

Gay Hendricks on Nurturing Love in Midlife

Why Growing Up Can Mean Loving Better

by S. Alison Chabonais



Gay Hendricks and his wife, Kathlyn

Gay Hendricks and his wife, Kathlyn, have discovered through working on their own relationship and counseling hundreds of other couples that the time from midlife onward offers the greatest opportunity of any other period to grow love. At a mutual low point, they made the life-changing decision to rebirth their marriage, tapping into a new source of energy and rejuvenation that's producing extensive and surprising benefits.

The Ojai, California-based couple, both with Ph.D. degrees, co-authored their first trailblazing bestseller, *Conscious Loving*, more than 20 years ago and have published 30 other books, including their latest, *Conscious Loving Ever After*. The Hendricks Institute that they founded annually offers workshops and seminars in North America, Europe and Asia. Their nonprofit Foundation for Conscious Living funds research, films and scholarships related to relationship well-being.

Why do you say the best relationships are possible in the second half of life, including the greatest sex?

Childrearing responsibilities often decrease in our 40s and 50s, affording more time and resources to invest in the quality of the relationship. Psychological and spiritual maturity also comes into play—the more deeply we know ourselves, the more able we are to communicate meaningfully with our partner.

Probably the biggest factor is that people in the second half of life tend to be open to learning and trying new things, such as adopting our practice of scheduling two, 10-minute conversations a week to take care of relationship business: one covers “stuff talk”, the other is “heart talk”. Often, it only takes a few minutes of trying out a brand-new activity to spark a major rebirth of intimacy.

How pivotal is self-love, a tough concept for many, in securing a healthy relationship?

You can only love another person to the extent that you love yourself. After we take people through a process designed to give them a clear experience of loving themselves unconditionally, they often tell us that the experience changed everything in their relationship. It's powerful because so many of us enter a relationship in an attempt to get the other person to love some part of ourselves that we don't know how to love, which never works. Learning to love ourselves is an inside job.

What would you say is the biggest challenge for midlife couples in a long-term relationship?

It's vital to get out of the rut of recycling conflicts and predictable routines in order to liberate a new creativity. Creativity doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. It might be a matter of giving a



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new way to communicate a whirl or taking a walk together instead of watching TV. Ultimately, relationships only thrive when both people make an ongoing commitment to investing time and energy to explore their own creative nature. One may elect to learn to play a musical instrument, while the other might take up gardening. The only requirement is that we take on new activities that have the capacity to surprise us.

What tips do you have for those that are single during the second half of their life?

Enjoy your singularity! Singlehood affords great opportunities. You can choose whether or not you wish to invest time and energy manifesting a mate. No law requires that everyone has to have an intimate relationship, but if you'd like to, go about the process consciously. First, work on learning to love yourself, because it's wise not to depend on anyone else to do it for us. Second, figure out what we call your Three Absolute Yesses and Nos, the three most important qualities you want in a mate, and equally important, the three most important things you don't want in a mate. It's a good way to avoid mistakes.

Why do you call blame "the crack cocaine of relationships"?

When you blame another person for something, you fire up adrenaline both in yourself and the other person. Adrenaline is manufactured by our bodies and is highly addictive. Blame also typically produces a defensive reaction, causing a harmful cycle of two-way criticism and defensiveness that can go on for years. One couple we counseled had been having essentially the same argument since their honeymoon 29 years earlier—so addicted to the adrenalized "cocaine" of blame that it had become a permanent feature of their relationship. The answer is for each person to take healthy responsibility for issues in the relationship and together seek ways to both break unhealthy habits and replace them with mutually satisfying ways of relating.

S. Alison Chabonais orchestrates national editorial content for Natural Awakenings magazines.

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