

## Unacceptable behavior

There are relationships where fighting becomes abusive, or where one person is psychologically or physically cruel to the other. The Church does not expect any person to stay in an abusive marriage where physical or psychological harm is taking place. The U.S. bishops have noted that some abused spouses mistakenly believe that the Church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. This is not true. Any person trapped in such a relationship should talk to a pastor, trusted spiritual adviser, or counselor.

## Make it Last

Experts say there are four key ways to make marriage last:

1. **Manage Your Money.** The National Marriage Project's "Survey of Marital Generosity" shows that how *much* money a couple makes isn't related to marital bliss. But couples that worry about money and have a high level of stress about finances are 7 percent less likely to rate themselves as "very happy" and are notably more likely to separate or divorce.
2. **The Family that Prays Together Stays Together.** According to "When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America," couples who are religiously affiliated have a divorce rate that is 14 percent lower than the national average. Cultivate a strong Catholic faith



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by going to Mass on Sunday and talking about shared Christian values.

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3. **Just Hang On.** A recent Institute of American Values study found that two-thirds of unhappily married adults who — when times got tough — stuck with their marriages reported that after five years they considered themselves happily married. As we said before, the only thing constant is change, and things will often change for the better if you work together and give it time.

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4. **Grow Together.** In a healthy marriage, it's important to leave room for both members to grow and change. As Barry and Emily McCarthy note in their book *Getting it Right the First time*, "A vital marital task is to reach a balance between individuality and coupleness — between 'me-ness' and 'we-ness.'"



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## Conclusion

It is a great gift to journey through life together as a married couple. There will be "ups and downs," and as you move through the many phases of married life, it is most important to remember that **you're not alone**. The Church is there for your marriage long after the flowers have faded and the dress no longer fits. In times of joy and in times of trouble, remember that you have an entire faith community that wants your marriage to succeed and is committed to helping you in any way it can. Count your blessings and they will flow.

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## Additional Resources

### Books:

*30-Minute Read: Stress-Proof Your Marriage*, Cory and Heidi Busse. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009).

*For Better...Forever!*, Gregory K. Popcak, MSW, LCSW. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2008).

*Getting it Right the First Time*, Barry and Emily J. McCarthy. (Taylor and Francis Group, 2004).

### Parish Resources:

*7 Steps to Becoming Financially Free: A Catholic Guide*, Phil Lenahan. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2006).

*Together in God's Love: A Catholic Preparation for Marriage*, Joseph D. White, PhD, William Cashion, and the Diocese of Austin, Texas. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2011). <http://togetheringodslove.com/>

### Websites:

*Catholic Wedding Help*, [www.catholicweddinghelp.com](http://www.catholicweddinghelp.com)

Marriage and Family, *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/)

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# Marriage

A Sacrament of Lasting Love



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The great marriage myth of our time is that happy marriages “just happen.” When we were first married, we — like many young couples — were under the impression that true love was all that was required to live “happily ever after.” We certainly didn’t believe that we needed to put any work into our marriage, because only unhappy couples work on their marriages. Wow — were we wrong.



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The images of love and marriage that surround us in popular culture reinforce the idea that real love is easy, and experiencing hardship means you’ve married the wrong person. The reality is, we are all human beings struggling to find our way through relationships. Successful spouses know that putting time and energy into marriage is essential in building the foundation of a lasting love.

## Marriage Is a Sacrament



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The Church teaches that marriage is a sacrament. When a baptized man and a baptized woman freely consent to marry one another, their bond becomes sacramental — that is, it is a living and effective sign of God’s love. Christian marriage is more than a signed piece of paper and a shared checking account. Sacramental marriage

means that the couple shares together in the life of grace by the very fact of being married to one another.

The Church goes even further, teaching that the sign of God’s presence in marriage is the couple themselves. While the priest is an essential witness at a Catholic marriage ceremony, the spouses are the true ministers of the Sacrament of Matrimony. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Christian marriage in its

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turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant” (1617). As spouses, we are called to be signs of God’s love and presence through our words and actions, by raising our children in the faith, and through the way we show love for one another.

## Cycles of Marriage

Think of the shape of an hourglass. Wide at the top, continually tapering, tight at the middle and flaring out again to its widest point on the other side. That’s the shape of a marriage. At times we’re far apart, at other times we’re as close as we could be. The only thing constant in marriage is change.

### THE HONEYMOON

The heady, early days of romance are like “living on a breath mint,” because it seems like it takes almost no effort to keep your marriage happy and healthy.



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As time goes by, novelty is replaced by familiarity. It’s critical to navigate this transition because you want it to breed satisfaction instead of contempt. *Falling* in love is a wonderful blessing. *Staying* in love is a choice we make every day (and it takes a lot of work).



**YOUNG PARENTS**  
Children often give a marriage greater meaning and some amazing stuff to post on Facebook. Kids can be a source of joy and fulfillment.

But this phase of marriage is also among the toughest. The National Marriage Project reports that couples with children rate themselves as “very happy” in

Christian marriage is a holy vocation in which each spouse is called “to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love. In the joys of their love and family life he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb” (CCC 1642). Married life gives us a glimpse of the eternal union of God and his Church and calls each spouse to build the other up for everlasting life in heaven.

their marriage far less frequently than their childless counterparts, even though marital conflict and divorce rates are identical. To make matters tougher, this phase can last two decades or more. So finding joy in one another and your blossoming family is critical.

**MIDDLE AGE/EMPTY NEST** During this phase, your careers are probably flowing well and the house is paid off (or getting closer to it). Now that the kids are grown and gone, you can refocus your time and energy on one another. The world is your oyster — so long as you’ve taken care to stay connected and interested in one another.



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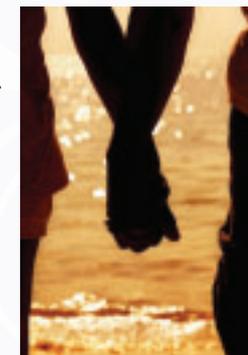


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**THE LATER YEARS**  
Couples that age together often find a deepening love. Many couples who have been married for twenty, thirty, or forty years say that they are even more in love in the later years of marriage than in their early days. This phase of marriage may also be called the “best friend” phase because spouses rely on one another and enjoy spending time together. One couple in their later years summed it up this way: “We simply can’t imagine life without each other!”

## Staying Connected through the Years

It is important to foster closeness with your spouse through all cycles of marriage. Parenting often becomes the main connection while the “couple relationship” is no longer prioritized. Spending time together alone as a couple is essential to staying connected.



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- Date nights may seem trite, but they really do work!
- If a babysitter isn’t forthcoming, turn off the television or computer and share the news of the day with each other. A friend of ours who was married for more than forty years says that the secret to a lasting marriage is “to periodically learn something new about your spouse.”
- Nourishing your faith life together is also essential to a lasting union. Praying together at bedtime and at mealtimes is a great way to keep God at the center of your marriage (and serves as a faith model for children and friends as well).

## When Problems Arise (and They Will)

Difficult times visit every marriage. Unexpected challenges arise: illness, job loss, or death in the family. But that doesn’t mean your marriage is doomed — far from it. Even the happiest and most successful marriages you can think of have had troubles — many of them *big* troubles.



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Sacramental marriages work through the tough times. When marital conflicts arise, it is helpful to remember there are no “winners” because you are always on the same team. Being “right” is not so much the goal as being heard and understood. And listening is just as important as talking. It is important to respect your spouse enough to listen and consider his or her side of the conflict. The best marriages are a union of two “forgivers.”