

# Navigating Midlife



A SERIES DESIGNED TO MEET THE CONCERNS AND NEEDS OF OUR AGING POPULATION

## Enhancing Midlife Marriage

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The middle years of marriage are difficult to pinpoint. The time frame included, especially in a childless marriage, is vague. Despite this, the middle years of marriage are receiving more attention due to increased life expectancy and couples spending more years together after children leave home.

Research has found that marital satisfaction decreases during the early years of marriage and reaches a low point during the middle years. This change in satisfaction is most often related to increased stress during this life stage. Increased work demands, parenting adolescents, empty nest, caring for aging parents, financial issues, and retirement are just some of the concerns that increase stress during midlife. For most couples, it is a challenge to learn how to manage all the change so that their marriage relationship can continue to grow.

It is important to note that there are also significant benefits for the relationship in the middle years of marriage. Most of today's midlifers enjoy relatively good health. Their children are in adolescence or young adulthood so less dependent on their parents. This can be an opportunity for couples to pursue their own interests and to spend more time together.

Because marriage is a constantly evolving process, couples need to learn new skills as well as sharpen existing skills to navigate the changes of a midlife marriage. Working together to select goals, make decisions, develop strategies, and cope with multiple responsibilities will likely result in a stronger relationship.

## Strategies for Strengthening Midlife Marriage

A vital and satisfying marriage also requires marital maintenance to perform efficiently and in a way satisfactory to both partners. Reviewing the following aspects of married life will help midlife couples honestly look at their relationship so that they can realize more of their marriage potential.



**Spend Time Together** - It is ideal for a couple to spend time together when they are at their best. Scheduling time with your spouse may reduce the chance of it being leftover time. Make this time together fun, enjoying simple things like a walk, a sunset or a cup of cappuccino together.



**Common Goals & Teamwork** – It is essential to support each other in the achievement of individual and marital goals. Couples need to revisit and revise their goals periodically to adapt to their changing life stages. Use these goals and values to set priorities and make decisions as a team. Strengthening marital teamwork will encourage cooperation rather than competition.



**Communication & Expectations** – Communication is a vital component of a successful relationship. Couples must listen attentively, avoid blame and sarcasm and validate each other's feelings. Having years of marital experience may lead a spouse to falsely believe they know the other's preferences and opinions without even asking. Partners should avoid making assumptions and clarify each other's position on issues before decisions are made. Each partner has an obligation to verbalize their own expectations to avoid misunderstandings.

⊗ **Appreciation & Affection** – Sometimes by midlife, partners take each other for granted. Simple expressions of appreciation are forgotten. Showing appreciation and affection are powerful methods of strengthening a marriage. Love must be shown in words and actions.

⊗ **Sexual Fulfillment** – While marriage requires much more than a physical relationship, sexual responsiveness contributes to a satisfying marital union. Sexual difficulties at midlife are most often the result of normal physical and emotional changes that reduce desire. There are many ways to compensate and adjust to these diminishing desires. Exercise and good eating habits enhance sexuality. Couples can use their experience to overcome their physical and emotional changes and renew their enjoyment of sex.

⊗ **Agreement on Gender Roles** – Even if a couple has worked out their gender roles for the early years of marriage, midlife may be a time when partners want to revise their role assignments. Reduced work schedules, new tasks added to the work load, retirement or caring for aging parents can all create a need to realign the jobs and who is responsible for them.

⊗ **Commitment to Growth** – Midlife couples need to examine their commitment to each other and make a commitment to grow together for the second half of their marriage. Let go of disappointments in each other and look forward to the second half of married life, making it the best it can be!

Most couples have a great deal of unrealized potential in their relationship, but it takes a lifetime of sharing and caring to achieve it. The goal of marital maintenance is to develop, through a process of growth and behavior change, the potential for a mutually satisfying and creative relationship. The potential for a stronger relationship is realized as spouses develop a realistic appreciation of their partners as persons and value each other's contributions to the marriage. Through communication and mutual sharing, couples are well on their way to enriching and strengthening their marriages.

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*Pull Quote: "Because marriage is a constantly evolving process, couples need to learn new skills as well as sharpen existing ones to navigate the changes of a midlife marriage."*



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