

Why the “perfect marriage” is the one you’re in

Going through a rough patch? Hang in there! We asked six couples to tell us what’s going on in their marriages. What we found out could change how you think about yours

No matter how strong your marriage is, bad days—even bad years—creep up over a lifelong commitment. Certain periods are crisis points for even the most compatible partners. When you’re in one, it’s often hard to have faith that better days lie ahead. To help you keep perspective, we asked six couples, married five to 29 years, to give us glimpses into their marriages. We also asked two pros their advice for staying close at every stage. *By Lisa Arcella*

Our experts



JacLynn Morris, M.Ed., and Paul L. Fair, Ph.D., are therapists and the authors of *I’m Right, You’re Wrong. Now What? How to Break Through Any Relationship Stalemate Without Fighting, Folding or Fleeing.*

Every marriage has its moments. Keep them in perspective.





New baby

Rachele McGinty-Mock and Donald Mock, both 28, Atlanta

RACHELE Don and I have so little

time for us, between Zoe and work and whatever other drama is unfolding. Sometimes I feel like I'm raising a child with a stranger because I haven't had a

meaningful conversation with him in seven days! Then I look back and remember that he still is the great guy I married and my soul mate. I just miss him a little.

DON Zoe's the best thing that's ever happened to us. She's brought us closer because she's part of both of us, but she does monopolize our lives and zap our energy. We've gone from staying out all night to starting the 18-year plan of becoming an "old married couple."

all you view

Bringing your first baby home is exciting, but even the closest couples can lose their connection in the first year of parenthood. New mothers can be so intensely focused on the baby that partners can feel left out. Some moms also begin to grow resentful if dads don't do their share of the diaper changes and feedings. Sleep deprivation and postpartum hormones can also take a serious toll on your marriage.

RACHELE AND DON went from carefree newlyweds to responsible parents when they had their baby, Zoe, last year. And while they're overwhelmed with love for their daughter, they sometimes lose touch with each other while juggling two full-time jobs and a baby.



Expert advice

Even small gestures—sending an e-mail or leaving a sweet phone message—can help keep you bonded however hectic life gets.



Young family

Marcy, 34, and Peter Romary, 33, Greenville, N.C.

MARCY I believe the more comfortable you feel in your work, the more confident you are in your marriage.

That's the case with us. I've always wanted to work and have a family, and I can because Peter's such an involved dad.

PETER Becoming a parent was more difficult in some ways than I expected—I'd never been around an infant before Elizabeth. Now we're doing so well that I'm reluctant to talk about my work stress because I don't want to complain.

all you view

Couples who cross the 10-year mark have much to celebrate, but new marital dynamics can also mean trouble. Your kids may have reached school age and are independent by now, tossing you into a different role. At this point, some couples also feel they know each other so well that they stop communicating like they used to. And that's when problems can begin.

MARCY AND PETER have the freedom to devote more time to their jobs and to rediscovering each other now that their daughter, Elizabeth, is nine years old. After 12 years of marriage, they feel like they're finally hitting their stride.



Expert advice

It's healthy to use each other as a sounding board. Instead of clamming up about an issue, make it clear that sometimes you just need a sympathetic ear rather than a solution.



Michelle, 45, and Shawn Taylor, 44, Houston

Midlife challenges

all you view

This is a tricky time for marriages. While some men show the signs of a midlife crisis by buying a convertible or, worse, having an affair, others may simply seem melancholy about getting older. Either way, this passage impacts your relationship. You may also be stretched caring for kids and elderly parents.

MYCHELLE AND SHAWN are pulled in a lot of directions because they have two kids and

look after Shawn's mom. Good communication and their belief in each other carry them through.

MYCHELLE Balancing our family's needs is tough. I wait for the right time to ask Shawn questions, not when he's wiped out. We also go out alone about once a week, but sometimes staying home with a movie feels like a treat.

SHAWN My siblings live across the country, so my mother's care is all on me—she was seriously ill for a while. I can

get preoccupied. I'm still deeply in love though, and I make a conscious effort to discover new ways to make sure Michelle knows that.



Expert advice

Continue surprising and indulging each other. Leave a loving card or tickets to a game on the bedside table. Trouble starts when you take each other for granted.



Empty-nesters

Barbara Bartlein and George Brosky, both 53, Milwaukee, Wisc.

so I hardly remember what George was like before he became a dad. Our conversations always revolved around the kids. We have friends who've reached this stage

and divorced. We like skiing and playing golf together, but it's a period of rediscovery.

GEORGE I didn't know how hard it would be for me when our kids left. I'm struggling. I'm really close with my kids, and while my marriage is strong, I miss them a lot. We spend holidays together and they call us every Sunday, but the sadness never completely goes away.

all you view

You're likely to ask, "Who am I? Who are you?"

when your kids move out. If you've left parts of your relationship untended after years of parenting, you might not have as much in common as you used to. If you don't make it a point to find new ways to get to know each other again, alienation or even divorce can be on the horizon.

BARBARA AND GEORGE are struggling to identify themselves as more than parents now that their kids are at college. Barbara needs to figure out who she really is, and George never knew how much he would miss his children.

BARBARA We were married six months when I got pregnant,

Expert advice
Seeking a new shared interest—by taking a class or going on a trip you wouldn't have considered before—can help you rediscover the spark that brought you together in the first place.



Grown family

Karen and Charles Bertani, both 48, Middletown, N.Y.

KAREN Years ago, when I started my first job, I neglected Chuck and the kids. My priorities were lopsided. I eventually learned that family comes first. Today I have a great job, a husband who supports me in everything I do and kids we consider good friends. We've tackled the tough stuff. It's time to have fun.

CHARLES We always believed we were soul mates, even when we were in the middle of a financial nightmare. Now that our kids are grown, I'm especially appreciative of our marriage. Few couples who marry young stick it out.

all you view

When your kids become adults, you'll need to

transition from being their disciplinarians to becoming their friends. If one partner relinquishes control more easily, it can drive a wedge between you. But once you complete this metamorphosis, your marriage will benefit as you see how satisfying it is to count your kids—and later their partners—among your closest friends.

KAREN AND CHARLES endured harrowing times when they were younger, including a period when they barely had the money to scrape by. But their struggles made them more thankful for their marriage and for the kids they raised to be great adults.

Expert advice
If your spouse is finding it easier to relate to your kids as adults, ask him how he does it. When you ask for advice you create a connection.



Golden years

all you view

You're in the homestretch. Still, many marriages

derail during retirement. The couples that survive place a high value on their friendship. If you continue to treat each other with kindness and accept each other's idiosyncrasies, your love can grow as you grow older.

BARBARA AND DAVID are savoring these years, thanks to conversation and compromise.

BARBARA One day, I started crying at my hairdresser's—I've seen marriages crumble at this stage, and I didn't want to become a statistic. Then I threw myself into working out and playing my violin. David got lonely, so we compromised. Now I want to spend time with him because he's more supportive of me.

DAVID I've learned that marriage doesn't survive by itself—it has to be

nurtured. Now, instead of being overwhelmed by a problem, we discuss it and find a solution. We couldn't do that 20 years ago.

Expert advice
Create a renaissance in your relationship by sharing your dreams. If he wants to go fly fishing, go with him; ask him to play tennis with you.

Barbara, 56, and David Coventry, 58, Goleta, Calif.