

The Five Lessons Divorced People Learn About Marriage

Sometimes it takes going through a bad marriage to figure out what makes a good marriage. Five strategies for a successful, happy marriage from divorced people who learned these lessons the hard way. Elizabeth Bernstein has details on Lunch Break.

Want great marriage advice? Ask a divorced person.

People who lose the most important relationship of their life tend to spend some time thinking about what went wrong. If they are at all self-reflective, this means they will acknowledge their own mistakes, not just their ex's blunders. And if they want to be lucky in love next time, they'll try to learn from these mistakes.

Research shows that most divorced people identify the same top five regrets—behaviors they believe contributed to their marriage's demise and that they resolve to change next time. "Divorced individuals who step back and say, 'This is what I've done wrong and this is what I will change,' have something powerful to teach others," says Terri Orbuch, a psychologist, research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and author of the new book "Finding Love Again: 6 Simple Steps to a New and Happy Relationship." "This is marriage advice learned the hard way," she says

Dr. Orbuch has been conducting a longitudinal study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, collecting data periodically from 373 same-race couples who were between the ages of 25 and 37 and in their first year of marriage in 1986, the year the study began. Over the continuing study's 25 years so far, 46% of the couples divorced—a rate in line with the Census and other national data. Dr. Orbuch followed many of the divorced individuals into new relationships and asked 210 of them what they had learned from their mistakes. (Of these 210, 71% found new partners, including 44% who remarried.) This is their hard-earned advice.

Boost your spouse's mood

Of the divorced people, 15% said they would give their spouse more of what Dr. Orbuch calls "affective affirmation," including compliments, cuddling and kissing, hand-holding, saying "I love you," and emotional support. "By expressing love and caring you build trust," Dr. Orbuch says.

She says there are four components of displays of affection that divorced people said were important: How often the spouse showed love; how often the spouse made them feel good about the kind of person they are; how often the spouse made them feel good about having their own ideas and ways of doing things; and how often the spouse made life interesting or exciting.

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The divorced individuals didn't specifically identify sex as something they would have approached differently, although Dr. Orbuch says it is certainly one aspect of demonstrating love and affection.

Men seem to need nonsexual affirmation even more than women do, Dr. Orbuch says. In her study, when the husband reported that his wife didn't show love and affection, the couple was almost twice as likely to divorce as when the man said he felt cared for and appreciated. The reverse didn't hold true, though. Couples where women felt a lack of affection weren't more likely to divorce.

Do something to demonstrate that your partner is noticed and appreciated every single day, Dr. Orbuch says. It can be as small as saying, "I love you," or "You're a great parent." It can be an action rather than words: Turn on the coffee pot in the morning. Bring in the paper. Warm up the car. Make a favorite dessert. Give a hug.

Talk more about money



Photo Illustrations by Stephen Webster

Money was the No. 1 point of conflict in the majority of marriages, good or bad, that Dr. Orbuch studied. And 49% of divorced people from her study said they fought so much over money with their spouse—whether it was different spending styles, lies about spending, one person making more money and trying to control the other—that they anticipate money will be a problem in their next relationship, too.

There isn't a single financial fix for all couples. Dr. Orbuch says each person needs to examine his or her own approach to money. What did money mean when you were growing up? How do you approach spending and saving now? What are your financial goals?

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Partners need to discuss their individual money styles and devise a plan they both can live with. They might decide to pool their money, or keep separate accounts. They might want a joint account for family expenses. In the study, six out of 10 divorced individuals who began a new relationship chose not to combine finances.

"Talk money more often—not just when it's tax time, when you have high debt, when bills come along," Dr. Orbuch says. Set ground rules and expectations and stick to them.

Get over the past



Photo Illustrations by Stephen Webster

To engage in a healthy way with your partner, you need to let go of the past, Dr. Orbuch says.

This includes getting over jealousy of your partner's past relationships, irritation at how your mother-in-law treats you, something from your own childhood that makes it hard for you to trust, a spat you had with your spouse six months ago.

It isn't good advice just for those with broken hearts, she adds.

In Dr. Orbuch's study, divorced individuals who held on to strong emotions for their ex-spouse—whether love or hate—were less healthy than those people who had moved on emotionally.

Having trouble letting go of anger, longing, sadness or grief about the past? Keep a journal. Exercise. Talk to a friend (but not endlessly) about it.

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Or try writing to the person who has upset you to explain your feelings: "Dear Mother-in-Law. It's about time you treated me like a full-fledged member of this family and stopped second-guessing my parenting decisions."

Then take the excellent advice Abraham Lincoln is said to have given his secretary of war, who had written an emotional missive to one of his generals.

"Put it in the stove," Lincoln said. "That's what I do when I've written a letter when I am angry."

"This is an exercise for you, to get all the emotions out on paper so you can release them," Dr. Orbuch says.

Blame the relationship



Photo Illustrations by Stephen Webster

The divorced individuals in the study who blamed ex-spouses, or even themselves, had more anxiety, depression and sleep disorders than individuals who blamed the way that they and their partners interacted. Those who held on to anger were less likely to move on, build a strong new relationship and address future problems in a positive, proactive manner.

It's hard not to blame. In the study, 65% of divorced individuals blamed their ex-spouses, with more women blaming an ex-husband (80%) than men blaming an ex-wife (47%). And 16% of men blamed themselves, compared with only 4% of women. Dr. Orbuch says the men may simply accept their ex's view of the breakup. More men than women admitted to an extramarital affair.

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How do you blame in a healthy way? Say "we," not "you" or "I." Say, "We are both so tired lately," not "You are so crabby." When you remove blame, it's easier to come up with a solution.

Ask your partner for his or her view of a problem. Say, "Why do you think we aren't getting along?"

"There are multiple ways of seeing a problem," Dr. Orbuch says. "By getting your partner's perspective, and marrying it with your perspective, you get the relationship perspective."

Reveal more about yourself



Photo Illustrations by Stephen Webster

Communication style is the No. 1 thing the study's divorced individuals said they would change in the next relationship (41% said they would communicate differently).

Spouses need to speak in a calm and caring voice. They should learn to argue in a way that produces a solution, not just more anger.

They have to practice "active listening," where they try to hear what the other person is saying, repeating back what they just heard and asking if they understood correctly.

To communicate well, partners need to reveal more about themselves, not just do "maintenance communication."

"It doesn't have to be emotional," Dr. Orbuch says. "But it should be about issues where you learn about what makes each other tick." Such topics help your partner understand you better.

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Dr. Orbuch suggests a 10-minute rule: Every day, for 10 minutes, the couple should talk alone about something other than work, the family and children, the household, the relationship. No problems. No scheduling. No logistics.

"You need to tell each other about your lives and see what makes you each tick," Dr. Orbuch says.

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