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Optimal characteristics for happy and satisfying marriages

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Abstract
For many people, having a happy satisfying marriage is the ultimate goal in a marital relationship. However, what constitutes a happy marriage is not always clear. Many people go into marriage with high ideals and expectations, but without the reality that marriage is an entity in its own right that needs to be maintained daily. Communication, including conflict resolution, is a large part of a successful marriage. Other characteristics include sharing positive feelings, having more positive than negative interactions, having a solid friendship, maintaining a strong commitment, and staying focused on the positive aspects of the marriage. Marriage is difficult, but building relationship skills can ensure better marital satisfaction, as will be addressed in this paper.
OPTIMAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR
HAPPY AND SATISFYING MARRIAGES

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Abstract

For many people, having a happy satisfying marriage is the ultimate goal in a marital relationship. However, what constitutes a happy marriage is not always clear. Many people go into marriage with high ideals and expectations, but without the reality that marriage is an entity in its own right that needs to be maintained daily. Communication, including conflict resolution, is a large part of a successful marriage. Other characteristics include sharing positive feelings, having more positive than negative interactions, having a solid friendship, maintaining a strong commitment, and staying focused on the positive aspects of the marriage. Marriage is difficult, but building relationship skills can ensure better marital satisfaction, as will be addressed in this paper.
Although there are many similar characteristics that happily married couples share, the divorce rate in the United States is around 50% for first marriages and even higher for second marriages (Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf & Groth, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988). Because of this high statistic, coupled with the fact that marriage is something most people experience and desire, characteristics that constitute a happy marriage are important to understand. This understanding is particularly important because happy marriages benefit society, whereas unhappy marriages and divorce create numerous problems. Consequently, society benefits from lower divorce rates because of lower incidences of physical and psychological ailments for both the couple and involved family members.

In this paper, couples will be described as satisfied and happy interchangeably. The American Heritage Dictionary (2001) refers to the term happy as “enjoying, showing or marked by pleasure, and well-adapted” (p. 387). The term satisfying is “to gratify or fulfill a need or desire” (p. 740). The couples in question will include heterosexual married couples. The purpose of this paper is to identify many common characteristics that researchers have identified in happily married couples. According to Whisman, Dixon & Johnson (1997), the most common issues that bring couples into counseling are “lack of loving feelings, power struggles, communication, affairs, and unrealistic expectation” (p. 363). By understanding qualities that make up a good relationship, thus having a more knowledgeable base, counselors can better help their clients discover possible sources of external or internal conflict. The qualities of satisfied married couples are the building blocks of solid long-lasting marriages. Topics that will be
covered in this paper include attachment needs, the importance of positive
interactions, qualities that create a dissatisfying marriage, and characteristics that
constitute a satisfying marriage.

The Human Need

Attachments

People have a fundamental need for security and attachment with another
person (Parrott & Parrott, 1995). Attachments are important because humans are
social creatures who need to have a place in society. According to Ainsworth and
Bowlby (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004), attachment involves the
relationship between a baby and the caregiver. It is an emotional (psychological)
bond between them. The quality of this attachment is evaluated by both, thus
affecting the strength of the relationship. Secure attachments are important
because it means that our physical and psychological needs are being met (Lahey,
1998).

Social Connections

In association with attachment, the sense of belonging is also a fundamental
part of life. Maslow identified this in his Hierarchy of Needs theory. According
to Maslow (as cited in Lahey, 1998), people need to have their basic needs met
before they can move to the more advanced needs. Love and belonging (social
connection) is one of the components of his theory. Maslow (as cited in Parrott &
Parrott, 1995), also concluded that since humans are social beings, they need to be
around other people to thrive. The attachment need is the same in a romantic
relationship as in the infant/caregiver relationship (Davila & Bradbury, 2001).
In a healthy relationship, people feel secure, approved of, and have a sense of belonging (Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gilbert, 1992). However, without a secure attachment in a relationship, there is distress and dissatisfaction, along with fear of abandonment, which is seen more in dissatisfied couples than satisfied couples (Davila & Bradbury, 2001).

Health

Quality Related to Marriage

Physical and psychological health are linked to marital quality. Spouses in happy marriages are healthier than the spouses in unhappy marriages (Perrone & Worthington, 2001). For the most part, they suffer fewer illnesses and other physical health problems, as well as live longer lives. Actually, Gottman and Silver (1999) reported a 35% increase in the chance of becoming ill for those spouses in dissatisfying marriages. According to Gottman and Silver (1999), satisfied married couples experience less chronic physiological arousal and are less stressed most of the time, which is good since stress is linked to many health problems including high blood pressure, heart disease and immune deficiencies. In addition, satisfied couples experience fewer psychological difficulties and mood disturbances such as depression and anxiety (Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser & Malarkey, 2003; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Kaiser et. al., 1998). In satisfied marriages there is also less suicide, homicide, domestic violence, and substance abuse (Gottman & Silver, 1999).
Exchange Rate

*Positive and Negative Interactions*

The foundation of marital satisfaction is the exchange rate of positive to negative interactions. Marriage stability and happiness for each partner is determined through this exchange rate (Johnson, Davila, Rogge, Sullivan, Cohan, Lawrence, Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2003; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith & George, 2001; Kaiser et. al., 1998; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). According to Gottman (1994), couples need five positive interactions to every one negative interaction. Examples of positive interactions include healthy and productive communication, positive and supportive emotions towards each other, and quality time spent together as both married partners and as friends. Some examples of negative interactions involve criticism, contempt, defensiveness, withdrawing, possessing too much anger, and other negative emotions directed towards a spouse (Gottman, 1994).

*Benefits of Positive Interactions*

Positive interactions facilitate healthy marital functioning (Johnson et. al., 2005; Perrone & Worthington, 2001). Having a marriage based on positive interactions helps the couple feel more comfortable to discuss problems, cope with daily stressors, and enjoy each other’s company. Poor marital outcomes occur more frequently in the marriages that have more negative than positive interactions. The satisfaction in these marriages also declines as time passes (Karney & Bradbury, 1997).
Peaks and Valleys

How spouses communicate, as well as the satisfaction level of the marriage, does have its peaks and valleys over time. There are different stages in marriage as well as daily events that cause this change. For example, most newly wedded couples are happier than even three years later. Also marriages typically valley around the first child being born and during adolescence, but the marriage peaks when the children leave the home (Levenson, Carstensen & Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). The severity of the difference between the peaks and valleys can be negatively correlated to good marital outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Truly satisfied couples will recover and return to a healthy state faster, as compared to a couple who is dissatisfied in the marriage because of overwhelmingly negative interactions. These couples recover slower, if at all, and if they do, they may be in an even less healthy status than before.

Reciprocity

How a partner communicates and responds to his or her spouse can determine that spouse’s satisfaction level in the marriage. If a partner behaves in a positive manner as opposed to a negative manner, the opposite spouse’s satisfaction level will be higher. This spouse then reciprocates positive behavior back to his or her spouse (Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2003; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Thus the reciprocity of behaviors is an important factor in marital happiness. However, just as positive behaviors are reciprocated, so are negative behaviors (Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2003; Julien, Brault, Chartrand & Begin, 2000; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991).
Barriers to a Satisfying Marriage

Marriages can be difficult to maintain. Life in American society has become faster paced and chaotic, with more issues to handle everyday, such as include longer working hours, less time with family, less one-on-one personal communication, poor communication skills, lower commitment levels, previously being divorced or having divorced parents, and financial difficulties. Other problems such as alcohol, drugs, infidelity, mental health issues and physical illnesses can also add to daily stressors (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001; O’Leary, Heyman & Jongsma, 1998).

Marital Myths

American society is filled with expectations about how people should live. How married life is to be maintained is no different. Some expectations are actually marital myths in the form of irrational beliefs that were identified by O’Leary and colleagues (1998) and will be subsequently discussed.

High expectations. The first myth is all of the expectations the American culture has put on marriage. American society believes in idealizing marriage, possessing extraordinary emotions within marriage, that there is only one person for everyone, that men and women want the same things from marriage and communicating effectively before the marriage is not necessary. American society believes that marriage should come easy; if it is difficult, then the marriage is not meant to be. In reality, marriage is hard work and it takes a lot of investment and maintenance in order for it to thrive. In their idealized thinking, people also believe that marriage is something magical that will fix any problem
in a relationship. However, what problems exist before the marriage will still be there after the vows have been said.

*Overwhelming emotions.* Another myth is that within a marriage, spouses should have continual and powerful emotions. They believe that there should be constant overwhelming emotions, including romance, in marriages. However, romance, as well as love and affection, ebb and flow throughout marriage. This is a normal process, but American society does not view it this way. If the passion and romance are not at the peak, then people make the mistake of believing that the relationship is failing or that they are not meant to be together. In reality, when the passion and romance have waned, a deeper level of intimacy begins (Huston et. al., 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Unfortunately, not many couples maintain a positive outlook towards the marriage and their spouse to reach this point.

*No negatives.* A third myth is that no negative experiences should occur. American society not only believes that also the relationship should involve everlasting passion, but also that it should be continuously perfect, that there should never be conflict, and that the couple should not address any negative feelings because that will ruin the marriage (Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). This is all based on a fantasy of what marriage should be (Huston et. al., 1995), but it sets real marriages up for failure because couples believe they are not living up to these ideals.

*Idealized companionship.* Along with these other irrational beliefs about marriage come idealized concepts that having a spouse will make a person complete or whole and that there is only one right soul mate for each person out in
the world. However, one person can not make another person complete and there are many compatible companions for everyone, but people put all their faith into finding their soul mate; the one. If the marriage is failing, people believe it is because they chose the wrong person to marry, when in fact it could just be that the couple is lacking relational skills (Huston et. al., 2001; Parrott & Parrott, 1995).

**Gender differences.** A final myth involves differences between men and women. Many couples do not discuss with each other what they want from the marriage. Men and women actually desire different things within the context of a marriage. If the couple does not discuss these differences, negative interactions and dissatisfaction begins. Many women from Western cultures want and need to be valued, feel worthy, and be respected. Many men from Western cultures want and need to be looked up to, to be needed, and to be independent but still engage in activities with their spouse (Parrott & Parrott, 1995). Ideas about how a marriage functions and what roles the husband and wife are supposed to play come not only from the ideals of Western society but also from each spouses’ family of origin. The family of origin is where a person’s beliefs are formulated and roles were modeled.

**Overcoming Expectations**

Expectations are built upon each individual’s values and beliefs and can be conscious or unconscious (Markman et. al., 2001). People come into marriages with their own goals, values and beliefs about every aspect of life. Conflicts occur when people go into a marriage without communicating these. Without this vital communication, each partner is missing an important component of his or
Satisfied Marriages

her spouse. The conflict is the result of this understanding of one another. The conflict is based on the feeling that one spouse does not respect the other and is not meeting his or her expectations of life and marriage (Markman et. al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; O’Leary et. al., 1998). Expectations, therefore, play a large part in the satisfaction each partner feels in regards to the marriage.

Satisfied couples have learned to overcome expectations by “being aware of what each expect, being reasonable about what each expect, being clear about what is expected and by being motivated to meet each other’s expectations” (Markman et. al., 2001, p. 286). Happy couples have discovered and identified the realistic versus unrealistic expectations. According to Markman et. al. (2001), realistic thoughts and ideas are linked to more satisfied married couples. Unrealistic expectations need to be reevaluated, which includes focusing on the origins of the expectation, understanding it, and then reframing the unrealistic expectation into a realistic one. Realistic expectations need to be directly and specifically addressed. No spouse should assume that the other partner understands his or her expectations without a clear explanation because most likely the spouse does not understand. Finally, after the realistic expectations are discussed, both partners need to respect, uphold, and support those expectations (Markman et. al., 2001; O’Leary et. al., 1998) because of the importance they play in each spouse’s life.
Negativity and Marriage

It is important to point out the distinction between negativity and conflict that occurs in marriage. It is normal to have conflict within a marriage. Actually, engaging in conflict is healthy, as long as it is handled correctly.

Negativity, in opposition, is not healthy and should not occur within a marriage. Some examples of negativity include stubbornness, contempt, criticism, defensiveness, continually expressing negative or hurtful emotions towards a spouse, and acting in emotionally and physically hurtful ways towards a spouse. The negativity builds on itself and as time passes, becomes more destructive to the marriage. Negativity can be present at any time in the marriage (Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) and can escalate an interaction, which means that the negativity (mostly negative comments) continually goes back and forth between the couple, getting worse and more negative (Markman et. al., 2001; Julien et. al., 2000; Gottman, 1994) and resulting in increasing dissatisfaction (Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2003; Huston et. al., 2001; Markman et. al., 2001; Gottman, 1994). The increasing dissatisfaction creates a downward spiral into marriage failure when conflicts are not handled appropriately and the negativity gets to a high level but is never resolved. These negative feelings continue to build and each interaction gets worse, with little or no positives, causing the marriage to become unstable.

Negative Affect

Negative affect reciprocity (reciprocating negative emotions about one another) is a key sign of marital distress (Johnson et. al., 2005; Huston et. al., 2001; Julien et. al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Levenson, et. al., 1994;
Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). In unhappy couples there is a long history of negativity in which couples are so focused on the negative aspects of the relationship that it is difficult to remember the positive aspects or good times. In fact, these couples are more likely to not even be able to recall much of their past together (Gottman & Silver, 1999). These couples also tend to have a weaker romantic bond, show less affection toward one another, and they self-report being less in love with one another. An overall pessimistic view of life can develop, which can also lead to the downfall of the marriage (Huston et. al., 2001).

**Negative Conflict**

In dissatisfying marriages there is continual fighting over significant and insignificant issues as a power struggle ensues. Conflicts become not about the presenting issues, but really about hidden issues. The problems never seem to be resolved but continue to infect the marriage. Neither partner wishes to compromise resulting in continual fighting which leads to the couple becoming stuck on an issue, causing it to erode the marriage as negative feelings of disappointment, isolation, resentment, loneliness, abandonment, and anger take over (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Neither partner wants to take responsibility for his or her own actions and instead blames the other. If this negative thinking continues to build, the commitment to the marriage decreases (Whisman et. al., 1997; Parrott & Parrott, 1995).

**Negative Communication**

Communication is a major weakness for couples who are unhappy in their marriage. Early dissatisfaction with the couple’s ability to communicate is linked to poor marital quality later on (Whisman et. al., 1997; Markman et. al., 1988).
According to Johnson et. al. (2005), “distressed couples are ten times more likely on average to express disagreement with negative affect” (p. 16). In daily interactions, people use body language to communicate. However, with unhappy couples, neither spouse keys into these nonverbal cues, resulting in both fighting independently of one another and not working together, unlike their satisfied counterparts (Huston et. al., 2001; Julien et. al., 2000).

Characteristics of a Happy Marriage

Communication

Communication is important in everyday lives. In a marriage, however, it is even more vital as it is a main aspect to a happy satisfied marriage. Healthy communication between partners is positively correlated with good marital functioning. It is the central aspect of marital quality as every aspect of marriage is performed through it in one fashion or another (Perrone & Worthington, 2001).

Listening skills. Communication includes verbalizing, but it also involves listening. Any person can hear the words of another, but to understand then involves active listening. To be an active listener, the listener needs to be conscious of his or her body language to guarantee that an open and inviting posture is presented. This promotes an inviting environment in which to talk. Active listening involves nodding, saying verbal encouragers such as uh-uh, yep, and keep going. In addition, the listener needs to paraphrase and summarize what his or her spouse is saying to ensure that he or she is hearing the partner correctly, as this also encourages the spouse to continue to talk. Because the listener needs to repeat back what his or her partner has said, this prevents the listener from interrupting or thinking about what he or she will say in response. The listener
needs to reflect back heard feelings to his or her spouse, giving a sense of validation for the speaker. Both partners also need to learn to use “I” statements, because saying “I” instead of “you” helps prevent blame and other negativity to enter into the conversation (Gottman & Silver, 1999; O’Leary et. al., 1998; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994; Long & Andrews, 1990).

*Nonverbal communication.* Nonverbal communication is a large part of communication. Positive or negative interpretation can be inferred depending on not only what the person said, but how it was said. The tone of voice, volume, body language, and hidden undertones are just some examples of how something can be said and are just as influential (Johnson et. al., 2005). A spouse needs to be aware of his or her nonverbal messages since they can effect how his or her spouse interprets the message.

Touch is an important nonverbal way of communicating that is greatly overlooked. Touch is valuable because it relates back to the human need for attachment. Without touch people do not thrive. Touching tells a person they are wanted, belong, and are important. Touch is an effective way to express love, respect, and acceptance, as well as building a deep intimate connection between the partners. In a healthy marriage, touch is used on a daily basis (Parrott & Parrott, 1995).

*Open and daily communication.* Happy couples talk openly about their feelings and thoughts which prevents communication errors and unspoken issues to underlay conflict. Included in this is that satisfied couples talk more during the day than unhappy couples, even if they are discussing unimportant minor details. This talk helps build a connection between the two partners (Kiecolt-Glaser et. al.,
Satisfied Marriages (2003; Gottman & Silver, 1999). If the couple is talking but the content is negative, this erases any positives of communication and is instead harmful. With good communication skills and little negativity infused into the conversation, most couples remain satisfied.

**Communication filters.** There are five filters of conversation that couples have to overcome for a happier marriage. These filters, like nonverbal cues, affect how a message is heard, understood, and responded to. These filters include, "distractions, emotional states, beliefs and expectations, differences in style and self-protection" (Markman et. al., 2001, p. 93). Distractions can be either internal or external which prevents the partner from paying close attention to what the other is saying. Internal distractions include such examples as the listener's own thoughts and physical sensations. External distractions include the surrounding environment. According to Markman et. al. (2001), to prevent this filter "the couple needs to talk in a place that is quiet and comfortable and when both spouses are ready to talk" (p. 93).

Emotional state filters are filters that influence reactions. If the listener is in a negative mood, he or she is more likely to interpret what is being said as negative. The opposite, therefore, is true for being in a positive mood. To prevent this filter, the couple needs to be sure that both are in an emotional state that will be most beneficial to the conversation. This state depends both on the couple and the type of conversation.

The third filter is beliefs and expectations. People hear, understand, and respond according to their expectations of the conversation. Active listening and
not making assumptions before or during the conversation can prevent this filter (Markman et. al., 2001).

The fourth filter is different communication styles. How a person was raised, his or her family of origin, and environment are all examples of influences that can determine communication styles. Markman et. al. (2001) suggested acknowledging these differences and discussing them with one another to prevent difficulties.

The final filter is self-protection. This comes from the speaker who may be afraid to truly express feelings, thoughts, and opinions. The speaker fears being shunned and thus may not be honest, which leads to communication errors. A warm, trusting, and accepting environment must be in place for this filter to not occur (Markman et. al., 2001).

Positive Over Negative Communication

Satisfied couples have negative feelings and thoughts; however, they have learned to keep the negativity from becoming predominant in the marriage. Instead, the positive thoughts and feelings take precedent over the negative. When a couple is focused on the positive aspects of the marriage, each spouse is able to look into the future (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts in marriage are inevitable. They are going to occur, especially because of the close dynamics of a married couple (Markman et. al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). In fact, some conflict is necessary and is dangerous only when handled poorly. Conflict can also tell a spouse a lot about his or her partner, such as range and strength of his
or her emotions, as well as many held beliefs and values. Overall, this builds the marital bond (Gottman, 1994). Early dissatisfaction with problem-solving skills between spouses is linked to disruptions later in the marriage. In contrast, early adequate abilities to solve problems and healthy communication skills are associated with better marital outcomes (Kiecolt-Glaser et. al., 2003; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Markman et. al., 1988). Couples that can work through differences during a conflict and find common ground are more likely to maintain a long-lasting marriage.

**Proper fighting techniques.** Satisfied couples do not hide from conflict, but instead handle it directly, thus not allowing it to overwhelm them. They engage in techniques of proper fighting. Along with techniques like good problem-solving skills, avoiding negativity, and possessing good listening skills, a couple also needs to acknowledge the problem, both take responsibility, and communicate about it effectively. Addressing all positive and negative aspects of the situation, as well as what can and can not be changed, is intricate to conflict communication (O’Leary et. al., 1998). In healthy marriages, the couple works together to solve a problem. They do not hurry through it, but take time to understand each other’s point of view, which contributes to a happier couple with lasting solutions (Markman et. al., 2001).

Through the course of a conflict, those couples who are the happiest remember to say “I’m sorry” and say it with sincerity. Apologies can become quite useful in defusing the conflict and strengthening the relationship when it comes from understanding and acceptance (Parrott & Parrott, 1995).
**Repair techniques.** Another technique that is used in proper fighting by happily married couples is that they use what Gottman (1994, 1999) calls repair techniques. These are phrases that allow the conversation to halt for a short time and prevent the negativity from becoming unmanageable. Examples of repair techniques include commenting on what is happening in that moment, telling each other positive emotions, using humor, and expressing affection (Johnson et. al., 2005; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman, 1994). The success of repair techniques is positively correlated to the outcome of the marriage. However, repair techniques only work in marriages that have a firm base. They can be given and received only when the relationship is more positive than negative because otherwise they will go unnoticed. A negative tone can not be used with the repair technique or the attempt to decrease the tension will go unnoticed as well (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

**Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a concept created by Gottman (1994, 1999), who studied ways couples fight. Gottman identified four stages leading to poor marital outcomes. These stages prevent effective communication between partners and create a vicious cycle that results in a downward spiral marriage failure (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). These four stages include criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Gottman claimed that these appear in this order as negativity and conflict increase in the marriage. Fortunately, repair techniques are one way of preventing this downward spiral.
Criticism, which involves attacking the spouse’s personality and blaming the spouse, is the first stage. In contrast, complaining is a comment about the situation. Complaining is the healthy way for couples to discuss problems. To avoid engaging in criticism, each partner needs to use complaining related to the situation. Using “I” statements helps couples avoid placing blame.

After criticism comes contempt, which is purposely exposing a spouse to emotional pain. At this point most of the positive emotions between the couple are few and far between as the marriage continues the downward spiral. To prevent or reduce contempt, the couple needs to acknowledge each other in ways of positive regard and emotion (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994).

If the negativity increases, next a couple engages in defensiveness. It occurs automatically in people when they feel unjustified blame or vengeance against themselves by another person. That person wants to defend his/her personality; however, it further heightens the negativity. To help prevent this, the couple needs to understand each other’s point of view and allow a break in the conversation for both spouses to calm down. Both partners also need to take responsibility for their actions and words.

If not stopped, then the fourth stage, stonewalling occurs. At this point in the conflict, one of the spouses shuts down or withdraws. He or she no longer tries to listen, hoping to stop the fighting. While the stonewaller thinks he or she is not worsening the situation by not further engaging in the fighting, it makes it worse because it sends a strong nonverbal message of avoidance, rejection, and uncaring. At this point there is no longer any connection or bond between the
couple. When this is continually present, the marriage is basically destroyed. To avoid stonewalling, both spouses can not allow themselves to withdraw but to continue the conversation and start trying more positive ways of interacting (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994).

Additional Characteristics of a Happy Marriage

Perception Taking

Whether it is an everyday conversation, a small disagreement, or a major conflict, it is important for married couples to understand each other’s perspective. In doing this, each partner feels understood and feels that the other partner is more willing to accept his or her needs, feelings and thoughts. According to Long and Andrews (1990), “perception taking” (or empathy) “indicates sensitivity and an understanding” of another person (p. 130). Perception taking also allows spouses to change their behaviors because upon seeing another viewpoint, a spouse can reevaluate the situation and change any behavior as appropriate. Empathy does not mean that each spouse must absolutely agree or have similar opinions (O’Leary et. al., 1998; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994; Long & Andrews, 1990). In reality, it is good not to agree on every issue because a marriage is much healthier if each partner maintains his or her own individualism (O’Leary et. al., 1998) and compromises.

Empathy needs to take place inside and outside of conflicts. If the couple uses empathy outside of conflicts, it makes it easier to use within a conflict. The ability to understand each other’s point of view while fighting is one of the proper strategies for handling conflicts. Thus, spouse perception taking (empathy) is

Differences

Every person is different, which is what makes a person an individual. These differences carry through the marriage and the key to couple satisfaction is when their differences are discussed and accepted (Huston et. al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; O’Leary et. al., 1998; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). Happy couples appreciate the individuality of each partner instead of fighting over it because fighting is pointless. Most of the differences that exist between people are not easily changed, such as personalities, values and beliefs. Anger and resentment occur when a spouse tries to change the other partner. Whether the differences between the couple can be changed or not, happy couples respect each other as currently are (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Satisfied couples work with the differences instead of fighting them. When couples use and focus on their similarities, a greater bond is formed between them in which they focus on the positives instead of the negatives (O’Leary et. al., 1998; Parrott & Parrott, 1995).

Equality

Happy couples view marriage as equal. They share in many of the household chores and are equal in most all of the aspects of marriage, including decision making (Perrone & Worthington, 2001; Parrott & Parrott, 1995).

Power and decision making are correlated with marital functioning and quality (Whisman et. al., 1997). In satisfied marriages, both partners share equally in the decision making process and decisions that need to be made take both points of
view into consideration, which allows for a compromise that is satisfying for both partners. Sharing the decision making process shows commitment and respect within the marriage. Another benefit is that it keeps the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from becoming prevalent in the marriage because neither partner has a reason to criticize, have contempt, be defensive, or stonewall (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Having the knowledge that they can handle a variety of situations and conflicts increases marital happiness and quality (Markman et. al., 1988).

**Commitment**

Strong marital commitment is also associated with marriage stability and satisfaction (Huston et. al., 2001). The commitment level of one or both of the spouses determines the fate of the marriage; if there is a lack of commitment, the marriage will not survive. A good sign of marital commitment is seen when a couple fights. If the couple works at resolving and compromising on a problem, investing time to doing so, then the marital commitment is high (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Whisman et. al., 1997). Married couples who end up unhappy have most likely failed to maintain their commitment to one another. The marriage needs to be a priority and needs time invested into it. Commitment can be maintained by expressing positive emotions, by each spouse supporting the other, by accepting each other as is, and by being devoted to each other (Markman et. al., 2001).

**Memories**

Yet another difference between satisfied and dissatisfied married couples is how they remember their past together. If a couple can recall positive memories, then there is a better marital outcome. Happy couples who are devoted to their
marriage want to and are able to remember the positive memories of their past and by doing this, are able to maintain the marriage through the positive feelings associated with the memories. Variety in memory recall is based on the idea that people are continually rewriting their history, thus, as the levels of happiness, love, and satisfaction increase, so does the intensity of the positive memories and good feelings associated with those memories. The reverse also holds true, which is why dissatisfied couples are unable to recall positives of their past but instead remember the negative aspects (Karney & Frye, 2002). What people remember about their marriage depends on their current level of satisfaction, which is also tied to their level of commitment to the marriage.

**Discussing the past.** Along with memory recall, another important factor is the way that couples discuss their marriage. Couples who talk about the positive aspects of the marriage and about each other have a higher quality of marriage (Karney & Frye, 2002). Overall, spouses will asses their past as a couple to decide if they should remain married or not (Karney & Frye, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

**Focusing on the improvements.** Satisfied couples focus on the improvements they have made as a couple. Possessing a positive perception of the changes in the marriage overrides the negative and dissatisfaction that has been experienced during the marriage. Focusing on the improvements makes it possible to maintain faith and optimism in a stable and satisfying marriage both in the present and future (Karney & Frye, 2002). It is important to focus on the positives of time spent together, but couples also need to use their past to learn from. By doing this, however, couples should not fixate upon the negatives but see them as
difficulties they have overcome together, thus turning the negatives into positives (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman, 1994).

Support

Satisfied and happy couples support one another in who they are and in what they do and want. Happy spouses admire and are dedicated to each other and speak of each other’s good qualities to other people (Huston et. al., 2001). Satisfied couples show pride and compliment one another for who they are as a person and through this support, the marital bond strengthens (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman, 1994).

Just as important as discussing each partner’s values, beliefs, wants, and needs, is to discuss each partner’s goals, dreams, and hopes (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman, 1994). Each spouse needs to appreciate, accept, and respect these aspects of his or her spouse. Satisfied and happily married couples try to combine each others’ goals and hopes into their marriage. If there are differences in opinions about any of these aspects, then each spouse needs to at least respect the other person’s opinion. In satisfied marriages, each partner strives to help his or her spouse obtain his or her goals and dreams (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). These couples are also more responsive and appreciative to each other in their wants, needs, dreams, and hopes.

Shared Value System

A stable and satisfying marriage is an equal balance that incorporates each spouse’s individualism. This, in turn, then creates a new “shared value system” (Kaiser et. al., 1998, p. 759). Marital satisfaction increases when a couple works together to get and maintain their shared meaning in life. This creates an ultimate
intimate connection (Gottman & Silver, 1999) as the couple creates their own traditions and rituals incorporating individualism and shared values and beliefs.

**Known History**

Happily married spouses also know what the significant other has experienced in life. Family and personal history of the spouse is well known. Again, acceptance, respect, and support are important in these areas in life, as this knowledge of each other provides the couple with greater intimacy and passion (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

**Positive Emotions**

Experiencing positive emotions between spouses can be a benefit in maintaining good positive interactions (Johnson et. al., 2005; Johnson & Greenberg, 1985). Happy couples report more loving feelings towards one another, show more concern for each other, possess a strong marital bond, and touch or show more affection towards each other. Marital happiness increases when spouses demonstrate care and concern towards one another and the welfare of the marriage (Huston et. al., 2001; Gottman, 1994). Satisfied couples rely on each other for all of their emotional needs and desires. They look to one another daily for such things as support, understanding, and affection. This reliance on one another allows a strong marital intimacy and connection beyond all other relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

*Love and respect.* “The two basic ingredients in marriage are love and respect” (Gottman, 1994, p. 61). Love is the main ingredient in which when high levels are experienced, marital satisfaction and quality are also high. Respect is vital in many areas in marriage (Huston et. al., 2001; Perrone & Worthington,
2001) and love creates more positive than negative interactions. Most dissatisfied couples report a drastic decrease in loving feelings towards their spouse (Perrone & Worthington, 2001; Whisman et. al., 1997; Gottman, 1994).

Affection and humor. Affection and humor are much more apparent in happy couples than unhappy couples (Johnson et. al., 2005; Gottman & Silver, 1999). In fact, the more affection that is displayed between the couple, the happier the couple because as the amount of affection decreases, negativity and dissatisfaction increase, replacing the affection. Affection can be intimate, such as kissing, or can be daily behaviors like holding hands, hugging one another, and sitting close to one another. Therefore, it is valuable to show affection daily as it also expresses appreciation in a marriage (Perrone & Worthington Jr., 2001; O’Leary et. al., 1998; Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991).

Fondness and admiration. According to Gottman and Silver (1999), “fondness and admiration are two more critical elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance” (p. 63). These two elements play a role in promoting intimacy and commitment. Fondness and admiration occur when spouses acknowledge their significant other’s flaws, but choose to look beyond them and instead focus on the positive aspects. Spouses realize that “their partner deserves love, respect, and honor” (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 63).

Friendship

All in all, one of the most vital keys to a satisfying marriage is having a solid and meaningful friendship. Marital functioning is higher when the marriage is based on friendship. This friendship creates a warm and safe that permits the couple to share feelings, thoughts, and opinions and makes it easy to express
positive emotions and engage in positive behaviors towards one another. It also allows intimacy and a sense of connectedness which no other two people share. Having a friendship reduces the risk of isolation and increases attachment, security, and a feeling of belonging.

Couples who have this deep friendship are able to share good and bad experiences. In a conflict, the friendship keeps negativity from overwhelming the couple and they are able to give and receive the repair techniques that can halt dangerous negativity (Markman et. al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman, 1994).

Protecting the deep marital friendship requires that the couple make time for one another. This time together allows the couple to build positive memories for the marriage (Markman et. al., 2001) and helps to strengthen the marital bond (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). Satisfied couples spend time together ranging from doing fun activities together to just being in the house watching television together. Other ways of creating a bond include joking around and being silly with each other and creating private jokes (Huston et. al., 2001; Markman et. al., 2001; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Parrott & Parrott, 1995; Gottman, 1994). When a couple spends less time together, there is a decrease in romantic and loving feelings and they miss out on experiences that can bond them as a couple.

Conclusion

"In the realm of the purely personal- after food, water and shelter- the quality of relationships most often determines the quality of life" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 3). Marriage is a form of a relationship that a person shares with another that matches
no other relationship either person possesses. It is intended to be a safe place in which vulnerabilities can be shown and a deep intimate friendship can blossom. Marriage is to be cherished and valued, which is how spouses should treat each other. Unfortunately, in American society today, marriage is often times not seen as a long term commitment. Thus, many marriages fail because people do not understand the continual work and effort it takes to maintain it. Both spouses need to be involved and committed to the marriage daily for it to remain solid (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Through this solid marriage will come higher marital quality and in turn will help establish higher life and health quality.

This paper was written to help therapists help clients improve their marriage. In addition, this information can be used to assist people in their interpersonal relationships, using the concepts from this paper to identify possible sources of discontent. The content in this paper can also be used as a stepping stone for conversation to brainstorm possible areas that are lacking in a person’s marriage because identifying problematic areas is the first step to happiness and satisfaction.

While this paper has identified many characteristics of happy satisfied couples, there is still much more to learn. The contents of this paper should be used in addition to further research and reading. With any of the topics covered in this paper, there are plenty of sufficient resources to consult in order to continue the learning process. In the area of interpersonal relationships, marriages in particular, there will always be a continual interest in further study because of the basic human need to belong and feel needed by other people. The information
gathered in this paper is a solid base in which many people can begin to understand the complexities of marriage.
References


