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Love for the ages

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After 51 years of marriage, Jean Laturnus says her husband Joe is her "best friend." They've run a business together, raised seven children, doted on 13 grandchildren and built a social life that revolves around their Catholic Church community.

"I think basically it was trust in each other and respect of each other's opinion," says Jean, 74.

Being together for more than half a century also has its privileges.

"We feel comfortable saying whatever we have to say to one another without having to walk on eggs every time you let loose," she says, laughing.

The Victoria couple may be one of the lucky ones. A new study reveals that people tend to find their spouses more irritating and demanding as time goes on.

The findings are particularly surprising given that other close relationships - such as those with a child or best friend - become more harmonious later in life. However, the authors say gritting your teeth over your long time spouse isn't necessarily a bad thing - it may simply indicate couples are close enough to speak their minds.

"Compared to all of our relationships, a spouse is the most negative and the most positive," says Kira Birditt, a research fellow in life course development at the University of Michigan. "It's the closest relationship."

She and her co-authors surveyed approximately 800 adults aged 20 to 93 for the study. Participants were asked to think about their spouse, a best friend and the child they relied on most and to rank "how much they got on their nerves, basically," says Birditt. When the same people were interviewed 12 years later, interesting patterns emerged. Most ranked their relationships with their children and best friends as less irritating and demanding over time, but those over 60 said their spouses annoyed them more.

The researchers were surprised, Birditt says, because gerontological research suggests that as people age they become better at regulating their emotions and there's less negativity in their relationships. She speculates the sheer volume of time spent together is what makes spouses the objects of irritation.

"Getting on nerves and making too many demands are things that might happen on a daily basis," she says. "They're more minor irritations, I would think, that are more likely to happen with lots of contact. It's harder to get rid of your spouse than a negative best friend."

Indeed, when the participants were surveyed a second time, 4.1 per cent had different spouses, 15.5 per cent listed a new best friend and 15 per cent said they relied on a different child. Those who had a new spouse reported less irritation than those who were still with the same person.

"It could be that they were getting rid of particularly irritating spouses," Birditt suggests.

According to the most recent numbers available from Statistics Canada, divorce becomes less common as people age. Just over seven per cent of men divorced between the ages of 55 and 59 in 2004, while just over five per cent of women in that age group ended their marriages. At age 65 and older, the rate drops to 1.6 per cent of men and 1.1 per cent of women.

Retirement can be a trying time for many couples because it means changes to their long-held roles, says Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem, a registered marriage and family therapist in Burlington, Ont.

"Many times men will retire and they will come home and they're bored, so they want to rearrange the house, they want to tell a woman how she could fix the kitchen so it's more efficient," she says.

Memory and health problems can also strain decades-long marriages, Barnicke Belleghem says, and anxiety over those issues can sound a lot like nagging.

"It's very hard to accept the health problems so it's easier to say, 'What's the matter with you? Don't you remember where you put your glasses?'" she says. "That may seem like picking until they understand they need to help each other."