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Reality check for couples

Valentine's Day comes once a year, but what's the state of your union? Experts weigh in on how the strongest pairs make — and enjoy — the whole cake.

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For Jeanne-Marie Moore, a licensed social worker and couples counselor at InSight Works in Eugene, the perfect metaphor for the foundation of a healthy marriage is a layer cake.

Say you're trying to bake a cake, but you don't think you have all the ingredients; you may tell yourself, I'm OK, but if I only had the eggs.

"Some people walk around and look for the eggs instead of understanding 'I'm an already baked whole layer of cake just right here the way I am,'" Jeanne-Marie explains with a warm laugh.

She is serious, however. Believe you're "a good, whole person" going into the relationship. That means you address personal issues, you face your inner demons. Most importantly, you don't rely on your partner to compensate for the inner work you haven't done. Or to provide the eggs, as it were.

Two wholes make the layer cake. Frosting is all that extra stuff you get to enjoy as a couple, Jeanne-Marie adds. "But you can't if you don't believe you have everything already for the cake," she says.

There are other components to a healthy partnership. In the month of February — or any month, for that matter — it's appropriate to ask the experts what makes a good union and how to preserve and strengthen the bond. Couples may even need help if they think they've lost that special feeling, or worse.

Diane Thurlow, a licensed clinical counselor at Healthy Marriages in Eugene, turned from a career in divorce mediation to counseling when she realized she would rather work with couples who are trying to figure out how to be together successfully.

"I've had so many couples who come in here," Diane says, "and one of them has already filed, or they're going to file, or they think they hate each other; and a week or two later, they've got their arms around each other. That's how close love and hate are. It's amazing."

Ties that bind

Jeanne-Marie became fascinated about couples by noticing what happened when people thought about themselves as part of a couple. “There are lots of nuances and subtleties in relationships,” she says. It can be astonishing, she says, what each person perceives about his or her partner, and how those notions can either help lay the groundwork for success or lead to strife as the relationship progresses.

Both Jeanne-Marie and Diane believe that couples wanting to commit to each other should undergo pre-commitment or pre-marital counseling. “Every couple,” says Diane wholeheartedly. Adds Jeanne-Marie, “The Catholics have Pre-Cana classes, where people have to sit down and talk about the good, the bad and the ugly.” Talk about everything openly and honestly, she advises.

Once happily committed to each other, couples should have periodic reality checks. “The unrealistic part has to do with the fairy-tale aspect, you know, the bliss part,” Diane says. “What you feel initially, the infatuation you feel. Any anticipation that that’s going to continue forever is totally unrealistic.”

So, when the honeymoon is over — or, as Jeanne-Marie says, that “whole February feeling” passes — here are some signposts that can reveal the health of a marriage, or expose issues that need the couple’s loving attention.

Are there common values and beliefs? “I believe you can negotiate almost anything,” Diane says, “but not values. Those are things that we don’t want to have to cave on or negotiate.” Says Jeanne-Marie: “Commitment can be much less complicated if the partners have similar views on key issues.”

Are there daily positives in the relationship? “That actually is a habit,” Diane explains. To say kind things. To appreciate and value the things the partner does. Jeanne-Marie believes in knowing your partner’s love languages, Gary Chapman’s concept. “You have to understand what your partner’s love languages are, and then you’ve got to come out of your comfort zone and speak in that language to reach your partner.”

Is the couple a united front? This concept carries into many challenges that can test a partnership, including parenting, future goals, financial responsibilities and each other’s respective families. “Those family issues can destroy the boundaries of a relationship,” warns Diane. For example, if a parent is made more important than one’s spouse, “you set up a triangle, and the odd person out is the spouse,” she explains. “It’s very destructive.”

Is there healthy space between the partners? “I think it’s important that people have space away from each other,” advises Jeanne-Marie. She likes the idea of each person having a reasonable monthly allowance to do with whatever he or she wants, no questions asked. If one wants to have a night out with friends, or the other wants to take a class, wonderful. Those things done separately enhance “the fire” of life,” Jeanne-Marie adds.

Also, connection to and reliance on a wider community, whether it be a church, a circle of friends, or others is important. “You’re going to need those people as transitions happen,” Jeanne-Marie says. “If all you lean on is your partner ... it can’t work like that. It’s too much to ask of one person.”

Are partners in tune with each other’s personality? Often times as marriages evolve, the personality traits partners once found endearing and attractive can become annoying, or worse, intolerable. This is fairly common, agree Diane and Jeanne-Marie. “As we go along in a relationship ... and we stop telling each other the things that we like or seeing the things that we like, we start not liking our partner’s personality,” Diane explains. In actuality, Diane muses, those personality dislikes are really the flip side of what the couple used to like in each other. “That’s why they can so quickly be lovey-dovey again, because once they start seeing it, those things are still there.”

Is the couple having fun together? Couples should be doing something together at least once a week, Jeanne-Marie says. “You’ve got to have breaks where your baby or child or teen can go and you guys can pretend you’re married.” She chuckles.

Adds Diane: “It’s important to remember they’re a couple and to have fun together, because that’s one of the things that drew them together in the beginning.”

And have a sense of humor, says Jeanne-Marie. “There is real healing in laughter. Life is hard enough without taking it too seriously.”

Overall, what matters, Diane says, “is how the couple handles their relationship regardless of whether there’s something big or small going on. They still need to be kind. They still need to show appreciation. They still need to act loving.”

“Have five positives to one negative,” Jeanne-Marie says, drawing from John Gottman’s concept, “because you’ve got to have a bank account to draw from when the negatives hit.”