

# Conflict levels don't change much over course of marriage

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Think about how much you fight and argue with your spouse today. A new study suggests that your current level of conflict probably won't change much for the remainder of your marriage.

That may be good news for the 16 percent of couples who report little [conflict](#) or even the 60 percent who have only moderate levels of conflict. But it's not such happy news for the 22 percent of couples who say they fight and argue with each other a lot.

The study followed nearly 1,000 couples over 20 years, from 1980 to 2000.

"There wasn't much change in conflict over time," said Claire Kamp Dush, lead author of the study and assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"There was a very slight decrease in the amount of conflict reported in the final years of the study, which was slightly larger for the high-conflict couples. Still, the differences over time were small."

Kamp Dush conducted the study with Miles Taylor of Florida State University. The results appear online in the *Journal of Family Issues* and will be published in a future print edition.

The researchers used data from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course survey, conducted by researchers at Penn State University. The

telephone surveys started with 2,033 married people 55 years of age and younger in 1980, when the study began. Many of the same people were interviewed five more times through 2000. They were asked a variety of questions about the quality of their [marriage](#) and their relationship with their spouses, as well as demographic questions.

[Marital conflict](#) was measured by how often respondents said they disagreed with their spouse: never, rarely, sometimes, often or very often.

Based on these results, Kamp Dush and Taylor separated the [respondents](#) into high, middle and low conflict marriages.

The researchers found that people in low-conflict marriages were more likely than others to say they shared decision-making with their spouses.

"That's interesting because you might think that making decisions jointly would create more opportunities for conflict, but that's not what we found," Kamp Dush said.

"It may be that if both spouses have a say in decision making, they are more satisfied with their relationship and are less likely to fight."

People in the low conflict group were also more likely than those who reported high levels of conflict to say that they believed in traditional, life-long marriage.

"People who believe marriage should last forever may also believe that fighting is just not worth it. They may be more likely to just let disagreements go," Kamp Dush said.

These results suggest there may be two types of relatively low-conflict couples, she said. These categories were revealed when the researchers

looked at how conflict was related to overall marital happiness.

They used a classification system developed by psychologists that classifies marriages into four general types: volatile, validator, hostile and avoider.

The lower conflict couples who had equal decision making tended to fall into the validator marriage category, who report high and middle levels of happiness and no more than middle levels of conflict. About 54 percent of couples were in this category, and had low levels of divorce.

"The validator marriages are often seen as positive because couples are engaged with each other and are happy. We found that in these marriages, each partner shared in [decision making](#) and in housework," Kamp Dush said.

The other low conflict couples were in the avoider marriages, which included 6 percent of those studied. These couples had more traditional marriages in which husbands were not involved in housework and in which the participants believed in life-long marriage.

"These couples believed in traditional gender roles and may have avoided conflict because of their beliefs in life-long marriage. These couples were also unlikely to divorce."

About 20 percent of those surveyed were in volatile marriages – high conflict and high or middle levels of happiness. The remaining participants were in hostile marriages, which were the most likely to divorce.

While couples in both validator and avoider marriages tended to have lower levels of conflict, validator marriages may be the healthiest for couples, Kamp Dush said.

"Avoiding conflict could lead [couples](#) to avoid other types of engagement with their spouse," she said.

"A healthy marriage needs to have both spouses engaged and invested in the relationship."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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