

What I Know For Sure After 40 Years of Marriage

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This week, my husband Patrick and I celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary. To mark the occasion, I booked a room for us at the rustic inn down the coast where we spent our wedding night.

Sitting at a small table by the fire at dinner, Patrick lifted his glass to toast to our many years together. “To us,” he said. “To us,” I replied and at that moment I could see us as newlyweds, at a far table by the window. There we were, young, bright-eyed, naive, in love. So much of life yet to be lived, so much to learn.

Looking at them, I knew they had no idea of the bumpy road ahead, the hard-fought lessons they would learn, the ways they were yet to grow, and the sweetness and depth of connection that their decades together would bring.

Now, at 40 years, here’s what I know about marriage that I wish I’d known then:

1. Most people believe that marriage should be easier than it is. The truth is, marriage is hard. It isn’t just you.
2. The ways that you’re different will either make life interesting or drive you crazy. Which of these it is will depend on how open-minded and flexible you’re able to be.
3. Owning up to your own shortcomings becomes easier the more that you practice it.
4. Don’t think having challenges means you’re doing something wrong. All couples struggle. It’s the way that we grow.
5. Every couple writes their own rule book. Who does what. What you can talk about. What can’t be discussed. If you don’t like the rules, make up some new ones.
6. The conflicts you have make sense. They also tell a lot about your strengths and your weaknesses. The sooner you figure out what you’re really fighting about the sooner you’ll actually know what to resolve.
7. Generosity may be the key to a happy marriage. I’m not talking about over-giving or saying *yes* when you mean *no*, just to keep peace. I’m talking about saying *yes* as often as possible because you have plenty to give.

8. No matter how long you've been married, no matter how much work you've done, you may still find yourself in an idiotic argument about absolutely nothing.
9. More idiotic the argument, the less time you should spend on it.
10. Believing that asking for what you want means you will get it will bring you great suffering. Most things are a negotiation. While it's important to ask, it's also important to accept that your partner is not obligated to give you what you want.
11. When saying no, keep in mind point number 7 about the value of generosity.
12. The following words are totally subjective: clean, finished, enough.
13. The chewing noises...knuckle cracking...yawning...sighing...that annoyed you early on are likely to continue to annoy you. Oh well.
14. Learning how to keep your cool when you're being misunderstood is an essential skill.
15. Never bring your telephone to the dinner table. Same goes for time spent in the car together, watching TV, and snuggling in bed.
16. Blame is a lot easier than being accountable for your role in your difficulties, but I don't recommend it.
17. Give up on 50-50 and things being fair. Sometimes one person is going to do more of something or not enough of something.
18. Every couple is mismatched in some way. Messy or neat. Early-riser or night owl. Piler or filer. Don't think for a minute there wouldn't be some issue with somebody else.
19. Your spouse is not your mother, father, child, or maid.
20. Everything will change over time. Your energy. Your body. Your interests. A long marriage is an exercise in adaptability.
21. A half-assed apology will only make things worse.
22. Forgiveness is important since you'll both make plenty of mistakes.
23. Any two people can work out pretty much anything if they *want* to.

24. It's not sexy to pout or be angry when you're turned down for sex.
25. What you're doing now and going to do in the future is as important— or more important— than what you did in the past.
26. If you've gotten too busy to kiss hello and goodbye, slow down.
27. Some of your partner's complaints about you are valid. Some are not. It's your job to figure out which is which.
28. Saying I love you never gets old.
29. Being told that you're loved doesn't get old either.
30. Don't think for minute that the satisfaction of winning will offset what you lose.
31. In the midst of a heated conversation, surprising things will happen if at the end of every sentence you speak you ask, "What do you think?"
32. When you do this, it's really important to listen to his or her answer.
33. There's a big difference between interrupting and "participating" in the conversation. The trouble is it can be hard for some of us to tell the difference.
34. Which way you hang the toilet paper is not a hill to die on. Nor is being the only person who replaces the empty roll.
35. Don't freak out if now and again you feel hate instead of love.
36. If you hear yourself think, "I have no choice..." think again. The choice you're facing may be perilous, but resentful compliance is, too.
37. When it comes to making things better in your marriage, don't be afraid to take the lead. The alternative is saying stuck forever, waiting for the other to go first.
38. Most of us don't function well under pressure. In all circumstances there's a really dumb thing to do and really wise thing to do. If we're able to calm ourselves down, we're more likely to choose the wise one.
39. There are 101 ways to say "I love you" without saying a word.

40. Forty years will pass in the blink of an eye. The less time you waste on things that don't matter, the happier you'll be.