

JUST MAKING a New Year's resolution, whether you stick to it or not, can help you figure out what's really important in life. Funny, then, that aspirations for our marriages rarely make the list unless our relationships are already in trouble. "People get so caught up in careers, raising kids and satisfying their own souls," says Gloria Richfield, co-author of *Together Forever*, "that they forget their marriage needs to be fed too."

This year, while you're busy sweating off those extra pounds or working your way through some must-read books, set aside some time to reach for marital goals too. Keeping these resolutions can be illuminating, gratifying and just plain fun. Any one of them can make your marriage better in 1999 and beyond.

1. Be Your Spouse's Biggest Fan.

"My wife has a great eye for color," her husband, Mario, said at a dinner party I attended not long ago. "She's so artistic." The women at the table glanced enviously at his wife, who was beaming at the unexpected compliment.

"Words of praise—especially if they're offered in front of other people—are so important," Richfield says. "Unfortunately, most of us are more likely to criticize our spouse in public."

Who hasn't shared a laugh at her partner's expense? Comedians have built entire careers on spouse-bashing humor. But negative comments—even ones with a punch line—can backfire. "If you joke often enough about a man not being romantic, he'll use that as an excuse for not making the effort," says Georgia Witkin, assistant professor

of psychiatry at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. "But if you keep saying how good your husband is with the kids, he'll want to be good with the kids. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

2. Bring Something New to Sex.

"It's very easy to fall into doing things the same way, having one scenario that you always follow," Richfield says. If both you and your spouse are ready for a change, Richfield suggests expanding your sexual knowledge by reading books and talking to your spouse openly about what you read. If you're not comfortable doing that, try something more sensual than sexual—give him a massage or wear something different to bed.

"Somebody has to bring something new to the equation," Richfield says. "Why not you?"

3. Spend Quality Time Apart.

It's one of those paradoxes of a relationship: time apart can actually bring you closer together. When a hairdresser in Marblehead, Mass., expressed an interest in cycling, his wife didn't complain about the time he would spend away from the family. Instead, she agreed to watch the children for three hours every other Saturday morning so he could join a local bike club. Within a few months the hairdresser was fitter, happier and a lot more pleasant to be around. "I may not be out there riding with him," his wife says, "but I'm definitely reaping the benefits."

"People in a relationship have to retain their identity so they won't feel smothered," Witkin says. She stresses this is especially important for couples with

young children "or life will become too fatiguing."

4. Spend Quantity Time Together.

Studies show that anything increasing the amount of time you spend together—be it a fancy evening out or just walking the dog—will also increase the level of satisfaction in a marriage.

Ideally, you should get out of the house together once a week. If you can't, make sure you spend ten minutes every evening just talking. "It's hand in hand, eye to eye. No TV, no distractions," Witkin says. "It doesn't matter what you talk about. Just listen to each other."

The average American couple spends remarkably little face-to-face time per week, Witkin points out. "If you do ten minutes a night, you'll be way ahead of other couples," she adds.

5. Break the Date Rut.

Whenever my husband and I were lucky enough to snare a baby-sitter, we'd run out for a quick dinner and a mov-

Canoe for Two—No noise, no distractions for three hours.



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At first our uncoordinated efforts had us spinning in circles, but eventually our strokes fell into sync and we began moving through the water with relative ease. For the next three hours there was no noise, no distractions—just time together. It turned out to be a great day. We can't wait to do it again.

If you can break away from your standard dating routine and explore a new activity, your marriage will benefit. Think of it as a marital adrenalin boost. "Every once in a while you have to bring new energy into your relationship," Richfield explains. "New energy stimulates you."

6. Be Kind. Small courtesies that are *de rigueur* while dating seem to fall by the wayside when children and career start demanding more of your attention. But little acts of kindness fit into any schedule.

Let your spouse sleep in some Saturday morning while you take the children out to breakfast. Take on a chore that normally lands on your spouse's list. And remember to show gratitude when your mate does a kind deed for you. "People forget to thank each other," Richfield says. "To thank somebody—even for something you expect—shows your appreciation. And it will make your spouse want to do more for you."

7. Make a Five-Year Plan. At the end of each fiscal year, many compa-

nies write down goals they'd like to see their organization achieve over the next several years. Couples can use the same technique to give their lives more direction.

Set aside a weekend to develop a five-year plan of your own. Ask yourselves: Do you want to buy a new home? Change jobs? Go back for more schooling? Devote more time to sports or hobbies?

Consider what you're satisfied with and what you'd like to change. You'll come away with a guide to use when you're faced with little decisions throughout the year. You may also learn things about each other that you didn't know before.

"A five-year plan is a great tool for opening up communication," Richfield confirms. "It's also a wonderful reassurance for couples that they're in this marriage for the long haul."

8. Do That One Task Your Spouse Has Been Bugging You About. Having heard her husband, a New York City police officer, complain for months about all the toys cluttering their home, a Long Island homemaker bought some attractive shelves and bins and settled down for a spree of sorting, organizing and eliminating.

"You should have seen my husband's face when he came home," she says. "He was thrilled."

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"I'm not perfect, but I want you to know I'm trying."

9. Put It in Writing. A New Jersey sales representative was surprised when she received a letter in the mail from her husband, a production manager. "It was like

the ones he used to send me when we were dating," she says. "Handwritten on plain notebook paper." Her husband wrote about how he loved falling asleep next to her every night and how he loved the way she looked on Saturday mornings with her hair pulled back and no makeup on.

"Little things that I thought he never noticed," she says, blushing. "It's a great reminder that even though we don't say it every day, the feelings we have for each other are still there."

We all have moments when love for our spouse wells up inside. Why not take a few minutes to write about it? "A letter is like visual proof of your love," Richfield says. It's also something you can read again and again, through 1999 and all the happily married years to come.

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BUSH LEAGUE



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