

For Better: Four Proven Ways to A Strong And Stable Marriage

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For Better:

Four Proven Ways to a Strong and Stable Marriage

Jeffrey Dew, Brad Wilcox, and Jason Carroll

“Marriage is a path to misery and a transition of loss marked by giving up and missing out.” This is the message that, surprisingly enough, is emanating from both leftwing journalists like Amy Shearn, who tells us in *The New York Times* that “Married motherhood in America... is a game no one wins,”¹ and rightwing online influencers like Andrew Tate, who claim “there is zero advantage to marriage in the Western world for a man”—especially because “it’s very common that women” divorce their husbands.² Given the rise of so many anti-marriage voices in the public square, not to mention technological, cultural, and educational shifts that have made it harder to find a romantic partner, it should come as no surprise that a growing share of young adults are discounting marriage and turning towards work as the focus of their lives. One Pew Research Center survey found, for instance, that today’s men and women are about three times more likely to consider “career enjoyment” as the “key to living a fulfilling life,” compared with “marriage.”³

But what many elites and ordinary Americans alike do not realize is that, in general, married men and women across the United States are much more likely to be both prosperous and happy than their single peers. Married men and women, for instance, have about 10 times the assets as their single peers in their 50s, heading towards retirement, as

¹ Amy Shearn, “A 50/50 Custody Arrangement Could Save Your Marriage,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2022.

² Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York City: HarperCollins, 2024): pg. ix.

³ Kim Parker and Rachel Minkin, “What Makes for a Fulfilling Life?” Pew Research Center, Sept. 14, 2023.

Brad Wilcox notes in his book, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization*.⁴ Perhaps more importantly, both married men and women are almost twice as likely to be “very happy” with their lives, compared to their unmarried peers, according to *Get Married*. They also report more meaning and less loneliness than their unmarried peers. These results parallel other recent research from University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman indicating that for both men and women, marriage is “the most important differentiator” of who is happy in America.⁵ Meanwhile, Peltzman concluded that falling marriage rates are a chief reason why happiness has declined nationally. His research found an astounding 30-percentage-point happiness gap between married and unmarried Americans.

Within Their Reach

Although the research on the benefits of marriage is robust, it is also clear that the benefits of marriage do not generally extend to men and women who experience persistent marital unhappiness or end up divorced. Accordingly, it is important to understand what factors predict marital quality and stability in the twenty-first century.

Increasing knowledge about how to create a loving and lasting marriage is particularly important for the rising generation, as recent studies show⁶ that most teens and young adults continue to have plans to one day get married and have children. In fact, the MAST Center (or Marriage Strengthening Research & Dissemination Center) recently analyzed the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and found that 95% of teens ages 15 to 19 still hope to get married when they get older.⁷

Unfortunately, some young adults are losing confidence that they can actually have the

⁴ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York City: HarperCollins, 2024).

⁵ Sam Peltzman, “The Socio-Political Demography of Happiness,” *George J. Stigler Center for the Study of the Economy & the State Working Paper 331* (2023).

⁶ Alysse ElHage, “Do Today’s Teens See Marriage and Children in Their Future?” *The Institute for Family Studies*, Oct. 12, 2022.

⁷ Katherine Graham, Karen Benjamin Guzzo, & Wendy D. Manning, “Teens Self-reported Expectations and Intentions for Marriage, Cohabitation, and Childbearing,” *Marriage Strengthening Research & Dissemination Center* (MAST), Sept. 2022.

successful marriage they hope for. This is because they have not seen good models of marriage in their own families of origin and have not been taught how to make a marriage that will last. They do not understand that not all marriages are the same. We often do not distinguish between different types of marriages in our cultural narrative about couple relationships. But the truth is that different couples marry for different reasons, have different priorities, and have different patterns of interaction.

Young people are frequently unaware of the fact that different kinds of marriages have unique profiles of risk factors and protective factors, and because of this, the divorce rate varies greatly. They have never been told that many marriages have strong foundations that make them incredibly resilient and enduring. And they certainly are not aware that many of the most important protective factors that contribute to an enduring and flourishing marriage are controllable and fall within the scope of their agency.

There is a growing need to help young people understand that the true roots of enduring marriage are within their reach and that there are proactive ways that they can initiate and form an enduring union. Given young adults' high desire for marriage, understanding the truth of how loving and lasting marriages are formed can help the rising generation have confidence in their own ability to pursue this path in their own lives.

Helping young people achieve their life goals of marriage is deeply important because a happy marriage is one of the best predictors of life satisfaction for men and women.⁸ Accordingly, in this report from the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute, we sought to find the top attitudes and behaviors that were predictive of a high-quality and stable marriage in a recent survey of married men and women.

A New Study of What Makes Marriage Work

We used data from the 2022 State of Our Unions Survey (SOU22) to identify leading predictors of marital quality. The SOU22 was collected by the survey research firm

⁸ Jonathan Rothwell, "Married People Are Living Their Best Lives," *The Institute for Family Studies/Gallup*, February 9, 2024.

YouGov in September 2022. The data contain responses from 2,000 married men and women in the United States between the ages of 18–55. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute.

Marital Happiness

We focused first on participants' overall marital happiness. We began by separating participants into two groups—those who were “very happily” married and those who were not. The SOU22 measured overall marital happiness on a scale from 1–7. If participants said they were “very happy, extremely, or perfectly” happy (a 5, 6, or 7 on the scale), we assigned them to the “very happily” married group. In this sample, 73% were in the very happy group. Otherwise, they were in the “not very happily” married group.

Next, we conducted an iterative series of logistic regressions to see which of 11 attitudes and behaviors related to different features of marriage—*communion* (e.g., frequent date nights), *children* (e.g., attitudes towards divorce involving children), *commitment* (e.g., taking the view that marriage is for life), *protectiveness* (e.g., reporting that your spouse is protective), and *community* (e.g., joint religious attendance)—that we hypothesized would be linked to marital quality and were most predictive of being in the “very happily” married group.⁹ We first ran a logistic regression with all 11 of the marriage variables that also

⁹ Those variables were:

1. Pooling finances (fully pooling their finances vs. Not fully),
2. Having frequent date nights (at least once a month or more),
3. Reporting that “it’s definitely true” that one’s spouse is “protective”,
4. Regularly attending worship services together (several times a month or more),
5. “mostly” or “completely agreeing” that divorce should be avoided if kids are involved
6. Having high levels of marital commitment (completely agreeing that “my relationship with my spouse is more important to me than almost anything else in my life”),
7. Stating that they felt that marriage was a matter of “we before me” rather than needing to “look after your own needs first” to have a good marriage,
8. Feeling that marriage is “for life” rather than “for as long as you feel fulfilled in the relationship,”
9. Completely agreeing that children are “one of life’s greatest joys,”
10. Feeling that “marriage is mostly about an intense emotional/romantic connection between two adults rather than “marriage is partly about romance but also about the kids, money, and raising a family together,”
11. And following an old boyfriend/girlfriend online

included controls for age, education, income, presence of children in the home, and race/ethnicity. After the first analysis, six¹⁰ of the 11 measures were statistically significant. We performed another logistic regression retaining those six variables, along with the control variables. In the second regression, only four variables remained statistically significant—these were having the highest level of marital commitment, feeling that one's spouse is “protective,” regularly attending religious worship services with one's spouse, and having regular date nights. (See Appendix, Table 1 for more details).

We performed these analyses separately for wives and husbands. Interestingly, the findings were similar for both men and women. The odds of being very happy in marriage based on these characteristics are shown in Figure 1.

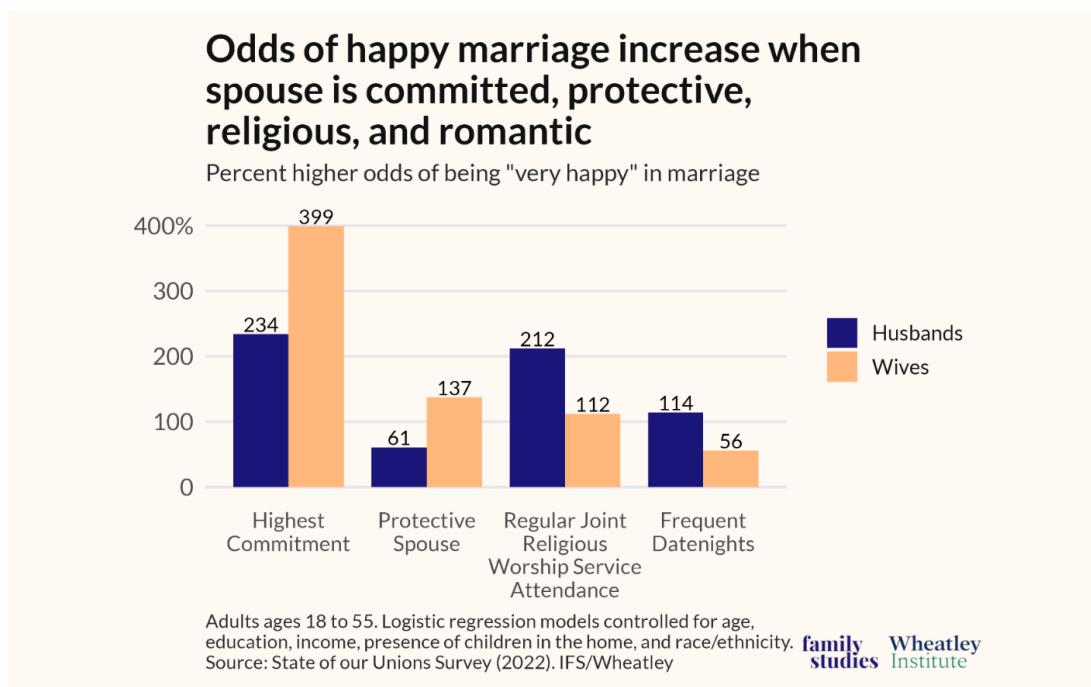


Figure 1. The Likelihood of Being “Very Happy” in Marriage

¹⁰ Fully pooling their finances (+), having regular date nights (+), feeling that their spouse is “protective” (+), regularly attending worship services together (+), having high levels of marital commitment (+), and following an old boyfriend/girlfriend online (-).

Divorce Proneness

Our procedures to assess the likelihood that husbands and wives' marriages would end in divorce were the same as marital happiness. First, we separated the participants into two groups. The SOU22 asked participants how likely they felt that their marriage would end in divorce. Those participants who responded "not at all likely" were put into the group who had high subjective marital stability. Participants who did not respond this way were put into the other group.

We then ran an iterative series of logistic regressions to see which of the 11 measures were most predictive of saying that divorce was "not at all likely." After two analyses, four variables remained. The strongest predictors of feeling that one's marriage is "highly unlikely" to end in divorce were the same predictors of being "very happy" in marriage. That is, having the highest level of commitment to one's marriage, feeling that one's spouse is "protective," and regularly attending religious worship services were all strongly associated with lower proneness to divorce (see *Figure 2*). Having regular date nights also reduced wives' reports of divorce proneness, but this was not the case for husbands. (See Appendix, Table 2 for details).

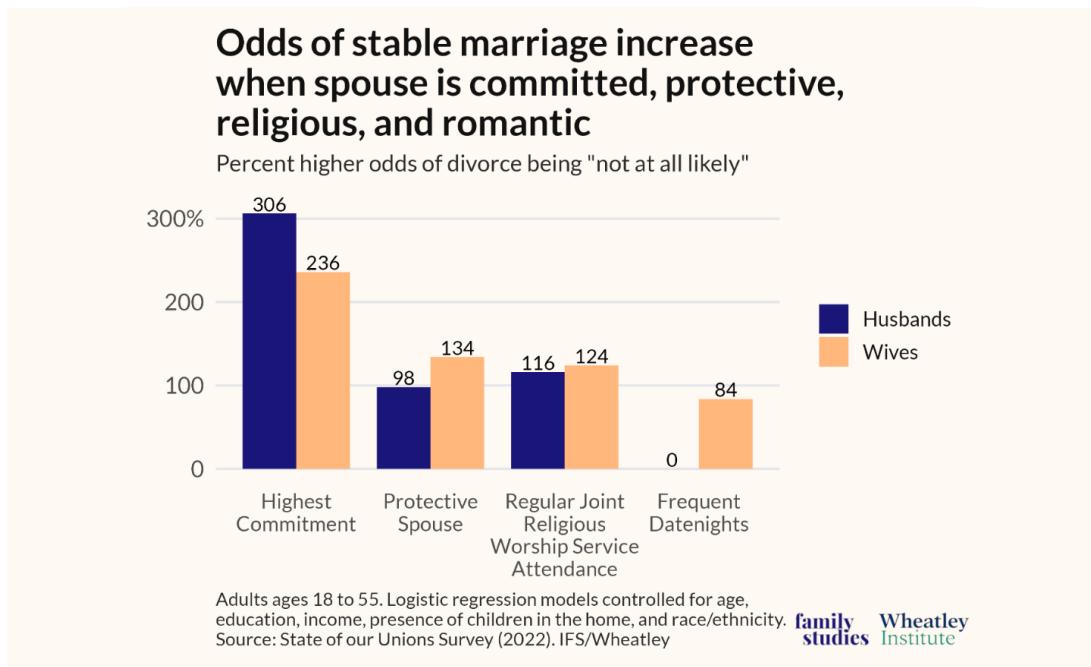


Figure 2. The Likelihood of Being in a Very Stable Marriage

Four Proven Ways to Create a Strong Marriage

It is striking that the same four factors are strong predictors of both happiness and stability in marriage for both men and women. This creates extra confidence that these aspects of marriage are particularly strong in predicting which marriages will be happy and thriving. It is also worth noting that all of these factors are attitudes and behaviors that spouses can actively choose and put into practice in their relationships. Simply put, each factor provides some “how-to help” for couples striving to stay close to each other and make their marriage last.

1

Be Fully Committed to Your Spouse and Your Marriage

It should be no surprise that the first factor we found was the depth of commitment spouses have to their spouse and their marriage. Specifically, we found that wives who completely agreed that their relationship with their husband was one of the most important things in their lives were 399% more likely to be very happy in their marriage than wives who did not report the same amount of commitment to their relationship.

For husbands, completely agreeing that their marriage was one of the most important parts of their lives was linked to a 234% increase in the odds of being very happy in their marriage relative to other less committed husbands.

We found the same pattern when it came to the likelihood of divorce. Specifically, husbands and wives with the highest levels of commitment had odds of reporting that divorce was “not at all likely” that were 306% and 236% higher than their less committed counterparts.

Marriage experts have long emphasized the importance of commitment to one’s marriage

as a foundation for developing a flourishing marriage. While commitment has always been an important part of a healthy marriage, it may be even more significant for couples today where they are surrounded by media and cultural trends that often encourage spouses to turn their attention toward work, friends, and technology.

According to Scott Stanley, one of the world's foremost experts on couple commitment, there are four important components of lasting commitment in marriage:¹¹

- 1 A desire for a future together.

- 2 A sense of "us" or "we"—or as being part of a team,

- 3 A high sense of priority for the relationship, and

- 4 A sense of satisfaction with sacrificing for the other.

From his years of research, Stanley notes that marriage functions like a long-term investment and that it is the expectation of longevity that makes the day-to-day investment rational. He explains that people require a sense of security about the future of the relationship in order to fully invest in the present for that future. This is the nature of commitment in marriage, in which some options are given up in favor of the richer possibilities of building a life together.

In contrast, Stanley has found that relationships with no clear sense of a future often turn to forms of pressure for performance in the present relationship—because there is no

¹¹ Scott Stanley, "Me, You, and Us: We-Ness and Couple Identity," The Institute for Family Studies, June 14, 2021.

guarantee that the partner will stay.¹² Couples also often fall into patterns of scorekeeping about spouses' levels of effort and investment, and anxiety increases in the relationship because there is no confidence that the relationship will continue. Simply put, couples do best when they have a clear sense of couple identity and a long-term view.

2

Be Protective of Your Spouse

The biggest surprise of this new study was the second factor that we found to be strongly predictive of a flourishing marriage for both wives and husbands—having a highly “protective” spouse. In our study, spouses were presented with a list of 10 attributes and asked to report how well each trait described their spouse using a response range of “Not at all true” to “Definitely true.” The word list included the personal traits of ambitious, protective, confident, physically strong, good provider, respectful, attractive, loving, and sexually responsive. While several of these traits are associated with marital happiness and stability at the bivariate level, the spousal trait of being “protective” is the real standout in multi-factor models.

In fact, wives who felt that it was “definitely true” that their husbands are protective were 137% more likely to be very happy in their marriage than their peers who rated their husbands as less protective. Wives with protective husbands were also 134% more likely to report that they have a highly stable marriage than other wives. Similarly, husbands who reported that they have highly protective wives were 61% more likely to be very happily married and 98% more likely to be in a highly stable marriage than other husbands with less protective spouses.

What does it mean to have a protective spouse and how is this factor associated with creating a flourishing marriage? While we can't say for certain which types of “protection” spouses meant when they answered this question, previous research on couples gives us some sense of what types of protection most benefit marriage.

¹² Scott Stanley. *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2005).

First, having a “protective spouse” should not be interpreted as having an “overprotective” spouse. The term “overprotective” is sometimes used in reference to boyfriends or husbands that exhibit possessive or controlling tendencies, which are clear indicators of an unhealthy relationship. But in our analyses, identifying your spouse as “protective” was predictive of relationship happiness for both husbands and wives. At the same time, wives’ rating of their husband’s protectiveness was a more powerful predictor of their happiness than vice versa.

We believe that the term “protective” in our study partly captured wives’ sense that their husband makes them feel physically safe. For instance, a number of the married women interviewed for *Get Married* mentioned that their husband made them feel safer both at home and when they were out and about. One woman noted how much she appreciated that her husband protected her from a mugger in a subway; several indicated they liked the way that their husbands took the outside of the sidewalk when they walked on city streets; and several also mentioned that their husbands were responsible for making sure that their homes were physically secure at night. These sentiments were expressed by both conservative and liberal women interviewed for the book and are consistent with a broader literature indicating that women appreciate physical protectiveness as an indicator of a husband’s willingness to invest in them.¹³ They are also consistent with evidence indicating women are more attracted to men who are physically strong,¹⁴ and that they worry more about their day-to-day physical safety than men.¹⁵ Accordingly, one reason we think wives’ reports of their husbands’ protectiveness are so strongly tied to the perceived quality and stability of their marriage is that wives are happier when they feel physically safe at home and when they are out and about with their husbands.

But it is noteworthy that husbands also are happier when they report their wives are protective. This leads us to hypothesize that “protectiveness” encompasses more than

¹³ Pelin Gul, and Tom R. Kupfer, “Benevolent Sexism and Mate Preferences: Why Do Women Prefer Benevolent Men Despite Recognizing That They Can Be Undermining?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2019): 146-161.

¹⁴ Aaron Sell, Aaron W. Lukaszewski, and Michael Townsley, “Cues of Upper Body Strength Account for Most of the Variance in Men’s Bodily Attractiveness,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 284 (2017).

¹⁵ Elizabeth A. Stanko, “The Case of Fearful Women: Gender, Personal Safety, and Fear of Crime,” *Women & Criminal Justice* 4, no. 1 (1993): 117-135; Jodi Lane, Angela Gover, Sara Dahod, “Fear of Violent Crime Among Men & Women on Campus: The Impact of Perceived Risk and Fear of Sexual Assault,” *Violence and Victims* 24, no. 2 (April 2009).

physical safety. We suspect protectiveness is also understood in the sense that their spouse protects their relationship by being loyal and faithful. This would fit with other research showing that loyalty and commitment are among the most important factors that lead to stable, long-term marriages.¹⁶ Protective spouses safeguard their relationships by looking out for the social welfare of their partners in professional, social, and family settings, and by not talking negatively about their spouse to others outside of the relationship. For instance, verbally defending your spouse from a negative comment at a family gathering or making sure they feel comfortable at a neighborhood social gathering are markers of loyalty that are likely perceived as “protective” by both husbands and wives. According to research conducted by the Gottman Institute, building commitment and loyalty is the culminating phase of a love relationship—the developmental phase in which couples create a deeper love that will last a lifetime.¹⁷

Another important aspect of being a protective spouse is to safeguard your marriage from infidelity. Fidelity—that sense of being off the market once we enter marriage and purposefully avoiding emotional and physical intimacy with former partners, work colleagues, and friends—is a cornerstone of protecting a relationship and makes a real difference in the amount of happiness and stability couples experience in their marriage. Studies have shown that a lack of commitment and infidelity are two of the most common reasons for divorce.¹⁸

It is worth noting that our first analysis model in this study also identified that husbands and wives who maintain strong boundaries online against potential sexual and romantic alternatives are also more likely to be happy in their relationships (i.e., not following an old boyfriend/girlfriend online).

¹⁶ Reza Karimi, Maryam Bakhtiyari, and Abbas Masjedi Arani, “Protective Factors of Marital Stability in Long-Term Marriage Globally: A Systematic Review,” *Epidemiology and Health* 41 (2019).

¹⁷ John Gottman, “The 3 Phases of Love,” *The Gottman Institute*, Nov. 19, 2014.

¹⁸ Shelby B. Scott, Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, Elizabeth S. Allen, and Howard J. Markman, “Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education,” *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2013): 131.

3

Participate in Shared Church Attendance

Another factor that strongly predicts marital happiness and stability is shared church attendance for spouses. Our analysis found that wives who attended church regularly with their husbands had odds of being very happy in marriage that were 112% higher than women who attended less often or not at all. For husbands, regular shared church attendance was associated with a 212% boost in their odds of being very happy in marriage compared with their less religious or non-religious peers.

Again, we also found that shared religious attendance is strongly linked to having a marriage that lasts. Specifically, wives reporting regular joint worship service attendance had odds of reporting high marital stability that were 124% higher than other wives' odds. Husbands reporting regular joint worship service attendance had odds of reporting perceived stability that were 116% higher than their less religious peers.

In another recent study, we found that the benefits of religion for marriage increase even more when spouses engage in shared home-centered religious practices.¹⁹ Specifically, we found that married couples who consistently engage in home-centered religious practices are nearly twice as likely as their less-religious peers, and more than four times more likely than their nonreligious peers, to report feeling a high sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. They are also significantly more likely to report high levels of life satisfaction and happiness. For example, they report significantly higher relationship stability, emotional closeness, and sexual satisfaction in their marriages. Couples who regularly engage in home religious practices also report significantly higher levels of shared decision making between partners, fewer money problems, and more frequent patterns of loving behavior such as forgiveness, commitment, and kindness than their less-religious peers.

¹⁹ Jason S. Carroll and Spencer L. James, *A Not-So-Good Faith Estimate*, A Wheatley Institute Report (Provo: The Wheatley Institute, 2022).

These findings lend new contemporary evidence for some of the long-recognized mechanisms associated with the benefits of religious participation. Specifically, these explanations can be organized around the beliefs, behaviors, and belonging that shared religious participation—both in church attendance and home worship practices—provide for couples and families.

Beliefs



Part of the reason faith matters is that it fosters beliefs such as commitment to marital permanence and fidelity—that tend to strengthen marriages. In various ways, religious communities often emphasize commitment in marriage relationships and encourage prioritizing family life and child well-being as a significant part of religious devotion. In almost all world faiths, marriage and family relationships are held up as something sacred, and, therefore, deserving of the highest attention in people's life priorities. Religious teachings also often place a strong emphasis on love, forgiveness, respectful behavior, and putting the needs of others above one's own. This emphasis on virtuous living may also improve the quality of married life and lower the likelihood of divorce. Therefore, as Curtis and Ellison have observed, regular involvement in religious practices may "reinforce beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, while helping to define appropriate marital conduct and assisting partners in fulfilling their familial roles."²⁰

²⁰ Kristen Taylor Curtis and Christopher G. Ellison, "Religious Heterogamy and Marital Conflict: Findings from the National Survey of Families and Households," *Journal of Family Issues* 23, no. 4 (2002): 551-576.

Behaviors



Second, previous studies have shown that shared religious behaviors between partners help account for the link between church attendance and a happy relationship.²¹ Previous studies show that prayer and other shared personal religious activities help couples deal with stress, enable them to focus on shared hopes for the future, and allow them to deal constructively with challenges and problems in their relationship.²² In simple terms, it appears that more often than not, the couple that prays together flourishes together.

Belonging



Previous research also indicates that a sense of belonging and social support also helps explain the power of joint church attendance and home religious practices.²³ Religious communities can also support marriages through classes and seminars, publications, and pastoral counseling, which may promote improved communication and conflict resolution. Religious institutions often provide various types of family support, including a place for families to get to know one another and build relationships, programs for children, marital and premarital counseling, and retreats and workshops focused on building a good marriage.

²¹ W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Living and Loving 'Decent': Religion and Relationship Quality among Urban Parents," *Social Science Research* 37, no. 3 (2008): 828-843.

²² Ashley N. Cooper, Ross W. May, and Frank D. Fincham, "Stress Spillover and Crossover in Couple Relationships: Integrating Religious Beliefs and Prayer," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 11, no. 2 (2019): 289-314.

²³ W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Living and Loving 'Decent': Religion and Relationship Quality Among Urban Parents," *Social Science Research* 37, no. 3 (2008): 828-843.

It is important to note that a sense of belonging is not simply between religious individuals and their fellow adherents but may also extend to their sense of belonging with God.

Annette Mahoney, Kenneth Pargament, and colleagues have greatly advanced understanding of how religious meanings are related to personal well-being, marital quality, and family relationships. For example, to examine sanctification in marriage relationships, they assessed the extent to which partners feel the presence of God in their marriage (e.g., "God is present in my marriage;" "My marriage is influenced by God's actions in our lives."), and whether they believe their marriage has sacred qualities.²⁴ A series of studies have found that perceived sanctification is related to marital satisfaction, greater collaboration between partners, less conflict in resolving disagreements, and greater investment in marriage.

4

Establish a Pattern of Going on Regular Date Nights

Finally, we found that married couples who have regular date nights are significantly more likely to be happy in their marriages. Wives reporting regular date nights had odds of being very happily married that were 56% higher than wives who went on date nights less often, and husbands who reported regular date nights had odds that were 114% higher than their peers who dated less.

Similarly, wives with regular date nights had odds of perceived marital stability that were 84% higher than wives who reported less frequent date nights. The fact that this factor was associated with wives' sense of relationship stability, but was not associated with husbands' views of divorce proneness suggests that regular date nights may be particularly important to how women appraise the quality of their marriage.

Although date nights are an important part of creating and maintaining a flourishing

²⁴ Kenneth I. Pargament and Annette Mahoney, "Sacred Matters: Sanctification as a Vital Topic for the Psychology of Religion," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 15, no. 3 (2005): 179-198.

marriage, only about half of couples go on frequent date nights.²⁵ But for couples who make the intentional effort to spend meaningful time together, there are numerous benefits for their relationships. Previous research indicates that in addition to being linked to marital happiness and more stable marriages, regular date nights are also linked to better communication, more commitment, and greater sexual satisfaction. For example: 68% of wives and 67% of husbands who had regular date nights were very happy with their sexual relationship, compared to only 47% of wives and 47% of husbands who did not have regular date nights.²⁶

In today's world, date nights are likely to strengthen relationships in a number of ways. The social science literature suggests at least three ways in which date nights may foster stronger marriages and relationships:

Communication



One of the crucial ingredients to a successful relationship is an open channel of communication. By removing distractions such as children and employment responsibilities, date nights may afford couples the opportunity to discuss things that are important to them—from their shared dreams for the future to the state of their family finances. Date nights may help partners and spouses “stay current” with each other’s lives and offer one another support for meeting these challenges. Communication also can be an important vehicle for approaching mutual difficulties productively and for fostering intimacy between partners. Thus, date nights should foster much-needed communication, mutual understanding, and a sense of communion between spouses and partners.

²⁵ Brad Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew, *The Date Night Opportunity*, A National Marriage Project and Wheatley Institute Report (Charlottesville: The National Marriage Project at UVA, 2023).

²⁶ Ibid.

Novelty



Most couples experience a decline in relationship quality after a few years, partly because they become habituated to one another and are more likely to take one another, and their relationship, for granted.²⁷ The initial excitement associated with getting to know a person, growing in intimacy, and trying new things as a couple can disappear as the two people settle into a routine. By contrast, a growing body of research suggests that couples who engage in novel activities that are fun, active, or otherwise arousing—from hiking to dancing to travel to card games—enjoy higher levels of relationship quality. Thus, date nights should foster this higher quality, especially insofar as couples use them to engage in exciting, active, or unusual activities. Is it also important that they choose activities that represent a balance of each partner’s interests, rather than tending to do things (novel or not) that are desired more by the same partner each time.²⁸

²⁷ Arthur Aron, Christina C. Norman, Elaine N. Aron, Colin McKenna, and Richard E. Heyman, “Couples’ Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship Quality,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 2 (2000): 273.

²⁸ Duane W. Crawford, Renate M. Houts, Ted L. Huston, and Laura J. George, “Compatibility, Leisure, and Satisfaction in Marital Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 2 (2002): 433-449.

Romance



Most contemporary relationships begin with an element of romance—that overwhelming love that is linked to passion, excitement, and a deep sense of attraction to one's beloved. But with time, the emotional and physical manifestations of romantic love tend to decline in most couples. Insofar as date nights allow couples to focus on their relationship, to share feelings, to engage in romantic activities with one another, and to try new things, date nights may strengthen or rekindle that romantic spark that can be helpful in sustaining the fires of love over the long haul. All of these things can foster higher levels of sexual satisfaction in a marriage or relationship.

We know that while the divorce rate in the United States is falling, a large minority of couples will dissolve their relationships. In order to strengthen families, for the sake of both adults and their offspring, couples need help to make their relationships work. Taken together, our results indicate that commitment, having a protective spouse, shared religious attendance, and frequent date nights are associated with higher quality marriages in America today.

Conclusion

Given rising rates of elite and public skepticism about marriage, it is important to spotlight features of contemporary married life that elevate the odds of marital success.

Accordingly, we examined 11 factors that might be linked to marital quality and stability in the 2022 State of Our Unions Survey from YouGov. This report indicates that four factors are especially predictive of higher quality and more stable marriages in the 21st century.

First, reporting high levels of commitment (i.e., completely agreeing that “My relationship with my spouse is more important to me than almost anything else in my life”) was the most powerful predictor of marital quality and stability in our models. This is consistent with other research indicating commitment is a powerful force for marital quality.²⁹ Commitment often engenders a sense of trust, security, and mutual investment in one’s relationship that fosters higher quality relationships.

Second, somewhat to our surprise, we found that rating your spouse as “protective” was very predictive of relationship quality and perceived stability, especially for women. We speculate that having a protective spouse elevates one’s feeling of physical and emotional security in ways that foster couple closeness and global life satisfaction.

Third, joint religious attendance was linked to higher quality relationships. Our findings here are consistent with research indicating that religion is linked to norms (like forgiveness and fidelity), family-friendly social networks, and collective rituals that foster greater relationship investments, buffer against stresses that can undercut marital quality, and afford couples access to extra-dyadic emotional and financial support.³⁰

Finally, regular date nights also seem valuable for contemporary couples. By introducing novel activities and opportunities to rekindle romance, date nights seem conducive to

²⁹ Samantha Joel, Paul W. Eastwick, Colleen J. Allison, Ximena B. Arriaga, Zachary G. Baker, Eran Bar-Kalifa, Sophie Bergeron et al., “Machine Learning Uncovers the Most Robust Self-Report Predictors of Relationship Quality Across 43 Longitudinal Couples Studies,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 32 (2020): 19061-19071.

³⁰ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization* (New York City: HarperCollins, 2024).

higher-quality marriages for husbands and wives. In a word, they foster a sense of communion in marriage.³¹

Although we cannot be sure that our results are causal, they are suggestive for husbands and wives looking to forge strong and stable marriages in the 21st century. In particular, this report indicates that embracing commitment, communion, and a protective spirit towards your spouse—as well as communities that emphasize the importance of the first two virtues in marriage—boosts the odds of being married “happily ever after.” These findings are especially noteworthy for couples looking to form and sustain good marriages in the face of rising elite and popular skepticism regarding our most fundamental social institution.

³¹ Brad Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew, *The Date Night Opportunity*, A National Marriage Project and Wheatley Institute Report (Charlottesville: The National Marriage Project at UVA, 2023).

Appendix

Table 1. Predictors of reporting being very happy in marriage. (N = 2,000).

Predictor	Wives			Husbands		
	b	SE _b	Odds Ratio	b	SE _b	Odds Ratio
Intercept	.13	.46		-.77	.46	
Highest commitment	1.61***	.20	4.99	1.21***	.18	3.34
Protective spouse	.86***	.16	2.37	.48**	.16	1.61
Regular joint religious worship service attendance	.45***	.20	1.56	.76***	.19	2.14
Frequent date nights	.75*	.22	2.12	1.14***	.23	3.12
Above average household income	.70***	.78	2.02	.05	.17	1.05
Age	-.01	.01	.99	.02	.02	1.02
Presence of children	.05	.17	1.05	.18	.17	1.20
Black	-.88**	.28	.42	-.25	.30	.78
Hispanic	-.17	.21	.85	-.51*	.20	.60
Asian	.10	.29	1.11	.15	.32	1.17
Other race/ethnicity	-.87*	.38	.42	-1.20**	.43	.30
Four-year degree	.01	.18	1.02	-.08	.18	.92

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Predictors of reporting being “not at all likely” to divorce. (N = 2000).

Predictor	Wives			Husbands		
	b	SE _b	Odds Ratio	b	SE _b	Odds Ratio
Intercept	-1.37***	.42		-2.40***	.44	
Highest commitment	1.21***	.15	3.36	1.40***	.15	4.05
Protective spouse	.85***	.15	2.34	.68***	.15	1.98
Regular joint religious worship service attendance	.81***	.17	2.24	.77***	.16	2.16
Frequent date nights	.61***	.18	1.84	-.05	.17	.95
Above average household income	.26	.16	1.30	-.18	.15	.84
Age	.01	.01	1.01	.03***	.01	1.03
Presence of children	-.09	.15	.92	-.24	.15	.79
Black	-.40	.27	.67	.02	.26	1.02
Hispanic	.10	.19	1.11	-.16	.19	.85
Asian	.06	.26	1.06	-.04	.28	.96
Other race/ethnicity	-.52	.38	.59	-.16	.44	.85
Four-year degree	-.14	.16	.87	.16	.16	1.18

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

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