

Spouses Mutually Supporting The Other's Needs and Dreams Key To Happy Marriage

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***Editor's Note:** New Canaan Matters will periodically delve into major life issues and cover them a few elements at a time. Major topics for a newsletter such as marriage, which begins here, are better covered over the course of a few articles.*

For such an important issue affecting so many New Canaan lives, marriage gets little public discussion. There seems to be more information available on how to negotiate a divorce than on the relationships that make strong or weak marriages.

Statistics show that the rate of divorce in Connecticut is about the same as the 50%-of-all-marriages number that holds for United States. While there are no known statistics specific to New Canaan, local marriage counselors believe the 50% number holds here as well.

A local licensed marriage counselor, a local life coach and doctor of psychology who has counseled New Canaan couples over 30 years all agree: devoting time and energy to help a spouse fulfill his or her needs and dreams is a key to a successful marriage. At the same time that a married person is supporting the needs of the spouse, one should be clear in his own mind about what his own needs and dreams are and be open to express them, so the spouse can offer similar support in return, according to the counselors.

Dr. Stanley Rosner of The Counseling and Psychotherapy Group in Stamford, which had an office in New Canaan for nearly 20 years, says for a happy marriage there needs to be "a willingness to be considerate of what the other's interests and needs are and to help the other achieve them. And you need to understand your own needs, gain a sympathetic ear, and get support. You need to understand each other so you can help each other."

On top of that, Dr. Rosner said, "You need to adapt as your spouse's needs change over time."

So happy marriages result when individual spouses help the other fulfill their individual lives. Conversely, two individuals simply trying to create a happy couple will fail unless they themselves first are supportive of the other's individual needs and receive support for their own needs in return.

It seems logical, but judging by the numbers of failed marriages it is not a prescription that is easy to follow.

Some factors contributing to difficult marriages are general to all people, and some are exacerbated by the amount work required to maintain and improve one's lifestyle in an

expensive town like New Canaan, according to the counselors who spoke to New Canaan Matters.

Honest, open communication is necessary for a good understanding of the other, according to Suzanne Harris, a Weston resident whose personal coaching practice is in Norwalk. “As soon as you start posturing and stop being real, you are set up for a problem” in a marriage, Ms. Harris said. “You need to talk about pivotal life events.”

Ms. Harris cited an example of the importance of being understanding of a spouse, particularly when stress may be high. When a spouse who is out of work does not accept a job when it is offered, that could increase tension between the couple. However, if the spouse of the job-seeker understands the values that the job-seeker has about the right type of job, there would be support toward the spouse who just turned down a job. More support means less unhappiness.

A lack of understanding of a spouse occurs when one “stops listening to find what the other wants,” according to Susanne Weil, a licensed clinical social worker in Stamford whose clients come from New Canaan and neighboring towns. “They lose touch.”

As spouses lose touch and communications breakdown, “couples start blaming each other, which leads to stress,” said Ms. Weil. “Then people stop trying to communicate, and things get worse.”

Ms. Weil suggests couples “take time for intimate reflection with one another. You need to be there when the other needs you, not to fix things, but just to be there and listen.” And when the shoe is on the other foot, says Ms. Weil, “you need to take the vulnerable step to say ‘I need you to listen. I need you to be supportive, not to give advice, but just understand me.’”

All three counselors said that New Canaan couples are apt to lose touch and understanding when the amount of time a spouse spends at work is excessive. Dr. Rosen said, “Living in New Canaan people feel a need to keep making more and more money, and that requires lots of time away from home, working all hours. Often, the one at home feels lonely. And the more success there is at work, the more chance that the one at home is treated as office help.”

Ms. Weil says she sees troubled couples where a spouse is motivated to work all the time. Even when the worker is home, he or she is “often not there” for the other, Ms. Weil said. “They are either Blackberrying or preoccupied with work or the kids. The hard worker who is focused on making a living does not as readily sense the loss” in the relationship, according to Ms. Weil. The one at home senses it first.

Ms. Weil sees also sees crises caused by sexual affairs outside the marriage. In an affair, “a person gets focus from another...gets someone who is curious to really get to know (him or her),” Ms. Weil said. In other words, the support and understanding that is cited

as essential to happily married individuals are frequently welcomed outside the marriage when they are lost within the marriage.

Another factor that leads many New Canaan couples to marriage counseling is the spending of money, according to Ms. Weil. Breadwinners often resent excessive spending by the spouse who may be spending a lot in order to feel better about an unpleasant marriage, or because as Ms. Weil says, “there is pressure from others around town who always talk about their stuff, their homes. There is pressure to keep up.”
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