

The Fatigue of Long-Term Relationships

What to Expect when Relationships Last

Recently I went to pick someone up at the airport. Ahead of me as I moved through the terminal was an older couple, probably in their 60s. He was walking some 20 feet in front of her. She was carping at him from behind, something to the effect of "You're not pulling the suitcase correctly."

That scene stuck with me, because in some ways it seems to sum up the fatigue of long-term relationships. The freshness is gone, there are years of scrapes and struggles and resentments large and small. It doesn't have to be all bad to look like this couple looked to me.

Just the combination of years, and routines, and taking each other for granted is enough. How fresh is your commute to work after a few years or even a few months? How much new scenery do you take in? What about your car, after it loses its "new car smell?" How long does it stay special to you? Or your new purse or a new dress?

One part of me says, "What can be done to make this better?" I have heard most of the suggestions from most of the experts, and I don't believe in "five easy steps to keep your marriage fresh." If there really were five easy steps, there wouldn't be so many marriages that look and feel like this couple at the airport.

Yet still, I grapple with the question. If there are not five easy steps, then what is there? What does being real and honest and conscious look like as we age with our partners?

So here's a list I made up, trying to be as real and honest and conscious as I can about what it means to stay together past the "I can't keep my hands off you" stage:

1. **Let go of the romantic expectations you see in movies and in younger couples.** It is exciting, and it is wonderful, but research shows that the romantic phase lasts anywhere from six months to three years. Perhaps there is an outlier couple somewhere who are still pawing at each other after 10 years, but they are the exception, not the norm. It can be hard to let go of these expectations, but I think holding on to them only leads to suffering.

2. **There is no easy way to stay connected and stay growing.** It requires conscious and sustained effort. Do not believe anyone who tells you otherwise.
3. **Let go of criticism.** You don't need to say 99 percent of the critical things you want to say to your partner. You've already said them at one time or another. They will do nothing to make your marriage better, even if you're 100 percent right.
4. **Tell the truth, as in "say what you mean, don't say it mean."** Nothing builds intimacy and trust as much as vulnerable honesty.
5. **Seek out other friendships, rather than load your marriage partner with the job of meeting all your needs.** And give your partner space to have outside friendships.
6. **Imagine for a moment the alternative**—the horror of having to go out on dates again, sleeping alone night after night, not having that "someone else" in the house who ends up taking care of the things you don't.
7. **Take advantage of what you can have in a long-term partnership that you can never get in a new relationship**—someone to grow old with, someone who knows you well, who you've been through more than half your life with, someone you probably trust in a deeper way than you can most anyone else in your life.
8. **Ask yourself the following question: If your spouse died tomorrow, what would you want to say today?**
9. **When you're younger, you are working with the uncertainties of your career, your finances, the externals of life.** Hopefully now that you're older and more established, these are no longer ongoing questions. Use this security and establishment in the service of openness, not more routines. Be honest enough to not know. This also extends to your spouse. Who is really underneath that face you know so well? Are you sure you're sure you know?
10. **Many of you are living with people who won't want to talk about these things, or not know how to talk about these things, or who will feel criticized if you try to talk about these things.** That's a part of reality too. Can you grapple with these questions on your own, without resentment, and see where they lead you?

I do not claim any of what I've just listed is going to dramatically change anything. The idea of solutions to problems and recipes for success is the stuff of heroic youth, where there are mountains to be conquered if only we try hard enough.

Take away all of our theories, which are simply lies in search of the truth, and what really do we have left? Not much, except the people and the relationships in our life. Learn to appreciate how meaningful that really is, even if it isn't as sexy, fun, or exciting as it once was. I believe what it's been replaced with can be something much deeper.