

Did our grandparents know the secret of a happy marriage?

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"Art is a hard mistress, and there is no art quite so hard as that of being a wife" writes Don'ts for Wives, 1913.

The divorce rate is still one in three, so what are we doing wrong? We go back to the advice of our mothers - and grandmothers - to see if the old tips can be made new again.
Words: Kerrie Davies

My mother's copy of *Woman's World* is a yellowing, hardcover book engraved with a gold rose, enclosing 606 pages of advice on grooming, dating, marriage, home, babies and entertaining, which she bought as her bible when marrying in 1962.

Editor Alleyne M. Jukes writes:

"Being a successful wife and mother is a most desirable achievement, for which unfortunately there is little training. Consistently bad or uninspired cooking, a neglected appearance, a disorganised or chaotic home, an unbalanced budget, a constant feeling of pressure by the absence of a proper household routine, and generally an inability to cope with the many demands life places on a woman, makes it an impossibility to achieve domestic bliss." Sound familiar?

But, dare I write it, maybe there's some truth in these old tomes of advice.

We have equality at home and work, yet the top causes of conflict remain timeless: work, the kids, mess, boys' (or girls') nights out, sex (or lack thereof), and money.

"Conflict becomes a game of power ping pong, as each person becomes defensive and tries to justify their point of view. That leads to nasty situations like yelling, name-calling and stonewalling," says Mosman-based relationships therapist Christine Bennett.

Inspired by *Woman's World* (1960), *Housekeeping Monthly* (1955), and Blanche Ebbutt's 1913 classic, *Don'ts for Wives*, the *Northside* office roadtested whether such advice was still relevant for domestic bliss.

Martini, darling?

Advice: "When he comes home from work, have a martini ready for him." (*Housekeeping Monthly*, 1955)

Tried & tested: In the interests of authenticity, Vanessa Fowler, wife and mother of a four-year-old, tried this one at home.

"I asked him if he wanted a martini," she reports. "He blanched and asked for a gin and tonic, which I duly made (I even cut up a lemon instead of using the squeezey stuff, which should make me Wife of the Year).

I then fetched his slippers. By this time, hubby was right on board with the whole traditional housewife plan, and asked - with a little too much enthusiasm - what other 1950s housewife stuff he could expect now, and how soon?"

That's when Vanessa rewrote the martini marriage rules. "I think whoever is home first makes the martini. By the time I drag myself home after sitting in traffic for an hour to pick up our daughter from after-school care by 6pm (or risk a fine), my husband's usually already home on the couch.

Given he's often home before me, I ask, 'Where's my martini?'"

Modern day interpretation: Sexism aside, this piece of advice is about consideration for your partner, and the small acts that show you really care.

Christine Bennett agrees: "Whoever is home first should make the drinks."

Add a touch of lippy

Advice: "Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking." (*Housekeeping Monthly*, 1955)

Tried & tested: "And take him out for pizza," adds photographer Yie Sandison, married for three years.

"Usually when I get home, there's no ribbon, but there is always a smile and a kiss."

Modern day interpretation: With or without a ribbon, 15 minutes of time out after a stressful day, is good for everyone.

Christine is all for a relaxed date night. "Prepare yourself to meet them at their favourite restaurant, or send a text to the late homecomer to bring in take out."

All ears

Advice: “Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival home is not the time. Let him talk first.” (*Housekeeping Monthly*, 1955)

Tried & tested: Still in *Bewitched* mode, Vanessa asked her husband about his day.

“I forced myself to listen. At this point, I should say that my husband has a highly technical computer job in a financial institution.

I listened, clutching my own (strong) drink, as he gave me a blow by blow account of his day. I understood about one out of every three words that came out of his mouth.

We normally talk about our child, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and other nerdy things we like together.”

Yie thinks sometimes silence is golden.

“My duty is to let him watch *The Biggest Loser* without interruption,” she says.

Modern day interpretation: However busy you are, don’t forget to talk.

“Offering support to each other at the end of the day can be as simple as listening to your partner,” says Christine.

Heartfelt cooking

Advice: “Don’t forget to ‘feed the brute’ well. Much depends on the state of his digestion.” (*Don’ts for Wives*, 1913)

Tried & tested: Editor Abi Weeks roadtested a hearty homecooked meal.

“I took a leaf from Donna Hay and decided ‘drunken chicken’ was the way to my husband’s heart.

It tasted fabulous, although he was slightly horrified I’d used half a bottle of Casa Noble tequila for the marinade ... and that I left him with the washing up. I felt that was only fair.”

It works for non-cooks too - with sparkling results.

North Shore Times writer, Fiona Brady, says, “I bought (my partner) a Chargrill Charlie’s chicken roll, with chips, on Saturday and had it waiting for him when he returned home ravenous from football.”

He proposed the next day.

Modern day interpretation: This is essentially saying ‘I care about you and I want to nurture you’. If your partner has been run off their feet, step in and take over the cooking.

“There is nothing more libido-enhancing than to see a man in the kitchen,” says Christine cheekily.

Play together

Advice: “Don’t object to your husband getting a motor-bicycle; merrily insist he should buy a side-car for you at the same time” (*Don’ts for Wives*)

Tried & tested: “He already had a motorbike when I met him, and I’m a little too accident prone to get my own,” says Abi Weeks.

“So we took up cycling together. We love exploring the suburbs on the weekends.”

Yie and her husband have biked around Europe together, and Vanessa and her husband both like SciFi and fantasy.

“I sleep in the car when he plays football but we like to travel together,” Fiona says.

Modern interpretation: Couples that play together, stay together.

“Whatever is your choice of fun or enjoyment, really doesn’t matter,” says Christine.

“What matters most is spending some fun time with your partner. This happens naturally when you first meet, but seems to sadly dwindle over time. This can lead to a dwindling in the quality of connection with your partner.”

I told you so

Advice: “Don’t say ‘I told you so’ to your husband, however tempted you feel.” (*Don’ts for Wives*, 1913)

Tried & tested: “I never say ‘I told you so,’ agrees Yie Sandison. “I just roll my eyes and he gets the message.”

Modern day interpretation: This advice seems to be a classic.

“I agree with this one,” approves Christine. “Never rub it in when your partner (both genders) stuffs up ... Far better to offer understanding.”

Keeping up appearances

Advice: “Don’t allow yourself to get into the habit of dressing carelessly when there is ‘only’ your husband to see you.” (*Don’ts for Wives*, 1913)

Tried & tested: Fiona Brady thinks lounge wear is the exception.

“When I wear my purple dressing gown, he calls me Ming the Merciless, but he seems quite fond of it. And he does have some bad lounge wear himself,” she says.

Modern day interpretation: It’s good to be able to relax with your partner, but a little effort will go a long way. Take care of yourself for your own happiness, and the marriage will benefit too.

As for lounge wear, there's some fabulous pyjamas in the shops if you want to update the old dressing gown.

"Dressing comfortably can be just as sexy as dressing to impress," says Christine.

Kiss, kiss

Advice: "Don't forget to wish your husband good morning when he sets off to the office. He will feel the lack of your good-bye kiss all day." (*Don'ts for Wives*, 1913)

Tried & tested: It seems that Blanche was a futurist, for much of her advice is timeless.

"I always kiss him goodbye," Vanessa says. "I thought this was standard."

Yie adds. "He rushed off the other morning, so there was no goodbye kiss. I asked that night 'Did you miss it?' And he said yes."

Modern day interpretation: Never underestimate the small gestures of love.

Christine agrees: "Remember to kiss each other good-bye in the morning and on return in the evening. A romantic text during the day is nice too ... along with the three most special words."

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