

Maggie Scarf Breaks Down Unique Family Dynamics in 'The Remarriage Blueprint'



☒ Interview by Gabriela Robles. Editorial by Kristin Mattern.

Maggie Scarf, *New York Times* bestselling relationship expert, fellow of Yale University, and member of the advisory board of the *American Psychiatric Press*, shares with readers in-depth stories of seven remarried couples in her newest book, *The Remarriage Blueprint*. Though almost 40 percent of new marriages in the United States are remarriages, little has been written about the unique challenges that these couples face. Scarf has dealt with the subjects of divorce and remarriage for over thirteen years, and with this book, she delves into the core of the five major challenges remarried couples will confront as they work towards becoming a unified family: the impact of insider/outsider forces, the losses children face, the task of parenting, the unification of disparate family cultures, and the extension of family boundaries. Through interviews, the author touches on the every day difficulties of combining families, such as stepparenting, household routines, exes, alone time, and finances. She explores what works and what doesn't and reveals the complications of remarriage.

We recently talked to Scarf about this must-read book.

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***The Remarriage Blueprint* shares seven stories of married couples. Can you tell us about your process for collecting their experiences?**

I started in 1998, and I interviewed 40 volunteers. During my work, I found that there were no good theories or research on remarriage and stepfamilies, so I tucked the project away for later. Research about remarrying and stepfamilies is taught nowhere, even though a huge segment of the population struggles with these unique issues. Around 2009, I saw that there was this wonderful theory that had been set up on the basis of the evidence that has been collected since the late '90s. So I started a new set of interviews but also went back and talked to the couples from before. This way, I had a longitudinal and fresh approach to work with with this theory, which boils everything down to the fact that there are five major factors – that aren't discussed – that couples who are remarrying with children have to face.

How do you think that a remarriage differs from a first marriage?

It is said that "remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience." Remarriages are ten percent more fragile than first marriages. Even though we have a very high divorce rate in our country, remarriage divorce rate is ten percent higher than that. The truth of the matter is, at the very worst, 60 percent of remarriages fail. These people really need information and answers to their questions.

Many remarriages happen later in life when people more settled and have a career. How do you think this affects remarriage?

You may be choosing a much better partner, one who is kinder and more accepting or maybe one who is less abusive verbally or even physically. But it may also include children. Two partners have fallen in love and chosen each other, but the kids haven't chosen them, and they may have been through a lot of loss and change already.

The biggest difference between first marriage and second marriage is, in the first marriage, you have time to iron out

your differences and work out your habits. You can work out issues like: Do we sit down to dinner? Can you start eating before everyone is at the table? What is a decent curfew? Are kids allowed to have tantrums? Where do you keep the silverware? It sounds silly, but it can cause huge upsets when the outsider comes in and says, "Hey, I want some changes here. I want some more order. I want some more authority."

Usually, the biological parent and kids are resistant. The outsider, the new stepparent, is hammering, "Let me in, let me in," and the biological parent is trying to make sure his new partner is happy while also trying to reassure the kids that nothing will change. That's impossible, though, because changes have to happen.

Think of it like architecture. You can think of one building, that's the first marriage building, and the second building is the remarriage building. The second one has design challenges. It's not a conventional building like the first one it's going to have to be worked out overtime. The whole *Brady Bunch* idea that we all simply meld together doesn't work. You have to cope with the unique difficulties involved.

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And finally, do you have any tips for our readers who are trying to keep their remarriages alive?

I would suggest they look at the five challenges because it gives them a way to think about the work of remarriage. For example, parents are sensitive about the way they raise their children. Let's say the stepdad says to the biological mother, "My heavens! The way your daughter came in last night and left her snack out and her shoes on the floor – was she raised in a barn or what?" That is a huge message – you're a bad parent. Change that to an I statement: "When I came down, I found all the cheese and crackers out. I'd really appreciate if you

could get Trish to clean up after herself. It leaves the kitchen messy, and I don't want mice. How can we handle this?" That's not a fight; that's a discussion.

Now, what about if the mom and the stepdad have Coke with dinner and the other set of parents have milk? One way you can deal with that is to that Mom's house and Dad's house are different. It is just like two different classrooms; in one classroom, you have to raise your hand to do anything, but in Mr. Smith's classroom, you can just get up and walk around. In other words, it's never that one house is good and one's bad. Keeping parental conflict down is the most important thing a couple can do.

If you want to purchase The Remarriage Blueprint, visit Amazon.com. For more information on Scarf and other books she has written visit her website, <http://maggiescarf.com/books/the-remarriage-blueprint/synopsis/> or connect with her on www.facebook.com/Maggie-Scarf-175903732441707/ or Twitter @Maggiefirst.