

**Information from****Human****Environmental****Sciences****Extension** ▼**HUMAN RELATIONS**

# Creating a Strong and Satisfying Marriage

Sharon J. Leigh, Program Assistant  
Janet A. Clark, Program Leader and Associate State Specialist

**P**ause for a moment and think about your marriage. What thoughts come to mind? How do you feel about your relationship? Your marriage may generally provide great happiness and satisfaction for both of you. Or, because of high levels of conflict and unfulfilled expectations, your marriage may be a source of great anxiety and frustration. Another possibility is that life for you and your spouse has become so hectic that you never seem to be able to connect with each other as you once did. Do any of these situations sound familiar? If so, you are not alone. Many spouses could relate to one of these descriptions.

About half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. It is obvious that many people do not get married and live "happily ever after." However, marriage continues to be an important goal for most Americans. In fact, over 90 percent of adults will get married at least once in their lifetime. Most spouses start out full of hopes and dreams and are truly committed to making their marriage work. Yet as the reality of living with a less than perfect spouse sets in and the pressures of life



build, many individuals feel less romantic and do not find as much satisfaction in their relationships. All marriages change over time. But with hard work and dedication, people can keep their marriages strong and enjoyable. How is it done? What does it take to create a long-lasting, satisfying marriage?

A volume of research indicates that most successful marriages share some key characteristics. This guide will explore these in detail. It will also focus on marital conflict and the skills needed to handle it effectively. Finally, the guide will discuss ways that spouses can strengthen their marriages.

## Characteristics of happy and satisfying marriages

Consider the positive aspects of your marriage. What are you doing that works well and brings you and your spouse joy and happiness? If you have a satisfying marriage, chances are that your relationship has high levels of positivity, empathy, commitment, acceptance, love and respect. These are some of the characteristics that researchers have found to be common in successful marriages. Let's look at each of these factors.

### Positivity

John Gottman, one of the nation's leading experts on marital relationships, has found that the main difference between stable and unstable marriages is the amount of positive thoughts and actions spouses engage in toward each other. Through careful observation of hundreds of couples, he has come to the conclusion that successful spouses have far more positive than negative interactions. If there is too much negativity — criticizing, demanding, name-calling, holding grudges, etc. — the relationship will suffer. However, if there is never any

negativity, it probably means that frustrations and grievances are not getting air time and unresolved tension is accumulating inside one or both partners. The key is balance between the two extremes. There are many ways to foster positivity in a marriage. Being affectionate, truly listening to each other, taking joy in each other's achievements and being playful are just a few examples of positive interactions that help make marriages successful.

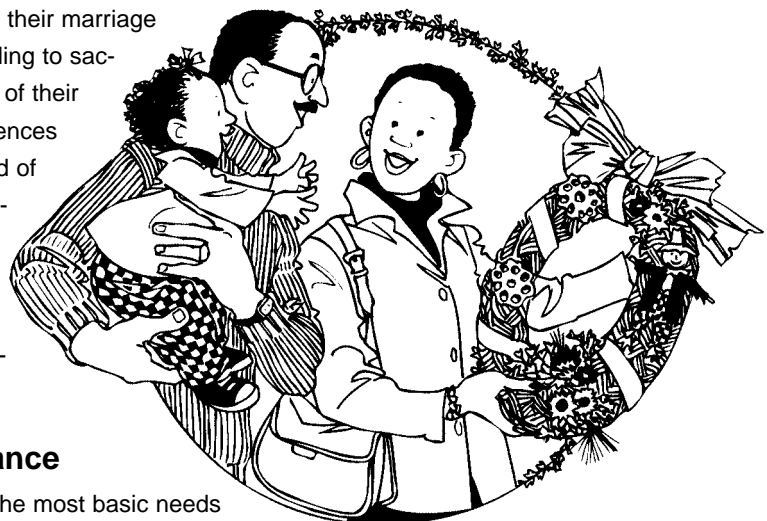
## Empathy

Another characteristic of happy marriages is empathy. Empathy means understanding a person's perspective by putting oneself in his or her shoes. Many researchers have shown that empathy is important for relationship satisfaction. People are more likely to feel good about their marriage and spouse if their partner expresses empathy towards them. Husbands and wives are more content in their relationships when they perceive that their spouses truly understand their thoughts and feelings.

## Commitment

Successful marriages involve both spouses' commitment to the relationship. When two people are truly dedicated to making their marriage work, despite the unavoidable challenges and obstacles that come, they are much more likely to have a relationship that lasts. In most Western cultures, individualism is highly valued. Individualism focuses on the needs and fulfillment of the self. Being attentive to one's own needs is important, but if it is not balanced by a concern for the needs of others, it can easily lead to selfishness in marriage. Husbands and wives who only focus on themselves and their own desires are not as likely to find joy and satisfaction in their relationships. However, when spouses are committed to

investing in their marriage and are willing to sacrifice some of their own preferences for the good of the relationship, they usually have high-quality marriages.



## Acceptance

One of the most basic needs in a relationship is acceptance. Everyone wants to feel valued and respected. When people feel that their spouses truly accept them for who they are, they are usually more secure and confident in their relationships. Often, there is conflict in marriage because partners cannot accept the individual preferences of their spouses and try to demand change from one another. When one person tries to force change from another, he or she is usually met with resistance. However, research has shown that change is much more likely to occur when spouses respect differences and accept each other unconditionally. Basic acceptance is vital to a happy marriage.

## Mutual love and respect

Perhaps the most important components of successful marriages are love and respect for each other. This may seem very obvious — why would two people get married who did not love and respect each other? The fact is, as time passes and life becomes increasingly complicated, the marriage often suffers as a result. It is all too easy for spouses to lose touch with each other and neglect the love and romance that once came so easily. It is vital that husbands and wives continue to cultivate love and respect for each other throughout their lives. If they do, it is

highly likely that their relationships will remain happy and satisfying.

## Managing conflict

Have you ever experienced a disagreement, difference of opinion, or misunderstanding with your spouse? If you answer truthfully, the answer will almost certainly be, "Yes, of course." Conflict in marriage is inescapable. All marital relationships — even the best ones — will experience at least some conflict from time to time. However, many people are successful and happy in their marriages, despite the conflicts that arise. The key to their success is how they handle their conflicts and disagreements. This section will explore many issues related to conflict, such as common areas of contention in marriage, gender differences in communication styles, and the importance of proper management of conflict. It will also discuss skills for handling conflict and how to solve problems in marriage.

## Common areas of conflict

Although all relationships are different, spouses frequently experience several common areas of conflict. Here are brief descriptions of some typical issues that spark conflict in marriage.

### Money

Regardless of the amount of money

a couple has, it is often the biggest source of marital conflict. Husbands and wives often have very diverse ideas about how money should be handled because they have experienced different family values and goals regarding money. Potential disagreements about money include how to spend it, how much to save and who should be responsible for paying the bills. It is important for spouses to discuss their values and feelings about money so each partner can try to understand the other. Constructing a budget and financial planning often require negotiation and compromise, but they are important tasks and aid spouses in identifying their priorities and goals for the future.

#### **In-laws**

Conflicts over in-laws are usually most problematic in the first years of marriage. A common issue that arises is one partner feeling that his or her in-laws are too critical or intrusive. Husbands and wives may disagree about the length and frequency of their parents' visits. Some people may also feel that their spouse is too dependent upon his or her parents. All of these in-law issues can trigger conflict within the family. Spouses can deal with in-law problems by sharing their feelings and discussing what kind of relationship they would like with their in-laws. It is important to avoid being accusatory and speaking critically of one's in-laws, especially during such talks. Expressing negativity towards in-laws tends to worsen the situation because it alienates spouses from each other and promotes defensiveness.

#### **Sex**

Sex is an emotion-filled issue and many spouses are afraid of getting hurt or rejected by their partners in this area. Thus, people frequently avoid discussing their feelings and expectations about sex. Even when partners do talk about sexuality issues, they are often

embarrassed and speak indirectly about their feelings. These patterns can lead to conflict in the marital relationship. Difficulties with sex often reflect problems in other areas of the marriage as well. In order for couples to resolve conflicts about sexual matters, it is crucial that they communicate directly and specifically about their needs and desires. Many people feel very vulnerable in this area, so it is important that the discussion be done in a gentle, loving manner.

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#### **Children**

Child rearing is a time-consuming task that requires huge amounts of energy. It's easy for spouses to become frustrated with each other over this issue. Husbands and wives often have conflicting views about how to parent because they were raised differently. Agreement about the best way to raise children may not always be possible, so it is necessary that spouses learn to compromise and negotiate in this area. Whatever decisions and rules parents make, it is important that they be united in front of their children. Otherwise, the children will learn to play one parent off the other, further contributing to marital disharmony.

#### **Gender differences in conflict**

Due to a combination of social and biological factors, men and women have different styles of interacting and handling conflict. Women raise concerns and problems far more often than men

do. Men are more likely to avoid conflict and downplay the strong emotions that they feel inside. When men close down and suppress their feelings, women often become more insistent that they discuss the issues that have been raised. At this point, however, men only want to withdraw further. These different ways of interacting can lead to frustration and misunderstandings.

In order to overcome frustration with communication styles, it is essential that both husbands and wives improve their methods of dealing with conflict. Wives need to make sure that they bring up issues gently and in a positive, non-confrontational manner. A soft, gentle approach in introducing a topic for discussion usually has a greater chance of leading to a satisfactory solution for both partners. Husbands need to respond to their wives' concerns and complaints in a respectful manner. They can learn to recognize when their wives need to talk and take a more active role in resolving issues instead of withdrawing. It is each partner's responsibility to respect and honor his or her spouse and make an effort to communicate as effectively as possible.

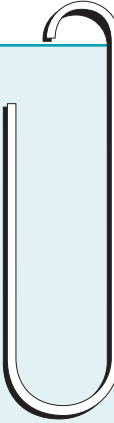
#### **The importance of managing conflict well**

Although some conflict is unavoidable, it is critical that spouses manage their differences in constructive ways. There are several reasons for this. First, if husbands and wives do not handle conflict effectively, it is likely that negativity will increasingly become part of their relationship. As unresolved conflict and negativity grow in a marriage, the good aspects of the relationship often diminish and partners become disenchanted with each other. Second, research has shown that, when spouses are unhappy in their marriages, they tend to experience more physical and emotional problems than do happily

married couples. People who are satisfied with their marriage even tend to live longer than those in unhappy marriages.

This finding leads to a third reason why it is important for spouses to manage their conflict well. A strong and satisfying marriage establishes a firm foundation from which spouses can function. When the quality of marriage is positive and supportive, partners can better attend to their personal responsibilities and obligations. A strong marriage also provides people with a greater opportunity to develop their personalities and talents than does an unhappy union. Although marriage requires a considerable amount of time and effort, it is crucial that partners care for their own needs and development as well. They can best do this when the relationship is warm and encouraging and they know how to handle marital conflict effectively.

Finally, it is essential that spouses practice good conflict management skills for the sake of their children. Conflict and hostility are extremely harmful to children's well-being. Many studies have shown that marital conflict leads to poor outcomes in children, such as decreased self-esteem, greater stress and anxiety, low achievement at school and behavioral problems. Conversely, spouses who support each other and have peaceful marriages are more likely to have well-adjusted, competent children. However, an unhappy marriage should not be preserved solely for the children's sake. Children in two-parent families marked by a lot of conflict often fare worse than those in families that have undergone a peaceful divorce. Whatever the situation, it is important that spouses learn to manage their disagreements effectively and control the amount of conflict in their relationship. This will help foster the well-being of themselves and their children.



## Ideas for effective marital communication

- ✓ When your spouse talks to you, try to understand what he or she is feeling.
- ✓ Give your partner both verbal and nonverbal feedback so he or she will know that you have understood what he or she meant.
- ✓ Be aware of the nonverbal messages you send when someone is talking to you, such as facial expressions or body posture. These can be very powerful!
- ✓ Refrain from voicing judgmental comments and jumping to conclusions before your partner is done speaking.
- ✓ Show respect for your spouse's perspective, even if you do not agree with it.
- ✓ Take the time to really listen when your spouse needs to talk. Doing this will help him or her feel that you value his or her opinions and ideas.
- ✓ When you need to have an important discussion, remove distractions as much as possible so you can talk with each other more easily. For example, take a walk outside in order to get away from the telephone or talk in your bedroom where the children will not interrupt.
- ✓ Communicate clearly and directly so your partner will have a greater opportunity to understand you.
- ✓ When you are speaking, focus on expressing your own feelings, not trying to guess what your partner is thinking.

## Skills for handling conflict

Because managing conflict is so important, it is essential that you practice certain skills that will enable you to handle conflict well. The following sections highlight some of the skills needed for dealing with differences and disagreements effectively.

### Open communication

Good communication can be difficult at times — especially during conflict. People often hear a different message than what the speaker intended. There are several possible reasons for this. First, spouses are often preoccupied with their own concerns or are preparing a rebuttal and do not really listen to what their partners are saying. Second, spouses may perceive their partners' messages negatively if they are tired or in a bad mood. Finally, different styles of communicating can also result in misunderstandings.

Partners can learn to communicate better by developing more effective ways of speaking and listening. It is important to take turns in a conversation so each can have the opportunity to express his or her thoughts and ideas. The person talking should focus on his own feelings and not attempt to read his partner's mind. He should also be positive and avoid making accusations or criticizing his spouse. The person listening needs to be aware of her body language. Eye rolling, negative facial expressions and crossing one's arms may signal disapproval to the person who is speaking. Even if the listener does not agree with what her partner is saying, she needs to make an attempt to understand his viewpoint and be respectful. Showing genuine interest in someone's feelings and refraining from giving unsolicited advice go a long way in creating an atmos-

phere that is conducive to positive communication.

### Controlling negative thoughts

The way a person treats others usually reflects the kinds of thoughts he or she has about them. This pattern holds true for spouses, especially during times of conflict. When partners focus on each other's shortcomings and weaknesses, they often fall prey to having negative thoughts about each other. This negative thinking makes it more likely that they will treat each other unkindly.

Suppose a wife comes home from work at the end of a long, hard day in a bad mood. Her husband is in the kitchen making dinner and calls out, "How was your day?" Instead of responding to his question, the wife snaps at him for having left his coat and briefcase on the kitchen table. How might the husband react? If he is in the habit of thinking positively about his wife and giving her the benefit of the doubt, he may think, "She must have had a really hard day." He might stop what he is doing and give his wife his full attention so he could try to find out what is really bothering her. However, if the husband takes offense at his wife's complaint and thinks, "Here I am, cooking dinner, and all she can do is criticize me," he will be more likely to respond negatively to his wife's complaint and further escalate the conflict.

Research supports these ideas about the power of one's thoughts. Marriage researchers have determined that stable marriages have more positive than negative interactions, while the opposite is true for unstable unions. Because negative interactions are

often fueled by one's thoughts, negative thinking can have a significant impact upon a relationship. Therefore, because the substance of a person's thoughts is often a powerful determinant of his actions, it is very important for spouses to control the way they think about each other. Husbands and wives can do this during times of conflict by focusing on the troublesome issue instead of their partner's flaws. By keeping their feelings about the issue and their spouse separate, it is more likely that they will manage conflict better and have a healthier relationship.

### Forgiveness

Because there will be hurt feelings and conflict from time to time in every marriage, it is very important that spouses forgive each other when arguments and disagreements occur. Forgiveness enables partners to stay emotionally connected and keep their marriage positive. If people want their relationships to grow and become stronger, they must be willing to forgive their spouses whenever necessary. When spouses do not forgive each other, remain bitter and hold grudges, they often experience physical and emotional problems. Thus, forgiveness is important to the individual health of each partner as well as to the health of the relationship!



### Problem solving

All couples will encounter problems in their marriage that will require problem solving skills. At these times, it is very important that the spouses work together as a team, instead of insisting on their point of view and working against each other. It is crucial to understand problems before attempting to solve them. Problem solving is a much smoother process when spouses have discussed the issue thoroughly and each partner feels understood. Surprisingly, research has shown that after a good discussion about a troublesome issue, most people are so satisfied that there is no need to come up with a solution to the problem. Usually, people just want the opportunity to express themselves and feel as if they have really been understood.

Of course, many problems still need to be resolved, even after open, productive discussion. Markman, Stanley and Blumberg, a team of prominent marriage researchers, have identified an effective process for solving problems.

- ✓ It helps to set a specific time to work on the problem so that partners can mentally and emotionally prepare. During the meeting, spouses should think of as many solutions to the problem as possible, ruling out nothing until all possible solutions have been presented.
- ✓ The next step is to choose the solution, or combination of solutions, that will best solve the problem. It is likely that negotiation and compromise will be necessary at this step of the problem solving process.
- ✓ After testing the chosen solution for an agreed upon length of time, it is important for spouses to discuss the solution and whether the problem is being solved adequately. If not, adjustments should be made.

Not every issue that arises will require such an extensive problem solving process, but these steps can help couples solve their problems in a calm, controlled manner.

## Changing oneself first

It is common for husbands and wives to overlook their own weaknesses and focus instead on the faults of their spouse. In some marriages, one person feels that his or her partner is the cause of their marital problems and the only one who really needs to change in order for the relationship to improve. This may occasionally be true. However, in the vast majority of marriages, both partners make a contribution to the conflict and problems that arise.

It is crucial that spouses realize that the only person's behavior they can control is their own. In marriage, it is typical for partners to become annoyed or irritated with what they perceive to be their spouses' personal shortcomings, unusual habits and weaknesses. For example, a wife may feel upset because her husband arrives home from work late on a regular basis. Or, the husband may resent how his wife cuts him off in the middle of conversations. Frustration over shortcomings such as these often builds over time, motivating people to insist that their partners change. However, people usually end up discovering that their demands are not granted and their efforts to change their partners have failed.

Instead of trying to compel each other to change, it is more effective for partners to honestly assess themselves and think about what they can do to make the relationship better. Considering the contributions they make to disagreements and trying to overcome their own weaknesses will accomplish far more than dwelling on their spouse's faults. **When husbands and wives stop trying to change each**

**other and instead shift their attention to improving their own behavior, they will likely be more content, even if their partner continues to do the things that they do not like.**

When spouses choose to make changes in themselves first, regardless of what their partner does, they are often surprised to find that the overall quality of their relationship improves dramatically. In an ideal situation, of course, both spouses continually strive to improve themselves and overcome their weaknesses. However, one spouse is often more committed to self-improvement than the other, at least for a while. Nevertheless, even if the other person does not feel a need to change himself or herself, the marriage will likely improve through the efforts of the one trying to change.

## Strengthening the marital relationship

Although it is important for spouses to learn how to resolve differences, having a good marriage requires more than just being able to manage conflict effectively. What else is needed to create a strong and satisfying marriage? Recent research has shown that the most satisfied spouses have marriages based on good friendship. Nurturing the positive aspects of the marital relationship on a regular basis is also important. This final section will highlight ways in which husbands and wives can strengthen their marriages, including being good friends, performing daily acts of kindness, sharing enjoyable times and creating family traditions.

## Remain good friends

Many people say that having a friendship with their spouse is an important goal of their marriage. Life usually becomes more complicated as marriage progresses. If a marital relationship is not built upon a solid founda-

## How to be best friends

- ✓ Talk.
- ✓ Hold hands.
- ✓ Go for walks.
- ✓ Dance.
- ✓ Play games.
- ✓ Work on a mutual project together.
- ✓ Plan little surprises for each other.
- ✓ Laugh together.
- ✓ Compliment each other often.
- ✓ Create memories together.
- ✓ Leave unexpected notes of praise.
- ✓ Develop signals that say "I love you."
- ✓ Go on a date.
- ✓ Say "thank you" for little kindnesses.
- ✓ Talk about your dreams.
- ✓ Listen to music.
- ✓ Say "I love you."
- ✓ Remember birthdays and anniversaries.
- ✓ Have a candlelight dinner.
- ✓ Go for an evening or afternoon drive.

*(Adapted from Kansas State University Extension)*

ation of friendship, it may become more difficult for partners to stay connected over time. It is also easy for spouses to become less polite and respectful to each other as time passes because they feel more comfortable with each other. However, spouses who remain good friends throughout life usually find much more enjoyment and satisfaction in their relationship.

There are many things spouses can do to keep their friendship alive.

- ✓ Set aside a specific time each day to talk and reconnect. In some marriages, spouses stop confiding in

each other and stop having stimulating discussions, only to later discover that they do not know each other very well anymore. All people change over time, and partners need to continue to learn about each other's thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

- ✓ Another way to maintain friendship in marriage is to have weekly "dates." Dates allow spouses to spend time along together, which can be especially important if they have children. Partners can also build friendship by trying to avoid conflict during "couple times," making the time spent together more enjoyable and memorable.

### Perform daily acts of kindness

Another way for couples to strengthen their marriage is to express fondness and concern for each other on a daily basis. Showing kindness in little ways is important for several reasons. First, it enables spouses to increase their love for each other and become better friends. It also

keeps little annoyances from being blown out of proportion, which helps the relationship stay strong. Daily acts of kindness can also promote the growth of romance in the marriage. When many people think about romance, they envision going away for a weekend to celebrate their anniversary or receiving a dozen roses. Instances such as these are certainly romantic. However, John Gottman has found that true romance is best preserved when partners frequently respect and care for each other in ordinary ways.

There is an endless variety of little things spouses can do to show thoughtfulness to each other on a daily basis. A few examples include writing love notes or sending special e-mail messages, helping each other with a project and preparing a favorite breakfast. It is important that spouses do not take for granted the power of such actions. Performing small, simple acts of kindness regularly can have a dramatic impact upon the quality of one's marriage.



### Share enjoyable times

Most relationships start out with a lot of emphasis on dating and having fun together. After they get married, many spouses become busier and stop making special times a priority.

However, it is **very important for partners to take the time to enjoy their relationship.** Research has

shown that the amount of fun time spouses spend together is a major factor in the happiness of their marriage. Sharing enjoyable times prevents people from getting bored with their relationships and helps rejuvenate them when they are very busy and preoccupied with other cares and concerns.

In order for spouses to increase the amount of enjoyment in their relationship, it is likely that they will have to deliberately plan leisure time into their schedules. Planning and scheduling goes a long way in ensuring that the activity will actually happen and not be shoved aside by a more pressing matter. Spouses can have fun together in simple ways, such as going on picnics, taking walks, laughing together and having long talks. They can also plan more extensive times for pleasure, such as all-day outings or vacations. It does not matter what the activity is, as long as it allows both partners to relax and enjoy each other's company.

### Create family traditions

Observing family traditions and rituals is another way spouses can strengthen their marriage. Traditions and rituals serve many important functions in families. First, they enable husbands and wives to figure out what is important to them and their relationship. They also give meaning and predictability to marriages and families. Rituals help couples recharge themselves from the stresses of everyday life and increase the amount of intimacy in their relationships. A marriage that is marked by many traditions and rituals is often richer and more purposeful than those that are not.

There are many ways to incorporate traditions and rituals into the marital relationship.

- ✓ Having a private conversation at the end of each day is one common ritual observed by many spouses.

- ✓ Going on a weekly date is another typical marriage ritual.

However, traditions and rituals can be less formal than these examples. In fact, many marriages include traditions and rituals of which the spouses may be unaware.

- ✓ Kissing each other goodbye each morning, talking on the phone during lunch and taking walks on a regular basis are all examples of less obvious rituals.
- ✓ Many spouses also have rituals connected to special days, such as Valentine's Day and wedding anniversaries.

These traditions enable them to reaffirm their love and devotion to one another. Whether traditions and rituals in marriage are simple or elaborate, they are important and give the relationship shared meaning and significance.

## Conclusion

Marriage is a challenging endeavor that requires hard work, determination and discipline. However, as this guide has shown, it also has the potential to be very rewarding and satisfying. Spouses who seek to incorporate positivity, empathy, commitment, acceptance, and mutual love and respect into their relationship are more likely to have a fulfilling marriage. Husbands and wives also benefit when they understand the nature of conflict and know how to manage it successfully.

Finally, when people base their mar-

riages on friendship, thoughtfulness, fun and traditions, they usually find joy and happiness in their relationship. Creating a strong and satisfying marriage is possible, and it is definitely worth the effort!

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