

**The 10 Secrets to an enduring marriage**  
**Workshop Summary notes**  
**2016 Better Marriages Australia Conference**  
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## **1. Commitment**

Imagine you've been practicing or training very hard for something – a race, a presentation, or an exam. The day arrives and you have some last minute nerves. *Will I pull this off? Can I do it? What if it all falls apart?* What do you do? You take a big deep breath and you tell yourself: *I can do this.* You feel instantly stronger and more capable. It's like an injection of confidence that allows all your hard work to pay off.

When it comes to relationships, the sentiment behind those words, *I can do this*, is commitment. If you want your relationship to work, you can't be ambivalent about it. It's black and white – either you're committed or you're not. You may have your concerns, both major and minor, but commitment will make you do the work that is necessary to address those concerns.

Some people don't even realise that they're not committed. They have one foot out the door and wonder why their relationship is not as close as they'd like it to be.

To me, commitment is a mindset that says: *You are the person I choose. No matter what difficulties we face, whether as a couple or as individuals, I will be there for you. My behaviour will reflect the fact that I have chosen to be in a relationship with you for the rest of my life.*

If you're still trying to decide whether or not you should commit, I'd encourage you to consider whether your relationship has the following essential ingredients:

- A certain amount of passion and chemistry
- A certain amount of physical attraction
- Like-mindedness
- Similar values
- Bringing out the best in each other
- Spending time together in everyday life
- Accepting each other's warts
- Loving each other
- Enjoying each other's company
- Shared goals and dreams

If you have enough of these essential ingredients, then you should be able to confidently commit.

## **2. Bringing out the best in each other to become a better person**

In healthy relationships we bring out the best in each other. We feel like we are better people because we are with our partners. I'm not suggesting that we need to be in a relationship to be at our best, but if we are with someone, the relationship shouldn't bring out our worst qualities. In fact if you notice that since you have been with your partner, you have become a slave to the green-eyed monster or you feel timid and weak or you are suddenly extremely argumentative for the first time in your life, the relationship might not be as healthy as it should be.

Ideally, when you are in a good relationship, their good qualities start rubbing off on you. You might feel calmer or more tolerant because your partner is fairly relaxed. Perhaps your confidence has increased because your partner strongly believes in you. Maybe you have learned to manage money for the first time because your partner is good at saving.

## **3. Treat each other like the most important person in the world**

- Let them be the first person you greet when you walk into a room – not the kids, not the dog, not the other guests who have dropped in
- Let them be the first to hear good or bad news
- Remember what they tell you and follow up – on that doctor's appointment they had or the important meeting they had on
- Try to connect during the day via a phone call or a text to say that you're hoping they're having a good day

- Forgive them easily and be quick to apologise

When we are made to feel special by our partner, it's easier to cope with the hiccups that inevitably come.

#### **4. Be good role models for your children**

- Letting them see how you resolve conflict
- Modelling resilience in the face of failure
- Being willing to delegate when stressed rather than being a control freak
- Taking time out for the relationship – letting your children hear you say: Mum and Dad are having a chat, so please leave us for a little while.
- Don't apologise for leaving them with a babysitter – tell them how excited you are to be spending time with each other
- Letting them see you compliment each other and being affectionate
- Letting them see you greet each other first
- Model respect and acceptance

#### **5. Empathy and validation**

To have empathy for another human being is actually quite difficult. A lot of people believe that they are being empathic, but are they?

Contrary to popular belief, empathy doesn't involve trying to imagine how you would feel in the same situation that another person finds themselves. It's actually about letting go of you altogether and imagining how that other person is feeling in that situation. It has absolutely nothing to do with you and nothing to do with how you would think or feel or behave.

Empathy helps you to understand, as much as you can, another person's pain, hardship or love. It doesn't mean you know how someone else feels, because that's impossible. It's about forgetting your own perspective, focussing on someone else's experience and imagining what life might be like for them at that moment. It doesn't actually involve telling someone not to think, feel or act in a certain way. Empathy allows you to accept what someone feels as their truth.

To be truly empathic, you need to really listen to what the person is telling you. Don't offer solutions. You need to be comfortable with silence and with things that are difficult to hear. Ask gentle questions, but resist the urge to bring up similar experiences you may have had.

If you think you've got empathy down pat, but your partner struggles to show you any, you may need to help them to master this important skill. Whenever your partner is not empathic in day-to-day life, make a joke – remind them that what you are telling them has nothing to do with them. Encourage them to zip up and listen – just listen. Praise them when they refrain from bringing the conversation back to them. Praise them when they don't tell you what you should do. Tell them that it is becoming easier to talk to them. Remind them to be empathic with their friends, family and workmates too.

## **6. Picking your fights by accepting each others faults**

One of the hardest things we need to do in relationships is to accept our partners – warts and all. Trying to change your partner's personality is a futile exercise. They are who they are and you probably used to love them for it.

Think back to why you were attracted to each other in the first place. Now think about some of your recent disagreements. How much have they related to basic personality differences, which you had originally found attractive? Personalities don't weaken with age – quite the opposite. With the strengthening of certain behaviours comes increasing intolerance because we take off the rose-coloured glasses.

It's actually fairly easy to predict how someone will react in certain circumstances. You can simply look at how they reacted to similar circumstances in the past. But somehow we can start to become more unrealistic in our expectations of our partners as time goes by. So, the next time you wish your partner would behave differently, ask yourself: How do they usually behave in similar circumstances?

It's so important to pick your fights. Which issues are worth addressing and which should you let slide? By picking your fights, you can learn to accept and ignore the more insignificant behaviours, so that when you do tackle something, it becomes clearer that the issue is really important to you. It might help before you pick a fight: Will I be worrying about this in a year's time? You could also try the following exercise:

### **Hierarchy of irritating behaviours**

1. Think of the 5 most irritating things your partner does. Rank them in order from least to most irritating.
2. Accept that it is **your** problem that they irritate you.
3. Starting with the least irritating behaviour, see how long you can ignore it.
4. If you can let go of the least irritating behaviour, start work on ignoring the next behaviour on the hierarchy.
5. When you get to the behaviour that you can't ignore, tackle the issue with your partner, making sure you own the fact that the behaviour is bugging you and you want some help with it.

## **7. Hellos and goodbyes**

This is a little but important point. Making sure that you take the time to greet your partner when you have been apart for the day or the night and saying goodbye properly before you leave is essential. It allows you to register that you are important to each other. You care about being apart and about being back together. Leaving each other for the day without a proper goodbye feels wrong and can make you feel empty or unloved. Failing to give each other a hello kiss can also make you question the strength of your partner's interest in being there with you.

## **8. Fun and laughter**

Life can be really heavy, so it's important to lighten things up whenever you can. Laugh with each other. Be silly. Have fun. Watch comedies. Reminisce about funny times. Tickle, rumble, chase & gently tease. Anything to keep you smiling.

## **9. Celebrate everything**

Remember when you were younger. At a gathering with friends, someone would get up and make a toast to something. The more you celebrated, the more you wanted to toast. Now, you need to celebrate and congratulate each other on small and large achievements – another year, a pay rise, a successful dinner party. Being mindful of the little things helps to keep the focus on the positives.

I really believe that it's important to resist the urge to care less and less about special dates such as birthdays and anniversaries. On the contrary, I always encourage couples to celebrate more and more. You don't have to exchange

lavish gifts to celebrate such events. It's more about reinforcing the fact that your relationship and your partner are special.

## **10. Vulnerability**

Yes confidence is attractive, but not if it's a permanent state of being. When a person puts a positive spin on absolutely everything and never admits mistakes, it becomes harder to relate to them. Think about when you were getting to know each other. There was probably that moment when your partner revealed some kind of hurt or pain or fear. How much closer did you feel to them once they had shown you some vulnerability? It is a very attractive quality. In fact, we can start to mistrust people who never show their vulnerability.

In a relationship, it's actually easier to show some weakness every now and then than to continue to maintain a façade of permanent confidence. Admit when you are feeling rejected rather than trying to show your partner what it feels like. Express your frustration at trying to keep the house tidy and ask for some help with the load. Tell someone you're dating that you really care about them rather than playing hard to get.