

How to Build a Successful Marriage

An Interview with Philippa Barr, LCSW by Jaleh Weber



Jaleh Weber holds a BA in Psychology and MS in Marriage and Family Counseling. She is the book author of **Making Marriage a Success** and **Life's Little How-to Book**.

Did you know that most couples can build a successful marriage if both partners have the desire to do so? Yes, it's true! To help learn how to create a successful relationship, I have interviewed couples therapist Philippa Barr, LCSW, on the subject.

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

"I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, in private practice in Half Moon Bay, California. I was trained in New York City, where I practiced for many years, until moving to the west coast in 2006. I work with adults, using individual, couple and small group psychotherapy. My specializations are trauma of all kinds, addiction, adult attachment disorders, and how all of these impact relationships."

"Having been raised in a family in which the expression of difficult feelings was simply not done, I came to learn that being really honest, with yourself and with others, especially when it was hard, was the only way to become truly free. I believe that being in an authentic relationship, whether it be a personal or a therapeutic one, is the most significant healing agent for all emotional pain."

Why do some marriages fail?

"First of all, I think it is important to say that just because a marriage ends, does not necessarily mean that something wrong has happened. Sometimes couples come together for certain reasons, to meet certain needs, and when those needs get met, it is time for the relationship to be over. People grow and change, sometimes in the same direction and sometimes in different directions. That is no one's fault. It is only our culture that tells us that a "successful" marriage lasts forever. Some do and that is wonderful, but I have worked with many couples, whose second or even third marriages, was the one that was the happiest."

"That being said, I believe that the majority of marriages that do end do so because one or both members of the couple are not willing to face their own personal issues and/or defenses against real intimacy (into-me-see). We all have the same needs and the same feelings deep inside. We all want to be loved, seen, understood, taken seriously, valued for who we are. It has been my experience, that on some level, most people feel lonely. This is not a popular notion because we humans don't like to think of ourselves that way, or to speak about it out loud. People often become uncomfortable when someone openly shows their pain and loneliness. Our culture teaches us to behave as if we are okay, no matter what. It is the willingness to be deeply honest and vulnerable with other people, however, that is the cure for loneliness."

"We often aren't willing to do this because we have been hurt in the past, most likely as young children. We then learn to hide our vulnerability as a way of trying to feel safer and to prevent others from hurting us again. To do this, we develop defenses. These defenses take the form of familiar roles, with which we are more

secure. Perhaps we are comfortable appearing competent and far more together than we actually feel on the inside. Perhaps we are comfortable acting more dependent than we actually are, because our strength got us in trouble as a child. Other common roles are a comedian/entertainer, a tough guy, a caretaker, a storyteller, or a hero/rescuer."

"Then a split gets created inside of us, between the comfortable persona that has been created to keep vulnerability at bay, and the small wounded part that will do anything to remain hidden. Marriages fail when people are not willing to come out of their comfortable defensive hiding positions. It seems to them that maintaining the role is more vital to their survival than letting it go and feeling the pain of their own vulnerability. Willingness to take this risk is what makes space for deep connection and a healthy marriage to take place."

What can a couple do to build a successful marriage?

"The key to a good marriage is for each partner to engage in their own personal healing work. Until each person can distinguish their partner from someone else in their personal history, with which they have unresolved issues, they can't actually interact in present time with their current partner. If a wife is still reacting to her husband as if he is the person who wounded her when she was young, then there is no room for him to be different. Feeling threatened by her husband, as if he were that other person, she certainly is not going to take down her self-protective walls, since those are what protected her in the past. The more each partner becomes conscious of how they were wounded in childhood, and the ways of being that they created to protect themselves, the more apt they are to heal from those old wounds, and be able to take part in the relationship as an adult, rather than a wounded child."

What can a couple do when they come across challenges in their marriage?

"Know that challenges are opportunities. Every time that there is a rupture in a relationship, it is a chance to make new, different choices. For example: Jane and Joe have been married for 10 years. They find themselves having the same fight over and over, because they are stuck in the same familiar roles. No matter what the issue is, Jane's way of coping is to shut down and give Joe the silent treatment. Joe's role is to scream at her, hoping each time that it will stop her from shutting him out."

"If this couple were to come in for couple's therapy, I'd have them both look at what might be going on underneath their fear-based defenses. Who in Joe's past didn't listen to him, so that he learned to protest so loudly, and who scared Jane so much that she learned to withdraw to protect herself? Once we can see the childhood defenses operating in present time, then Jane and Joe have an opportunity to make different choices, to get on the same 'team,' to heal those old wounds, and to create a different kind of relationship."

What last advice would you like to leave for a couple that wants to have a successful marriage?

"Do whatever you can to give your partner the space to be who they truly are, to support them in their dreams, to trust their intentions, to realize that your own willingness to be vulnerable is the quickest way to becoming a stronger person, both as an individual and as part of a couple. And most importantly if things start feeling overwhelming, scary, or more than you can handle on your own, don't hesitate to ask for help."

Thank you Philippa for the interview. If you would like to contact Philippa Barr you can check out her website at www.coastsidepsych.com.