LIVING MARRIAGE

How to Stay Married

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Staying married is more challenging than ever. But new data says it's worth it

There's a reason fairy tales always end in marriage. It's because nobody wants to see what comes after. It's too grim. Meeting the right person, working through comic misunderstandings and overcoming family disapproval to get to the altar–those are stories worth telling. Plodding on year after year with that same old soul? Yawnsville.

Most Americans of every stripe still want to get married–even millennials, although they're waiting until they're older. To aid them in their search, businesses have devoted billions of dollars and thousands of gigabytes to mate seeking. Lawyers have spent countless hours arguing that people should be able to marry whomever they choose, of any gender. Techies have refined recommendation engines so that people can more accurately find their perfect other half. In many ways, getting married is now easier than it has ever been.

But staying married, and doing so happily, is more difficult. In 2014, having spent a year looking at all the sociological, psychological, economic and historic data he could get his hands on, Northwestern University psychology professor Eli Finkel announced that marriage is currently both the most and the least satisfying the institution has ever been. "Americans today have elevated their expectations of marriage and can in fact achieve an unprecedentedly high level of marital quality," he writes, but only if they invest a lot of effort. And if they can't, their marriage will be more disappointing to them than a humdrum marriage was to prior generations, because they've been promised so much more.

Matrimony used to be an institution people entered out of custom, duty or a need to procreate. Now that it's become a technology-assisted endeavor that has been delayed until conditions are at their most optimal, it needs to deliver better-quality benefits. More of us think this one relationship should–and could–provide the full buffet of satisfaction: intimacy, support, stability, happiness and sexual exhilaration. And if it's not up to the task, it's quicker and cheaper than ever to unsubscribe. It's not clear any relationship could overcome that challenge.

It's not even clear anymore exactly what couples are signing up for. Marriage is the most basic and intimate of our social institutions, but also the one most subject to shifts in cultural, technological and economic forces, many of which have made single life a completely viable and attractive proposition.

At the same time, new evidence keeps piling up that few things are as good for life, limb and liquidity as staying married. "Couples who have made it all the way later into life have found it to be a peak experience, a sublime experience to be together," says Karl Pillemer, a Cornell University gerontologist who did an intensive survey of 700 elderly people for his book 30 Lessons for Loving. "Everybody–100%–said at one point that the long marriage was the best thing in their lives.

"But all of them also either said that marriage is hard," he adds, "or that it's really, really hard."

Marriage has become what game theorists call "a commitment device," an undertaking that locks individuals into a course of action they might find dreary and inconvenient on occasion in order to help them achieve a worthwhile bonus later on. And in an era when it's both harder and less necessary to stay together, the trick is figuring out how to go the distance so you can reap the surprisingly rich rewards.

What does a modern marriage promise that historical unions didn't? The ultimate dream: a partner who sees what you really are and not only accepts it, but improves it. "The promise you make is not just to be faithful and true and to stay married, but to try and bring out the best in each other," says Lisa Grunwald, who with her husband Stephen Adler put together a historical compendium of marriage, The Marriage Book, in 2015. "To try and understand, really deeply understand what the other one wants and hold her feet or his feet to the fire and say 'O.K., this is great but remember, this is what you wanted and don't let go of that dream.'"

And just as the benefits have changed, so have the challenges. The roles partners play in the home are a moving target. Child rearing has long been discounted as the main reason for marrying, and yet married couples today are encouraged to engage in it more intensively than before. Technology offers more enticements to stray while the culture and the law offer fewer penalties for doing so.

In some cases, the penalty is for staying. That Hillary Clinton stuck with a philandering husband is considered in some circles to be a liability, evidence of weakness or that the marriage is a sham. And when, in April, Beyoncé dropped Lemonade, her gloriously enraged album about infidelity, many people assumed that as a feminist she would soon be single. Not so. "Today, choosing to stay when you can leave is the new shame," says relationship therapist Esther Perel.

Beyoncé has plenty of time to change her mind; "until death do us part" is a much longer stretch than it used to be. People can get married, have kids, put them through college, retire and still have decades of life together ahead of them. For some, that's just way too much time with the one person with the one set of stories and gross habits. "Being married is like sharing a basement with a fellow hostage; after five years there are very few off-putting things you won't know about each other," writes Tim Dowling in How to Be a Husband. "After 10 years there are none." After 25 years, he might have added, you're ready to put their eyes out.

So while divorce rates have been dropping among all ages since the 1980s, there's one exception: older people. Divorce rates among this group are up. A report in 2014 found it has doubled among people 50 and older in the past two decades; more men over 65 are divorced than widowed. Only a tenth of the people who divorced in 1990 were over 50. In 2010, it was 25%. Some of those were in second or third marriages, which tend to be less stable than the first, but more than half of them were first-timers.

Some demographers have hypothesized that the reason marriage is most popular among the highly educated is that they see it as the optimal way to give advantage to their offspring. Unhappy couples often split at a later stage because they've waited until their kids have left: the empty-nest divorce. But it may be that it was the demands of child rearing that first caused the rift. "If you look at time-use studies, all parents are spending more time with their children than parents with equivalent resources did decades ago," says University of California at Santa Barbara demographer Shelly Lundberg. "And at the top end, among college graduates, we're definitely at a new level." Children are not merely fed, educated and sheltered; they are curated or, as family scholars put it, raised using "concerted cultivation."

This intensive parenting is made more complicated when both spouses work outside the home, as more do than even 20 years ago. Since the child-care burden is still primarily shouldered by women, they are often the more stressed partner. In addition, their careers make it simpler for them to imagine a life without a spouse. They have their own income, a network of friends and associates and their own retirement savings.

And when people go home after work, their networks go with them. Social media has made it much easier to seek support and conversation elsewhere than in a spouse. Conveniently, it has also made it much easier to line up a new one if all that not talking takes a toll. "Man is basically as faithful as his options," says noted marriage counselor

Chris Rock. “No more, no less.” And now, people–of both sexes–feel like they have options to spare. They can find old flames easily. Or they can drop their lure into the vast schools of partners in online dating pools. Singledom looks less like murky waters and more like limpid ocean.

All of this would be academic, of course, without a reasonably unobstructed route to Splitsville. Divorce may feel like a failure but it has lost a lot of stigma, and hassle. Since 2010, every state in the nation has allowed people to leave their spouses without accusing them of anything–and in most states, it doesn’t even require their consent. Mediators are making divorce cheaper and less onerous. There are books, TV shows and websites dedicated to the once unthinkable concept of the good divorce, what practitioners Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin popularized as “conscious uncoupling.”

Lifetime monogamy, as many have pointed out, is not a natural state. Very few animals mate for life, and most of those that do are either birds or really ugly (Malagasy giant rat, anyone?). One theory as to why humans took to monogamy is that it strengthens societies by reducing competition among males.

But natural and worthwhile are not the same things. Reading isn’t a natural thing to do. Neither is painting, snowboarding nor coding. Nobody suggests we abandon any of those. Monogamy also has a certain energy-saving appeal: it saves humans from wasting time and effort on constantly hunting out new mates or recovering from betrayals by current ones.

Perhaps because fidelity is quite a challenge, cheating is less of a deal breaker than popularly imagined. “Surprisingly, a single episode of infidelity was not considered to be an automatic end” to the couples Pillemer interviewed, he says. “But there had to be reconciliation, remorse and often counseling.”

For those who can stay the course, indicators that a long marriage is worth the slog continue to mount. Studies suggest that married people have better health, wealth and even better sex lives than singles, and will probably die happier.

Most scholars agree that the beneficial health effects are robust: happily married people are less likely to have strokes, heart disease or depression, and they respond better to stress and heal more quickly. Mostly, the health effects apply only for happy marriages, but a study in May found that even a bad marriage was better for men with diabetes.

Some of this could be a result of selection bias: clinically depressed people and addicts find it difficult to get and stay married, so of course fewer married people are depressed or addicted. Some of it could be much more mundane; married people are more likely to behave responsibly about their health because their lives are more routine and other people need them. Bella DePaulo, a scientist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, argues that all studies of marriage are flawed: “If you want to say that getting married and staying married is better for your health than staying single,” she says, “then you need to compare the people who chose to stay married with those who chose to stay single. I don’t know of any studies that have done so.”

It’s also possible, researchers suggest, that individuals who share wealth and expenses can afford better health care. The couple’s well-being might actually not be due to their marriage but because those whose finances are in order are more likely to get married in the first place.

Even so, married women’s finances are generally more robust than divorced women’s. “Historically, divorced women have had the highest poverty rates among all-aged women in the United States,” says Barbara Butrica, a labor economist at the Urban Institute.

Of course, money isn’t the only thing women need. There’s also sex. A 2011 Kinsey Institute study of sexual satisfaction in the U.S., Germany, Spain, Brazil and Japan found

that women in committed relationships were feeling more sexually satisfied after 15 years than they were in the first decade and a half of the relationship. Another study found that people in their first marriages had more sex than people in their second.

John Gottman, one of the nation's leading marriage researchers and educators, reports that older married couples tend to behave like younger married couples outside the bedroom too. "The surprising thing is that the longer people are together, the more the sense of kindness returns," he says. "Our research is starting to reveal that in later life, your relationship becomes very much like it was during courtship."

The biggest disincentive to divorce, however, may be the same as one of the biggest drivers of divorce: kids. Many sociologists and therapists agree that kids from what are known as "intact marriages," as a whole, do better on most fronts than kids from divorced families, unless the marriage is very high-conflict. (It should be noted that therapists are clear that some marriages are just too toxic to sustain, and if a spouse is in physical danger, he or she must leave.) Not all children of divorce are the walking wounded their whole lives, but the stats are not encouraging.

Research suggests that in the long term, children of divorced parents are more at risk of being poor, being unhealthy, having mental illness, not graduating college and getting divorced themselves. It's true that being poor might be the cause of all the other adversities. Nevertheless, studies that have taken income into account still found that kids from divorced families face more challenges than those from parents who stayed married.

The things we don't know about what keeps people together are legion. But here are some of the things we do know: if people get married after about the age of 26, have college degrees, haven't already had kids or gotten pregnant, and are gainfully employed, they tend to stay married. If individuals form romantic partnerships with individuals who are similar to them in values and background, they find it easier to stay married. And the devout, by a slim but significant margin, get divorced slightly less often than people for whom faith is not a big deal.

But what's the trick once you're hitched? It's hard to do thorough scientific testing of what actually makes a marriage work, because of the ethics of experimenting with people's lives, but over the years, sociologists, psychologists and therapists have seen patterns emerging.

One constant is to avoid contempt at all costs. By contempt, therapists mean more than making derogatory remarks about a partner's desirability or earning power. It's also communicated by constant interruption, dismissal of their concerns or withdrawal from conversation.

Contempt, say therapists, sets off a lethal chain reaction. It kills vulnerability, among other things. Vulnerability is a prerequisite for intimacy. Without intimacy, commitment is a grind. And without commitment, the whole enterprise goes pear-shaped.

Alas, contempt's favorite condition for breeding is familiarity. And you can't have a family without familiarity.

How to avoid it? There are two main antidotes, says Gary Chapman, arguably the country's most successful marriage therapist–his book The 5 Love Languages has been on some version of the New York Times best-seller list for eight straight years. The first, obvious as it sounds, is to figure out what specifically makes your partner feel loved.
(According to Chapman, it's probably one of five things: words, time, kindly acts, sex or gifts.) And the other is to learn to apologize–properly–and to forgive. Disagreements are inevitable and healthy, so learning to fight fair is essential; resentment is one of contempt's chief co-conspirators.

Obvious idea that actually works No. 2 is to find shared interests, which can help offset the changes that relationships go through. “The most successful couples began to embrace one another’s interests,” says Pillemer. Since people are staying healthy longer, they can be active much longer. “We try to find everything we can think of that we really like to do together,” Jimmy Carter has said, and his 70-year marriage to Rosalynn endured four years in a governor’s mansion, one presidency, several failed campaigns and a passion for Trikkes, among other trials.

Another helpful adjustment is to drop the idea of finding a soul mate. “We have this mythological idea that we will find a soul mate and have these euphoric feelings forever,” says Chapman. In fact, soul mates tend to be crafted, not found. “There are tens of thousands of people out there that anyone could be happily married to,” says Gottman. “And each marriage would be different.”

And how do you make a soul mate? Practice, practice, practice. Pillemer observed that long-married couples he interviewed always acted as if divorce was not an option.
“People really had the mind-set they wanted to stay married,” he says. They regarded their partnership as less like buying a new car and more like learning to drive. “Marriage is like a discipline,” he says. “A discipline is not reaching one happy endpoint.”

If all that discipline sounds a bit dreary, take heart, because the regimen includes bedroom calisthenics. A 2015 study found that sex once a week was the optimum amount for maximizing marital happiness. The Canadian researchers who analyzed data from three different studies found that sex played an even bigger role than money in happiness. The difference in life satisfaction between couples who had sex once a week and those who had it less than once a month was bigger than the difference between those who had an annual income of $50,000 to $75,000 and those who had an annual income between $15,000 and $25,000.

Sex, of course, does not occur in a vacuum (unless that’s the way both partners like it). Therapists urge couples not to let the kids keep them from going out. “It does not have to be huge swaths of time but bits or chunks,” says Scott Stanley, a co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. “Even something as simple as taking a walk together after dinner.” This is not time to work out differences. “When they should be in fun and friendship mode, [some people] switch into problem and conflict mode. Don’t mix modes.”

One of the more controversial ideas therapists are now suggesting is that men need to do more of the “emotional labor” in a relationship–the work that goes into sustaining love, which usually falls to women. “What men do in a relationship is, by a large margin, the crucial factor that separates a great relationship from a failed one,” writes Gottman in his new book, The Man’s Guide to Women. “This doesn’t mean that a woman doesn’t need to do her part, but the data proves that a man’s actions are the key variable that determines whether a relationship succeeds or fails.”

Men are beginning to step up at home and value work-life balance almost as much as women. But recent scholarship has reinforced the value of old-school habits too–having family dinner and saying thank you actually make a difference.

The one piece of advice every expert and nonexpert gives for staying married is perhaps the least useful one for those who are already several years in: choose well. The cascade of hormones that rains down on humans when they first fall in love, while completely necessary and wonderful, can sometimes blind individuals to their poor choices. Therapists suggest you ask friends about your prospective life mate and listen to them. Aim to find someone you know you’ll love even during the periods when you don’t like him or her so much.

And then, cross your fingers. As Grunwald puts it in an aphorism that may end up in a future marriage book: “Just pick out a good one and get lucky.”