

How to Be Happy: Love the Man You've Got

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Looking to turn your frog back into a prince?

[Dr. Noelle Nelson](#), author of *Your Man is Wonderful: How to Appreciate Your Partner, Romance Your Differences and Love the One You've Got*, says that many couples fall into a common trap of unappreciation - often in the first five years of marriage. Here, she discusses how women complain, men retreat, and both could use a lot more loving.

Q: Does our appreciation of our partner generally diminish over time?

A: Yes. As a little bit of time goes by we start getting reinvested in our individual lives and we start taking our partner for granted. Along with that, we start taking all of the wonderful stuff for granted and start focusing more and more on the irritating things. Of course, there are going to be things that we don't find superb. But it's when you start looking at that and focusing on that and picking away at that. Frankly, women do it more than men.

Q: I could see how a lot of women would look at the topic of your book and say, "Well, I don't feel appreciated so why should my focus be making him feel appreciated?"

A: I hear that a lot. We women are basically fixers. We nurture and grow and develop things, and

along with that comes a lot of fixing. We're forever telling our kids to button up their sweaters and eat their greens, and we also do that with our guys. Men don't tend to do that. Men's ardent desire when they commit themselves completely to someone is that we never, never change because they fall in love with us just the way we are. If you talk to a man who's been married for 40 or 50 years, he'll tell you that he sees his wife the way she was the day he was smitten - even if she has grey hair frizzing on the ends and nothing is up and perky. What you find is that, when dissatisfied, women complain and men leave. We talk to our girlfriends, we talk to ourselves, we talk to God - we talk to whoever will listen. But men tend to leave emotionally, and that's why they retreat to the couch. The prince you married hasn't disappeared; he's just gone inside.

Q: Now, 10 or 15 years down the line, when a man feels unappreciated, what does this scenario look like?

A: Actually, most divorces happen in year 5.

Q: It happens that quickly?

A: Oh, yeah. It usually sets in after the first year or two.

Q: So we're not necessarily talking about couples who have been married for decades.

A: No, we're not. I'm talking about those first five years. Men perceive that fixing as emasculating. What a man wants most is to be your knight in shining armour. He wants to be your hero. It is impossible to be a hero and a good guy for your mate when all she does is tell you how you're doing things wrong. "You stacked the dishes wrong. You put the darks and the lights together in the laundry. You rumped the sheets. You left the cap off the toothpaste. Can't you burp a baby?" But what we're saying is, "You're not the hero you want to be." We're making him less than a man.

Q: I've read that feeling unappreciated is one of the top things that drive men to cheat.

A: Yes. If you talk to long-term marrieds, they'll tell you that 70 percent of the success of the relationship is the friendship - not the sex or the romance. And friendship is based on what? When you and your girlfriend get together, do you say, "You didn't do that right"? No, you say, "Oh, your hair looks so nice!" or "I love that book you lent me!" We appreciate our friends quite openly, but we don't do that with our mates. And that's why they end up a toad on the couch. It really doesn't take much. [In the book] I have set out a 35-day challenge, and if your relationship is in trouble it's a great way to restore it. But you can take just one of those elements - such as criticize less and praise more. There are so many things you can genuinely say: "Thank you for bringing me coffee. Thank you for spending time with the kids. I love to see you smile. You barbecue a great steak." And what's wonderful is that when you start doing it, they'll start doing it back. They won't always do it with words, but they'll often do it by picking up the slack with chores or the kids. Men don't talk nearly as much as we do, so you have to pay attention to the other ways they show they appreciate you. Sometimes, it's just filling up your car with gas or getting a sweater when you're cold.

Q: Do we sometimes appreciate the wrong qualities when it comes to looking for long-term relationships with men?

A: I think, unfortunately, we get bedazzled by qualities that are not lasting virtues but are a whole lot of fun. And I don't know one amongst us - me included - who hasn't fallen for that kind of guy. And there's that voice in the back of your head that says, "Are you sure?" If you look a little deeper, notice how your new beau is with everyone - the cashier, his friends, his family. Notice how he is. Is he reliable, trustworthy, appreciative toward others? Is he rude to the cashier, valet and waiter? You have to watch how this person is around other people, because that's how he's going to be around you. Most of the time we're so swept up in the romance of it that we don't even look. We choose our dresses with more care than we do our mates.

Q: I hear a lot of women talk about "the spark." Do you think that idea of ultimate romantic chemistry can sometimes blind women to men who might be better candidates for a long-term relationship?

A: It very much does. Unfortunately, women usually come to that conclusion after the first marriage - sometimes the second. Often, the spark you'll get is later. That's what long-term marriages will tell you, and I found this fascinating. There will be an initial spark because you're not going to commit to someone you don't feel anything for. But often, with growing to know each other really deeply, that's when the spark really happens. It's becoming fascinated with each other over the course of time. My parents knew each other for six weeks and they got married and were married 60 years. But that is rare. There's the other scenario where you've known someone for five or six years and one day you look at them and it's all different - in the good sense. There's no set thing, but you don't have to look for it first because it may or may not be real. It may just be a flash in the pan. The biggest way to know is to take your time. Anyone can look great for three months. Too often, in that period we'll commit to a man who may turn out to be fool's gold.