



What Comes
After
Ever
After?

"Happily Ever After?"

We've all grown up with the stories of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, all of whom were rescued by a handsome prince. We've indulged in Hollywood love stories, which paint a picture of romance based on finding your "soulmate" in record-breaking time and under the unlikely circumstances. Reality television pits single hopefuls against one another in search for their true love and a proposal in just a few short weeks, and yet we continue to tune in, even though more times than not, the relationships end shortly after the cameras stop rolling. You can find these idealized versions of romance and marriage everywhere you look. While these stories can be a fun source of escape, my concern is their effects on how we view relationships. Have you ever noticed that these tales end just after the couple gets together and never really address how they got to the *happily ever after*?

What would be on your list if I asked you to define your happily ever after? And from where did you cull these criteria? Our expectations and beliefs are based on our experiences – from our family and cultural backgrounds as well as from society-at-large, including the media and endless clever marketing campaigns. In the past, marriage was less about personal fulfillment and more about practical or social status demands. People were often expected to marry to build financial powerhouses between two prestigious families, regardless of whether there was love between them. Women married at younger ages for fear of being labeled "old maids." There were more stringent gender roles and limited views of happiness. Today, couples tend to want it all from their marriages – emotional, intellectual, and financial partnerships. Some of these shifts in expectation are welcome and can lead to more fulfilling relationships. But with the good always comes the bad, and some of these expectations can lead to unrealistic demands on both you and your partner.

Although Prince Charming and Cinderella look pretty on the outside, we really have no idea how well they can cook, raise children, or fix a leaky sink. There is no such thing as perfect. Unrealistic expectations can set you up for a life of chronic shame, disappoint, and resentment in your marriage. If your relationship leaves you feeling this way more than you've expected, perhaps it's time for a reality check. Remember the following, and you'll be on your way to establishing your own REALISTIC happily ever after:

Relationships are three-dimensional and messy. You need to expect that there will be easy and rough times and periods when you do not like each other. The garden of marriage requires constant tending. In contrast, extramarital affairs are two-dimensional: It's all about excitement, sneaking around, and escaping from reality. Even in a healthy relationship you'll want to take "escape breaks" from the day-to-day grind, the demands of kids, etc., but most of the time, you need to commit to coping with the reality of life. See your spouse as three-dimensional and messy as well. You will both have your share of strengths and flaws. Have gratitude for your respective strengths, and practice patience for those things that you wish were different.

Beware of the escape-fantasy priming from fairy tales. Sure, it's tempting at times to wish that someone else would swoop in and solve all of life's dilemmas, but don't be too quick to play the damsel in distress if you truly want an equal partnership. Furthermore, you take away your opportunity to learn and grow if you don't take on at least some of the challenges yourself. Also remember that men often feel a lot of pressure to live up to the Prince Charming ideal and that princes sometimes need to be taken care of, too. It's okay to expect things from each other, just don't take it to the extreme.

Cherish your relationship and remember that feelings, dreams, and vulnerabilities are gifts that your partner gives to you to protect, not to use against him or abuse.

Lastly, remember that healthy relationships grow and change. We move through several stages in our relationships – from infatuation, when we see each other in the "ideal" form, through disillusionment, when we finally "see" the flaws in each other along with the strengths, and onto mature love where we must accept the whole package in order to truly love. Mature love may not have all of the fireworks and adrenaline that the infatuation stage does, but it comes with its own set of rewards: security, tranquility, and trust.

You can write your own fairytale for your marriage – you just need to think about it as a documentary of your life together rather than as a piece of fiction. Happily ever after doesn't just happen – it takes a different kind of script and a commitment to make it work. DEBORAH ANDERSON PhD