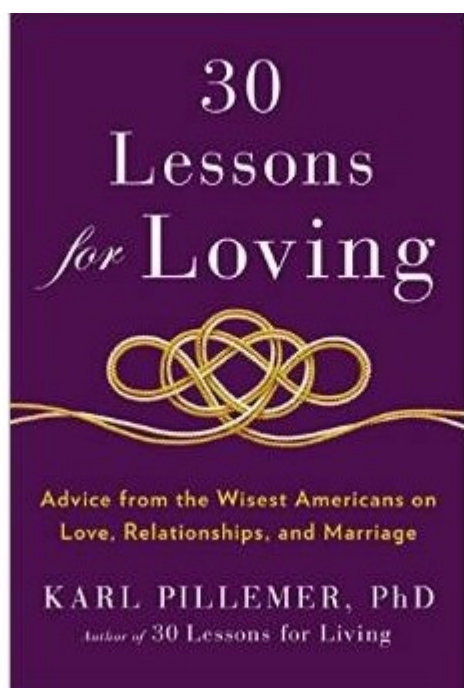


# Dr. Karl Pillemer Interviews Hundreds of Americans for '30 Lessons on Loving'



By [Sarah](#)

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Dr. Karl Pillemer is a professor in the Department of Human Development at Cornell University and an internationally-renowned gerontologist. Being so familiar with the biological and social aspects of aging, he set out to answer some of our society's biggest questions about what it takes to create a long-lasting love. What makes long-term relationships so successful? How do older married couples' feelings change over time? In his book, *30 Lessons for Loving: Advice from the Wisest Americans on Love, Relationships, and Marriage*, Dr. Pillemer interviews elder Americans all across the country in order to convey their messages to our country's young lovers

who hope to enjoy long, happy relationships as well.

**What thoughts kept running through your mind when you first set out on your journey to interview couples?**

I'm a little bit of a self-help junkie myself, but looking at marriage and relationship advice books, it really hit me that many of them weren't based on any hard information. They're either written by a top psychologist, a celebrity, or a motivational speaker, but none of it seemed to be based on anything concrete. So the idea occurred to me: Why not talk to people who have actually done what young people are hoping to do?

That led me to collect the data for this study, which does include the largest sample of long-time married people ever done. I essentially wanted to find out if there's something older people know about having a healthy, happy marriage that younger people don't and if I could I distill it to young people by sharing these practical lessons.

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**How did you narrow down 700 interviews into just 30 lessons?**

That was the most difficult part of writing the book. There were thousands of pages of transcripts. There were two ways I did it. First, I used social science methods to code the data, meaning I went through and assigned codes to the lessons people provided, which allowed me to narrow it down more easily. In addition to this, I read, and re-read and re-re-read all of these interviews. Even though it was very difficult, these lessons emerge very clearly from the data.

**When it comes to dealing with obstacles in relationships, what do older generations have in common with Generation Y?**

I think that young people often forget that a lot of the

things that cause stress in marriage were experienced by older generations but worse. People are now trying to start lifelong relationships during the second worst economic downturn in American history, but a lot of the people interviewed were starting relationships in *the* worst economic downturn. Let's put it this way: Our bad jobs would seem like great jobs to those who were starting families during the Depression.

Another example is that people were much more tied to their spouse's family back then, so they had in-law problems, much like people do today. These examples are relevant because they show that older people have been through every kind of problem that keep young people awake at night nowadays. Because these people have experienced the same problems, but perhaps more intensely, that, to me, makes for incredible experts.

**Is there one particular lesson that you think is most valuable? Or one that was most surprising or eye-opening?**

I found all the little lessons to be the most surprising. A number of the elders identified one particular thing that contributes to solving arguments and fights, and that's asking, "Are you hungry?" Often, they describe arguments as going out of range or becoming much worse if one partner hasn't eaten. So, interestingly, one of their solutions to fights is making a sandwich.

Other small insights that never really occurred to me is the small act of being polite and to lighten up. If we use "please" and "thank you" in our relationships, it really helps. You should also always ask yourself, "Is this thing we're fighting about really going to make a difference when we're both 70 or 80?" People tend to forget to have fun. We get stuck in the midst of work, career, and children, and life goes by in a blur.

One personal example I can give is a time that my wife and I were going on a trip, and she left her I.D. in the car and we

had to run all the way back and get it and almost missed our plane. So I had to ask myself what's more important: the quality of our time together and our overall relationship or my being mad about this? That's what older people want younger people to know about their relationships.

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**Finally, what do you think is the most difficult part about learning these lessons?**

One problem is that people don't know where to go for advice about their relationships. Another problem, which research proves, is that often times, in your 20s and 30s, you have an impossible level of perfectionism about how the relationship has to be. One of the lessons from older people that we have to learn is that marriage and long-term relationships are hard. So people have this image of a trouble-free perfection in a relationship when really it's a mixture of incredibly joyous, exhilarating experiences and very difficult ones. We are treated to a lot of false ideals in our society, but the nuts-and-bolts, nitty-gritty of a relationship is to try and try every day.

*Be sure to pick up a copy of 30 Lessons for Loving today!*