

# *National Survey of Marital Strengths*

## **Executive Summary**

This National Survey is one of the first major studies on the strengths of marriage versus the exclusive focus on problems. Using a sample of 21,501 married couples (both husbands and wives) from all 50 states, this survey used a comprehensive marital assessment tool called ENRICH which focuses on 20 significant areas and contains 195 questions.

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

The top five categories in rank order of importance were *communication, couple flexibility, couple closeness, personality issues and conflict resolution*. While most past studies have identified the importance of communication and conflict resolution, the importance of couple flexibility and couple closeness demonstrate their growing importance in our high stress society.

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

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

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

## **Overview of the National Survey of Marital Strengths**

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

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

### **Description of Sample:**

The research sample is 21,501 married couples from fifty states who took the ENRICH couple inventory mainly during 1999. From this large sample we looked in depth at 5,153 couples where both partners were very happily married and 5,127 couples where both partners

were not happily married. We used the entire sample of 21,501 to identify the major problematic issues for married couples.

The sample was obtained from all fifty states and the states with the largest sample (about 8 percent) were California, Minnesota, and Texas. The average age of the husbands was 35 years and 32 years for wives. About 40% of the couples were married five years or less, 35% were married six to fifteen years and 23% were married sixteen years or more. About one-quarter (29%) of the sample had no children, about half (48%) had one or two children and about one quarter (27%) had three or more children.

While 18% had completed high school, over two-thirds (36%) had some college, one-quarter had a four year degree and one-fifth (21%) had a graduate or professional degree. About half (48%) earned \$30,000 or less, while about one quarter (28%) earned \$30,000 to \$50,000 and one quarter (24%) earned \$50,000 or more.

The majority (85%) were Caucasian, while 6% were African American, 4% were Hispanic and 6% were other ethnic groups. About half (54%) of the couples were Protestant, 16% were Catholic and about one quarter (28%) were other denominations. About one quarter of the couples lived in rural areas (24%), in towns (22%), in large cities (24%) and about 30% in small cities.

### **Survey Instrument:**

The survey instrument used was the ENRICH Couple Inventory by David Olson, David Fournier and Joan Druckman and is distributed by Life Innovations. ENRICH was developed as a research and counseling inventory for married couples. It contains 20 major categories which are assessed by 165 questions and there are also 30 background questions.

ENRICH has a high degree of reliability, validity and clinical utility. It provides a comprehensive picture of “his” and “her” perspectives of the couple relationship and also the couple. The level of couple consensus is measured using the *Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score* for each area of the relationship. For more information, see the *PREPARE/ENRICH Counselor's Manual*.

### **Data Analysis:**

The results from this national survey of married couples describes the characteristics that distinguish “happy” from “unhappy” couples. Based on their scores on a marital satisfaction scale, couples were classified as either “happily married” or “unhappily married.” There were 5,153 happily married couples and 5,127 unhappily married couples. The middle group was excluded because either their marital satisfaction scores were both moderate, or one partner was high and one was low on marital satisfaction.

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

## Top Ten Marital Strengths and Issues

*For one human being to love another is perhaps the most difficult task of all, the epitome, the ultimate cost. It is that striving for which all other striving is merely preparation.*

—Rainier Maria Rilke (1876–1926)

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

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

### Top Ten Strengths of Happy Couples

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

It was possible to predict with 93% accuracy whether a specific couple was happy or unhappy using these top ten items. Table 1.1 rank orders the best items from these ten areas that discriminate between happy and unhappy couples. This list identifies in rank order the ten most important categories and items for describing happy couples.

The ten best categories that can predict strong marriages are in rank order: communication, couple flexibility, couple closeness, personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, leisure activities, family and friends, financial management and spiritual beliefs.

<b>Table 1.1 Top Ten Strengths of Happy Couples</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other	90%	15%
2. We are creative in how we handle our differences.	78%	15%
3. We feel very close to each other.	98%	27%
4. My partner is seldom too controlling.	78%	20%
5. When discussing problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas	87%	19%
6. I am completely satisfied with the amount of affection from my partner.	72%	28%
7. We have a good balance of leisure time spent together and separately.	71%	17%
8. My partner's friends or family rarely interfere with our relationship.	81%	38%
9. We agree on how to spend money.	89%	41%
10. I am satisfied with how we express spiritual values and beliefs.	89%	36%

Why is it that some couples seem so happy, regardless of life situations, transitions, or circumstances they may encounter? Are they simply well matched individuals? Are they doing something different from less happy couples? What is their secret? The most discriminating item from each of 10 ENRICH categories were used to identify their relative importance to happy couples.

**Communication** was the area found to be most predictive of happily married couples and the issue was whether partners agree that they are satisfied with how they talk to each other. Almost all happily married couples (90%) agree with this statement, whereas only 15% of unhappily married couples do so.

**Couple flexibility** was the second most important category distinguishing happy and unhappy couples. Seventy-eight percent of happily married couples agree that they were creative in how they handle differences, whereas about half (15%) of unhappy couples agree on this item.

**Couple closeness** was the third most important category. Happy couples were in much higher agreement about feeling very close to each other (happy couples 98%; unhappy couples 27%).

**Personality compatibility** was also an important characteristic of happy couples. Happy couples have much more agreement on this item than unhappy couples do (happy 78%; unhappy 20%).

**Conflict resolution** is an important skill used by happily married couples. They are much more likely to agree to feeling understood when discussing problems than unhappily married couples (happy 87%; unhappy 19%).

**Sexual relationship, Leisure activities, Family and friends, Financial management and Spiritual beliefs** are other major components in distinguishing between happy and unhappy couples. Most happy marriages are more satisfied with the level of affection and sexuality (happy 81%; unhappy 26%). A majority of happy couples have high agreement on issues about leisure activities (71% happy; 17% unhappy). Happy couples also have much higher agreement than unhappy couples on issues regarding family and friends (happy 81%; unhappy 38%), financial management (happy 89%; unhappy 41%), and spiritual beliefs (happy 89%; unhappy 36%). Table 1.1 presents the specific items that differentiate best between happy and unhappy couples in these areas. These findings clearly demonstrate that happy couples have significantly more relationship strengths than unhappy couples.

## Top Ten Stumbling Blocks for Married Couples

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

Understanding common relationship problems can help people realize they are not alone. However, unless you are a professional therapist, you are unlikely to hear about the problems that couples face and must work through in their relationship. It is much more common for couples to share with others only the positive aspects of their lives together.

To identify the most common problematic issues for couples, we analyzed the entire sample of 21,501 married couples. This analysis was to determine both the most problematic relationship areas and the most problematic specific issues.

The top ten specific issues for married couples come from six relationship areas: *conflict resolution* (3 items); *couple flexibility* (2 items); *personality issues* (2 items); *communication, leisure activities, and parenting*. The high percentage of couples reporting these problems clearly shows the prevalence of specific relationship issues (See Table 1.2).

The importance of *conflict resolution* is indicated by the fact that three of the top ten specific issues that are problematic for couples are from that area. The three specific issues are: “I always end up feeling responsible for the problem” (81%); “I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner” (79%); and, “Our differences never seem to get resolved” (78%).

<b>Table 1.2 Top Ten Stumbling Blocks for Married Couples</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. We have problems sharing leadership equally	93%
2. My partner is sometimes too stubborn.	87
3. Having children reduces our marital satisfaction.	84
4. My partner is too negative or critical.	83
5. I wish my partner had more time and energy for recreation with me.	82
6. I wish my partner were more willing to share feelings.	82
7. I always end up feeling responsible for the problem.	81
8. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner.	79
9. We have difficulty completing tasks or projects.	79
10. Our differences never seem to get resolved.	78

*Couple flexibility* is also an important area that has not been revealed in past studies to be problematic for couples. Flexibility is reflected in the most problematic issue where “We have problems sharing leadership equally” (93%). Another problematic issue is that “We have difficulty completing tasks or projects” (79%).

The third most common couple problem is in the area of *personality*. Specifically, 87% of couples feel their partner is sometimes too stubborn and 83% report that their partner is too negative or critical.

## Communication

*Talking is the major way we establish, maintain, monitor and adjust our relationships.*

—Deborah Tanner

Communication has the power to bring couples together and the ability to push couples apart. The willingness and ability to communicate contribute greatly to the health and happiness of a couple relationship. The good news is that good communication skills—speaking and listening—are something that can be learned and improved upon, as you will see in this chapter.

## Strengths of Happy Couples in Communication

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

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

<b>Table 2.1 Strengths of Happy versus Unhappy Couples Regarding Communication (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other.	90%	15%
2. My partner understands how I feel.	79	13
3. I find it easy to express my true feelings to my partner.	96	30
4. My partner is a very good listener.	83	18
5. My partner does not make comments that put me down	79	20

## Common Stumbling Blocks to Communication

*We hear only half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that.*  
—Mignon McLaughlin

Communication and intimacy are closely interrelated. Couples, especially unhappy spouses, are often heard to complain that, “We don’t communicate.” But it is impossible not to communicate. In fact, the absence of conversation, physical contact, smiles or self-disclosure “communicate” a lot about the feelings people have toward each another. Our national survey of 21,501 married couples identified specific communication issues that are problematic for married couples ( see Table 2.2).

<b>Table 2.2 Stumbling Blocks regarding Communication</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. I wish my partner were more willing to share feelings.	82%
2. I have difficulty asking my partner for what I want.	75
3. My partner does not understand how I feel.	72
4. My partner often refuses to discuss issues/problems.	71
5. My partner makes comments that put me down.	67

The majority of married couples (82%) wish that their partners would share feelings more often. Many spouses have difficulty asking their partner for what they want (75%), do not feel understood (72%) and feel that their partner will not discuss issues with them (71%). Still another common problem with married couples is feeling put down by their partner (67%).

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

*We're born with two ears and one mouth.  
That ought to tell us something.*

—Bits and Pieces (1997)

## Conflict Resolution

*Happiness is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with it.*

Anonymous

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

### Strengths of Happy Couples in Conflict Resolution

Table 3.1 summarizes the key differences between happy and unhappy couples. The most significant item that distinguished happy and unhappy couples married couples as they deal with conflict is whether the partners feel understood when discussing problems.

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

<b>Table 3.1 Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples regarding Conflict Resolution (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas.	87%	19%
2. I can share feelings and ideas with my partner during disagreements.	85	22
3. We are able to resolve our differences.	71	11
4. We have similar ideas about how to settle disagreements.	64	13
5. My partner takes our disagreements seriously.	78	26

## Common Stumbling Blocks to Conflict Resolution

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

—Jesse Jackson

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

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

According to the survey, most couples disagree on the issue of who is responsible for a given problem. Many couples feel that their differences never seem to get resolved, and partners will go out of their way to avoid conflict with each other. A majority of couples have different ideas about the best way to solve disagreements and report having serious disputes over trivial matters.

<b>Table 3.2: Stumbling Blocks regarding Conflict Resolution</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. One person ends up feeling responsible for the problem.	81%
2. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner.	79
3. Differences never seem to get resolved.	78
4. We have different ideas about the best way to solve disagreements.	78
5. We have serious disputes over unimportant issues.	78

*The goal in marriage is not to think alike, but to think together.*

—Robert C. Dobbs

## Role Relationships

*Coming together is easy; keeping together is progress;  
working together is success.*

—Henry Ford (1863–1947)

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

## Strengths of Happy Couples regarding Roles

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

Division of household tasks is the second issue that is strongly related to couple satisfaction. Happy couples are much more likely to not feel concerned that one partner is doing more than his or her share of household tasks than unhappy couples are. Another important indicator of a happy marriage is whether both husband and wife work to maintain an equal relationship.

<b>Table 4.1 How Happy versus Unhappy Couples View Their Roles (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. Both are equally willing to make adjustments in their marriage.	87%	46%
2. Both are satisfied with the division of housework.	81	41
3. Both work hard to have an equal relationship.	90	54
4. Couples make most decisions jointly.	89	57
5. Household tasks are divided based on preferences, not tradition.	71	55

## Marital Satisfaction and Role Relationship

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

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

<b>Table 4.2 Role Relationships in Happy Versus Unhappy Couples</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>	<b>Total</b>
Perception of Relationship	(n=5,153)	(n=5,127)	(n=10,280)
Both perceive as equalitarian	81%	19%	100% (n=4,130)
Husband perceives as traditional, wife perceives as equalitarian	50	50	100% (n=1,267)
Wife perceives as traditional, husband perceives as equalitarian	37	63	100% (n=1,561)
Both perceive as traditional	18	82	100% (n=3,322)

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

*All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.*  
—George Orwell

## Managing Finances

*To some people, money means power; to others, love.  
For some, the topic is boorish, in bad taste.  
For others, it's more private than sex.  
Add family dynamics to the mix,  
and for many you have the subject from hell.*  
—Karen S. Peterson (1992) USA Today

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

### Strengths of Happy Couples in Finances

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

<b>Table 5.1 Strengths of Happy versus Unhappy Couples on Finances (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. We agree on how to spend money.	89%	41%
2. I have no concerns over how my partner handles money.	80	32
3. We are satisfied with our decisions about saving.	73	29
4. Major debts are not a problem	76	35
5. Making financial decisions is not difficult	80	32

## Common Stumbling Blocks to Managing Finances

*There is nothing wrong with men possessing riches.  
The wrong comes when riches possess men.*

—Billy Graham

Couples have trouble dealing with money issues for a number of reasons, as our national survey reveals (See Table 5.2). Many problems occur when one partner thinks the other should be more careful about spending. Although the current trend to marry later in life benefits these couples on many levels, they may have more adjusting to do when it comes to merging partners' finances. Prior to marriage at an older age, individuals are accustomed to making money decisions without having to consider another person.

<b>Table 5.2 Top Five Stumbling Blocks regarding Finances</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. I wish my partner was more careful in spending money.	72%
2. We have trouble saving money.	72
3. We have problems deciding what is more important to purchase.	66
4. Major debts are a problem for us.	56
5. My partner tries to control the money.	51

Having trouble saving money also is a problem for a majority of married couples. Many couples report disagreeing on what is most important to spend their money. Major debts are an issue for over half of married couples, and many couples have disagreements over who should control the money they have.

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

## Spiritual Beliefs

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

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Spirituality and faith are powerful dimensions of the human experience. Spiritual beliefs can provide a foundation for the values and behaviors of individuals and couples. But what is meant by spiritual can be very different both across various religious denominations and within individuals.

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

## Strengths of Happy Couples in Spiritual Beliefs

A key factor that distinguished happy and unhappy couples in terms of religion was agreement on satisfaction with how spiritual values and beliefs are expressed. Most happily married couples (89%) agree on this item, compared with only 36% of unhappily married couples.

Often spiritual beliefs are practiced individually and not integrated into the couple relationship. Although spirituality can also be regarded as a private matter, we know that shared religious faith can strengthen a marriage. Table 6.2 summarizes the research on happily versus unhappily married couples in terms of spiritual beliefs. Happily married couples are much more likely (85%) than unhappily married couples (46%) to report that shared religious values improve their relationship. Happily married couples also more often report that they feel closer as a couple because of shared spiritual beliefs.

<b>Table 6.1 Strengths of Happy versus Unhappy Couples in Spirituality (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. We are satisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs.	89%	36%
2. We feel closer because of shared spiritual beliefs.	79	40
3. Shared spiritual beliefs improve our relationship.	85	46
4. Spiritual differences do not cause tension in our relationship.	90	54
5. We rely on our spiritual beliefs during difficult times.	79	43

## Common Stumbling Blocks in Spiritual Beliefs

*Without faith, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible.*

—Mary McLeod Bethune

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

The most common disagreement item regarding spirituality involves resolving differences in their spiritual beliefs. More than half of all spouses (53%) disagree on this item. Half of the spouses disagree that religious beliefs make them feel closer. Almost half (48%) of them disagree that they rely on their spiritual beliefs during difficult times, and that they are satisfied with how they express their spiritual beliefs and values. Some couples (38%) report that spiritual differences cause tension in their relationship.

<b>Table 6.2 Stumbling Blocks in Spiritual Beliefs</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. We have not resolved the differences in our spiritual beliefs.	53%
2. We do not feel closer as a result of our spiritual beliefs.	50
3. We do not rely on our spiritual beliefs during difficult times.	48
4. We are dissatisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs.	48
5. Spiritual differences cause tension in our relationship.	46

## Sexual Relationship

*The war between the sexes is the only one in which  
both sides regularly sleep with the enemy.*

—Quentin Crisp

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

### Strengths of Happy Couples Sexually

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

<b>Table 7.1 Strengths of Happy Versus Unhappy Couples regarding Sexuality (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. I am completely satisfied with the affection from my partner.	72%	28%
2. Our sexual relationship is satisfying and fulfilling.	85	29
3. My partner uses or refuses sex in an unfair way.	90	39
4. I have no concerns that my partner may not be interested in me sexually.	88	37
5. I am not worried that my partner has thought about having an affair.	92	43

### Stumbling Blocks to a Satisfying Sexual Relationship

Sexuality is an area in which differences in husband and wife preferences are more common and problematic. The most problematic sexual issue for couples is dissatisfaction with the amount of affection received. A majority of couples also disagree that their sexual relationship is satisfying and fulfilling and disagree in finding ways to keep the sexual relationship interesting. More than half of couples have difficulties discussing sexual issues openly. And half of the couples report reluctance to be affectionate with a partner because the partner often interprets affection as a sexual advance.

<b>Table 7.2 Top Five Stumbling Blocks regarding Sexuality</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problem</b>
1. I am dissatisfied with the amount of affection from my partner.	70%
2. We work to keep our sexual relationship interesting and enjoyable.	62
3. Our sexual relationship is not satisfying or fulfilling.	57
4. I am dissatisfied with the level of openness in discussing sexual topics.	54
5. I am reluctant to be affectionate because my partner may interpret it as a sexual advance.	50

The movie *Annie Hall* depicts two lovers with different perceptions of their sexual relationship. When a therapist asks them (separately) how often they have sex, the character played by Woody Allen answers, “Hardly ever, maybe three times a week.” The character played by Diane Keaton replies, “Constantly, three times a week.”

Among married couples, the most common sexual concern stems from differing interests in sex. Studies have shown that, for a majority of men, sex can be easily separated from the relationship. Feelings of emotional intimacy in the relationship usually precede sexual expression for women, whereas males often view sex as a way to increase intimacy.

Spouses often are not satisfied with the affection they receive from their partner. We know that this is a very important component to a happy marriage, because it was also the highest discriminator between happily and unhappily married couples (in 72% of happily married couples, partners report being satisfied with the affection they get from each other, versus only 28% of unhappy couples).

## **Children and Parenting**

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

—John Wilmot (1642–1680)

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

### **Strengths of Happy Couples in Parenting**

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

<b>Table 8.1: Strengths of Happy Versus Unhappy Couples in Parenting (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. I am satisfied with how child rearing is shared.	89%	36%
2. My partner focuses as much on our marriage as on the children.	63	32
3. We agree on discipline.	59	30
4. We agree on how to provide financially for the children.	60	38
5. Children do not create major problems in our marriage.	61	38

In fact, a strength of happy couples is that they are about twice as likely (63%) as unhappy couples (32%) to report that their partners give attention to the marriage as well as the child(ren). Taking time each day to share the day's events and to connect with each other is important.

Satisfaction with how the responsibility of raising children is shared is the most significant issue distinguishing happy and unhappy couples. Happily married couples are more than twice as likely (63%) to be satisfied with how child-rearing and parenting are shared than unhappily married couples (27%). Happily married couples are much more likely to agree on discipline than are unhappily married couples. Thus, it's important to discuss and develop a joint plan for discipline.

### **Stumbling Blocks to Effective Parenting**

*If it was going to be easy raising kids,  
it never would have started with something called labor.*

—Bits and Pieces (November 6, 1997)

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

<b>Table 8.2: Top Five Stumbling Blocks in Parenting</b>	<b>Percentage of Couples Having Problems</b>
1. Having child(ren) has reduced our marital satisfaction.	84%
2. The father is not involved enough with our child(ren).	68
3. I am dissatisfied with how child-rearing is shared.	66
4. We disagree on discipline.	66
5. My partner focuses more on the children than on the marriage.	64

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

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

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

## Couple Flexibility and Couple Closeness

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

—David H. Olson

### Couple Flexibility

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

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

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

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

<b>Table 9.1: Strengths of Happy Versus Unhappy Couples in Flexibility (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. We are creative in how we handle our differences.	78%	55%
2. We make most decisions jointly.	54	33
3. Both of us are able to adjust to change when it's necessary.	64	42
4. We are flexible in our lifestyle.	59	38
5. We compromise when problems arise.	68	47

## Couple Closeness

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

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

When happy couples were compared with unhappy couples in our national survey, there were distinct differences between the two samples in couple closeness. For instance, members of almost all of the happy couples agree that they feel very close to their partner, whereas only 27% of unhappy couples feel that way. Partners in happy couples are also more than three times as likely as unhappy couples to agree that they find it easy to think of things to do together.

Happy couples also have togetherness as a top priority compared to unhappy couples (88% to 28% respectively). They also are more open to asking each other for help (96% to 40%). They find it easy to spend time together and like spending time together.

<b>Table 9.2: Strengths of Happy Versus Unhappy Couples in Couple Closeness (% Couple Agreement)</b>	<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
1. We feel very close to each other.	98%	27%
2. Our togetherness is a top priority for us.	88	28
3. We ask each other for help.	96	40
4. We find it easy to think of things to do together.	86	28
5. We really enjoy spending our free time together.	97	43