the newlywed’s instruction manual
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ESSENTIAL INFORMATION, TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS, AND ADVICE FOR THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE

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Introduction

The notion of “happily ever after,” popularized by many pop-cultural sources but especially by Jane Austen novels and their movie adaptations, is a common one. It implies that the struggle is all in the courtship. Once people are wed, the cliché goes, they are destined for unsullied happiness and all their problems will disappear. In reality, newlywed life more resembles the writings of another nineteenth century scribe, Charles Dickens, who famously penned, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times . . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

To express the degree of difficulty in being a newlywed, it may help to compare it to a difficult undertaking that’s fresh in your mind: planning the wedding. That was a walk in the park compared to this. You’re conditioned to think otherwise based on the reams of material that exist on how to plan a wedding. In fact, the difficulty of planning a wedding is in inverse relation to the number of books that are written and reality shows that are produced around wedding planning how-to’s.

In fact, most experts agree that the first year of marriage is the hardest. Why, you ask? There are many reasons: You’re getting used to each other. You’re laying a foundation for the way your marriage is going to operate. You’re learning when to compromise, how to negotiate differences, how to handle your in-laws, and all of the other aspects that go into your new life as a pair. You are no longer operating solo. Most newlyweds joke about the moment that occurs soon after they return from the honeymoon when they see their partner’s dirty socks on the floor and reality hits them like a ton of bricks: “This is my life. These are my dirty socks on the floor. Forever.” It helps to be able to find the humor in that daunting notion, and it helps to have a manual.

The Newlywed’s Instruction Manual is meant to be a guide to the post-wedding period when the fairy dust has been swept away and what’s left are two saucer-eyed kids and a pile of presents to return. This guide will help with the myriad topics that come up the first year—including merging finances, deciding where to spend the holidays, decorating the house on a budget (and with two styles to accommodate), practicing healthy communication, maintaining the romance, and many more issues. This manual does not purport to suggest that you should have everything figured out by the time you’re no longer a newlywed, but it will help you make a dent in the meatier matters and give you the tools for navigating this time of extremes, this tale of two cities.
Troubleshooting Gifts

There’s a reason couples go through the bother of creating registries, though many guests still feel the need to do something more personal. This is fine if your guests know your taste, but if they don’t, some problems may arise. Then there are those guests who don’t give any gift. Here are some guidelines for dealing with these situations.

“Gone Missing”

This is what you call the gifts that are still missing in action six months after the wedding. You reason aloud to your friends and your hair stylist that you certainly didn’t have a wedding in order to get gifts. After all, what kind of coarse brute thinks of a gift as the price of admission to a blessed event celebrating the union of two souls? But to each other and to yourselves, you wonder about the chutzpah of people who don’t realize that a gift is the price of admission to a wedding and that they should’ve calculated the per-plate cost at the reception and gifted accordingly.

Who Hasn’t Given You a Gift and Why

- Who: The couple you socialize with infrequently
- Why: They kept meaning to, but they never got around to it and then they just forgot. They’ll remember when they see you next. It’ll be awkward.

The best way to deal with such situations is to let it go and be thankful for the wonderful gifts you did receive. A few extra presents are not really going to make that big of a difference in the grand scheme of things anyway.

The Rings

Your wedding bands and/or engagement ring are probably the most expensive jewelry either of you have ever owned. They also happen to symbolize an important union. It is, therefore, your large responsibility to keep them safe and sound. Like a car or a kid, rings require regular care and need to be checked every six months or so. This is especially true for engagement rings. Specifically, the setting needs to be eyeballed by a jeweler who’ll make sure the stone hasn’t come loose. This is a particular concern for those with large stones.

Insurance

You’re extra-careful with your ring and chances are nothing will ever happen to it, but it’s important to have insurance just in case. Most insurance companies will add a rider (or an extension) to your homeowner’s or renter’s policy to cover wedding bands and engagement rings. These policies cover the items in your home up to a certain dollar value, and the rider allows you to increase the value that’s covered. To secure a rider, you’ll need receipts and appraisals, which you can request from the jeweler.
For the Ladies: 
Cleaning Your Engagement Ring

The jeweler who sold you the engagement ring will mostly likely allow you to come back as often as you like to have the ring cleaned. Take advantage of this—there’s nothing like a bath to make your diamond sparkle like it did the day you got engaged. If frequent trips to the jeweler are inconvenient, you can clean the ring at home using one of these methods:

- Use a gentle dish detergent to clean lotion buildup. Scrub the top and bottom with a soft toothbrush and rinse several times in hot water. For diamonds, you can use a drop of an all-purpose cleaner (such as Formula-409) with a large quantity of water, but be sure to rinse several times to remove all the cleaner. If your ring contains an emerald, use only a gentle detergent; never chemicals (such as the aforementioned Formula-409).
- For extra shine, soak your diamond ring in a small bowl of ammonia diluted with three times as much water; use a soft toothbrush to gently brush the top and bottom of the mounting. Dip the ring into the solution again and rinse it in warm water several times to be sure to remove all the solution. Note: Don’t do this over an open drain! Set the ring on a soft towel to dry or gently pat it dry.

When to Wear the Ring (and When Not To)

Sometimes you’re concerned about mucking up your ring. Other times you may be concerned about it possibly slipping off and disappearing down a drain. As you get older, your fingers will grow in diameter, making it harder both to take off your ring and for your ring to slip off. Until
then, you may want to think about when to wear it and when to store it for safekeeping.

Take it off before you . . .

- **Handle raw meat.** This is the last thing you want stuck in the setting’s nooks and crannies.
- **Play sports.** Holding a racket (tennis, squash, racquetball) tightly is not good for a wedding band that has stones set all the way around, especially if you’re left-handed or have a two-handed backhand. As for wearing your ring(s) to the gym, lifting weights with it on can be hazardous. You wouldn’t want a 25-pound dumbbell making contact with a stone. (Then again, if your gym is full of single people looking to pick up their next date you may want to leave it on.) If you’re set on wearing your ring(s) and plan to lift weights, consider buying weightlifting gloves.
- **Garden.** It’s possible to chip the diamond in an engagement ring or knock the setting loose while doing heavy yardwork.
- **Clean.** Harsh chemical soaps or cleansers can soil a ring. It’s also a good idea to remove yours when washing dishes.
- **Apply lotion, sunscreen, or perfume.** These kinds of products can leave a film on gemstones.
- **Swim in the ocean or a pool.** You know how the ocean tends to shrink things? This is true of your fingers as well, and the last place you want to lose a wedding ring is in the deep blue ocean. You may never find it again (at least not without the help of a professional diver). A pool’s chemicals can discolor gold and silver if exposed regularly. Platinum and titanium, on the other hand, can withstand most chemicals.

Keep it on when you’re . . .

- **Out for a drink with your friends.** Wedding bands should never come off when you’re in a social situation and mingling with singles.

It can go either way if you’re . . .

- **Getting a massage.** You may want every inch of each finger available for massaging, and the therapist is likely to pull and knead less of your hand if you’re wearing rings. Also, the massage oil could loosen jewelry and increase the chance that the ring will fall off.

Safekeeping

Make sure you have a safe storage place. Always travel with a dedicated ring box. Note that diamonds should be kept separately from other jewelry; they are extremely hard and can scratch other gemstones as well as metals.

At home it’s a good idea to have ringholders stationed near the kitchen sink, on your bedroom dresser, and anywhere else you’re likely to remove your ring (a work table, the bathroom, etc.). Providing ease of storage means that you won’t hastily place rings on the edge of some perilous precipice. Ringholders come in many forms and range from inexpensive to posh. In some families, a fancy ringholder is a common engagement gift. Some of the holders look like small trinket dishes; others are delicate boxes. The most useful kind is shaped like small fingers pointing up.
Your Spouse

Getting Used to Saying “Husband” and “Wife”

Some newlyweds claim they feel “different” toward their spouse after the wedding. Others say they feel that neither they nor the relationship has changed much at all. This range of reactions probably has a lot to do with how long the couple was in a committed relationship prior to the wedding and whether or not they were living together. If a couple has lived together for many years, they may already feel married. However, one aspect of their relationship is guaranteed to change: their respective identities. Girlfriend and boyfriend evolve into “fiancés,” which transitions to “husband” and “wife.” For the first six months or so, you’re likely to stumble over these brand-new words just as every January you still think you’re in the year before. It is human nature to need time to grow accustomed to such a primary change. You’ll notice it for the first time during the honeymoon when hotel employees refer to your husband or wife. Like, “Would you and your husband like the table by the pool or by the dance floor?” The first few times, you’ll look around to see who the person is talking to before you realize that it’s you: You are the wife or the husband.

How Long Can You Call Yourselves “Newlyweds”?

There are several “official” answers floating around the universe, so feel free to choose the one that suits you best. Possible answers include:

- One month
- One year
- Two years
- As long as you feel like newlyweds

Note: In common parlance, to “feel like newlyweds” means that you laugh together constantly, particularly at each other’s jokes; stare at each other moony-eyed; and frequently act on your passionate feelings for the other. Don’t feel bad if this does not describe you and your partner. The notion that a couple can maintain this fevered pitch of newlyweddedness over years is largely mythical. It’s much more typical to have newlywed-like moments scattered throughout a more even-keeled lifecycle.

Marriage Myths

To launch a successful marriage, it is imperative to clear away a number of commonly held notions that are more mythical than factual. It’s not surprising that so many marriage-related myths pervade our society—most are propagated by the portrayal of marriages on television, in movies, in literature, and by the public personas that many people present to the world when they describe their marriages as 100 percent perfect.

The average person doesn’t have a huge number of real-marriage role models. This is unfortunate, because they are who show you how marriage truly works. At most, you may have your parents own marriages and maybe those of other close relatives. Without real-life models, you tend to put more stock in stereotypes.

Some common marriage myths debunked:

- **Myth:** Marriage is a cure-all for loneliness.
  - **Reality:** Unfortunately, it’s still possible to be lonely within a marriage.

- **Myth:** Being married carries instant grown-up status.
  - **Reality:** No one becomes a grown-up instantly. You have to earn it.
Myth: Marriage brings a guarantee of happiness ever after.
Reality: A marriage cannot be your primary source of happiness. You need to be happy with yourself to be happy in your marriage.

Myth: Being married makes you "complete."
Reality: Being married may add dimensions to your identity, but it does not complete you. It’s still up to you to complete yourself.

Myth: If you’re truly meant for each other, your marriage will be easy.
Reality: A good marriage comes from a willingness to work at the relationship, to compromise, and to constantly communicate. This requires plenty of effort.

Myth: Now that you’re married, you’ll be able to read each other’s minds.
Reality: A marriage license does not come with an ability to communicate telepathically. You still need to discuss—perhaps more than ever—your needs, hopes, dreams, desires, and gripes.