

## KEEPING IT TOGETHER

### Couples working harder at marriage

By CAROLE KEENEY  
Houston Chronicle

**M**ARGIE AND Bob Jenkins have three rules that have kept their marriage together for 41 years: Go to bed together, get up together and eat at least one meal a day together.

It may not work for every busy couple, but it has for them.

Margie, 64, a psychotherapist, and Bob, 64, retired as vice president of marketing for Conoco Inc., say keeping it together has not been easy. The couple has four grown children and moved 19 times in the first 20 years of their marriage.

Flexibility, listening and a sense of humor, they say, have gotten them through the years.

"The key to our marriage was that we were both committed to it, and if you have commitment you can get through a lot of storms," Bob said. "Also, we both respected each other and supported each other. I was proud of what she did, she was proud of what I did."

As a counselor, Margie thinks communication keeps marriages healthy. She says more couples are learning how to talk when problems develop.

And statistics are improving.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, divorce peaked in the 1970s and has stopped its nearly two-decade long increase. Experts think the combination of rising age of first marriage and changing attitudes are responsible.

The median age at first marriage for women has been rising steadily over the years. It rose from 21.1 years in 1975 to 23.3 years in 1985. And a study of "Marriage and Divorce Patterns of U.S. Women" by the Census Bureau concluded that women who wait until they are older to wed tend to have more stable marriages.

Florence Kusnetz, 58, an attorney and divorce mediator, was ahead of her time.

When she was graduating from high school, most women her age were getting married. Florence waited until age 21 to marry her husband, Howard, now manager of safety and industrial hygiene at Shell Oil Co.

The two have been together for 37 years.

And like the Jenkins, they've moved around a lot — 14 times during their marriage. Along with flexibility, they also learned that strong personalities must compromise to stay together.

Early in their marriage, they decided to defuse their naturally competitive natures. Playing games that pitted them against each other made sparks fly. So they stopped bridge and Scrabble bouts to avoid family conflict.

Most of all, they've kept talking and working on a sense of humor.

"I'm a punster," Howard said. "I like to tell stories, and after 37 years of having to put up with my jokes she doesn't seem to mind."

Florence, on the other hand, says her spouse was able to compromise and adjust to her changing ambitions. When she went back to law school in her early 40s, he picked up the slack at home.

"That's when I knew the support was real when he'd go down in the basement and do the ironing," Florence said about the year she first started law school in Ohio.

Couples such as the Jenkins and Kusnetzes, local experts say, are likely to become more common. Although the divorce rate remains high, more people in the next decade are going to think about working it out before making the break.

Joan McKirachan, a psychotherapist, says social attitudes toward divorce have changed over the past five to 10 years.

"I think society in the late '60s and '70s assigned a positive value to divorce," she said. "If this relationship doesn't work, find another one. And then there was the love-children philosophy that you can find anybody to love. There was a real loosening of the marriage bonds."

Another social factor that is affecting divorce rates is the fear of sexually transmitted diseases, she says. An unhappy spouse who once thought about straying is more likely to hesitate. Monogamy seems more attractive than the swinging or single life.

"I've had people say, 'I'd seriously consider having an affair if I wasn't afraid of AIDS,'" the therapist said.



Buster Dean / Chronicle

Margie and Bob Jenkins, married for 41 years, have a plan that works; they make it a point to

plan activities together to keep their marriage happy and healthy.

**"More and more men are willing to talk to their female companions about their problems. It was standard for the woman 10 years ago to say, 'There's trouble,' and he'd say, 'I'm going to play golf.' That's not true so much anymore."**

— Dr. John Boynton



Ben DeSoto / Chronicle

Flexibility, talking and a sense of humor have helped Howard and Florence Kusnetz stay married for 37 years. Since Florence got her law degree, Howard often cooks.

Dr. John Boynton, a psychologist, agrees.

His clients are definitely more inclined to monogamy. Although the opportunities are there, they're rejecting them. A pattern of breaking up and getting back together has subsided.

"I really think it's because the single scene is kind of wretched," he said.

Couples, especially the male partner, are now more willing to seek therapy and open up. They're reading self-help books and joining groups such as Adult Children of Alcoholics when drinking has affected their early lives.

"More and more men are willing to talk to their female companions about their problems," Boynton said.

ton said. "It was standard for the woman 10 years ago to say, 'There's trouble,' and he'd say, 'I'm going to play golf.' That's not true so much anymore."

Talking about goals is another change the psychologist sees in couples. In the past, few people negotiated goals until trouble started. By then, emotions were running high and each was likely to take a hard stand.

"I really think that having common goals and sitting down and talking about them is the glue that binds the relationship and gives it longevity," Boynton said.

Jan, 34, and Marty, 36, (not their real names) decided talking was the answer for them.

They have been married for 12 years with three children under age 8. The past four years were full of stress for the young couple. They had a new baby, moved to a new house, Marty changed jobs, Jan's grandmother died and then Marty's dad died. Shortly after that, Marty went into a deep depression.

Soon the marriage was in trouble. Jan says she considered divorce.

"I thought about being single, that it would be a relief," she said. "It got down to our value systems. I don't necessarily believe it's wrong, but personally I could not live with myself."

Because Marty was an only child, he withdrew while Jan, from a large family, wanted to talk. They finally agreed to see a counselor and went for therapy for six months. Jan decided to quit her full-time job to ease some of the stress.

Marty made it clear he needed more quiet time but that he wanted to be married. Both agreed the common goal of rearing their children was important in keeping them together.

"Divorce is messy," Marty said. "I've got enough stress in my life. There's no way divorce is going to fix it."

Economics is one source of stress Marty and Jan considered in their decision.

And in the depressed Houston economy, it's one factor that is pressing couples to work harder on their marriages, says psychologist Dr. David Ogren. Unemployment can postpone a pending divorce long enough for a couple to mend their differences. And the idea of trading up to a better partner has faded in Houston.

Once economic pressures propel the couple to think twice about divorce, Ogren says a second decision must be made if the marriage is to last.

"What I've seen in those rebuilding marriages is a deep commitment," he said. "They don't think of love as a feeling but as a deep commitment to grow as a couple. Those who are afraid of hard work and don't understand commitment are less likely to stay in it long enough to see if the pain will pay off and renew the marriage."