



marital statistic. Dilemmas that come up don't just vanish -- resolutions require work, which prevents problems from compounding. "You have to have a lot of devotion to each other to stay together 65 years, and you really have to work at it to make it work," Dora says. "We've covered a lot of ground but we've never had a lot of problems. We worked things out."

In addition to love and dedication, Dora says taking time out for each other and respecting one another has made their marriage strong. "Watch what you say and don't be critical of your mate," she says. Hurtful words uttered in anger are not always so easy to erase, for the sting may last long after they're spoken.

"And do things for each other -- everyone likes to feel special," the 88-year-old continues. "It's like when you volunteer. You feel good about yourself and so do those (you've helped). The same things help in marriage, when you help each other."

According to licensed psychologist Dr. Yael Gold of Insight Counseling Center, both couples' analysis of America's escalating divorce rate is right on. "I think society, over time, has given us permission to divorce, whereas ... in the 50s and 60s people did stay and work things out," says Gold, who is a counselor for individuals, couples and group therapy. "People seem to take the easy way out and opt out because we can."

And the legal process continues to simplify matters. A handful of Internet Web sites now offer divorce packages online, putting the task literally at the fingertips of disgruntled spouses. Many of these pages tout their services as "low cost, fast and easy" -- so why not get the divorce ball rolling?

As for the cause of relationship problems, leftover family baggage is partially to blame, Gold explains. Whether it's insecurity and trust issues stemming from a father's abandonment or fear of emotional smothering due to an overzealous mom, unsettled personal conflicts can rear their heads in future unions.

"Unresolved past issues are brought into new relationships, and we play this out with a new partner without being consciously aware of it," Gold says. "I don't know if families are more dysfunctional these days, but we're more aware of it and its potential to impact."

While it's no secret that the divorce rate remains at an all-time high, the number of people currently in a marriage *does* outnumber those who

have divorced. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy reports that 110.6 million (56 percent) adults are married and living with their spouses, compared to 19.4 million (9.8 percent) divorced adults.

What can couples do to increase their odds of staying together? Gold says developing real problem-solving skills is a starting point for relationship success. "Learning to communicate and solve problems is essential, and a couple needs to know how to properly do this before marriage," she says. From her perspective, the inability to do so is a major

factor leading to divorce.

Like conflict resolution, Gold's other keys to a happy coupledom also are evident in the Brown and Ferrell marriages. Being close friends -- as well as lovers -- builds a solid foundation, along with maintaining mutual respect and settling disputes as quickly as possible.

On the flip side, Gold says, one of the biggest mistakes a couple can make is not forgiving each other. Ghosts resurrected from past arguments into present ones can have detrimental effects. "Holding onto grudges and not moving on from a problem can jeopardize a relationship," Gold says. "Bringing something up from the past over and over again... can build resentment and negative feelings toward each other that results in distancing." What's more, beating a dead horse ultimately breaks down the romantic intimacy that a couple

needs to be cohesive, eroding away their sense of connection.

For couples to remain close, Gold advises taking time to take care of the relationship. Bear in mind that marital bliss won't take care of itself. Like a garden, it requires care to grow, so sharing quality time is key. For instance, besides volunteering together, the Ferrells also enjoy taking a whirl on the dance floor.

And for those with busy schedules, there is good news -- togetherness need-

n't be a huge ordeal. Sitting down each night to talk while sipping a glass of wine or dropping love notes into your spouse's briefcase are simple ways to express yourself. Not only does this nurture a relationship, it gives couples a means to connect.

"Make a point of having intimate conversation, communication at a deep level, every day," Gold says. "It's easy to get lost in day-to-day things and only talk about the grocery list. You don't want to do that."

"In reality, relationships are an ongoing project," she says. "But the benefits, to be in a relationship with someone you're compatible with, can be wonderful." ▼▼

*"Marriage is something
you work on every day.
Never take it for granted."*

- Ruth Brown



Above: Ruth and Barry Brown are still smiling 45 years after their wedding day. Here, they are relaxing on the backyard deck of their Wilmington home.