7 Rules For Renegotiating Our Long-Term Relationships — Without A Manual

BY BRIGID HOPKINS

I remember starting a new job and being handed a large manual chock full of information on how to be the best employee I could be.

It detailed information for each area of my role, that would help me develop a greater understanding of how to execute the tasks I was hired for. I would use the manuals almost on a daily basis, as you can only remember so many things when beginning a new occupation.

Why aren’t we given any instructions on how to be in long-term relationships?

I would even settle for a hall pass. A way to make a quick exit, grab a few breaths before going back in!

My spouse and I are nearing our 20th year together, and while exciting, it hasn’t been easy. We have maneuvered waves of intensity over the years, without any manuals to refer to for support. Did we do it well? The answer depends on who you ask, and on what day.

Some days, we have more positivity when viewing our history, others not so much. What I have come to understand is that no one can write the exact manual for your marriage. It’s a deeply personal and unique set of circumstances that bring two people into the union.

Even more personal are the terms by which you structure the rules of your relationship. We met in our mid-twenties. We had little rules, other than to be loved. We both came from
When we met, we were inseparable, carefree mates. We had everything in common and all the time in the world to pursue our mutual interests. It sounds grand, right? It was! We soaked up every moment we could. But as the years ticked by and we enmeshed ourselves in various responsibilities, we were less carefree and more focused. Either in our career or beginning a family.

Add three children, numerous animals, and a home — and we were in deep. The early days built our foundation and the tides became more restless. We couldn’t depend on the same things we once did for entertainment, mutuality, or peace.

I was chronically exhausted and needed to be alone. He was stressed and needed my support. We unconsciously placed our needs on the back burner, figuring sometime soon we could resume the life we had known. What was never clear to us is that our early years were a season, that we may not revisit often, and certainly no time soon. We were clinging to something that was a memory, not mean to be recreated.

As my husband grew in his career, I was learning how to manage a home, children, and the complexity of constantly feeling like an inept housewife. I had zero skills to maintain my newfound responsibilities, coupled with the mountains of baggage from my own upbringing.

I lived in constant worry that I was screwing our children up! If I couldn’t make a casserole, what qualifications did I have
to raise a child? Being at home each day was an incredible gift – one that I had a hard time appreciating in the moment. I was too focused on my own shortcomings and overwhelm to find gratitude.

Looking back, I can see how privileged I was. What I also recognized is how many things were sacrificed. We didn’t have the newest gadgets, cars, or home upgrades. We seldom took vacations or ate at restaurants. While none of these things are necessary for living a happy life, they were things we desired and couldn’t afford. We had our health and the security of a solid income, but somehow, it just fell shy of being all we needed. Each of us had desires for different comforts and experiences.

It’s easy to think, “This too shall pass,” but after fourteen years of being a homemaker, it doesn’t pass. Objects become less important as the home fills with a variety of items sent to each of the children year after year for holidays and birthdays. Some were just too precious to donate, so they lay sleepily in our attic, garage, and basement.

I am fully satisfied with having enough objects. All of the wanting was really a filler for the voids that replaced connection. My husband worked tirelessly to provide everything we could have needed, and all I ever wanted we left in the dawning of our relationship.

We didn’t learn how to renegotiate the promises we made, and the vows exchanged. Everything we promised in our youth was irrelevant to the life we were creating.

How could we have possibly known what we would face in our lives together? The passing of parents, a child born with anomalies, financial burdens, health crises for both of us. We walked through fires of alchemy and transformation.

Each turn in our path offered an opportunity to forge a new way of relating and loving one another. An opportunity to
appreciate where we were, and not look to the future with hope or the past with longing. There is always enough to be savor
in this now moment.

The way I learned to love was a pattern well worn into my psyche and it followed me into my marriage. I believed that being codependent and controlling was a way to secure my safety. That safety equated to love. I didn’t know they were separate entities existing with their own sets of rules.

The best part of living is gaining experience. Taking the necessary time to reflect on mistakes made, and lessons learned. I knew something had to change between us if we were to remain married. It was time to be purposeful in our marriage and not hide behind our children, jobs, or hobbies.

We each had a responsibility to imparting respect, happiness, time, and connection into our marriage. It was time to begin appreciating – and not focusing on the sacrifices. Who was the man sitting next to me on the couch night after night? Was I even curious anymore? Can I really keep telling myself that I know him inside, and out? What did I know for sure? NOTHING!

The man I am cohabitating with isn’t the man I married. He has swapped forms ten times over, and I didn’t even notice. He still looks the same, smells the same, sounds the same, but he isn’t the same man.

I, too, am not the same woman. To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t even a woman when we married. I became a woman in our years together. Why keep pretending we know one another? That
we know what the other needs? I realized I stopped asking and solely assumed!

This is when I became curious.

I started to pay attention, without any preconceived notion that I know the man who walks beside me. I began to wonder, what does he take notice of in the world? What are his passions? What drives him in this lifetime?

The same inquiries are true for me. I am constantly asking myself – what do I need to live a life of fulfillment? What do I really want out of life? What can I offer?

The life I am living is because I followed the mold of society. I checked the boxes and met the desired timelines to live a so-called happy life. Dammit, why aren’t I glowing with glee? I should be on cloud nine! They promised me that this road led to contentment. I am not content! I am just waking to understand that living life has nothing to do with occupation, location, status, savings, census.

To live a life of fulfillment takes dedication to the unknown. Following a beat that often doesn’t lead anywhere with the herd. It’s going out on your own and creating your own set of rules! Making your own manual and playlist.

There is no right way to live your life. It’s hard, messy, and sometimes downright lonely, even when you’re married. I thought by marrying and having children I was assured to never be lonely. That I would always feel loved, safe, and known.

That was my misconception. It’s nobody else’s job to fulfill my life. It is solely my own responsibility, as it is
The very first step towards a happy marriage and life.

1. Stop blaming others.

I can blame my husband until I am blue that it’s his fault I am not satisfied. I would be standing there the rest of my life, because nothing he would offer me would satisfy my misconstrued notion of personal happiness.

You can’t achieve personal happiness through another person, ever. EVER. They only amplify what is happening inside of you. If you aren’t happy, that too will be amplified.

2. Rewrite your story.

If you read all of the fairytales and watched all of the movies about the perfect relationship — that it’s effortless and there is no arguing or struggle — it’s time to rewrite this story. Very few things in life come with complete ease, except our breath. Everything else takes attention, devotion, and care. A great relationship comes from consistency in discovering more about the person you are intimately involved with.

3. Break up with your past.

The person you are today loves and lives differently than the person you were a year ago — let alone a decade ago. It’s time to take notice of what it takes to spark desire and passion within you now. Even the way you communicate has changed. We are always gaining tools that improve our lives, use your tools!

4. Take responsibility.

Taking out the garbage isn’t being responsible. Looking for ways to take impeccable care of yourself is. Also, notice the
energy you bring into your relationship. It’s vital to the growth and health of your marriage to own your part. If you screw up, own it. If you have nothing to offer, own it.

If you have a preference or interest in doing something differently, speak up. Let your partner know what you need to stay connected. It’s your job to say so, not theirs to guess or wonder.

5. The air between you.

Each time you share your struggles with another. You’ve invited them into your relationship. Do you value their feedback or opinion? The more we include others, the thicker the air may become. When the dust settles from the relationship issue, you may now have another issue to contend with if your friends or family had negative things to say about your partner.

Asking yourself – am I sharing, or complaining? That question can help you to receive support without advice or opinions.

6. Lighten up.

Shit gets hard, stale, and messy. When it happens to the bread, we make breadcrumbs. When it happens in marriage, we want a divorce. Find a new way to laugh and joke about the place you’re in.

Get creative to find a new way of freshening up the sheets! Pretend you are a new couple and know nothing about one another. Get curious about your partner. You began as friends, be friendly.

7. Learn to receive.

How often do you notice the subtle ways your partner has considered you? Being able to receive with an open heart is a skill and one that is difficult to cultivate if we are closed off emotionally. Letting our hearts soften and begin to
receive the small ways our partner shows they care can go a long way.

Remember you chose one another because of attraction. What it takes to stay together is dedication. And rewriting the rules of engagement annually, sometimes quarterly.

There is always room to renegotiate the way you participate with one another. Cell phone providers renew contracts every two years – our lifelong relationship deserves the same courtesy!

Photo by Toa Heftiba on Unsplash

For more self-study, The Urban Howl recommends The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom.

Sip a little more:

Finding The Grace In The Waves Of Growth & Change

Don’t Live Your Life To Please Others (Come Home To Yourself)

Uncomfortable Is The New Comfortable & The Heave Out Of The Rut
"Open yourself up to a whole new week."

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