

# Middle-Age Couples: Your Marriage Doesn't Have to Be Stuck in Survival Mode

How the stresses and strains of aging can strengthen the bonds of love.

ASHLEY HALES

During the coronavirus pandemic, my husband and I celebrated the 23rd anniversary of our first date, our 18th wedding anniversary, and our 40th birthdays. We're plenty familiar to one another, not to mention the disruptions wrought by moves, career changes, and children.

But as we begin midlife and navigate marriage in this moment of time, we realize it's easy to simply survive instead of thrive. Marriage in the middle of a pandemic feels a bit like steering around shipwrecks. Recently, we heard that another couple we knew was filing for divorce. While we've all seen high-profile couples announce their split on social media, it's the marriages closer to home that remind us we're not immune to the pressures that force their way between two people.

Amid months of unprecedented circumstances, as husbands and wives negotiate working from home and schooling their children, marriages are withstanding even greater pressures than before. When there is too much pressure on something delicate—like a wine glass—it shatters. Yet with harder, denser objects—think of exercises that break down muscles to help them grow back stronger—added pressure can have the opposite effect.

In a pandemic—and in midlife generally—marriages seem to go one of two ways: The added pressures cause the marriage to crack, or they can make it stronger. When I asked my friends on social media to describe the state of their marriages in one word, the most common responses were “improved,” “refined,” “closer,” and “tested.” Just about everyone I polled sensed an urgent need to band together, lest the stresses and uncertainties of 2020 overwhelm them.

How might our marriages become more resilient in the face of enormous pressures? And how, in particular, do we navigate marriage in the middle of life, when the romance may have faded? Writer Dorothy Littell Greco tackles questions like these in *Marriage in the Middle: Embracing Midlife Surprises, Challenges, and Joys*. In her book, Greco draws wisdom from her own marriage, shares insights from vulnerable, practical interviews with couples, and offers thoughtful theological reflections about how marriage in midlife can be more opportunity than crisis—a message we need more than ever in the midst of an actual global crisis. She writes candidly of changing hormones, midlife sex, being sandwiched between caring for children and caring for aging parents, and navigating trauma, infidelity, and loss.

*Marriage in the Middle* highlights three themes at the heart of building resilient marriages during pressure-packed times: embracing our limits, remembering the importance of community, and keeping the ultimate goal in view.

## Vehicles of Grace

Greco helpfully reminds us that the “universal lesson of midlife is that we are limited people.” While being human at any age involves acknowledging that we are finite rather than infinite, contingent rather than independent, midlife underscores our limitations. We wake up with back pain, aware that our bodies aren't what they used to be. We lose out on a promotion to someone younger. We realize we cannot control our adult children or the trajectory of our lives. And we find ourselves looking backwards, more concerned with questions of regret or legacy than thoughts of what lies ahead. Limits of time and declines in mental and

physical ability seem to shout that we're past our prime, and so we might as well make our peace with the new, diminished reality—or perhaps splurge on a sports car in one last bid to stop youth from slipping away.

We can certainly mourn the limitations common to middle age. We can acknowledge, for instance, that we can't keep the house running while working from home and schooling children. We may find ourselves exhausted, burnt out, and burdened with anxiety about retirement or other aspects of the future. We may find ourselves less interested in sex. But these limitations need not be crises. On the contrary, as Greco suggests, we can welcome them as potential vehicles of grace.

In middle age, there is an inevitable disconnect between what we long for—peace, stability, connection, a meaningful legacy—and what we're actually able to achieve. When we acknowledge this disconnect, we create opportunities for our spouses to show grace. As Greco helpfully reminds us, carefully stewarding our longings (sexual or otherwise) is essential for fidelity.

Our limitations invite us to empathize with our spouses and to create boundaries ensuring, in Greco's words, that "we can be available to do what God is asking of us." In other words, acknowledging our limitations leaves us free to be ourselves, to love sacrificially, and to ask for help when we need it. We trade off doing the cooking, we bring each other coffee, we watch the show the other prefers, and we dream again about what God is up to instead of feeling boxed in by the decades. In all these ways, we're drawn into deeper union with God and our spouses.

### **Communal Building Blocks**

Marriage and community go hand in hand. Just as healthy marriages are essential to sustaining strong communities, strong communities are essential to sustaining healthy marriages. As sociologist Mark Regnerus observed in a recent CT [cover story](#), "we've lost sight of the fact that marriage is in many ways a corporeal (and spiritual) act of mercy not just to our own spouse and children but to the world beyond our household." For marriages to flourish amid the trials of midlife, community is indispensable. Over the course of her interviews with various couples, Greco highlights how the [soulmate version of marriage](#)—where two lovers ride off alone into the sunset—is not a helpful model. Christian marriages are covenants that require community to flourish while also forming the basis for wider communal flourishing. As Greco explains, "There's only so much healing you can do on your own."

While many marriages are enduring an enormous amount of pressure right now, perhaps they would encourage more grace and healing if we thought of them as building blocks of community. If, as Greco argues, the purpose of marriage is more than attraction, pleasure, or self-actualization, then we should welcome the presence of others who can offer accountability, suffer alongside us, and enrich our lives in various ways.

Married couples can strengthen bonds of community by inviting friends to speak into their own marriages, mentoring younger couples, or opening their homes to give singles and vulnerable people a safe place to land. The more we treat our marriages as vital building blocks of flourishing communities rather than vehicles of self-fulfillment, the more resilient they're likely to prove over the long haul.

### **More Than Maintenance**

Bookending Greco's discussion of the unique opportunities for marriage in the middle years is a discussion of marriage's *telos*—its direction and ultimate goal. She emphasizes how *telos* refers more to a "guiding purpose" than a particular destination: The *how* matters as much as the *what*. Within a marriage, this involves a couple imagining together where they are headed in light of the grand arc of the gospel story. For me, having a *telos* in view means that I can let go of my ideals about keeping a perfect garden or maintaining a spotless home,

because I know my husband and I see more value in having people over for meaningful conversation about ideas and the life of faith.

A marital *telos* can be as unique as each partner, and the journey toward each couple's guiding purpose is its own dance. Greco offers some practical starting questions like "Where are the two of us at our best?" and "Where do we have the most conflict or stress?" These help couples identify and confront the challenges of midlife head-on, all while persevering in seeing the marriage partnership as more than maintenance. As my husband and I enter our middle years, we're aware that our dreams may be a bit less shiny than they were decades ago. But we're confident that this season holds out forms of rootedness and acceptance that allow for real growth. *Marriage in the Middle* affirms that the best is yet to come—not by stubbornly clinging to a wide-eyed, youthful naivete about one's spouse, but by choosing to open oneself to the transforming work of grace. And especially in this moment of global crisis, we need guides to help our marriages flourish. Greco is an excellent one to trust.

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