



We're Together All The Time...
Now What Do We Do?



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5 Problems and a Solution

For many couples, reaching retirement age is the promised land. What seemed so far off years ago is now reality. For most married couples, it marks a totally new phase. For the first time, you may be living together with no competing tasks impacting on the relationship: no jobs; no children to raise; no aging parents to care for; maybe even no mortgage to pay.

Many couples enter this phase being either emotionally prepared for it or otherwise finding the transition to be relatively easy – and actually fun. A surprising number, however, find their new shared time together to be disappointing, or actually depressing. And what makes it even more depressing is a lack of coping strategies or tools for dealing with this phase and the prospect that this may be as good as it's ever going to get.

It Doesn't Have To Be That Way!

Let's look at some of the problems and try to solve them.

1

You've Never Really Lived Together and Dont Know How

Don't laugh at this one. It could be true. You may never have experienced being with each other exclusively all the time. You may have always had a job to do or kids to raise or aging parents to attend to – and never had to navigate the waters in which you currently find yourself swimming. Your partner's silliness or sloppiness or obsessive neatness or litany of medical complaints may have been cute on occasion, but they can be downright annoying when you are faced with them on a near-constant basis. If a spouse was given a pass from doing much housework because s/he worked hard and brought in a nice income, that is no longer an excuse for not sharing in housework. Habitual lateness or sarcasm or any of a number of annoying traits in the other person can become infuriating when you face it on an ongoing basis.

This is really a new experience, and it can be an exciting one, but couples often fail to see it as an exciting challenge and they become entrenched in their positions, and either overtly or silently carry around resentment because the spouse refuses to be “more like me.”

2

Not Having A Structure To Accomodate To Different Interests And Routines

With newly found freedoms and fewer obligations to be anywhere at any particular time, one spouse may enjoy sleeping the morning away while the other may be an early riser. One may be regimented about having meals at certain times while the other may enjoy the freedom to “eat when I get hungry.” During their working days, both members of the couple may have enjoyed 1-2 hours watching TV after dinner before retiring to bed at a shared time. Now one may have become a TV addict, watching many hours a day and into the night, resulting in two significantly different bedtimes. All types of unshared routines become more evident when spouses spend more time together.

In addition to the emergence of differing individual routines, retirement can bring different interests into focus. One spouse may want to use more of the free time to socialize, and the other prefers more free time spent at home. One may view this as an opportunity to travel while the other sees it as a waste of money now that they can finally enjoy spending as much time as possible enjoying the dream home that was purchased with retirement in mind. They may even differ on how much time they want to spend with each other; one feeling that it is good for a marriage to not be with each other constantly while the other has spent years waiting for the time when they can be together almost all the time.

3

Health-Related Disappointments

Physical and cognitive health issues unfairly target the older adult population. At the same time, we live in an age when medical science has given us tools to age in a more active and healthy manner than previous generations. Although the years of the Covid pandemic, coupled with an increase in drug overdose deaths, has interrupted what had been a progressive increase in life expectancy, there is reason to believe that progress in medical and other life sciences will increase the projected lifespan even further. There are some highly regarded gerontologists who believe that they average life expectancy will surpass 100 years, and – if you regularly glance at the obituaries – you are aware that it is no longer rare to see ages of deceased individuals reported in triple figures.

Despite these optimistic findings, too many retired couples often have to deal with physical and cognitive declines in one or both spouses at a time when they anticipated enjoying life rather than preparing for death. The mindset of how the members of the couple deal with medical issues can go a long way toward determining how well they will get along together in the non-medical part of their lives.

Certain skills are required to navigate this time in their lives. While it is possible that certain lifestyle choices that a person made when s/he was younger, and may even continue to make, may well have contributed to current medical problems, this is not a time to be placing blame, shame, or guilt. In addition, genetics or environmental factors may trigger health problems even in a person who has led a healthy lifestyle.

Among unfortunate byproducts of health-related issues among older adults include the fact that many of them reduce their activity level rather than modifying it, thus promoting a sedentary lifestyle which contributes to an even more dysfunction. Another byproduct is a tendency to make medical issues the center of your life, which leads to unproductive “medical report” types of conversation that create a social barrier between the complainer and peers who are more active. An additional issue arises when one of the spouses is more fit and becomes the caregiver. While the experience is always somewhat draining, it can also be very satisfying if it’s not done with resentment and blame.

Clearly the best way of dealing with health-related issues is to acknowledge them and work together as a couple to maximize functioning, eat healthy, exercise, and participate in activities to keep the brain active.

4

Finances

Financial issues can impact upon your relationship in one of two ways – and possibly both of them. There just may not be enough money to maintain the lifestyle that you had when one or both of you were earning significant incomes, and the money may not be there to enable you to live the lifestyle that you anticipated and want and you see some of your peers experiencing. This may be due to a combination of funding other priorities in the past, inadequate planning, and/or unrealistic expectations. This can create stress and resentments when dealing with the realization that there may not be an obvious way to change the financial situation.

Even when finances appear to be adequate and in order from an objective standpoint, however, there can still be considerable financial stress caused by differing attitudes about money. One spouse may be much more willing to spend, while another may prioritize maintaining as large a “nest egg” as possible or wanting to leave the largest possible legacy to the next generation. One may resent having lived below their means throughout their life together on the assumption that retirement would be a time of abundance – and now learning that living below their means is the other spouse’s idea of a wonderful lifestyle. One may see retirement as an opportunity to make substantial charitable contributions while the other is less interested in doing so. Thus, finances can be a problem – regardless of a couple’s actual degree of wealth.

5

Missing Your Former Lives

After waiting years for the opportunity to no longer have to go to a job and have a regimented lifestyle, some people – quite remarkably – find that there was a lot to like about their former life. Just being part of the normal world, where people go to work, share stories with their colleagues, go shopping on lunch breaks, and ultimately being a respected elder at the workplace can be quite rewarding. If a person is in one career for many years, much of their identity comes from the work they do – especially if they are quite accomplished at it. All that may now be history, especially if the person doesn't maintain some sort of connection to the place of employment or the field in general. This can be compounded if the spouse didn't share a similar vocational background or pattern of career interests.

Frustration can be further compounded if you chose to move to a new community for retirement; and while there may be some significant lifestyle or weather or tax benefits in the new location, it may also be a place where no one knows or cares who you used to be.

While this scenario isn't necessarily typical, or nobody would want to retire, it also isn't rare. When it does happen, the other spouse may become the unfair target of pent-up frustration – and this is further intensified if one spouse was more ready to move into a new phase of life than the other.

And Now For The Solution!

It may seem simple – even too simple, but a lot of issues between couples can be resolved if they learn to communicate better. Any of the above problems can be addressed through improved communication. The reality is that, for many couples, this is the first time that communication skills are being tested around issues that don't involve a third party like a child or an aging parent or a home purchase or a job. Even during those times, decision-making in certain areas may have been defaulted to one of the spouses. The end result is that it's now harder to communicate in a healthy manner than it is to blame or resent. Here are some strategies to reset the communication paradigm.

First of all, recognize that communication with your partner is a skill; one that you're not really good at yet. It doesn't mean that you won't get good at it, but it does mean that there will be a learning curve. During this time, you will both make some mistakes because the process is similar to what you went to in learning other skills – like walking, reading, using the computer, etc. Your spouse will make errors too, and the best thing that you can do is recognize this with compassion and empathy.

A good way to begin improving the communication process is to actually set aside time for communication. At least once a week (and nightly isn't too frequent), have an appointment to meet as a couple to check in on how things are going from each other's perspective, and the sources of dissatisfaction with the way that something was dealt with last week, and are there concerns about something in your future schedule that could divide you.

Those concerns may include whether you can afford something that's upcoming, or whether your kids are making requests that are uncomfortable for at least one of you, or whether you are already expecting to feel neglected by your spouse in an upcoming social gathering. This should be a blame-free time. The goal should be for each of you to feel that you're being heard. If you come up with a solution, that would be a bonus, although you may find that solutions will happen more and more as you get used to communicating effectively.

Deal with current issues on their own merits. If you been together for most of your adult lives, you own a memory bank full of things that your partner has done that were either thoughtless, disrespectful, or stupid. Let me ask you a question: Can you think of one productive thing that is to be gained by dredging up this history and bringing it into the current discussion?

You may be surprised to see how easily solvable some problems are if they are dealt with on their own merits rather than added to a historical scorecard of grievances. Agree beforehand that you will try to catch yourself and stop engaging in behaviors that undermine effective communication and agree that your partner has the obligation to point it out to you when you revert to unhealthy habits of this type.

Don't be afraid to disagree but do it respectfully. It is illogical to assume that any two people, regardless of their relationship, will agree on everything – let alone how they are building a critical stage of their life together. The avoidance of discussing legitimate differences is a major reason why communications get fouled up in the first place. Recognize, however, that a disagreement is reflective of a difference of opinion, not the other person's bullheadedness, stupidity, or dishonesty.

You may be unable to comprehend how any rational adult could not comprehend the soundness of your position, but that doesn't negate your need to present your position in a respectful way and to listen to the opposing point of view.

Listening is the operational term when it comes to communication. The more precise term is Active Listening. If you want to change the dynamic that exists between you as a couple, the most important thing that the two of you can do is to agree to be active listeners. Agree that during the times that you set aside for communicating with each other you will give your partner undivided attention. Agree that you will hear the other person out before you formulate a response, rather than have a response ready to make your point before you've completely heard what your partner has to say. You may be surprised how sensible your spouse's point of view may be – even if you disagree with it.

Remember that the goal of communication between equals is to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion rather than pre-determining beforehand that you are correct, and your goal is to persuade the other person of that fact.

Finally, at the conclusion of a civil conversation, expressing thanks to the other person will go a long way toward ultimately resolving the issues that you may be having. These problems didn't arise overnight, although your current circumstances may be highlighting them for the first time. But if you are learning to communicate in a respectful and empathic manner, you are greatly enhancing the chances of finding mutually acceptable conclusions to the problems that have arisen because you're now together all the time.

If It's More Complicated Than That...

I'd like to invite you and your spouse to have a conversation with me to see if I can help you get unstuck. Sometimes a brief conversation with a third party is all that it takes to resolve an issue that you're too close to notice a pretty obvious conclusion. Some issues and some relationships are too complex to deal with in a short conversation. If that's the case, I won't hesitate to recommend couple therapy or my specialized REJUVENAGING® coaching program to help you become your best version of a couple by developing communication and other lifestyle management skills that can make the rest of your life the best part of your life.

To schedule a zoom conversation, please click the following link: <https://calendly.com/ron-kaiser/conversation?month=2023-06>