

LOVE

It takes a whole lot more than love to keep a marriage running along smoothly, writes **ELIZA ADAMTHWAITE**. And making time to nurture a relationship, without the kids tagging along, may just be the key to a lasting union and happier family.

LAST month I booked a babysitter for a Friday night and reserved a table for two at a Border restaurant.

My husband and I got a bit dressed up, I put on some lippy and we headed out for an evening together — without our two precious offspring. It's probably the first time we've been on a date for six months and, while our seven-year-old marriage is ticking along smoothly, it was time for a couple of hours of adult conversation ... and a movie in gold class.

The question is, how many of us treat our closest relationship the way we would even, say, treat our car — in need of regular maintenance?

How many of us have regular date nights, without children, and deliberately set aside time to talk to each other about how we're feeling, what is troubling us and what we love about each other?

Authors Sara Dimerman, from Canada, and JM Kearns, from the US, have joined forces to address the health of couples' relationships in a new book, *How can I be your lover when I'm too busy being your mother? The answer to becoming partners again*.

It's a self-help book on how to turn relationships around when they've gone sour, and it has plenty of tips for those who want to prevent the syndrome from developing.

Dimerman says there's a direct correlation between what she describes as the "mother syndrome" and the rate of divorce.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 121,000 marriages registered and 50,200 divorces granted in 2010.

"We think the mother syndrome is the hidden key to many troubled marriages," she tells *Pulse*.

"And we think that if couples were to become more aware of the problem and how to resolve it, then they might not feel the need to admit defeat."

Dimerman describes the mother syndrome as when a woman finds herself in the role of her partner's mother rather than the loving equal she hoped to be.

She says it's a situation that couples don't pursue purposefully and often aren't aware it is developing until it is pointed out.

But the root of the problem lies in the division of domestic responsibilities, which has a huge impact on a couple's emotional connection.

"The change occurs as a result of sharing a home and domesticity together," Dimerman says.

"Over time, as the resentment and anger towards one's partner grows (as a result of an unfair division of tasks), so intimacy wanes."

In a social media straw poll, friends' responses are varied in how they approach marriage maintenance.

Some admit to struggling and not knowing the solution while others have plans in place that they are determined to stick to — for the sake of their love for each other and their family.

One friend says her husband is always complaining they don't go on dates, which is because she doesn't want to leave their children.

"I think I need to make more of an effort because it seems to be a constant argument," she says.

Another friend says she and her husband have a date night about once a month, prioritising a special celebration for their wedding anniversary.

"We believe one of the best, most loving and caring things we can do for our kids is to make our marriage a priority, which means getting away from the kids regularly to just be husband and wife," she says.

A husband says working six days a week is tiring but spending his day off — Fridays — with his wife, while their children are at school, gives them a chance to spend time together "and have uninterrupted conversations

Ian and Elke Hutchins have been married for 10 years and work hard to look after their relationship.

Pictures: BEN EYLES

& MARRIAGE



HAVE YOU BECOME A MOTHER TO YOUR MAN? TO FIND OUT, TAKE THIS SHORT QUIZ ...

1. You and he used to be a team. Now the team is down to one member.
2. **You used to tell each other your deepest thoughts and feelings. Now you sit and text other people.**
3. You find yourself trying to stop him from doing jobs he might mess up.
4. **Somehow he has a lot more leisure time than you do. You're always busy at home and he isn't.**
5. You wonder if he thinks the tub and toilet are self-cleaning or a magical elf cleans them while he's away from the house.
6. **Every time you pick up one of his dirty socks, your libido goes further down.**
7. His biggest contribution to meals is lifting his fork.
8. **You're his secretary, his memory and his supervisor. And you're not happy about it.**
9. You hardly trust him to take the kids on an outing, because he behaves too much like one of them.
10. **When he gives you that "come hither" look, you think "in your dreams".**

■ Head to howcanibeyourlover.com/ to do the quiz for real.

without interjections from the inquisitives".

A third wife says date nights about three times a year are "precious times".

She admits to being jealous of friends who have family close by who can babysit, so that dates can be more regular.

"Date nights are a foreign concept to our parents and when I ask for babysitting they don't seem to understand the need for them," she says.

"They just took us everywhere or didn't go out.

"I am really looking forward to when our kids are older and we can go out more.

"It's what gets me through the hard times."

Dimerman says couples today are much more aware of the importance of nurturing and cultivating their relationship than their parents or grandparents were.

"By this, I mean that they may take more time to communicate, to continue to go on date nights and to read self-help books, especially if they become aware that they are not as connected as they used to be," she says.

Thurgoona's Ian and Elke Hutchins have been married for 10 years and have always worked hard at looking after their relationship.

Earlier this month they left their three children, aged four, two and five months, with the grandparents for a Melbourne getaway.

"It was absolutely fantastic," Mr Hutchins says. "We spent the whole day in the city, did some shopping, went to a funky little restaurant and went to the football that night."

The next day they headed to the Yarra Valley for a fun run. Now they are looking forward to a week in Fiji next month — again without their children.

The couple are directors of Albury and Lavington Specsavers, Mrs Hutchins is an optometrist, so they are blessed with the flexibility of being able to spend time together when they choose.

"We're in business, which means we can schedule these things in a bit easier, whereas my parents always had nine to five jobs, which was a lot harder for them," Mr Hutchins says.

"We can take a day off when we want to, as long as it fits in with everyone else, and not everybody can do that."

Working together means they can go out for breakfast or lunch but Mrs Hutchins says that doesn't mean those opportunities just happen.

"I think when you have kids you don't realise how all encompassing that is," she says.

"So unless you plan to do stuff, it won't happen. You've got to be a bit active in scheduling things."

Their advice is to make time for hobbies outside the home; don't talk about work or the kids when you're out on a date; and always have something to look forward to, such as the next breakfast date or their holiday to Fiji.

Matt Thorp is the associate pastor at Wodonga District Baptist Church, where he has co-ordinated a marriage course recently.

He says the most important lesson the course conveys is that you actually need to look after your marriage.

"A good marriage doesn't just happen; it takes constant work, attention, commitment and communication," he says.

LEFT: Elke and Ian Hutchins with their children, five-month-old Lucas, Analise, 4, and Ethan, 2.



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lems but dealing with them and working through them is the way to stop them from becoming destructive."

He encourages couples to learn how their differences and similarities can work to serve their marriage, rather than get in the way of it.

Mr Thorp has been married to his "high school sweetheart" Merryn for 12 years and they have three children, aged seven, five and four.

He knows personally the joys and blessings children bring to a marriage but also the pressures in time, money and energy.

"Because of this, it takes deliberate, intentional effort to still prioritise our spouse and our relationship with them," he says.

"Life happens, and we get involved in doing lots of good and worthwhile things; we might even do them together.

"But unless we prioritise the marriage itself — giving attention to working on the relationship and devoting time to each other — we can easily drift apart from each other."

Dimerman believes that if couples spent more energy on maintaining their marriage — and if they were able to prevent obstacles such as the mother syndrome from emerging — they may never get to a place where they are considering being apart.

For those who are already down the track of resenting each other, don't fear.

There is still hope!

Dimerman says once the root cause has been revealed, everything seems much clearer and is more easily treated.

"There's always a great degree of relief when a problem is diagnosed," she says.

"Finally the couple understand what is wrong and what to do to manage it.

"Couples who make a sincere effort can get there. And when they do, the benefits for their relationship are huge."