

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Treat Your Marriage Like Your Teeth!

By Betty Phillips, Ph.D. <www.BettyPhillipsPsychology.com>

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Now what kind of whacked-out title is this? Is Phillips off her rocker? Well, just think about it. We're told to pay daily attention to our dental health, brush and floss each night and seek professional assessment with dental checkups every six months. When a dental problem is discovered we invest immediately in corrective work, whether or not the charges are covered by insurance. Why? Our teeth are a long-term investment and we know we will be much better off if we take good care of this important resource. Sure, we can purchase replacement ("false") teeth but we worry that they won't care for us as well as our original permanent teeth. Get the picture now? Phillips isn't crazy, just likes analogies to get your attention and make her point. Marriage is an important resource for our long-term mental and physical health -- but how do we take care of our marriage partnership? Not nearly as well as we take care of our teeth. Sometimes I feel like a voice calling out in the wilderness -- let's pay attention

to the health of our marriages! And let's pay attention before they deteriorate and decay! Most couples wait six years from the time marital problems begin until they seek marriage counseling. No wonder it's so difficult to restore health and vitality to the marriage. Your dentist would be appalled if you came in for treatment after six years of dental neglect -- assuming you have any teeth left to repair! When your teeth hurt, you don't care whether insurance will cover the treatment, you make the appointment and pay up. When your heart and soul hurt from marital problems, however, the refrain is often: "we can't afford marriage counseling." As a point of information, most insurance programs will cover "family treatment" for you and your spouse although they may tell you they don't cover "marriage counseling." One or more of you will need to be distressed enough to qualify for the family treatment. My basic point is that you and your spouse should sign up for marriage counseling whether or not it is covered by insurance. Your marriage should be at least as important as your teeth.

There is another important similarity with dental health. We grow our first temporary set of teeth which will need to be replaced as we grow up. Let's compare this to the first stage in partner relationships, the romantic phase, being madly "in love", the beginning stage which like baby teeth is destined to fall apart and must be replaced by a second stage of mature and hopefully long-lasting love. We're told about the transition from baby to permanent teeth. Why aren't we taught about the demise of romantic love and the need to care for the next partnership stage? Research shows that the stage of romantic love will last up to two years but inevitably will fade. The serious work of sustaining the longer-term, hopefully permanent relationship begins when this romantic phase ends. Instead of understanding this, many people become distressed, blame their

marriage or partner, and start looking around for another romantic love. But let's take another look at the statistics. 40 to 50% of first marriages, 60 to 70% of second marriages and 75% or more of third marriages end in divorce. The very romantic love of affairs rarely ever graduates to marriage. When affair partners marry, many of these marriages end up in divorce court. There are many reasons to stay with our original partner and work on a long-term relationship.

When our baby teeth disappear we can't get them back. The euphoric peaks, wonderful happiness, the obsessive need for the lover's company, the passionate moments of romantic love, similarly are doomed. When reality strikes, too many of us feel tricked and trapped into a less than happy marriage. We're left with an acquired taste for passionate love facing a grumpy spouse, dirty dishes, bills to pay, surprised by the loss of the dream but feeling the same deep need for love and understanding and connection. What next? You begin noticing all those annoying, frustrating or just plain awful characteristics of your spouse. Even worse, you wonder what happened to all those special things you love: tender moments, compliments, little gifts, words of endearment, thoughtful actions. No it's not just your marriage; it happens to everyone. That information will not make you happy but it may help you understand the next step to marital happiness: love work. Yes the love that was so spontaneous and exciting now has to be prioritized and pursued. Yes you can live "happily ever after" but the reality is not as easy as the dream.

A major mistake is to blame your spouse for this loss of romantic love. You have equal responsibility in a relationship. Furthermore you are the only person who can

guarantee that you will change. If both of you decide to change -- great! Sometimes one spouse will refuse to participate in marriage counseling with the classic words, "you can go to counseling; you are the problem." Just smile because you know better. You can make the initial investment but your spouse will soon become involved when your efforts begin to work.

So what can you do, or both of you do, to keep your love alive? Let me say here that the basic task is to revitalize or restore the emotional love and intimate connection of the marriage partnership. Everyone wants to love and be loved. No one wants to nag and fight or withdraw in stony silence. Real mature love cannot emerge until the romantic illusion fades and is replaced by a partnership of mutual self-interest.

In keeping with my emphasis on humor, here is one of the many marriage jokes: "A word of wisdom for the women who is looking for Mr. Right. Be sure that his first name is not Always!"

Dr. Phillips holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Harvard University and is certified by the National Register of Psychologists. She specializes in relationship and marriage counseling, including helping couples deal with the challenge of recovering from infidelity. Her office is located at 466 Eagle Point Rd. Pittsboro, NC 27312. You can find out more about Dr. Phillips practice, as well as other articles she has written on her website, www.BettyPhillipsPsychology.com, or by contacting her at (919) 967.1860.