

Do Your Marriage a Favor—Rock the Boat!

Sally knew that she and Mark had different tastes on their first date. But she kept her knowledge to herself.

When Mark said he liked to go camping, Sally didn't express her first thought, which was: "The closest I get to camping is a walk in Central Park." Instead, she said, "We used to go camping a lot when we were kids." When he said he liked country music, she didn't say, "You've got to be kidding!" Instead, she said, "My boss is crazy about Garth Brooks."

It's not that she was trying to misrepresent who she was. It's just that she was in fairy tale love mode. You were probably in fairy tale love mode on your first date with your fiancé. Most of us are on a first date. We are wondering if a relationship is possible and secretly hoping we are "made for each other." If we are, we will understand each other effortlessly and our relationship will glide forward smoothly. Or so we imagine. When we are in fairy tale love mode, we have a sharp eye for the tiniest commonalities. And we are often blind to differences, or we try to be. We don't want to rock the boat.

Of course, by the time you become a bride, you are past fairy tale love mode. You are in real love mode. You speak with perfect frankness about your tastes, your goals, your dreams. Right? Well, maybe not quite. When you move from planning your weekends to planning the rest of your life, you are on a threshold of a new dream. Once again you are hoping you are "made for each other." Even if you have achieved great honesty in your relationship, an engagement ring has a way of transporting you right back to fairy tale love mode.

One of my clients told me that in England, you can't get married after 6:00 in the evening. This law is left over from the days before electricity, when a man could wind up married to the wrong woman, thanks to the candlelight, the bridal veil, and a sneaky family. If you remain too long in fairy tale love mode, you could end up getting married "in the dark." You will be doing yourself and your fiancé a huge favor if you turn the lights on now, even if you're uncomfortable, rather than years down the road, when you could end up disappointed and disillusioned. As a marriage counselor, every day I see couples who are disconnected and living separate lives, because for years they've kept their real selves in the dark.

Most likely you agree completely with what I'm saying. And yet, it still might be tough to step out of fairy tale love mode. Here are some ideas that might help you.

It's important to realize that being "made for each other," is a small part of what will make your marriage successful. Even if you could find someone who was 99% identical to you, that 1% of difference will come to feel like a sizable challenge. Ask anyone who's been married more than a few years! And there's no such thing as effortless understanding, no matter how similar you are. People are far too complicated for that, not to mention that they are constantly changing.

For a happy marriage, you need to learn to handle your differences wisely. That means believing that you and your partner can have different ways of thinking and living that are equally valuable. Even more than believing, it means being able to act on this belief in every day life and not fall into the common traps of impatience, criticism, put downs, or trying to make your partner be more like you.

Handling differences wisely also means looking for ways in which your partner's differences can enrich your life. And ideally, it means using those moments that are most challenging for you as opportunities to look inside and strengthen your own character. That's when you really strike relationship gold. This is how you turn fairy tale love into real love.

The first step to handling differences wisely is to acknowledge they exist. So, the next time you and your fiancé see things differently, resist the pull of fairy tale love mode. Bring your true self out into the light and take a step toward real love. Do your marriage a favor. Rock the boat!

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