always come to mind when describing marriages of 20 years or longer. The transition to an empty nest can often be the death blow to weak marriages, when husband and wife look across the kitchen table at each other for the first time in years and realize they have let the relationship slip away.

Couples can avoid this fate by nourishing the relationship every day, working on problems and joining together to build a vision for their golden years. If you want to rekindle that lost spark or prevent one from flickering out, follow the advice of couples and experts for transforming a solid marriage into an extraordinary one—turn that touch of the lips into six seconds of intimacy, show appreciation, share a hobby.

“Joan and I are very much in love, even now,” says Al Rudnitzki, 66, of West Bend, Wis., a retired software executive who has been married for 43 years. “We are best friends. We are confidantes. Her success is mine.”

Happily married couples attribute their longevity to nurturing their bond, developing shared interests and seeking help as needed from counseling, books and classes. “The likelihood of our marriage still being together without the help of marriage counseling is pretty remote,” says Joan, 64, a nonprofit executive.



Married for 43 years, Al Bend, Wis., and Joan Rudnitzki of West Bend, Wis., are still “very much in love,” says Al.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help when nothing is working. Make sure you’re communicating twice as much as you think you need to.”

THREE THINGS THAT MATTER

By studying married couples for more than 20 years to determine what factors contributed to divorce or staying together, the Seattle-based Gottman Institute has determined that successful couples operate well in three arenas of the relationship: conflict management, friendship and finding shared meaning in life, says Don Cole, Houston-based master trainer in the Gottman method of couples therapy.

“They’re good friends, they understand and like each other, they spend time together successfully in satisfying ways, they do manage their conflicts well, and they have a sense of shared meaning,” Cole says. “They’re on the same side of the rope, pulling together.”

It’s not that couples in successful marriages have less conflict than those who divorce, but the way they approach conflict differs. While resolving disagreements, the successful couples exchanged five positive or neutral comments for every

negative one, whereas the unsuccessful couples had a 1 to 1.25 ratio of positive to negative, Cole says.

Moreover, successful couples began discussions differently—in as calm and unthreatening a manner as possible.

“The successful couples put a lot of emphasis on thinking through how they are going to bring up something to their partner, doing it in a way that avoids blaming their partner,” Cole says. “The unsuccessful couples would more often bring things up in a harsh way and those conversations would fail.”

Gottman research finds that the first three minutes of a conversation predicts with 96 percent accuracy whether the conflict will be resolved effectively or not.

The Rudnitzkis follow rules for fair fighting, being careful not to say anything hurtful or cruel. They wait until both parties have cooled off before discussing a hot topic.

“We recognize that if there was a really big issue that could be potentially very confrontational, we don’t talk about it unless we’re both unemotional,” says Joan.

GO DANCING

Still, the area of friendship and shared vision holds the most potential for bringing new passion to your enduring relationship. Couples who have been focused on raising children and building careers often grow closer by developing new shared interests—like the Falls’ new home project—as they enter the second or third decade of marriage.

“I think of marriage as being a growth opportunity,” says Priscilla Hunt, the executive director for Better Marriages, a Winston-Salem, N.C., nonprofit providing marriage education and enrichment. “The relationship is not stagnant; it is constantly changing. It’s either changing for the good or changing for the bad.”

There are many ways and opportuni-



ties to find that common ground—trying a new fitness class, planning a trip, or taking up a new activity such as dance. Sharing an interest could be as simple as deciding to try and rate every Chinese restaurant in town.

The most important requirement is

From overnight stays at wineries to couples massage and tennis, Katherine and Carlos Greene of Lillburn, Ga., shown on their wedding day and with their two sons, put a premium on fun activities and “learning and growing together,” says Katherine. The couple has been married for 22 years.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE RUDNITZKI FAMILY; PREVIOUS PAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO AND PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FALL FAMILY

Become Better Friends

Experts say that a couple’s friendship is the underpinning of the relationship. So how do you become better friends when you’ve been married for decades?

● LOVE MAPPING

Gottman Institute theory uses the term “love map” when talking about how well you know your spouse’s internal world: what stresses her out, what makes him laugh, if you bring your husband brownies when you know he’s trying to lose weight, for instance, you won’t receive a kind reception.

To improve your love map, try card-

based games such as Food for Talk, Know Your Partner or Table Talk. The Gottman Institute’s Love Maps card game can be purchased online for \$15, and is also available as a \$1.99 iPhone app.

● TURN TOWARD EACH OTHER

When you’re reading a book and your spouse mentions an interesting bird outside the window, do you look up and pay attention? That’s called “turning toward” you, and it is behavior that can predict whether a marriage lasts.

Research by the Gottman Institute found that successful couples turned

toward each other 86 percent of the time versus 33 percent of the time for unsuccessful couples. When you turn away from your partner, it raises his level of stress hormones.

● SHARING APPRECIATIONS

If you don’t already have a tradition of verbalizing gratitude for your partner’s actions, start now. It can be as simple as “thank-you” for taking out the trash or as romantic as bringing home takeout when it’s his turn to cook and you know he’s had a rough day.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MURPHY PHOTOGRAPHY; TOP, COURTESY OF CAROLYN BLOOM; BOTTOM

that the two of you interact—sitting silently in a movie theater or in conversation with a large group of people doesn't count.

Every three months, Carlos and Katherine Greene of Tallburn, Ga., who have been married for 22 years, choose a fun couple activity. One year they decided to take an overnight getaway to a different winery every quarter. They've also tried couples massage and tennis.

"Learning and growing together is very important to us. It (the relationship) can become stale and stagnant," says Katherine, 47, a program specialist for the Georgia Center for Opportunity. "We do have things that happened organically, but I think you still have to stay intentional."

They also enjoy little rituals, like ordering popcorn from Garrett Popcorn Shops every Christmas, a snack they first tried together at a marriage enrichment retreat in Chicago. "This is the taste of marriage for us," says Carlos, 49.

The Rudnitzkis always kiss "hello" and "goodbye," and hold hands whenever they're walking together, even if they're just in the grocery store.

And Al has a habit of tapping Joan's rear end whenever he passes her in the kitchen. "I always appreciate the tap because if it doesn't happen, I think, 'I wonder if it's getting too big,'" she says. "I'm 64. I don't have the figure I had. I have more wrinkles and gray hair. He always tells me when I look nice, and that's important."

EVERYDAY LOVE

In deed, the experts say that while date nights and big romantic trips can be wonderful, it's the day-to-day interactions that create an excellent marriage, by demonstrating that you care about each other's feelings, interests and experiences.

"What we learned in the research is that it's the small things repeated often that make a difference, not the huge vacations to Hawaii," Cole says. "The things that really make a difference are the thousands of little things we do during the day: kissing in the morning, texting during the day, having that stress-reducing conversation at evening, a candlelight dinner at home every now and then."

If you're looking to spice up your sexual intimacy, you can use video resources such as Gortman's *Cott-Sex* or share fantasies verbally. But more often, the solution to a better sex life

Tips to Rekindle THE SPARK

- **Kiss outside of lovemaking**, and make it last at least six seconds. According to the Gottman Institute, the idea is to prolong kisses as a path to intimacy apart from sexual activity. After so many years of marriage, many couples just peck on the lips and never extend their kisses outside of the bedroom.

- **Reminisce** about how you fell in love, maybe while browsing through your photo albums.
- **Consciously focus on your partner's appealing traits**, not the annoying habits.
- **Explore the five C's of a good relationship:** Commitment, communication, conflict resolution, collaboration and

- **Continue with your own personal growth and hobbies**: be an interesting, healthy person.
- **Rediscover your partner in conversation**.
- **Establish new rituals** such as sharing your daily experiences for 20 minutes before or after dinner.

is outside the bedroom, in love notes tucked into a briefcase or in simply listening attentively to a long explanation of your spouse's office politics.

And as the years pass, you may need to make more of a conscious choice to be physically intimate on a regular basis, because you know it nourishes your marriage bond.

If you're in a rut or taking each other for granted, try marriage education classes or marriage enrichment workshops. Or read a book or two about relationships and discuss them. You may benefit from better listening or communication skills, or perhaps you just need to make a conscious choice to focus on what you love about your partner—not the annoying habits.

The Greens put to good use the career training they each received. "You value your employees' opinions, and you don't attack them," notes Katherine. "We started taking some of those tools and skills and resources we learned in our workplace and applied them to our relationship."

In a long-lasting marriage, it's easy to anticipate your spouse's needs and thoughts, and to assume you know what the other person is feeling. While that is often comforting, it can also be dangerous if you fail to truly hear what the other person is saying.

"The danger is in assuming that person always knows how much you still continue to love them if you're not saying it. You have to say it," says Joan Rudnitzi. "You always have to be working at it. A relationship either flourishes or it dies. It doesn't just stay in limbo." ●

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