

Mastering Marriage, Part 2

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

Originally published in *Coast Magazine*, October 2005

Last month's column offered a few rules intended to help men relate better to their wives. Now I flip the coin, offering some principles women need to know and practice if they'd like to improve their marriages.

1. MEN DON'T GIVE GOOD EMPATHY. Expecting your husband to listen empathetically to your problems can be a frustrating proposition. Why? Because men are not typically taught good listening skills or to value the expression of feelings. You're wanting him to say something like, "I'm so sorry to hear that, honey, tell me more about how you feel." But, as self-help books have pointed out ad nauseum, your husband thinks that telling him how you feel is complaining.

And complaining to him means you want him to solve your problem. He doesn't understand how offering a sympathetic ear will make a difference so instead he offers a solution. Until your husband learns to value feelings and sympathetic listening, give up the notion that he'll show much empathy or sympathy. But don't take this to mean he doesn't care.

2. LET THE BIG DOG RUN. Husbands complain that their wives don't appreciate their desire to "be themselves" during their free time. Your husband doesn't want to be nagged about not keeping up his physical appearance or told what activities to engage in. This means such things as not shaving, wearing sweatpants or shorts and a T-shirt around the house, watching football or any other sport, scattering the newspaper, and temporarily not picking up his clothes. He needs room to run with the big dogs. Don't worry if he begins to smell like one too. Refrain from complaining about his slovenliness or leisure activities. He is not looking for an alma mater (alternate mother). He already has one in his college football team.

3. SHOW HIM HE'S STILL THE ONE. Your husband wants to hear in words and see in your affectionate behavior that he's still The One. He cares about knowing this just as much as you do. Find creative ways of showing him you respect, admire and love him more than anyone else in your life. If he isn't the verbal type, he may never tell you directly that this matters to him. But it does.

4. DON'T CARRY RESENTMENTS. Watch out for petty resentments. Your husband doesn't want to hear repeatedly how you once noticed him gawking at an attractive woman. If you have a resentment, it's best to express it directly and then let it go. Resentments strangle the life out of marriages. Holding them leads to bitterness and ultimately, withdrawal. Treat them like hot potatoes and get rid of them as fast as you can.

5. LEARN TO DISCUSS SEX AND MONEY. As two of the most problematic issues in marriages, learning to talk with your husband about sex and money directly and without embarrassment will make problem-solving easier. Get help from a professional if you can't do it on your own.

6. TAKE TIME TO MAKE TIME. Successful marriages are nourished through taking time away for just the two of you. While family activities are important, make sure you get away from the kids for at least a weekend on a periodic basis. Make time to give your husband your undivided attention that so often is split between kids, work and other activities. While gone, engage in enjoyable activities that increase your connectedness.

7. ALLOW FOR SPONTANEITY. Couples often decry how boring and predictable their lives become after they've been married more than a few years. They forget how to let anything unfold without a plan. Spontaneity fuels playfulness, enlivening a marriage and keeping it on its toes. In addition to planned get-a-ways, make room for spur of the moment impulses, such as a leisurely drive down the coast for an hour with no plan in mind, rolling around on the carpet or grass together, or playing tag at the beach.