

Sustaining Your Marriage as an Empty Nester or Retiree

Navigating the transition into your “Golden Years” as a couple may be difficult, but doing it successfully has the potential to strengthen your marriage.

Many couples who have been married more than 20 years expect that life will get easier as they approach their “golden years.” Often their marriage has endured child-rearing, career-building, and the juggling of extended family obligations. They are preparing to relax and enjoy the good life when suddenly the comfortable rhythm of married life becomes interrupted.

Transitions are a part of life. These natural transitions may involve children growing up and moving away, the loss of a parent, or retirement. The aging of the baby-boom population has brought added visibility to these transitions. This group, which numbers 78 million, or about 40 percent of the population older than age 15, will have aged to their late 40s, 50s and early 60s by 2010. Individuals respond differently to mid-life transitions based on gender, background and family support. While a mild level of anxiety is common, some find the changes more difficult than others. This tip sheet provides advice for how to navigate these transitions while sustaining, and potentially strengthening, your marriage.

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Preparing for Mid-Life Transitions

Financial planners suggest you begin retirement planning when you begin working. The same is true for your marriage. The first step in preparing your marriage for mid-life transitions is discussing your individual and couple goals before you marry.



Clearly defining each other’s expectations related to marriage and parenting can be helpful. As life happens, couples often shift their expectations and need to share their new thoughts and feelings with their mate. Maintaining open lines of communication can alleviate the stress and resentment of unmet expectations.

Setting boundaries to protect the couple relationship is important. Drs. Cloud and Townsend, authors of

Boundaries in Marriage, include work and kids on their list of “intruders” that can weaken the marital bond. Parents spend a tremendous amount of time and energy rearing and caring their children. Once the children are no longer the primary focus, couples may begin to feel that they no longer have anything in common if they have neglected to nurture their marriage throughout the years.

Some tips for setting boundaries are:

- ✓ Establish a routine of putting children and/or projects to bed at an hour that still allows you and your spouse a chance to spend a few minutes together at the end of each day. If that is not possible, get up a little earlier to spend time together before your day starts.
- ✓ Stay connected to your spouse by planning regular date nights. Establish rules that these dates are not to be spent talking about the children or other family business such as finances, but focused on each other. Discuss your dreams for the future and reminisce about fun events from the past.
- ✓ Say “no” to commitments that impose on scheduled couple time.

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Strategies for Surviving

While setting boundaries and maintaining open communication can help couples stay connected and minimize the impact of mid-life transitions, many couples are surprised by their own - or their partner's - response when these transitions occur.

Here are a few survival tips:

- ✓ Eliminate outside distractions when possible to allow time to connect with each other emotionally. Date nights, relationship classes and honest communication are all helpful tools.
- ✓ Communicate with each other before making plans with your new recreational time. One spouse may view retirement as an opportunity to spend more time with grandchildren; the other may want to spend more time on the golf course. It is important to convey your expectations about how you want to spend time with your spouse, and how much time alone you would like.
- ✓ Decisions regarding caring for aging parents and allowing adult children to move back home should not be made without considering all the options and the potential impact of each one. For couples with financial resources, options may be more readily available, but there are often resources available in most communities to assist.

- Connecting adult children with subsidized rent and child care services may provide the boost

they need to become self sufficient.

- Respite care and home meal deliveries may be available to assist with elder care.
 - Kiplinger, the organization behind the country's first personal finance magazine, provides a contract template for use with "Boomerang Kids" to help establish rules and timelines. (Boomerang Kids are adult children who return to live with their parents after a period of independence.)
- ✓ Attend a marriage education workshop. This can help to equip spouses with the tools to revisit their expectations and communication patterns in the marriage. If a skill-based program is not sufficient, then individual or couple counseling may help to work through issues.

Open communication and nurturing your spousal relationship are just as important 20 years into a marriage as they were in the beginning. Partners who do not feel emotionally connected to each other are less likely to view one another as a source of strength during tumultuous times, making the marriage vulnerable. Couples who feel connected are better able to overcome the challenges of mid life. They can enjoy a fulfilling retirement not only as a couple, but as active members within their circle of family and friends.

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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center would like to thank Robyn Cenizal for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Ms. Cenizal is the Executive Administrator for the Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families Initiative, a program she co-developed and implemented in 2002. The program's objectives include increasing the number of prepared marriages, reducing divorce rates and encouraging financial and emotional support for children.

This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.