

Happily Ever After
By Brian Shrock

“And they lived happily ever after.”

What a wonderful ending! Who would want anything else?

The trouble is, that's a fairy tale ending isn't it? And it is rather elusive. The ironic reality seems to be that the pursuit of happiness in relationships causes people a great deal of misery. The closer we get to each other, the harder it is just to get along. Finding myself as both a victim and a student of this reality, it is my sincere desire to help others find the happy path into that golden sunset, whether in marriage, or relationships in general.

In support of this goal, today I want to share with you three things that destroy relationships and three things that build relationships.

1. A major destroyer is **fantasy**. In our society, we enjoy microwaves, fast food, disposable convenience, instant gratification, and satisfaction guarantees. Meanwhile Hollywood and advertising paint images that breed *dissatisfaction*, telling us we deserve more and better. If something takes time and patience or has a problem, or doesn't do exactly what we want, then we want to trade it in for something more gratifying.

The *fantasy* is that we can do the same thing with relationships; thinking that the other person is the problem, and that the answer to my problem is to move on to something better. Life and relationships do not come with a satisfaction guarantee. They are challenging. They take time and they take work.

If the grass looks greener over the next fence, it may be because you're not watering and caring for your own.

If we truly realized our mistakes, learned from our past and gained the

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wisdom that we thought we did, and if the other person really was the problem, then second marriages should be more successful than first. Instead they fail even more often.

Nobody can live up to a fantasy. Fantasies blind us and destroy relationships.

2. Another destroyer is **Expectations**. I'm not talking about hopes or accepted responsibilities, but a form of one-sided obligations and demands. [American Sign Language has two similar signs for hope and expect, which I think help illustrate the difference. Hope vs expect.]

Let's say that I have a birthday and I *expect* to receive gifts and special treatment. If that doesn't happen, then I'll be angry and upset. In that case, I cannot actually receive a gift, but rather only the fulfillment an obligation or the satisfaction of a demand.

Also, if I give a gift, but I “expect” it to be used in a certain way, then I am giving an obligation, not a gift.

When I **expect** someone to cook dinner or take out the trash or put the toilet seat down, or to be nice, or whatever; then I have become something of an *emotional terrorist*. The other person can only meet my demand or else fail. The higher you raise your demand bar, the fewer relationships that can survive it.

Expectations destroy relationships and people.

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3. A third destroyer is “**mind-reading**”. This comes in two forms.

One is to *expect* someone else to read *your* mind – to know what you're thinking or what you want, or what they did wrong, without you telling them. A young lady once said “If he would just look deep into my eyes, he would know what I want”. (Now there's a fantasy.)

The other form of mindreading is to assume you know another person's motives or thoughts when you haven't checked and they haven't told you.

How often have you ever misinterpreted silence as anger or arrogance? I know of two brothers didn't speak for years because of what they incorrectly assumed about each other.

Everyone is unique, with different thoughts and desires. To expect others to already know what is in our heads or to assume that we know what is in theirs *is to throw knives at the relationship*.

Those are three relationship destroyers to avoid. Now we turn to the more positive relationship builders.

1. First, **Practice ownership**.

This is very important. Own your part of the problem. We often project our problems onto other people and then insist they change. To assume the other person is the problem is to be the problem, and to buy the fantasy.

With significant exceptions, **all** marriage and relationship problems are 50/50. Whoa, whoa, what??!! That's right, 50/50!

Example couple: domineering vs domineered. The first is rude, insensitive, takes advantage, oversteps boundaries, and lacks respect for the other. Meanwhile the other person doesn't stand up, rewards poor behavior, has

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poor boundaries and lacks self-respect. That may be more socially acceptable and it may not be fair, but that is just as much a problem. If either person were to change appropriately, the entire problem would be resolved. It starts with ownership.

Some examples of ownership: Recognize that your emotions are your responsibility. Say “I feel” (which is true) instead of “It makes me” or “you make me” (not true). Ask for what you want. Check things out :“Did you mean to hurt me when you said that?”

Taking responsibility and practicing ownership will do wonders for any relationship.

2. A second building strategy is to **Practice appreciation**. Make this a mission. Remember that only behavior that is rewarded will continue. Actively look for things you appreciate and for sincere and meaningful ways to express that. This is much more than just saying thank you, but is an active form of gratitude and affirmation.

When you practice appreciation for another person your relationship will appreciate faster than gold.

3. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **Practice Connection**.

Focusing on your issues can often make them worse, while focusing on connection will often reduce or resolve your issues automatically. For example: A speaker focused on avoiding ahs and uhms, is more likely to stumble than one focused on connecting with the message and with the audience.

Find simple ways to connect such as:

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- Talk every day about something fun or interesting. No logistics. ...
Hey, I saw a deer in a field.
- Practice meaningful touch. ...Brush of the hand, hand on the
shoulder.
- Take a walk together. Take a trip.
- Keep a memory album. Put only positive memories in it, cards,
letters, pictures, your experiences. Review it at least every 6 months.

*Be deliberate about connecting. Life gets busy, but busy leads to
disconnected and broken. Practice connection.*

CONCLUSION:

Fairy tales may not be real, but if you avoid the relationship destroyers of *fantasy, expectations, and mind-reading*, and practice the relationship builders of *ownership, appreciation, and connection*. Then chances are good you can find something to smile about every day in your relationship and truly live “Happily Ever After”!