

MAKING MARRIAGE HAPPY

Hard-Won Wisdom
from Real Couples

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For my husband, Barry, who makes me happy

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INTRODUCTION

WHY DO SOME MARRIAGES LAST while others don't? Why are some couples happy when so many others aren't?

Are some just lucky to be blessed with chemistry that makes the relationship easy?

Or do happy couples actually *do* things that make their happiness possible?

I got married when I was thirty-nine, which is relatively late. A few people around me breathed a sigh of relief that my single years were finally over, just under the wire before I hit forty.

I remember that way back when I was in my twenties, my grandmother was already pretty worried that I wasn't married. She even went so far as to suggest that maybe my standards were too high, which struck me as both insulting and hilarious—but mostly hilarious, because I knew she just wanted the best for me and genuinely worried about the Old Maid withering on the vine.

I wasn't opposed to getting married. I just hadn't met anyone that made me think that life would be better with a husband in the mix than it was as a single person surrounded by really good friends.

Meanwhile, people my age were pairing off all over the place, year after year, creating an endless cycle of engagement parties and weddings. Some of these marriages lasted and some of them didn't (but at least the newlyweds were an appropriate age, which allowed their grandmothers to sleep at night).

By the time I found someone I did want to settle down with, I had been on the receiving end of a *lot* of well-intentioned, but rarely helpful, advice. In the years I've been married, I've thought a lot about the common wisdom that's floating around, and I think we can do better.

If "How do you make a happy marriage?" were a *Family Feud* question, then I'm guessing the number one answer would be, "It takes a lot of work."

Well yes, it does. But when you really think about it, what exactly does "work" mean in this context? Is it housework? Chores every weekend? Changing the litterbox? Operating heavy machinery?

Or is "work" referring to something more psychological, like gritting your teeth and suffering the petty annoyances of sharing a home with another person? Is it holding your tongue when you want to argue? Or accepting that you will always need to unload the dishwasher because your spouse will never, ever do it?

Other common pearls of wisdom are equally as vague, like, "Good communication is the key."

Does this mean you have to tell your spouse everything that happens when the two of you aren't together, or can you keep some information to yourself? And if you have trouble expressing your emotions, or you aren't good with conflict, does that mean your marriage is doomed to fail?

Here's another: "You have to put your spouse first."

I get it, but again, huh? That's not actually possible. I need to be first. That's just how it is. If I'm not minding the store, the windows get dirty and squirrels start nesting in the attic.

Also troubling is that if you take this one too far, it seems a good way for one partner to eventually become dominant and the other subservient. I think we want to keep an eye on that.

Now, these nuggets of marital wisdom undoubtedly all have some virtue, and I'm not trying to be obtuse about the truths these phrases actually hold. I just think pithy tips and clichés can be misleading.

I wondered if I could tap into something deeper by digging into the details of how happy couples live day-to-

day. I wanted to understand what these phrases, and more, mean to real people *in real life*—the stressful, cluttered lives where we have jobs to go to, kids to pick up from soccer practice, houses to maintain, dentists to see, parking tickets to fight, bills to pay, birthday gifts to buy, and holiday dinners to plan with the in-laws.

How do these maxims take on meaning in the day-to-day grind of living?

What Do Happy Couples Do?

After wondering about the answers to these questions for years, I decided to put my professional skills to use. I've spent my career as a nonfiction television producer and writer. My work is about asking questions, looking for answers, and telling stories. I've interviewed hundreds of people on subjects ranging from polar bear attacks to the pyramids in Egypt to killers on the loose and the cops who catch them. (Pro tip: the spouse pretty much always did it, but that's a different kind of marriage book.)

Producers learn early on that the best interviews are the ones with people who are really passionate about their subject matter. You know you've struck gold when you're talking to someone who is so enthusiastic that it's hard to make them stop. When I started talking to happy couples about their marriages, that's the kind of interviewee I found.

I started by interviewing friends and acquaintances, wondering if they had anything in common.

Turns out, they did. Very different couples with disparate backgrounds and life experiences had overlapping ideas in a number of areas. I started to hear some of the same concepts and practices over and over.

When I was done interviewing a core group, they referred me to other happy couples they knew, and additional referrals grew from there.

This is not a scientific book, and it hasn't been vetted by therapists or marriage and relationship experts. That kind of book is easy to find, if it's what you're after.

And I'm certainly not a marriage expert—just ask my husband.

What this book offers is a collection of wisdom, advice, secrets, strategies, and confessions from ordinary couples who describe themselves as happily married. These people sat for long, very personal interviews because they liked talking about their relationships. More importantly, they wanted to share their experiences in the hopes that others might find them helpful.

When I began this process, I wondered how many people I should talk to. How many interviews would provide a body of information worth sharing?

I decided that years of marriage are what counts. In my opinion, if you've experienced something firsthand, that gives you the right to talk about it with some authority. I started to tally up the years each interviewee had been married and ended at *one thousand years* as a worthy yield of material.

In other words, the individuals in the interview group represent more than one thousand years of married life—in which they've collected one thousand years of wisdom.

Who Are These Happily Married People?

The interviewees are regular people who have no special training. They'd never dream of telling you how to live your life; they were just willing to describe how they live theirs.

The average couple I interviewed has been married for about twenty years. The youngest couple is in their late twenties and has been married for four years, and the oldest is in their eighties and has been married for sixty-three years.

Almost all are legally married, though a few are unmarried but in long-term, monogamous relationships.

They are a diverse group: old and young, straight and gay, from a variety of faith traditions. They represent

many cultures outside the United States, including Canada, England, France, India, Japan, South Korea, Peru, Vietnam, and more.

The group includes stay-at-home moms, retirees, and professionals in a wide variety of fields, including law, sales, science, finance, construction, media, insurance, medicine, real estate, education, engineering, architecture, church ministry, and human resources.

Some individuals found happiness the second or third time around, having divorced and learned some good lessons the hard way earlier in life.

I've tried to present their thoughts free from my own beliefs and biases. To that end, most of the content of this book is lifted directly from the interviews. Text has been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. For organization and ease of reading, I've grouped conversations into chapters on various themes.

Early in the interview process, it became clear that for people to share their experiences freely, their identities would need to be protected. Couples were in danger of offending their own children, shocking their aging parents, or becoming the butt of jokes at work if certain confessions could be traced back to them.

Therefore, the identities of those interviewed for this book are being kept anonymous. Rest assured, they're probably a lot like people you know—your best friend from high school, trusted co-worker, friendly neighbor, chatty hairdresser, cool aunt, workout buddy, favorite bartender, or grandfather who always made time for you.

By revealing both the good and bad, the ups and downs of these couples' lives, my hope is that you'll get an insider's look at a variety of elements that exist in happy marriages and practical actions that keep them that way. In this context, we can better understand what people mean when they're talking about the "work of marriage," and other regularly cited wisdom.

Maybe one of the stories will make you reflect on your own relationship.

Maybe it'll spark a solution to something you've been struggling with.

Or maybe you'll find it heartening to hear someone else's story of an imperfect life tinged with occasional failure and indecision. At the very least, you'll see that even happy marriages aren't always easy, though the people in them definitely think they're worth the trouble.

And along the way, if you find a tip or two that you might want to try in your own relationship, then so much the better.

So what do these happy couples do that others don't?

What do they know that could help others?

What do they know that might help you?

Their answers are inspiring, thought provoking, and often very funny.

CHAPTER 1

TWO BECOMING ONE

A long marriage is two people trying to dance a duet
and two solos at the same time.

—Anne Taylor Fleming

UNITY CANDLES are popular at weddings. This is the tradition where the bride and groom each hold a burning candle that they use to light a new candle together, which represents the joining of two people.

Typically, after the unity candle is lit, the bride and groom blow their own candles out.

Extinguished! Destroyed. No more single flames, only the one they made together.

Boy, that's final. There is a version of this ceremony where the unity candle is lit but the original two candles are kept burning. This seems a much better representation of what happens in marriage, at least ideally. You're adding, not taking away. You're gaining a spouse, not extinguishing yourself.

Whatever version of the ceremony is performed, the unity candle represents the idea of two becoming one, which is a pretty vague phrase we've attached to marriage. How do two people *become one* in real life?

Obviously, you become one in a certain sense by forming a new family unit, filing a joint tax return, and perhaps sharing a surname and address. But it's more than just that.

Sharing a life means you take into account your partner's likes and dislikes, fears and phobias, passions and hobbies. You have food in your house that you might not eat yourself and clothes in the closet that aren't yours. You have to learn to live with another person's habits, idiosyncrasies, and weird private stuff.

For many people, the idea of "becoming one" also requires compromise and sacrifice. But how much should you reasonably expect to give up, and when is it okay to insist on having your own way? Is marriage an endless

TWO BECOMING ONE

series of negotiations?

The happy couples I interviewed had a lot to say about what it means to them for two to become one. Much of the secret to making it work seems to lie in the cyclical effect that's created when happiness is both given and received—as spouses are strengthened by what they get, they're energized to keep on giving.

Some people choose to make sacrifices on matters both great and small for the good of their marriage.

I've compromised in that I'll never be able to have video games in the house. Some wives don't mind them, but mine does.



When my husband and I were first married and broke, we couldn't afford a lot, so we had one very new, fluffy pillow and one dead pillow the thickness of a pancake. Every time I made the bed, I would look at the fluffy pillow and give it to him because I was being a good wife.

I asked him to help me make the bed one day, and he gave me the fat pillow and took the skinny pillow. "Oh, thanks, dear," I said, "but why did you give me the good pillow?" I assumed he had given it to me as a sweet gift for all the sacrifices I'd given him. Instead, he said, "Oh, that one kills my neck. I hope you don't mind, but I've been envying the skinny pillow." We still laugh about it decades later.



My husband is risk-averse, and that has been both the rock that our marriage stands on—and the rock I'd like to bash him in the head with occasionally. He doesn't jump into things easily, whether it's changing where we live or finding a new job. Sometimes that's been incredibly comforting, like the time I thought it would be fun to start an oyster farm when we lived in Seattle. He had the good sense not to go along with that.

Half the time I'm glad I can't change him, but sometimes I feel like we wind up missing things.



My wife likes to do the same thing all the time when we go out, and I hate that. She's also very much an inside person, whereas I'm an outside person. I always know going into these outings that I don't want to do it, but I also know I'm going to wind up enjoying spending time with her. Like when she says, "Let's go to Starbucks," I never really want to, even though I want to do something with her. It's the perfect picture of a compromise: I'm willing to compromise on the location to get her into a caffeinated mood where she's talking and comfortable, and then I know we'll enjoy being with each other.



I used to feel very strongly that I needed to either choose marriage or career. In my field, chemistry, I have a lot of gifts and felt like, with a lot of focus, I could be a really great chemist. But having talked to people in my field, I didn't feel like it was compatible with having a family. I needed to choose one or the other.

Marriage was very important to me, and I didn't feel like I could do justice to both my career and a marriage. And so, a big part of my deciding to get married was choosing that over being career centered. I decided that my wife was more important. That decision affected the job I took. It's affected what we've done since then, although now it doesn't feel like a sacrifice. I don't wish I'd taken the other route. And I've actually found that I can be quite a good chemist in spite of this lead weight holding me back. Just kidding. I can possibly be a *better* chemist than I'd been if I'd tried to focus solely on work, because now I have more balance.

TWO BECOMING ONE



The biggest challenges and arguments my wife and I have involve agreeing on the path we want our life to take. I'm very goal oriented. My three things in life are vision, process, and execution. Visualize what you want to do, develop the perfect process to get there, and then it's pure execution. The success I've had in my life has been the result of following that basic process.

But my wife and I can never seem to get past the vision stage for our life. I think we'll have it, and then she'll change her mind. Why don't we join the Peace Corps? Why don't we go on a mission to Burma? Why don't we register for the Cordon Bleu in Paris? There are a million things we could do, and there's no reason why we can't, but we don't do them. We've agreed to work out a vision, to sketch it out and come to terms with what the next one, five, ten, twenty years will look like. We've agreed on the framework to get to a deal, but in the meantime, there will be bloodshed, trade embargoes, and rocket-propelled grenades. I prefer to think the adventure is just on hold for now.



I've been ready to move from our house for over a year now, but my husband doesn't want to move. I'd be willing to pull up roots and move to Australia for the heck of it. All my life I've never stayed in one place more than a couple of years. It's a big compromise for me not to push it, to shake up life and make it more interesting, but my husband keeps me grounded. He has a life he likes to lead, and I choose to be involved in that life because I know that makes him happy. I love him so much, and out of everything in my life, he's my foundation. I'd never throw away what I have with him for a jaunt overseas for a year.



My wife and I lived in Taiwan when we were first married, and she hated it. It got worse when we had our first baby. It was overwhelming to her to be a new mother in a foreign country. I grew up in Hong Kong and came back to the United States for school, where we met. I've never been in a situation where I couldn't make myself happy. I'm laid back, and I make friends easily, but you can only do what you're capable of. I don't expect her to force herself to be happy in a culture that's completely foreign to her. If somebody asked me how I could give that all up, the question would be, "Give up what? Having our life be miserable?" That's a no-brainer.



Vacations are important, and we sometimes get into those discussions where I might want to go to the mountains, and my wife wants to go to the beach. I don't think a good compromise is to camp out on the plains, where nobody's happy. If you say, "I want my way," then it makes for a difficult decision. But if you say, "I want you to have your way," and the other person says, "No, I want you to have yours," then I think you can eventually come to a good agreement where both of you are honored in some way.



Do whatever you have to do to make your marriage work, because it's expensive when it doesn't.

What about me? Compromise doesn't have to come at the expense of independence.

I love the freedom my wife gives me to be myself. It astounds me sometimes. I guess it's because I was married before and didn't experience this, so it can sometimes take me by surprise. I got conditioned to feel like I couldn't really be myself, so now when my wife encourages me to go do something I want to do, I sometimes think, *Is this a trick?*



When I was single, I thought I was pretty hot. I was an attorney living in the city, had lots of friends, was looking good. I thought I was so independent and strong, but I'm not sure that I was as much as I am now. I think being married has shown me I don't need to assert my independence over my husband in an obnoxious, in-your-face kind of way. It's very important to know who you are so you can respect both yourself and the other person in a marriage. You're so intertwined that you can lose yourself, so you really need to be yourself and be real.



I think it's one of the biggest fallacies of marriage to think that you'll be melded into one. It won't happen, and it's not a good thing anyway. You will always be the center of your own universe. It doesn't matter how kind you are, you'll never be able to get beyond yourself completely to become melded with someone else. Therefore, the best thing you can do is recognize that same thing in your spouse and respect his or her identity.



My partner and I don't get into each other's business. We're very independent. We met as adults, and we have different worlds and different backgrounds. I would love to share more things with him, but I know there are things we can't share because our histories are different. So, when we're together, we share what's in common.



It's very important to have your own interests. To me, if you're being less than you are, there's a problem. Being who you are isn't going to fit who the other person is all the time, but you can't compromise that. You can find ways to accommodate, however.



When I first married my husband, I never wanted to be vulnerable with him. I didn't want him ever to see me cry, be upset, or be stressed, but time has a wonderful way of easing you into who you're supposed to be. I feel better about myself now as a woman than I did when I got married at thirty-two.



My partner and I give each other a tremendous amount of space to function—not have our activities infringed upon, not have them scrutinized, not have them questioned. That, to me, is very healthy.



Before my husband and I got married, I thought it was important to tell him how I felt about everything and to make sure he knew where I stood. I didn't have that idealistic, lovey-dovey thing about getting married. I don't mean to denigrate the feeling, but I wanted a more practical partnership with somebody who saw eye to eye with me on certain things.



I don't want to be the mother in our marriage. That's not my role. I don't want to have the feeling that I'm restricting my husband from doing something. I don't want to be in a marriage where he's doing things he doesn't like doing because I told him so. He needs the freedom to do some of what he wants to do.



I have a married friend who says that she and her husband haven't spent a night apart in twenty years. I don't need that, and neither does my husband. In the beginning, I could be gone for six weeks at a time with work, so we learned how to remain entwined but physically separate for long stretches. We aren't insecure about our relationship if we're in different cities.



To me, the goal of marriage is helping each other become better selves. Compromise is generally the way to go, but every once in a while, you need to get your way. Compromise too much, and you become less than yourself.

Compromise may be easier to make in a marriage after you've spent some time being single.

I have a brother who's in college, and it makes me think about how I was in college. Any girl who had wanted to marry me in college was an idiot. Basically, all guys in college know is what they want right then, which is partying, or girls, or usually both. You have to get that out of your system first and figure out the things that matter to you as a person.

It's really important for people to know what lights them up. For me, it's being outdoors and being physical and building things. You don't get an opportunity to discover that when you go from high school to college and segue right into a marriage.



When I got together with my wife, I'd been living the bachelor life, and I traveled all the time. The only thing I had to my name was a scooter and eight different backpacks for every situation you could imagine. As hard as that was to give up, I remember those nights as a bachelor thinking, *I wish I had somebody to be doing this with. I'm in this amazing place doing it all by myself.*



My husband and I both felt very lonely for a long time before being married. Some people really haven't ever been single, so they might not understand how lonely it can be. Now I appreciate being together. Even when my husband and I are having conflicts, I think it's great to have somebody there.



My parents gave it all up early and never got to do any of the things they dreamed about doing because they got married and had a family. That was common in their generation, but my wife and I got married much later. We waited to have kids until later. We've both done a bunch of things in life. Maybe we haven't accomplished all that we set out to do, but we feel reasonably good about our accomplishments to date.



Once you have a family, it's hard to do those things you always wanted to do. We have kids now, and we had them soon after we were married. My husband did a lot of traveling before we got married, so now he's not looking back and saying, "I wish I'd done that." And I had enough of a career that I don't have to think I didn't get to start one. Being a little older also helped us figure out who's in charge of what. We each knew what our passions were before we got married, so it was a really easy changeover.



Marriage should complement your life and make it better and stronger, but it won't *be* your life. I think people really need to live their lives to the fullest before they get married. If you have things you really want to do as an individual, they may be easier to do before you get married. This depends on your partner, of course, but in marriage you'll need to compromise. You're going to take on someone else's needs along with your own when you make that commitment, and sometimes your own desires will need to go on the back burner. That's just the reality of it.



You trade certain kinds of activities, enjoyment, and struggles for other kinds of activities, enjoyment, and struggles. When you're in a relationship where you no longer have to struggle with loneliness, it's easy to think, "Wouldn't it be fun if I could do everything I wanted to do and not have to worry about checking in with my wife?" There's all this stuff we'd like to do as single people that we can't as married people, but that picture isn't realistic. You can't have the benefits of being married without some of the sacrifices of being married. I think in our minds we sometimes dream about merging the best parts of being married with the best parts of being single, but that's not an actual option.

**Go on, do what you want.
Happy couples encourage each other's
interests and hobbies.**

My husband built a climbing wall in the backyard. I think it's an eyesore, but it was important to him. It wasn't a big deal to me. He can do whatever he wants.



Compromise doesn't mean that nobody's happy and everybody's in the middle. My husband is a runner, and I like to garden. Sometimes I'll say, "You go for a run, and I'll garden, and we'll find something else to do together." You don't have to water down the joy of whatever it is you're trying to do to find the perfect mutual solution. I get the idea of everybody being willing to give up something, but if we always did that, then I'd never get to garden.



My husband plays tennis, and he does it entirely without me. I think it's very important: we shouldn't have to do only those activities the other one wants to do. I know he enjoys it, it's healthy, and he can make friends that he wouldn't have otherwise. Likewise, I've played in an orchestra every Monday night for the last eleven years. When I'm there, my mind is totally immersed in the music, and there's nothing else in my brain. That's like therapy for me.



How much you need to pursue interests outside your marriage depends on personality. I get my time alone because I'm a stay-at-home mom now. My husband has hobbies but nothing that bugs me. If he were the type to watch every single football game on TV, that would drive me nuts, but he pursues gardening or reading or learning a language. I think those are all great things.



My husband and I might not encourage each other in activities that would require huge amounts of time or money, or things which would take away from our family, but I'd never discourage him from doing something just because I can't do it with him.



Some of our friends think my husband and I are strange because we do things apart quite a lot. We don't feel the need to do everything together all the time. Lately I've found I can tolerate horse racing, which my husband likes. He gets what he gets out of going to the track, and there's always a nice lunch, so I'm happy.



Sometimes I feel like I've compromised more than my husband has in our marriage. I got what I wanted, which is a family. I'm content with that, though sometimes I think now that I should be out doing more.

Marriage has given me the security to know I could go off and do things. If I told my husband I wanted to climb Mount Everest, he'd be completely behind me. He has many more outside interests than I do, though, so I go with the flow. Maybe that's why I feel like I've compromised more than he has. He has very strong ambitions, and that's one of the things I'm attracted to in him.

“Yes” is a magic word.

Last summer my wife decided she really needed to get away, and she wanted to go to Scottsdale. It was August, and I didn't want to go because it was like 106 degrees there. But she really wanted to go, and it was important to her, so I said “Yeah, let's go.” It was expensive since it was totally unplanned, but we did it anyway.

I think you can adjust to that. Most of the guys I know would have said forget that, it's not a good business decision, we need to plan ahead and get better prices. But it was important to her, and there was also a win in it for me. Could we afford it? Yes. So, do I care? To me it wasn't about the money; it was about the bigger picture.



One of the best decisions I made in our relationship was to get along with my husband's friends, whom I call the Beatnik Boys. They're all unmarried guys in their fifties with a lot of quirks and idiosyncrasies. I could see early on that they'd always been important to my husband, and I could either fight it or go with it. I decided to accept them, and now I have a good relationship with all of them.



When my wife first asked me to go shopping for clothes with her, all I heard was, *Blah, blah, blah shopping*. But I've learned something: when your wife asks you to go shopping, consider it quality control. She really cares what I think, and I now know she'll keep wearing something because we both like it. So, go buy yourself a cup of coffee and coast along. It's like saving yourself money up front.



Learn to say yes to your partner, and don't take yourself too seriously. Make yourself agreeable to your spouse when you might normally, to any other person, say no. You don't have to do everything you did the way you did before you were married. Of course, when you have a good wife like I do, who isn't going to request things that would be terribly wrong, that makes a big difference.



We all have preconceptions about the way we're going to live our lives. Since I got married, though, I've had to change my mind about things quite a few times. You can't go through life on auto-pilot. Sometimes you need to be prepared to jettison a decision and go in a different direction.



There have been a number of instances where I wanted to do something and my husband didn't. If I say, "It's really important to me, and I'd like you to go," then he'll go. Often, he'll say afterward that he's glad he went, or glad that I talked him into it, because he had a good time.



It takes a little maturity to know that you're not going to get exactly what you want every single day, but I also look at marriage as an adventure. Why not go on that trip and see what it's like? We've taken our kids so many places, and they bitched and moaned the whole way. Then when we came home, they said, "Can we go back again?"

This is one of the best qualities in our marriage. My wife makes a suggestion, and I'm like *Oh, okay, I'll go*, if it's something she really wants. I usually find a way to have a good time, and she does the same for me. I think people forget that philosophy. Just go try it. I've told this to many people who've complained to me about their marriages. Did you try? No. Then how do you know?

**No slackers allowed.
Both partners must work
to bring happiness to the other.**

Whenever there's been something that I said I wanted, my wife will say, "You know what? You deserve it." She realizes I'm working hard to make things happen, so she wants to make sure I'm rewarded for making it work. If it went the other way, if neither of us was working hard or we didn't have respect for the other, then that would cause a downward spiral.



If you find yourself keeping score about how often you have to give something up or have your mind changed, then I think that's screwed up. There are times I get my way on things, and there are times when my wife gets her way on things, but I don't keep track. If you're thinking of everything in terms of battles, winning and losing, you're

probably set up for conflicts for the rest of your life. Maybe there's a certain type of person who enjoys that, but I don't.



I've seen subjugating in some unhappy marriages—where one is dominant and the other is the audience, or where one's always the mentor and one's the student, for example. That makes for a bad long-term relationship. It needs to be equal.



It would be very difficult if you were always putting your partner first and they were never doing the same for you. If you're always the giver or you're always the taker, something's out of whack. If you're always putting the other person first, they should have more of a desire to do that for you.



There is a commitment in marriage that's different from dating. When you don't have that commitment, you can compromise to a certain point, but then it becomes a burden. Once my husband and I made the commitment to spend the rest of our lives together, compromise came naturally.



I don't think compromise means sacrifice. I compromise on what I can, and my wife compromises for me on other things. If it's only going one way, that's out of balance.

If I were in a relationship where I was constantly compromising, like she was always getting new stuff and I couldn't get anything because there was no money left over, I would start to think it's not working for me, and it would go south quick. But she compromises so much for me. We're both giving, and we're both getting.

**In a good relationship, partners get pleasure
from making each other happy.
The act of giving brings them joy.**

I know that in order to have stability and peace in my life, there are little things I will have to compromise on. In order for me to have the greatest amount of daily happiness, my wife's overall happiness is very important. So, I might not care to clean something, but I know that not doing it will cause her not to be happy and give me grief. She's never a diva, and she doesn't throw rock-star tantrums, but that's part of why I do what I do for her, in the most positive way. I know that this is something I might not want to do, but I do it because it's going to make her happy.



Compromise doesn't mean I never get what I really want, because I know chances are equally as good that my husband will put me first. It's not hard at all for me to put him first. It's one of the things that makes our marriage strong. It gives me so much pleasure to please him. I really like doing things that make him happy. If you're both thinking about it from that angle, then you know you're dealing with someone who's sensitive to what's really important to you.



When my husband and I were getting ready to get married, I owned property and he didn't. I said, "Let's be adults. Sixty percent of marriages don't work, and we have no notion of how long same-sex marriages last because they haven't existed until now. I've got assets, so you write down what the split ought to be, and I'll write down what I think, and then we'll compare notes." It turns out that each of us was way more generous to the other person than we imagined. He wanted to make sure I was taken care of, and I wanted to make sure he was.



The idea of putting your spouse first is like reading a book or watching a movie. For example, I've never been to war. But I can suspend myself long enough to get into a book about it and really be with a character and follow them through. I think you need to do that in marriage. It's a huge thing, maybe the number one thing, to get out of my own way long enough to get into where my husband is coming from. When you become familiar with someone, you begin to like them because you understand what's happening to them and why. Your next question, then, is, *What can I do to either ease their pain or assist their joy?* That's where your job comes in as a partner.



There are some things I do just to please my wife. If you're doing something that's displeasing, what's the advantage of doing that activity? I never married my job, and I may lose track of our neighbors in ten years, but my wife and I are going to be together. We do the things we do to preserve our relationship and our love, not to make other people happy.

Some couples reject the idea of compromise.

There can be an obligation that comes with love, but my husband and I don't feel obligated at all. We're here because we want to be.



There's a myth that's very strong, and that's that a relationship means compromise. I don't believe that's true. I'm not compromising anything, and my husband's not compromising anything.

I respect what he wants to do, and he respects what I want to do. When we have conflicts, we have no problems making adjustments, but I don't sacrifice anything for this relationship.



Complement is a better term. My partner has a daughter, for example, and it took me years to accept her as a family member, a part of my life. A lot of times it was not something I even saw that I wasn't accepting.

One day her daughter wanted to borrow one of our cars. I thought she should take her mother's car because their names are the same, and this really upset my partner. In talking with her about it, I realized that I was limiting my relationship with her daughter. The experience allowed me to broaden how I see that, and that relationship has been an enriching thing to add to my life.

Everything so far has been more of a complement, enhancement, enrichment. I just don't see why a relationship should mean compromise.

**For many couples, the value of life together
outweighs individual desires.
What they get is greater than what they give.**

TWO BECOMING ONE

I've had to make sacrifices, but it's been well worth the reward: the security, the excitement, and the closeness that I've had with my wife.



There are people who are in relationships who don't want to get married because it would cramp their style. Ultimately, that's trying to have your cake and eat it, too. You're trying to have the relationship without having the commitment to it, and that just doesn't last long-term.



You can paint a picture in your head and think that if I were free of the old ball and chain, I would have done this, that, and the other thing. *If I didn't have a husband, I would have had my hot pink-painted apartment in Manhattan, three cats, an elaborate publishing job, and an entire closet of shoes.* You can think that to yourself, but it's not real. I don't think it's honest.



My partner and I come from two worlds and cultures that are very, very different. There's a huge part of my world that I wish I could share with him. I can share that with friends and with my daughter, but not with him, and it's painful. I tried to merge those worlds more at the beginning, and once in a while I'll push a little bit. But as I'm growing older, I'm controlling this impulsivity much more. And I think it's a key thing in a relationship—a lot of it has to do with controlling your impulses. I'm not going to damage my relationship trying to push that.



You do make sacrifices when you get married. An obvious one is flirting. Flirting was fun, and you don't do that anymore. But you gain something, which is well worth the tradeoff, and that's a lifelong companion. Either you have a companion and you compromise on some things, or you choose not to have a companion. When you frame the idea that way, it's obvious to me that you're doing better with the lifelong companion and that you're happier.

Chapter 2

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THE BATTLE OF WILLS

In the early years, you fight because you don't understand each other.

In the later years, you fight because you do.

—Joan Didion

I DON'T REMEMBER being taught how to fight in high school, but I think it would have been helpful if it had at least been offered as an extracurricular. Lacking any instruction, many people learn to fight by trial and error, experimenting with truly bad ways to handle conflict.

For example, the old-school shouting match. It allows for really satisfying blind rage and name-calling, but the downside is that the physical exertion might give you a heart attack.

Psychological torture is another popular way to fight: for example, the silent treatment. This is where you freeze out the other person by ignoring them when they want to talk, though it takes a little acting skill to do well.

There's also the passive-aggressive fight, which is fun because it allows you to be mean without going to the trouble of addressing the real issue.

Obviously, there are better ways to handle conflict than these.

So, what do fights between happily married people look like? Are they different from conflict in unhappy marriages?

Is it normal to fight, or do some couples not fight at all?

In this chapter, couples reveal what they fought about in the early days and the techniques they've learned to manage conflict as the years pass. They talk about ground rules for keeping it civil, how important it is to be "right" in an argument, and how they evaluate when, and when not, to fight.

None of the happy couples would say their relationship is always easy, but many state that life today has a lot less conflict than it did when they first started.

Couples argue, and even people in happy marriages can get really angry with each other from time to time.

In the early days of our marriage, my wife and I would go through a period of harmony that I thought was great. I thought we were getting along, communicating well, having fun, enjoying each other's company. Meanwhile, my wife viewed that as very superficial. She'd think we weren't talking, that we were skirting around all the really key issues we needed to discuss.

Eventually it would just explode. It would boil over, and I'd be looking at her like, *What the hell just happened?* When it was over, she'd say it was cathartic and she felt better, but for me, it was the exact opposite. I felt bad. I felt we'd had a failure in the relationship, that a good relationship shouldn't boil over into those big shouting matches.



My wife and I both grew up in volatile households. I remember swearing, seriously vowing that was not the way it would be when I got married. I would do anything to avoid that. The result is that I either blew up or kept things bottled up. It was one extreme or the other. It took us a long time to find the middle ground.



Of course my husband and I love each other, but we both do things that sometimes annoy the other one. Last week we went to a party, and we got there really early. And he said, "What are we doing getting here so early?" He was mad, but that's part of marriage. We just accept it. We go with it. It's not going to be happy and joyous all the time.



For the first few years we were together, my husband and I fought a lot—real shouting, real fights. I'm more reserved than he is. When I used to get upset, I would hold onto it because sometimes I didn't know what I was feeling in the moment. I wanted to figure it out on my own. On the other hand, when my husband was upset, he'd want to talk and talk about it and resolve it right then. He'd push and push, and then I'd explode.



I think fighting helps you figure each other out. If it's at the beginning of the relationship, then I say keep fighting. If it doesn't work out, then there's a reason it doesn't. But if it does work out, and you've got understanding and chemistry, then it can be amazing.

Being honest can be uncomfortable, but it can also get easier with time.

You have to talk about the things that bother you, and you should try to talk properly about things on a regular basis. Something might happen and you don't like it, but you don't have time to have the argument right then. Later you have to sit down and say, "Hey, I didn't like it when you did that."



My husband and I are very different. We have to do a lot of adjusting all the time. It's not smooth sailing because we like to do different things, and our personalities are quite different. Luckily, we have a sense of humor in common.



My husband and I are two people who absolutely hate conflict, but that doesn't mean we avoid it. I speak my mind, and my husband speaks his mind. That's not the same thing as an argument.



If anything has evolved over time, it's that I don't get as stressed out when we have fights. I really hate conflict. It used to be that when we'd fight, I'd take it personally or think something was wrong with us, and it would take me a long time until everything was right again. Now I don't take it so seriously. We take conflicts as something that's going to happen naturally. I'll do the best I can, and if I miss, then I'll say I'm sorry.



When I was growing up, my parents would say, "We've never had a fight in our married life." I wasn't supposed to disagree with my husband, because that's the way I was brought up. But then when we got married, I thought, *I'm not going to do that*. As I've gotten older, I just give my opinion, and he still loves me no matter what. I disagree much more now than when we first got married, because I know I can.



I don't complain much generally. When I was younger, I thought that for me to complain about something meant that I needed to be upset about it. Now that I've been with my husband for a few decades, I've learned that it doesn't have to be upsetting to talk about feelings. Today we discuss our complaints and what we dislike without being upset.

**House rules:
some couples agree to how they
will and won't behave when they fight.**

There are certain lines you don't cross. You just don't say certain things because you can't take them back, like fighting dirty or calling names.



We never insult each other. Never.



TWO BECOMING ONE

You can talk about the way you interact with each other. You can draw a line and say, "Don't talk to me that way."



I think, in the happiest marriages, you go out of your way to protect and take care of the one you love. You make good choices, even in the heat of anger. Over the years I have never called my wife a name. Yes, I've been mean and selfish and ornery, but even then, I've tried to be respectful. You can still love someone, even in anger.



A good argument is not going to be pretty, but you don't have to use weapons that destroy the relationship or one another. You don't have to hit below the belt. My husband and I have both always had that editing process, knowing that we can't take some things back. That has been a saving grace repeatedly in our lives.



How you fight, and the words you choose, are really important. I have to confess that I break the rules by sometimes getting in little jabs that I regret later. Then I'm lying in bed afterward and think that I shouldn't have said something the way I said it, and I'll have to go apologize.

My husband's very good at this, to his credit. He's considerate when we're fighting, and he never says anything derogatory. That's really important to me, because it shows me that even when we're not agreeing, he loves me, values me, and cares about how I feel.



You know that classic thing about never going to bed while you're fighting? My wife and I have also learned the lesson of sleep and food. When you're laying your head on the pillow at night, that's not the time to have a conversation about anything important. We try to have those conversations after we eat dinner and at least a good half hour before we go to bed. You can't forget that there's a little toddler inside each of us, and there are three things that make toddlers cranky: when they're hungry, when they're tired, or because they just pooped their pants. And that's still pretty true for us, even at our age.



My husband and I come from two different styles of arguing, which was very hard for us to work out in the beginning. He comes from a family where you don't go to bed mad, and I come from a family where you need to sleep on it.

We've decided it's better for us to call a truce when we're angry. Then, when you wake up the next day, it's still important to say, but it won't be with the heat and the emotion. You can make your point in a much more logical fashion. It's crazy to argue when you're angry. When you're saying the same, identical thing over and over, only louder, you're going nowhere.



We don't have fights that last for days. And contrary to some advice, I've gone to bed pissed at my

wife, and I'm sure she has with me. But it's never carried over. The next morning, it's fine.



We live by that verse from the Bible, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." I can't say we've ever talked about it, but I think it was understood in our marriage. Otherwise when you wake up the next morning, it's awkward, and you're right back where you were. I can't think of a time we've ever gone to bed mad or someone said, "I'm sleeping on the couch."



My wife and I bicker, but those arguments are stress releasers. We're both the type of people who say what we're feeling in the moment. There's no going into your corner, figuring it out and coming back. There's no break. We talk about it until it's solved, and our fights usually last a few minutes. I don't think we've ever gone for more than an hour being mad, ever.



One night we were driving home from the theater, and my husband would not stop telling me how to drive. After the third time he said something, I stopped the car on the side of the road and calmly said, "Okay, these are your choices. You can be quiet and stop telling me what to do, because I know what I'm doing. Or you can get out of the car and get a cab home. Do you need some money?" At first he had this shocked look on his face, and then we both started laughing.



Early in our marriage my husband had temper tantrums. I never felt threatened physically by him, but those tantrums would frighten me. Instead of saying something, I had a tendency to placate him, but then I realized I was letting him get away with it. I decided that he was not to do this anymore.

I told him that if he had another tantrum, then I would take a baseball bat and demolish in thirteen seconds what he had done in thirteen minutes, because I was entitled to blow steam off too, every once in a while. He looked at me and said, "Well, I think that's a very reasonable arrangement." And he never had another tantrum again, ever.

How's somebody supposed to know they're doing something wrong if you don't tell them so? In all the fury, give yourself enough room to figure out what part of your partner's behavior you might be responsible for.

**Many couples have hot buttons
they fight about repeatedly, sometimes
known as "that same, stupid argument."**

The only thing that'll break up this marriage is if my husband and I decide to play tennis on the same team.



TWO BECOMING ONE

Yesterday we were doing our taxes, and my husband said something and I talked back loudly to him. We've learned over the years that when we do our taxes, we get into arguments. There's so much pressure, and we find ourselves getting snippy about nothing. Now when I realize it's the taxes that are stressing us, I apologize right away.



My husband and I have conflicts about the fact that he does not listen. It's what I get upset about the most. Sometimes I'll be talking and he hasn't heard a word I've said, and he'll then repeat what I've said as his own idea. It drives me insane. Then I get irritated and snap at him, and I become a know-it-all, and then he gets irritated. It doesn't always lead to an argument, but often it does. I haven't yet learned to let it wash off my back, but I'm working on it.



My wife and I have a consistent theme in that we both have the tendency to take the other for granted. When you get married, have kids, and get in a routine, there's a certain amount of mutual taking for granted of the other person. I may be looking for a certain amount of gratitude or recognition if I've had a hard day, and if she doesn't acknowledge it, I may feel unappreciated. I have those moments, and I know she has those moments. It's still something we struggle with, but we've brought it up so many times that we understand it now.



Just last night we had a little meltdown. We're doing a house renovation and haven't gotten the plans yet, and my husband started talking about it and said the contractor would be starting in a couple of days. I flipped out. It wasn't a normal reaction, and I got more and more hyper about it. We'd had a bad experience with renovations before, and I finally said, "It's because of what happened last time, and I just don't want that to happen again." That defused the whole thing, and I was able to stop pushing him away.



The last argument my husband and I had was about how late he came home from being out somewhere, and this is a recurring thing. It's not that I don't trust him or what he's doing, but when you get to a certain age, you shouldn't be coming in at four in the morning anymore. I think maybe it's just because I can't settle until he comes home. I don't completely relax. I'd prefer that he's in by one in the morning at the latest, and then we can all go to sleep. It's not one of those things that's going to destroy a marriage, but it's something we're going to continue to argue about. It's our major area of conflict—nothing else tops that.



Having that same argument over and over can be like a wedge in a log. If you know it's already caused an issue and you're not resolving it, each time you hit that wedge harder, it's not bringing that log back together. Each time you strike it, it's going to push you further apart.

**If you need to be right all the time,
then you just bought a ticket to the fights.**

There's that classic question: Would you rather be right, or would you rather be happy? If you asked me twenty-five years ago, I'd unhesitatingly say I'd rather be right, but that was stupid. As far as marriage goes, happy is really much smarter.



I've learned so much about myself from the conflicts I've had with my husband over the years. I used to have to win all the time, right there, with no other interpretation but that I crushed you. I got that from my dad. He leaves no room for anyone else to win, and I've never heard him apologize. I'm mostly not like that anymore. It also helps because my husband is very easy to get along with. I lucked out on that.



Early on in our relationship, my husband and I fought a lot. But after we decided we wanted to be a couple, I decided that if this is going to work, we needed to be on each other's side first, regardless of whether we agree on an issue. I began to look at my defense of my husband as a human being first, because I have his back over everything else. Not that I'd back off or stop expressing my viewpoints, but winning didn't matter anymore. What mattered is that we knew we took each other's side first in all things.



I think when a person goes overboard in focusing on independence, being the strong one, and defending their right to be right all the time, that's a big relationship killer. Not only do they have to be right, they have to let everyone know they're right, especially their spouse. Well, what does that get you? You know you're right, the other person still knows you're wrong, and now you've completely alienated yourself from everybody else around you.



I used to have a boss who always had a lot of New Age sayings that I thought were a bunch of crap. He had this one that I never understood, but I understand it now as it relates to our marriage. He'd say, "Don't make other people wrong. They can be wrong, but don't make them wrong."

My wife and I will "make each other wrong" sometimes. We'll assume someone's done something out of a bad or incorrect intention. Our reactions to our kids can be very different, for example. Sometimes we'll make a judgment that the other person was wrong, rather than that they just did something differently. So, let's not blame each other, and let's not make each other wrong. I still think some of what that guy said was hippie crazy, but I buy into that one now a little bit.



I can be bossy and pushy, but I'm very conflicted with myself about that, and I know this is a conflict for other couples, too. Sometimes my husband gives up and says he's too old to fight with me, and that's not right. I think it's important always to listen to what he has to say, even when I believe I'm right. It's hard, but I really try to listen, compromise, and give him a chance to do some things the way

he wants to do them.



The younger you are, the more aggressive you might be in worrying about being right or getting your way. I can tell you now that after fifty or sixty years of marriage, you know each other pretty well. You don't press for the things you know are going to be problems. It doesn't make any difference anyway. Can you imagine how many of my dirty socks and underwear my wife has laundered? And she's still feeding me. So, am I going to argue about right and wrong? Forget it.

Zip it. Holding your tongue can prevent unimportant arguments.

I was listening to this basketball coach talk recently about his players. He was saying that he doesn't get into a lot of arguments with them unless he has to. He feels like he has about three bullets for every player, and that's how I feel about my marriage. With my wife, I'm very careful about when I choose to use a bullet, so to speak.



My husband doesn't really criticize me, which I appreciate. The meals are pretty much my job in our home. If I make a meal that's not very good, he'll just go and get a bottle of Tabasco sauce. He won't say anything, and then I know it's bland, but he doesn't criticize.



Sometimes my husband asks me to help him with his chores, but then he'll constantly correct me. Like if I'm holding a board while he's sawing, he'll say, "You need to do it this way," and he'll go through a big list of requirements. And I'll think, *Oh, my goodness*. To me it's a compromise to keep my mouth shut. This is something I've learned to deal with, and it's not that important.



It can be a problem when couples don't communicate, but we have the opposite problem sometimes. I probably over-communicate. I'll tell my husband what irritates me right away, but honestly, I don't need to talk about *everything* that irritates me. I should shut up more, and we'd probably argue less.



You can't mention every tiny thing that bugs you. If you can let it go, and in the next day or two you forget about it, then it wasn't important. Just don't let it happen too often, or you'll be seething about the fact that you keep letting things go.



I was married to my first wife at a young age, and it lasted a long time. It was a very unhappy marriage, and then I went through an extremely ugly divorce. I grew accustomed to a terrible quality of life. It's like if you grow up in Winnipeg, you think it's always 40 below in the winter, right? Well, it isn't like that everywhere.

In my current marriage, I remember in the early days my wife would say, "Oh, we're fighting." And I'd say, "Are you kidding? Holy smokes, let me tell you about fighting. This isn't fighting." I pick my battles carefully now. Compared to how I was ten years ago, my fuse is a mile long.



In my early twenties, I had a very painful experience. I decided I didn't want to live in pain anymore, so I began a pursuit of spirituality for the next twenty years, and I developed inside myself a very strong place of contentment. Since then, I've realized that there's nothing that can pull me from this place of contentment unless I allow it to, and I will not allow it. When you're with someone and they get angry, and that person makes you angry, it escalates the conversation. If a person gets angry and you *don't* get angry, it minimizes the conversation, and you get back to more of the facts.

Just the other day we were going somewhere, and I was wearing something my wife didn't like, and she got really emotional. We got into the car, and the car was quiet for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Then she took her hand and put it on my hand, and I knew it was finished. I refused to be a part of her anger, so it got minimized very quickly.

**Marriage is a marathon.
Is what you're fighting about today
still going to be important
at the end of the race?**

After ten years of marriage, I still haven't perfected the skill of not sweating the small stuff, but I really try. I say that if it's not harmful or illegal, then let it go.



It helps to project a little bit into the future and think, *Do I want to make this permanent? Because if I say this, it's going to hurt. Is that really what I want?*



They say the devil's in the details, and I think the devil really is in the details in marriage. Bad things happen when you lose sight of the big picture.



We went through a terrible time when I was pregnant. One of us wanted to keep the baby, and the other didn't. We had to accept, in a bad situation, that both of us were right. In a good, healthy relationship you can accept that the other one is right, and so are you, and it doesn't have to be one way or the other. I don't have to give ground in a very important situation, and neither does he. You have to make peace with the way it is and have patience to see how it all shakes out in twenty years. This is how you learn to grow up in a marriage.



Don't be so worried about protecting what you think is your turf or about the right way to do things. Take a step back, take a deep breath, and ask yourself whether, in the big scheme of things, it really matters. Is it worth having conflict over? Or is it worth keeping the peace? You don't want to do that at the expense of being a doormat, but at the same time, you have to recognize the fact that you're going to have conflicts over stupid stuff, and is it really worth it?



I think you can tell the difference between a temporary fight and something that's more serious. When my wife and I went through a bad patch, I was always looking beyond that. It's intangible, but even when it was difficult, I really loved her, I was stimulated by her, and I couldn't imagine being with anybody else. If I look at the relationships I know that have fallen apart, in most of the cases, the people came to a point where they couldn't be in the same room because there was all this experience and this well of emotion they couldn't control. In our case, I never had that. It never got to that point, even during those bad times. I felt like what we were going through did not define our relationship.



We're approaching fifty now, and we're dealing with friends and family who have cancers and those kinds of things. I try to think about if I were in that situation. If I had a year or six months to live, or my wife did, would that really be important to me? Often times I have to answer, "Well no, it wouldn't." So, why am I living my life as if it's important now? Sometimes forcing yourself into those exercises, saying those mantras to yourself, can actually change the way you feel about something.

Apologies and forgiveness are worth learning.

Apologies might not play a role every time, but the willingness to apologize if you're wrong must be an expectation. You have to have a history, if you were out of line, to be willing to apologize. And it has to be a genuine apology, not, "I'm sorry you made me so mad."



My husband and I had to work on apologies. I'd tell him I was sorry about something, but he'd keep harping on the subject. Then I'd say, "Okay, tell me which apology is going to be meaningful to you. Do you want me to say it ten times or a hundred times? Tell me which apology you're going to accept, and I'll get there, but I meant the first one when I said it." Sometimes when you're angry it can be hard to hear the apology, but it's important to learn how.



After a fight, my husband wants to say he's sorry right away and move on. That's stereotypically male, I think, wanting to have peace, but I'm not interested in that apology if he's not going to change his behavior. The apology doesn't mean anything if the same thing is going to happen again.



I'm not sure I'd believe it if someone told this to me, but my husband and I don't have the need for many apologies in our relationship. Someone may lose their temper, and that's not cool. In that case, the apology comes sincerely and is accepted readily, and then it's really let go.



When we have emotional outbursts, they don't go for days and weeks. It's like, *Okay, we had this thing, tempers flared, now let's move on.* The next day I say, "Give me a kiss, I gotta go to work." It wasn't like that in the beginning, but we don't hold on to grudges and bad feelings anymore.



One of the things I've always appreciated about my wife is that whenever we argue, it comes and goes. It's like a thunderstorm. The next morning it is gone. On rare occasions it will be brought up again, but for the most part, neither one of us dwells on it or comes back and brings up the same thing. It's always stuff for the moment.



I think having a bad memory is quite a good asset in a marriage. If you remember every tiny little thing that ever went wrong or every argument, then it would be a nightmare and you'd never go forward. As long as it's nothing big like someone having an affair, then having a bad memory is sometimes useful.



Forgiveness is key for my wife and me. I think the ability to forgive is the most significant trait you need in a successful marriage. There might be stewing for a little while, but the forgiveness is there, and I think it has to be a decision. Either I'm going to stay angry about this, or I'm going to let it go. You have to make a choice.

**Couples who know each other
really well may fight less
than couples who don't.**

Even after twenty-six years, one of the things that keeps our marriage very strong is that my wife and I talk, talk, talk all the time. It creates more understanding. We get to know each other really well. Then if there's something I do or say that she doesn't like or doesn't agree with, she might better understand the reason I would do it or say it.



My husband has a stronger personality than I do, and that was part of the reason I fell in love with him. But when we got into the relationship, ironically that became a source of conflict. Over the course of our relationship I've learned who he is, and I've accepted it.

TWO BECOMING ONE



My wife and I don't argue much anymore. When we talk about our arguing style, it sounds like there are a lot more than there were. In the last twelve years together, I bet we've only had three good arguments that lasted for more than thirty minutes.



I'm very expressive, and my husband is the opposite. He likes to think things through, and the more I push, the more reticent he'll be. In the early days, I'd know there was something wrong, and we'd end up screaming at each other to break the logjam, and it was exhausting and hurtful. After a while, I learned to express myself, then wait and let him eventually open up. It took patience on my part and recognizing who he is, not bending to get him to be who I want him to be. These days we almost never fight.



After you're married for a while, you find on certain issues it's not worth pressing anymore. Forcing a decision becomes more damaging than what it's all about. These days, if my wife feels something is going to be too hard on me, she backs off. And I do the same for her.



I've heard it said that if people don't fight it means there's a time bomb, something ticking underneath. It's not true for my husband and me at all. We disagree all the time, but we don't have arguments.



Sometimes my husband and I will be deep into a fight, and one of us will make a face or say something ridiculous, and we just start laughing—and it changes. Actually, nothing's changed, but it lightens the load. For the most part, our fights are stupid miscommunications that escalate. We don't ever really want to be fighting, so any course to get us out of it will help.



I used to pay a lot of attention to when my wife was up or down. I'd constantly ask, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" Now I don't worry about it. I've learned that if I ask her what's wrong and she says, "Nothing," then I believe her and move on.



We've been together for eight years, and my wife and I might have had two arguments. Conflict for us is very, very rare. That's part of our chemistry. We respect and allow the independence of the other person. There are a lot of things she does that I would never do, but I have no interest in trying to intervene in her habits, methods, language, friends, whatever it might be. She respects me in the same way. We disagree about a lot, but we don't infringe.



TWO BECOMING ONE

You're supposed to be partners. You're supposed to be there to help each other through life. There will always be conflict, but that's just part of finding common goals. If you approach life as partners, you'll find a way to work through it.