

National Survey of Married Couples

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2008

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The National Survey of Marriage was used as the foundation for the book *The Couple Checkup: Find Your Relationship Strengths (2008)* by David H. Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg and Peter J. Larson. The book can be reviewed and purchased at the website: www.couplecheckup.com

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Executive Summary

This National Survey is one of a few major studies on the strengths of marriage versus the exclusive focus on problems in marriage. Using a sample of 50,379 married couples (both partners) from all 50 states, this survey used a comprehensive marital assessment tool called ENRICH which focuses on 20 significant areas and contains 195 questions.

This survey identified the *Top Ten Strengths of Happy Marriages* and discovered some new areas not found important in past studies of marriage. Using these top ten strengths, it is possible to discriminate between happy and unhappy marriages with 93% accuracy.

Five categories were found to have the greatest importance for happy marriages, ranked in order of importance as follows: *communication, couple closeness, couple flexibility, personality issues and conflict resolution*. While most past studies have identified the importance of communication and conflict resolution, the significance of couple flexibility and couple closeness demonstrate their growing impact in our high stress society.

Another important discovery was the emergent importance of an equal role sharing marriage. Most of the couples (81%) where both spouses perceived the relationship as equalitarian were happily married, while most of the couples (82%) where both spouses perceived their relationship as traditional were mainly unhappy.

This national survey also identified the *Top Ten Issues for Married Couples*. Out of the 10 items, 3 items dealt with Conflict Resolution, 2 items from Couple Flexibility, 2 items from Personality Issues and one item from Communication, Leisure and Parenting.

In summary, the primary goal of this national survey is to encourage couples and professionals to focus more on the strengths of marriage rather than specifically on weaknesses.

Overview of National Survey

The primary goal of this national survey was to learn what happy couples are doing correctly and what specific strengths they have as a couple. In order to empower couples, it is important to focus on the resources utilized in strong marriages.

This study of marital strengths is in contrast to most studies of marriage, which focus on only marital problems. The national survey used the ENRICH couple inventory that assesses twenty distinct areas of a couple's relationship. For this report, the most important areas for building strong marriages are highlighted and described in accordance with their significance.

Description of Sample:

The total research sample includes a total of 50,379 married couples from fifty U.S. states who took the ENRICH couple inventory between 2006 and 2007. This large sample was divided into happily married couples (20,675) and unhappily married couples (20,590). The middle group was excluded because one partner reported being happily married and the other reported being unhappy; allowing for a more distinct comparison between two clearly different groups. However, the total sample of 50,379 married was used to identify the major problematic issues for married couples.

The sample was obtained from all fifty states and the state with the largest included percentage (about 10 percent) was California. Minnesota and Texas each accounted for eight percent of the sample. The average age of the husbands was 34 years and 32 years for wives. About 42% of the couples were married five years or less, 35% were married six to fifteen years and 23% were married sixteen years or more. About one-quarter (29%) of the sample had no children, about half (48%) had one or two children and about one quarter (27%) had three or more children.

While 14% had completed high school as their highest level of education, over one-third (36%) had some college, one-quarter had a four year degree and one-fifth (21%) had a graduate or professional degree.

Individual income, rather than combined family income was asked of the sample. The mean individual income for males was \$45,000 and \$30,000 for females. About one-tenth (10%) of males and one-third (38%) of females earned under \$19,999 annual income. Almost one-third (31%) of both males and females earned between \$20,000 and \$39,999 annual income. About a third

(37%) of males, and one-fifth (21%) of females earned between \$40,000 and \$74,999 per year. About one-fifth of males (22%) and one-tenth of females (10%) earned \$75,000 or more annual income.

The majority (84%) of the sample were Caucasian, while 5% were African American, 5% were Hispanic/Latino, three percent reported an ethnicity of “other”, two percent were Asian American, and two percent were mixed ethnicity. In terms of religious affiliation, a majority (52%) of the sample were Protestant. About 14% were Catholic, one percent were Jewish, and thirty-three percent were “other” (a range of diverse denominations). About one fifth of the couples lived in rural areas (19%); twenty-three percent lived in the suburbs; thirty-two percent lived in a small city, and twenty-seven percent lived in a large city.

Survey Instrument:

The survey instrument used was the *ENRICH Couple Inventory* developed by David Olson, David Fournier and Joan Druckman and distributed by Life Innovations. ENRICH was developed as a research and counseling inventory for married couples. It contains 20 major categories which are assessed by 165 questions and includes 30 different background questions which aid in customizing the assessment to each couple.

ENRICH has a high degree of reliability, validity and clinical utility. It provides a comprehensive picture of “his” and “her” perspectives of the couple relationship and also of the couple as a whole. The degree of couple consensus is measured using the *Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score* for each area of the relationship.

Data Analysis:

The results from this national survey of married couples describe a majority of the characteristics that distinguish “happy” from “unhappy” couples. Based on their scores on a marital satisfaction scale, couples were classified as either “happily married” or “unhappily married.” There were 20,675 happily married couples and 20,590 unhappily married couples. The middle group was excluded because either their marital satisfaction scores were either both moderate, or one partner was high and the other was low on marital satisfaction.

Through in-depth analysis using “ENRICH,” distinct differences between happily married and unhappily married couples were identified. In addition, the major issues faced by married couples are described.

Top Ten Marital Strengths and Issues

“A block of granite, which is an obstacle on the path of the weak, becomes a stepping stone on the path of the strong.”

—Thomas Carlyle

Marriage can be the most nourishing and most enduring of human relationships. Ironically, marriage can also be the most disappointing, frustrating and conflicted of human relationships.

Given these extremes in emotions, marriage can be a source of great joy and deep pain as well as a unique combination of strength and vulnerability. Within marriage, individuals have a source of happiness and a haven from the rest of the world. However, marriage can also affect partners negatively, making them feel as if they need a retreat *from* their marriage.

Top Ten Strengths of Happy Couples

One of the reasons for highlighting differences between happy and unhappy couples is to discover what happy couples are doing well. That is, we do not need to make all the mistakes ourselves—we can learn a lot from the experiences of others.

The top ten areas which were found to predict strong marriages include communication, couple closeness, couple flexibility, personality compatibility, conflict resolution, sexuality, leisure activities, family and friends, financial management and spiritual beliefs. It was possible to predict with 93% accuracy whether a specific couple was happy or unhappy using these top ten items. Table 1.1 lists the best items based on these ten areas that discriminate between happy and unhappy couples. This list identifies in rank order the ten most important items for describing happy couples.

(Note: Of the top twenty items used to distinguish between happy and unhappy couples, only six of the top ten areas of marital strengths are represented. This further strengthens our findings of the five categories which can best predict strong marriages.)

The five categories from ENRICH which can best predict strong marriages (discriminate between happy and unhappy couples) were (ranked in order): **communication, couple closeness, couple flexibility, personality compatibility, and conflict resolution.**

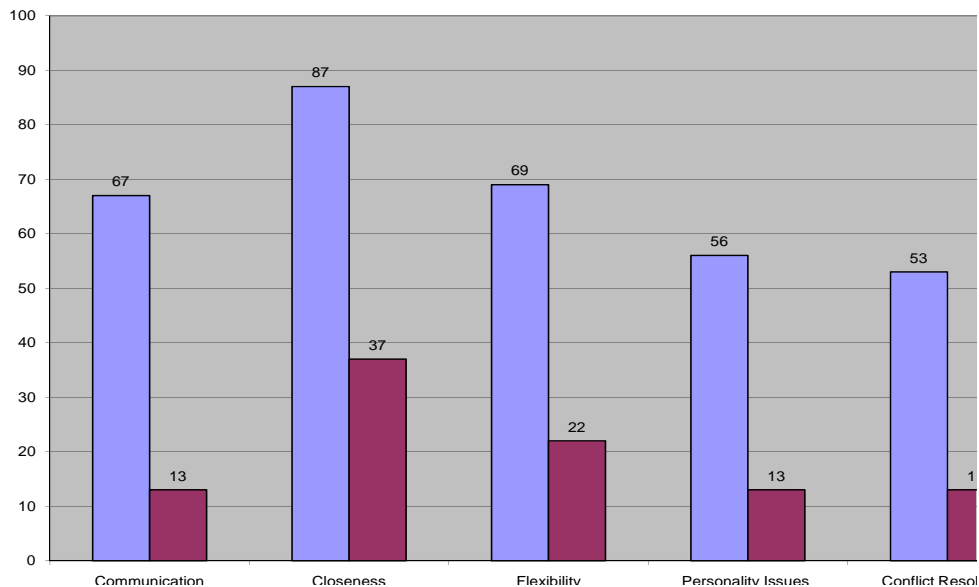
Table 1.1 Top Ten Strengths of Happy Couples

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We feel very close to each other. (Closeness)	93%	29%
2. I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other. (Communication)	95%	15%
3. When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas. (Conflict)	78%	20%
4. I can express my true feelings to my partner. (Communication)	96%	30%
5. We compromise when problems arise. (Flexibility)	83%	28%
6. Our togetherness is a top priority for me. (Closeness)	83%	30%
7. Even during disagreements, I can share my feelings and ideas with my partner. (Conflict)	78%	25%
8. I am satisfied with the amount of affection my partner gives. (Sexuality)	68%	17%
9. We find it easy to think of things to do together. (Closeness)	81%	30%
10. My partner is reliable and follows through on most things. (Personality)	75%	16%

Top Five Predictors of a Happy Marriage

Why is it that some couples seem so happy, regardless of life situations, transitions, or circumstances they may encounter? Are they simply well matched individuals? Are they doing something different from less happy couples? What is their secret? The most discriminating item from each of the following five ENRICH categories were used to identify their relative importance to happy couples. These categories are referred to as the “five keys to intimacy.”

Figure 1.1



Communication was the area found to be most predictive of happily married couples and the issue was whether or not partners agree that they are satisfied with how they talk to each other. Most (95%) happily married couples agree with this statement, whereas only 15% of unhappily married couples do so.

Couple closeness was the second most important category. Happy couples were in much higher agreement about feeling very close to each other (93%), compared to 29%

Couple flexibility was the third most important category distinguishing between happy and unhappy couples. Eighty-three percent of happily married couples agree they compromise when problems arise, whereas only 28% of unhappy couples do the same.

Personality compatibility was also an important characteristic of happy couples. Happy couples are much less likely to report their partner being too controlling compared to unhappy couples (30% and 88%, respectively).

Conflict resolution is an important skill used by happily married couples. They are much more likely to agree to feeling understood when discussing problems than unhappily married couples (happy 78%; unhappy 20%).

Top Ten Problems for Married Couples

*Learn from the mistakes of others,
you won't live long enough to make them all yourself.*
—Anonymous

Understanding common relationship problems can help normalize relationship experiences for couples. Unless you are a professional therapist, you are unlikely to hear about the problems that couples face and must work through in their relationship. It is much more common for couples to share with others only the positive aspects of their lives together.

To identify the most common problematic issues for couples, we analyzed the entire sample of 41,265 married couples. This analysis was to determine both the most problematic relationship areas and the most problematic specific issues.

The top ten specific issues for married couples come from five relationship areas: *personality* (4 items); *leisure activities* (2 items); *conflict* (2 items); *communication*, and *parenting*. The high percentage of couples reporting these problems clearly shows the prevalence of specific relationship issues (See Table 1.2).

The importance of *personality* is indicated by the fact that four of the top ten specific issues that are problematic for couples are from that area. The three specific issues are: “Sometimes my partner is too stubborn” (84%); “I wish my partner were less critical or negative” (78%); and, “Sometimes I have difficulty dealing with my partner’s moodiness” (73%).

Table 1.2 Top Ten Problems for Married Couples

	(% Disagreement)
1. My partner is sometimes too stubborn. (Personality)	84%
2. Having children reduced our marital satisfaction. (Parenting)	81%
3. My partner is sometimes too negative or critical. (Personality)	78%
4. During an argument, one person ends up feeling responsible for the problem. (Conflict)	77%
5. My partner does not have enough time and energy for me. (Leisure activities)	77%
6. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner. (Conflict)	76%
7. I wish my partner were more willing to share feelings. (Communication)	76%
8. My partner has some personal habits that bother me. (Personality)	75%

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 9. I have difficulty dealing with my partner's moodiness.
(Personality) | 73% |
| 10. My partner and I have dissimilar recreational interests.
(Leisure Activities) | 73% |

Conflict Resolution and *Leisure* are the other two categories that are problematic for many couples. Seventy-seven percent of all couples disagree on the items, "During an argument, I usually feel responsible for our problem" and "My partner does not have enough time and energy for me."

The other two couple problem areas are Communication and Parenting. Specifically, 82% of all couples report that they are less satisfied in their marriage since having children and 76% of all couples wish their partner were more willing to share feelings.

Communication

“Two monologues do not make a dialogue”

- Jeff Daley

Communication has the power to bring couples together and the ability to push couples apart. The willingness and ability to communicate contribute greatly to the health and happiness of a relationship. The good news is that efficient communication skills are something that can be learned and improved upon.

Strengths of Happy Couples in Communication

One important goal of the study is to discover the specific communication skills and attitudes that distinguish happily married and unhappily married couples (see Table 2.1).

Couples in happy relationships are almost five times more likely than those in unhappy relationships to agree that they are very satisfied with how they talk to each other. These individuals are significantly more likely to feel understood by their partners, and they find it much easier to express their true feelings than their unhappy counterparts. A majority of happy couples believe that their partners are good listeners, whereas only a small percentage of unhappy couples feel this way. And a majority of happy couples agree that they do not make comments to put each other down, compared to only one-fifth of those in unhappy relationships.

Table 2.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples regarding Communication (% Agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other.	95%	15%
2. I find it easy to express my true feelings to my partner.	96%	30%
2. My partner understands how I feel.	79%	13%
4. My partner is a very good listener.	83%	18%
5. My partner does not make comments that put me down.	79%	20%

Common Problems in Communication

“The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.”

-George Bernard Shaw

Communication and intimacy are closely interrelated. Couples, especially unhappy partners, are often heard to complain that, “We don’t communicate.” But it is impossible not to communicate. In fact, the absence of conversation, physical contact, smiles or self-disclosure “communicate” a lot about the feelings people have toward each another. Our survey of married couples identified specific communication issues that are problematic for spouses (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Common Communication Issues

% Couples Having Problem

1. I wish my partner were more willing to share feelings.	76%
2. I have difficulty asking my partner for what I want.	69%
3. My partner does not understand how I feel.	65%
4. My partner often refuses to discuss issues/problems.	64%
5. My partner makes comments that put me down.	62%

The majority of married couples (76%) wish that their partners would share feelings more often. Many spouses have difficulty asking their partner for what they want (69%), do not feel understood (65%) and feel that their partner will not discuss problems with them (64%). Still another common problem with married couples is feeling put down by their partner (62%).

Comedian Lily Tomlin urges us to “listen with the same intensity reserved only for talking.” If one communication skill could be considered paramount for developing and maintaining intimacy, it would be listening. We can hear someone talking but not actually be listening. Good listening skills require patience, as well as the ability to withhold judgment and to spend more energy trying to understand.

“It seems rather incongruous that in a society of super-sophisticated communication, we suffer from a shortage of listeners.”

—Erma Bombeck

Conflict Resolution

*“Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage.
The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.*

-William Ellery Channen

The way we handle problems, more than the problems themselves, often can be the problem. Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human relationships. Individuals in a relationship are going to have differences, and relations will not always be harmonious. As partners become closer, these differences inevitably will cause some disagreements. However, the fact that conflict exists in intimate relationships does not necessarily mean that love is absent. In fact, conflict can be beneficial to a relationship if it is handled and resolved in a healthy way.

Strengths of Happy Couples in Conflict Resolution

Table 3.1 summarizes the key differences between happy and unhappy couples. The most significant item that distinguishes between happy and unhappy couples as they deal with conflict is whether or not the individuals feel understood when discussing problems.

Individuals in happy relationships are much more likely than those in unhappy relationships to feel understood by their partners and to feel able to share feelings and opinions during disagreements. Happy couples are also much more likely to agree that their disagreements get resolved than unhappy couples are. Finally, partners in happy couples are much more likely to agree that they have similar ideas about how to resolve conflict and to take disagreements seriously.

**Table 3.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples
regarding Conflict Resolution (% Agreement)**

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas.	78%	20%
2. I can share feelings and ideas with my partner during disagreements.	78%	25%
3. We are able to resolve our differences.	58%	12%
4. We have similar ideas about how to settle disagreements.	72%	28%
5. My partner takes our disagreements seriously.	54%	14%

Common Problems in Conflict Resolution

Speak when you are angry – and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret."

—Dr. Laurence J. Peters

When you think of the word conflict, what images come to mind? Are these images positive or negative? The first obstacle to conflict resolution is probably a faulty perception of conflict itself. If two individuals immediately see conflict as negative, and therefore avoid talking about it, their relationship will presumably suffer.

Conflict is common and it does not have to damage a relationship. Rather, problems arise when couples do not know how to manage conflict. Our national survey identified the top five issues regarding conflict resolution for couples (see Table 3.2).

According to the survey, most couples disagree on the issue of who is responsible for a given problem. Many couples avoid conflict with each other, and have different ideas about the best way to solve their disagreements. A majority of couples report having serious disputes over unimportant issues and have some issues that they are unable to successfully resolve.

Table 3.2 Common Conflict Resolution Issues

	<i>% Couples Having Problem</i>
1. One person ends up feeling responsible for the problem.	80%
2. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner.	78%
3. We have different ideas about the best way to solve disagreements.	77%
4. We have serious disputes over unimportant issues.	77%
3. Differences never seem to get resolved.	76%

"I would not waste my life in friction when it could be turned into momentum."

—Frances Willard

Role Relationships

Throughout history the more complex activities have been defined and redefined, now as male, now as female, sometimes as drawing equally on the gifts of both sexes. When an activity to which each sex could have contributed is limited to one sex, a rich, differentiated quality is lost from the activity itself."

—Margaret Mead

Roles relate to how couples handle leadership responsibilities and divide household tasks. While most young couples, especially women, prefer the idea of a more equalitarian relationship, this is harder to achieve than you may imagine. It takes greater relationship skills to develop and maintain an equalitarian relationship because there are more things to negotiate and compromise. Who does the laundry? Who pays the bills? Who does the shopping? Who takes care of the cars? Who cleans? Especially after children arrive, the woman often becomes more involved in child-care and housework than the man, and the couple relationship becomes even less equalitarian.

Strengths of Happy Couples regarding Roles

Two role issues are particularly related to whether the couple is happily married. The first is the couple's agreement that the husband is as willing to adjust in marriage as the wife. For example, in a traditional role relationship, the wife would most often be the one to change her schedule around their child's activities or appointments. In equalitarian relationships, both the husband and wife would make adjustments, equally sharing in these responsibilities.

The item with the next highest discriminating ability is whether or not both individuals agree they work hard to have an equal relationship. Division of household tasks is the third issue that is strongly related to marital satisfaction. Happy couples are much more likely to feel satisfied with how the division of housework is arranged. Other important indicators of a happy marriage are whether or not couples are both involved in important decision-making and whether or not household tasks are based on preferences or on tradition.

Table 4.1 How Happy vs. Unhappy Couples View Their Roles
(% Agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. Both are equally willing to make adjustments in their marriage.	82%	46%
2. Both work hard to have an equal relationship.	87%	54%
3. Both are satisfied with the division of housework.	76%	42%
4. The couple make important decisions jointly.	87%	59%

5. Household tasks are divided based on preferences, not tradition. 67% 55%

Marital Satisfaction and Role Relationship

Happy couples have a much more balanced relationship in terms of roles than do unhappy couples. This claim is clearly supported by an analysis of 10,280 married couples whose ENRICH scores on the marriage satisfaction scale were related to scores on individual Role Relationship items (see Table 4.2).

A dramatic finding was that couples who perceive their relationship as traditional in terms of roles are much more likely to be unhappy than couples who perceive their relationship as equalitarian. If both people perceive their relationship as traditional, more than four-fifths of them are unhappy with their marriage, while less than one-fifth are happy. Similarly, when both people perceive their relationship as equalitarian, more than four-fifths have a happy marriage, while less than one-fifth are unhappy.

Table 4.2 Role Relationships in Happy vs. Unhappy Couples

Perception of Relationship	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. Both perceive as equalitarian	81%	19%
2. Husband perceives as traditional, wife perceives as equalitarian	50%	50%
3. Wife perceives as traditional, husband perceives as equalitarian	37%	63%
4. Both perceive as traditional	18%	82%

For couples in which the woman perceives the relationship as traditional and the male views it as equalitarian, almost two-thirds are unhappy while only about one-third are happy. If the husband perceives the relationship as traditional and the wife perceives it as equalitarian, an equal percentage of the couples are happy and unhappy. So, the more equal they both perceive the role relationship, the happier they are in their marriage.

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

-George Orwell

Managing Finances

*To some people, money means power; to others, love.
For some, the topic is boorish, in bad taste.
For others, it's more private than sex.
Add family dynamics to the mix,
and for many you have the subject from hell.*

—Karen S. Peterson (1992) USA Today

If you sometimes feel as though financial issues dominate your life, you are not alone. It is estimated that we spend up to 80% of our waking hours earning money, spending money, or thinking about money. A survey conducted by American Express Financial Advisors revealed that 66% of Americans spend more time thinking about money and careers than they do about sex, health, or relationships.

Strengths of Happy Couples in Finances

In general, even happy couples disagree more about finances than any other topic. There are still, however, clear differences between happy and unhappy couples regarding money issues (see Table 5.1). Happy couples agree on how to handle money significantly more than do unhappy couples. They also have fewer concerns about debts and the proper amount to save. Clearly, one way to improve your couple relationship is to discuss and agree on relevant financial matters.

Table 5.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples on Finances (% agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We agree on how to spend money.	85%	43%
2. We agree on how much money to save.	67%	29%
3. Major debts are not a problem for us.	69%	35%
4. My partner does not try to control our money.	74%	43%
5. Credit cards are not a problem for us.	69%	42%

Common Problems in Finances

Couples have trouble dealing with money issues for a number of reasons, as our national survey reveals (See Table 5.2). Many problems occur when one partner thinks the other should be more careful about spending. Although the current trend to marry later in life often means these couples have more assets and more income, they may have more adjusting to do when it comes to merging their finances. Individuals who marry later may be accustomed to making money decisions without having to consider another person.

Table 5.2 Top Five Problems Regarding Finances

	Percentage of Couples
1. I wish my partner was more careful in spending money.	72%
2. We have trouble saving money.	71%
3. We have problems deciding what is more important to purchase.	63%
4. Major debts are a problem for us.	56%
5. Credit Card use has been a problem for us.	52%

Having trouble saving money also is a problem for a majority of married couples. Many couples report disagreeing on what is most important to spend their money. Major debts are an issue for over half of married couples.

Not surprisingly, saving/spending problems are common among couples because individuals often have different personal spending and saving habits. Most partners do not find out until after marriage how different their spending/saving styles are. The greater the difference in these money habits, the greater the possibility of conflict over funds.

“The real measure of a man’s wealth is how much he’d be worth if he lost all his money.”

—J.H. Jowett

Spiritual Beliefs

*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Spirituality and faith are powerful dimensions of the human experience. Spiritual beliefs can provide a foundation for the values and behaviors of individuals and couples. But what is meant by spirituality can vary greatly both across various religious denominations and among individuals.

Couples with strong spiritual beliefs and practices say their faith provides a foundation that deepens their love and helps them grow together and achieve their dreams. Even if partners hold dissimilar views, they can still have a committed, strong spiritual life that adds meaning and purpose to their existence.

Strengths of Happy Couples in Spiritual Beliefs

A key factor that distinguished happy and unhappy couples in terms of religion was agreement on satisfaction with how spiritual values and beliefs are expressed. Most happily married couples (85%) agree on this item, compared with only 40% of unhappily married couples.

Often spiritual beliefs are practiced individually and not integrated into the couple relationship. Although spirituality can also be regarded as a private matter, we know that shared religious faith can strengthen a marriage. Table 6.2 summarizes the research on happily versus unhappily married couples in terms of spiritual beliefs. Happily married couples are much more likely than unhappily married couples to report that shared religious values improve their relationship. Happily married couples also more often report that they feel closer as a couple because of shared spiritual beliefs.

Table 6.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples in Spirituality

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We are satisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs.	85%	40%
2. We feel closer because of shared spiritual beliefs.	78%	43%
3. Shared spiritual beliefs strengthen our relationship.	83%	50%
4. Spiritual differences do not cause tension in our relationship.	86%	56%
5. We rely on our spiritual beliefs during difficult times.	77%	46%

Common Problems in Spirituality

In comparison to other relationship issues, spiritual beliefs have a low overall disagreement rate among married couples. In part, that may be because both spouses agree that spirituality either has a high or low priority in their lives.

The most common disagreement item regarding spirituality involves resolving differences in their spiritual beliefs. Half of all spouses disagree on this item. Almost half of the spouses disagree that religious beliefs make them feel closer. Forty-five percent of them disagree on whether or not they rely on their spiritual beliefs during difficult times, and are not are satisfied with how they express their spiritual beliefs and values. Some couples (34%) report that spiritual differences cause tension in their relationship.

Table 6.2 Common Spirituality Issues

	(% Having Problem)
1. We have not resolved the differences in our spiritual beliefs.	52%
2. We do not feel closer as a result of our spiritual beliefs.	47%
3. We do not rely on our spiritual beliefs during difficult times.	45%
4. We are dissatisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs.	45%
5. Spiritual differences cause tension in our relationship.	34%

Without faith, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible.
—Mary McLeod Bethune

Sexual Relationship

*Sex is a conversation carried out by other means.
If you get on well out of bed, half the problems in bed are solved.*
—Peter Ustinov

The sexual relationship acts as the emotional barometer for the relationship in that it can reflect a couple's satisfaction with other aspects of the relationship. A good sexual relationship is often the outcome of a good emotional relationship between the partners. Paradoxically, sex can also suppress the expression of deeper concerns and issues. This is because sex is one of the most difficult topics for individuals to discuss and to share personal feelings about.

Strengths of Happy Couples Sexually

A major strength for happily married couples is the quality of the sexual relationship. Individuals in happy marriages are much more satisfied with the amount of affection they receive from their partner than unhappily married couples are. They also agree that their sexual relationship is satisfying and fulfilling, and they are much more likely to agree that their partner does not use or refuse sex in an unfair way. Further, they are far less likely to feel concerned that their partner is not interested in them sexually. Finally, they agree much more often that they are not worried that their partner may have thought about having a sexual relationship outside of their marriage.

**Table 7.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples
regarding Sexuality** (% Percent Agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. I am completely satisfied with the affection from my partner.	68%	17%
2. Our sexual relationship is satisfying and fulfilling.	76%	28%
3. My partner does not use or refuse sex in an unfair way.	82%	36%
4. I have no concerns that my partner may not be interested in me sexually.	84%	40%
5. I do not worry that my partner will consider an affair.	86%	45%

Common Problems in Sexuality

Sexuality is an area in which differences in husband and wife preferences are more common and problematic. The most problematic sexual issue for couples is dissatisfaction with the amount of affection received. A majority of

couples also are concerned about their different levels of interest in sex and are not able to keep their sexual relationship interesting. About half of couples are dissatisfied with their openness in discussing sex. Sixty-two percent of couples reported that they were unsatisfied or unfulfilled by their sexual relationship.

Table 7.2 Top Five Problems Regarding Sexuality

1. I am dissatisfied with the amount of affection from my partner.	68%
2. Our levels of sexual interest are different.	66%
3. Our sexual relationship has become less interesting and enjoyable.	62%
4. I am dissatisfied with the level of openness in discussing sexual topics.	52%
5. Our sexual relationship is not satisfying or fulfilling.	62%

The movie *Annie Hall* depicts two lovers with different perceptions of their sexual relationship. When a therapist asks them (separately) how often they have sex, the character played by Woody Allen answers, “Hardly ever, maybe three times a week.” The character played by Diane Keaton replies, “Constantly, three times a week.” This is a good illustration of the differing opinions that couples have, but don’t always recognize in their relationship.

Among married couples, different levels of sexual interest cause much dissatisfaction. Studies have shown that, for a majority of men, sex can be easily separated from the relationship. Feelings of emotional intimacy in the relationship usually precede sexual expression for women, whereas males often view sex as a way to increase intimacy.

Spouses often are not satisfied with the affection they receive from their partner. We know that this is a very important component to a happy marriage, because it was also the highest discriminator between happily and unhappily married couples (in 68% of happily married couples, partners report being satisfied with the affection they get from each other, versus only 17% of unhappy couples).

Children and Parenting

*Before I got married, I had six theories about bringing up children;
now I have six children, and no theories.*

—John Wilmot (1642–1680)

Paradoxically, parenting can be the most frustrating and the most satisfying experience in our lives. Parents are primarily responsible for children's development of self-esteem, sense of responsibility, values, and physical and emotional health, as well as for their social and economic needs.

Strengths of Happy Couples in Parenting

Although children take a lot of energy and attention, it is essential for the survival of the marriage that spouses not forget about each other and their relationship. Parenthood has an amazing way of bringing out the selflessness in people; children's needs and desires often come before those of the parents. And although you may not mind this at all, it is still important not to forget about each other.

**Table 8.1: Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples
in Parenting (% Couple Agreement)**

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. I am satisfied with how child-rearing is shared.	61%	30%
2. My partner focuses as much on our marriage as on the children.	59%	31%
3. We agree on discipline.	59%	33%
4. We feel closer since having children.	53%	33%
5. I am more satisfied in my marriage since having children.	35%	19%

In fact, a strength of happy couples is that they are about twice as likely (59%) as unhappy couples (31%) to report that their partners gives attention to the marriage as well as to the child(ren). Taking time each day to share the day's events and to connect with each other is important.

Satisfaction with how the responsibility of raising children is shared is the most significant issue distinguishing happy and unhappy couples. Happily married couples are twice as likely (61%) to be satisfied with how child-rearing and parenting are shared than unhappily married couples (30%). Happily married couples are much more likely to agree on discipline than are unhappily married couples. Thus, it's important to discuss and develop a joint plan for discipline.

Problems in Parenting

The most problematic parenting issue that couples report is feeling less satisfied in their marriage since having children. Two-thirds of married couples report that the father does not spend enough time with their children. Almost as many couples are dissatisfied with the balance of attention given to their marriage versus the attention given to the children. Many couples do not agree on how to discipline their children and are dissatisfied with how child-care responsibilities are shared.

Table 8.2: Top Five Couple Problems in Parenting

	(Percent having Problem)
1. Having child(ren) has reduced our marital satisfaction.	82%
2. The father is not involved enough with our child(ren).	65%
3. My partner focuses more on the children than on the marriage.	64%
4. I am dissatisfied with how child-rearing is shared.	64%
5. We disagree on discipline.	63%

Parenting is one of the most challenging and stressful areas for couples. Over four-fifths of the married couples in our national survey report feeling less satisfied in their marriage since having children. Even happily married couples are not immune from the stresses and strains associated with child-rearing. Less than two-fifths of happily married couples report that children do not create major problems in their marriage.

The sacrifices related to parenting are felt mostly by mothers. Women adapt their careers, sacrifice their free time, and otherwise adjust their lives to accommodate children considerably more than husbands. In our national survey, a majority of both partners report that the father does not spend enough time with the children.

When children become the main focus of family life, the marriage can suffer. A majority (64%) of married couples report that partners give more attention to the children than to the marriage. Ultimately, by the time one or both parents are done taking care of the children, they have little time left for each other or for the marriage.

"It's time for us to turn to each other, not on each other."

-Jesse Jackson

Couple Flexibility and Couple Closeness

In your couple relationship, you either repeat what you learned in your family or you tend to do the opposite.

—David H. Olson

Couple Flexibility

Flexibility refers to how open to change couples are in their relationships. It describes the amount of change that occurs, for example, in leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules.

In this National Survey, couple flexibility was the third most important predictor of happy marriages. This is a new finding since most studies have rarely included this variable. The importance of flexibility is more obvious, in retrospect, since couples need to be able to adapt to the ever changing challenges and stress in our society.

So flexibility in marriage is critical because it helps a couple better manage stress and change. Since change is inevitable, individual and relationships must be open to change. But people also want and need stability. Without stability, they cannot develop intimacy in their relationships. Relationships that have an “appropriate” level of flexibility are somewhat structured, and members sometimes share leadership. Roles are well defined and stable, but they can change depending on current needs.

Flexibility also becomes vital in times of crisis, as members adapt to changing conditions and roles while coping with stress. Relationships that function well at these times are still considered balanced because they operate in one of the extremes for only a short period of time before returning to a more equal state.

Table 9.1: Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples in Flexibility (% Couple Agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We compromise when problems arise.	83%	28%
2. We make most decisions jointly.	91%	42%
3. Both of us are able to adjust to change when it's necessary.	85%	35%
4. We are creative in how we handle our differences.	58%	14%
5. We share leadership equally.	63%	23%

Couple Closeness

*And stand together yet not too near together:
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.*

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Closeness refers to how emotionally connected you feel to another person. It involves how you balance separateness and togetherness— your private space and your intimate connection.

When happy couples were compared with unhappy couples in our national survey, there were distinct differences between the two samples in couple closeness. For instance, members of almost all of the happy couples agree that they feel very close to their partner, whereas only 27% of unhappy couples feel that way. A majority (83%) of happy couples make togetherness a top priority, compared to less than a third (30%) of unhappy couples. Partners in happy relationships are more than twice as likely as those in unhappy relationships to report that they really enjoy spending free time together (95% to 45% respectively). They are also much more open to asking each other for help (92% to 43%). Partners in happy couples are also more than three times as likely as unhappy couples to agree that they find it easy to think of things to do together.

Table 9.2: Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples in Couple Closeness (% Couple Agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We feel very close to each other.	93%	29%
2. Our togetherness is a top priority for us.	83%	30%
3. We really enjoy spending our free time together.	95%	45%
4. We ask each other for help.	92%	43%
5. We find it easy to think of things to do together.	81%	30%