

# Healthy Marriages, Healthy Relationships



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## How do some unhappy marriages get better?

It's easy to identify the conditions that might push a once blissful marriage into misery, like – money problems, constant bickering, no romance, binge drinking, and job stress. For some couples the emotional discontent and practical circumstances of living together become unbearable. Divorce is certainly an understandable option. But do individuals end up happier apart than if they had stayed together?

Conventional wisdom might suggest that folks who divorce would be measurably happier; less depressed and have a stronger sense of personal mastery than those who stay married. With the important exception of those in violent relationships, results of a national study suggest that unhappy couples who divorce are no happier on average than those who stay married. Surprisingly two out of three of these unhappily married adults who avoid divorce or separation, report being happy five years later.

How do these mediocre to miserable couplings regain their footing toward marital bliss?

### *The marital endurance ethic*

The most common strategy to survive tough times is to simply hang on. Couples who do this aptly tend to

- Identify their unhappiness as primarily due to outside stressors (like job loss or illness) rather than the bad character of partners
- Modify their expectations of marriage or their partner
- Accept change and adjust to circumstances.

Many couples find as time passes, financial situations often improve, children mature or they gain the ability to see chronic problems in a new light. A trucker's wife who struggled with loneliness when he was on long road trip notes, "I mellowed . . . I adjusted more than he changed."

### *The marital work ethic*

Another approach supported by counselors, marriage educators and clergy is to actively work on the relationship. Common strategies include:

- Adjust work and home schedules to plan time together as a couple
- Arrange monthly dates – begin to court your spouse anew
- Learn "fair fighting" or negotiating skills to improve problem-solving
- Practice active-listening and empathy to increase positive communication and break cycles of chronic conflict.

*The personal happiness ethic*

To alleviate the disappointment of a lackluster partnership some refocus their efforts from “relationship improvement” to “self-improvement.” Joining a sport clubs, taking up hobbies or finishing a degree can often help to relieve the pressure of a high-stakes relationship in a tense holding pattern.

Commitment to marriage and reluctance to divorce itself appears to allow partners to minimize the negative impact of difficulties, avoid pursuing outside romances, and invest more time and energy into fixing problems and enhancing the relationship.

A resource link to information on the Administration for Children and Families' healthy marriage initiative is:

<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>

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