



my spreadsheets. I explain that I've saved a buffer, hired an accountant, and put away money for tax. He didn't realise I was so organised, and is relieved.

#### Date Five: Room To Grow

'The decision to have children or not can be a deal-breaker,' the book says. I had my heart broken eight years into a relationship because I didn't want children, then struggled to find dates who felt the same. So I know how crucial it is to agree on this topic – which Don and I, thankfully, do.

The Gottmans encourage couples who want children to discuss the family they're picturing. Instead, we talk about how we plan on creating a sense of family. We're in agreement on this: one day, we'll get a dog and call him Mr Wuffles.

#### Dates Six and Seven: Fun and Spirituality

The next two chapters focus on our shared time. We're a couple rooted in routine, so I worry that Date Six – about fun – will throw a harsh light on our idea of a good night, which tends to involve a box set and a pizza. The book suggests that laughing together is a form of adventure and we have no problem there – in fact we have a good laugh at the activities the Gottmans suggest. (Could there be anything worse than taking an improv class?)

Date Seven focuses on growth and spirituality, and warns: 'The only constant in a relationship is change.' Don and I have faced bereavement and two career changes together, but instead of isolating us from one another, they've brought us closer. The Gottmans also say that weaving small rituals into daily life is a sign of closeness – and we've got plenty of those, from a Sunday takeaway to private jokes. These small acts create a sense of shared meaning.

normal' – so I cut straight to the chase and ask if he's satisfied. 'I'm happy if you are,' he says, to my relief. We agree it's important to be in sync, rather than focused on an idea of what we should be doing. This had been bothering me more than I'd realised.

#### Date Four: The Cost Of Love

Money, the Gottmans warn, is one of the issues most likely to cause conflict in couples. Although we've bought a flat together, Don and I have our own bank accounts, and I'm surprised when he tells me he's been worrying about my finances.

I recently swapped a stable income for freelancing. 'I worry that if you have a bad month, you'll struggle,' he says.

Initially, I'm insulted. Does he really think I'm crap with money? But I realise that he sees only my Amazon parcels, not

#### Date Eight: A Lifetime Of Love

The final date looks to the future by asking us to share our three dreams in life. Mine are to write a novel, get married and buy a dog. Don can only think of one: to explore his creative side. Initially, this throws me and I panic. Doesn't he want to get married?

'It's not a dream of mine,' he admits. 'But my goal has always been to be content, and I am.' I realise I feel the same – being content is a worthy goal in itself.

At the end of the process, we've laughed a lot and feel closer. Some of the issues that arose surprised us, while the conversations I was nervous about – such as our sex life – turned out to be the ones most worth having. It's now more obvious to me than ever that when it comes to relationships, it's all about honest communication.

*'Eight Dates: Essential Conversations For A Lifetime Of Love' by Dr John Gottman and Dr Julie Schwartz Gottman (£18.99, Workman Books) is out now*

#### HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DATES

**Be attentive.** Put away your phone, show interest in what your partner is saying – and don't interrupt.

**Be present.** Don't assume you know what your partner's going to say next, and avoid thinking about what you'll say next.

**Ask questions.** If you don't understand something, ask questions and listen to the answers.

**Witness.** Repeat back in your own words what you've heard your partner saying.

**Avoid judgement.** Don't be critical, and don't give advice unless your partner asks for it.

**Magnify acceptance.** Try to understand what makes your partner tick, and work to accept the way your partner is.



Rosie and Don put the Eight Dates challenge to the test