

Marriage: 4 ways to keep it strong

Here are four ways to keep your marriage strong so it can be the foundation for everything (and everyone) that comes after it in your family.

Treat your marriage like a nest, high up in a tree.

It's inevitable. Every marriage is going to have difficult times. And sometimes the most dangerous moments we face as couples are when those close to us are struggling – money worries, infidelity, kids or drama with the in-laws. Marital stress has a funny (but not “ha-ha” funny) way of slopping over onto couples who are near it and offering support to those in the middle of it. In moments like these, it's important to protect your marriage. Take time to remind each other that the problems around you aren't yours. Stay out of it. Don't take sides. And steer clear if things get particularly toxic.

Which is not to say you shouldn't be compassionate.

The Church does a lot for couples as they prepare for marriage – for example, pre-Cana and/or RCIA classes for those converting to our faith. Once the vows are said and the pews are empty, though, couples are often left to fend for themselves. It's often up to a married couple to seek out help when they need it, with no formal playbook to follow. One way to keep your marriage strong is to serve as an example for others in your faith community. Talk to your pastor and parish staff about beginning or serving on a ministry for couples who might need to bend an objective ear.

Support each other.

In nearly 20 years of marriage, the one thing that still astonishes me is seeing couples not support each other in the things they love to do. He/She loves to paint, hunt, sing, skate, garden, race, cook, build, fly, travel. But there are spouses who live in open, eye-rolling contempt of these hobbies, these passions. Husbands and wives resent interests they feel are sapping time and energy that should be poured into them, into the relationship. Take a different view. Support one another. Even go so far as to praise one another. No one ever said of his or her spouse, "I'm so glad you made me give up my dream for you."

Don't forget the little stuff.

Not long ago, I found some tchotchke at a bookstore. I picked it up. I smiled. I thought of my wife. Then I put it back down, and I went home. Afterward, I told my wife, "It was so funny; I almost bought it for you." To which she replied, "Why didn't you?" It's a fair question, and one that has lots of reasonable answers: "I didn't want to spend the money." "It would have just collected dust." "The last thing we need is more stuff." But the fact was, I didn't have a good answer. I was thinking of her, I had a chance to show it, and I walked away from it. We can almost always rationalize not paying attention to one another. The trick is to do it anyway.