

Love lessons for baby boomers

As divorce rate jumps for the over-50 set, some lessons for keeping a marriage intact, whatever age you are



DANIEL LAFLOR/THE AGENCY COLLECTION PHOTO

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Baby boomer marriages are having a best of times/worst of times moment.

Despite the overall divorce rate in the U.S. dropping during the past two decades, the rate of couples divorcing after age 50 has doubled. In 1990, fewer than 10 percent of divorces included spouses age 50 or older, according to a National Center for Family and Marriage Research study out of Bowling Green State University. Today, boomers account for more than 25 percent of divorces. Bad news, right?

Researchers and sociologists cite a handful of arguably positive factors, though: longer life spans, more financial stability for women, a higher standard for happy coupling. Indeed, a 2010 Pew Research Center study found that boomers are more likely than any other population segment to say the main point of marriage was to

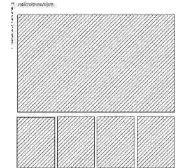
seek happiness, and 66 percent said they would prefer divorce to an unhappy marriage, compared with 44 percent of younger Americans.

Ideally, marriage experts say, more couples will find a way to capitalize on the evolution of marital roles and norms without feeling like they've got to throw in the towel.

"It would be insane for any of us to think we're the same person at 55 that we were at 25," says New York-based relationship counselor Rachel Sussman. "The criteria we used to make decisions in our 20s are no longer the criteria we feel are important in our 50s and 60s."

Facing the future together

But there are ways, big and small, for couples looking ahead to — or inhabiting — the post-50 years to divorce-proof their marriages.



"Baby boomer marriages have been on cruise control," says Justin Buzzard, author of the newly released book "Date Your Wife" (Crossway). "There are many wonderful exceptions, but by and large boomer marriages have been in maintenance mode for decades. The man has been focused on his career. They haven't been keeping the marriage strong and fit and healthy. The kids leave home, and the husband and wife look at each other and say, 'I'm not in love with you. I barely know you.'"

Discord has been long simmering in most cases, Sussman says.

"For people 50 and older, divorce is generally not an 'aha' moment," she says. "It's usually many, many years of dysfunctional patterns that for one reason or other the couple can't break."

So the patterns break the couple. But it doesn't have to be so.

"Couples entering this next phase of their lives have such a great opportunity to get out there and see the world together," Sussman says. "My husband and I had an ongoing dialogue throughout our daughter's senior year of high school about what we wanted the next chapter of our lives to be about; what we wanted to do individually and what we wanted to do together." But getting your relationship to a point where you're eager to embrace the next phase (or the current one, for that matter) can take some doing."

Boomers need to redefine marriage, Buzzard says, partly because of how completely the culture around them has changed since they exchanged vows and partly, oddly enough, because their parents probably stuck it out through thick and thin.

"The generation ahead of them stayed together for good or ill, and a lot of it was ill," Buzzard says. "They put a lid on it and suffered through. A lot of boomers just figured that's how marriage was. They

didn't know marriages could fall apart."

So they threw themselves into jobs, kids, hobbies and other pursuits that required time and focus and passion, assuming their marriages were, in effect, a given.

"There's a fundamental misunderstanding of marriage," Buzzard says. "Guys get married and think the mission is accomplished. The real mission begins at marriage. The real dating begins at marriage. Vows don't keep themselves. Vows aren't magic."

Not-so-secret ingredient

The key (surprise, surprise) is better communication.

"The most important thing is to listen to your partner's emotions and communicate the message, 'Baby, if you're unhappy with something, the world stops, and I listen and we do something about it,'" says renowned marriage researcher John Gottman, author of 40 books, including the just-released "What Makes Love Last? How to Build Trust and Avoid Betrayal" (Simon and Schuster). "I see people who've left one another in pain for 10, 15 years, and by then you don't feel loved or safe. The critical variable is making sure your partner feels cherished."

Gottman has spent four decades researching couples in three specific domains: friendship, which encompasses

intimacy, romance and enjoying and trusting each other; conflict, specifically how couples deal with inevitable disagreements and moments of inadvertently hurting each other's feelings; and shared meaning, which takes into account how they connect around holidays and traditions as well as their lifelong goals and values.

The "master" couples, Gottman says, aren't necessarily aligned on every count. But they hear each other out and treat one another gently. "Disaster" couples, he says, tend to believe the worst about their partners and feel burdened by relationship talk.

"Masters say, 'Talk to me. You don't look very happy,'" he says. "Disasters say, or give a look that says, 'I don't want to deal with this. I don't want to talk. You're too needy.' That's a big mistake.

"Masters scan their social environment for what's going well and say thank you and build a culture of appreciation and respect," Gottman says. "Disasters look for their partner's mistakes and tend to miss the positive things their partner is doing, and read in negativity when it's not there. We've determined in our research that the negative habit of mind is actually a distortion of reality, and the positive habit of mind is much more accurate."

Gottman tells couples to engage in a weekly hourlong "state of the union" talk. "Masters are talking about goals and values and making sure they're on the same page about the big things in life and about what they are all about as people," he says. "'Are you picking the kids up? Did you call the plumber?' is just errand-

talk. You need real conversation.”

Buzzard counsels husbands, in particular, to write action plans for their marriages. “Guys will often map out business plans or plans for their upcoming fishing trip with their buddies,” he says. “I tell them, ‘Hey, man, put a plan together for how you’re going to date your wife, and fill in your hobbies and other responsibilities around that.’”

“It’s not enough to say, ‘I’m going to start taking better care of my wife and my marriage,’” Buzzard says. “A dream without a plan is worthless. You need to come up with a practical plan and put legs on that dream.”

And don’t be naive about the challenges ahead, real and hypothetical.

“You have to face your fears, and when you see change ahead, don’t hide from it,” Sussman says. “‘If I lose my job, how is that going to feel for us?’ ‘How’s it going to work when our kid moves back home?’ You’ve got to do some individual soul-searching, and soul-searching as a couple, about how you see the next part of your life unfolding.”

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Hello, I’m your spouse.

It’s nice to meet you.

Couples who’ve been living together for decades often forget to keep each other intimately involved in topics that dive deeper than child-rearing and household upkeep. In “Five Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage From Good to Great”

(Delacorte Press), marriage therapist and University of Michigan research professor Terri L. Orbuch suggests couples spend at least 10 minutes a day getting to know each other. She offers the following questions to get your conversations started:

- What was an important turning point in your life?
- Do you think you are/were closer to your mom or your dad?
- What is the one thing you want to be remembered for?
- What is one thing you really want to accomplish in the next two years?
- If you were able to work in any other job for a year, what would it be?
- What are you most afraid of?
- What was the one thing you hated most as a kid?
- What age do you feel like inside?

— H.S.