

PROJECT

*Happily Ever After*

# Relationship Rules

10 steps to falling back in love all over again



# Chapter 1

## Rule #1

### **Put Both Feet in the Door**

Stop thinking about divorce. Stop thinking about that affair. Stop thinking about your spouse getting run over by that car.

Just stop it already. Stop imagining the easy way out. Just stop.

Put both feet inside the door. Close the door behind you. Lock it.

You are in this for the long haul. Your marriage is worth it. Your kids are worth it.

Whenever you find yourself tempted to leave, revisit your Happily Ever After. Remember your commitment to yourself. Say “I do” all over again. Say it as often as it takes.



## Chapter 2

### Rule #2

#### Get Over It

Sure, you're mad at your spouse. Sure you have years of bad feelings between you. Sure you can list 100 different reasons why you hate your lover.

Get over it. Holding on to such grudges does just one thing—it prevents you from improving your marriage. I know this is easier said than done. So been there, okay? Here's what to do.

**Step 1:** **Commit to releasing the old grudges.**

**Step 2:** **Remind yourself that you're part of the problem.** Your spouse hasn't been perfect, but neither have you. Don't believe me? Most people don't, including me. That's right, I didn't believe I had anything to do with the downfall of my marriage, either. As far as I was concerned, it was all his fault. Then, I read a book that asked this question, "What did you do to contribute to the downfall of your marriage?" At first, I read that question and thought to myself, "Me? Um, it's all him, okay? All him." Then, I allowed myself to be honest about it. I'd used the silent treatment. I'd withheld sex. I didn't stand up for myself. I didn't tell him what I wanted.

When you see yourself as a person who deserves forgiveness, it's easier to see your spouse as the same type of person.

**Step 3:** **List all of those old grudges on a piece of paper.** Spend some time to really think about them all. Go back in time and relive every drop of anger and hurt. Then, when you and your spouse are both calm, go over your list. Now, this isn't your time to beat up on your spouse and prove to him that he's the rotten person you think he is. No, it's not about that. This is about getting it out of your system. So say something like this, "I'm having a hard time moving on from the past, and I really want to move on. I know you are better than I give you credit, but these old wounds still need to heal. Can we talk about these past incidents? I'd like to tell you why I felt hurt. I would really appreciate it if you told me that you were sorry. I know it may seem silly, but please bear with me. I'm really trying to forgive and I think this might just help."

**Step 4:** **Be patient.** It takes time to see your spouse for who he is today and not who he was yesterday, but it will eventually happen. It will happen faster if you make a mental note of all of the things he is doing right, so you can remind yourself just how far he's come.

## Chapter 3

### Rule #3

#### **Come Out With It**

Make this promise to yourself right now: “I will stop being passive aggressive. I will stop using the silent treatment. When my spouse asks me, “What’s wrong?” and something IS DEFINITELY WRONG, I will not answer, “Nothing.”

Are you slamming drawers, throwing laundry on the floor, or just generally fuming about something your spouse did or did not do? Whenever you catch yourself taking part in such behaviors, stop and do the following:

Think about what’s wrong. How do you feel? Angry? Taken advantage of? Overwhelmed? Label the feeling.

Why do you feel this way? What happened, and how did it lead to this emotion?

Is the emotion legitimate? Be honest with yourself. Are you just grumpy or did your spouse really do you wrong?

Get it out of your system—and not when your spouse is around. Go for a long run or walk. Call a friend and rant for a while. Write in your journal (or blog).

Once you are calm, address it. Tell your spouse how you felt (remember: taken advantage of, angry, sad, overwhelmed, guilty, etc) and why you felt that way. Talk about how to prevent this problem in the future. Would you appreciate a change in behavior? For instance, do you want your spouse to not talk to you in a certain tone of voice, not make fun of you in front of your friends, not ignore the kids?

Validate. Whenever your spouse follows through on your request, say two important words, “Thank you.” You can say those words in any way that makes sense to you, but say them. This will get him to do it again.

Follow up. Spouses learn in the same way kids learn—taking two steps forward, one step back. He will slip up from time to time. Expect it. That will help you to stay in control of your emotions when it happens. Then, just gently point it out, “Honey, you just did it again” or “Sweetheart, you are doing it again.”

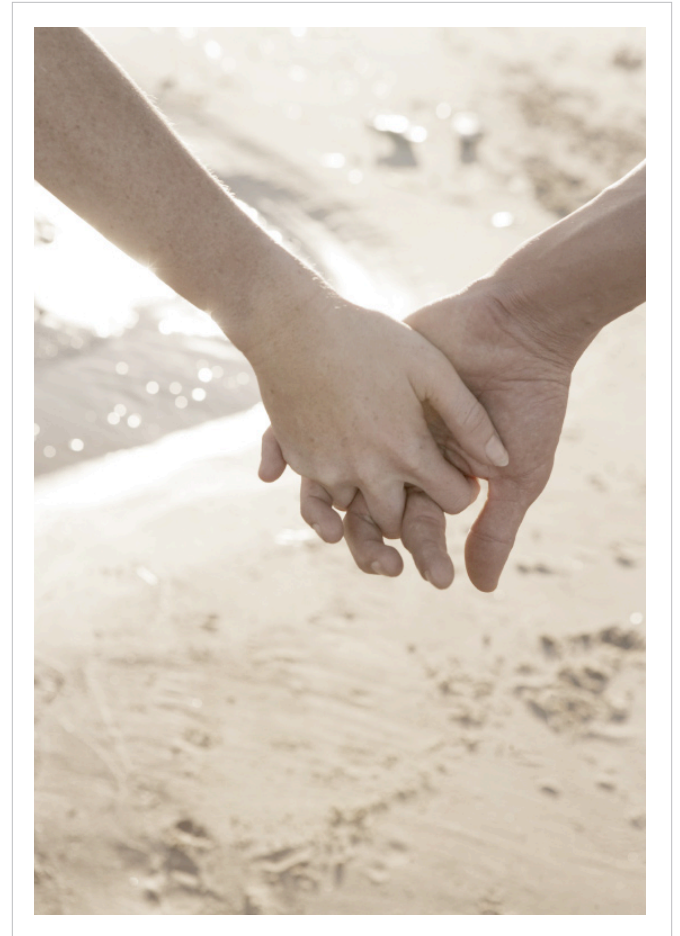
## Chapter 4

### Rule #4

#### **Touch - Frequently**

Did you know that married Puerto Ricans touch 180 times a day? The French do it 110 times daily. Married Americans? Just twice, and that's the happily married ones. Yet touching is so important. It's how we say, "I love you" without saying the words. It's how we grow closer, without having intense discussions about our feelings. It's how we bond. It's how we instill good will toward one another.

Try to touch early and often. Yes, you can hug, but you can also softly stroke your partner's shoulder blade, run your fingers over his forearm, or just pat him on the thigh. He might pinch your rear, stroke your cheek with the back of his fingers, or just wrap you up in a big bear hug. For more ideas, read the Young Adult novel *Twilight*. The main character and her vampire boyfriend never take off their clothes, yet it's one of the steamiest novels around because of how they touch.



## Chapter 5

### Rule #5

#### **Schedule Sex**

With kids, work, and lots of fatigue, sex may be the last thing on your mind. It shouldn't be. It's important for your relationship to keep your sex life going. Sex is:

Good for your health. It reduces stress, increases levels of pain-numbing endorphins, and even counts as a form of exercise.

Good for your relationship. The more often you have sex, the more often you say, "I love you" to your spouse and the closer the two of you will feel.

Sex is how you validate your partner, saying, "You are worthy. You are sexy. I want you." Sex is how you relax—and we all need more relaxation in our busy lives.

The problem, of course, is making it happen. Don't wait until the mood strikes. This sets you up for problems in two ways.

First, for some people, the mood never strikes. This is especially common in women with young children. We're so exhausted and busy that we don't give ourselves enough time to relax in order for the mood to surface.

Second, one partner is usually a bit more highly sexed than the other. If that partner is always in the role of initiating and the lower sexed partner is always in the role of turning down, a power struggle can easily emerge. The highly sexed partner feels unloved and the less highly sexed partner feels guilty.

But if you schedule it, then you break out of this role. Talk to your spouse about an ideal sex schedule. It might be as often as three times a week or as little as once a month. Create a schedule you are both comfortable with. Then, put it on the calendar. For example, my husband and I have a date every Friday afternoon.

Make this date sacred. Nothing interferes with it. And get down to business even if you are not in the mood. Just get into bed together and see what happens. Chances are, once you tune out the world and tune into your partner, the mood will strike. And, if it doesn't, explore the use of DVDs, magazines, erotica, sex toys, lubricants, lingerie and other options.

## Chapter 6

### Rule #6

#### **Continually Romance Each Other**

In the beginning, you romanced one another without thinking about it. You were trying to reel one another in, so you were on your best behavior. You listened with rapt attention. You paid one another compliments. You tried on his activities and friends. He tried on yours. You held hands. You snuggled. You slept in.

Then you got married. Worse, you had kids. You turned into household partners who shared a bed but little else.

Let me be honest here. If you are seeking that romantic feeling—the rush of first love—just forget about it. That warm giddy feeling you get in your chest when you first meet someone? It never ever lasts. When I’m talking about romance, I’m not talking about butterflies, blushing, or giddiness.

Rather, I’m talking about saying, “I love you” without saying the actual words.

We all need validation. We all need support. We all need to know that we are loved, accepted, and valued. Romance is doing what it takes to validate and support your partner. Romance is about letting him know he’s loved, accepted, and valued.

Now, if your marriage is where mine used to be, you might be thinking something along the lines of, “But he’s the problem. Why should I romance HIM? HE should me romancing ME!”

While that very well might be true, you’re the person who came to Project: Happily Ever After in search of a solution. You’re the person who is invested. You’re the person who wants change. Therefore, you need to take that first step.

So take it. Take it by continually stopping yourself from practicing the following Anti-Romance Tactics:

He does something around the house—say he empties the dishwasher—and announces it, clearly looking for an “Atta Boy!” You say, “Big deal, I’m not going to hold my breath to see if you ever do it again.” Um, not romantic. Not at all.

You’re at a party and your man is standing nearby. You make a snarky comment about him, perhaps about how he announces the fact that he empties the dishwasher. Again, so not romantic.

You withhold sex because he doesn’t romance you. How would you feel if he refused to take out the trash because you refused to have sex? See where this can lead?

You purposefully try to make his day more difficult. Perhaps you usually fold his laundry, or but decide he’s no longer worth it. It’s OKAY to have a discussion if you feel

## Chapter 6 (continued)

overwhelmed and need more help around the house. It's not okay to withhold help just to make a point.

You give him The Look. It's okay to have those little silly moments that you as a couple share—those can be wildly romantic—but it's not okay to constantly belittle your partner with loud sighing, eye rolls, and other Anti-Romantic body language. There's a fine line between teasing for fun and teasing for blood. If you are both laughing and smiling, great. If one of you is frowning, hurt, and licking a wound, not great.

So if that's Anti-Romance, what is Romance? The opposite, of course. It's building him up and making him feel good.

How do you do that? It will depend on your mate. Below are some ways my husband likes to be romanced:

Sex.

Sex.

Sex.

Hearing me tell him that I appreciate him a.k.a. "The Atta Boy."

Sex.

Back rub.

Sex.

Hearing me say something positive about him to someone else.

Sex.

It's very simple, really. He doesn't care about flowers. He doesn't care about surprise gifts or love notes. He just wants to know that I'm happy to have him in my life. He wants to know that I think he is the ultimate man. That's it. End of story.

Now, women are a bit more complicated and if your man is anything like mine, he will need some help in the romance department. Otherwise, your guy is going to continually romance you by asking you to take off your clothes.

Spend some time thinking about what you want. Think back to the early days of your relationship. What did he do then that he no longer does now? Think about your friends' husbands, particularly those who are naturally romantic. How do they romance their wives? Think about the romantic men in movies and books. What do they do?

Once you know what you want, write it down. This is your Romance Instruction Manual. Give it to your husband. Ask him to do more of everything on the list. Whenever he does something on your list, tell him, "Thank You." This positive reinforcement will encourage him to continually romance you in the future.

## Chapter 6 (continued)

To help you get started, here's the Romance Instruction Manual I wrote for my husband.

### **Romance Instruction Manual**

*Touch me, not because you want to have sex, but because you love me. Touch the back of my arm. Touch my neck. Hold my hand. Place your palm against my upper back.*

*Kiss me. Kiss my cheek. Kiss my forehead. Kiss the back of my neck. Walk up to me in front of other people and kiss me on the lips, and say, "That's just what I needed."*

*Court me. Show me amazing things. Remind me to see the sunset. Marvel at the stars with me. Sit and listen to the crickets with me.*

*Be with me. Walk with me. Ride the tandem with me. Watch James Bond with me.*

*Tell me that I'm beautiful. Tell me in the morning, when my hair is a mess. Tell me when I'm dressed up. Tell me when I come into the coffee shop. Tell me just because.*

*Say I love you. Say it when you leave for work in the morning. Say it when you come home. Say it as we are falling asleep at night.*

*Surprise me. Send me small gifts, even if it's not my birthday or Mother's Day. Pick flowers for me. Take me somewhere unusual. Send me a card for no reason. Hide a note in my purse. Send me a text message.*

*Help me. When I seem tired, harried or overwhelmed, do more. Ask to help and, when I don't suggest a way to help, help anyway. Entertain Kaarina. Empty the dishwasher. Straighten up the house. Sort the mail. Scoop the poop. Wash the dog. Make dinner.*

*Excite me. Encourage me to face my fears. Rekindle my sense of adventure. Help me to loosen up. Push me beyond my limits. Make me ride a roller coaster with you. Blindfold me and feed me.*

*Bring me on adventures. Take me to new places. Enjoy new cuisines with me. Explore the world with me.*

*Listen to me.*

*Look in my eyes.*

*Rub my back, neck, or shoulders without me asking.*

*Practice random acts of helpfulness. Let Rhodes out in the morning or put food in his bowl. Take dishes out of the sink, even if they are not yours, and put them in the washer. Put the clothes away.*

# Chapter 7

## Rule #7

### Explore Your Fantasies and Crushes

My dermatologist tells me that nearly half of her clientele are married women with a condition I'm going to call Lust Induced Acne. They are in bad marriages, and they find themselves lusting after men they are not married to. They feel stressed out about their marriage and the lust, and the stress is triggering them to break out.

She tells these women the same thing I'm telling you. Make a decision. Do you want to be married or do you want to be single? You can't have both at the same time. Assuming you want to stay married, put on blinders. Force yourself to stop thinking about other alternatives.

**There**

**Are**

**No**

**Alternatives**

**Other**

**Than**

**The**

**Man**

**You**

**Married.**



Got it? There really aren't. Sure, it's normal, from time to time, to notice someone. Heck, there's this young, hot bartender who works at the restaurant down the street from me. All of my married friends have a crush on the guy. Sure, from time to time, you will meet a Mr. Eye Candy, a Mr. Sweet Talker, or a Mr. Why Isn't My Husband More Like Him. You will. That's life. Your husband will never be your everything, which means that other men will occasionally display some desirable traits that your husband just doesn't have.

And there will be times when you are tempted to think that Mr. Eye Candy is really your Mr. Soul Mate. He's so not, okay? He's just not. I know you don't believe me, so I'm going to prove it to you.

Here goes. Why did you marry your husband? Think about it for a little while. (I'm praying you are not about to answer, "For his money," because, if you do that, you are going to ruin my argument.) You married him because you thought he was your soul mate, right?

## Chapter 7 (continued)

Now, of course, you might argue that you were mistaken about your husband, that Mr. Eye Candy is really your soul mate. I'm going to answer that argument with a question: Are you ready to leave your husband? If the answer is no, then Mr. Eye Candy is not your soul mate. He's just something you'd like to have, but don't really need.

Now, to get over Mr. Eye Candy, do the following:

Think about what Mr. Eye Candy has that your husband does not. Can you develop these traits in your husband?

Put yourself on a Mr. Eye Candy diet. Whenever he comes to mind, force yourself to think about your husband instead. Cut off all contact with him. No emails. No phone calls. No chance meetings.

Have sex with your husband more often. This will accomplish three goals. First it obliterate your sex drive, so you are less tempted to think about having sex with Mr. Eye Candy. Second, it will bring you closer to your husband. Third, it will make your husband feel like the luckiest man on the planet, which means he's bound to dote on you even more.

Soon, Mr. Eye Candy will be a distant memory.

# Chapter 8

## Rule #8

### **Fight Fair**

You will blow up at your spouse from time to time. Depending on your personality, your fighting style may differ. You might yell loudly, slam doors, or just brood quietly by yourself.

To get past the fighting and onto the loving, you always must remember:

Fighting is normal. We all get grumpy from time to time. Learn to see the signs of a fight that's brewing: one or both of you is sick, one or both of you is sleep deprived, one or both of you is hungry, one or both of you is stressed out.

Don't try to solve the problem while you are angry. You can't. It's impossible. Just stop trying.

But you do need to solve the problem eventually. So, when you find yourself in the middle of an angry face off, do the following:

1. Call a time out. Say, "I'm so mad at you right now I could cut your balls off." Or something like that. Be creative. The more creative you are about describing your anger, the more likely one or both of you might just laugh, and, if that happens, the anger will drop down one level. Once you state the obvious, say, "Let's take a time out until we both calm down."
2. Calm down. Do whatever it takes. Exercise. Break a few glasses in the sink. Breathe deeply. Do a shot or two. Really, whatever it takes.
3. Remind yourself that your objective is NOT to win. This isn't a chess match. It's your marriage. Your objective is to come to a common understanding. As you calm yourself down, try to stop formulating comebacks and zingers. Instead, try to see the situation from HIS perspective. Don't even bother opening your mouth until you think you can do this.
4. Talk, one at a time. Flip a coin to see who goes first. While one person is talking, the other is listening. If you find yourself formulating comebacks while your partner talks, YOU ARE NOT LISTENING. Take notes if needed. Repeat back to your partner what he just said. Knowing that you must do this will force you to listen.
5. Try to solve the problem. Again, it's not about winning, it's about solving a problem. First, mutually define the problem together. Then come up with lots of different solutions, listing the pros and cons.

## Chapter 8 (continued)

### **Use these pointers when defining and solving problems:**

Tackle only one problem at a time—the one that caused the fight. Don't dredge up everything that has ever ticked you off since you met the man.

Try to smile and keep an even tone of voice.

Get rid of the words “never” and “always,” as in, “You always do this to me” or “You never do what I ask.” Focus only on the one specific incident.

If you get heated up again, take another time out.

Don't give up and sweep everything under the rug. You'll just end up fighting about it at a later date.

When in the heat of the moment, NEVER:

Threaten to leave.

Threaten to hurt yourself.

And try not to sling insults at one another, but know that this—at times—just happens. After all is said and done, apologize for your bad behavior and move on.

## Chapter 9

### Rule #9

#### **Grow Up Together**

After being together for many years, it's easy for two people to grow in two different directions. You form divergent hobbies. Perhaps one person takes up exercise while the other lounges on the couch.

This is natural, but not inevitable, especially if you occasionally examine your relationship and try to create common interests.

For instance, you might talk about your dreams. What do you dream of doing that you are too scared to even try? Ask him the same question. Can you help each other reach those dreams? This will bring you closer.

Similarly, talk about the legacy you would like to leave. Perhaps you can support a common charity or do some sort of volunteer work together.

Finally, be willing to try new things. I didn't particularly care about beer until I met my husband. Now I enjoy attending beer dinners with him.

Keep in mind that there is a fine line between being open to new interests and evolving into a chameleon who has none of her own. I enjoy beer with my husband, but I won't be caught dead watching a Formula One race with him. Be open-minded, but be yourself, too.

# Chapter 10

## Rule #10

### **Be Patient**

It takes time—a lot of time—to build a stronger marriage. The process has many ups and downs. In fact, once you start communicating, you will probably fight MORE OFTEN than you have in the past. There may be a period of time when you blow up at one another every single day.

Try to be patient during this rough patch. It can be really disheartening. Whenever you feel discouraged, remind yourself of how far you've come. Are you having sex more often than you were before? Is he more romantic than he was before? Rationally list as many ways your marriage has improved as you can.

And just keep communicating. Keep trying. Keep asking for what you need.

Eventually, after about a year, you will arrive at the place where my husband and I am now. You will bicker very rarely. You will be able to discuss important topics calmly. You will continually romance one another. Most important, you will look at him everyday and think, "I'm so glad I stayed married to that man."

Alisa Bowman writes about the ups and downs of marriage--and life in general--at [www.projecthappilyeverafter.com](http://www.projecthappilyeverafter.com). She is the relationships editor for [www.capesssa.com](http://www.capesssa.com) and a featured blogger for [www.savorthesuccess.com](http://www.savorthesuccess.com). Her articles and essays frequently appear in national magazines such as *Better Homes & Gardens*, *American Baby*, and *Women's Health*. She lives happily ever after, most of the time, with her husband, daughter and dog in Emmaus, Pa.

**PROJECTHAPPILYEVEAFTER.COM**

©Alisa Bowman.

**Do not reprint without permission. All reprints must link to [www.projecthappilyeverafter.com](http://www.projecthappilyeverafter.com) and offer byline credit. Project Happily Ever After is a registered trademark.**

