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### JOURNAL REPORTS

# Forget 'Gray Divorce': Here's How to Make Love Last

Sharing Interests and Being Mindful of Everyday Behaviors Top Researcher's List

By DIANE COLE

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Researchers, and headlines, have dubbed it “gray divorce”: the climbing divorce rate in recent decades among couples age 50 and older.

But what about marriages that work, even flourish, well into later life? How do couples keep the spark alive?

That is the focus of a new book by noted gerontologist Karl Pillemer, “30 Lessons for Loving: Advice From the Wisest Americans on Love, Relationships and Marriage.” Dr. Pillemer, a professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., surveyed more than 700 women and men age 65 and older. Among his key findings: A willingness to share new interests in midlife and beyond is critical.

“It’s striking how many couples talked about diverging interests as a focal point about whether they became closer or more distant,” he says.

We recently spoke with Dr. Pillemer about his research. Here are edited excerpts.

## Partner's Interests

WSJ: If you could give one piece of advice for keeping relationships alive through the years, what would it be?

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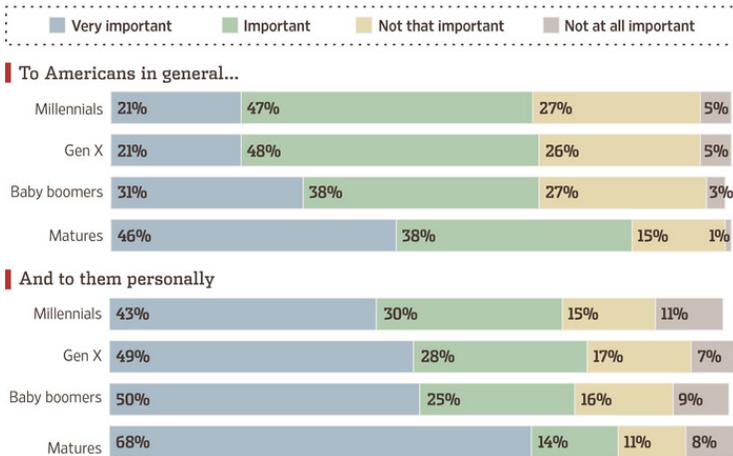
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DR. PILLEMER: The romantic spark is important, but over the long term there has to be something more, and that is friendship. A core aspect of that is the ability to embrace your partner's interests, even if you aren't initially particularly interested.

**Marriage in the U.S.**

When asked to gauge the importance of marriage to Americans in general and to them personally, the following percentages of surveyed adults in these age groups said:



Source: Harris Poll online survey in February 2014 of 2,266 adults age 18 and older. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Millennials, age 18-36; Gen X, 37-48; Baby boomers, 49-67; and Matures, 68-plus. The Wall Street Journal

WSJ: What are some examples?

DR. PILLEMER: A positive example is a woman in her mid-70s who, after years of being a resentful golf widow, took up the sport with her husband. He told her that had been his life dream for her to play with him.

In another case, a husband started going to the ballet and opera with

his wife, and she started to go to sports events with him. Rather than fighting about competing interests, figure out how you can share them in a meaningful way.

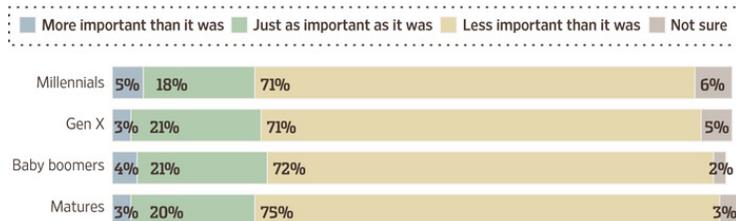
WSJ: Are there everyday behaviors that help for the long run?

DR. PILLEMER: Pay attention to and make a habit of small, positive everyday actions. Say it's a cold, rainy morning, and it's your partner's day to walk the dog. You offer to do it instead. Or you surprise your partner by cleaning out the garage to give him a break.

And don't forget to give compliments. A major regret I heard was not expressing enough positive feelings, and of too often taking the other for granted. Marriage is made up of thousands of micro-interactions. If you can keep creating positive feelings in those small ways, that will have a major impact.

### Is Marriage Losing Importance?

When asked if the idea of marriage is more important or less important today than it was to earlier generations, the following percentages of surveyed adults in these age groups said:



Source: Harris Poll online survey in February 2014 of 2,266 adults age 18 and older. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.  
Millennials, age 18-36; Gen X, 37-48; Baby boomers, 49-67; and Matures, 68-plus.  
The Wall Street Journal

## Myth About No Sex

WSJ: What about sex?  
Does that change?

DR. PILLEMER: The idea of the sexless older years is really a myth. The major reason that older people aren't sexually active is lack of a

partner. People who have partners and are in reasonable shape do continue to have sexual intimacy.

Also, over the years, there is a broadening of the concept of sexuality to involve a greater sense of other kinds of intimacy, such as the importance of touching and a more general sense of physical pleasure of being around one another. One woman told me that if you're attracted to someone you can feel that way until the end of your life.

WSJ: What impact do physical changes over the years have on intimacy?

DR. PILLEMER: I thought people would emphasize inner beauty and disregard physical appearance, but I was wrong about that. Over and over people said that if you really want to keep the spark alive you'll take care of your appearance.

That didn't mean conforming to an impossible standard, but making the most of what you've got.

Interestingly, male respondents were harder on other men and females on other females. One piece of really good news was that many people said that if you've grown old together, your partner seems the same as they always were.

### Generational Gap: Views on Marriage

When asked about their views on marriage and relationships, the following percentages of surveyed adults in these age groups said they strongly or somewhat agree that:

	Millennials	Gen Xers	Baby boomers	Matures
In households with a stay-at-home parent, it's not important whether it is the mother or the father	83%	85%	86%	76%
In a marriage, men and women are equal in every way	82%	78%	84%	86%
Children need to be brought up in a family where their parents are married	60%	66%	67%	86%
Couples should live together before getting married	68%	65%	52%	32%
Children should ideally be raised in a household with a stay-at-home parent	52%	53%	58%	70%
The term "marriage" should apply only when between a man and a woman	38%	48%	53%	68%
Marriage isn't necessary	54%	41%	34%	19%
To make a marriage work, one partner needs to be dominant	23%	16%	12%	14%

Source: Harris Poll online survey in February 2014 of 2,266 adults age 18 and older. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Millennials, age 18-36; Gen X, 37-48; Baby boomers, 49-67; and Matures, 68-plus. The Wall Street Journal

WSJ: A study published in 2012 in the Journals of Gerontology found that the rate of divorce among married people 50 and older jumped to 10.05 per 1,000 in 2010 from 4.87 in 1990. Should those statistics scare people?

DR. PILLEMER: I wouldn't want people to get discouraged. Many people still do make it to

the finish line of a lifelong marriage, and a lot of people find a relationship the second time around that is just as happy as, or happier than, the first. So I came away optimistic about marriage in the later years.

WSJ: When couples grow apart, should they seek professional counseling before deciding to separate?

DR. PILLEMER: The endorsement of marriage counseling was universal among those I interviewed. So many couples went through awful periods and almost broke up, but they held it together and were extraordinarily happy they did so. Others who did divorce wish they had tried harder.

Certainly, there are marriages that should absolutely end. But if you're having trouble and your partner says "we need counseling," you have to say yes.

Many found this was exactly what they needed to save the relationship. Others found that the breakup was far less acrimonious because of it, or felt less regret later because they had tried.

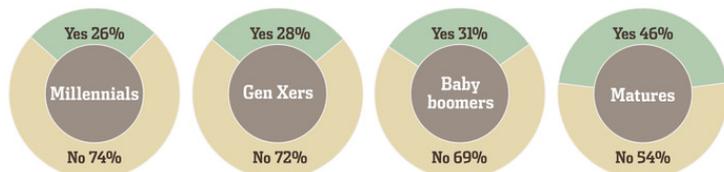
## Trying Again

WSJ: What would your interviewees say to those who are divorced or widowed and looking for love again at middle-age and beyond? What qualities and values should they look for?

DR. PILLEMER: If your friends are telling you that your prospective partner seems controlling or disparaging or moody, you should really listen. That is a protection against the feeling that you're getting older and "this is my last chance."

### The Sitcom Model of Marriage Fades

A majority in every age group says TV sitcom families of the 1950s and 1960s don't serve as good models for marriage in the 21st century, and the numbers are more pronounced among younger respondents. The percentage of surveyed adults in these age groups who said a father heading to work and providing for the family and a mother who stays at home and takes care of the children and has dinner ready every night is how families should look today.



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Many people also suggest making a list: writing down what you are looking for in a relationship. One woman I interviewed had gone through two disastrous marriages, and before entering another, she did just that and showed her list to the person she was

dating. The idea of making this explicit early on and writing down what you want and need came up a surprising number of times.

WSJ: Any closing advice?

DR. PILLEMER: Long-term marriage is a discipline. It's not always easy. But when it works, it can be incredibly good, kind of transcendently wonderful. Something worth striving for.

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