

Making Marriage Fun: 4 Guidelines to Stress-Free Dates With Your Spouse

When you get married, you sign up expecting to have fun. You know there will be some responsibility, but really you think there should be some fun involved. After all, it took you all these years to find your ultimate playmate: your spouse!

The demands of life are great, and if a couple isn't careful, they will move out of a relationship and into a functionship. In a functionship, life is all about functioning, not relating. You both get your list and you do this, do that, drive here, pick up this, don't forget that, pay this, return that, call so and so, go home, maybe eat together, maybe eat on the road, do homework, go to bed and then wake up and do this again and again and again.

In a functionship, both people can be prone to burnout, attain weird eating habits, have irregular exercise and feel more like a worker on an assembly line than the love of each other's life. In a relationship, time together has an equal or even higher value than all of this other stuff that life wants you to jump out and do. In a relationship, you have to fight to make sure that your going out night is as sacred as going to church.

Dating your spouse is a fundamental aspect to having a successful marriage. If you don't date, you will eventually spend more time arguing and have to see someone like myself to suggest you start dating again.

Dating involves some planning, travel and probably some cash. That's OK. You are both absolutely worth the time, travel and money. These are the memories you will have about each other as you live together, raise a family, become empty nester, and

go into retirement.

Let's cover a few guidelines for dating. These guidelines will help make dating a lifestyle. I have seen couples over the years make some errors that sabotaged their ability to maintain a going-out lifestyle. Please consider these guidelines as you make "going out" your way of living in a greater and happier 10-minute marriage.

Guideline 1: No Therapy

I am amazed at how many couples have spent time planning their date. They travel to dinner, they plan to spend a considerable amount of money for dinner and then they even prepare child care. Everyone's on the same page. They get escorted to their seat at their local restaurant, the waiter brings their beverages—and then it happens. One spouse starts bringing up some contentious issue, problem, or something negative about their spouse that they have been wanting to talk about for a long time.

That's when it starts the therapy hour. The couple gets into issues, negativity or problem-solving over this otherwise nice meal. For some couples, this can become a ritual. They go out, start dealing with negative issues, and whammo—nobody is having a good time. Over a period of time, one or both people no longer want to date.

The no-therapy guideline means that when you are on a date you do not:

- bring up negative or sensitive issues
- talk about things you know you disagree on
- bring up negative feelings or insights about each other
- focus on things that were not accomplished
- have financial discussions

I can hear some of you wondering, "Well, then what would we talk about?" There are endless things you can talk about on

your date. How you love and appreciate your spouse, where their heart and life has been throughout the week, dreams, goals, what you are enjoying in your life, what the Lord has been teaching you, and so much more.

Guideline 2: No Running Around

Here is a second error I have seen couples make when dating. All of us have running around to do. Some people call these errands. It can be anything from going to the dry cleaner to swinging by Mom and Dad's to give them something they left at your house the last time they came over. Pick up this item at this store. Drop off something at the office, friend's house or church.

Couples can get lulled into thinking that the purpose of a date is to get a few things done instead of having fun and having relational time together. You know that by the time the babysitter comes over, both of you are ready to go out the door, you run a few errands, then try to do something else, but it's getting late, and now you're both starting to get tired. Often what can happen is whatever the fun thing was you were planning to do gets postponed and you just have to run errands, stop by Kentucky Fried Chicken and then head home.

Make sure your dates don't involve running around or doing little errands. This guideline can help protect you from being distracted from the main purpose of going out: connecting to each other and disconnecting from the rest of the responsibilities of life.

Guideline 3: No Shopping

I know that some couples have also made the error of regularly shopping as dates. Walking around the local malls for hours and hours, looking, looking, looking, but not buying anything. I'm not sure that's really shopping, but this is not fun for anyone either.

There can be some rare exception to this guideline. If you are close to Christmas and want to use this one date to get a few gifts—as long as both people agree—then this can occur. If you're doing a large purchase and need a couple hours of undistracted time to think without hearing the words “Mommy” or “Daddy,” that could be understandable as well.

Just remember: you must both agree to sacrifice a date to do this. One person can decide that a date shouldn't involve shopping. Both must believe this is important enough to do as a date. In other words, both spouses can veto shopping as a suggestion for a date.

Guideline 4: Switch Responsibility

Some couples also have fallen into a rut of allowing one person to pick all the dates. This can really become a problem for a couple who want to sustain going out as a lifestyle for a successful marriage.

A second rut that a couple can fall into is only doing a very small range of activities when they go out. You know the classic dinner and a movie. There is nothing wrong with a dinner and a movie, but if that is the extent of creativity in dating, it can also become quite repetitive and boring.

So I want to strongly suggest that you switch responsibility in dating. What I mean by this is that for one date it is *entirely* her date. She decides where you both go together. If you are eating on your date, she decides the restaurant. If she wants to go on a picnic, rollerblade, sit in a coffee shop or go to an event, then that is what you do on this date.

Also, when it is your date, you are not in any way trying to make your spouse happy. It is their job to make themselves happy on their date. Of course, you don't want to be cruel to your spouse. My point is this: On your date, you are the focus. It's what you would do to have fun and your spouse is along as the guest.

When you are the guest of the other person, have a great attitude. Your spouse is enjoying the time, so be happy for them. Don't pout, grunt, walk slowly, be silent, sarcastic or in any way punish them for their choice of pleasing themselves on this date. Remember: Next time is your turn.

Why do you want to switch responsibility for dating? There are several reasons why you want to switch responsibility for dating. First, you avoid the rut of always doing the same thing. It will become clear very quickly that you are uncreative or boring if you keep doing the same date over and over. Second, when you switch responsibility for dating, you definitely expand your options of what you will try to do.

When a couple tries to make each other happy, they stay in a very safe range of activities. When they switch responsibility, they can be much more creative, since their aim is only to make themselves happy on a date. Some of you might be thinking that could be selfish. What I have seen happen to couples repeatedly who try to make everybody happy is often they make nobody happy at all.

When you rotate going out, you have at least one happy person every date. If you can't be happy on your own date, you at least don't get to blame your spouse at all. So I encourage you: when creating your going-out lifestyle, switch responsibility for dating. {eo}

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