

Long Term Happy Marriages
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Fairhope Unitarian Fellowship

How many of you have been married to the same person for 30 years or more? If you are widowed and had a long marriage raise your hands too. 40 years or more? 50 years or more?

Good. I want you to do me a favor. Listen to what I have to say and later in the hour I'll ask for your reaction and opinion regarding my comments. Let me know what you agree with and how your experiences have been different.

“When you've been married to the best, it's hard to settle for less.” This comment from the widow of my dad's best friend pretty much sums up the attitude I have encountered as I have pursued my professional hobby. For the last 32 years I have been intrigued by couples who marry, stay together for at least 30 or 40 years and are very happy with their marriages. During this same time period I have worked with thousands of couples who have been very unhappy in their marriages. I have been curious to figure out why some couples do so well when 50% or more do so poorly that they divorce or stay in an unhappy marriage. 32 years of research with has given me some ideas of what makes the difference.

I started with older couples in rural west Texas; Southern Baptists, members of the Church of Christ, a few Catholic Mexican-Americans and a few happy non-believers. I then moved to Iowa and again worked with older happily married rural couples of German Lutheran and Catholic heritage. Later I worked with older dual career couples who were not only happy in their marriages but had also had fulfilling professional careers. I also have had an opportunity to interview older happy couples in Germany, England, Spain, Greece, Turkey, India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Although I noted some cultural differences, I was taken by the strong similarities among all these couples. This is a highly select group; at least fifty years old but usually in their 60's, 70's, or 80's. They are a resilient and up-beat bunch. They are survivors, children of the depression, in love with life and each other. They are not whiners or slackers. They have worked hard, most have raised a family, have persevered through adversity, and grown close to one another in the process.

I will highlight seven characteristics that appear common among this group. At ten minutes before noon I will stop talking and ask you to react.

All the couples I have studied have been in relationships that are highly stable and **highly satisfactory**.

Most researchers have found that as the marriage lengthens, marital quality decreases. Marriage typically begins with a high level of satisfaction, declines as the first child improves, and increases again after the last child leaves home. However, most couples never again achieve the high level of satisfaction present early in their marriage. This is not the case for the couples I have studied. Their level of satisfaction may have lowered a bit when their children were young but they report having the highest level of satisfaction in the later years of marriage. These couples tell me "...you work hard all of your life and at the end you should get your reward." The reward is high marital satisfaction. But how do these couples beat the odds?

These couples have told me "we really got to know each other, we learned to respect each other, things that troubled us earlier don't now, if you keep vintage wine it becomes better with age, the longer you're married, the closer you get." These couples learned what was important to one another and did things for each other just to make their partner happy. They talked about becoming "comfortable" with one another and becoming much more than two separate individuals. "We talk to each other about what happens during the day. When she's not home I start to talk to her until I realize she's not next to me." One recent widower told me "I still talk to her even though I know she's gone, I don't want to break the habit."

These couples all went into their marriages with a very idealistic outlook of what their marriage would be like. They felt they would have no problems and everything would work out for the best no matter what happened. They felt that love would carry them through any difficulties but soon found they were wrong. They learned it took hard work and dedication to make their marriage a success. Over the course of time they developed a "true definition of love."

I really pushed these couples to define "**true love**". They saw love as doing things to please their spouse. They wanted to do everything they could to make the marriage a success. They described their spouse as their best friend and their life's companion. They all wanted to give to their spouse

without expecting a return. However, they all reported getting as much and usually much more back than they felt they had put into the relationship.

What these couples described to me is what family studies specialists describe as multifaceted love; the so-called four faces of love. Let me explain that concept. Marital love can be thought of as coming in four overlapping flavors: romantic, sexual, companionate, and altruistic.

“Love is not passion, love is not sex or what you see on television, sex and passion are nice in the beginning but later in life it’s giving without receiving, but yet you are receiving. Love is mutual respect, conducting yourself in such a manner that is pleasing to your spouse.” “It’s doing things for her that she could do for herself because she is special to me. It’s having someone there who knows you and cares for you. It’s living with my best friend.”

Explain four faces of love

Crisis: “Problems make you look at the bigger picture. Everything works together for the good, even the bad. Make the best of everything, look on problems as challenges. Problems help you become more united. You realize that there are things in life more important than money and material things. You turn a lot of coals over on the fire at a time like that. A crisis helps you get your priorities in order. Turn a scar into a star.”

One way couples explained moving to a “higher level of love” was through a **crisis**. Each couple had some trying time in their marriage. This trying time was seen as a turning point, a time when they realized what is truly important in life. Each of these crises was threatening to one or both spouses or their family. The most common examples were severe physical illness, financial difficulties, long periods of physical separation usually due to war, and infidelity. Each of the couples looked on these crises in a positive way. They tried to find the good in the bad. They had the attitude that “it could have been worse and it has brought us closer together.” In sum the crisis was seen as a catalyst that helped the couple’s marriage move to the high quality state the couples were experiencing in old age. Without a crisis they felt they never would have obtained **their** “good” marriage.

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Children were an important part of the lives of many of the couples I have interviewed. Raising a family did cause marital quality to decline but not as steeply for these couples as for couples in general. Children were seen as an asset not a liability. Couples saw raising a family as an opportunity to grow and develop as well as to receive pleasure from their children. They felt satisfied to spend their free time with their children. Again, these couples saw raising children as a challenge and an opportunity to grow together as a team.

Religion and Values are also key characteristics of long-term happy marriages. The rural couples were almost all religious as were many of urban couples. A few rural couples and a significant proportion of urban and European couples were not religious. However all these couples had one thing in common, similar values. Couples believed that having similar values made it much easier for them to make important decisions in their lives and helped them avoid arguments. For example, these couples usually agreed about how to raise their children, both how to relate to children and what values to instill. Disagreements about children are common among unhappy couples because children bring the parents' value differences into sharp focus. The couples I interviewed were spared this problem.

Living in a small community or having a supportive social group helped happy couples maintain their marriage. Again common values come into the picture because the couples I interviewed could turn to the community or their social group for support. In small rural communities people tend to have similar values that discourage divorce and promote marriage for life. Couples from small communities saw cities as places where marriage was not supported and divorce was allowed if not encouraged. However, my urban couples talked about being members of closely-knit social groups that promoted marriage by providing support to group members. This support took the form of companionship and fellowship as well as assistance in times of trouble. Very much like our own fellowship group here in Fairhope.

Commitment is the final characteristic I want to highlight. The couples I have interviewed enter marriage with an unshakable belief that their marriage would last forever. These couples believe that "we no longer instill in our children the idea that when a couple is married, it's for life." They

also believe that we “should take any negative situation and turn it to our advantage in some way or another.” The key to success is having the desire to make the best of life’s hard times. “Face life together. Commit to one another and life’s challenges can be handled.”

To review and summarize, the couples I have studied see their happy marriages as due to: highly satisfying relationships, true love, having faced crises together, raising children, shared values, living in supportive communities, and a having strong sense of commitment to one another.

I would like to close my comments with a case example that I feel is illustrative of this group of couples in general. In 1986 I spent 100 days at sea with 22 retired couples, 20 of whom were married 35 or more years, some as long as 60 years. All but two were very happy in their relationships. One couple was particularly interesting.

Irving was an 83year old retired appellate court judge. His “bride” Rosa belle was an 81-year-old homemaker who met Irving when she was 20 and married him two years later. When I met them they had been married 59 years. They were both Jewish although they never mentioned it until I asked them about their religious beliefs. They were both raised in and have always lived in the same large southern city. When I watched them they were like two teenagers on their third date, obviously in love and not ashamed to show it. Irving always referred to her as his bride, Rosa belle always introduced him as her Southern Gentleman.

As I got to know them I was impressed by the intense emotional intimacy of their relationship. I asked them what made them so close. They told me of their desire to have a family. They had a son two years into their relationship. It was a difficult pregnancy and Rosa belle was told she would never have another child. To deal with their disappointment they put all their efforts into raising their son. He grew into a “fine young man who followed his father into the law.” Unfortunately, their son suffered from biological depression and began taking anti-depressant medication in adolescence. At age 36 the depression worsened and he committed suicide. The loss devastated the couple. They “turned to each other because our relationship was all we had left.” Their commitment to each other as life companions allowed them to continue in the face of a tragedy that would have overwhelmed most couples.

One morning I went up to the top deck to lift weights with Irving. When I got to the weight room Irving was sitting on the bench press looking ashen and distressed. I thought he was having a heart attack. “Irving, are you alright?” “Yes, yes, I’m just flustered.” “About what?” I asked. “About 20 minutes ago I came up here (about 5:30 am) and started to walk out to the front deck and I saw a young couple, on the deck, you know, being intimate!” “What did you do?” “Nothing, I just watched, I had never seen anything like it.” “I finally realized they might see me so I stepped in here.” “Irving, you mean you have never seen anyone having sex?” “No, of course not.” “It must have been quite a shock.” “Yes it was.”

Later that day I saw Rosa belle on the sun deck lying on a lounge chair. I asked her if Irving had gotten over his shock. “What shock?” “Oops.” About this time Irving came walking over and Rosa belle asked him, “Irving, I understand you had a shocking experience, what happened.” Now if I had been a gentleman I would have left at that moment. But, I’m no gentleman. I had to hear how this was going to turn out.

Irving turned bright red, hesitated, but finally told her.

“Irving, you dear sweet man, we’ve been together sixty years and you still think I’m innocent.” At that point she winked at me and I took my leave.

I shared this example because it illustrates many of the key characteristics of long-term happy marriages I just illustrated.

With that let me turn the microphone over to my distinguished panel of relationship experts. What do you think about my comments?