Ask any young couple how long their marriage will last, and chances are, they'll say forever, says Clark University psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, PhD, an expert on emerging adulthood. In the latest [Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults](http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll), he found that 86 percent of the more than 1,000 18- to 29-year-old Americans surveyed expect their marriages to last a lifetime. The participants who didn't, Arnett presumes, don't plan to marry at all.

Yet statistics suggest that many of these young optimists are only kidding themselves. According to the latest national data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the likelihood that a couple will celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary today isn't much greater than a coin toss: 52 percent for women and 56 percent for men.

Although the rate of divorce has declined slowly and steadily since the early 1980s, the rate of marriage has diminished rapidly, with more people choosing to marry later in life (see [The changing face - and age - of marriage](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/04/changing-face)). As a result, experts routinely estimate that between 40 percent and 50 percent of marriages today will end in divorce.

For decades, psychologists have been trying to answer the key question: What's going on when two people who once said "I do" to a lifetime together decide they're better off apart?

Now, thanks to longitudinal studies of thousands of couples and emerging research on previously understudied partnerships, one answer is becoming more apparent: Why some couples stick together isn't so much a coin toss as a science.

"Today, we have a pretty good idea of what's likely to make for a good marriage," says Stony Brook University researcher Arthur Aron, PhD.

Some of those factors, including ethnic background and socioeconomic status, are beyond a couple's control. But, say psychologists, there are many behaviors, such as how a couple talks and fights and even the type of dates they go on, that can be learned and practiced — and can give a pair a fighting chance at 'til death do they part.

Several demographic factors predict how well a marriage might fare, according to NCHS data. One is ethnicity: Asian women and foreign-born Hispanic men, for example, have the highest chance of the demographic groups studied that their marriages will last 20 years (70 percent), while black women have the lowest rate of reaching the two-decade mark (37 percent). For white men and women as well as black men, the chances are just more than 50 percent, NCHS reports.

**Education also plays a role.** Women with at least a bachelor's degree have a 78 percent shot that their marriages will last 20 years, compared with a 41 percent chance among women with only a high school diploma, according to the NCHS data. Age at marriage is also a predictor of marital success: Couples who wed in their teens are more likely to divorce than those who wait to marry. In addition, a person whose first child is born after the wedding is more likely to stay married than one who enters a marriage already a parent.

**Another factor is finances.** A 2009 report from the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, for example, showed that couples with no assets are 70 percent more likely to divorce within three years than couples with $10,000 in assets. That comes as no surprise to Terri Orbuch, PhD, of the University of Michigan and Oakland University, who says arguments over money — how to spend, save and split it — plague even well-off couples. In her work with the Early Years of Marriage Project, a longitudinal study of 373 couples who married in 1986 (funded by the National Institutes of Health), Orbuch has found that seven out of 10 pairs name finances a cause of relationship trouble. "Money is the No. 1 source of conflict or tension," she says.

Other predictors of divorce are more contextual than personal. Stress, for example, can cause even the strongest relationships to crumble, psychologists' research finds.

In one 2012 study, graduate student April Buck, PhD, and social psychologist Lisa Neff, PhD, from the University of Texas at Austin, evaluated diaries of 165 newlywed couples. Every day for 14 days, each participant responded to prompts about stressful circumstances (such as getting stuck in traffic), the energy expended to handle those stressors, their positive and negative interactions with partners, and their levels of satisfaction with their relationships.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that on the most stressful days, spouses reported more negative behaviors toward their partners and less satisfaction with their relationships. The psychologists posit that the energy dedicated toward handling stressful events detracts from the energy needed to maintain a good relationship ([*Journal of Family Psychology*](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22866931), 2012).

Couples who rarely get a chance to restore their "reserves," such as those from low-income communities, can be particularly prone to marital dissatisfaction and divorce. In one study using data from about 4,500 respondents to the Florida Family Formation Survey, social psychologist Benjamin Karney, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles, and colleagues found that the marriages of lower-income couples were more likely to be hurt by stressful life events and mental health problems than the marriages of the more affluent couples.

Analysis of the same data set found that all respondents — regardless of income level — reported similar problems within their relationships, such as wanting more affection and struggling to communicate effectively with their partners. Lower-income groups, however, experienced more problems related to economic and social issues such as drinking or drug abuse ([*Journal of Marriage and Family*](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&id=1F100485-A864-FB1C-50CC-659C1F71860F&resultID=7&page=1&dbTab=all), 2012).

"[Low-income couples] don't say, ‘If only we had more skills training and better communication,'" says Karney. "What they say is, ‘If only we had better jobs, more money, more health care, more child care, more time to spend together.'"

He points to his work with military couples as an example of how strong social support can buffer against the type of chronic stress that can be toxic to a relationship. His team's study found that military personnel are much more likely than civilians to be married and not as likely to be divorced compared with civilians of similar ages, races, employment statuses and education levels ([*Journal of Family Issues*](http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/33/12/1572.abstract), 2012).

"There's a lot of stress if you're [part of] a military family, but at the same time, there are lots of things that the military is doing to try to protect you from that stress, to try to make it better," says Karney. That includes providing health care, child care and allowances for housing and children. "It appears that those things are paying off."

Another predictor of divorce seems to be how a couple fares — and feels — even before they tie the knot.

One 2012 study of 232 newlyweds by researchers at UCLA, including Karney and led by doctoral student Justin Lavner, found that women who had reported premarital "cold feet" were more than two times as likely to be divorced four years later than couples in which the woman hadn't experienced doubts. Men's feet, on the other hand, did not have such predictive powers — they were more likely to be cold in the first place (Journal of Family Psychology, 2012).

Another study by the same team showed that marital trouble is also often evident soon after the vows. The researchers found that couples whose relationship satisfaction declined during the first four years of marriage were most often those who had reported less satisfaction to begin with ([*Journal of Family Psychology*](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&id=1F100485-A864-FB1C-50CC-659C1F71860F&resultID=5&page=1&dbTab=all), 2012).

Orbuch's analysis suggests the trajectory from bad to worse is likely to continue throughout the marriage and eventually to lead to divorce. By looking at how the Early Years of Marriage Project participants rated their marital happiness over time, she and her colleagues found couples tended to fit into two groups: those whose happiness started high and stayed that way, and those whose contentment started medium or low and got worse (Research in Human Development, 2012).

Still, many happy honeymooners go on to divorce years later. Fortunately, psychologists are finding that many ways to strengthen a relationship's odds of survival are surprisingly simple. "You don't have to buy that $10,000 trip" to keep your partner satisfied, says Orbuch.

What does work? According to the latest research:

**Know that a little goes a long way.** In the Early Years of Marriage Project, Orbuch found that three-fourths of the happy couples reported that their spouses made them feel cared for or special often, while less than half of the unhappy couples reported the same. "Doing or saying small things frequently to make your partner feel special, cared for and loved … is very predictive of staying together, being happy and [preventing] divorce," she says. These "positive affirmations" can be as simple as tucking a nice note in a spouse's wallet or giving a shoulder rub after a long day at work, she adds.

Men seem to need these affirmations most, Orbuch's analysis suggests. Men who didn't feel affirmed by their wives were twice as likely to divorce as those did. The same effect didn't hold true for women. Orbuch postulates that's because women are more likely to receive such affirmations from others — a hug from a friend or a compliment from a stranger in line at the deli. "Men don't get it from other people in their lives so they especially need it from their female partners or wives," she says.

**Fight nice.** John Gottman, PhD, founder of the Gottman Institute and the University of Washington's Love Lab, says that 69 percent of marital conflict never gets resolved. But research shows it's how couples handle those inevitable sore spots that matters. "The people who have stable, happy relationships are much gentler with one another than people who have unhappy relationships or break up," says Gottman, who's known for his ability to predict which newlyweds will divorce with more than 90 percent accuracy by observing how they communicate ([*Journal of Family Psychology*](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/fam/5/3-4/295), 1992). "They're kinder, they're more considerate, they soften the way they raise a complaint."

More recently, UCLA's Lavner led another study reevaluating how a couple's fighting style affected their marriages. He looked at data from 136 couples over the 10 years since their weddings. After a decade, the most striking difference between the couples who had divorced and the ones who stayed together was how they had handled conflict during their first year of marriage. The couples who as newlyweds had interacted with anger and pessimism when discussing difficult relationship issues were more likely to be divorced 10 years later. Couples' communication patterns proved to be more predictive of divorce than their reported levels of commitment, personality assessments and stress ([*Journal of Family Psychology*](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/fam/26/1/1.html), 2012).

In the Early Years of Marriage Project, Orbuch also found that good communication set the happiest of couples apart from the less blissful. Partners who reported patterns of destructive behavior when dealing with conflict in the first year of marriage, for example, were more likely to divorce years later ([*Journal of Marriage and Family*](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00758.x/abstract), 2010).

**Talk about more than the dishes.** But nice talk isn't enough, says Orbuch. It also matters what you talk about. "Most couples think they're communicating with one another, but what they're really talking about is what I call ‘maintaining the household,'" she says, or detailing to-do lists and divvying up chores. The happiest couples also share their hopes, dreams and fears. "They're spending time getting to know one another," Orbuch says.

Gottman calls this "the existential area." Conversing about "who are we, what's our mission and what's our legacy" creates shared meaning and purpose in the relationship, he says.

**Celebrate good times.** Other research suggests that supporting a spouse when times are good might go further than doing so when life goes sour. In a 2012 paper in the [*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&id=1B860101-08FE-DEB1-7EFB-99BE955FB1CB&resultID=1&page=1&dbTab=all), Shelly Gable, PhD, of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and colleagues found that participants who felt supported by a partner during a positive event, such as receiving a high rating at work, felt better about themselves and about their relationships. But feeling supported during negative events was inconsistently — and sometimes even negatively — linked to similar good feelings.

The researchers explain that finding by comparing it to a fire alarm: Testing the alarm to find it works makes you happier and more satisfied than discovering it works because there is a fire. At that point, the distress of the fire distracts from the appreciation of the alarm.

**Take risks.** Few factors undermine a relationship more than boredom, says Orbuch. In the Early Years of Marriage Project, she and her colleagues, including Aron, found that couples reporting boredom in the seventh year of marriage were significantly less likely to be satisfied with the relationship by their 16th anniversary ([*Psychological Science*](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&id=1C50033A-E380-5B51-2A1D-C00650183024&resultID=1&page=1&dbTab=all), 2009).

Growing used to your partner is natural, but it's a process that can be slowed down, says Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a social psychologist at the University of California, Riverside, and author of the 2013 book "The Myths of Happiness." Her theory of hedonic adaptation holds that people are wired to become accustomed to positive changes in their lives, whether that change is a fresh outfit, a new job or a wedding band. "The positive emotions we get from the change get less and less frequent each time," she says. "So the question is, how do you thwart that process? How do you reduce it?"

Psychologists say the answer can be summed up in three words: novelty, variety and surprise. By trying new and exciting activities together, couples can rekindle feelings similar to ones they once had, Lyubomirsky says. The technique supports what Aron showed in a 1993 study: that spouses were more satisfied with their relationships when they were told to go on more exciting dates, such as hiking or going to parties. Those who succumbed to the safer movie-rental routine didn't reap the same benefits.

"If you open yourself up to new opportunities and potential surprises with your partner, then that can slow down adaptation," says Lyubomirsky.

**Know that love's not enough.** Perhaps the most important lesson relationship research has taught us is that marriage, like any other commitment, takes conscious effort to preserve, says Nicholas Kirsch, PhD, a couples therapist in Bethesda, Md.

"So many people do lifelong training in so many things — if you're a golf enthusiast you go to the driving range a couple times a week. If you're a lawyer, you take continuing education. If you're an artist you take workshops. And somehow, there's this belief that we don't have to work at learning how to be a couple, it should just come naturally," he says. "That, to me, is just very backwards."

And the earlier you acquire the tools to maintain a relationship, the better, adds Gottman, who estimates that newlyweds who engage in his programs are three times more likely to succeed than those who wait until they need an intervention. "What makes love last is cherishing your partner and feeling lucky that you have this person in your life," he says. "That act of cherishing is something that some couples build."