

9 Tricky Marriage Transitions—Mastered

Learn how to strengthen your bond while facing job loss, empty nest syndrome and more

By [Denise Schipani](#) Posted November 14, 2011 from [WomansDay.com](#)

For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health—your marriage vows hinted that you’d face hurdles along the way, but successfully navigating them as a couple can be harder than it seems. Whether it’s because one of you becomes the caretaker of an aging parent, or because you have to uproot your family and move cross-country, major life transitions can put a strain on any relationship. But whatever stressor or life upheaval you’re going through, “It matters less what the problem actually is, and more how you deal with it,” says Samantha Litzinger, PhD, clinical program director of the [Supporting Healthy Relationships program at Montefiore Medical Center](#) in the Bronx, New York. With this in mind, we spoke with experts to discover ways to navigate nine common life transitions together—and come out as a stronger couple on the other side.

1. You have your first child.

Anyone with kids can tell you that having a baby changes everything. But couples continue to be blindsided by the transition. “A new baby shifts the dynamic of the family,” says Dr. Litzinger. “While you once focused solely on each other, now it’s all about the baby.” To avoid losing sight of your one-on-one relationship, don’t wait until you feel like you *have* time to focus on each other, she says, because that time will never come on its own. Instead, you have to *create* time. You don’t need to schedule weekend jaunts or even weekly dates if you’re too tired or cash-strapped. “Even spending 10 minutes together after dinner or when the [baby] is asleep can help you connect,” Dr. Litzinger says. Even if you barely speak and just cuddle on the couch for that 10 minutes, you’ll get in the habit of connecting and will avoid losing sight of your relationship. *Photo: Thinkstock*



2. One of you loses your job.

The shock of losing a job can be immediate and disrupting. “Your equilibrium is punctured,” says James Cordova, PhD, of the Center for Couples and Family Research at Clark University, and author of [The Marriage Checkup](#). “Your predictability and stability is now missing.” The unemployed spouse may feel a blow to his ego and worry about his ability to support the family. Meanwhile, says Dr. Cordova, “the other spouse, while trying to be supportive, may have a hard time expressing feelings of fear and worry.” The result can be both partners hiding their true feelings and withdrawing from each other. Here, Dr. Cordova stresses the importance of keeping the lines of communication open. “Couples who fare best are those who emphasize the ‘we-ness’ of their relationship.” But, he adds, try to avoid giving job-search advice unless the unemployed partner is asking for it—emotional support is much more helpful than practical advice, which can come across as badgering. When you talk about your changed circumstances, Dr. Litzinger recommends discussing expectations and working out a new household budget together. Sharing your thoughts as well as addressing the reality of the situation is what will get you through. *Photo: Shutterstock*



3. You become a caretaker for an elderly parent.

If you’re squeezed in a generational sandwich, with kids still at home and parents getting older (and possibly sicker), you may

find yourself in the role of caretaker. “The problem that can arise is that with so much on your plate, it’s too easy to put your partner last in terms of attention,” says Dr. Litzinger. If you’re the main caretaker for a parent—whether that means shuttling your folks to medical appointments, taking over their finances or even finding room in your home for them—be sure you also take care of yourself, too. The best way to be attentive to your spouse is to make yourself a priority. “If you put your spouse on a list of things and people to take care of, you’ll only end up resenting him or her, too,” says Dr. Litzinger. If you are depleted, you can’t pay attention to anyone—but if you’re practicing self-care, you’re less likely to feel resentful. Once you’ve spent some time caring for yourself, sit down with your partner and discuss how you both feel about your changed circumstances. *Photo: Thinkstock*



4. You lose a parent.

When there’s a death in the family, be sure to give your spouse time and freedom to grieve. “Often, not enough attention is given to the grieving process,” notes Dr. Litzinger. Even if your husband is back at work and dealing with regular life, know that he may still need some TLC. “Ask him what he needs,” suggests Dr. Cordova, “which will depend on how he’s dealing with the loss.” For some, extra help around the house is useful; others may welcome distraction, while some people want opportunities to talk about the parent they lost. Giving your spouse expectation-free support is the key to working through a tough time like this together, says Dr. Cordova. *Photo: Thinkstock*



5. One of you gets sick.

When one spouse becomes seriously ill, both suffer, says Dr. Cordova. The healthy partner is obviously worried about the other, and is likely dealing with practical issues such as insurance and medical bills. But there’s also the fact that he or she is missing out on the intimacy and support they once got from their spouse. “If that person falls too far into the caretaker role, the dynamic between the couple shifts, which can be dangerous,” says Dr. Cordova. If you’re in the caretaker role, don’t hide your feelings. “If one of you is suffering, the other likely is, too,” he says. You’ll probably find that even though your spouse is sick, he or she is worried about you and your relationship as well; being mutually supportive will help you pull through. *Photo: Thinkstock*



6. One of you seeks a big life change.

When one of you decides to shift careers or go back to school, it can disrupt the balance of your life together. You think that you’ve figured out your life-long plans, but suddenly they’re upended, and worries begin to trickle in about what these changes mean for your finances, future plans and children. If you’re the one who wants to make a change, it’s important to

talk about your proposed plans in advance; it's never a good idea to spring a big decision on your partner. And if you're on the other side of the conversation, it can be all too easy to feel resentment. Avoid conflict by using the speaker-listener technique, suggests Dr. Litzinger. "It's important that you each express what you're feeling, thinking and planning; actually listen to what your partner is saying," she says. You'll need to negotiate a lot of changes, which you can't do without understanding each other's point of view first. Instead of leaping to conclusions—"This will never work"; "We can't afford it"; "It's selfish and unfair"—listen to what your partner's plans actually are, and work together on the logistics. For example, you can make lists of pros and cons and creatively re-organize your budget jointly, so both partners feel like they're embarking on the journey together. *Photo: iStock*



7. Your living situation changes.

Whether you're moving into your first home together or transitioning your whole family to another city, state or country, relocating is a major stressor. On top of financial worries and packing, you also have the potential loss of your old community to deal with, says Dr. Litzinger. In order to get through these major changes, she stresses the importance of talking about your feelings and approaching everything as a team. Humor can be particularly useful. "Instead of using your spouse as a dumping ground for all your shared stress, try to laugh at it together," she says. While you're in the process of moving, stay on the same page with each other regarding your budget. And once you have moved, seek out new connections as soon as you can, to avoid relying solely on each other for support and companionship, which can lead to resentments—especially if one of you moved because of the other's job, for example, says Dr. Litzinger. *Photo: Thinkstock*



8. One of you has an affair.

"Infidelity represents a breach of trust," says Dr. Cordova. "You enter into a relationship having given each other the gift of your trust, so when an affair is discovered it's usually the lying and deceit that is most damaging to the relationship." If you choose to stay together, know that the road to recovery will be long, and that you can't expect a quick repair. "Trust is very hard to rebuild; it can take years to get to the point where it feels easy," cautions Dr. Cordova. Enlist social support from family and friends who are sympathetic to both sides. Counseling is also important. "Good therapy can make a significant difference; the earlier you go, the better chance you have of working through early feelings of anger," he adds. A marriage therapist can help you sort through the issues that may have led to the affair, and move you slowly in the direction of forgiveness. *Photo: iStock*



9. Your children move out of the house.

Just as having children changes the dynamic of your marriage, when those kids finally leave home, your relationship will continue to evolve. "Unless you've been nurturing your marriage all along, you may find you need to get to know each other all over again," says Dr. Litzinger. Don't assume you know your spouse as well as you did on your wedding day; people

change, and what you enjoy individually and as a couple may be different now. “Talk to each other about what you like to do, and what you want to find time for separately, as well as together,” says Dr. Litzinger. Then make plans together, preferably a mix of couple-focused activities and separate pursuits that feed your individual interests. “When you make time to find out what you like—together and apart—you may find you reconnect and rediscover why you got together in the first place,” she says. *Photo: Shutterstock*

