

5 Sure Fire Tips for Thriving in Remarriage

By Mary Kelly Williams

“The second marriage is the triumph of hope over experience.”

When we're talking family values, people seem to automatically think of the families with the biological mother and father living in the family home, raising the children together. Those who divorce are often seen as lacking “family values”.

I've been working with stepfamilies and couples in remarriage for the past ten years and I can unequivocally state that it takes some real family values to have been married, go through the heartache and pain of divorce, fall in love again and take on the challenging task of combining children and households yet one more time.

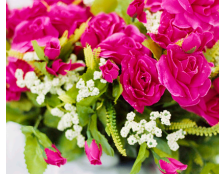
“Blending” families is not for the faint of heart. The statistics are daunting. Approximately 70% of second marriages end in divorce.

I teach a workshop on how to thrive in remarriage. During this February month of hearts, valentines and romance, many of you in second marriages may not be feeling the love. It is not uncommon for the marriage to get swallowed up by the larger systems in the family...children, ex-spouses, pets, etc. It is easy for couples to get to the point where they can't see the forest through the trees and before they hit their one year anniversary, they're in a rut, scratching their heads, and saying, either verbally or in their heads, “What the heck was I thinking?”

On the next pages are 5 surefire tips I teach couples to help them not fall into the trap of a marriage lost in the mess and chaos of these lumpy remarriage families...



Thriving in Remarriage



If necessary, reframe your divorce.

It may seem like an odd focus in a second marriage, but it's important to make sure you are not bringing any unfinished business into your remarriage. If you have felt that your first marriage was a failure, or you feel shame that you experienced divorce, the subsequent underlying guilt can be another negative energy in your current marriage. Bring compassion and forgiveness to yourself and former spouse so that the waters of the second marriage aren't tainted by the first.

Get rid of the "blended family" myth.

No other television program has had more influence on remarriage life than the Brady Bunch. What couples need to remember is that it was a TELEVISION PROGRAM. Often, couples want to use their second marriage to provide their children the security and "good" family life they may have been missing in the first marriage. Or couples want to redeem themselves by making sure the second marriage is a place where the children from each family can finally experience "one big happy family". Research tells us this expectation is an unrealistic one. It is a set up for all kinds of problems when the other family members don't buy into this concept. Remember that expectations are often times premeditated resentments. Allowing an organic and natural process for family members to decide for themselves what their family means to them and who is included in their concept of family is critical. Trying to impose the "blended family" on children especially is unrealistic and unhealthy. If it ends up happening, great, good. However, a large majority of combined families never experience this sense of one big happy family and letting go will give space for each family member to process the new people that have come into their lives.

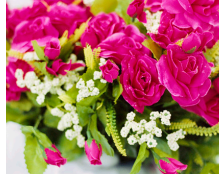
Don't get eaten up by the green-eyed monster of jealousy.

It is a common theme when I'm working with stepmothers that they see their husband's ex-wife as CRAZY. There are tendencies towards jealousy and possessiveness when it comes to the interactions with their husband's ex-wife. If his ex-wife is also the mother of his children, which is more than often the case, it is important for the sake of the children that there are good lines of communication between the parents of those children. Attempting to hinder reasonable and necessary communication will show up in the marital relationship and problems will follow. Secrecy, avoidance, or walking on eggshells will arise for the spouse who feels his/her interactions with the ex-spouse are being monitored or judged and problems are sure to follow. Obviously, honesty is pivotal to a trusting and successful relationship. Learning to swallow one's own pride or facing one's insecurities will be helpful in acknowledging and accepting that your spouse has been married before and because of the children involved, it is in everyone's best interest that there be an open and healthy relationship.

Stepmothers, have your eyes wide open and know that you are the Wicked Witch of the West.

Be wise and aware that when you say, "I do", you might as well wear a sign that on your back that says, "Kick Me", or place a bull's eye target sign on the front of your shirt. Research strongly supports (check out Wednesday Martin's excellent resource "Stepmonster" for the statistical facts) that stepmothers are the scapegoat for many of the problems arising in the family. It is advantageous to not assume because you have the cultural title of "stepmother" that you will be seen in any way as a stepparent. I've always advocated taking the "mother" out of "stepmother" and "parent" out of "stepparenting." The majority of children involved in combined families do not buy this notion or want another parent in their lives, even if one of their parents is deceased. Know where your boundaries are and know where you have a voice. Couples need to come up with house rules together and present them as a united front. But when it comes to actual parenting, it is often best to be an ally for your husband rather than to try to parent yourself. Give feedback to your spouse sensitively. I've yet to meet a parent in remarriage who isn't hypersensitive to any feedback from their spouse about their children. Treading lightly is always a good approach.

Thriving in Remarriage



Find intimacy in the midst of a crowd.

It is vital that the marriage be given priority over the children. One of the first questions I ask couples when they come in for remarriage counseling is, “Do you have an established date night?” I know it sounds like a corny and predictable question, but I cannot emphasize enough the importance of making one night a week a sacred night for you as the couple. Not only is it vital for your marriage, it’s a great role model to show to all the children involved.

John Gottman, noted marital researcher, has found the four most common predictors of divorce. He refers to them as “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”. They are:

Criticism
Contempt
Defensiveness
Stonewalling

It would be well worth your time to examine your own heart, actions, and behaviors to make sure that none of these characteristics have taken residence in your marriage. Any one of these four factors, over time, will erode at the good and loving aspects of your relationship.

Gottman also notes that for every zinger thrown a spouse’s way, five positive affirmations are needed to replace that one zinger. Be mindful of the words coming out of your mouth. Ask yourself if they are words that are tearing down or building up. Touch is important as well. Remember that you did not marry your current spouse because you wanted to raise his children. Remember you married him because you fell in love with him and want to share a life with him, *despite the complications and challenges inherent in remarriage*.

Remarriage is for the brave and courageous. A successful remarriage is more than doable, as long as each partner is willing to take a look at what they contribute to any unhealthy dynamic in the relationship.

Graciousness and forgiveness need to be constant companions in any marriage relationship, and for subsequent marriages, they are even more critical.

Lastly, always keep a sense of humor. Lighten up, take a chill pill, relaaaaaax and don’t take yourself so damn seriously. It takes years for everyone to get settled in. The astute Erma Bombeck said, “If you can’t fix it, laugh at it”. Truer words were never spoken.



Mary Kelly Williams, M.A. is a therapist, mother of four, and ally to her husband's daughter. Mary practices in Boulder, Colorado and regularly conducts workshops for couples and women with stepchildren. As well as in-person counseling, Mary offers telephone stepparent coaching. For more information, visit her website: www.marriedwithbaggage.com