

When the Honeymoon Phase is Over

Remember your first crush? Chances are, you can still summon the feelings of those early flirtations with vivid clarity: the swarm of butterflies in your stomach, the giddy excitement, the hot flush in your cheeks. Commonly dubbed “the honeymoon phase,” it’s a truly exhilarating time, one that repeats itself in the early part of every subsequent relationship. The only drawback of such a hot-burning flame? For most of us, it’s destined to fizzle out sooner or later.

Whether it happens after six months or sixteen years, I hear the same common complaints among the couples who come in for relationship coaching:

“The thrill is gone.”

“There’s just no spark anymore.”

“We’re stuck in a rut.”

One of the first things I urge these couples to do is to think back to those first early weeks of the relationship and try to recall how they felt about their new partner.

The answers are always startlingly similar:

“He was so wonderful!”

“She was everything I could ask for in a girlfriend!”

“He had all the qualities I wanted in a man!”

“She was what I’d always dreamed of!”

It quickly became clear that these relationships were based on unrealistic expectations. From day one, the spouses had put their partners on sky-high pedestals, expecting them to live up to those lofty ideals year in and year out. The problem with pedestals is that they don’t stand up too well to strong winds—and every marriage is destined to experience its share of gale-force storms. When your partner comes tumbling down, it can be a real shock to the fairy-tale scenario you’ve conjured up.

When that early excitement gives way to the everyday stresses of work, bills, kids, and chores, the letdown can be hard to bear. Too often, spouses assume the disappointment is a signal that something’s inherently flawed with the relationship and decide they’d be happier with someone else—only to repeat the entire cycle all over again. In fact, studies have shown that second marriages have much higher divorce rates than first marriages, which implies that divorced couples are carrying their idealistic expectations into their next unions, only to be disillusioned again.

The key to overcoming the end of the honeymoon phase is to reinvent your relationship with a new—and more realistic—set of expectations. Instead of placing your happiness into the hands of one person, focus on your own fulfillment first. If you're satisfied with your own position in life, you'll be more likely to see your spouse as an equal partner, not as a springboard to a storybook ending.

Couples who enlist the services of an effective Life Empowerment coach have one thing in common: they have a sincere desire to make their relationships work. First and foremost, I help my clients get to know themselves, which is the first step toward understanding their motivations, likes, and dislikes. Armed with this knowledge, they'll be better equipped to communicate their desires and emotions to their spouses.

For any marriage, long-term satisfaction is all about continually redefining expectations with the goal of exceeding them. So go ahead and give yourself—and your spouse—permission to climb down from that pedestal and settle into a comfortable chair. Together, you'll weather even the most blustery of times.