

Making Marriage (Like) Work

An Author Says Men Can Succeed by Treating It Like a Job

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Scott Haltzman, a psychiatrist and Brown University professor, has been studying marriages good and bad for a long time, both in his clinical work and via his Web site. His new book, "The Secrets of Happily Married Men" (Jossey-Bass, 2006), collects what he says are the guy behaviors that lead to happy marriage. As his Web site says, he's "out to save marriages, one husband at a time."

Haltzman believes conventional marital therapy often tries to make men more like women -- you know, getting in touch with their feelings, talking about their feelings, feeling their wives' feelings, etc. But this approach is doomed to failure, he says, largely because men and women are equipped with such different hardware from the neck up.

While accounting for the inevitable exceptions (and the hazards of stereotyping), Haltzman says that due to differences in brain structure and chemistry, men are inclined to cull the savannah for food; women maintain the cave. Women communicate; men fix. Women remember events and emotions; men remember the dimensions of the deck. Men are from cerebral cortex, women are from amygdala, so to speak.

So, if a guy doesn't have the right tools to cope with conventional marriage counseling -- yet wants a good marriage -- what can he do?

Use the male habits and male skills that serve him well at work, at play, in competition, in the field and in other venues where he thrives. View marriage as your most important task, Haltzman urges men, and pursue success as you would anything else that matters. The assumption is it's a lot more pleasant, and the payoffs far greater, to live with a woman who is satisfied, secure and feeling loved compared to one who is none of the above. Make this your job, he says.

This sounds good. But Haltzman's honey-do list is awfully long, starting with a happy-marriage job description that makes a 40-hour work week look like a hobby by comparison. He also encourages guys to take advantage of their logical, accomplishment-oriented inclinations and collect data, make observations and create to-do lists.

Which is enough to make any man, upon reading the "secrets" ponder: Okay, fine, it's a lot of work but it's (probably) worth it. But first, let's have a look at the book that tells women the eight things *they* need to do (to adopt Haltzman's language) to "win your husband's heart forever."

Anyway, following are the eight guy "secrets" Haltzman shares.

1. Make Marriage Your Job.

Premise: Guys have skills and habits developed at work that can be successfully applied to marriage.

Details: If men are to accept marriage as a job, they need a job description. Here's Haltzman's: Love, honor and respect her; be sexually and emotionally faithful; listen without being judgmental; support her ambitions; try to understand how she is different emotionally; be honest at all times and keep promises; share in child care and domestic work; be as attentive, fun-loving and adoring as you were during courtship; and be affectionate. This is no part-time gig.

2. Know Your Wife.

Premise: You think you know your wife, but you haven't really been paying attention. Do your research.

Details: Citing the old therapists' joke (there are two times men don't understand women: (1) before marriage and (2) after marriage), Haltzman urges guys to do what guys do: Collect data. Observe her in mundane situations where she reveals herself: at the sidelines at a kid's game; when she's with her best friend; at a restaurant or coffee shop; and before, during and after sex. Here is where you will discover who she really is, not who she says she is. For detail and accuracy, Haltzman recommends creating a "Daily Observation Chart" (!) to record her activities. He appears to be serious about this.

3. Be Home Now.

Premise: Guys evolved as prowlers and hunters, not home-tenders. But to make a marriage work, you've got to spend a lot of time around the cave.

Details: "To . . . build a lasting marriage, you have to be there, in person, day by day, Mr. Regular, at home, in the building -- and that's that." And why don't more guys do this? Saltzman says men need to be honest about why they often leave the cave, returning only to feed, sleep and lie with their mate: to avoid conflict, loss of control, domestic responsibilities, intimacy or . . . having to grow up. But if men are sufficiently present at home -- and attentive while present -- the payoff is "direct and bountiful . . . love, friendship, support, emotional nourishment, peace of mind, fun, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction."

4. Expect Conflict; Deal With It.

Premise: Fights are inevitable, but you can control them.

Details: "You can . . . stop the mounting tensions in their tracks," Saltzman says, not by doing what guys are inclined to do (dig in and fight to the death) but by using various higher cerebral strategies. For instance, take advantage of a woman's natural inclination

to nurture by softening your tone. And stymie escalation by not letting emotion drive something you say or do.

5. *Learn to Listen.*

Premise: Listening does not come naturally to male humans, who are more inclined to act. But it can be learned, to great benefit.

Details: Stand still while she talks. Turn off the TV. Look directly at her. Use verbal nods to show that you're listening. If it's important, seek clarification. If not, just let her talk.

6. *Aim to Please.*

Premise: "In the workplace . . . men are masters of relationship-building." So: Bring this skill home.

Details: Treat your wife at least as well as you would a valuable client, co-worker or employee: Greet her warmly, ask how she is, see what she needs and how you can help. Do thoughtful favors, anticipate desires and entertain and offer gifts as appropriate.

7. *Understand the Truth About Sex.*

Premise: Men. Women. They're different!

Details: In response to the old women-want-slow-intimacy/men-want-to-get-down-to-business conflict, Saltzman planks out a by-the-numbers program consisting of five "gears" that men need to move through, sort of like a sporty transmission. First gear is holding hands, kissing, etc. Second gear gets more emotional and private. Third is playful. Fourth is getting awfully close, and fifth is where guys usually wanted to be from the beginning. Attend to the earlier stages, the author says, and the fifth is more likely -- and better.

8. *Introduce yourself.*

Premise: Enough about her. Time to let her know "this is who I am, this is what I need."

Details: Take inventory of who you are, Haltzman says, which is something that can get lost in the shuffle of a busy married life. Then, assuming you've mastered the seven "secrets" above, your efforts to meet your own needs -- doing stuff together that you like, hanging with the guys, taking occasional solo sorties, playing sports, cultivating personal interests and hobbies -- won't be greeted as if they are threats or acts of abandonment.

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Well, those are the Big Eight, the things that Haltzman says characterize husbandly behavior in good marriages. The key question is, have any *men* read this far? And if

you're a woman wondering how you can get your husband to read this . . . well, that tells us plenty, doesn't it?

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