

Family and Relationships

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Nine 'Psychological Tasks' Needed for a Good Marriage

Psychologists have long studied the factors that contribute to troubled marriages, but have devoted relatively little time to finding out what makes good marriages succeed.

Judith S. Wallerstein, PhD, has sought to explore this gap by studying 50 couples who have been married for at least nine years. During the APA convention, Wallerstein, co-author of the book **The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts**, listed nine "psychological tasks" as the pillars on which any marital relationship rests. Wallerstein identified the nine tasks after conducting separate and joint interviews with 50 San Francisco Bay Area couples who had been legally married at least nine years; had had children together; and independently regarded their marriages as happy. She also conducted follow-up interviews two years later.

- She concluded that the first psychological task of a happy marriage is "to separate emotionally from the family of one's childhood so as to invest fully in the marriage and, at the same time, to redefine the lines of connection with both families of origin."
- Closely related, she says, is the second task of "building togetherness based on mutual identification, shared intimacy and an expanded conscience that includes both partners, while at the same time setting boundaries to protect each partner's autonomy."
- A third crucial task, she says, is "to establish a rich and pleasurable sexual relationship and to protect it from the incursions of the workplace and family obligations."
- Fourth—at least for couples with children—is to embrace the daunting roles of parenthood and to absorb the impact of a baby's entrance into the marriage. The couple must learn to continue the work of protecting their own privacy.

The next two tasks are closely related, Wallerstein said:

- confronting and mastering the inevitable crises of life, and
- maintaining the strength of the marital bond in the face of adversity. The marriage should be a safe haven in which partners are able to express their differences, anger and conflict.
- Equally vital, she said, is the seventh task of using humor and laughter to keep things in perspective and to avoid boredom and isolation.
- The eighth task is nurturing and comforting each other, satisfying each partner's needs for dependency and offering continuing encouragement and support.
- The final task is to keep alive the early romantic, idealized images of falling in love, while facing the sober realities of the changes wrought by time, she said. Wallerstein emphasizes that these nine tasks are not assigned from outside of the marital relationship, but are inherent in the marriage. They do not represent a chart to be hung on the kitchen wall and checked off daily.

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