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Should Your Marriage Be Saved?



Fear your relationship is getting stale? Lifestyle expert Barbara Grufferman reveals five things to help you start over — right now!

By Barbara Hannah Grufferman

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When I turned 50 a few years ago, I was very confused about almost everything. Wanting to be healthy, fit, vital, and stylish for many years to come, I sought the advice from some of the best experts around, used their programs, and put it all together in an easy-to-use book, *The Best of Everything After 50*.

One of those experts was Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity*. Esther is a New-York-City-based relationship therapist, and through her workshops and private practice she has helped thousands of couples get through the toughest transitions that life can throw at us.

The most complicated, according to Esther? Finding each other — again.

In the years leading up to this transitional time, most of us were working, raising children, and probably juggling many other obligations. The challenge then seemed to be finding the time to be together as a couple, as man and woman — not as mom and dad or worker, or, as Esther is fond of saying, "productive citizens." All couples have to pay attention to their relationships and nurture them, but this is especially true of couples who are over 50 and are finding that they have more time together, not less. This can bring its own set of unique challenges, for which many couples are not prepared.

A friend put it this way: "I've always worked from home as a marketing consultant, while my husband went to his job at an office. This arrangement was perfect, especially while our daughters were younger and still living at home. Both daughters have left home for college and my husband took early retirement. He's home a lot, and while I still love him, he's starting to drive me insane. I don't think I've ever spent this much time with him. Help!"

Another "empty nester" confided that even though she and her partner are both still working and find that they have more time to spend together, somehow their relationship seems a little stale, and she's getting worried.

What to do?

The most important thing to point out is that couples need to create a space, which is critical for keeping the relationship from getting stale. That's the bottom line. So, how do we do that? There are several tools that every couple can use to keep their partnership fun, sexy, and alive. The key to success, though, is that both of you have to be on board. Here are a few that you can implement today:

1. A Room of One's Own

Create your own physical space, your own place to work, think, be creative, be private, chill out. It can be the bedroom, your home office, a part of your basement, wherever there is a place that you can call yours. Your partner should not be allowed to enter this space unless invited, or unless you give permission. Set the guidelines, the boundaries, and the rules, and stick with them. But remember, he gets to have a space, too!

2. Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

A critical mistake that many of us make is believing that in order to have a stronger relationship, we need to be closer and share everything. In fact, Esther argues, the opposite is true. Popular marital advice tells us we need more communication and more talk with our partner, but excess information and over-sharing can put a damper on a relationship, while a little mystery can feed attraction.

3. It Takes a Village

You can't get everything you need from one person. Many people (men and women) make the mistake of turning their partners into their "everything" — lover, best friend, confidante, advisor, work-out partner. It's way too big a role for any one person to fill. This is especially true, very often, of people who retire and find that they have too much time on their hands and expect their partner to fill in the gaps. It's a recipe for disaster.

4. Get a Life

You need lives separate from each other. Both of you should try to find time for friends, hobbies, work that matters to you, and volunteering, if you can. As I often tell my daughters, "The more interested you are, the more interesting you are." Get out there, get engaged, and when you and your partner come together as a couple, you'll have so much more to discuss and share. Esther has seen this incredibly simple approach bring relationships back from near-death.

5. Come Together

Make time for your partner. Plan it and make it special so that when you are together, you'll be completely engaged and ready to give it your all. Remember when you were first dating? Remember how you planned what you would wear and what you would discuss? That's what you want to be doing now. Look fabulous, and have fun!

Esther recently told me that "you can have several marriages in your life." She didn't mean that you can divorce and remarry, although that is certainly an option for many people. What she meant was that during each transition we experience in life — becoming newly married, having children, embarking on life after 50 — we can reinvent ourselves and our relationship with our partners. It's like starting over — together.



Barbara Hannah Grufferman is the author of *The Best of Everything After 50: The Experts' Guide to Style, Sex, Health, Money, and More*

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