

HEALTHY MARRIAGES

The traditional ending to fairytales is that, after a long search and escaping many dangers, prince meets princess and after having known each other long enough to exchange a glance and a kiss they get married and live happily ever after. Today, while the getting together might include the fairytale dress and party, or might miss the actual marriage altogether, many people still expect that living happily ever after should follow easily. If not, get divorced. How is your happily ever after going? How much thought have you put in to what might make it happier if there is an awful feeling of ill-health in the relationship?

Healthy and happy marriages and relationships, while they might superficially take on many different appearances, usually have several factors in common. Here are some of them. Take a look and consider your own.

Firstly, they allow each person to be the person they are. Many marriages break down very early when one or both partners discover that they simply don't know each other sufficiently well beforehand. Love is not blind but romance might be. When the prince fell in love with Snow White he imagined he knew her by looking at her sleeping face. Real people too can put their own ideas and feelings on to an attractive other person and can greatly distort the reality. Or they imagine they can change the little somethings that are not so attractive about the other, or that love will change them, or that the other will change as proof of their love.

Secondly, healthy relationships allow for and encourage development in the other. Everyone does change in some ways over time (though not necessarily because their partner wants them to), so healthy marriages allow for developmental changes in the partners. Therefore the reasons for staying married may also have to develop and change, even if the early heady days are remembered with great affection – as they should be. The need for exciting romance might change to a need for companionship. If that suits both partners then all is well. But if one wants to keep wining and dining and the other prefers to eat in the kitchen and if both of them think the other has it completely wrong (is “immature” or “boring”) there will be problems. Of course if factor one remains constant – allowing the other to be who they are – then compromise can be achieved. Not the kind of compromise where one feels he or she can never win, but the kind of compromise where both people move a bit to fit in with the other is what I'm talking about here. If it can't be then there will probably be a constant wish to change the other back to what they used to be, or forward to something they should be, with resultant tension and unhappiness.

Healthy marriages promote both a sense of “I” and a sense of “we”. We are born into a relationship (with mother, father, siblings etc) and one of the tasks of growing up is to develop a sense of self. Another is to develop the ability to care for, respect and be involved with others. So there should be a kind of invisible fence or boundary around the couple, a sense of being a unit composed of two other units. This should continue even with the arrival of children – after all, they will grow and move out one day and what will be left will be the couple. The sense of this must endure.

Another factor in couple relationships is how power and responsibility are shared. A healthy marriage is basically one where there is respect and a sense of equality, not one where one is frightened of or feels lesser than the other. This does *not* mean that all tasks

must be divided down the middle, each alternatively taking out the rubbish bins for example. However there must be agreement (silent or spoken) as to how the tasks are shared. If both partners find the traditional gender roles – he mows, she irons – suits them, then fine. However if one or the other forces his or her viewpoint on the other, and the other feels unable to have their view considered or to share in decision making, there is bound to be great unhappiness, perhaps anger or depression. There are many ways to take inappropriate control in a marriage, from brute force to sulking or to other more subtle forms of manipulation like headaches, which might not be consciously expressed but which can be powerfully controlling. Where there is no agreement on tasks, money management, the freedom of each to think and express there can be no real sense of a healthy couple.

Couple relationships can be tested in the extreme when confronted with change, even when it is planned, for example with the arrival of children, moving house and so on but even more so when it is unplanned. Even apparently wonderful change like winning the lottery has caused many a marriage to break down as the partners have so many new things to negotiate – around work, living arrangements and so on. When the change is clearly not wonderful, perhaps traumatic and involving things like job loss, illness, disability, the death of a child, the results can be catastrophic. Marriages which survive these hurdles are usually strengthened because the partners have worked together manage them and to support each other.

What about sex? There is of course no prescription for how often intercourse should occur, but each person's needs for sex and intimacy should be met, or as at least not ignored, ridiculed, or put up with while "thinking of England". Sexual problems are often the first sign of other underlying tensions but not necessarily so. Some couples continue to enjoy passionate love making when all else around them is falling apart. Sex, while it can provide great joy and indeed help to heal hurts, should not be used to cover up problems or as an excuse not to deal with problems or as a way of controlling one's partner.

So: a happy marriage or couple relationship includes amongst other things two whole people who appreciate and respect each other, who share power and responsibility, who work together to deal with life's challenges and who satisfy each other's needs for sex and intimacy. I wonder how Snow White and her prince got on!

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