

MHC

MAKING HAPPY COUPLES

ALL ABOUT THE MENTAL
LOAD: THE INVISIBLE
RELATIONSHIP KILLER

WHAT NOBODY
WARNS YOU
ABOUT THE
FIRST YEAR OF
MARRIAGE

DISCOVER THE GLOW-UP
NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

YOU'RE NOT
UNLUCKY IN
LOVE! -
DISCOVER WHY

WHY DON'T WE

Create the
marriage we have
dreamed of having!

VOL
15

MEET NICK & AMY / @ULTIMATEINTIMACYAPP



EDITORS' NOTE

On traffic, chaos, and why the best relationships move like Vietnam.

The first time you see Vietnamese traffic, your instinct is to look away. Motorcycles everywhere — not in lanes so much as in a constant, swirling negotiation with everything else on the road. Cars, bicycles, food carts, pedestrians. No clear rules, no obvious order, and from the outside, no apparent reason why any of it works. It looks, from the sidewalk, like the world's most patient disaster in slow motion.

Then you look longer, and something shifts, nobody is panicking. Nobody is fighting for position. The motorcycles are not racing — they are flowing. Each driver is simply focused on their own line, their own next few meters, their own task. And because everyone is doing that — because everyone is present to their own part and trusting that the others are doing the same — the whole thing moves. Slowly, surely, and with a grace that is genuinely hard to explain until you've stood there and watched it long enough to believe it.

I stood on a street corner in Vietnam and thought: this is what a good relationship looks like. **Nobody is fighting for position. Everyone is focused on their own part — and trusting that the other person is doing the same.**

Because every relationship has chaos. The chaos is not the problem — the chaos is just life arriving, the way it always does, without asking permission. Busy seasons, hard conversations, money stress, the slow drift that happens when two people stop checking in. The question is never whether the chaos will come.



In Vietnam, the drivers who cause accidents are not the ones moving through traffic. They are the ones who stop. Who freeze. Who try to fight the current instead of reading it. The danger is not the complexity — it is the person who opts out of participating.

I think about that when I think about the couples we feature in this issue. Nick and Amy, who hit their own version of stopped traffic at year fifteen and chose to move again — together, one small change at a time.

The partners navigating the first year of marriage, who have discovered that the adjustment is not a warning sign but a gear change. The couples doing the invisible work of redistributing mental load, learning to fight without withdrawing, rebuilding confidence they thought they had lost.

None of them found a way to eliminate the chaos. They found a way to move through it — because they stayed focused on their own part, and trusted the other person to stay focused on theirs.

The couples who make it through the hard seasons are not the ones who avoid difficulty. They are the ones who keep moving toward each other inside it.

The marriage you want is not waiting on the other side of the chaos. It is being built inside it, one ordinary moment at a time. Welcome to Volume 15.

With love...
Daniel & Daniella



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THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE

What Nobody Warns You About



Let me tell you something nobody said at my wedding, not in the speeches, not in the cards, not from any of the well-meaning married people who hugged us at the reception and said you'll love every minute of it.

The first year is hard. Not hard like something is wrong. Hard like growth, like adjustment, like two people who love each other trying to figure out how to actually live together in a way that doesn't slowly drain the life out of both of them.

I'm three years in now. And I can tell you that what I needed in year one wasn't more romance advice. It was someone to look me in the eye and say: this is normal, here's what's actually happening, and here's what to do about it. So that's what this is.

The first year isn't the best year. For most couples, it's the adjustment year. And adjusting is not the same as failing.

The wedding industry spends a lot of energy on the before. The proposal, the planning, the day itself. What it doesn't prepare you for is the morning after — not just the honeymoon morning, but the ordinary Tuesday morning six weeks later when the flowers are dead, the thank-you notes aren't finished, and you're standing in the kitchen arguing about whose turn it is to deal with the recycling.

That Tuesday is where marriage actually begins. And most people arrive there completely unprepared.

Five things that actually catch people off guard

The honeymoon hangover is real.

You spent months — maybe years — building toward the wedding. Then it's over, and suddenly there's no countdown, no shared project, no reason to be excited about the same thing at the same time. Some couples call this the 'now what' moment. It's not a red flag. It's a gear change nobody warned you was coming.

You will become roommates very fast if you let it happen.

Logistics are seductive. It feels productive to sort out the joint account, the lease renewal, who handles the grocery order. But logistics are not intimacy. The couples who struggle in year one are usually the ones who confused being organized together with being connected together.

Your families got louder, not quieter.

You assumed the ring would settle things. It rarely does. Marriage has a way of activating family members — opinions about holidays, money, children, where you live — with a renewed sense of entitlement. You are now officially a family unit, which somehow gives everyone else more to say about it.

The fights feel higher stakes than they should.

Before marriage, a bad argument had an escape route in the back of your mind — even if you never planned to use it. That exit is gone now, and your nervous system knows it. Arguments in year one can feel disproportionately terrifying, not because your relationship is failing, but because it finally feels permanent.

Your identity does a quiet disappearing act.

Not dramatically. Not overnight. But slowly, some version of the person you were before starts receding. You become a spouse before you've finished becoming yourself. The ones who navigate this best are the ones who notice it early and protect their individual life on purpose — not because they're pulling away, but because two full people make a better partnership than two halves.

What to do with all of this

Here's the thing about year one: it's not a test you pass or fail. It's a calibration. You're learning each other's rhythms at close range for the first time, with all the pressure of permanence sitting on top of it. That's not a small thing.

The couples who come out of year one closer — not just intact, but actually closer — tend to do a few specific things differently.



They talk about the marriage, not just in the marriage. That sounds abstract, but it's not. It means having conversations about how things are going — not just logistics, not just complaints, but actual check-ins. Is this working? Are we connected? Are we heading somewhere together? Once a month. Not a big production. Just a deliberate pause.

They protect fun with the same seriousness they protect everything else. Bills get scheduled. Exercise gets scheduled. Somehow, fun — the thing that made you fall in love in the first place — is supposed to just happen. It won't. You have to make it. Not grand gestures. A walk. A stupid game. A dinner with no phones where you actually look at each other.

They let the fights be small. This sounds obvious but it isn't. When arguments feel existential — and in year one they often do — there's a temptation to make them mean something. The couples who do better are the ones who can fight about the thing and only the thing.

Two people who love each other can still have a terrible first year. And two people who have a terrible first year can still build a great marriage.



The part nobody wants to say

Some people have a genuinely hard first year and come out the other side saying it brought them closer. Some people have an easy first year and coast into problems they didn't see coming. The first year is not a reliable predictor of anything, except this: how you handle the hard parts matters more than whether the hard parts show up.

Do you repair? Do you come back to each other after the argument instead of going cold? Do you stay curious about your partner instead of certain about them? Do you choose the relationship on the days when it doesn't feel like a choice?

That's it. That's the whole thing. Nobody told me that at the wedding. I'm telling you now.

If you're in year one right now

Pick one night this month to check in — not about logistics, about you two. Ask each other: what's one thing that's felt hard lately, and one thing that's felt really good? That's the whole agenda. Fifteen minutes. You'll be surprised what you find out.



HOW TO TELL IF YOU LIKE THEM OR JUST LIKE BEING CHOSEN

There's a version of 'falling for someone' that has very little to do with them. Here's how to tell which one you're in.

Picture the scene. You've been seeing someone for a few weeks. You think about them constantly. Your friends are hearing about them on a rotating basis. You've checked your phone eleven times in the last hour. Now here's the question nobody thinks to ask: **are you thinking about them, or are you thinking about whether they're thinking about you?**

The validation crush is one of the most convincing experiences in early dating. It mimics real feelings with impressive accuracy. What isn't necessarily real is any particular feeling about that specific human being, as opposed to the experience of being wanted by them.

This is not a character flaw. It's biology with slightly questionable judgement. Humans are wired to respond to being chosen. It activates the same reward circuits as genuine connection, which is why the two are so easy to confuse — especially early on, when you don't know the person well enough to have strong feelings about who they actually are.

Being chosen feels identical to attraction — right up until the moment the person who chose you is in a bad mood and suddenly you have nothing to talk about.





The validation crush is one of the most convincing experiences in early dating. It mimics real feelings with impressive accuracy. The giddiness is real. The preoccupation is real. The way your day improves when they text back is absolutely, physiologically real.

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The test that actually works

Forget the butterflies. Forget the constant thinking about them. Both of those show up in validation crushes too, and they'll mislead you every time.

Instead, ask yourself this: when they're not performing interest in you — when they're tired, or distracted, or just talking about something they care about — do you find them interesting?

Or do you find yourself slightly impatient for the conversation to return to the topic of you?

That's the tell. Real attraction survives the moments when the other person isn't actively making you feel good about yourself. Validation seeking does not.

You actually like them if...

- You think about who they are when you're not together
- You're curious about their inner world, not just their opinion of you
- You'd still want to spend Sunday with them if they were in a bad mood
- When they cancel plans, you're disappointed
- You want them to know you — actually know you
- You feel more like yourself around them

You like being chosen by them

- You think about what they think of you when you're not together
- You're mainly curious about whether they're still interested
- You need them to be in a good mood to enjoy the time
- When they cancel plans, you spiral
- You want them to find you impressive
- You feel like a better version of yourself — performed, not real

Why it matters more than you think

The validation crush has a predictable arc. It feels intense at the start — genuinely, thrillingly intense — and then, once the person is securely interested, it flatlines. The pursuit was the point. The having is surprisingly anticlimactic.

At which point most people assume they chose the wrong person, end things, and find someone new to be uncertain about. Repeat indefinitely.

The people stuck in this loop aren't unlucky in love. They've just never learned to distinguish the feeling of being wanted from the feeling of actually wanting. Which means they keep optimising for the chase and then wondering why the landing is always disappointing.



What to do if you recognise yourself here

The useful exercise is this: spend one conversation being genuinely curious about them rather than monitoring how you're coming across. Ask about something that has nothing to do with the relationship. Listen to the answer without formulating your response.

Notice what happens. If you're engaged — if their answer is actually interesting to you — that's something. If you're mostly just waiting for them to be curious about you again, that tells you something too. You're allowed to want to be chosen.

Just make sure the person doing the choosing is someone you'd actually choose back.

SELF-SABOTAGE IN LOVE

You're not unlucky in love.

In over a decade of working with couples and individuals, I've noticed something that most people find uncomfortable to hear: the majority of relationship pain I see in my practice is not caused by the other person.

That's not what anyone wants to be told. It's much easier to trace the problem back to them — their avoidance, their inconsistency, their inability to communicate like a functional adult. And sometimes, yes, that's real. Some people genuinely are the wrong person for you.

That's self-sabotage in love. And if you've read this far with a knot in your stomach, there's a reasonable chance you know exactly what I'm talking about.



Why you do it (and it's not because you're broken)

Self-sabotage in relationships almost always has a logical origin. At some point, probably before you had the vocabulary to name it, love came with a cost. A parent who left, or who stayed but made you feel invisible. A relationship that ended badly enough to rewire your expectations. A childhood environment where love was conditional, inconsistent, or weaponised.

Your nervous system learned something from that: wanting love is dangerous. The closer you get, the more it will hurt when it's taken. So it built a defence system. The problem is that defence systems don't update themselves automatically. The thing that protected you at eight years old is now actively sabotaging you at thirty-four. It doesn't know the threat has changed. It just knows: closeness equals risk. And it acts accordingly.



Self-sabotage isn't self-destruction. It's self-protection that outlived its usefulness.

The four patterns — and what they're actually hiding

The Test Setter

Creating situations to see if your partner will fail — pulling back to see if they chase, picking fights to see if they'll leave.

What is really about: Fear that love is conditional. Testing because you don't quite believe you're worth staying for.

The Nitpicker

Finding fault before the relationship gets too close. Criticizing small things.

What is really about: Manufacturing distance when intimacy starts to feel threatening. Easier to focus on their flaws than face your fear of losing them.

The Ghoster

Emotionally checking out before anything goes wrong. Becoming unavailable, distracted, suddenly very busy.

What is really about: Pre-emptive self-protection. If you leave first — or make them leave — you control the ending.

The Minimizer

Downplaying the relationship to others. Not committing to future plans. Treating something real like it's casual.

What is really about: Avoiding the vulnerability of being seen to want something you might not get to keep.



The pattern doesn't need to be eliminated. It needs to be interrupted — once, then again, then enough times that the new response becomes the default.

The moment it becomes a choice

Here's what nobody tells you about self-sabotage: the first time you do it, it's almost entirely unconscious. The pattern runs without your permission. You don't decide to pull away or pick a fight or suddenly find seventeen reasons why this person isn't quite right for you. It just happens.

But the second time — and every time after that — there is a moment. A brief, uncomfortable moment where you can feel yourself about to do the thing. Where something in you knows what's coming and watches yourself do it anyway.

That moment is where the work is. Not in the therapist's office, not in the journal, not in the conversation with your best friend about why you keep ending up here. In that specific moment, when you feel the familiar pull toward the exit.



A starting exercise

This week, when you feel the urge to pull back, create distance, or pick a fight — pause. Write down, in one sentence, what just happened before that urge appeared. Not what you did. What happened. Do this three times. By the third, the pattern will start to show itself.

What to stop, and what to do instead

Stop: Waiting to see if they'll prove your fear right

Do instead: Naming the fear out loud — to yourself first, then to them

Stop: Manufacturing distance when things get close

Do instead: Sitting with discomfort instead of creating a distraction from it

Stop: Treating a feeling like a fact

Do instead: Asking: is this evidence, or is this anxiety?

Stop: Using conflict as a substitute for conversation

Do instead: Saying the thing you actually mean

Stop: Protecting yourself from something that hasn't happened

Do instead: Letting yourself want something without insisting it will be taken from you



One more thing

The question worth sitting with

There's one question I give to clients who are ready to be honest with themselves. I'm giving it to you now.

In your last relationship that ended — or in your current one where things feel stuck — what was the earliest moment you felt yourself starting to pull back? Not the blowup, not the conversation where it all came out. The first quiet moment, weeks or months before that, when something shifted.

What was happening then? What had just gotten real? What were you about to have to want, out loud, with no guarantee?

That's the moment. That's where the pattern started. And that's where it can be interrupted next time — if you're watching for it.

I want to be direct about something, because I've seen this particular misunderstanding cause a lot of unnecessary pain. Doing this work does not guarantee the relationship. You can stop self-sabotaging and still end up with the wrong person. You can interrupt every pattern and still find that this particular person and this particular dynamic aren't right for you.

What the work guarantees is that the ending — whatever it is — will be based on reality. On what's actually there between two people, rather than on a defence system that's been running on autopilot since before you were old enough to choose differently.

That's worth doing. Not for any particular relationship. For yourself.

Because the version of you that isn't getting in your own way? That person is going to have a very different experience of love.

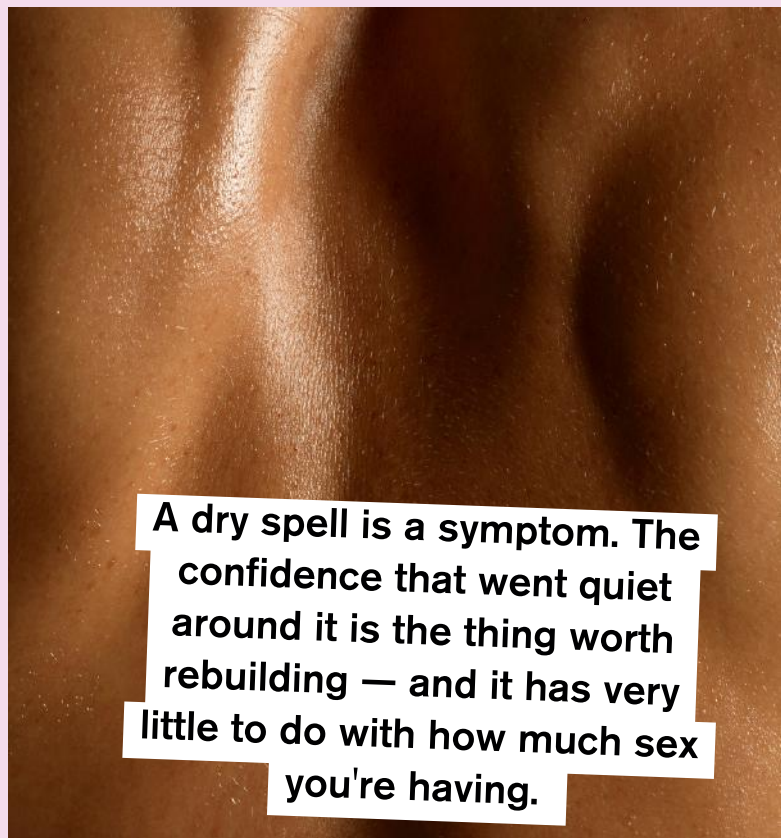


How to Rebuild Sexual Confidence

Let me tell you what I hear most often from people who come to me after a long gap in their intimate lives. What I hear first, almost without exception, is this: **"I don't know what happened to me."**

Sometimes they mean physiologically. Sometimes they mean emotionally. Most of the time they mean both, tangled together in a way that feels impossible to separate. What they're really saying is: I used to feel like a sexual person and now I don't, and I'm not sure I remember how to get back there.

That experience — the disconnection, the uncertainty, the quiet shame of feeling like you've lost something you can't quite name — is one of the most common things I work with. And it's almost never about sex.



A dry spell is a symptom. The confidence that went quiet around it is the thing worth rebuilding — and it has very little to do with how much sex you're having.

First: stop calling it a dry spell

The phrase itself is part of the problem. "Dry spell" implies a temporary weather pattern — something that happened to you, that you're waiting to end. It frames the experience as passive, which makes the solution feel equally passive. Just wait for it to rain.

What's actually happened, in almost every case I've encountered, is that something specific interrupted the connection between you and your own desire. Stress. Illness. Relationship distance. A breakup. A major life change. Your body and mind, very sensibly, redirected their resources elsewhere.

That's not a failure of your sexuality. It's your system responding appropriately to its circumstances. The question isn't what's wrong with you. The question is: what happened, and what does getting back feel like from here?

The shame layer nobody talks about

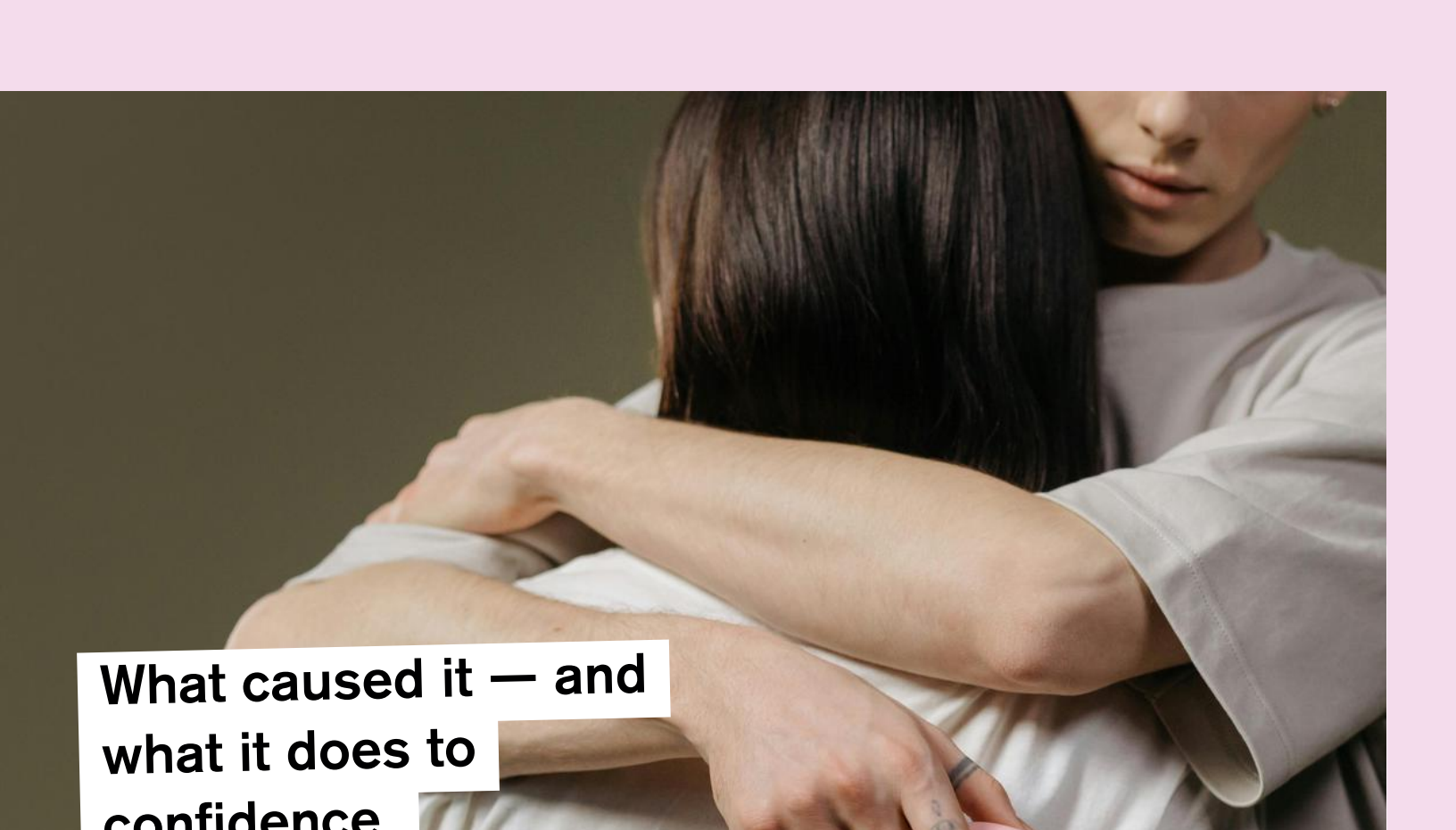
Here's the thing about sexual confidence that most advice skips: it's not primarily about technique, or attractiveness, or experience. It's about permission. Whether you feel permitted to want, to ask for what you want, to take up space in the experience.

A dry spell — whatever caused it — almost always chips away at that permission. Not dramatically. Quietly. You start monitoring yourself. Wondering if you're doing it right, if you seem into it, if your body is responding the way it should. This mental observer — what sex therapists call spectating — is the single most reliable way to kill pleasure, and it shows up reliably after any significant gap.

Naming it, just to yourself, is the first step to interrupting it. You're not failing at the experience. You're watching yourself have it instead of having it. Those are different problems with different solutions.



You don't rebuild sexual confidence by having more sex. You rebuild it by removing the conditions that made it go quiet in the first place.



What caused it — and what it does to confidence

Stress or burnout

What it does to confidence:

Desire goes quiet. You don't miss it because your nervous system is in survival mode. Then the silence becomes its own source of anxiety.

The first move back:

Address the stress first, not the sex. Intimacy cannot be rebuilt on an exhausted foundation.

Relationship conflict

What it does to confidence:

Emotional safety erodes. Sex requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires feeling safe. Without safety, desire shuts down as self-protection.

The first move back:

The intimacy repair starts outside the bedroom. Reconnect emotionally before expecting physical connection to follow.

Illness or physical change

What it does to confidence:

Body trust breaks down. You feel disconnected from yourself, uncertain of what you're capable of, hyperaware of what's changed.

The first move back:

Reestablish a relationship with your own body before bringing someone else into it. Start with touch that has no destination.

Coming out of a breakup

What it does to confidence:

Identity disruption. You're no longer sure who you are as a sexual person outside of that relationship — what you want, what you like, what you're worth.

The first move back:

Rebuild desire as a solo experience before re-introducing another person. Desire is yours, not a function of who wants you.

Six steps that actually work

Name what happened — to yourself, without judgment.

You cannot rebuild what you won't look at. This doesn't require a deep psychological excavation. Just a clear, honest sentence: 'I haven't felt like myself sexually since X.' That sentence is the starting point, not the destination.

Separate your body from the story you've built about it.

Dry spells generate narratives: I've lost it. I'm not attractive anymore. This is just what happens at my age. These stories feel like facts but they're not. They're interpretations. Notice them, and notice that you built them, which means you can revise them.

Start smaller than you think you need to.

The instinct after a long dry spell is to overcompensate — to go from zero to a fully intimate encounter and prove to yourself that you're fine. This usually backfires. Start with touch that has no performance attached. Closeness without expectation. Let the pressure come down before the stakes go up.

Talk about it — with a partner if you have one, with yourself if you don't.

Silence makes everything bigger. If you're with a partner, naming the vulnerability ('I've been in my head about this') almost always reduces the pressure more than any amount of trying to power through it. If you're solo, writing it down achieves the same thing. Externalize it and it loses some of its authority.



Redefine what counts.

A dry spell often ends not with a grand return to form but with a series of smaller moments that gradually rebuild the path. Let those count. Let a moment of genuine desire count, even if it doesn't lead anywhere. Let closeness count. Let a good conversation count. You're not rebuilding a performance. You're rebuilding a feeling.

Be patient with the timeline — and set a real one.

Patience doesn't mean passive. If three months pass and nothing has shifted, that's information worth acting on — with a therapist, a doctor, or an honest conversation with yourself about what's actually going on. Waiting without a check-in point is not patience, it's avoidance with a softer name.



A word for couples reading this together

If you're both in this — navigating a period of distance and trying to find your way back — the most useful thing I can tell you is this: the partner who is not in the dry spell has a job too, and it isn't to wait patiently and not mention it.

The job is to make the reconnection feel genuinely low-stakes. Not "no pressure" said with an expression that communicates pressure. Actually low-stakes — where closeness is welcome and nothing is required of it, and where the conversation about how you're both feeling happens outside the bedroom, with clothes on, at a moment nobody is already anxious.

The rebuilding happens faster when both people are actively creating safety, not just one person trying to perform their way back to confidence while the other watches to see if it's working.

This week, one thing only

Write down — for your eyes only — the honest answer to this: what would need to be different for you to feel safe enough to want again? Not what would need to be different about your body, or your partner, or the circumstances. What would need to be different about how safe you feel. Start there.

DRESS LIKE YOU STILL MEAN IT



The question isn't 'what should I wear.' It's 'have I stopped making any choices at all.' The answer to the second question is usually more honest.

Here's something I've noticed in fifteen years of dressing people: the couples who've been together longest are almost always the ones who've stopped getting dressed for each other.

The version of themselves they present to the world stops making it through the front door. The office gets the good blazer. The partner gets whatever was closest. I'm not here to tell you that your relationship depends on your outfit. It doesn't. But I am going to tell you that there's a version of effort, that signals something to the person you live with. That you still see the evenings as worth showing up for. That they're still someone you're getting dressed around. That signal matters more than most people realise until it's gone.



The four scenarios — and exactly what to wear for each

The Weekend Morning

The uniform: The oldest t-shirt you own and whatever bottoms were closest to the bed.

The fix: Keep the comfort, lose the giving-up energy. A well-fitted crew neck in a neutral colour and tailored sweatpants or straight-leg joggers reads as intentional rather than defeated. The difference between 'I'm relaxed' and 'I've stopped trying' is almost entirely fit.

Specific pieces:

- Heavyweight crew neck tee
- Straight-leg joggers in charcoal or navy
- Clean white socks, no logo



Working From Home Together

The uniform: Full pyjama mode by 11am because nobody's coming over and the camera's off.

The fix: Dress from the waist up, minimum. Not because your partner needs to be impressed — because it changes how you hold yourself, which changes the energy in the room. A clean shirt or a good knit on top of whatever you're wearing below the desk is the lowest-effort version of this that still works.

Specific pieces:

- Linen or cotton button-down
- Good quality basic knit
- One piece of jewellery you actually like

The Impromptu Home Evening

The uniform: 2018 race t-shirt that has a small hole in it.

The fix: Create a 'home but assembled' category in your wardrobe. Not getting-ready clothes. Not gym clothes. A middle category — comfortable pieces that look like you put them on because you wanted to, not because they were the last option.

Specific pieces:

- Linen wide-leg trousers
- Ribbed knit cardigan
- Simple slip dress over a fitted long-sleeve



The Actual Date Night

The fix: One upgrade from your everyday. Not a complete outfit rebuild — one thing that signals you got dressed for this. A good blazer over your usual base. The dress you save for restaurants. Trousers instead of jeans. The effort communicates that the evening matters to you, which communicates something about them.

Specific pieces:

- Unstructured blazer in a neutral
- The dress that lives at the back of the wardrobe
- A fragrance you don't wear every day

Three rules. No negotiation

Fit over everything: A \$15 t-shirt that fits well reads better than a \$150 one that doesn't. This is the whole game.

One intentional thing: You don't have to get dressed up. You have to choose one thing that signals you made a choice. That's enough.

Comfort is not the enemy: The goal isn't to be uncomfortable at home. It's to stop conflating comfort with invisibility.

The wardrobe audit that takes twenty minutes

Pull out everything you wear at home. Separate it into two piles: things you chose, and things you ended up in. The second pile is the problem — not because comfort clothing is wrong, but because a wardrobe that's entirely default is a wardrobe that's stopped making choices.

You don't need to replace anything. You need to retire two or three items from the second pile — the ones that have genuinely given up — and move two or three pieces from your 'going out' category into your 'home but assembled' category. The dress that only gets worn to restaurants.

The good knit that lives in the wardrobe waiting for an occasion. An occasion is a Tuesday evening at home with someone you chose. That counts.

The last thing I'll say on this, because I think it often goes unsaid: this isn't gendered advice. The sweatpants spiral does not belong to any particular partner. Neither does the solution. Both people in a relationship benefit from continuing to make choices about how they show up to each other. Both people feel the difference when someone stops. And both people have, at various points, been the one who stopped.



Getting dressed isn't a performance. It's a small, daily signal that the person you live with is still someone you're showing up for. The outfit is almost irrelevant. The intention behind it is not.

This week, one thing

Identify one piece that lives in your going-out wardrobe that has no good reason not to be worn at home. Wear it this week on an ordinary evening. Notice whether anything shifts — in how you feel, or in how the evening goes. That's the whole experiment.

You don't need a new wardrobe. You need to stop saving the good stuff for somewhere else.

Wedding Budget Conversation

You've talked about the venue, the flowers, and whether the DJ can play that one song. You haven't talked about any of the things that actually matter.

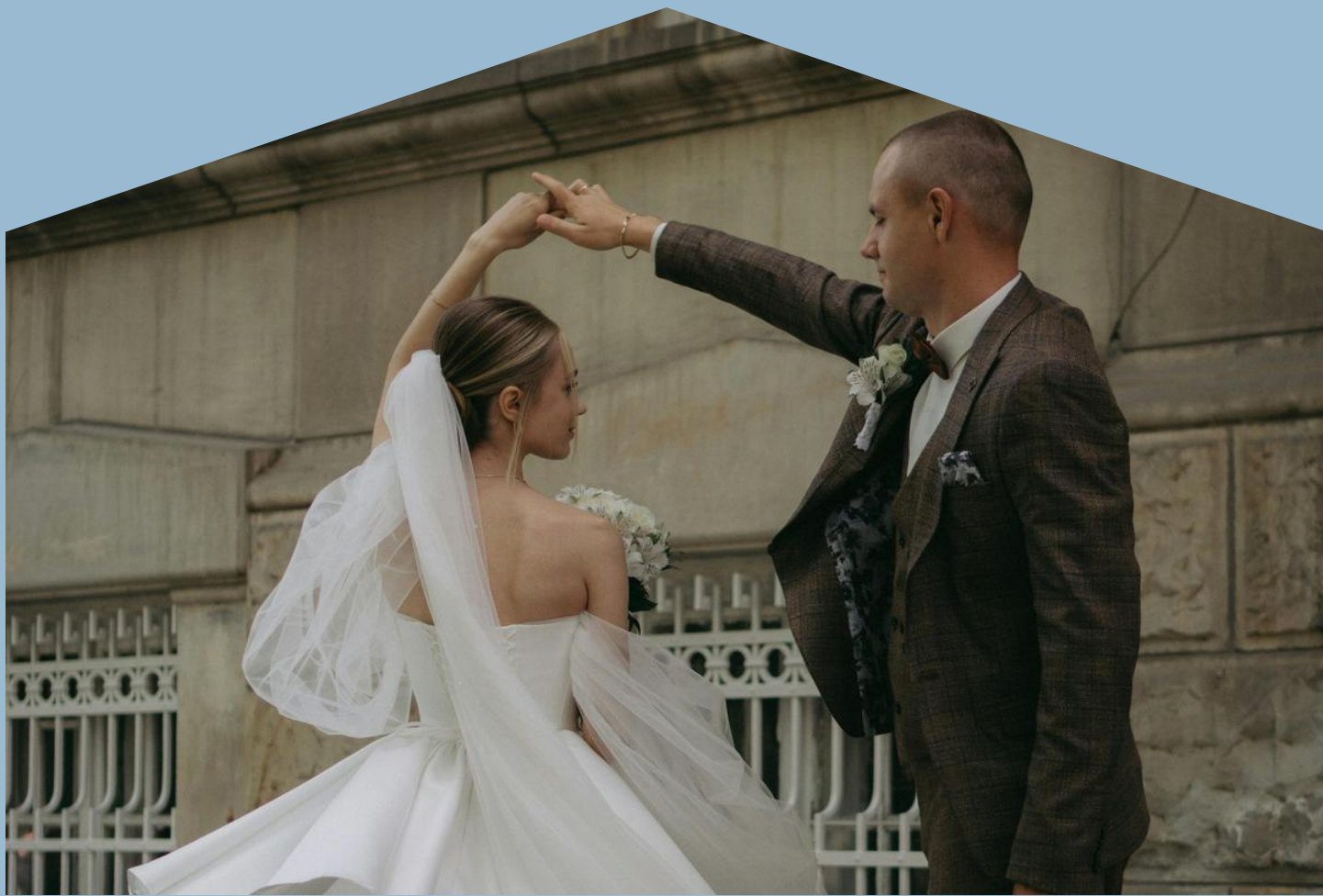
We'll be honest with you: we did not have the wedding budget conversation properly. We had a version of it — a few stressed exchanges involving spreadsheets, one memorable argument in a car park outside a venue we couldn't afford, and several conversations that ended with "let's figure it out later" — which is not, as it turns out, a financial strategy.

What we wish someone had told us is this: the wedding budget conversation is not actually about the wedding. It's about money values, family dynamics, financial power, and what kind of couple you want to be from day one. The flowers are just the flowers. The rest of it is a preview of every money conversation you'll have for the next thirty years.

So let's do this properly. Here are the four conversations inside the one conversation — and how to have each of them without ending up in a car park.



The number on the spreadsheet is the easy part. What the number means to each of you — that's where it gets interesting.



Most couples treat the wedding budget as one big negotiation. It isn't. It's four distinct conversations that keep getting tangled together, which is why they go sideways. Separate them and they become manageable.

What's the total number?

What you're actually deciding: Your shared financial comfort zone and how much debt you're willing to start a marriage with. Comfort is great for stability, but it's not what creates attraction.

The landmine to avoid: Anchoring to a number before discussing values.

Who's contributing what?

What you're actually deciding: Financial power dynamics, family obligations, and what strings come attached to outside money.

The landmine to avoid: Assuming a contribution equals a vote.

What's the total number?

What you're actually deciding: Your priorities as a couple vs the expectations of everyone watching.

The landmine to avoid: Spending \$8,000 on things neither of you cared about because it felt expected.

What happens to the debt after?

What you're actually deciding: Whose debt it is, how fast you pay it, and whether it becomes a source of resentment.

The landmine to avoid: Never having this conversation and then arguing about money for the first three years of marriage.



The family money problem

Family contributions are often the most complicated part of wedding finances because money can come with expectations. A common pattern is that parents offer help, the couple accepts, and the wedding gradually becomes the parents' event because their financial support brings opinions.

Before accepting any contribution, discuss privately what you think comes with it — not what you hope comes with it. If it's truly generous with no strings attached, accept it. If it means they expect control over decisions like the guest list, decide together beforehand whether the money is worth the compromise. Also discuss what happens if one family contributes more than the other. More money should not mean more say, but without an honest conversation, it often does by default.

What matters more than the total

Everyone focuses on the total budget number. The number that actually matters more is the one you're comfortable carrying into your marriage. Specifically: how much debt, if any, are you both okay with on the other side of the wedding? Not theoretically okay with — actually okay with, when the invoices arrive and the accounts look the way they'll look.

Have this conversation with a specific number. Not "we don't want to go into too much debt" — that sentence means wildly different things to different people. A number. Written down. Agreed on. Before you book anything that requires a deposit.

If the wedding you want costs more than what you can fund without exceeding that number, you have three options: reduce the wedding, increase the number, or find the gap between you and talk it through. None of these options are fun. All of them are better than the fourth option, which is not having the conversation and just hoping it works out.



You are not planning a party. You are making your first major financial decision as a married couple. Treat it accordingly.

What to actually say

The reason these conversations don't happen isn't that couples don't know they need to have them. Here's some middle ground.

Instead of saying: "My parents want to contribute but they're being weird about it."

Try this: "My parents have offered X. Before we decide whether to accept it, I want us to talk about what comes with it and whether we're okay with that."

Instead of saying: "I don't want to spend that much."

Try this: "When I picture us a year after the wedding, I'd rather have [X] than have spent that money on the day. What do you picture?"

Instead of saying: "Can't we just figure it out as we go?"

Try this: "I'm feeling overwhelmed by the numbers. Can we set a total ceiling first and work backwards from there?"

Instead of saying: "Your family is being unreasonable."

Try this: "I want us to make this decision as a couple. What do you want to do — independently of what either family thinks?"





The one thing that makes all of this easier

Start with values, not numbers. Before you open a spreadsheet or talk to a single vendor, sit down together and answer this question: a year after the wedding, what do we want to have?

Not what do we want the day to look like. What do we want to have — financially, relationally, emotionally — on the other side of it.

Some couples say: we want to have done it properly, spent what it took, and have no regrets. Great — then you know your priority is the experience and you can budget accordingly.

Some couples say: we want to have the deposit for a house, or the start of a travel fund, or just the comfort of not being stressed about money in year one. Also great — then you know your priority is financial stability and the wedding is a means to an end, not the end itself.



Neither answer is wrong. What's wrong is spending \$40,000 on a wedding neither of you particularly wanted because you never asked each other the question. Ask the question. Then build the budget. In that order.

Do this before your next vendor meeting

Separately, write down your maximum comfortable budget, the debt you're willing to take on, what you'd spend more on if possible, and what you don't care about.

Then compare lists — where you agree, you have your range; where you differ, you have the conversation you need.



Mental Load: The Invisible Relationship Killer

Your relationship doesn't have a communication problem. It has a distribution problem.

I want to start with a scenario. See if it sounds familiar.: Two people live together. Both work. Both consider themselves equal partners. On any given evening, one of them cooks dinner while the other watches television. The one cooking is also, while cooking, mentally tracking that the dentist appointment needs to be rescheduled, that someone needs to reply to the birthday invitation, that the weekend is filling up and one commitment conflicts with another, and that the thing in the back of the fridge needs to be used before it turns. The one watching television is watching television.

Neither of them is doing anything wrong, technically. The tasks are getting done. The relationship, from the outside, looks functional. And yet one partner is quietly accumulating a debt of invisible labour that the other doesn't know exists. **That is mental load.** And it is one of the most reliable predictors of relationship resentment I encounter in my practice.

The visible and the invisible

Most couples can have a reasonably productive conversation about the division of household tasks. Who does the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping. These are visible, countable, negotiable.

What almost no couples talk about — because most haven't been given the language for it — is the invisible layer beneath those tasks. The planning, the anticipating, the tracking, the remembering. The cognitive work of managing a shared life that happens constantly, in the background, whether or not you're at home.

Mental load is not about who does more. It's about who carries the awareness that something needs to be done at all.

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Here's the difference between visible and invisible, made concrete.

Visible task: Cooking dinner, doing the laundry, paying the bills, walking the dog, cleaning the bathroom, taking out the rubbish.

Non visible task: Tracking which bills are due when and on which account, noticing the bathroom needs cleaning before it becomes a problem, remembering the dinner party is next week and the fridge needs stocking, knowing what food is running low before it runs out, monitoring everyone's mood and calibrating accordingly, anticipating what the week needs and planning around it.

The non visible task are mental load. In the vast majority of couples I work with, it is carried almost entirely by the woman. While the other remains largely unaware that it exists.



Resentment rarely announces itself. It accumulates quietly, in the gap between what one partner sees and what the other is managing.

This is not a character flaw. It is a structural problem that looks like a personal one, which is why it's so difficult to address. The person not seeing it isn't lazy. They genuinely don't see it. And the person carrying it often can't articulate it clearly, which means their frustration comes out sideways — in the tone of voice when a small thing goes wrong, in the disproportionate argument about whose turn it is, in the exhaustion that doesn't make sense given how much sleep they're getting.



Carrying the mental load can mean constantly thinking about the house, feeling exhausted despite resting, becoming frustrated by “small” things, avoiding asking for help, or feeling unseen even when your partner is present.

Not recognizing the mental load can look like believing you would help if asked, not understanding the issue, focusing only on visible tasks, being surprised by your partner’s frustration, or thinking the solution is simply doing more chores.

If you’re the one who is not noticing the mental load, I want to be direct with you. The fact that you haven’t been asked to carry more does not mean the load is being shared. It means one person found it easier to absorb than to fight about. That is not a sustainable arrangement, and the resentment building on the other side of it is real — even if it hasn’t been named yet.

Four steps that actually redistribute it

Do the audit together — out loud, not on paper:

Separately, each of you writes down every task that you manage in a typical week. Then compare lists. The gap between them is the conversation. Don’t do this on a night when you’re already tired or frustrated.

Assign ownership, not help:

The difference between ‘I’ll help with the shopping’ and ‘I own the shopping’ is everything. Help means the other person still holds the task in their head. Ownership means they don’t. Go through the audit and assign categories — not individual tasks. One person owns the kitchen. One person owns the social calendar. Ownership includes the planning.

Remove the reporting layer:

If one partner owns a category but has to give constant updates, ask for approval, or justify every decision within it — the mental load hasn’t actually transferred. It’s just been delegated with an overhead tax. When you assign ownership, mean it. That means letting go of how it gets done.

Build in a monthly check-in — five minutes, not a meeting:

Life shifts. What worked in February stops working in July. Once a month, over dinner or a drink, ask two questions: is there anything you’re carrying that I’m not seeing? Is there anything you’re doing that you’d rather hand over? Keep it low-stakes and keep it short. The point is maintenance, not negotiation.

The conversation most couples avoid

The hardest part of addressing mental load is that the partner carrying it is often exhausted, which makes them a poor advocate for themselves. They know something is wrong. They can’t always articulate what. So they ask for help with specific tasks — the visible ones — when what they actually need is a structural shift in how the invisible ones are held.

The conversation that actually changes things is not 'can you do more dishes.' It is: 'I need you to understand what I'm managing that you can't see — and then I need us to change how we hold it together.'

That conversation requires both people to be willing to sit with some discomfort. The one carrying the load has to resist the urge to undersell it. The one not seeing it has to resist the urge to get defensive about something they genuinely didn't know they were doing.

It's a hard conversation. It's also one of the most valuable ones a couple can have — because the resentment it prevents is the kind that, left alone, quietly corrodes things that both people thought were fine.



**Do this before
the end of the
week**

Each of you, separately, writes down every task — visible and invisible — you managed in the last seven days. Not to score points. To see.

Then swap lists. Sit with the gap before you say anything. The gap is where the real conversation starts.

Scripts for bringing up hard things



Most hard conversations don't fail because of bad intentions. They fail because the opening line lands wrong and everything that follows is damage control.

What's here isn't advice about communication. It's the actual language — the specific sentences that open the conversation without triggering the defense. Use them word for word if you need to. Adapt them once they feel like yours. The goal is to get the conversation started, not to script the whole thing.

Each script follows the same structure: set the context, name the feeling, say the specific thing, make room for them. Four steps. Every time.

Money

Money carries shame and judgment on both sides. The person bringing it up fears seeming controlling. The person hearing it fears being criticized. Both defensiveness and guilt show up before anyone says a word.

The script: "I want to talk about something financial and I want us both to stay calm. Can we find a time this week where we're not stressed about anything else?". I noticed [specific thing] and I didn't say anything at the time, but I've been thinking about it. I'm not assuming the worst — I just want to understand.



Sex

Why it's hard to say: Sex sits at the intersection of desire, vulnerability, and ego. Bringing it up can feel like a criticism of your partner or an admission that something is broken. Neither framing is useful, but both show up anyway.

The script:

"I'd like to talk about us — our physical connection — not right now, but sometime this week when we're both relaxed. Is that okay?. I want to say first that I'm not unhappy. I love being close to you. I've just been noticing something and I think it's worth talking about rather than letting it quietly grow. Lately I've been feeling a little disconnected from that part of us, and I miss it. I don't think it's anyone's fault — I just wanted to name it out loud"



Family

A family member has crossed a line, inserted themselves, or created a dynamic that's affecting your relationship, and you need your partner to understand that without feeling attacked.

The script:

"I want to talk about something involving your family, and I want to be clear that this is about us finding a way to handle it together — not about me having a problem with them. When [specific situation] happens, I end up feeling [specific feeling]. I'm not saying it's intentional. I'm saying this is how it lands for me, and I need us to think about it.

I'm not asking you to take sides. I'm asking you to help me figure out how we handle this as a couple, because right now I'm not sure what to do. What would feel okay to you? I want us to land on something we both feel good about — not something I've decided and you're going along with.

Feeling Neglected

You've been feeling distant, unseen, or low on the list — and the feeling has been building long enough that you know you need to say something before it becomes resentment.

The script:

"I've been missing you lately — which sounds strange since we live together, but I think you know what I mean. Can we talk?. I've been feeling a bit invisible to you recently. I know life has been full. I'm not saying you've done anything wrong. I'm saying the feeling is there and I'd rather tell you than let it grow.

What I think I need is just some time where it's just us and we're actually present with each other. Even an hour would help. I also want to ask — how are you doing? Sometimes when I feel like this it's because something is off for both of us, and I don't want to make this only about me."

Wanting More

You want something more or different — a label, a move, marriage, children, a clearer future — and you've been waiting for the right moment for long enough that the waiting has become its own problem.

The script:

"There's something I've wanted to talk about for a while and I've been putting it off because I wasn't sure how. I'm not bringing it up to pressure you. I'm bringing it up because I think we're at a point where it matters. I want [specific thing]. I've known that for a while and I think it's fair for both of us if I say it out loud rather than hoping you'll arrive there on your own.

I don't need an answer right now. I'd actually rather you thought about it honestly than gave me a response in the moment. What I do need is to know that we can talk about it. I love where we are. I'd like us to figure out together if those two things can go in the same direction"



One rule for all five

Pick the time deliberately. Not in the car. Not right before bed. Not mid-argument. These scripts work best when the other person doesn't feel ambushed.

A simple 'there's something I'd like to talk about later — nothing urgent, nothing bad, just something I've been thinking about' gives both of you a moment to arrive prepared. That five-second setup does more work than any opening line.

WHY DON'T WE CREATE THE MARRIAGE WE HAVE DREAMED OF HAVING!



MEET NICK & AMY

THEY MET ON A BLIND
DATE. THREE WEEKS LATER
HE PROPOSED. FOUR
MONTHS AFTER THAT THEY
WERE MARRIED.

@ULTIMATEINTIMACYAPP

RELATIONSHIP RECEIPT

23 YEARS TOGETHER – MET ON A BLIND DATE, ENGAGED 3 WEEKS LATER, MARRIED 4 MONTHS AFTER

KIDS: 4 – ONE SON AND THREE DAUGHTERS

LOCATION: ST. GEORGE, UTAH

JOBS: FULL-TIME FOUNDERS OF **ULTIMATE INTIMACY**
A MARRIAGE COACHING PLATFORM

THEIR RITUAL: WEEKLY DATE NIGHT, EVERY SINGLE WEEK, WITHOUT EXCEPTION

THEIR MOTTO: "MARRIAGE SHOULD NEVER BE MEDIOCRE. WE WERE MEANT FOR PASSION AND ROMANCE."

FUN FACT: THEY'D ONLY KNOWN EACH OTHER 3 WEEKS WHEN NICK PROPOSED. SHE SAID YES.

TOTAL: **TRUE LOVE**

INSTAGRAM: @ULTIMATEINTIMACYAPP

TIKTOK: @ULTIMATEINTIMACYAPP

YOUTUBE: @ULTIMATEINTIMACYAPP

WEBSITE: ULTIMATEINTIMACY.COM



MAKING HAPPY COUPLES

They met on a blind date. Three weeks later he proposed. Four months after that they were married. By most measures, Nick and Amy's story begins impulsively — the kind of beginning people politely raise an eyebrow at. Twenty-three years, four kids, and a business that has helped over a million couples later, that eyebrow tends to come back down.

But the part of their story that matters most to us isn't the romantic beginning. It's what happened at year fifteen.

By that point, they had built a full life together. And they were quietly falling apart. The passion was gone. They felt like roommates. They didn't know how to move forward.

What they did next — the work they put into their own marriage, and the decision to turn what they learned into a resource for others — became the Ultimate Intimacy app, now rated 4.9 stars across thousands of reviews and used by couples in every corner of the world.

Nick is a former golf professional who still hikes slot canyons and plays whenever he can. Amy is a former graphic designer who starts her mornings on the pickleball court and still bakes, decorates, and makes art in her spare time. Together they run Ultimate Intimacy full-time from St. George, Utah — minutes from Zion and the Grand Canyon.

They are a couple who chose each other on purpose — not once, but continuously. We sat down with them to talk about what year fifteen really looked like, what communication means in a marriage, and why they believe no marriage should ever be mediocre.



"It is us against the world —
not us against each other.
That mentality makes marriage
wonderful and united."



Let's start from the beginning. How did you two meet — and what made you both move so fast?

Nick: We met on a blind date and completely hit it off. I fell in love with her quickly — I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and her personality was even more beautiful than that. I was scared to imagine my life without her. So I asked her to marry me three weeks later. Amazingly, she said yes. Four months after that we were married. Best decision I have ever made. Twenty-three years later, I am even more in love with her.

Amy: *I had recently turned my life over to God and had been praying for direction. Within a couple of weeks I went on that blind date that changed everything. By the end of our first night together, I felt more excitement about Nick than I had with anyone before. We were together nonstop after that, and we both knew after three weeks that we wanted to be together forever. He was kind, honest, respectful, and a Godly man. All the best qualities.*

The Ultimate Intimacy app has helped over a million couples. What moment in your own marriage made you decide to build it?

At about year fifteen, we were really struggling — to the point that we didn't know how to move forward. The passion was gone. We felt like roommates. We wondered if our marriage could ever be happy again. We were disconnected and dealing with some very heavy trials.

We started implementing things and making changes, and we saw results almost immediately. Our marriage changed quickly — in a good way. And we thought: there must be so many other couples going through the same thing. So we built the app. We had never built an app before. It took off, and it has now helped over a million marriages. The 4.9-star rating with thousands of reviews tells us people are genuinely benefiting. That means everything to us.



"Date nights literally saved our marriage when things were hard. You have to keep dating each other to keep a marriage passionate."

You work together, parent together, and create together. What has that taught you about staying aligned as a team?

Nick: There are probably very few couples who could do this, and it is not always easy. The key is communication and always operating as a team. Look at any great sports team or successful band — they communicate constantly. Marriage should be no different.

Amy: The only way we've made it work is finding balance in our roles and maintaining incredible communication. We have to make deliberate time for us — not just as co-workers and parents, but as a couple. Date night is non-negotiable. It keeps our marriage passionate, not just functional.

So much of your work is about helping couples talk openly about sex and intimacy. How did you overcome that discomfort yourselves?

When people contact us with a problem — usually about sex — the first question we ask is: have you talked to your spouse about it? Probably nine times out of ten, the answer is no. They are scared of rejection, scared of how their partner will react, scared it will cause an argument.

This was an issue for us early on too. But once we had the tools and started having real communication — even when it was uncomfortable — everything changed. We hear from couples constantly who have transformed their relationship simply by starting those conversations. They are hard to begin and life-changing once you do.

What do you believe most couples fundamentally misunderstand about intimacy?

Nick: The biggest misunderstanding is that many women believe sex for a man is just physical — that he wants it but doesn't truly need it. Nothing could be further from the truth. For most men, sex is how they feel loved, secure, and emotionally connected. When a man feels sexually desired by his wife, he relaxes, he opens up, he becomes more emotionally available. Sexual intimacy is not just a physical act — it is an emotional pathway.

Amy: And on the other side — if husbands can understand how important emotional intimacy is to their wife, there would be far fewer issues with physical intimacy. The two are deeply connected. Men need to feel loved to make love. Women often need to feel loved before they want to make love. When both partners truly understand this about each other, everything shifts.

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What's one of the most transformative moments you've experienced as a couple — something that genuinely shifted how you love or communicate?

When we finally realised that you can have a thriving marriage even with different sex drives, different upbringings, and different opinions — that was the shift. We discovered that the foundation is not matching each other perfectly. It is trying to understand each other, listening genuinely, and actually caring about what the other person needs. Putting each other first sometimes means doing things we don't necessarily want to do. But when it matters to your spouse, it strengthens the marriage in ways you never imagined.

How do you handle conflict in a way that keeps you connected rather than pulling you apart?

Learning to disagree in a loving and healthy way has completely changed our relationship. We had a guest on our podcast who said: if you wouldn't say it to your boss, don't say it to your spouse. That landed hard. We should be treating our partner better than anyone else in our lives.

The day we decided we would never raise our voices when upset, never give the silent treatment, never say anything rude no matter what — we started communicating on a completely different level. It is us against the world, not us against each other. That mentality makes marriage wonderful and united. We disagree about many things. We grew up differently. We see things differently. But we try to understand each other's perspective genuinely.



What does prioritising your marriage actually look like day to day — not just on trips or special occasions?

Couples who are happiest put their marriage first. That doesn't mean neglecting your kids — it has nothing to do with time. You can spend eight hours with your children and thirty minutes with your spouse and still be prioritising your marriage, because those thirty minutes are intentional and consistent.

For us, it means making time for each other and for connection every single day. When life gets too full, we cancel things. We've learned it's okay to say no to things that take too much of our time together. Our evening walk with the dogs has become one of our most valuable daily rituals — some of the best conversations of our marriage have happened on those walks.

When our kids were younger, we found quality time after they went to bed. Now that they're older, we have more flexibility. But the principle never changed: you prioritise what's important to you. It really is that simple.

What's one marriage myth you both strongly disagree with?

Nick: That intimacy should always be spontaneous. The first time I heard about scheduling sex I laughed — I thought it was the craziest idea. What I've learned is that when life gets busy, sex becomes the last thing on the list. You schedule what's important to you. Doctor's appointments, business meetings, lunch with friends — because if you don't, they won't happen. Intimate connection is no different. When you put it on the schedule, you make it a priority. And it completely removes the anxiety of wondering when or whether to bring it up.



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Amy: My biggest myth was believing you need the same sex drive to have a great marriage. You don't. What you need is the understanding that sexual intimacy keeps a marriage passionate, and that great intimacy comes from a strong emotional connection first. When both partners genuinely want a thriving, romantic marriage and approach each other with positive attitudes and willingness — you can be complete opposites in drive and still have an incredible relationship.



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Has creating content for millions of couples ever taught you something that surprised you when you applied it to your own marriage?

We try to practice what we preach, so there have been many lessons we've learned and implemented along the way — all of which have genuinely helped us. Probably the biggest one is realising that putting each other first in small daily ways consistently builds emotional intimacy in ways we didn't always expect. A simple hand hold, a spontaneous gift, a message in the middle of the day — these things mean the world to your spouse. The small choices compound.

What patterns or challenges come up again and again in the couples you work with — and how do you encourage them to break through?

Hands down, the most common issue is mismatched sexual desire and the inability to communicate openly about it. In most relationships there is a higher-drive spouse and a lower-drive spouse, and typically the lower-drive spouse controls whether and when intimacy happens. When the lower-drive spouse isn't feeling sexual for any reason, it becomes infrequent — sometimes for a very long time.



What most higher-drive spouses don't realise is how crucial emotional connection is for the lower-drive spouse to want to be intimate at all. Emotional intimacy is the foundation that makes sexual intimacy possible and enjoyable. A strong connection first is what transforms sex into true making love. That understanding — on both sides — changes everything.

What ritual or habit keeps you most emotionally, spiritually, or physically connected day to day?

One of the things we started is showering together — often. We rarely have sex in the shower, but that uninterrupted time together has been one of the most connecting things we do. It's one of the few moments in a day with kids where nobody interrupts us. Some of the best conversations we've ever had as a couple have happened in those ten minutes.

What has parenting taught you about your marriage — both the joy and the challenge of it?

Parenting is hard but so rewarding. Each child has a different personality and different challenges, which means they have to be parented completely differently — what works for one won't work for another. But I think the best thing you can do as parents is show your children what a good marriage looks like by example.

We are always united as a couple in how we parent and discipline. Our kids know that. And it's funny — all of our kids say they can't wait to get married. Hopefully that means they're seeing something worth wanting in what we have.

What's been one of your most memorable marriage reset moments — big or small — that helped you genuinely reconnect?

One of our most memorable reset moments came when our oldest child was old enough to babysit the younger ones. That was when we started doing date night every single week without fail. It made a huge difference. The dates didn't need to be expensive or elaborate — what mattered was showing each other that we were committed, that we were willing to keep pursuing one another. Consistently prioritising quality time is one of the most important ingredients in a healthy marriage. And for us, it was a turning point.

Looking ahead — what impact do you hope to have on marriages around the world through Ultimate Intimacy?

We hope to continue growing and helping as many couples as we can through the app and the podcast. We also have another app in development that we believe will be a game changer. We love what we do. We love sharing what we've learned. And we genuinely hope to keep helping couples all over the world build the marriage they've always dreamed of.

If we could leave every couple who reads this with one thing, it would be this: Why don't we create the marriage we have always dreamed of having? That question changed everything for us. It can change things for anyone willing to ask it.

Nick and Amy's marriage reached a difficult point around their fifteenth year together, but working through that experience became the foundation for everything they would later build, including helping more than a million couples strengthen their own relationships.

Throughout their journey, they discovered that open and honest communication, even when conversations are uncomfortable or involve topics like intimacy, is essential for maintaining a strong connection.



**Why don't we...
Create The Marriage
We Have Dreamed
Of Having!**

They also learned the importance of protecting regular date nights as a consistent opportunity to reconnect, regardless of how simple they are. Their experience showed that differences in sexual desire do not have to create distance when both partners approach those differences with understanding and empathy.

Above all, they found that lasting marriages are shaped by small, intentional actions repeated every day, whether it's holding hands, sending a thoughtful message, or spending uninterrupted time together. These seemingly simple habits gradually create a stronger and more resilient relationship.



Skin After 40

The Glow-Up Nobody Talks About

Nobody warns you about your skin at 40. There's plenty of noise about wrinkles and collagen loss, the usual fear-based messaging designed to sell you something. But very little honest conversation about what's actually happening inside your skin after forty, why it matters for both of you, and how navigating this chapter together can quietly become one of the most connected things you do as a couple.

Nobody warns you about your skin at 40. There's plenty of noise about wrinkles and collagen loss, the usual fear-based messaging designed to sell you something. But very little honest conversation about what's actually happening inside your skin after forty, why it matters for both of you, and how navigating this chapter together can quietly become one of the most connected things you do as a couple.



Younger skin renews itself roughly every 28 days. By your forties, that cycle stretches to 45–60 days.

Skin aging isn't a cliff you fall off at midnight on your fortieth birthday. It's a gradual shift that's been building since your late twenties, but by the early forties, several biological processes converge, and the change becomes noticeable enough to see in the mirror. **Collagen production drops significantly.** Your skin produces collagen at a slower rate every year after 25, but by your forties, the loss becomes structural. Skin starts to lose its bounce, what dermatologists call elasticity, and the area around the jaw, eyes, and cheeks begins to soften and shift. **Cell turnover slows down.** Younger skin renews itself roughly every 28 days. By your forties, that cycle stretches to 45–60 days. Dead skin cells linger longer on the surface, which is why skin can look dull, uneven, or congested even when you're doing "everything right."



When your partner's skin is reacting, breaking out, or feeling different, it's often their hormones talking, not neglect.

The skin barrier weakens. The protective outer layer of the skin, its moisture barrier, becomes less efficient at retaining water and protecting against environmental stressors. The result is skin that feels drier, reacts more easily, and takes longer to recover from irritation. **Hormonal shifts reshape the skin differently** for each gender. This is the part that rarely gets discussed, especially among couples.

For women, the approach to perimenopause and menopause triggers a significant drop in estrogen. Estrogen plays a direct role in collagen production, skin hydration, and wound healing. As levels fall, skin can become noticeably drier, thinner, and more reactive, often in a matter of months. Some women also experience sudden adult acne for the first time, driven by the relative increase in androgens as estrogen drops.

For men, testosterone decline is slower and more gradual, beginning around 35 and dropping roughly 1–2% per year. The skin tends to stay thicker and oilier for longer, which is partly why men's skin often looks younger at the same age, but this also means enlarged pores, slower healing, and increased sun damage become more visible in the forties and fifties.



**Retinol or a dermatologist?
Knowing when each makes sense**

This is the question that comes up most often, and the honest answer is: both, at different moments, for different reasons.



Start with retinol if:

Retinol is a great option if your main concerns are uneven texture, mild dullness, fine lines, or early signs of sun damage. It works best for skin that tolerates active ingredients well and for those willing to stay consistent, as results develop over months rather than weeks. With regular use, it can become the foundation of an effective, science-backed skincare routine at a manageable cost.

Retinol (a form of vitamin A) is one of the most-studied skincare ingredients. It speeds up cell turnover, stimulates collagen production, and helps fade hyperpigmentation over time. At 40, a low-to-mid-strength retinol (0.025%–0.3%) used 2–3 times per week is a meaningful addition to most routines for both men and women.

The rules for using it well:

Retinol should be introduced gradually, starting once a week during the first month before increasing frequency as your skin adapts. Because it increases photosensitivity, daily sunscreen is essential. To minimize irritation, avoid using it on the same night as vitamin C or AHA/BHA exfoliants. It's also normal to experience a temporary purge for four to six weeks before visible improvements begin.

Retinol 5% in Squalane The ordinary



Retinol B3 Serum
La roche Posay



See a dermatologist if:

While retinol can address many common skin concerns, some situations call for professional guidance. Sudden or severe acne in your forties may be hormonal and require systemic treatment, while persistent melasma or deep hyperpigmentation often responds better to prescription therapies or in-office procedures. Any new or changing moles or unusual skin texture should also be evaluated by a dermatologist. If you're interested in stronger options like prescription tretinoin or treatments such as laser resurfacing, chemical peels, or microneedling, a professional consultation is the safest place to start.

The couple effect: Aging skin, together!

Here's what the beauty industry rarely addresses: skin aging happens inside a relationship. And how you navigate it together matters more than any product.

When one person starts caring, the other usually follows. Research on shared health habits consistently shows that when one partner adopts a new wellness behavior, such as exercising, eating better, or improving sleep, the other partner is significantly more likely to adopt the same behavior. Skincare is no different. If you start a consistent nighttime routine, your partner notices. Curiosity follows. Conversations start. Before long, there are two sets of products on the bathroom counter instead of one.

Supporting each other's skincare should come from a place of care rather than appearance-based pressure. That can mean inviting your partner to do face masks together instead of criticizing their skin, helping apply sunscreen to often-missed areas like the neck and ears, sharing helpful information without telling them what they should do, and celebrating small improvements while keeping the focus on well-being rather than physical appearance.

A simple joint ritual for your forties

A simple skincare routine is often the most effective. Start with a gentle cleanser, a moisturizer containing hyaluronic acid and ceramides, and SPF 30 or higher every morning. Once your skin has adjusted to these basics, introduce retinol at night two to three times a week. Additional products can always come later, but consistency is what makes the biggest difference, and building the habit together can make it much easier to maintain.



There's a version of skin aging that's about fighting time. And then there's this version: understanding what your body is doing, giving it what it actually needs, and deciding that forty is a perfectly good moment to start paying real attention.

Not because society has decided this is when you need to "fix" something. But because you've earned the self-knowledge by now. You know what stress does to your face. You know which nights show up on your skin the next morning. You know what your partner looks like when they're exhausted, and when they're genuinely glowing.

That kind of awareness, turned into small, shared daily habits, is what actually changes skin at 40.

The Best Date Night Spots in Miami

Miami does a lot of things well. Subtlety is not traditionally one of them. But if you know where to look the city has a quieter side. Bars where the lighting works for you. Places where you end up leaning in without realizing it. Spots built for chemistry, not Instagram.

1

Swizzle Rum Bar & Drinkery

The vibe: Warm, tropical, dimly lit — feels like you escaped the city without leaving it. Close seating, strong cocktails, and a rum menu long enough to start a real conversation. The kind of bar where you lean in without realizing it.

Pro move: Sit at the bar and let the night unfold. Don't over-plan — the vibe does the work.

Coconut Grove · coconutgrovemiami.com area



2

The Broken Shaker

The vibe: Lush, unexpected, slightly magical — a hidden garden bar that feels like a secret. The outdoor space creates intimacy without the noise of an indoor bar. Hard to feel tense in a place this beautiful.

Pro move: Go on a weeknight when it's quieter. The weekend energy is fun — the weeknight energy is better for connection..

Freehand Miami · Indian Village



3

Sweet Liberty

The vibe: Neighbourhood bar energy with serious cocktail ambition — unpretentious and genuinely fun. the kind of place that relaxes both of you. No performance, no scene. Just good drinks and the chance to actually enjoy each other.

Pro move: Order off-menu and ask the bartender what they're excited about. Best conversation starter in any bar.

Mid-Beach · 237 20th St



4

Lagniappe

The vibe: Wine, cheese, live music, and candlelight — the rare Miami spot that earns the word 'romantic'. BYOB wine and a cheese board means the date moves at your pace, not the bar's. Live jazz in the background does the rest.

Pro move: Arrive before 8pm to get a good spot. Bring a bottle of something you've been meaning to try together.

Wynwood · 3425 NE 2nd Ave



5

Ball & Chain

The vibe: Historic, electric, alive — a 1930s jazz club brought back and done properly. The energy pulls you both into it. Hard to stay in your head at Ball & Chain. The music creates shared experience without requiring shared effort.

Pro move: Stay for the late set. The night opens up after 10pm in a way the early crowd never gets to see.

Little Havana · Calle Ocho



The only rule

Don't let the night end at the bar. Miami does late well. Better than almost any city in the country. Which means if the date is going well — and if you picked the right bar, it probably is — you have options.

The walk after the drinks. The drive with the windows down. The moment someone says 'one more thing' and means it. Add one more moment. That's usually the part you remember.

Complete the night



Talk for hours

Conversation cards that go somewhere. Pull a few at the bar, save the rest for home. The easiest way to get past 'how was your week' without forcing anything.



Laugh Together

Sometimes the best connection is laughing way too hard over something stupid. This is for those nights — and the couples who know the difference between fun and filler.



Spice it up

The night went well. Carry it home. Cards that shift the vibe from 'good date' to something the two of you will actually remember.



Why not?

Dares, prompts, and ideas for the night you don't want to end. No planning required — just the willingness to say yes to the next thing.

Spice it up - Card game



Available at
Amazon

Kristen Bell & Dax Shepard

The Couple Who Chose Honesty When Hiding Would Have Been Easier

There is a version of the Kristen Bell and Dax Shepard story that is easy to admire from a distance: two charming, funny, genuinely likable people who appear to have built an unusually solid marriage in an industry that specializes in dissolving them.

But the version worth paying attention to — the one that has something to teach — is considerably less tidy.

Dax Shepard has been open about his history with addiction and his recovery, which began before he and Kristen met. What became public knowledge in 2020, through Dax's own disclosure on his podcast *Armchair Expert*, was that he had relapsed after sixteen years of sobriety — and that he had told Kristen about it himself, before she found out any other way.



What Dax described in the aftermath was a process that many couples never attempt even in far less dramatic circumstances: radical, voluntary transparency. He came to Kristen not because he was caught, not because the situation had escalated beyond concealment but because their relationship operated on a foundation of honesty that he wasn't willing to compromise — even when he had already compromised something else.

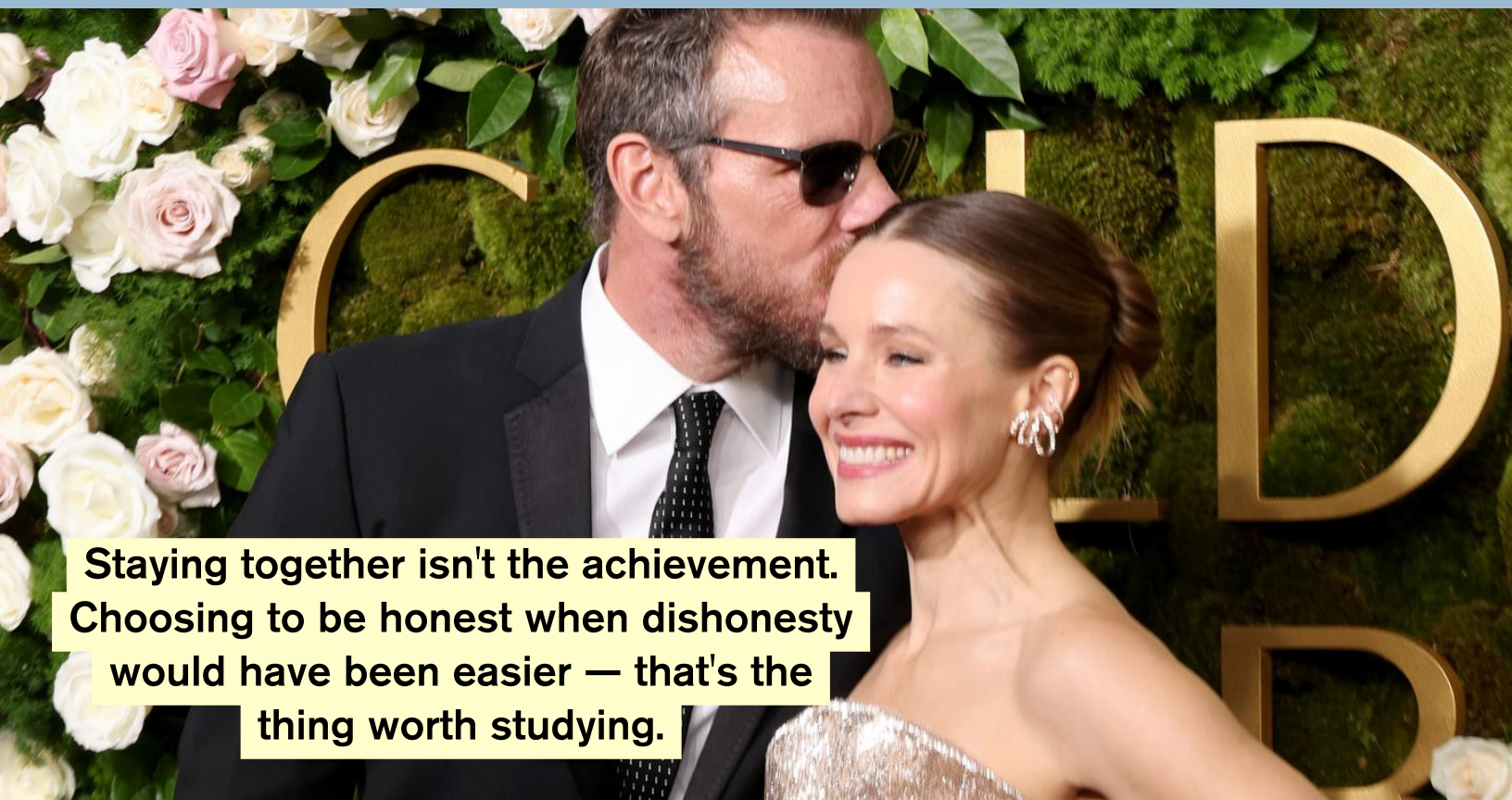
Kristen, for her part, has spoken about the experience with a clarity that is rare in celebrity interviews about marriage. She described being devastated, and working through it, and choosing — deliberately, not automatically — to stay. Not because leaving was unthinkable, but because staying was what she wanted once the initial shock settled.

That distinction matters. A relationship that survives because neither person could imagine leaving is different from a relationship that survives because both people looked at what they had and chose it again. The first is inertia. The second is commitment.

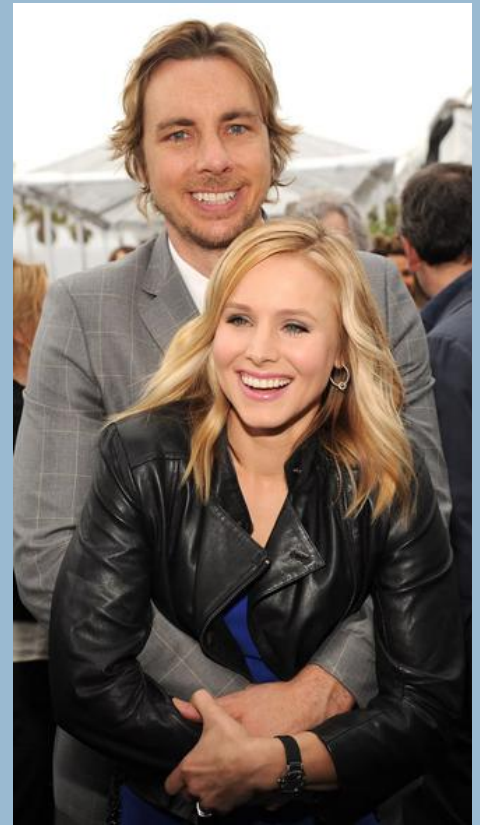
They have also been unusually candid, over years of interviews, about the ongoing work of their marriage: the therapy, the arguments, the differences in how they process conflict, the specific friction points that haven't disappeared simply because they love each other.

Dax has described Kristen as someone who holds him accountable in ways he finds uncomfortable and necessary. Kristen has described a relationship that requires active maintenance rather than assumed ease.

The public nature of their story — the podcast, the interviews, the willingness to name things that most couples only discuss behind closed doors — has a secondary effect worth noting. By owning their narrative openly, they removed the power of speculation. There is no version of their story that a tabloid could tell that would be more damaging than the version they've already told themselves. That's not accidental. That's a strategy, whether or not it was conscious.



Staying together isn't the achievement. Choosing to be honest when dishonesty would have been easier — that's the thing worth studying.



Honesty before it's required Dax told Kristen about the relapse before she found out another way. Voluntary disclosure is an act of respect. It also changes the nature of the breach.

Accountability without collapse : He didn't fall apart with guilt or deflect with excuses. He owned it, sought help, and let her process without making her manage his feelings about it.

Public honesty as private protection: By being open about their struggles in interviews, they removed the power of rumor. Owning your story is its own form of armor.

The easiest reading of Kristen Bell and Dax Shepard is that they're a particularly well-matched couple who got lucky. The more honest reading is that they've built something deliberately, with tools that are available to anyone: honesty before it's required, accountability without collapse, and the decision to choose each other not once, at the altar, but repeatedly, in the ordinary and extraordinary moments that follow. That's not a celebrity story. That's just what commitment looks like when it's working.

They didn't survive the hard chapter because their love was exceptional. They survived it because their honesty was.

The question to bring home

Is there something in your relationship right now that you know about and haven't said? Not because it doesn't matter — but because it's easier to hold it quietly than to open that conversation. That's the thing worth examining. Not whether to say it. Why you haven't.



Still Choosing You

How Each Zodiac Sign Shows
They're Still Choosing You

The way we express love naturally changes over time. What begins with excitement often grows into something deeper and more intentional.

When we first fall in love, the signs are easy to recognize. The texts are constant, compliments come naturally, every date feels exciting, and even ordinary conversations seem special.

As time passes, though, everyday responsibilities begin to shape the relationship. Careers, children, finances, busy schedules, and routines gradually replace the novelty of the honeymoon phase, leading many people to wonder whether their partner still feels the same way.

After working with couples and reflecting on my own marriage, I've come to realize that lasting love is rarely defined by grand romantic gestures. Instead, it shows up through the small, everyday choices that communicate care and commitment.

Sometimes love isn't expressed through the words "I love you," but through simple acts like asking if someone has eaten, reminding them to drive safely, bringing home their favorite snack, making coffee in the morning, or taking something off their plate because they're exhausted.

As relationships mature, love becomes less about the excitement of falling and more about the decision to keep choosing each other every day. Just as every zodiac sign has its own love language, each one has a unique way of saying, "I still choose you." Let's explore what that looks like.

Aries

Aries continues choosing you by making you part of their life and their adventures. They still call you first when something exciting happens, ask for your opinion, and make plans with you in mind. For Aries, love means sharing life's journey together, and their way of saying "I choose you" is simply, "Come with me."



Cancer

Cancer expresses love through care. They remember the little things, notice when you're overwhelmed, and often anticipate your needs before you say a word. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "Let me take care of you."

Taurus

Taurus chooses you through consistency. They continue showing up, maintaining traditions, and building routines that include you because, for them, love is steady and dependable. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "You can count on me."

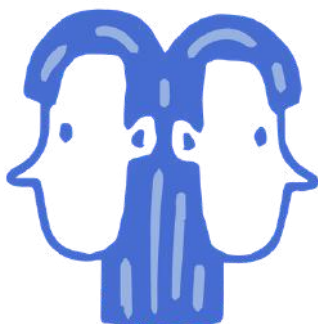


Leo

Leo continues choosing you by making you part of everything they're proud of. They celebrate your accomplishments, speak highly of you, and want others to know how much you mean to them. For Leo, "I choose you" sounds like, "I'm proud of us."

Gemini

Gemini keeps choosing you by continuing to share their world with you. Even years later, you're still the



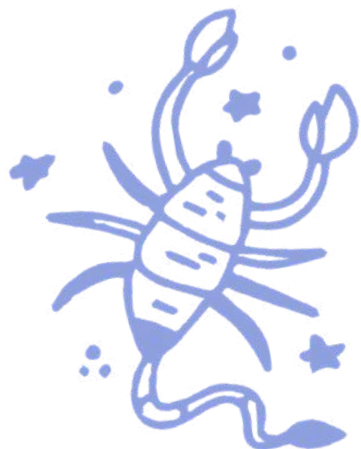
first person they text when something funny happens and their favorite person to talk to. Their version of "I choose you" is, "I want to share this with you."

Virgo

Virgo shows love through thoughtful actions. They solve problems, remember the details that matter, and quietly find ways to make your life easier. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "I thought of that for you."

Scorpio

Scorpio expresses commitment through trust. They continue opening up about their fears, dreams, and vulnerabilities, allowing you to know the parts of them that few others ever see. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "You still know the real me."



Aquarius

Aquarius chooses you by inviting you into their inner world. They share their ideas, dreams, and the parts of themselves they rarely reveal, seeing inclusion as a form of intimacy. Their version of "I choose you" is, "I want you in my world."



Sagittarius

Sagittarius keeps choosing you by including you in their future. They dream with you, make plans together, and seek new experiences side by side, finding that freedom grows alongside the relationship. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "Let's keep growing together."



Pisces

Pisces expresses love through emotional presence. They continue believing in the relationship, seeing your potential, and offering compassion through every season. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "I'm still here."

Capricorn

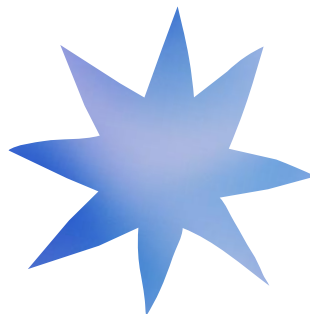
Capricorn shows love through dedication and effort. They continue investing their time, energy, and

resources into building a future together, demonstrating commitment through their actions. Their way of saying "I choose you" is, "I'm still building this with you."



The longer we're in a relationship, the clearer it becomes that lasting love isn't built through a single grand decision but through countless small ones made every day. Choosing to stay curious, compassionate, committed, and open creates the foundation for a relationship that continues to

grow. While every zodiac sign expresses that choice in its own way, the message beneath it is always the same: "After everything we've been through, I still choose you." Perhaps that's the truest definition of lasting love.



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