

Master of Your Marital Destiny

A happy marriage doesn't happen by dumb luck. It requires being intentional – setting a goal and striving to attain it. In my work as a clinical psychologist and as a yoga practitioner/teacher, I have seen the power of setting intentions as a means to a happier and healthier existence, both mentally and physically. Being intentional not only helps with inner harmony, but it also allows us to get along better with others. Marriage is one of the best training grounds and places to use these tools, since your relationship with your spouse will likely challenge you more than any other in your life.

Being intentional has its roots in mind-body science, and more and more research is being done to empirically demonstrate “the power of positive thinking.” Here are just some of the basic underlying principles of mind-body connections that I know to be true and important:

- Your thoughts and feelings will always correspond. For example, when you are worrying about staying within your wedding budget, you will feel anxious, and your physiology will also be anxious (e.g., your heart starts to beat faster or your palms get sweaty).
- Being specific with your words *does* matter, and when you set a goal, you need to tell your brain what you want to have happen rather than what you don't want.
- Techniques such as visualization can create mind-body connections, even when you are sitting still. For example, elite athletes do part of their training by visualizing themselves doing their routines. If you were to put electrodes deep into their muscle tissue, you would see activity even though they are not “moving” to the visible eye.
- You are not born an optimist or pessimist – it is a learned behavior.

In addition to these mind-body principles, I have been learning more about ideas surrounding the “Law of Attraction,” which basically states that we will attract that which we are thinking about. In other words, our intentions go beyond just our personal self and vibrate into the universe.

So, how do you use this knowledge to have a happier and healthier marriage?

Set goals. General psychology research has shown that goal-setters are more successful than their peers, and relationship research shows that shared goals are an important element for a couple's longevity.

Be specific with your goals. I recommend that you write down your goal list and describe the entries as specifically as possible. Or, create a “vision board” and cut out pictures that depict what you want. Place your list or board in a location where you will see it every day. This could include “material” wishes, such as a house or vacation, but also intangible things such as being a better listener or having more patience.

Spend some time each day visualizing your goals. According to Law of Attraction experts, not only do you have to state what you want, you have to get to a place where you can “feel it,” as if your goal is already present in your life. Set aside a few minutes every day for a visualization exercise. In your mind's eye watch yourself achieving your goal as if you were watching a movie on the big screen. See yourself as a better listener or signing the papers on your new home. Be patient with yourself. For some people, visualization can be a little challenging at first, and so it may take some practice until you can see things clearly. Remember that your brain often works like a muscle and needs to be trained to get good at a new skill.

Spend as little time as possible on negative things. Clearly you can't live in a bubble and avoid all things negative, but when something off-putting happens, shift your thinking back to what you want as quickly as you can. In your relationship, focus more energy on what you like or enjoy about your spouse. According to the Law of Attraction, if you keep focusing on the negative (e.g., “He keeps throwing his clothes on the floor”) instead of a more positive solution, the thing you dislike is precisely what you'll keep getting.

Remember that you can only control yourself. If your spouse is uninterested in sharing a particular goal, no amount of visualization will help your cause. In such a case, focus on what you can achieve on your own, and let go of what you cannot change.

Have gratitude for what you already have in your life. Just as you visualize your “want” list on a daily basis, make a list every day of a few things for which you are grateful. Remind yourself of the things that made you fall in love with your spouse in the first place. This shift in focus alone will help to neutralize a bad mood, and if the Law of Attraction works, you will have even more to be grateful for in the future.

Be patient. A goal may not happen in exactly the manner or the timeline you specify, but if it is something that really resonates with you, have faith that it will happen in time.

Take action. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just sit at home and the universe would bring everything we wanted right to our door? Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. You still need to take action. That will include doing the above steps, as well as following up on the ideas or opportunities that come your way as a result of your being intentional.

You can choose happiness over unhappiness through your thoughts and actions on a daily basis. By being intentional and proactive you truly can be the master of your own marital destiny.

DEBORAH ANDERSON, PHD