

There Really Is Hope: Relationship Advice for Baby Boomers

As a couples therapist, I often happily see Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964. I know their needs and sensibilities. I work with them to save their long-term marriages. Sometimes they find a way to grow in their marriage. Other times they finally divorce and are single again, seeking to find new partners, and re-marry. They allow me to dig in deep with them to find different pathways to wholeness. They know that there are no quick and easy solutions, but they have the courage to roll up their sleeves and re-invent themselves to have a chance at becoming “later-life romantic partners.”

One couple I have seen through divorce and re-marriage provides a valuable example of transformational change in them and in their ability to create and sustain a vital and nurturing relationship. What did this couple learn about relating that we can all benefit from? Three major elements crucial to relationships that work include: tolerating discomfort for growth, recognizing the power of vulnerability, and finding healing humor every day.

1. Being able to tolerate and learn from discomfort is essential to relationship longevity. That means all kinds of discomfort—including emotional, physical, and spiritual.
 - This couple’s previous marriages were unusually harsh and left them emotionally wounded and particularly raw. The positive side of that is that there was no way they could hide their pain from themselves or each other. Nor could they pretend that they didn’t have major work ahead. They knew from the very beginning that their meeting was a godsend for each of them. They also knew they could reveal any of their limitations in order to grow and protect their new relationship. For example, as uncomfortable as it might be, they needed to expose their foibles to themselves and each other and risk criticism. They found that healthy shame—that leads to self-awareness, accountability, and new behavior—is truly liberating.

- There is also a spiritual dimension to helping older divorced couples. Their growing self-acceptance and understanding can benefit all concerned, including their respective children and extended family. That proved to be the case with this couple since their marriage had a significant impact on the man's relationship with his daughter and her child. The developing relationship among the three adults proved to be profoundly healing for all of them, particularly in their shared recognition of the devotion they all had to providing the granddaughter with a truly nurturing childhood. Instead of casting a blind eye on the past, this kind of intergenerational family learning is associated with maturity and wisdom gained through everyone's hard work.

2. Being able to be vulnerable with each other is equally critical to success in any marriage, including between Baby Boomers. Yet being vulnerable in a relationship is complex. However, let me say that being vulnerable, when it's safe to do so, often opens up doors and hearts to communication like nothing else.

- With this couple, when the man grasped that his issues of abandonment in relation to her were his issues, he moved from being a jealous and insecure partner, to being a man willing to face the benefits of his vulnerability. He took responsibility for his feelings. He stopped finding fault with his partner for allegedly abandoning him. And she felt his pain and supported him in his connecting to his self-worth. Then his abandonment issues lessened considerably. He saw her as a friend who was equally vulnerable in her genuine wish not to hurt him. He utilized "feeling abandoned" to access his self-worth and found greater comfort with his vulnerability and an inner strength.
- Once she could face her own insecurities and resistance around being complimented for her many admirable qualities, she moved from being a tough, though well-meaning, do-gooder to being a soft and open, loving and more lovable woman. He then felt free to show his love and admiration for her, including as a caregiver. She, in turn, took in his perceptive awareness as they both, in their mutual vulnerability, deepened in their capacity to express their fears and their love.

3. On a lighter but equally important note, natural and spontaneous humor that is healing is a gift to couples. Some come by it easily, since it is often associated with being in love. This couple continually found laughter and humor in the little moments and in their underlying good will and positive regard. They were in love and wanted to keep it that way, and their humor was a signpost and means for their love to continue.

- Humor here, doesn't mean laughing at the manufactured joke. It means being lighthearted or whimsical, and laughing uproariously at the absurdity of the "crazy" twists and turns that relationship and life serve up. Insightful humor can be a healthy way to gain distance from getting stuck in emotional turmoil. With this couple, she was going through an extremely unpleasant divorce proceeding with her ex in the courts. She stood up for herself beautifully, and in the process, found the balance between humor and an anger that was appropriate and not self-defeating. No wonder that humor is praised for its healing properties.
- Laughing at ourselves—at the absurdity of our thoughts and what we say and do—is also time-honored in getting beyond an impasse and bringing creative movement to a relationship.

So, I would encourage Baby Boomers who might be reluctant to take the step, to trust that there is still time to be in a loving relationship. Everyone has a right to give and receive love with a romantic partner at whatever stage of life.