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Lydia Sohn [Follow](#)
Apr 18 · 6 min read ★



A Photo of Us from Our Happy Day

Occasionally, I hear enviable descriptions of preternaturally easy, harmonious and conflict-free marriages. Part of me can't help but be a bit suspicious of such accounts, wondering if they are selective or curated images. As both a married woman and a minister who has the privilege of helping other marriages, my own experience has been that marriage is definitely and invariably not always easy, harmonious and conflict-free. How can it be when two separate people with

completely different personalities, preferences and family backgrounds come together to form a life where almost everything is negotiated, from what to eat for dinner to how they should spend their weekends.

I have come to believe that the strongest and happiest marriages are not the supposedly conflict-free ones. Rather, they're the ones that do have conflicts but can work through them well. Good marriages are created and nurtured, not automatic. Like raising anything that is alive from a plant to a child, we must tend to it constantly.

It's this tending and working through conflicts well that trip most people up. The tending and conflict resolution come in the form of spending quality time together, honest and empathetic communication, playfulness, independent inner growth, self-awareness and continually extending forgiveness—forgiveness for yourself and your partner.

But in addition to these basic practices of tending and conflict resolution, I have discovered two hacks to be incredibly helpful when I am at my limits. You know, those moments when I don't want to “fight fair” and my centered and self-actualized self is nowhere to be seen. These hacks have come in to save the day and been able to miraculously defuse my piercing anger and somehow infuse me with a spirit of generosity in the midst of an emotional maelstrom.

A caveat: these hacks are precisely that—hacks. They are not meant to replace the essential practices for vital marriages that I mentioned earlier. These hacks will also be limited in helping marriages where there is any kind of abuse or if either one of the individuals are doubting whether they even want to be in the relationship. By the way, if you're looking for some tools and methods to figure out if you even want to be in this marriage, I recommend you take my class on spiritual decision making [here](#).

That said, let us begin:

Marriage Hack Number One: Make a list of all of the moments in your relationship that confirmed for you that you wanted to be married to this person and how much you love this person. This list can include a wide range of things from that very first love letter your

spouse gave you to a special memory. A few of the items on my list are: 1) The way my husband and I first met each other, which seemed providential to the both of us, 2) A photo where our shadows are holding hands (completely unintentional on our part by the way. We discovered this much later after we went through the photos and saw it for the first time.) and 3) The way he held me as I sobbed during a season finale of “The Bachelorette” because I was convinced she chose the wrong guy. Even at the time, I was stunned he didn’t laugh at me instead.

These items on your list can be as silly or as meaningful as you want them to be. The only thing that matters is that they *matter to you*. They are reminders of why you love this person, why you chose this person and why you want to keep choosing this person.

Over the years, I have added items to this list in the notes app of my iPhone. Whenever I am angry or disappointed (sometimes to the point of doubting my love or commitment), I open up that note called “Signs that He is the One for You” and something magical happens. I feel my body release anger and love swell up within me. And I am able to return to him with more empathy and kindness. Being able to capture this spirit of generosity is what is crucial here; it makes all the difference from a conflict that ends badly to a conflict that strengthens the relationship. As an aside, I also read my list at random times and it can still give me butterflies for my husband even after all these years of being together.

Marriage Hack Number Two: Let go of your victim story.

We all have a story. It’s a story that keeps repeating itself whenever a similar situation occurs. He is late *again*. She is distracted and ignores you *again*. Each time your partner does or even shows a semblance of doing whatever it is that you’re hyper-sensitive to, your brain goes on auto-pilot and endorses that narrative you initially created about this person.

This narrative is dangerous because it is self-reinforcing and can create a vicious cycle in a couple ways. First, if you are constantly telling your spouse that they are this or that, then they might even start to act in ways that confirm your ideas of them because of the things you are saying. For example, if I consistently tell my husband

that I don't think he is affectionate enough, he might become afraid to show affection for fear of not living up to my standards or simply out of resentment at the criticism. Second, you *convince yourself* of your story more and more, which limits your ability to consider any other possibility for why your spouse did what they did. And the truth of the matter is, if you're ready to hear this, these self-created narratives usually don't even have anything to do with the spouse. It has to do with you and your own fears and insecurities that are magnified as you misinterpret your spouses' behaviors and actions. Oftentimes, you are the one who has issues and you subconsciously choose external evidence to prove what you are afraid of rather than looking inward and critically examining those fears and insecurities. Truth bomb. There it is.

A minor example: I come home one afternoon and my husband doesn't greet me in his usual manner. I immediately begin to bring out that ever-familiar narrative of how cold and distant he can often be; how he is not an emotionally attentive person and that he doesn't actually love me very much. I wonder what I have done in my life to deserve this relationship where I have the short end of the stick. I forget his side of the story: he was watching our toddler all day, who resisted his nap, didn't eat his food and generally drove my husband crazy. But I don't consider him and his perspective. My brain immediately begins recirculating the familiar narrative that's permanently stored there. As soon as I pause the story and think about my husband's day, I realize it's not that he doesn't love me. He's probably physically and emotionally exhausted.

Using this strategy doesn't mean you'll never get hurt. For as long as you are together, your spouse will, from time to time, hurt, disappoint and sometimes even enrage you. And it's important for you to let yourself feel those emotions and accept your pain about the situation. Just drop the story. Feel the feelings, drop the story. Dropping the story also gives you and your partner so much more space to deal with the actual issue at hand rather than going down a rabbit hole of your imagined narrative.

If you can't let go of the story completely, one easy trick is to say to your spouse, "The story I'm telling in my head is..." Just labeling your thoughts as a story you've created gives it less power over you and the relationship.

So there it is. Two hacks. 1) Make a running list and return to it whenever you're in a conflict and 2) Drop your story.

Peace, love and blessings to all of you on this wild and wonderful adventure of marriage.