

Spring Cleaning for Your Marriage

By Patty Newbold

Ready to put a little sparkle back in your marriage? Try this spring cleaning approach from EnjoyBeingMarried.com. Even if you're not married, try it. It works for all sorts of relationships.

When my first husband died, I discovered many of my frustrations about our marriage could have been avoided easily if I had refused to live with the dust bunnies of disagreements or the clutter of unmet needs. After eleven terrific years with my second husband, I know this stuff matters.

The Enjoy Being Married™ approach to a happier marriage includes three steps: Assume Love, Expect Love, and Find Third Alternatives™. The last two are a great help in spring cleaning for your relationship.

Many marriage counselors and therapists say a fair fight about a matter can be healthy for a marriage. Of course, it's a lot healthier than sweeping it under the rug. Better yet, though, to take a broom to those disagreements, whether they currently lie under your carpet or all over the house. Turn them into agreements: Find Third Alternatives. Even if you miss a few stubborn ones, you'll feel great.

Then clean up the clutter. If you've turned your needs into expectations, love is hiding under the pile. And love could be meeting many of your needs, if it weren't covered with all this extra stuff. Clear it away.

Use the two checklists and the two worksheets on the next four pages to guide your spring cleanup. Follow the steps in order, and check off each step as you complete it.

Sweep out those Nagging Disagreements

- **Take inventory.** What do the two of you disagree about? Write it down. And for Pete's sake, make your own list. Don't ask your spouse to chime in, or you may need to include not just your disagreements, but your disagreement about what you disagree on, too.
- **Cross out any about the past.** It's over. You can't agree to change your memory of what happened. It won't work. It's pointless. Get it off the list, so you can do some real cleaning.
- **Start a page or note card for each one.** At the top, write, "I say _____." Fill in the blank. What outcome would make you happy? "I say leave the laundry water faucets turned on." Beneath this, write what your spouse says. "He says turn them off after the last load." Try not to get snarky here. We're cleaning. Neither of your proposals will keep your marriage tidy (or happy).
- **Add what's in it for you.** Bullet points work just fine here. There's a reason you want this, maybe even five or six reasons. If you got what you want, where would it get you? Is it less work? Would you feel safer? Would it take five pounds off your hips? Write it down. Be honest. We're not looking for convincing debating points here. We're looking for what you really want.
- **Add what you hope to avoid.** Sometimes, what's good about your preferred option is simply avoiding what's wrong with the other one. If there's something you want to avoid, put it on the list. My first husband, for example, said he wanted our laundry room off the family room, "because I don't want to have to walk through a creepy basement, like your parents do." Who knew? But very helpful. Write it down.
- **Find out what's in it for your mate.** Maybe you already know. Probably not. Usually, you've heard only the reasons your spouse thought would influence you. What does your spouse like about his or her solution? Or want to avoid about yours?
- **Find a Third Alternative.** If you've read Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, you've heard of these. Take your combined lists of everything you want to get out of the solution and everything you want to avoid. Now, start brainstorming together. Find a Third Alternative with all the good things you're each looking for and none of the things either of you wants to avoid.
- **Keep sweeping.** If you found a Third Alternative, you have given your spouse a big gift while still getting what you want. If not, at least you're on the same team now, looking beyond the two options you thought were mutually exclusive. What's next on your list?

Worksheet to Find Third Alternatives

Make as many copies of this worksheet as you need, for personal use only. Ask your friends to download their own copies, please.

I say: _____

My spouse says: _____

Because one or the other of us wants:

Because one or the other of us wants to avoid:

If we give up these two alternatives, there is a Third Alternative that will satisfy each of us as much as our conflicting choices:

Clean Up the Clutter of Unmet Needs

- **Make a list of what your spouse should do but doesn't.** Are there things you feel your spouse should be doing to make your marriage a happier one for you? Make a list. Start with "My spouse should _____."
- **Rewrite each one as a need.** Start with "I need _____." For example, if you wrote "keep her promises", rewrite it as "I need to know when I have a commitment from her and when I don't."
- **Mark the ones your spouse knows you need.** If it's just something you think every married person ought to know, your spouse may *not* know you need it. We all see love and life differently. But if you've discussed it or fought over it, your husband or wife probably gets it. Put a checkmark next to it.
- **Take back the ones you marked.** Your spouse wants to love you. But you unless you married a superhero, there are limits to what your mate can do for you. There's a good chance he or she finds this need of yours as hard to meet as you do. But trying to meet it, or ducking your reminders, keeps this partner of yours from doing other loving things for you. Keep trying to get what your partner can't give, and you may lose the partner, but you won't lose the need. Stop expecting your mate to meet this need, and you may find other needs of your, especially your need for love, well met.
- **Ask for help with the needs you took back.** Married or not, you need to get this need of yours met. Your spouse may not be good at meeting it, but he or she may have great ideas for how else you might get it met. If the need is sexual, please don't ask for help finding another partner. Instead, look for ways to meet some of your need for being touched without being unfaithful. Then find a Third Alternative to suit both of you for the rest.
- **Ask for any your spouse doesn't yet know you have.** Gently ask for the things you need and didn't mark, because you're not certain your spouse knows what you need. Ask, but don't expect, because this may be another area your spouse can't handle. Expect Love alone.
- **Pay attention to the love you get.** One of the best things about not expecting love in any particular form (like a cooked meal, an anniversary gift, a phone call on a business trip, attendance at your kid's soccer game, or a public display of affection) is how many forms it actually takes when allowed to. Watch for them. Expect Love and savor each sign of it, like the marvelous signs of spring.

Worksheet to Expect Love

Make as many copies of this worksheet as you need, for personal use only. Ask your friends to download their own copies, please.

My spouse should:	Because I need:	Spouse knows?
<hr/>	<hr/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I will take back and ask for help with:

I will ask for:
