

Romantic comedies are a huge high-grossing genre with the film industry. And there is a reason a large percentage of the population flocks to the movie theaters to see these types of movies: They leave the viewer with the notion that love is a fairy tale. The problem is that these kinds of movies don't show what happens after the "happily ever after" part. The hardships and growing together are what a marriage is all about, and in a medical marriage, in particular, it takes both parties working together and sacrificing for each other to make it work.

The Glass Half-Full Dilemma

Most people can be categorized broadly into basic personality types that color how they view the world—optimistic and pessimistic. Some people look at the situation and focus on the positive, while others analyze every potential negative contingency in advance.

According to Linda Miles, Ph.D. and wife of Robert Miles, M.D., co-author with her husband of *The New Marriage: Transcending the Happily-Ever-After Myth*: "One is a style of pleasure, and the other is one that sorts away from pain. Both people want to be happy, but because most physicians are so used to seeing accidents and serious illness, they will choose to sort away from pain." The Miles have been married for 18 years and have practiced couples therapy together for 25. An example from their personal life is a boat trip they took. While Linda was excited about the open seas and relaxing in a secluded place, all her husband, the physician, could think about was the fact that there might be a storm and that he needed to make sure everyone wore their life vests. "We sometimes take this worry home with us into the marriage," says Robert. "And it can lead to misunderstanding each other."

Linda goes on to explain that it is important to accept each other's differences. She realized long ago that having her husband always thinking about the contingencies provided safety for the family and allowed them to focus on creating happy and meaningful experiences. She realized that though they had different perspectives, neither was right or wrong, but contributed to their sense of safety and joy for a happy and lasting relationship. "You have to learn not to judge each other and avoid shame and blame," Linda says. Her husband adds, "And above all, avoid right-and-wrong games." It all comes down to seeing how the personalities work together and working to keep the balance.

Keely Hunsaker, an Alliance member, dentist and spouse of Jerry Hunsaker, M.D. for the past 22 years concurs, "He is always over prepared and I am always looking at the bright side of things thinking 'everything will be ok.' But when something goes wrong, he is always prepared with tools or whatever is needed to fix most situations."

The Medical Marriage

BY LEIA VINCENT

Changes Over Time: Role Reversals

Over the past 30 years, the Women's Movement has toppled traditional gender roles. Today, female physicians are a norm, but the changing demographics can have an effect on a marriage. "Problems can arise when a person with a role of being in charge at work, male or female, has to come home and share leadership," notes Robert Miles. "And if two people of this particular kind are married, trouble can occur if everyone doesn't learn how to shift gears when they come home at night."

In Keely and Jerry Hunsaker's situation, there are two people who are used to being in charge in the marriage, which *could* lead to disaster. "We have to re-program to live together because we are both bosses in our respective domains," says Keely. "As long as he does everything I say, we are okay," she jokes, going on to explain that it helps that Jerry teases her and uses humor because it works to help her realize how a lot of things she may focus on are not a big deal. He confirms her assessment that he's a "jokester" by lightheartedly saying, "She has the pleasure personality as long as she is causing me pain."

Robert Miles notes that when he was growing up, he didn't see feelings being expressed often. He grew up with the expectation that the man brought home the "bacon" and was not involved in much of the daily family life, while the woman was the homemaker. "The view was that homemakers have no work experience or knowledge, but only work to keep up family life," he says. "However, raising

children takes knowledge and skill building that can be used to do just about any job. And it takes the spouse who has a traditional job acknowledging this and not putting down or belittling the role of homemaker.”

Many spouses in the medical marriage are lucky to get to work with one another, including Keely and Jerry Hunsaker. They visit each other’s offices a least once a week, sometimes more, and Keely still files the electronic claims for Jerry’s practice. “This allows us to have a better respect of what the other does with their time, and allows for more understanding and flexibility when it comes to missing those aspects of daily family life for work matters,” Keely explains.

The evolution of gender roles is only one aspect of change that can affect medical marriages. Another is changes in the institution of marriage itself. The Drs. Miles state that at the turn of the century, an average marriage only lasted eight and a half years due to early deaths from infectious disease, complications of childbirth and other hardships. “Marriage and relationships go through more stages now than they once did, as we now live longer and require more skills and flexibility,” says Linda.



Simple Problems That Can Lead to Demise

Today, when men and women are on equal footing, there needs to be a greater emphasis on working together and talking conflicts through, according to the Drs. Miles. They coined the phrase the “Four Horseman of the Apocalypse,” to refer to four tactics that can spell trouble for a marriage, based on scientific research by John Gottman, Ph.D.:

- **Criticism:** Being critical of the other person/condemning them, name-calling; separate from general complaining which is normal in small doses.
- **Contempt:** Smart couples know how to get under one another’s skin; walk in front of the other person, raise eyebrows at just the right moment, put each other down, etc.
- **Defensiveness:** Don’t listen to the other’s reasoning, just jump on the defensive.
- **Stone-walling:** Putting a wall up between the couple so they can no longer reach one another.

Emma Borders, an Alliance board member, also shared insight into her marriage of 38 years to Robert Borders, M.D. She notes that a great percentage of their very few arguments

over the years have been about child rearing. She explains that she is the more conservative parent and he the more lenient. In one instance, she explains how Robert, who has two sons from a previous marriage, told their eight-year-old son that he could watch the movie “Terminator,” which he had heard about from his friends at school. Emma, being familiar with what the movie was about and feeling it inappropriate, disagreed. She soon realized that their son was being given mixed messages and that she was being portrayed as the “mean parent.” At first, she was furious, but then realized that Robert just didn’t know much about the movie when he gave his permission. “Once I explained it to Bob, he accepted my decision, and all without heated implications,” says Emma. She added with a laugh, “Most of the time he just needs to be given the facts.”

Most marriages don’t end over one huge blow up or irreconcilable difference, as they do in the movies, but over a series of small, unresolved issues. And since a medical marriage can fall victim to an even greater number of stressors, physicians can become preoccupied and not notice the dissatisfaction of their partners. “One day, the spouse of a physician announces that it is over,” says Linda. “The physician is crushed and ready to do what it takes to save the marriage, but there may be too much damage. This is a sad situation that can be avoided.”

“Couples need to repair their problems in a timely way,” she adds. “What seems sudden is generally the build-up of unresolved issues. A loving and lasting relationship requires compassionate listening and the ability to dialogue with a conflict. Love is a practice.”

Keely Hunsaker shared an example of this—how, over time, a couple learns how to approach each other and when to back off. Recently after she had entertained her husband’s family for four days over the holidays, she decided it was only fair to go see her own family. Her husband’s reply was, “No, there are only six more days left in hunting season.” While it hurt her feelings, she didn’t bother him any more about it, figuring she would give him some time to think about it. The next morning, he woke and asked, “So when are we leaving to go see your family?” Keely believes that sometimes the best retort is “just knowing when to shut up.”

“Love and marriage are like the practice of medicine, and we now have scientific knowledge of what makes marriages work,” says Robert Miles. “Like medicine, it can only be perfected to a certain extent.” But the Drs. Miles agree that the “Four Horseman” above, used regularly, will slowly ruin any relationship. Emma Borders adds, “Robert understands and once a decision is made, he moves on and does not look back or use past instances in current problems.” Hanging on to past issues without communicating a problem to the partner can also lead to a build-up of resentments and unresolved issues.

Is Love Really All We Need?

The experts with whom we spoke said no, but combined with solid techniques, it *can* sustain a lifetime of happiness with another person. This is not to say there won't be bumps along the road, but the formula is simple enough to follow and takes the effort of both parties involved. "Over time, after you have been through enough together, issues that arise can't do as much damage, and the time to repair is much less," says Linda. "At some point in a healthy relationship, you begin to realize that you can't change one another, you can only change yourself, and if you can live with that, you will make it through."

She adds that she and Robert believe that the two necessary compliments to love in a marriage are respect and flexibility. "Each person should be respected and if the couple is not in agreement, the disagreement should be of a constructive nature and not lead to an attack by any of the 'Four Horseman.'" Also, in any relationship, as people get to know one another, they learn how to repair differences over time. One spouse should never try to diminish the role of the other. "It doesn't matter what the roles," Robert says. "As long as there is mutual love and respect, different marriage models can work."

Flexibility is a major factor in any relationship, according to Drs. Miles. A person goes from being one person to part of a couple, meaning that they should now be living for two people instead of only for themselves. "In a medical

marriage, flexibility, humor and the ability to discover new remedies for problems help heal us as individuals and families," says Linda.

A prime example of all three of these qualities in action can be demonstrated in Keely and Jerry Hunsaker's family, with their five children. They make the extra effort to coordinate the schedules of seven people to go to their family ranch on a regular basis. "It is the one place where we are truly a family first. We are 100 miles from home, no landline, limited cell reception, and no influence from school friends or colleagues," according to Keely. "We try to go up there every weekend we can with the kids because it is our way of keeping connected."

Some matters require both respect and flexibility. Emma Borders shared another story about her husband's decision to buy a house without consulting with her. "He enjoys seeing my surprise when he makes major purchases, but he doesn't realize I want to participate in the decision process too," says Emma. "I want to look over all the choices." That house contract was cancelled and they instead found a house with the full family's blessing. "All it took was for me to point out the things I didn't like, such as the kitchen and general layout, and he knew he had to get out of the deal," says Emma.

Love is not a fairy tale and marriage takes hard work and compromise. And a medical marriage can be especially difficult, but worth the effort.

How do you keep your medical marriage working?

Email us your secrets (100 words or less) for a future issue. Send your comments to leia.vincent@ama-assn.org.

Advice From the Experts

According to all the experts in this article, love is a practice, and "Practice makes perfect, or almost perfect." Here is some advice from those that are still practicing a healthy marriage.

Linda Miles:

- "Arguments usually begin and end with the same tone of voice, so always try to begin in a normal tone."
- "In a relationship, if both people work on themselves, things will work out because that means there are two people 100 percent committed to the partnership."

Robert Miles:

- "Celebrate every day together."
- "Create family rituals. Linda and I, before we go to bed, have a spiritual practice and then share with one another one thing we appreciated about each other that day."
- "These rituals help when arguments erupt because memories of all the good things that the other appreciated are like a positive bank account."

Emma Borders:

- "Learn from each experience."
- "Know that better understanding does not mean there will be no more disagreements."

Keely Hunsaker:

- "We tell each other 'I Love You' about 10 times a day, and it still feels special."
- "We always kiss each other before we leave. I am hurt if he leaves without kissing me goodbye. It's the little things that matter."