

# Unrealistic expectations



*Jo Ann  
Lederman*

**FAMILY MATTERS**

Dear Jo Ann,

*I feel so sad. When I got married 15 years ago, I thought my love would change my husband and he would begin to be more like the man I hoped. He is still sloppy, gambles on football games and goes out with the boys two nights a week. He won't change. Any suggestions?*

Beth

Dear Beth,

You accepted your husband prior to getting married, or at least he thought so. Now you are changing the rules of engagement. Sounds like you have been trying to get him to change for a long time. That must be hard on you both. From the sound of your letter he has always been sloppy, gambled on football games and retained important relationships with the guys two nights a week.

You have made a common mistake. People don't change just because you love them or because you want them to. It has to make sense to them and they have to want to change. Usually, what you see before you marry is what you get. The time to notice and address potential problem areas is prior to your marriage.

It is destructive to keep criticizing your mate. No one gets married to be in a corrective relationship. No one gets married to be unhappy.

Here's what you two need to do:

- Bring up the fact that a particular behavior is disturbing to you.
- Learn what retaining that behavior means to him.
- Tell him how it impacts you.
- Establish dialog and give feedback to generate mutually acceptable solutions.
- Keep love and goodwill present at all times.

Remember, if one of you is unhappy the marriage is unhappy. Sometimes it's not so simple. You may not generate the solution immediately, but agree to continue the discussion at designated times. Chew the problem down as though it is gristle, until it is small enough to swallow. Criticizing, demeaning or being corrective are destructive interpersonal patterns of relating that surface in my office frequently.

What I've noticed is that most people are so infatuated during the dating period that they don't want to rock the boat by discussing potential problem areas, believing instead that love can transcend the issue. In every fine marriage I have known, each member has made hundreds of adaptations from their ideal. The adaptations are made with generosity of spirit. The couple understands that life is imperfect, they do not have unrealistic expectations

about what can change. They have chosen to accept, sometimes joke about it, and sometimes just cherish idiosyncrasies on the part of the mate. Comforting relationships require a sense of wanting to lubricate the relationship, rather than to etch it away. Which would you rather have, the pleasure of correcting your husband one more time, or a man who loves to come home and is delighted with your response to him?

Turn the tables for one moment. Look in the emotional mirror of having your husband correct you for what you do not intend to change. It may be that the 10 pounds you have gained since motherhood are visually distressing for him. Perhaps you ignore him somewhat to speak to your girlfriends at night when he is home, it may be that you don't cook the flavors he likes, or maybe you discipline the children differently than he feels comfortable with. What if he came home each day and showed his obvious disappointment with you? How would that feel?

In intimate relationships, you have a right to hope that if an issue is disturbing to you, it can and will be discussed gently and respectfully, with an eye toward generating new solutions.

My recommendation is that you develop an agreed upon method to discuss thoughts and feelings. This would take into account how you would signal each other that a discussion is necessary or desired. Your plan would need to include a time and place for discussion and not be left to chance.

One couple I know handles it by calling for a whirlpool tub meeting. That's the signal that a discussion is necessary. The warm water keeps them calm. The bathroom door is locked.

Uninterrupted and facing each other they can focus on themselves entirely. The person with the problem states the issue in non-blaming terms, then speaks about how the issue affects him/her. The listening spouse acknowledges what has been said and asks if there is more, until the upset spouse has described all of the elements of the problem. The listener, acknowledges how the upset spouse is feeling asks what change would be desired and how that can happen. This is a call for behavior change. At this point there is dialog.

You cannot imagine the relief moving toward solutions together will bring to your marriage. If you are distressed, the marriage becomes distressed. If you both give relief your marriage will become a place of solace and warmth.

Let me know what happens, won't you?

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