

Probing Question: What predicts a happy marriage?

February 19 2009, By Jesse Hicks

You've planned the perfect Valentine's Day, booked the candlelit restaurant, bought chocolate and flowers. (Or, depending on your darling's taste, bought tickets to a monster truck rally.) The night couldn't have gone better... and you might even be hearing wedding bells. But how can you tell whether your relationship — as exceptional and unique as it is — will translate into a happy marriage?

According to Alan Booth, “A happy marriage depends less on the aim of Cupid's arrow, and more on those mundane day-to-day elements no one finds particularly romantic.” In fact, says Booth, distinguished professor of sociology, human development, and demography at Penn State, “It's a bad idea to marry during that early, idealized period.” Biological factors produce that light-headed feeling of being in love, and while pleasurable, it can also be misleading. In his research, Booth has seen that divorce rates peak in the third year of marriage — a clear indication that a lot of newlyweds have early regrets. Couples need to know each other very well before marriage, and have a commitment to mutual respect, emphasizes Booth.

Perhaps surprisingly, one way couples get to know each other — by living together — doesn't necessarily lead to happier marriages. In fact, research suggests that divorce rates are higher among couples who cohabited before marriage than among those who waited until after their wedding to move in together.

“Even though they're living together, a couple can still see themselves as

in a temporary relationship,” Booth explains. Without committing to marriage, couples often spend this “trial period” avoiding long-term problems in their relationship. Couples who move in together out of convenience or economic necessity, for example, may find it easier to avoid talking about problems in the relationship. Those problems then carry over into the marriage.

Worse, some of those couples don't develop the problem-solving skills Booth sees as indispensable in any marriage. Negotiating disagreements is a skill, he explains, and it takes practice. Couples who can manage these problems effectively have happier marriages, but that doesn't mean their happiness came easily. As Booth points out, men and women generally approach conflict management in very different ways. Men, he says, tend to withdraw, while women want to solve the problems. “So they're initially at odds, strategically,” he says.

Couples in happy, long-term marriages manage disagreements without letting them get out of hand. (Booth offers a handy formula for keeping things in balance: “Every one negative thing said needs five positive statements to override it.”)

Happily married couples tend to make explicit agreements about everyday living — who does the dishes, for example — as well as weightier issues like the prospect of having children. In short, says Booth, they've talked to one another in an environment of mutual respect and consideration.

Booth's research and analysis may take some of the star-struck romance out of marriage, and suggest that like any long-term project, a happy marriage requires careful, daily tending. It suggests that couples are much more responsible for their happiness than they realize, which leaves Cupid without much of a role to play. But did you really want your fate decided by a flying baby with a bow and arrow?

Source: By Jesse Hicks, Research/Penn State

Citation: Probing Question: What predicts a happy marriage? (2009, February 19) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-probing-happy-marriage.html>

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