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Any couple approaching their seventh wedding anniversary has every right to feel nervous. We've all heard of the Seven-Year Itch, the traditional tipping point where relationships start to cool, and recent scientific research suggests that levels of passion have plummeted by this point.

The secret, it seems, is to find a way of maintaining the mutual attraction that got you together in the first place. But how do some couples keep the fizz going while others fall flat? Four women tell us how this crucial milestone impacted on their marriage

Report SADIE NICHOLAS Photographs DIANE PATRICE

MELANI VE, 30, originally from South Africa and a plus-size model and TV presenter, married Brian, 31, a sponsorship broker from Holland, in May 2001. They live in North London and, despite marriage counselling, are on the verge of divorce

Melani says: Faced with the possibility that we may soon be splitting up for good, I cry when I remember how in love Brian and I once were. Just three months after meeting through friends in February 2001 we married at a London registry office and honeymooned on a yacht in the Mediterranean. We were totally in love.

We met in London when we were both backpacking and for the first four years we had an amazing time, working in temporary jobs, then indulging our wanderlust to travel around Europe and Africa. Our sex life was fantastic, and our lifestyle was romantic because we were constantly jetting off on adventures rather than settling down to the nine to five.

There's a saying that when hardship walks through the front door, love walks out the back

door, and that's what has happened to us. The rot set in when we eventually started 'proper' jobs in London three years ago. Caught up in the rat race and both travelling for work, we went for weeks without seeing each other, then when we did we'd row over the slightest thing, such as whose turn it was to vacuum.

We come from very different backgrounds. I'm from a high-profile South African family and grew up with maids and drivers, and I have aspirations bred into me that are far higher than Brian's. I knew this when we married, though back then I thought that love would conquer all. Now I know that those differences catch up with you eventually. We haven't been able to buy a house – and I partly blame Brian's inability to save money and his lack of aspirations. The lifestyle we have now is the most that Brian has ever had and he's happy with that, whereas it's the least I've had and I want more. It's been a major cause of arguments between us.

The last year has been dreadful. We went to counselling in the summer, and with someone there to mediate I started to feel more positive

about our marriage. We even went to Spain to renew our vows last October. At the ceremony I cried – I was devastated that the feelings of overwhelming happiness I'd hoped for didn't materialise, and it was crunch time for me. We are now making plans to separate: for Brian and me seven years was enough time to know that we have given our marriage our best shot.

Brian says: I can still imagine Melani and I walking down a beautiful beach together when we're 80, but that's not how she feels. My own parents have been married for 35 years and that's what I aspire to. I fell in love with Melani the moment we met and I'd do anything to spend my life with her – I thought we'd have kids and grow old together.

London isn't a good place for newlyweds – there's too much financial pressure and the stress has driven a huge wedge between us. I'm devastated that Melani wants out of the marriage. I'm still hoping she may have a change of heart, although I know it's unlikely, and I'm grateful there are no children involved. ►

MIRANDA HARRISON, 40, works in publishing and lives in North London with her husband Howard Watson, 39, a writer. The couple met on a postgraduate course in 1990 and tied the knot in August 2000

Miranda says: When Howard and I married in 2000 it was ten years since our first date. I saw our wedding day as a continuation of a great relationship, not the start of something entirely new. For me this new milestone just means seven more years of the good stuff – we knew each other deeply by the time we got married so I don't think another seven years has made much difference. Today the idea of 'the itch' seems outdated because there are so many couples like us who spend years together before marrying, or who may never marry.

I never assumed that we would tie the knot, because I've never thought of us as particularly conventional. Neither of us wanted children, which made us kindred spirits and was another reason why marriage wasn't so pressing. But when Howard did propose I accepted without hesitation and it felt completely right.

We've always been equals in the relationship and I think this is the key to our happiness. I'm also fiercely independent – typically, it was with reluctance that I agreed to Howard moving into my flat (as it happens, seven years into the relationship) when a friend moved out. Not taking Howard's surname was also very important to me – it would have been bizarre to have suddenly become a Watson at 33. Although we have always kept our own interests and friends, marriage has made us feel more of a team and I'm glad we are husband and wife. Our dreams are the same – to focus on our careers, then one day pay off our mortgage and travel the world together. We shared those dreams when we got married and we still do today.

Howard says: When I realised I'd never love anyone like I loved Miranda I proposed. I wasn't sure she'd accept since marriage was a bit conventional for us. But I'd felt we were almost too laid-back about our relationship – no sense of tomorrow or plotting a future in which we'd grow old together. Marriage changed that for the better and although we don't go around joined at the hip, it's great to have the togetherness that being married brings. Whenever we travel to an amazing country I find myself thinking: 'This just wouldn't be the same experience if Miranda wasn't with me.' I just know we'll be together for ever.

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GABRIELLA GUGLIELMINOTTI, 41, is a neuro-linguistic programming practitioner (a type of psychotherapist) and lives in South London. She and her husband Peter, 52, a photographer, decided to divorce two years ago, in their seventh year of marriage. The divorce was formalised last July

Miranda says: Marriage was always so much more than a piece of paper to me and I entered into it wholeheartedly. But the heartbreak of the split with Peter was a far cry from the heady feelings of our first meeting, on a Christmas diving trip to the Maldives in 1997. I was working and Peter was on holiday. He was so white and scruffy, the opposite of the handsome, dark guys I normally dated. But we got to know each other and when I visited him in London a few months later we fell in love. I'm attracted to adventurers and I loved that Peter was a photographer who travelled the world and was passionate about diving. He proposed on holiday in Indonesia at Christmas 2000 and we married in March 2001 in Kew Gardens. It was all I'd dreamed my wedding would be. Looking back I was blinded by love. Peter had a temper and it was a side I hadn't seen during the first flush of love. He used any excuse to shout at me; as a result I started doing more things on my own.

There is a scientific theory of sorts to the seven-year itch: that you replenish all

the cells in your body every seven years so that you become a totally different person – and I think by the end of my marriage that is what I was. When I started spending time apart from Peter my confidence grew and I was more sociable. But I was also often lonely, which you should never feel in a marriage. In spring 2003 I suggested we start going to counselling and I was encouraged that Peter was prepared to try it – at that stage I convinced myself that it was going to

'Sometimes you have to admit defeat so you can move on'

be OK because we both wanted to save the relationship. However, Peter's mood swings returned and it became so bad that I wasn't sleeping or eating. The final straw was a huge row while shopping in Waitrose in 2006. It sounds trivial but I'd had enough. Sometimes you have to

admit defeat so you can move on. We continued living together until our divorce was finalised in the summer of 2007 as we had to wait for the court to settle our finances before we could afford to move on. But relations were very strained.

Now I have thrown myself into work and have set up my own practice to help people overcome things such as divorce. I'm not bitter, I still believe in marriage and hope to marry again. Of course I may change all over again after another seven years, but I think the trick next time will be to change with the relationship not against it. My new marriage would be for ever, otherwise what would be the point? ➤





'Marriage is only the beginning. It's very precious and has to be constantly nurtured'

CLARE COLLINS, 34, from Bristol, owns coochico.com, a company selling towels and textiles for babies. She is married to Guy, 37, who owns a landscape gardening business, and they have two children, Fred, two, and Esme, one. They married in September 2001

Clare says: As soon as you've been married for seven years, you can't help but momentarily evaluate your relationship. And I can see why it might be a turning point – the honeymoon period is over, the warm period of normality and familiarity may be cooling, and some people may start looking for what's next. Luckily for me, Guy and I are blissfully happy. We met at university and initially dated for seven years – there was no itch then either.

Having Fred and Esme has given us an even stronger bond, though having children has also put pressure on the relationship. I realise that

sometimes I neglect Guy when he comes in after a long day at work, because I'm so tired from looking after the children and working that I just crave time alone. Starting my own business after having Fred did wonders for our relationship, though, because it boosted my confidence. I'd begun to feel clingy, and going back to work helped me to be myself. I think a marriage is only as good as its two parts and I know that if I'm not the person I want to be, then I'm not going to make Guy happy either.

Even though we'd been together for so long, getting married brought about a renaissance in our relationship. I hear so many women say: 'I can't wait until I'm married,' as if that's the ultimate goal, but marriage is only the beginning. It's very precious and has to be constantly nurtured. We always make time for one another as a couple and we talk lots – even those end-of-the-day chats about what you've each encountered are so

important. And we never go to bed on an argument. My parents split after 26 years, which proves you can never take it for granted even when you've passed that seven-year marker.

Guy says: I knew Clare always wanted to get married and have a family and realised that if I wanted to keep her – which I did – then I'd have to make an honest woman of her. We're different but we complement each other – I'm shy, calm and level-headed; she's outgoing, gregarious and prone to getting flustered. Now we've got children we have an idyllic family life.

We are realistic because every relationship has its potential to break down, but we are very good at putting disagreements behind us. I hope that in another seven years we'll be as happy as we are now and that one day we'll celebrate our golden wedding anniversary, as my own parents recently have. **V**