

*Focus on the Fun*

A person living to age seventy has 613,000 hours of life. This is too long a period not to have fun.

—ANONYMOUS

One of the pillars of a great relationship is sharing common passions and pursuits. Happy couples usually enjoy several interests that bring them together in their free time. Outdoor adventures like hiking, biking, skiing, golf, camping, taking walks, gardening, or indoor activities like reading books, playing poker, watching TV, making love, visiting friends, or discussing movies all bring couples closer. They broaden your understanding and appreciation of each other—beyond the usual world of work and home.

Another side benefit—shared activities are just plain fun. The sign of truly happily married couples is that they are looking for fun even when they are doing ordinary, everyday chores.

“We read books together, we spend so many hours talking to each other on the phone that we feel like teenagers again,” says Kathryn, who is in her seventh year of marriage to Sam, after both had unhappy first marriages. Sam sums it up: “In the beginning, we had so much fun just being together we almost felt guilty.”

As you play and enjoy exercise, sports, or leisure activities together, you have the opportunity to learn new skills and spur each other on to greater heights. When you learn about your partner’s passions and join in on occasion, you may just find that his or her love of cooking, exercising, antiquing, gardening, or salsa dancing rubs off on you. You can tap into abilities you might never have realized you had.

*Learn and Grow—Together*

When you take a class together, you benefit from the intellectual stimulation at the same time you cut through daily routines and familiarity. It gives you a chance to broaden your knowledge and enjoy each other’s insights and abilities in a fresh context. If you happen to have met during college, it reconnects you to that wonderful time.

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Some couples take on more ambitious goals together, such as starting a community garden, renovating a house, or getting involved with a not-for-profit organization. Having a shared project enables you to work toward something challenging and significant in your lives. You learn about each other's strengths. You also get to show off your new expertise in front of each other and receive validation together. By working jointly toward a long-term goal you are building something solid together.

"Lilo and I went back for a master's degree together," Gerry explains. "It was some of the most fun we've had. It took us five years but we enjoyed every minute of it. We had one night a week when Lilo's mother stayed at the house and we went out without feeling guilty—we always went out to dinner before or after the class, too, to make it a real night out.

"We took classes in whatever seemed intriguing—from English literature to foreign policy. We even persuaded one of our teachers to let us write our term paper together. Lilo liked the facts, I liked fiction, so she did the research and I wrote the paper. We played to each other's strengths—and it brought us closer together."

One thing is certain: When you have fun together, whether you simply take a walk after dinner or travel to exotic parts of the world, you have a chance to relax, learn, and grow together. That's critical for deepening intimacy further. Doing something you both enjoy sets a great example for your children and creates an emotional bond that deepens your love and commitment to each other.

### *Date Nights*

You have probably heard other couples say that they try to go out on dates as often as they can to keep their marriage romantic. The reason you have heard about it is that it works.

It is so easy to get caught up in the busy-ness and seriousness of day-to-day living that you may forget to take a break—together. If you schedule a regular, weekly night out for just the two of you—even if only for a few hours—you’ll be glad you did.

David and Carla, married fourteen years, have three young children, which makes it especially important for them to get away by themselves. Once a week, after dinner, they go to a funny little inn thirty minutes from their house, where the only thing people do is sprawl on couches, smoke cigars, and sip brandy.

“Neither David nor I smoke cigars, but for just a couple of hours, after dinner, we sip our brandy, agree not to discuss the children at all, and just engage in completely grown-up conversation,” says Carla. “We talk about the news, our next vacation, our dreams, what we would do if we had three wishes. We flirt with each other and mostly we make each other laugh. Sometimes, when we get back home, we feel better than if we’d gone on a week’s vacation. And it’s a whole lot cheaper.”

### *Spend Time Alone, Too*

Happy couples aren’t stuck together like Velcro. They don’t have to do everything together. It is important to respect each other’s privacy and to give each other time alone. Much as you have in common, each of you needs to be able to use your creativity and find fulfillment individually. Whether you pursue your own interests in sports, the arts, playing an instrument, reading a good book, baking a cake, or just going out to lunch with friends—most people need the time and freedom to do things on their own.

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When you feel strong, accomplished, and happy as an individual, that happiness and confidence will carry over into your relationship. When you show your partner respect for his or her personal pur-

suits, it can only strengthen the bond between you.

“We do pretty much everything together—except shopping,” says Joyce. “We go walking. We play tennis. We like talking together, taking walks.

“But we also like to do a few things alone. I have more fun going shopping with my girlfriends.”

“She sometimes encourages me to go skiing with the guys on weekends because she doesn’t like skiing,” says Harry. “That works out fine for both of us.”

Happy couples are able to respect each other’s independence while still being strongly united as a couple.

“There are some Saturdays when neither of us knows what the other is doing all day,” says Richard, married seventeen years. “We are busy taking classes and volunteering in a literacy program. And many weekday evenings we are each with our separate friends or with clients.”

“Richard and I are married to each other—we don’t own one another,” adds Marilyn.

“But every Wednesday night is our ‘date night,’ so we are sure to get together in the middle of the week,” Richard continues. “And then Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights we are almost always together—often just the two of us relaxing at home or out for a simple dinner or a movie.”

Giving each other breathing space is critical. The wonderful irony is that this healthy separation will bring you closer together. It’s a matter of *differentiation*, as we discussed in Chapter Two, “Date with Purpose” (p. 25). The happiest couples are able to strike the right balance between their need for togetherness and their need for doing things on their own. The more developed and mature they become as individuals, the stronger and better a marriage partner they become. As Shakespeare summed it up in *Hamlet*: “This above all, to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou cannot then be false to any man.”

Jane and Lee have been careful to encourage each other to develop independent interests and talents.

“I really credit our individual growth for the success of our marriage,” Lee says, after thirty-eight years of marriage. “I absolutely do,

and I think that any couple that doesn't allow each person to develop is going to wake up one morning, whether it's two years, ten years, or twenty years later, and say, 'God, I was always doing everything for you, I never did anything for me.' We realized it's not fair to really blame the other person for that when you chose it yourself."

"At the beginning of our relationship," Jane adds, "each time I tried something new, like a new hobby, it caused a little turmoil. Lee had to get used to the idea of my having time away—and I did, too. But it always turned out to be just wonderful afterward. Now, even when we're on vacation, we try to give the other a chance to do something alone, on a daily basis. Lee has to make time to write. And I have to look for quilting fabrics. We understand that now, but we didn't at first. And it brings us closer."

### *Vacations Are Vital—With and Without the Children*

If you think of vacations as luxuries, think again. Happy couples say that they are absolutely essential to a great marriage. Because vacations are so important to keeping fun and pleasure alive in your marriage, they should be built into your budget. They don't have to cost a fortune to work their magic. They just have to provide you both with a break from the routine.

There's nothing like a moonlit walk along a beach, bare feet sinking into the sand, arms around each other's waists—far from the house, the bills, the busy schedules—to remind you how good life together can be, and will be for many years to come. Even when you have children, it is important now and then to try to get away together, just as a couple. As Mignon McLaughlin, an American journalist and author, once quipped, "A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, and always with the same person."

"We try every few months to get away for a weekend—or at least for a night alone," says Beth. "We call up my mother, who luckily lives nearby, and she babysits for our four kids while we go off to a bed-and-breakfast and do whatever pleases the two of us. Some weekends we never get out bed, except to go out to eat."

Vacations with the kids can build family spirit and add new dimensions to your relationship with your spouse and with your children,

too. Everybody tends to be more relaxed than usual on vacation. Just being away from school activities and work deadlines tends to bring out the best in everyone. You reinforce your admiration for your spouse as a creative, fun-loving parent and partner. You create joyous memories that deepen your bonds with your children, as well.

Vacations also provide opportunities to educate your children in unusual and entertaining ways. What better way to learn about the environment than on a camping trip to a national forest or a rafting trip on a river? When you see each other operating in a new setting and using skills that may not come into play at home, it allows family members to break out of the old patterns of interaction at home and gain new respect for each other's abilities.

Beth and David love to travel. "Recently we've started to do more traveling because all the kids are living on their own," David says. "We've been to Israel, Sweden, London, and Paris. When we were planning our last trip to Singapore, Thailand, and Japan, our younger daughter thought it sounded so exciting that she asked if she could come along, too. She did! That was just great."

### *Get Healthy and Stay That Way*

In a happy marriage, staying healthy is something both partners do—for themselves *and* for each other. The healthier each spouse is in mind, body, and spirit, the healthier and stronger the marriage will be:

- You will feel more energetic and alive, so you will be more active and fun company for each other.
- You will look more attractive if you're healthy and fit, so you will continue to be attracted to each other.
- You will cope better with stress, so you will be pleasanter, more relaxed, and better able to share your good moods with each other.
- And best of all, you will live healthier longer, so you will have the most time possible to enjoy your partner and your life together.