

The Secret to Our Happy Marriage? Bonding Rituals, Sexts, and Lots of Communication

It's all about having your priorities straight.

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By [Lizzy Francis](#) Jul 10 2019, 5:48 PM



By all accounts, Marty and Dana Lam have a very happy relationship. The couple, who lives in Phoenix, have been together for four-and-a-half years. They also run a business together and are very much in love. It's taken work, of course, to make sure it stays that way. Dana is divorced and has two teenage boys, aged 15 and 19, from her previous marriage; Marty has never been married and has no kids. Moving in together was a transition for everyone. For one, Marty had to adjust to living with a new family dynamic. For another, he and Dana needed to take measures to avoid the dreaded 'roommate phase' as well as the trappings of Dana's first marriage. How do they make it work? They say daily bonding rituals, casual walks, and a lot of sexts, help. So do weekly dates and good communication habits. Here, Marty and Dana talk about what makes their relationship work, the priorities they can't let slide, and the big lesson Dana learned from her first marriage that's helped them thrive.

Dana: We moved in together a little over two years ago. That meant that Marty, the kids, and I all under one roof. That shifted the dynamic in our relationship

Marty: We've been together for four and a half years. When we were getting to know each other, I met Dana's kids early on. But that dynamic shifts dramatically when you then move in together. Moving in — when you don't have your own place to go to — you have to face things head on. It's not like if something goes a little sideways that I can just

go back to my place. There's a whole different dynamic, living with someone 24/7. When you add children to the mix, that changes the dynamic with a couple even more so. Especially if you come from a blended family.

M: For me, having not had children previously, and being in love with Dana, it was then the added element of now having two teenagers. Even though I have two nephews and a niece, I never lived with them. The challenge was having this wonderful relationship with Dana and having her boys every other week, you know, that lived with us. I had to take on a different responsibility, right? Of parenting roles, and whatnot. That wasn't necessarily something that I came to the relationship with a great deal of experience with.

D: It was a little bit like walking on eggshells, trying to make sure that my kids felt comfortable and Marty did, too, and that we were all getting along. Luckily, the boys had a lot of respect for Marty and liked him a lot. They want me to be happy, which is great.

I think one of the most challenging things, since I had been married and lived with the kid's father, was that when he and I lived together we both took a role in the parenting. Because Marty wasn't the boys' dad, he felt a little, I don't know if it was uncomfortable, but he didn't want to step in. He always said that they were my kids.

So it took us a little bit of a transition, in the past year, where we were on the same page. I would say, "Harrison gives me trouble in the morning getting up." And sometimes the kids listen to a dad-figure more, anyway. Dads are gruffer — I'm the nurturing mom. I asked Marty if he would mind, some mornings, helping me to get Harrison up. He's really great. He'll take Harrison to school and plans family activities. But the disciplinary area was something we really had to work on. But now, are at a really great spot with that.

D: Marty and I had this great romance for the first two years, and we didn't live together. One of the first things I noticed was that after he moved in, I would go to the grocery store, I'd come home, he'd come into the kitchen and I would just say, "Hi!" and go do my own thing.

I had this epiphany one day: If we didn't live together, and I hadn't seen him, we would have really acknowledged each other and be present with each other and intentional. If I had gone to the grocery store and was bringing groceries to his house for dinner and walked in, we would have embraced, kissed passionately. I noticed we weren't doing that. I could see how relationships change from living together and having kids and all those daily things that we have. That we were unintentionally taking each other for granted.

So now, we decided that when we come home and we're leaving, we're really present with each other and say hello and goodbye as if we weren't living together.

M: In one of our workshops, we talk about bonding rituals, and what it is that you do to enhance a relationship. One of our favorite books is by Mark Nepo, a cancer survivor, called *The Book of Awakening*. It's 365 passages, done by day. In the morning, we'll read that before getting out of bed. It always seems to touch upon, in a serendipitous way, what's going on in our day and our present life. These bonding rituals are important for keeping us close because the bombardment of career and family and all of the different stresses of our daily lives, it's really easy to get stuck in that rut.

D: The other thing we do, in the summertime, we take walks early in the morning together. We chat and start our day. In the fall and winter we'll usually do it in the afternoon and end our day that way, just because it gets so hot here. We do that three to five days a week, depending on what we have going on. That's such a great time for us. It's a moving meditation. We're walking, we're with each other, we're not just talking about what we have to do and what's on the agenda and what's going on. We love to ask conversation starters like, "What is your favorite childhood memory?" After you've been with someone for a few years, you think, "Oh, we really know them well." But you share the same things over and over again. Asking each other new things to really get to know each other helps.

Dana: Having kids was really difficult on my ex's and I relationship. We put them first. I think that's why my marriage probably didn't last. When Marty and I started dating, he said, "I have this idea. I don't want to get bored. I want this relationship to last. Would you be willing to plan one surprise date a week?" I said, "how about once a month?" So I plan one surprise date for him a month, and he plans one surprise date for me a month.

We also go on typical dinner dates once a week. We have things that are not surprises. We go out to dinner. We love to have dinner parties at our house, so we'll usually have two other couples over — our table seats six. Marty makes an amazing sangria. We cook dinner together and we have Marty's famous sangria for dinner and it's great. We invite friends that don't know each other, so they can make friends.

We also love to travel. We travel quite a bit. We just went on a family vacation to Aspen last weekend, and for Marty's birthday, he and I went to Napa. If, financially, you can get away from the house, that's huge. It just revitalizes your soul and your relationship. If you can get away even overnight for a vacation, I think that's so beneficial.

D: In terms of prioritizing our physical relationship, we text each other. That's something we did more when we weren't living together — we'd send each other enticing or flirty texts or pictures. We both work out of our home so we see each other all the time, which means we have to ramp it up. When you miss someone and you don't see them, that brings mystery and desire. We have to be really intentional to text each other and not really schedule it. But we might say to each other, "Hey, let's go to bed early." Honestly, after you go out to eat and it's 10 or 11 at night, usually, you're too tired to have sex and it's probably not going to happen. What we've found is, because we work from home, we can have some afternoon delight.

A lot of times he'll say, "Want to meet me in the bedroom at 2 o'clock? We've done things like that." We are really conscious and aware of it. We both work on that.

D: I learned a lot from my first marriage. You get married, you have kids, you have these babies and you have this love like I've never felt a love so strong for another human being as the day I gave birth. It's so amazing. Like so many other parents, my ex-husband and I made the mistake of making everything being about the babies. I feel that I, and a lot of other parents, put so much into their kids and then they forget that it's because of their relationship together, that they've created these kids.

You should really nurture your relationship and be intentional because your kids are watching. It's not what's taught, it's what's caught. If they are watching us through our actions and what we're doing and if we can be an example to our kids that our relationship is first, that's good. My kids are going to grow up and move away. My job is to make them successful human beings in the world through teaching by example. My ex husband even said to me, "We'll have more time for us when the kids are out of the house."

They were 8 and 12 at the time. So, I thought, *I can't wait that long to live my life*. I really felt a little bit dead inside.

M: Having not been married before, and having come from a divorced home where my sister and I were five years apart — my parents didn't get divorced until my sister went away to college — I think that although the divorce rate hovers around 50 percent, there's probably at least another 20 or 30 percent of people who stayed together out of convenience or out of fear or whatever it might be —

D: Or for the kids.

M: Right, or who aren't truly in a passionate, fulfilled relationship. I think a lot of people walk around like *The Walking Dead*, where everything appears to be great on the outside and then you learn that someone is getting divorced and you're like "I can't believe it, I thought they had a great relationship."
