

Don't just survive – thrive
Summary notes of keynote presentation
Survivor Kiama Better Marriages Australia 2016 Conference
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Commitment enables us to stay in a relationship for the long haul. But we all want to do more than just survive a long-term marriage. We want to thrive in that partnership.

Nearly all relationships can improve. Good relationships can get stronger and struggling relationships can get better. But improvement takes a lot of work and it's impossible to do the work without awareness of the issues. Once you are aware of any issues, you can open up a toolbox of strategies that will enable you to create the strongest marriage possible.

Commitment

Without commitment, you won't thrive or survive the long term. To me, commitment is a mindset that says: *You are the person I have chosen to spend my life with and everything I do and say will reflect that decision.*

Commit to your relationship by adopting these strategies:

- Let your partner be the first person to hear any news, be it good or bad
- Shut down any flirtation that has crossed the line
- Stop the threats to leave
- Take responsibility for your own bad moods or mistakes rather than turning them around on your partner
- Having the difficult conversations
- Not looking for greener grass

- Not airing dirty laundry

Let your children teach you

Children bring us so much joy. Sure they are exhausting and expensive, but almost all parents would say that they couldn't imagine life without them. But did you know that children can also be wonderful teachers? They teach us how to be patient, how to be tolerant, how to have fun and laugh. Perhaps most importantly, children teach us how we should treat each other.

- What do you do when your child is very upset?
- How do you react when your child is being irrational?
- How do you help your child when they have a problem?
- What do you do when your child is nasty to you?
- Do you forgive your child when they have done wrong?
- What happens when your child says they need some time or space?
- How do you ask your child for help around the house?

Most parents treat their children really well. They forgive them, they listen to them, and they give their child space when they want it. If we treated each other as well as we treated our children, we would all get along a lot better.

So the next time your partner upsets you or acts badly, imagine it was one of your children and try to respond accordingly. If you don't have children, try pretending your partner is a good flatmate or a close friend. How respectful would you be? How forgiving would you be?

The importance of saying sorry

Some people find it really hard to apologise: they will defend themselves to the death. They might know that they have done wrong but feel weak or embarrassed if they apologise. The trouble is, if you don't say sorry, your partner won't feel understood and may feel resentful.

There are many reasons why an individual might have trouble apologising. They might not have come from a family who said sorry to one another. They might have a strong fear of criticism and so feel the need to always defend themselves. It takes strength to admit when you're wrong. It takes courage to take responsibility for upsetting another person. If you have trouble saying sorry, perhaps you don't feel good about yourself. Believe it or not, learning to apologise will improve your self-esteem, not harm it.

Remember that saying sorry doesn't mean that you are totally to blame for something. You might be simply saying that you are sorry that your partner is so upset, having misunderstood your words or behaviour.

It's equally important to learn to accept apologies. If your partner apologises and you use that as an excuse to launch into them again, then there will be no incentive for them to apologise the next time.

Keeping the spark alive

It's very normal for a relationship to feel a bit stale after many years together. But just because it's normal doesn't mean that you should ignore the issue. Before you can work on the marriage, you need to be happy within yourself. It takes two contented people to make a marriage work. It is too hard to change things when one person is depressed or full of resentment.

After you have addressed any unresolved issues, it's a good idea to look at changing predictable routines. How long has it been since you have both had a good laugh together? When did you last have some fun? It's important to keep spending quality time together – whether that means going out on some old-fashioned dates or getting away from a night every 6 months or so.

Work out what makes you laugh. Do something that you used to do years ago – ten-pin bowling or dancing. Regularly sit down and map out some goals for the next 5 or 10 years. And try these tips:

- Give each other space
- Pick your fights
- Keep making plans
- Reminisce

Mindreading

Many issues in relationships are due to the mistaken belief that our partners can read our minds. We expect them to interpret our moods or pick up on our subtle hints in the correct way. When they get it wrong, we jump to all sorts of irrational conclusions. Even if you've been with your partner for twenty years, it doesn't mean that you can read each other's minds. Many of the daily squabbles between couples could be avoided if we all learned to speak our minds.

If you both start saying what you really mean, the communication will improve dramatically.

Parenting your partner

Problems arise in relationships when the two people spend most of the time in either parent or child mode. The dynamic is really unhealthy because one person feels like they are being treated as a child and not respected in any way and the other one feels as if they are carrying their partner through life, always having to remind them to do something or reprimanding them for doing something wrong. Over time, resentment builds up and attraction fades. Intimacy disappears and the relationship is in trouble.

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Have a think about how you speak to your partner. Do you ever talk to them as if they were a child? Would you speak this way to a close friend? Would you react like this if a workmate asked you for some help? The sad thing is that we often treat our friends and workmates better than we treat our partners. That's because we usually treat our friends and workmates as adults.

Fighting fairly

A couple who never fights is not necessarily the happiest couple. It's possible that they're not communicating at all and there might be many unresolved issues. Some of the most successful couples argue a lot. It's how you argue that's important. Here is a list of dos and don'ts.

Dos:

- Pick your fights
- Listen
- Be empathic
- Apologise
- Set a good example

Don'ts

- Timing is everything
- Don't be passive-aggressive
- Don't make it personal
- Don't keep going if things escalate

Romance killers

1. Constantly seeking reassurance
2. Jealous behaviour
3. Teasing
4. Controlling behaviour
5. Taking things out on your partner

It can be hard to change some of these habits, but it's worth doing to help keep the romance alive. If you recognise any of these romance killers have crept into your relationship:

- Check your commitment to the relationship. Do you want the relationship to last?
- Are you willing to change the habit? If so, ask your partner for patience while you work on it.

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- Substitute healthy habits, such as trying to give compliments instead of making criticisms or teasing.

Don't be a dependent doormat

While it's vital to prioritise your relationship, it's just as important to have your independence. A strong relationship is made up of two people, not two halves of one whole. Relationships don't cope under the strain of one person relying on the other for absolutely everything. A dependent partner will sometimes end up being treated as a doormat and not respected.

So how to you decrease dependence?

1. Collect stories during your day
2. Take the lead sometimes
3. Keep up your own interests
4. Be aware of the family finances
5. Keep dreaming

Filling your rain tank

What are you doing to fill your rain tank?

- Dinners out
- Picnics
- Weekends away
- Laughing
- Walks on the beach
- Complimenting each other
- Surprise gifts or cards
- Nice SMSs
- Spontaneous sex

Make up your own list and keep your tank full.