

Mates for *Life*

Falling in love is easy, it's staying married for life that's hard. I talked to three happily married couples to glean their insights on what works, what doesn't and everything in between.

Text Ariel Chew *Images* Courtesy of Respective Interviewees / iStockphoto

When two people stays married for a long time, it makes me wonder just what is it that makes them stick together. Is it just inertia or a mark of immense patience and long-suffering? With alarming statistics indicating there's one divorce every 10 minutes in Malaysia*, it's natural to be jaded and cynical. But it also makes these lasting marriages all the more mysterious. What is it that shields them from the deadly blow of divorce as compared to the others?

This being the month of love, I approached three couples in their 20s, 30s and 40s in hopes of unearthing the secret behind their happy marriages. The answers I received vary greatly from one another. One couple fell in love at first sight, while it took the other two numerous encounters before something sparked. Two couples believe that children are the fruits and glue of a marriage while one couple is adamant nothing can keep a marriage alive except the husband and wife themselves. Two of them strongly believe that there is no better person to work or start a business with than your spouse, while one couple insists that it is inadvisable to do so as having some space apart would enrich the marriage.

So there really isn't one mystical formula to tie them all. And yet, in some small ways, the answers given have some commonalities: mutual commitment, respect, trust, and communication.

Commitment: Till Death Do Us Part

When nosy relatives ask why a nice girl like me is still single, I'll glibly answer that it's because I haven't found the right mate yet. That will often elicit a sympathetic smile and a 'don't be so picky!' comment until the next time I meet them again and they ask me the exact same question. While this may be a great answer to temporarily satisfy pesky relatives, I discovered that it is not the best mindset to enter a till-death-do-us-part marriage.

Anyone can fall in love and marry at the height of romance when everything is perfect and beautiful. At that point in time, the person they are marrying is The One. But when hardships come as they often do, most people assume that they have chosen the wrong partner and take off. The ones in lasting unions, however, managed to weather the storms, adapt and accept the weaknesses of their partners. Ergo, it's not about finding the right mate, it is being the right mate.





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And that takes commitment of the utmost level.

Mic, who met Anna 23 years ago in Malaysia and recently migrated to Australia with his family, puts it succinctly, “We made a commitment to keep our marriage vows to each other regardless of anything that befalls us or comes our way. Why? Because our spouse made the biggest decision in their lives to be exclusive to us alone for their entire lives and not to forsake the other for any other choices that come along until our last breaths on earth. We take our commitments seriously and thus, something as huge as this gives us all the more reason to stick with it.”

Michelle, who married her long-time childhood sweetheart agrees, “When I married Jason, we made a promise to never give up on each other. This helps us plow through the tough times.”

Respect: What You Give is What You Get

They say that opposites attract, so there is a good chance of marrying your polar opposite. This is where respect comes in. Rahim, an art director who’s the sole breadwinner of his family, heartily agrees, “I’m glad Siti is not like me. I’m artsy, she’s not into that. I love movies and she doesn’t. These differences make things

interesting and spices up the marriage!” He added that his wife is also more traditional and religious than he is. “These are qualities I deeply appreciate and respect her for. She’s a good influence in my life and has been instrumental in shaping me to be a better person. She’s also a great and devoted mother.”

Respect also extends to the in-laws, whom you may or may not be living with. The secret of co-existing with them with minimal angst is to make them as part of your family. “I spend a lot of time with her family as well and I share her responsibility of caring for her aged

How do you keep the spark alive?

Mic & Anna: We keep pursuing and attracting each other by any and all creative means. It’s fun!



parents," Rahim said. The other two couples also do not experience any major problems in relating with the in-laws. "The moment I saw how he treated my family as his own, I knew that he's the person I would marry because that proved how much I meant to him," said Michelle. That's pretty amazing when you think about the treasure trove of mother-in-law jokes we all know. It goes to show that respect begets respect and it's a win-win situation all around.

Trust: It's More Important than Love

Unfortunately, love is such an overused word that it doesn't mean much anymore. You can love a donut but can you really say that you trust one? So when a spouse says, "I trust you", it actually means more than "I love you."

For Rahim, trust works both ways. "My wife is my finance minister, I trust her with my money. Likewise, whenever I have to work late on projects, my wife trusts that I am out there working hard for us." After a long day at work, he looks forward to return to a well-managed home greeted by his loving wife. Make no mistake, this nuptial bliss took quite a number of years in the making. "It was hard-going in the beginning as my job requires me to put in a lot of hours. It kills me to spend so much time away from my family," he said. As such, he makes it a point to spend every minute he has at home fully attentive to his family and not to bring work home. "My wife now fully accepts the nature of my work and both of us are enjoying the fruits of my labour as my efforts are being recognised at work," he added. He believes it is a great mistake to ignore the family needs



in pursuit of a career. "What's the point of having a lot of money when you come home to an empty house devoid of love and affection? It is meaningless."

Trust frees up precious mind space for other more positive and productive thoughts and activities. A suspicious mind, however, kills a relationship by planting seeds of doubt which leads to discord, as Elvis woeefully sang. Nothing is more draining than having to explain yourself for the umpteenth time to a partner who doesn't believe a single word you say. Or who follows you everywhere you go because they can't trust you or worry you might gamble your life savings away, drink too much or flirt with the opposite sex. The sad fact is, while it can take years to build up trust, it only takes a second to tear it all down, with just one deceitful act. That's where the next trait comes in handy.

Communication: It Takes Two

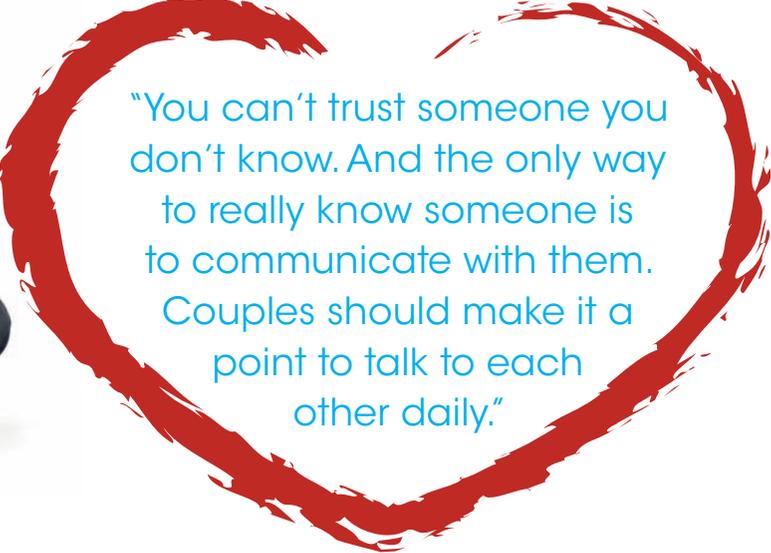
You can't trust someone you don't know. And the only way to really know someone is to communicate with them. All three couples make it a point to talk to each other daily, no matter how busy their day is. "I will always



When did you realise that she/he is the one?

Jason: When nothing seems complete without her.

Michelle: When he loved my family as his own.



"You can't trust someone you don't know. And the only way to really know someone is to communicate with them. Couples should make it a point to talk to each other daily."

answer calls from my wife or call her just to say hi, even when I'm in the thick of work because it's important to touch base with each other throughout the day. It doesn't take long and it means a lot to her," Rahim said.

Good communication is also like a habit. Once you make it a point to practise it, it will get easier over time until you do it automatically. "Whether it is a business venture or deciding which school the kids should go to or what to have for dinner, we will talk about it, come to a mutual agreement and stick on that decision regardless of the challenges we face later on. We co-own the success and failure of those decisions. It's all about having the same boat mentality," Mic explained. When both partners take equal responsibility for the decisions made, there is no room for the blame game.

Communication is easy during happy times, but what about communicating during times of conflict? Experienced couples would have a set of practices that are tested and proven over the years. When you know each other as well as you do, you know exactly what will hurt the person most. Happy couples refrain from saying the one thing the other hates hearing the most, no matter how angry they feel.

"I will take some time alone to calm down before calling or texting my wife," said Jason. Michelle prefers texting as it gives her time and space to frame her thoughts and words before hitting the send button. "It is important for us to never have a communication breakdown." This means no cold shoulder treatments and settling conflicts as soon as humanly possible.

Riding Off to the Sunset... Together

The road to happily ever after is far from smooth sailing.

It is frequently riddled with conflicts and confounding moments. And it requires constant changes, mostly on yourself. Mic summed it up brilliantly, "Over the years, I have learned to humble myself first and to tame my ego. I learned not to change my spouse but to change myself first. I learned to accept I'm not always right. I learned to ensure my emotions are processed before I speak. I learned that listening is better than speaking in heated moments. I learned how to lose gracefully without remembering it next day. I learned to obey rather than to command. And I am still learning about the woman I married and live with daily till today."

Couples who give up at the first signs of trouble would miss out on experiencing the beauty of a matured and well-seasoned marriage filled with knowing smiles and delightful private jokes. Where just a lift of the eyebrow or a loving touch can effectively nip an argument in the bud. Yes, it takes years of sheer will power, stamina and oodles of patience to get to that stage. But when you have arrived, as these three couples did, the view from the top is so breathtaking, you'll be grateful that the best person you ever wanted to go on a journey with is standing right there beside you. ■

** Source: Shariah Judiciary Department Malaysia (JKSM), Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) and Statistics Department of Malaysia (2012)*

Are you each other's best friends?

Rahim & Siti: Absolutely. We are loyal to each other and do not say negative things behind the other's back. This safeguards our marriage from any third party interference.

