

Opposites attract, but values must match

'LOVE DOCTOR' | 'Simple changes' can lead to happiness

BY MIKE THOMAS

Staff Reporter

Terri Orbuch knows relationships.

As a marriage therapist of more than 20 years, a research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and the host of Voiceamerica.com's weekly "The Love Doctor" radio show, she has ample opportunity to examine where couples go right and where they go wrong.

Orbuch's new book, *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great* (Delacorte Press, \$26), is based on 22 years of research with 373 participating couples. The mother of two, Orbuch herself has been hitched for 17 years. She says her parents have been together for more than a half-century.

Since Valentine's Day — when bended knees and popped questions abound — was last week, we asked her for some matrimonial insight.

Q. *What's the best way to determine whether a couple will go the distance before they tie the knot?*

A. I think for many people, they're attracted to what they're not. They're attracted to their opposite. But what you really want is someone who has underlying, similar values, like whether or not you want children, discipline of children, how many children, on religion, on lifestyle.

I think you can be opposite to someone in other kinds of ways, like interests or food preferences or movie likes. That's OK. So look for someone who's opposite and who can teach you about all these

other kinds of things, but not someone who's opposite in terms of those values and attitudes that are important to how a relationship is maintained over the long haul.

Q. *Is it tougher to stay married today because there are so*



"Many people come into marriage with unrealistic expectations," said Terri Orbuch.

many distractions and potential sources of conflict, or have we just become lazier and less loyal?

A. I think we've become busier. These days, we just have so little time. We're concerned with kids and making sure we're good parents or good workers, we're told that we have to eat healthy, so we go to the grocery store more. We have to exercise, we have to volunteer. I think our lives have become so busy that we don't become great at any one of those things.

And the first thing that goes

on the back burner among all of those is our relationship, because other things seem to be more immediate. But what I really stress in the book and when I talk to couples and when I give presentations is you cannot do that. Because those issues accumulate over time. So take your relationship off the back burner, become less busy, slow down. We really have to slow down.

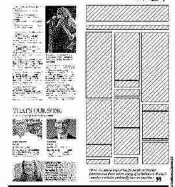
Q. *What's the key to good communication?*

A. First, you have to know about yourself, you have to be happy with yourself, you have to be confident with yourself. Second, you have to know how to say those needs or wants in words. And I think it's just as important for people to be good listeners, and that's where many of us fall short. We don't know how to listen and really hear our partner. And that takes being able to be not so threatened by what someone says to us.

Don't always take things so personally, because then you're more calm and you're really able to hear what your partner said. Next, it takes asking good questions, and we're not really good at that, either. So that's a skill that people need to learn.

Lastly, we also need to let go of some of the baggage from our past. I think we all come to relationships with childhoods and previous relationships, and that is personal baggage. And in order to let it go and be present and be a good communicator, you need to deal with all that past and let it go.

Q. *You tell people to expect less and get more. Can you explain that concept a bit?*



A. When I talk to people, and when I talked to the couples in my long-term study, which is really the basis of my book, what I found is that many people come into marriage with unrealistic expectations, with high expectations. So they expect their partner to be their best friend, the best lover, the best parent, the best provider, the best volunteer, the best exerciser. And that's exhausting.

That's too many, too much.

Q. *It's often simple things that keep couples happy.*

A. You need to sweat the small stuff. And that's opposite of what we've heard in the media. We've heard you shouldn't sweat the small stuff. But simple changes in behaviors and attitudes can lead to happiness and transform your relationship.