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Apr 02, 2014 7:00 AM by Vicki Santillano

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WHEN DOES A MARRIAGE BECOME "WORK?"

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Remember at the 2013 Oscars, when [Ben Affleck](#) shared a little unexpected insight into his marriage with [Jennifer Garner](#)?

"I want to thank you for working on our marriage for 10 Christmases. It's good. It is work, but it's the best kind of work, and there's no one I'd rather work with."

This quote generated more buzz than Jennifer Lawrence's earlier spill on the stairs — but the concept of marriage being "work" is hardly controversial or new. In fact, it comes up again and again, but for those of us who aren't married, it doesn't get less confusing.

When Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin announced their "[conscious uncoupling](#)" last week, married [Jezebel commenters](#) wrote about the importance of putting work into marriage every single day. Carson Daly discussed it on his radio show. Almost everywhere I turned last week, someone reiterated the marriage-work relationship. But no one answered the biggest question I had about it: When does a marriage become "work?"



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After deciding that texting my married friends the question, "Hey does ur marriage need work?" would be a tad intrusive, I pitched the question to several relationship experts around the country. Here's what they shared with me on the marriage-work conundrum.

Well, first of all, don't call it work:

"Sustained effort and attentiveness to your partner are important if a relationship is to thrive, but effort and work are not synonymous. Relationships are not jobs and should not be drudgery, so we encourage people to change their language." – [Patricia Johnson and Mark Michaels](#), co-authors of *Partners in Passion*, *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality*.

"Perhaps a better way to phrase it so it's not a four-letter word is that marriage takes attention. But so does anything that's going to succeed or thrive. **Just like a plant needs sun and water, so does a relationship need to be nourished.**" – [Dr. Karen Sherman](#), Psychologist and author of *Mindfulness and the Art of Choice: Transform Your Life*

Besides, lots of great things in life require work:

"People 'work' in other aspects of life... Why should love be any different? **Marriages require conscious efforts on the part of both spouses to stay emotionally, mentally and physically connected.** It won't 'just happen' on its own, especially given how busy people are nowadays. Spouses have to be deliberate in carving out time for each other to continue the connection, to show their spouse that they continue to be special." – [Anita A. Chlipala](#), licensed marriage and family therapist



Some people misunderstand what a marriage really is:

"The reason that marriage takes work is because most people don't understand the dynamics of marriage, and they expect only good times. **The reality is that marriage is a series of ups and downs and the cycle is often unpredictable, at least for a while...** If people take a broader view of marriage and expect these issues to occur (hence the traditional marriage vows that include the phrase, '**for better or for worse**') then the energy and behavioral changes required to overcome obstacles in marriage will feel less like work and more like part of a normal marriage." – [April Masini](#) of the critically acclaimed "Ask April" advice column

And *all* people change over time:

"Marriage requires listening and learning how your spouse is feeling, doing, changing. **When we marry someone at 25, or 45, we imagine that we KNOW this person and their quirks. Over time, however, our spouses change and grow. And we change and grow.** The challenge and work of marriage is to track these changes so that the differences between us do not become insurmountable. The other 'work' is to constantly experience curiosity about our partners, even if the changes that they are experiencing do not 'suit' us." – [Lauren Napolitano](#), PsyD, licensed psychologist in private practice and on staff at Philadelphia's Bryn Mawr Hospital

Loving someone is only part of the equation:

"The idea that marriage requires work means it's not automatic. **Just because you love someone doesn't mean your life will fall in place automatically.** Taking your relationship seriously, nurturing it and making room in your life for couple time are all necessary. You and your partner need to form a partnership, a team, which is capable of planning, solving problems, and carrying out plans." – [Tina B. Tessina](#), PhD (AKA "Dr. Romance"), psychotherapist and author of *Money Sex and Kids: Stop Fighting About the Three Things That Can Ruin Your Marriage*

"Anyone who's been married five minutes knows what it is to have second thoughts at times.

That's just human nature. But **what you have to do and what is essential is to find humor in each of your differences.**" – [Tomi Tuel](#), author of *101 Things I Learned AFTER My Divorce*

So with all of this work... is marriage still worth it?

"Marriage 'takes work' because it's hard to not be self-centered! You're still having to worry about self-care for yourself, but now you're also having to worry about what's best for your spouse, in addition to what's best for the marriage..."

"Does marriage take work? Yes. Is it worth it to be on the same team as your best friend, even if the puppy love fades? Hell yes." – [Genevieve West](#), relationship and dating consultant, author, and blogger

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