

How to Live Happily Ever After

Four experts with a combined total of over 126 year of devoted marital experience discussed the five myths that sabotage a happy marriage and seven tools for living happily ever after.

Participants included the following IdeaMarketers.com experts:

- Therapist and author Dr. Neill Neill - www.neillneill.com
- Relationship coach Nancy Gerber - www.sstones.com
- Christian coach and author David Evans - www.DavidEvansCommunications.com
- IdeaMarketers.com creator and author, Marnie Pehrson - www.pwgroup.com

This is a transcript of the highlights from this panel discussion. An audio recording of the entire panel discussion sponsored by IdeaMarketers.com is available at <http://www.ideamarketers.com/experts/calls/happilyeverafter.cfm>

5 Myths (Beliefs) That Can Sabotage a Happy Marriage

MYTH #1: Being married to the same person for so long is boring .



[Christian coach and mediator, David Evans](http://www.DavidEvansCommunications.com) related, "Somebody asked me just the other day when they found out my wife and I have been married for 50 years, 'How in the world could you be married to the same person for 50 years?' My response is, 'I'm not married to the same person.' If you're lucky and if you're living your life in a thoughtful way, you're always becoming a new person. You're growing into something maybe that you'd never imagined. We're always becoming new people... so that's kind of the adventure of marriage."

[Dr. Neill Neill](http://www.neillneill.com), a family therapist and author of *Living with a Functioning Alcoholic - A Woman's Survival Guide*, adds, "Even if people aren't conscious of the change, the changes happen anyway. You can take someone who's quite unconscious of change and ask them about what they were like 5 years ago, they're different."





"It's kind of a two sides of the coin thing . . . on one hand, we are at our core the same people that we've been and shall always be, but we also grow, and change and adapt and come into new places and new interests. It's an interesting combination," says [Nancy Gerber](#), [relationship expert](#).

[Marnie Pehrson](#), creator of IdeaMarketers.com and author of *You're Here for a Reason: Discover & Live Your Purpose* gave a personal example, "My nephew just got married recently. He and his bride are the same ages my husband and I were when we married (23 and 19). I came up to them at their bridal shower and said, 'You don't even know who you are right now.' They looked at me with slack jaws and confusion in their bright eyes, 'What? What do you mean?' I continued addressing my next words to her in particular, 'You're going to be affected so much by who he is -- you will adapt and change based on his strengths or his weakness.' I've seen that in my own marriage. I would not be who I am today had I not been married to my husband."



[Nancy Gerber](#): "Someone once asked me how do you know if it's the right person or if your marriage is a good one. As human beings when you get really close and intimate with someone, sometimes you bring out the best in each other, and sometimes you bring out the worst. When you bring out the best in each other more often than you bring out the worst that pretty much tells you that you have a good marriage."

MYTH #2: I must give up individual needs, desires, interests, and self.

[David Evans](#): "We have to be interesting people. We have to be developing, evolving, vital people so that we have something to bring to the marriage. I know of a couple where the guy had been married before and he was very leery, so he felt he had to completely give up any of his own identity so he could really be a good husband. Because of that they ended up getting a divorce because he denied himself. So you have to really be yourself, but be yourself in such a way that it's in sync with the other person."

[Dr. Neill Neill](#): "I knew a young couple and he announced that he was giving up pool because he was getting married (he was a good pool player). And I kind of privately shuddered, "Uh oh." They lasted about three years. You don't give up yourself. You bring out yourself in a good relationship. I've seen people give up things -- such as men giving up their motorcycles -- I think a great many of those things that people give up because of the constraints of marriage are self-imposed or imaginary."

Nancy Gerber: "People often automatically assume that their partner wants them to give up something or that it's expected without really having the conversation. In many cases their partner would not want them to give up their interests. In fact, their partners want them to do what makes them happy and is fun for them."

Marnie Pehrson: "Wallace Wattles (who wrote *The Science of Getting Rich*) also wrote a book on love. In it he talks about how it's not the other person's fault if they don't love you anymore. It's not their fault if they don't find you interesting anymore. It's your responsibility to be an interesting person and to increase your own skills, abilities and talents so that you're someone who is loveable. So when you cut off that part and say I'm not going to do these things that interest me, then you are losing a piece of what that person loves about you."

MYTH #3: Once you get married, the hard work is over.

Nancy Gerber: "It is our responsibility to grow ourselves, not only for the sake of our marriage, but for the sake of ourselves. If we are a stagnant person and not bringing energy to our life and to our marriage, it's nobody's fault but ours. It's nobody's responsibility but ours."

Dr. Neill Neill: "It's really important to invest in yourself. If you invest in yourself while you're married, you're also investing in your marriage. It's a bit of both. The thing is investing implies putting out and challenging and being difficult. But the return is huge. You can't get an area in life where there's bigger return and fulfillment and enjoyment than your relationships and your self-growth."

Nancy Gerber: "People invest in everything but their marriages. If they're parents, then they invest in their children -- which of course is essential. But they spend a lot of time doing community work, and they put in double the hours in their career. They are so invested in everything else while their marriages are dying on the vine."

David Evans: "It's very important for people to invest in themselves, but then having invested in themselves in a continuing and growing basis, to set aside special times and things to do with their mates. Maybe go someplace, have fun together -- just the two of you -- not with a group of people, not with the kids, just the two of you. Invest in your relationship. Spend time together."

Marnie Pehrson: "There are two types of crops -- there are early harvest and late harvest crops. Early harvest crops reap rewards immediately. We live in an instant gratification world. You do something for me... I do something for you. I get my paycheck this week. But a marriage is a late harvest crop. You could work and wait and put effort in for years, and then suddenly it grows exponentially. It's the law of increasing returns in a marriage. You're growing an oak, not a green bean."

Dr. Neill Neill: "It's a little bit like planting pear trees. You don't really expect a good crop until after twelve years."

MYTH #4: Once we're married, I can change my partner.

Nancy Gerber: "When my husband and I first got engaged, we went to visit a good friend who'd been married about five years at the time. She had a piece of advice for me, 'Think about how he is right now -- all his faults, all his gifts. Imagine that he's going to stay exactly the same for the next 50 or 60 years. Do you still want to marry him?' I thought about that for a minute and said, 'Yeah.' I thought that was a great question."

Many people try to change their partner by criticizing them.

Nancy Gerber: "Criticism can do irreparable damage. There's a difference between criticism and giving feedback about behavior."

Dr. Neill Neill: "If people can give feedback by way of their own emotional reaction. 'When you behave this way, I feel an upset. I feel something coming up. This bothers me. It's not that you're wrong, but I'm telling you that this is what's happening to me.' If you get in the habit of operating in that way, then there's far less defensiveness that comes up. You're not attacking the person. If my partner says, 'Neill this is bothering me.' Well, I really care about my partner. I don't want to be doing things that cause distress for her. So I start taking a look, 'What am I doing here? Where is this coming from?' And then change happens, but not because she criticized me. If she criticized me, I get my back up."

Nancy Gerber: "We can tell when we're criticizing versus giving feedback when we're pointing out "you ... you ... you" versus using I statements. 'I get angry when you behave that way. I feel hurt when you say those words to me.' When we're using 'I' statements we're giving feedback."

MYTH #5: Problems will usually work themselves out if we ignore them and let them go.

David Evans: "This is so untrue. You really have to address things right when they happen. The little twig that grew outside my office and I let it go, years later I had to have it cut down for \$300."

Dr. Neill Neill: "I met a couple recently who had been married 40-something years, and they were having real difficulties. It was about a chance meeting with an old boyfriend by the wife while the two of them were together, and it happened on their honeymoon 40 years ago." Problems don't go away on their own.

David Evans: "In conflict resolution situations, I see that again and again. People have something bothering them and they'll never bring it out."

Nancy Gerber: "If there's something going on that's a problem, you absolutely positively must address it some way - either with a qualified professional, or read a book together and talk. Do something to address it. It's just not going to go away otherwise. It affects your relationship and your relationship with others around you in ways that you can't even imagine."

Marnie Pehrson: "There's a really good book called *"Feelings Buried Alive Never Die"* by Karol Truman. She talks about how the feelings that we don't address end up coming out in physical ailments, relationship issues, and frustration in life. You have to address those feelings at some point or they will build up and cause you problems later on down the road."

Dr. Neill Neill: "A particularly dangerous place - and this fortunately doesn't happen to a lot of people - but if a child dies and there's the initial grieving, but then the couple decides not to talk about it because it's too hard and it festers -- a year later or sometimes 25 years later they split up because they've never processed it."

7 Tools You Can Use Right Away To Make Your Marriage Stronger

TOOL #1: Communication Fitness

Nancy Gerber: "Communication fitness is sort of like physical fitness, except it isn't taught in school like reading, math, English and science are. Maybe you learn how to give a speech in college, but basically we're pretty much left on our own unless we come from a family of good communicators or we happen to know good communicators. So we need to practice and learn the basics: owning and expressing our feelings (I versus you), listening skills, giving and receiving feedback, assertiveness, learning to ask for what you want, negotiation. Those are the basic skills and it's just like when you're in training and you want to stay physically fit. You do a little cardio, weight training and stretching. It's important to keep working on your communication fitness."

David Evans: "If you're in a dispute with someone, stop and ask, 'how does this look to the other person?' Never mind how it should look to the other person or how you think it ought to look, how does it really look to the other person?"

Dr. Neill Neill: "We're hardwired to be in relationships. We're hardwired to really want to be in communion with someone else. It all starts with talking. We meet somebody. We talk. If that continues, we get to know them and they get to know us. If that continues we get to like them and that makes us want to talk more. And it goes around that circle until we're really truly connected or reach a point of

communion with another human being. If anything breaks the communication, because we're changing throughout life, we soon get out of touch with who the person is. I see people in my office. They're both responding to the other person as they were five years ago. They have no idea where their partner is now because the communication part of it has been broken. But the only part of that process that people have any control over is communication. It's essential and if it's broken then the relationship goes from communion to the other extreme alienation. If you don't talk, you get out of touch. Period."

TOOL #2: Keep your marriage "boring" (i.e. minimal drama)

Dr. Neill Neill: "I say keep your marriage boring because I think of marriage as a sacred container made up of rules. These predictable rules are love, trust, respect, caring, acceptance, honesty and a number of others that are just there. They're part of it. But within that container you can climb Mount Everest, you can paddle down the Amazon. You can hitchhike around the world. As a couple you can do almost anything as long as you don't mess with the container. The container is predictable and inviolate. You don't touch that -- and that's boring."

Nancy Gerber: "Comedian Chris Rock has a whole bit on boring marriage. He says his marriage is boring -- there's not a lot of drama. He said that when you see a lot of drama in a relationship you know the relationship is in trouble. People seem to think that you need to have excitement in your relationship and that there needs to be drama."

TOOL #3: Give your partner freedom to fly and enjoy the show

Marnie Pehrson: "I tend to be the one that's flying like the kite up in the air pursuing different interests and very ambitious. My husband is not very ambitious about anything. That used to bug me until I realized he's like the string on my kite. He keeps me grounded, and he keeps things running smoothly. He keeps the meals coming at regular times and keeps the kids behaving, so that level of "boredom" - that consistent effort enables me to do what I do. And I couldn't have done it had I not had someone who was like the string on the end of that kite."

TOOL #4: Stop keeping score with your spouse and others

Dr. Neill Neill: "Stop keeping score."

David Evans: "I think the problem with keeping score with other marriages is that we know our own failings and frustrations, and we don't know those other people. We're comparing our insides with their outsides. We don't have any idea what those people are really like."

Dr. Neill Neill: "A marriage is not a business transaction. If you start getting into things like we're going to split the rent down the middle and each of us pay half of the hydro bill, that gets to be a mess. Incomes go up and down throughout a lifetime and they aren't equal. If both people are treated the same by the same rules, then they aren't equal. If you're spending half of your income on rent and your partner is spending a tenth of his income on rent, then that's not fair. That's not equal. It's not about that. It's a partnership. Let's do the best we can with our pooled resources -- financial, emotional, intellectual, and all our other resources."

David Evans: "There are so many other intangibles we invest in our marriage -- feelings, listening, being good with our spouse's relatives. There is no way to - even if you want to - keep score or equalize it."

Nancy Gerber: "There's a difference between keeping score and owning your feelings. You can still say things like, 'I feel like my needs are not being paid attention. Or I'm angry because I miss you because you spent five nights this week working late.'"

Marnie Pehrson: "One thing that has helped us in our marriage, where we have a lot of role reversal, is to sit down and come up with a mission statement for both of us as a couple -- this is where we're heading, this is where we're going together. This is how what he does fits into our mission. This is our mission together instead of me saying, "this is my mission and you go find your own thing... or come along if you want to."

TOOL #5: Keep your sense of humor & fun

Nancy Gerber: "One of my favorite quotes is by John Cleese of Monty Python, 'Just because you're serious, doesn't mean you have to be solemn.' We can be serious about our marriages, but not solemn about them. I have seen so many marriages where they are unhappy. There's no fun between them, no laughter between them. There's this down energy. Read silly books together, dress up and go to a costume party together, just go and have fun."

TOOL #6: Make dates with each other and keep them

Nancy Gerber: "A date doesn't have to be getting dressed up fancy and spending \$200. It might be put on some music and give each other foot rubs on the couch. The challenge is to keep the date, not just make dates. If marriage is a sacred container, then you make your sacred time."

David Evans: "My wife Sally does something she calls mystery evenings. A mystery evening is where Sally sets a date on the calendar and asks me to reserve it and then

she'll plan something to surprise me. One time she did a mystery weekend where we went to a bed and breakfast."

TOOL #7: Cultivate awareness without judgment

Nancy Gerber: "It's important to become more aware without judging. There is a way you can be fascinated versus punitive. It's important to see if you're beating yourself up or beating your spouse up every time you become more aware of something. See if you can figure out another way to respond instead of being judgmental because awareness is always going to happen. If you keep being judgmental every time you become aware, then you're going to shut that down."

"We can reframe something to notice versus accuse. Instead of saying 'you always do that' we can say, 'isn't this interesting. This is the third time today that I've been judgmental about this particular thing my spouse is doing. Isn't that interesting, let me think about that' instead of 'he's always doing this.'"

Dr. Neill Neill: "Often if someone points something out to us, we can always give an explanation for why we said or did that, but it's almost never the truth. We have to let it percolate and sometimes the truth underlying why we reacted, said or felt something will come out in the next hour. Sometimes it might be two or three weeks. But it requires patience. First be curious, 'Where did that come from? What was that about? What am I afraid of?' Fear underlies most negative emotions. Then let it go. Don't try to think about it, just let it go. Let it percolate."

Final Thoughts

Dr. Neill Neill: "We're hardwired to be in relationships so let's assume you're going to be in one if you aren't already in one. If you're going to be there, make the most of it. It can be a fantastic adventure."

Marnie Pehrson: "Be in it for the long haul. I think a lot of people think, 'Well if this doesn't work out, we can always get a divorce.' In my mind, divorce is not an option and it's never been an option. So I've got to dig in and figure out how to make this work. I think if you went into it thinking, 'I'm in it forever,' it totally changes the way you look at a marriage. It becomes that late harvest crop that you're looking forward to the fruit at the end and along the way."

David Evans: Marriage can be really wonderful and our culture really doesn't support that idea right now. And I'm talking about marriage for 50-60 years or more. It can be wonderful, have fun with it. There are problems that come up, but for every problem that comes up, there is some kind of wonderful tool that will help you deal

with that problem. Sure, problems will come up, don't worry about it because there's all kinds of stuff that will enable you to get through it -- all types of resources.

Nancy Gerber: Remember there's a distinction between perfect and personal best. We so often keep expecting perfection from ourselves and our partner. If we realize that we're only human. To be perfect and human is a contradiction in terms, and we seek to be at our personal best in any given situation, that kind of gives us room to be human. Secondly, we've got to speak up because marriage does not automatically make us mind readers. We automatically assume that our spouse knows exactly what we're thinking or we know exactly what they're thinking. Marriage does not convey upon it the magical power to read minds once you say 'I do.'"

Visit <http://www.ideamarketers.com/experts/calls/happilyeverafter.cfm> and the participants' web sites for more resources.

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