

Linda J. Waite, Don Browning, William J. Doherty,
Maggie Gallagher, Ye Luo, and Scott M. Stanley

Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages



This report comes from a team of family scholars chaired by Linda J. Waite of the University of Chicago. The Institute for American Values is grateful to the W.H. Brady Foundation, the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation, the Huston Foundation, the Maclellan Foundation, and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Rasmussen for their financial support.

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*Institute for American Values
1841 Broadway, Suite 211
New York, New York 10023
Tel: (212) 246-3942
Fax: (212) 541-6665
Website: www.americanvalues.org
Email: info@americanvalues.org*

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Executive Summary

DOES DIVORCE typically make adults happier than staying in an unhappy marriage? Many Americans assume so. This study represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first serious effort to investigate this assumption empirically.¹

Using the National Survey of Families and Households (a nationally representative survey), we looked at all spouses (645 spouses out of 5,232 married adults) who in the late '80s rated their marriages as unhappy. Five years later these same adults were reinterviewed, so we were able to follow unhappy spouses as their lives took different paths: in the interim, some had divorced or separated and some stayed married. Because marital strife takes a toll on psychological well-being, the conventional wisdom would argue that unhappily married adults who divorced would be better off: happier, less depressed, with greater self-esteem and a stronger sense of personal mastery, compared to those staying married.

Was this true? Did unhappy spouses who divorced reap significant psychological and emotional benefits? Surprisingly, in this study, the answer was no. Among our findings:

- **Unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married.** Even unhappy spouses who had divorced and remarried were no happier, on average, than unhappy spouses who stayed married. This was true even after controlling for race, age, gender, and income.

- **Divorce did not reduce symptoms of depression for unhappily married adults, or raise their self-esteem, or increase their sense of mastery, on average, compared to unhappy spouses who stayed married.** This was true even after controlling for race, age, gender, and income.

- **The vast majority of divorces (74 percent) happened to adults who had been happily married five years previously.** In this group, divorce was associated with dramatic declines in happiness and psychological well-being compared to those who stayed married.

- **Unhappy marriages were less common than unhappy spouses.** Three out of four unhappily married adults were married to someone who was happy with the marriage.²

- **Staying married did not typically trap unhappy spouses in violent relationships.** Eighty-six percent of unhappily married adults reported no violence in their relationship (including 77 percent of unhappy spouses who later divorced or separated). Ninety-three percent of unhappy spouses who avoided divorce reported no violence in their marriage five years later.

• **Two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later.** Just one out of five of unhappy spouses who divorced or separated had happily remarried in the same time period.

Does this mean that most unhappy spouses who divorced would have ended up happily married if they had stuck with their marriages? We cannot say for sure. Unhappy spouses who divorced were younger, more likely to be employed and to have children in the home. They also had lower average household incomes than unhappy spouses who stayed married. But these differences were typically not large. In most respects, unhappy spouses who divorced and unhappy spouses who stayed married looked more similar than different (before the divorce) in terms of their psychological adjustment and family background.

One might assume, for example, that unhappy spouses who divorce and those who stay married are fundamentally two different groups; i.e., that the marriages that ended in divorce were much worse than those that survived. There is some evidence for this point of view. Unhappy spouses who divorced reported more conflict and were about twice as likely to report violence in their marriage than unhappy spouses who stayed married. However, marital violence occurred in only a minority of unhappy marriages: Twenty-one percent of unhappily married adults who divorced reported husband-to-wife violence compared to nine percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married.

On the other hand, if only the worst marriages end in divorce, one would expect greater psychological benefits from divorce. Instead, looking only at changes in emotional and psychological well-being, we found that unhappily married adults who divorced were no more likely to report emotional and psychological improvements than those who stayed married. In addition, the most unhappy marriages reported the most dramatic turnarounds. Among those who rated their marriages as very unhappy,³ almost eight out of ten who avoided divorce were happily married five years later.

Other research (and the experience of clinicians) suggests that the kinds of marital troubles that lead to divorce cannot be sharply distinguished from the marital troubles that spouses overcome. Many marriages of middling quality end in divorce. Many marriages that experience serious problems survive and eventually prosper.

More research is needed to establish under what circumstance divorce improves and under what circumstances it is associated with deterioration in adult well-being. Additional information on what kind of unhappy marriages are most (and/or least) likely to improve if divorce is avoided is also needed.

To investigate the latter, we conducted focus group interviews with 55 marriage survivors — formerly unhappy husbands and wives who had turned their marriages around. Among our findings:

• **Many currently happily married spouses have had extended periods of marital unhappiness, often for quite serious reasons, including alcoholism, infidelity, verbal abuse, emotional neglect, depression, illness, and work reversals.** Why did these marriages survive where other marriages did not? The marital endurance ethic appears to play a big role. Many spouses said that their marriages got happier, not because they and their partner resolved problems but because they stubbornly outlasted them. With time, they told us, many sources of conflict and distress eased. Spouses in this group also generally had a low opinion of the benefits of divorce, as well as friends and family members who supported the importance of staying married.

• **Spouses who turned their marriages around seldom reported that counseling played a key role.** When husbands behaved badly, value-neutral counseling was not reported by any spouse to be helpful. Instead wives in these marriages appeared to seek outside help from others to pressure the husband to change his behavior. Men displayed a strong preference for religious counselors over secular counselors, in part because they believed these counselors would not encourage divorce.

Conclusion

While these averages likely conceal important individual variations that require more research, in a careful analysis of nationally representative data with extensive measures of psychological well-being, we could find no evidence that divorce or separation typically made adults happier than staying in an unhappy marriage. Two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce reported being happily married five years later. ■

Introduction

MOST EXPERTS and ordinary Americans now agree that a good marriage is better for children than other family forms, and that high rates of divorce and family fragmentation have negative consequences for the well-being of children and society.⁴

On the other hand, only a minority (albeit a rising minority) of Americans believe that adults should stay together for the sake of the children. While 64 percent of Americans agreed in a recent poll that divorce almost always or frequently harms children, just 33 percent agreed that “for the children’s sake, parents should stay together and not get a divorce, even if the marriage isn’t working.”⁵

Many Americans fear a reduction in divorces would condemn more adults to grim, unhappy lives, with negative consequences for children as well. So a 1991 study of marriages that were unhappy and in which spouses did not consider divorce concludes, rather gloomily, that future research should “focus on . . . possible consequences for being in an unhappy marriage for which one sees no real alternative.”⁶ “[A]t what point does intense unhappiness for the parents get balanced out by a slightly increased chance of success for the kids?,” asks Stephanie Coontz of the Council on Contemporary Families.⁷

But does divorce make adults happy? Most national dialogue on this important topic simply assumes that it does. If someone is unhappily married, how can getting rid of the marriage fail to bring significant psychological relief? Of course some unhappily married individuals may choose to sacrifice their own happiness to maintain the marriage, for their children’s sake, for religious reasons, or perhaps out of fear. Americans may applaud or deplore this sacrifice on the part of adults. But the widespread assumption among experts and lay people alike — divorce is better for adults than staying in an unhappy marriage — has never, to our knowledge, been investigated empirically.

Theoretically, however, there are good reasons to wonder. There is no question that marital unhappiness takes a psychological toll. Unhappily married adults are less likely to report they are happy with life in general, and more likely to report psychological problems than happily married people.⁸ On the other hand, the psychological consequences of divorce are uncertain. Divorce, by ending an unhappy marriage, eliminates some stresses and sources of potential harm, but may create others as well. The decision to divorce sets in motion a large number of processes and events that the individual does not fully control but which likely deeply affect his or her emotional well-being. Among these variables: the response of one’s spouse to the divorce (anger, retaliation, resignation, acceptance, or relief); the reactions of children (do they improve or deteriorate in their physical and mental health, conduct and school performance?); potential disappointments and aggravation in custody, child support, and visitation orders; new financial or health stresses for one or both parents; and new relationships or marriages that may bring new joys but also possibly new grief, disappointments, frustrations, anxiety, and family conflicts.

A substantial fraction of divorced people express doubts about their own divorce, even many years later. In New Jersey, for example, 46 percent of divorced people reported that they wished that they and their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.⁹ In one Minnesota poll, 40 percent of currently divorced people say they have at

least some regrets about their divorce.¹⁰ Sixty-six percent of currently divorced Minnesotans answered yes to the question, “Looking back, do you wish you and your ex-spouse had tried harder to work through your differences?”¹¹

While divorces are sometimes preceded by years of angry or violent conflict, divorce also ends many marriages that had both up and down sides. One recent study by Booth and Amato found that a majority of divorces involving children now dissolve not angry, violent marriages but relatively low-conflict marriages.¹² Another recent study found that only 20 percent of children who experienced divorce had parents who argued frequently while married (compared to seven percent of children whose parents stayed married).¹³

Qualitative research supports the idea that divorce occurs in many marriages of middling quality, marked by both real frustrations and real joys. Joseph Hopper, who conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 divorcing couples, found that “At the same time that they listed complaints, however, divorcing people easily reported good things about their marriages. They liked having someone at home, someone to talk with about their day. They described camping trips, holidays and birthdays . . . feelings of security, safety and comfort.” Among these divorcing couples, “[I]t seemed that many outcomes were possible in nearly every marriage I learned about.”¹⁴

By ending a strained marriage, divorce relieves some sources of emotional distress, and may remove the threat of harm from a dangerous partner. At the same time divorce can create new sources of distress, from financial troubles to new relationship problems with the ex, trouble with children, and new relationship difficulties (or violence) with new mates. The new husband or boyfriend may be no more satisfying than the old, and less able and willing to pay

for or help with the children — he could be a hero or a child abuser.

How do these potential risks and benefits of divorce balance out, on average, in the lives of unhappily married adults? What happens to unhappily married spouses who divorce compared to unhappy spouses who stay married? Did those who divorced experience a dramatic blooming of personal happiness and psychological well-being, while those who stayed married remain trapped and stunted by a bad relationship?

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The Divorce Assumption: Findings from the NSFH

WE TESTED the assumption that divorce is better for adults than staying in an unhappy marriage by analyzing data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a nationally representative database used by scholars. NSFH asked a large national sample of adults about both the happiness of their marriage (“marital happiness”) and about their happiness with their life in general (personal or “global” happiness). The survey also measured symptoms associated with depression and other indicators of psychological well-being, including self-esteem and sense of personal mastery, as well as a wealth of other information about marital quality (including domestic violence) and demographic variables (age, race, income, education, etc.). The same people were interviewed in both the late '80s and five years later. This allows us to track the consequences of divorce versus staying in an unhappy marriage on an individual's personal happiness, on average, using nationally representative data.¹⁵

Using NSFH data we were able to look specifically at what happened to adults who rated their marriages as unhappy as they later divorced and separated or stayed together.

How Do Happily and Unhappily Married Spouses Differ?

Demographically, unhappy and happy spouses¹⁶ were more similar than different. Unhappily married spouses were statistically somewhat more likely to be black, female, have minor children in the home, and to not be employed than happily married spouses. The differences, while statistically significant, were typically not large. For example: Fifty-four percent of unhappy spouses were women, compared to 49 percent of happily married spouses; nine percent of unhappily married spouses were black, compared to six percent of happy spouses. Unhappily married adults were on average just over 42 years of age, while happy spouses were on average just under 44 years. Sixty-four percent of unhappy spouses had children under 18 in the home, compared to 54 percent of happy spouses. Seventy-nine percent of happy spouses were employed, compared to 74 percent of unhappy spouses. There were no significant differences in education or income between happily married and unhappily married adults.

Unhappy spouses showed more symptoms of psychological distress than happy spouses. On measures of psychological adjustment, unhappily married adults had significantly lower levels of global happiness, were more likely to show symptoms of depression, and had a lower sense of personal mastery and lower self-esteem than happy spouses. These data do not allow us to disentangle causality, which likely runs in both directions. Being in an unhappy marriage exerts a psychological toll. But it is also true that depression or other psychological problems make it harder to have a happy marriage.¹⁷

Unhappily married adults reported higher rates of conflict and domestic violence. Unhappy spouses, for example, were about twice as likely as happily married adults to report that arguments had become physical (14 percent of unhappy spouses versus eight percent of happy spouses). However, the vast majority of unhappily married adults reported no domestic violence in the home: Eighty-six percent of unhappy spouses reported

that none of their arguments had become physical; 88 percent said the husband did not hit the wife; 87 percent reported the wife did not hit the husband.

In summary, the findings on unhappily married people came out as one would expect: They have more psychological problems, argue more with their spouses, and have more domestic violence than happily married adults. Perhaps it is no wonder that conventional wisdom assumes that divorce is better for adults than staying in an unhappy marriage. In the next section, we will look at what happens to these unhappily married people who stay married and to those who divorce or separate.

How Are Unhappy Spouses Who Later Divorce or Separate Different from Unhappy Spouses Who Stay Married?

Are unhappy spouses who end up divorced substantially different from unhappily married adults who avoid divorce or separation? Overall, in the ways we were able to measure, the unhappy spouses who headed for divorce or separation do not look very different from those who stay married. Demographically, there were no significant differences between unhappy spouses who divorced or stayed married in terms of education, gender, or race. There were statistically significant differences in terms of age, employment status, income, and the presence of children. Income and employment status worked in opposite directions. Unhappy spouses who were employed were more likely to divorce. But unhappy spouses with lower household incomes (before divorce) were also more likely to divorce or separate, as were unhappy spouses with minor children in the home (which may reflect the influence of stepchildren). Age was a significant factor: Unhappily married adults who ultimately divorced were on average 37 years of age, or almost seven years younger than those who stayed married.

Were unhappy spouses who later divorced or separated more likely to be victims of high conflict or violent marriages than those who stayed married? Yes. Twenty-one percent of unhappy spouses who ended up divorced had reported husband-to-wife violence, compared to nine percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married. However, the overwhelming majority of both groups of unhappy spouses reported no physical violence in the home. Eighty-five percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married and 77 percent of unhappy spouses who divorced reported in the initial interview that none of their arguments had gotten physical.¹⁸ Did staying married trap a large number of unhappy spouses in violent homes? No. Five years later, the overwhelming majority of unhappy spouses (93 percent) who stayed married reported that none of their arguments had become physical (compared to 96 percent of happily married adults).

Does Divorce Make Unhappily Married People Happy?

The National Survey of Family and Households has a number of measures of emotional and psychological well-being. So we were able to look at the differences between unhappily married people who divorced and those who stayed married on a number of psychological variables, including: global happiness, depressive symptoms, sense of personal mastery, self-esteem, hostility, autonomy, sense of purpose in life, and self-acceptance, as well as indirect measures such as days of drinking and number of drinks per day.

Four questions about psychological well-being were asked of both waves of the survey: global happiness, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and sense of personal mastery. Using these measures we were able to look at how staying married or getting a divorce changed the emotional and psychological well-being of unhappy spouses.

In the first level of analysis, we looked at outcome measures, without controlling for demographic variables. In these raw data, did unhappy spouses who divorced end up happier than those who stayed married? Did divorce appear to reduce depression? Did it at least increase unhappy spouses' self-esteem?

No. We were surprised by the systematic failure of divorce to be associated with improvements in the psychological well-being of unhappily married adults. Unhappy spouses who divorced or separated actually showed a somewhat higher number of depressive symptoms, compared to unhappily married spouses who stayed married. On the plus side, they were also somewhat more likely to report personal growth.¹⁹ The most dramatic difference occurred in alcohol use. Unhappily married spouses who divorced averaged 7.33 days of drinking per month, compared to 4.72 days for unhappily married spouses who stayed married, and they had significantly more drinks per day as well.

BUT ON MOST MEASURES, divorce made no difference at all. Unhappily married people who divorced were no happier, five years later, than unhappily married people who stayed married. They had no greater sense of overall happiness, no greater sense of personal mastery, no less hostility, no higher sense of purpose in life, and no more self-acceptance or self-esteem than unhappily married people who stuck with their marriages. Divorce, on average, failed to improve the psychological and emotional well-being of unhappily married people.

We wanted to make sure that the lack of association between divorce and improved well-being for unhappily married adults was not an artifact of differences in age, race, education, income, or parental status. So we ran a separate analysis, controlling for these variables, as well as baseline levels of global happiness, depression, personal mastery, and self-esteem.²⁰ The results tell us about how divorce or staying married changed levels of well-being for unhappy spouses, controlling for initial levels of emotional and psychological well-being.

Divorce was never associated with an increase in the emotional well-being of unhappily married spouses. Divorce did not make unhappily married spouses personally happier, or reduce depression, or increase personal mastery, or self-esteem, even after controlling for race, income, education, age, gender, employment status, and the presence of children in the home.

Next we looked at subgroups of unhappy spouses who divorced. Perhaps those who had remarried were happier than those who stayed in unhappy marriages? No. Whether unhappy spouses who left their marriages were separated, divorced but not remarried, or divorced and remarried made no statistically significant difference in their happiness or psychological well-being.²¹

Among those unhappily married spouses who stayed married, what factors predicted happier marriages down the road? Marriages with high conflict and domestic violence

were less likely to become happy five years later. While a majority of spouses became happy five years later, unhappy husbands were somewhat more likely than unhappy wives to become happier down the road, as were childless marriages, compared to marriages with children (including stepchildren). Race, age, and education had no effect on the likelihood that an unhappy marriage that avoided divorce would get happier.

Do Only Unhappily Married Adults Divorce?

No. Seventy-four percent of divorces took place among spouses who had, five years earlier, been happy with their marriages. While Americans usually talk of unhappy *marriages*, we found that unhappy *spouses* were far more common. Only about a quarter of unhappy spouses were married to a spouse who also reported being unhappily married.

Among adults who had reported being happily married (five years earlier), divorce or separation was associated with dramatic reductions in psychological well-being. Happily married spouses who ended up divorced five years later were significantly less happy, showed more symptoms of depression, had less sense of personal mastery and lower self-esteem, five years later, than happy spouses who avoided divorce. This remained true, even after controlling for race, education, age, gender, income, and initial levels of psychological well-being.

Happily married adults who avoided divorce were more than twice as likely to become happy with life in general, only about 60 percent as likely to develop many symptoms of depression, 30 percent more likely to report a higher sense of personal mastery, and about one-third more likely to have increased self-esteem, compared to happily married spouses who divorced or separated over the ensuing five years.

Is Staying Married or Divorce and Remarriage a Better Strategy for Getting a Happier Marriage?

Many people divorce hoping to make a better marriage down the road. How often does this happen? If the problem is marital violence, divorce appears to offer significant relief. Similarly, 23 percent of those unhappily married adults who divorced reported that an argument had become physical in the past year. Of those who had remarried (five years later), just 10 percent reported physical arguments in the home.²² When an unhappily married adult experiences violence, divorce and remarriage significantly reduce the likelihood he or she will experience domestic violence (at least from spouses).²³

What about other forms of marital unhappiness? Were unhappy spouses who divorced more likely to end up happily married than those who stuck with their current partners? No. Most unhappy spouses who stuck with their marriages ended up happily married: Sixty-four percent of unhappy spouses who avoided divorce ended up happily married five years later. The most unhappy marriages experienced the most dramatic turnarounds: Seventy-eight percent of adults who said their marriages were very unhappy²⁴ and who avoided divorce ended up happily married five years later.²⁵

By contrast, just 24 percent of those unhappy spouses who divorced or separated ended up in a second marriage within five years. Eighty-one percent of those second marriages were happy. Overall, therefore, 19 percent of unhappy spouses who divorced or separated were happily married five years later.

Five years is a fairly short time frame, however, and the number of unhappy spouses in these data who had divorced and remarried by that point is small.²⁶ Many more divorced adults will eventually remarry. In addition, because marital satisfaction typically declines with time, many of these second marriages may later become unhappy, experience violence, and/or divorce. NSFH data do not tell us how many of these divorced people will eventually go on to make better and more stable second marriages.

Summary: NSFH Data

Does divorce make unhappily married people happy? The answer, surprisingly, in this research, seems to be no. Divorce typically offered unhappy spouses no relief in terms of symptoms of depression, and was not associated with increases in personal happiness or other measures of psychological well-being.



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With the important exception of reducing the incidence of marital violence for unhappy spouses (in violent marriages), divorce failed, on average, to result in improvements in psychological well-being for unhappy spouses. And divorce also appeared to reduce adult happiness and increase adult depression in the majority of divorces, which took place among spouses who had been (five years earlier) happily married.

By contrast, most unhappy spouses who stayed married ended up happier five years down the road. Only a minority of unhappy spouses who divorced or separated had entered a happier second marriage five years later. Does this mean that most unhappy spouses who divorced would have ended up happily married if they avoided divorce? We cannot say for sure. It likely depends on individual circumstances. Unhappy spouses who divorced were statistically more likely to be younger, had lower household incomes, were more likely to be employed, and to have children in the home, but these differences (with the exception of age) were not large. Unhappy spouses who divorced were also somewhat more likely to report symptoms of depression. Unhappy spouses who experienced violence did better (in terms of avoiding domestic violence) if they divorced.

But in other respects, in the ways we were able to measure, unhappy spouses who divorced and unhappy spouses who stayed married looked more similar than different: Before the divorce, they reported similar levels of personal happiness, personal mastery, and self-esteem. Race, education, and gender had no significant effect on whether unhappy spouses divorce or stayed married.

One might assume, for example, that unhappy spouses who divorce and those who stay married are fundamentally two different groups; i.e., marriages that ended in divorce were much worse than those who stayed married. There is some evidence for this point of view. Unhappy spouses who divorced reported more conflict and were more than twice as likely to report violence in their marriage than unhappy spouses who stayed married. However marital violence occurred in only a minority of unhappy marriages: Twenty-one percent of unhappily married adults who divorced reported husband-to-wife violence compared to nine percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married.

On the other hand, if only the worst marriages end in divorce, one would expect greater psychological benefits from divorce. Instead, looking only at changes in emotional and psychological well-being, we found that unhappily married adults who divorced were no more likely to report emotional and psychological improvement than those who stayed married. In addition, the most unhappy marriages reported the most dramatic turn-arounds: Among those who rated their marriages as very unhappy,²⁷ almost eight out of 10 who avoided divorce were happily married five years later.

More research is needed to establish under what circumstance divorce improves and under what circumstances it is associated with deterioration in adult well-being. Additional information on what kinds of unhappy marriages are most (and least) likely to improve if divorce is avoided is also needed.

While these averages likely conceal important individual variations that require more research, in a careful analysis of nationally representative data with extensive measures of psychological well-being, we could find no evidence that divorce or separation typically made adults happier than staying in an unhappy marriage.

How Do Marriages Get Happier? Focus Groups Interviews

HOW DO MARRIAGES become unhappy and how do unhappy marriages turn around? The NSFH does not allow us to answer this question directly or in any detail. To supplement results from nationally representative data in the NSFH, we also collected “marital turnaround” narratives from 55 spouses in four focus groups in northern Virginia and northern New Jersey. What made their marriages unhappy? Who and what do they believe helped them avoid divorce? How do they think unhappy marriages get happier? The husbands and wives who told us their marital turnaround stories were not part of a nationally representative sample, and we interviewed them at only one point in their history, so the results must be interpreted with caution.

More rigorous qualitative and quantitative research is needed. At the same time, these personal interviews provide important clues for family scholars, policy makers, journalists, counselors, and clergy about how and why unhappy marriages that do improve first avoid divorce and eventually get happier.

Surprisingly little research has focused on such resilient marriages, and we did not know what to expect from our interviews with formerly unhappy spouses. These interviews conducted in focus groups in just two East Coast suburbs must be considered tentative, preliminary, and exploratory. Nonetheless, the stories they told surprised and intrigued us.

Overall, the stories these spouses told about how marriages become unhappy can be grouped into three large narratives: When bad things happen to good spouses, Men behaving badly, and Communication difficulties and difficult personality traits.

When Bad Things Happen to Good Spouses: “Our son was really getting into drugs.”

Perhaps the most common story the spouses we interviewed told us is that marriages become unhappy because of outside stressors. We were surprised by the dominance of this explanation. Many spouses we interviewed who survived marital unhappiness did not see problems within the relationship as the cause. Instead they blamed outside forces for causing both unhappiness and relationship stress: Spouses became ill, lost jobs, got depressed, children got into trouble or created marital stresses by their financial and emotional demands.

This may reflect real differences in the kinds of marital unhappiness that lead to divorce and those that don't. But it may also reflect the kinds of “attributional biases”²⁸ that help people stay married; i.e., it's easier to stay married to a guy whom you see as having “lost his job and got depressed” than a guy who is an “unreliable provider,” much less a “bum.” Spouses who say, “it's hard work providing for and raising little children” may weather marital stress better than those who say, “she's an emotional wreck who's never happy with what I do for the family” or “he's a workaholic who's never there for us.”

Outside stressors that spouses saw as causing marital unhappiness ran the gamut from job reversals to medical illness and problems with the kids. One husband actually blamed the weather: “I was in Florida, I couldn't take the weather, it was turning me into a mad-

man . . . She couldn't deal with it, I was a madman, very agitated, no tolerance for anything. The heat just really got to me."

Financial problems or job reversals were mentioned frequently, especially in husbands' accounts. Daniel, a 49-year-old business manager married 16 years, told us, "Several years ago I became the victim of a power play at the company I'd worked at for 13 years, completely blindsided. I went into a deep funk, probably a depression. I didn't handle my part of the bargain, I moped: 'It's unfair, it's not fair.' "

One husband reported the low point was when a client went bankrupt and he lost \$40,000 in commissions. Several men mentioned the birth of a first or second child as a difficult time, either triggering new conflict with wives who objected to time spent away from the family, or new financial stresses. One husband said both he and his wife "got scared" after the birth of their second child. When his wife quit work for a while, there was "a lot of pressure on the both of us." Another husband blamed his wife's "miscarriage" for her sudden unhappiness with his habit of going out with the guys.

WIVES ALSO blamed outside stressors, although this was a less prominent theme in wives' than in husbands' narratives. Laura's low point came after her husband, an independent contractor, hurt his hand and could not work for a long period of time. Then he became depressed and sat staring at the wall for "almost a year." "He doesn't talk, and I'm a big talker," recalls Laura. "I'd ask 'what's wrong?' and he'd say, 'Nothing's wrong.'" Laura: "You're doing nothing but staring at a wall, what do you mean nothing's wrong? The kids are avoiding you, you look like you are in a coma." Husband: "Can't I be miserable?" Laura: "Yeah, but for how long? Let's do something about being miserable."

Mona attributed her unhappiness to her husband's decision to run a limo business out of her home. The business wasn't bringing in much money, he was gone all the time, and she was answering the phones for him. Plus she was home from work after the second baby and had to go back to work early because her husband wasn't bringing in enough income: "I just knew I didn't want to live like this."

Several husbands and wives mentioned wives' feelings of being "trapped" by the demands of small children, especially when combined with the husband's need to work long hours, as an outside source of marital unhappiness. They did not blame their spouses (at least on reflection) so much as the circumstances. As Joe put it, "She felt, 'God, I'm trapped here in the house with the kids.'" "Did she ever think of divorce?" we asked. Joe: "Probably." How do you know? Joe: "Because she said so." Sally, who has been married 27 years, recalls the "hardest time" as when their kids were small: "I wasn't working, we were struggling financially, he was working long hours, the money was not great, I was home with the kids, he'd come home and I'd want to run, and those years were so hard, and I was angry. He didn't do anything wrong, He was making a living — I chose to stay home — but it was very, very hard. We were both tired, we'd have arguments. I'd say 'Why don't you leave?' And he'd say, 'I'm not leaving, you leave.' "

Others spoke of the marital distress created when children go seriously off-track. Jane remembers the low point in her marriage vividly:

“Our son was really getting into drugs, hadn’t dropped out of school yet, but he was in really bad shape. My husband got the opportunity to go to naval war college, like a sabbatical. I couldn’t go, because my eldest son would never have left. He was sneaking out at night, through the basement. He did attempt suicide. I got very, very angry. I was stuck, it made me very angry.”

Robby described a “ten-year period” of unhappiness in his 26-year marriage when “Our son went through drugs. It created problems between the two of us. Just the frustration on both our parts about how to deal with it. Just the incredible tension brought on us.”

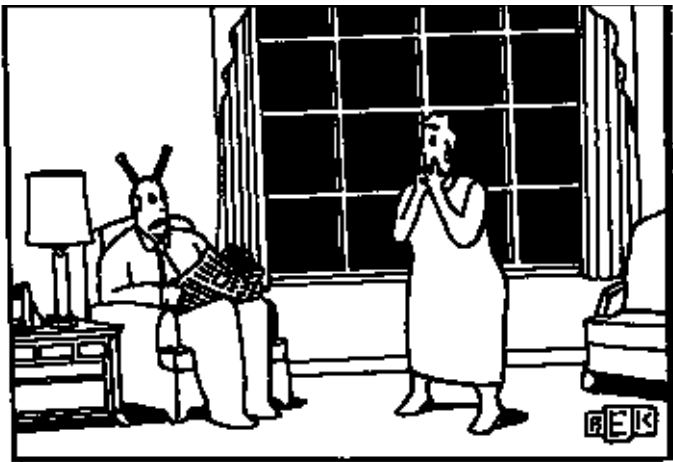
When one spouse becomes seriously ill, marriages become less happy. “What was a shared relationship is now one of dependency — she on me,” mused Roland, who had been planning to travel and enjoy life with his wife when he retired before learning his wife had MS. She now can walk only with a cane. “You can’t say, when this cycle is over, we’ll get a second chance. It’s a lousy roll of the dice. It’s a downward incline, with mental problems and ugly, ugly symptoms.”

Men Behaving Badly: “Macho, drinking, cussing, fighting at the drop of a hat.”

A second major account of how marriages become unhappy was: Marriages become unhappy because husbands behave badly. We were somewhat surprised to discover that, among the spouses we interviewed who saw marital unhappiness as caused primarily by bad behavior, very few husbands and no wives saw the wife’s behavior as chiefly to blame. Stories of infidelity (real or “emotional”), overly critical, belittling, or controlling spouses, alcoholism, spouses who “checked out” or spent too much time away from the family, were, in this sample, mostly stories that both husbands and wives told about the behavior of husbands. (The exception: Several husbands blamed their wives’ irrational jealousy for marital unhappiness, and one husband blamed his wife for becoming pregnant without his consent.)

There are several possible explanations for this gender gap in assigning marital blame. First, husbands may be more likely to violate basic norms of family behavior than wives, from infidelity to simply claiming large amounts of leisure time for personal pursuits.²⁹ Second, there is some evidence that the happiness of wives is more dependent on the daily “events” of the marriage than that of husbands.³⁰ Researchers have found that men have less well-developed narratives to explain marital unhappiness and divorce and that wives’ happiness in marriage is more dependent on supportive behaviors from husbands than vice versa.³¹ Many of the men we talked to appeared to see defining marital happiness as the job of the wife. How do you know if you are happily married? If the wife is happy, many men told us, then the marriage is happy. And finally, it may be that when wives violate basic marital norms of fidelity and family togetherness, marriages are less likely to survive, and so opt out of our “marital turnaround” sample.

What kinds of bad behavior did our formerly unhappily married people survive? “Macho, drinking, cussing, fighting at the drop of a hat,” as one military husband



"I'll be straight with you. I was put on this planet to make your life miserable."

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described the approximately 20-year period of his marriage where his alcoholism devastated his wife. "I wasn't physically abusive but I was verbally abusive without knowing it." Nora told us: "Ten years ago, my husband came home one night and announced he was going to do something different with the rest of his life that didn't include me." (It turned out it did include the co-worker he later moved in with.) Vance: "After seven years, I got that feeling again. My style was real cramped. Then things got really bad, I was out drinking, infidelity . . . I just shut her off and everything else except for me for two years."

"He was always picking on me. 'You didn't cook enough,' this and that . . . Getting put down all the time," Lisa summed up. Theodora's newlywed husband complained about her spending priorities and her domestic skills: "He kept criticizing me," she recalled, her cooking, how she spent money. They separated twice during the early years and when asked what she would have said to her husband at the time to explain why she left, she blurted, "I can't stand you." Georgina, married over 40 years, complained that her husband was critical and controlling: "He belittled me. I did everything, girls, I raked, I took care of schools, the children." But there was "no satisfaction. He was not my husband unless he wanted to grab me in bed."

The low point in Ellen's marriage was when "I was pregnant with my second child and he didn't come home for three days. I didn't know where he was. I was freaking out." When he showed up, she screamed at him, "You a**hole, get the f**k out." "He was horrified and embarrassed," she told us. "Oh, I didn't know you'd act like that," he told her. "I was really torn," he told her, to explain his three-day disappearing act: "I didn't know what to do. I was so upset, all the responsibility." Cora, after eight years of marriage, complained when her husband began spending too much free time away from home: "He started getting involved with a civic association. It's a good organization, but he spent more time going to meetings, parties. He invited me to the parties, but I said 'I'd rather spend time with our girls.' "

Joel, who at 29 has been married six years to his high school sweetheart ("We're best friends, we bought our first cars together"), described the low point in his marriage as happening "about two years ago." He went with his wife's brother to a topless bar. "I didn't consider it that bad. I came home at three a.m., she asked where I'd been. I said, 'With your brother at a gentleman's club.' 'You mean a strip joint!' she was screaming, yelling, fussing, she was devastated." She called up her mother, and the rest of her family, and for months afterwards would wake him up in the middle of the night begging to know "what did those ladies have that I don't have?" (Joel was particularly puzzled because his wife had visited the ladies' equivalent recently, but when he pointed this out, she insisted that it was not the same thing).

Sometimes, husbands complained when wives objected to the husbands' use of free time, even when infidelity was not an issue. "I was married three years and she decided she was unhappy, so we separated," said Greg. "She would have said I was always out all the time, which I was. I wasn't doing anything to her. I wasn't fooling around, I was active doing guy things, playing ball, being a guy." When men spent large amount of time in personal pursuits, wives saw this as husbands behaving badly, while some (but not all) husbands viewed their wives' objections as irrational.

Communication Difficulties and Difficult Personality Traits: "Conversations only at commercials."

The third large account of why marriages became unhappy is this: Marriages become unhappy because of chronic conflict, poor communication, and emotional neglect. Husbands told stories of wives who became very unhappy "for no good reason." After the kids came, reported Scott, his wife: "Got old real fast. I'm a happy-go-lucky guy. I want to go out and have a good time. When I met her, she was wild. She got too responsible, too regimented. She's like my grandmother."

Wives told of husbands with difficult personality traits, or differences in communication styles or money and lifestyle philosophies. We also note that where spouses had these sorts of complaints, they were (with some exceptions) less likely to report dramatic "turn-arounds" in marital happiness, but more likely to tell stories of learning to live with chronic complaints about (or from) their spouse.

Amy says that when she and her husband quarrel, it isn't about anything "big": "[My husband] says I'm a negative person. I don't see myself as a negative person but he interprets it that way. I'm a troubleshooter kind of person and so I'll come back and say 'What about this? What about that?' He considers that negative, I consider it looking into the future."

"It is harder than I really expected," says Jimmy, a 44-year-old newlywed (married less than two years): "A lot of what makes our marriage hard — I get into depressions, I feel she doesn't give me any time to do that. Before, I had a low for a month — when I get out, I get out. With Karen, two days of feeling sorry for myself and she gets really pissed at me. I feel like I have to be on my toes."

When asked what was the lowest point in her 16 years of marriage, Marian sighs. A long pause. "I can't pick one," she says: "The low points have been when my husband gets distressed about work or overwhelmed about his life and he'll say his life is just a complete disaster. He's a failure, our house is a disaster, our children are never going to amount to anything. He gets so despondent and then gets really angry with me."

"I resented conversations only at commercials," said Lilly, who was separated from her husband for six years out of their 42-year marriage. "Or that was when he'd get amorous. Only at commercials."

Why Not Divorce? "Worse Than Staying Married and Mad"

Why didn't many of these unhappy couples divorce, given the seriousness and the length of the marital unhappiness many described? We asked most focus group participants why they did not divorce. The answers ranged from children's need for fathers to

money, kids, marriage vows, religious and family norms, friendship, and the personal love story. This list of practical, personal, and moral considerations is very similar to the list researchers studying commitment use to explain why marital happiness alone cannot explain why some couples divorce and some stay married.³² The sources of marital commitment are an important, rich topic deserving additional research.

Many spouses mentioned the high financial costs of divorce as a deterrent. When Inez's husband returned home from temporary duty assignment in the military, "I'd unload on him. I'd say 'I've been here for three weeks with these kids,' " notes Inez. "He'd say, 'You think you are the only person with three kids? Why don't you leave?' Realistically I remember saying, 'I can't leave, I have three little kids.' It was just like financially impossible."

Women worried about the effects on children. Marie, for example, was a mother of young children at home, who told us she thinks about divorce "on an hourly basis," and yet she said she and her husband were in it for "the long haul":

"I'd rather be in a miserable marriage than do that to my kids. I'm from the old school, there hasn't been a divorce in my family anywhere, sister, parents, grandparents. I feel like my husband and I are so focused on how they do and raising them to be fine young men, I feel like I would be undoing everything if I got divorced. I think it would be awful for the kids if we divorced. I think divorce rocks their worlds and sets them on a life of feeling insecure, even if it is subliminal. I can't imagine going to one parents' house on one weekend, having another room, a stepmother, going through adolescence thinking about your dad with another woman . . . I think if you asked any kids . . . 'Are you hoping your dad becomes everything he wants to be, that he self-actualizes? . . . or do you want your dad at the dinner table?' they don't care about your happiness."

Krista, when asked why she did not divorce, answered simply, "Because of my child, I could have taken her back with my family in Germany but I think a child is better off with a mom and dad."

MANY MEN in particular in our focus groups saw their very existence as fathers deeply involved in the continuance of the marriage. Interestingly, while both some husbands and some wives mentioned the stresses associated with the birth of a child as the low point in a marriage (wives more than husbands), several husbands, but no wives, described the birth of a child as the "solution" to marital unhappiness. Many wives saw fathers as important to their children; but they did not describe marriage as essential to their mothering. Men, but not women, saw marriage as essential to their status as a parent, the pathway to fatherhood, the valued thing that gave them the opportunity to protect and love their kids.

Many emphasized that they could not be the same kind of father to their children outside of marriage, and that some other man would come into their child's home for good or for ill. Sam, married 11 years to a very unhappy wife whose outbursts (he reports) occasionally led her to hitting him, says he would never divorce: "I'm not leaving my kids, who

knows what might happen?" Challenged by other husbands about the bad effects staying married might have on his kids, Sam responded in two ways. First, he indicated that if the kids were damaged by his wife's violent outbursts, the failure would be hers, not his. Second, he did not worry only about what divorce would do to his kids, he also worried about what divorce would do to his life as a father. "My kids come up, I don't care where we go, they kiss me, that's what I want," he told us. "I don't know if I could go on without my kids, they are my life now. I've been waiting for this all my life."

We were struck, in general, however, with the generally low opinion many of these survivors of unhappy marriage had of divorce. They did not typically grit their teeth and say, "We must stay married for moral reasons even though divorce would offer us a world of joy." Instead, when divorce thoughts arose, they tended to compare the trials and tribulations of marriage to what they saw as the even greater trials and tribulations of divorce. Many pointed to a sibling's or friend's divorce to explain their reluctance. As Ariel, a technical editor married 13 years, with two kids, put it:

"We've just gone through periods of either not talking or . . . biting each others' heads off. And I've thought divorce a few times, but I've never said it. Because I think about what that would really mean. The children, it would just be too hard, it's just too emotional, I think it's worse getting divorced than it is staying married and mad. Because I've seen it, with my brother, and it's just awful."

Happy Endings: "I think I owe her one."

The tales of marital unhappiness were vivid and gripping. It would be easy to imagine these couples ending up divorced. What may be harder to imagine is that many of these marriages really did become happy. How happy were these marriages? Currently satisfied spouses described a range of marital intimacy and enjoyment. Even though almost all spouses described themselves as currently happily married, not all marriages had storybook endings. None described current problems with infidelity or substance abuse. Most were able to describe many good things about their marriages.

Among northern Virginia husbands, companionship and comfort figured prominently. "We enjoy each others' company." "We've reached the 'like and comfort' stage. You understand one another." "The best thing is the comfort factor," said another, married 20 years, "You can almost read each others' minds. If I weren't married, I'd have more money, but aside from that I'd be lonesome. Guys have this fantasy of being free to go out to the Super Bowl together. But after you do that you have nothing to come home to."

On the other hand, Neal also emphasized marriage as "work. It's a lot of work." Robert, whose wife has multiple sclerosis, says, "The best thing about being married to me is I'm not alone. I didn't want to be lonely. Someone to come home to, someone to talk to." "I still consider my wife my best friend," said David. "It's a total, complete partnership." On the other hand, "You don't always get along with your partner, especially with the Mars/Venus thing." "I'm a very independent person," said Sanjay, a school principal originally from India, yet "I never thought I'd be so dependent on anyone. I don't share everything with her, but I have never done anything I wouldn't like to share with her."

In New Jersey, husbands and wives emphasized the difficulties of married life, the work stress, the time taken up by kids. On the other hand, the joys of partnership also appeared: "Building a life together. Everything we did, we did together," said one man, married 40 years. "Being together," said another, describing the best thing about marriage as "Being able to enjoy some good things together." "We really enjoy each other," and "our kids give us a lot of joy," said a third. "You rely on each other," said another, "I gotta believe being single is not the best thing. Like when you have the flu or are sick. It's miserable getting along by yourself. We get along, won't say it is happy or unhappy, we understand each other, we get along."

One husband, when asked what would break his marriage, replied at first, "Infidelity." Then he corrected himself, "But I don't know even at this point if it would. I would always love her. Even if she wouldn't live with me, I would always love her."

Wives also described marriages that ranged from the merely functional to warm family partnerships up through still-passionate love affairs. Anna says that now "He is a great husband. He's very attentive to me, he's generous, and a good provider." Plus, "the make-up sex was great. That helps." Jill, who complained that her husband would talk to her only during TV commercials, said that after they separated he started "courting" her. "He wined and dined me, our sex life improved." Their separation was, she said, a "cooling off — or heating up — period." Theodora, who separated twice in the early years of marriage, calls her marriage happy now because they have "love and respect." Another wife, who talked about divorcing when her children were young, says now, "He is my soul mate. We have been through rough times, it almost always made us stronger. He has made a lot of me and I have made a lot of him. We just fit."

Even imperfect marriages fulfilled many needs. Marian, who has been in counseling for 10 of 16 years of her marriage, said the best thing about being married was: "The unconditional support I get from him. We've learned to work together and appreciate the strengths we bring and the weaknesses we have. We enjoy it, we enjoy being parents together."

One wife, who had no trouble describing the problems created by her happy-go-lucky husband, also recognized his vices as his virtue:

"He is just one big surprise after another, never a dull moment. He has the most unusual friends. He keeps strange hours. He'll come home at 4 a.m. and go to work. He's the soccer coach and he does other things too. He's creative; he likes to paint. He's totally useless around the house, he'd walk around that laundry hamper 25 times; I've done that as a test. One thing that is so great, he never complains about the house, the cooking, I don't cook — he loves to cook. He loves to go to the grocery store and write a \$200 check to Safeway. As a young man [in Iran], he really had to scrape, living in group homes, eating beans out of the can . . . He likes to live life to the fullest. We fight loud, then it's over. My daughter will say, 'You and Daddy have to be friends,' and we say, 'Yes, you are right,' and hug each other."

Jane admits that she perhaps never got over her husband's failure to help her when their oldest son got into trouble. Nonetheless she describes a happy period since he retired from the military, traveling and exploring, after he took a job with a computer company.

“He got young because everyone was young. When we had something in common and the children were all okay. . . . My husband loves me quite a bit.” Do you love him? we asked? “Not as much as he loves me. I wish he’d been a stronger person.”

Some spouses described not necessarily intimate marriages, but what sounded like happy family lives. Peggy said the best thing about her marriage as “. . . our family together as a unit. We really have a great time, the kids — all four of us together — just have a blast, we just enjoy each other.” Said Alex: “After three years, when she had a baby, I found I was really in love with the baby. We got much closer, closer to the children mostly.” Charles: “Most of the time we really enjoy each other: similar backgrounds, we like to travel, similar economic level, we have two great kids who are both doing really well (knock, knock), they’ve both been straight. I think my daughter could be the only 18-year-old virgin in her college. I’m optimistic. They are just great. They give us a lot of joy.”

Some of the worst marriages appeared to enjoy the most dramatic turnarounds. Husbands who behaved badly and later repented were often deeply grateful to their wives. Vance, whose marriage survived a two-year period of drinking, hanging out, and cheating on his part, says now,

“Personally for me, [marriage] probably saved my life. When I was younger, I was a pretty wild sort of guy. Drinking, driving, going across the country . . . Sometimes I



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look back and think God must of had a plan for me, so many places where I might have died. Marriage kind of settled me down, I got roots with my wife and family. Marriage is what we make of it. Sometimes we put the pressure on ourselves: We want this, we want that. There has got to be a point where I say, gotta enjoy it: It is not just money, it is enjoying your relationship with the wife, and watching your kids grow.”

Does his wife care about him? “Yes,” he replied instantly, visibly softening. What would break his marriage? “Probably just death,” Vance replied. “Even infidelity, if she does go out and cheat on me, I think I owe her one.”

Marital Turnarounds: How do unhappy marriages get happier?

Spouses’ stories of how their marriages got happier fell into three broad headings that we call the marital endurance ethic, the marital work ethic, and the personal happiness epic.

What is the difference? In the marital work ethic, spouses told stories of actively working to solve problems, change behavior, or improve communication. When the problem is solved, the marriage gets happier. Strategies for improving marriages mentioned by spouses ranged from arranging dates or other ways to spend more time together, to enlisting the help and advice of relatives or in-laws, consulting clergy or secular counselors, or threatening divorce and consulting divorce attorneys.

In the marital endurance ethic, by contrast, married people did not tell us stories of solving problems by concerted action on the part of the spouses. They did not “work” on their unhappy marriages; instead, they endured them. With the passage of time, these spouses told us, problems of life tend to get better, which improves the happiness of the married people in them.

Finally, in the personal happiness epic, marriage problems did not seem to change that much. Instead, married people in these accounts told stories of finding alternative ways to improve their own happiness and build a good and happy life despite a mediocre marriage. Focus group participants’ marital turnaround narratives were often mixed, containing elements of both the marital work ethic and the marital endurance ethic.

The Marital Endurance Ethic: “We just kept putting one foot in front of the other.”

When asked how their marriages improved, perhaps the most common story spouses told us was simply that time passed. With time, job situations improved, children got older or better, or chronic ongoing problems got put into new perspective. Joe’s marriage became unhappy (and his wife contemplated divorce) when his wife felt trapped at home with the kids while he worked long hours to make law partner. When asked what helped them, he replied, “We talked. But mostly we just kept putting one foot in front of the other.” Sally, a wife who reported a similar dynamic (“he was always at work and I always did the kids”), when asked what improved the situation replied, “raises at [her husband’s] work.” Asked how she avoided divorce, Sally said frankly, “Well, other than carp and bitch and be a witch all the time, I said, ‘well I’m just going to do it.’ ” Asked for her strategies for dealing with marital unhappiness, another wife said, “Just ride it out and try not to

bitch so much.” Nikki, upset with her workaholic trucker husband’s continued unpredictable absences, reported that after nine years of complaints, “I mellowed. . . . I adjusted more than he changed. I said, ‘What the heck, why are you making yourself crazy?’ ”

Marital Work Ethic: “I open up a little more, let her know what’s bothering me.”

Spouses gave accounts of working on marital problems, with wives especially often enlisting the help of outside others to help change their husbands’ bad behavior. “You work at it,” says Ron, whose sister-in-law falsely told his wife that he had had an affair with her, “I was determined to be in the house for the kids.” Vance’s marriage survived his infidelity in part because (thanks to clergy counseling) he “changed. I open up a little more, let her know what’s bothering me” and was “a little more sympathetic, more of an ear” when she talked about her problems. He credits his church with helping him to stop cheating on his wife, and to spend more time with the family. “I think church has a lot to do with it. It’s something we do as a family. It’s the one day I give my family the entire day.” Mina, whose husband began hanging out with the guys too much, talked with both her mother and mother-in-law, who said, “Sit down with him, you need to talk. You think one thing, he thinks another.” She asked both her mother and her mother-in-law to take turns baby-sitting, so she and her husband could spend more time together. Cora, whose husband became overly involved in a civic organization, warned his parents (who lived with them) that she was considering divorce and they pressured him to spend more time with the family. She also reported that his friends “sided with me, they know how I put out for him, how I loved him. That changed him.”

We were struck by the extent to which, in making changes to please their wives, many husbands did not see themselves as seeking their own happiness, but making manly sacrifices for a greater good. Although research shows that marriage is at least as important for men’s emotional well-being as for women’s,³³ husbands in our focus groups did not often understand their “job” as husbands as a search for emotional satisfaction or intimacy. They more often saw marriage as an essentially heroic endeavor, in which the happiness of their wives and the well-being of their children were the goal. They often spoke in ways that suggested (as Steven Nock has argued) that they see marriage-and-fatherhood as an important marker of successful manhood.³⁴

The Personal Happiness Epic: “It was me that did the changing. I got wings.”

Some marriages did not appear to change much. Instead the persons in the marriage changed their lives in ways that made them personally happier in spite of ongoing marital problems. “Travel helps keep me interested,” said one husband, “If I were in the house constantly, I have to be honest, I’d be gone.” Another wife attributed her marital unhappiness to the unfair increase in her domestic workload following the birth of their child. But she was not able to increase her husband’s contribution to domestic labor much, nor did she try to get him to provide more income. Instead she focused on her need (as a photographer) for doing more creative work, rather than simply taking on commercial projects.

Occasionally a spouse sometimes rated their overall marital happiness high as a way to “pat themselves on the back” for their achievement in building a happy life despite difficult marriages. Georgina, for example, who is retired, gave her marriage a six on the seven-point marital happiness scale. Yet she described an emotionally disengaged marriage without much respect or affection, in which husband and wife lead separate lives. For her this was a vast improvement over the past, when her husband was overbearing, critical, and dominated her. Her married life improved when she threatened divorce, silenced his criticism by speaking up for herself, and developed interests and friendships outside the marriage. Georgina: “I answered him back. I got ‘the Mouth.’ It was me that did the changing. If I wanted to go out with the girls, I went out. I got wings.”

Strategies for Avoiding Divorce: Who Helped?

Who helped these unhappy couples avoid divorce? Many husbands and wives named family members and sometimes clergy or others who discouraged divorce and/or who actively intervened to help change the behavior of husbands. Alex, an immigrant from Ghana, returned to Africa after living here, to seek a wife. He found the first three years of marriage “tough, because not much communication going on.” What helped him through that time? “I guess I listened to my father. Basically he said, it is not any easier with another wife. It is up to you to make it work and live with her. So I tried it.” Wives who saw their husbands behaving badly sought outside others who would actively exert pressure on their husbands to behave more like “family men.” Nancy, whose husband left her for another woman on the eve of her oldest daughter’s wedding, reported receiving important moral support from her mother-in-law. His mother was horrified that he had done such a thing, she kept in constant contact, she’d take her to lunch: “I’m so sorry my son is behaving like this.” “It helped me, I wasn’t just in la-la land, she was [also] shocked.”

When Patty told her sister, who had recently been divorced, “I think I want a divorce, I don’t want to do this anymore,” her sister said, “You don’t want to get divorce, I’ve been divorced, I don’t think that this is what you want. If you want to keep it up, go ahead, but if you don’t [want a divorce], knock it off right now.”

Several spouses mentioned religion as helpful in avoiding divorce. Some mentioned it as a kind of common ground or interest; e.g., “We’re both Christians.” Several husbands mentioned church as providing good family time. “It’s something we do as a family. It’s the one day I give the whole day to my family,” said one. “Just being around other families,” said another. Another husband said his religious faith helped him manage marital conflict. When his wife became falsely convinced of his infidelity, Edward said, “It was a spiritual battle. If I had responded in the same way, gotten angry with her, that would be flesh and blood. I used the word of God. The spirit was causing her to be abusive. I kept quiet, I let God deal with her, and the Lord is good.”

Several wives mentioned finding moral or spiritual inspiration when divorce thoughts arose. “We had Christian counseling one or two times, I realized I made a mistake [in thinking about divorce].” The counselor said, “Once you get married, you become one flesh,” Krista told us. But one of the biggest tools wives used to invoke change was the divorce threat.

The Divorce Threat: “He knows I would walk out.”

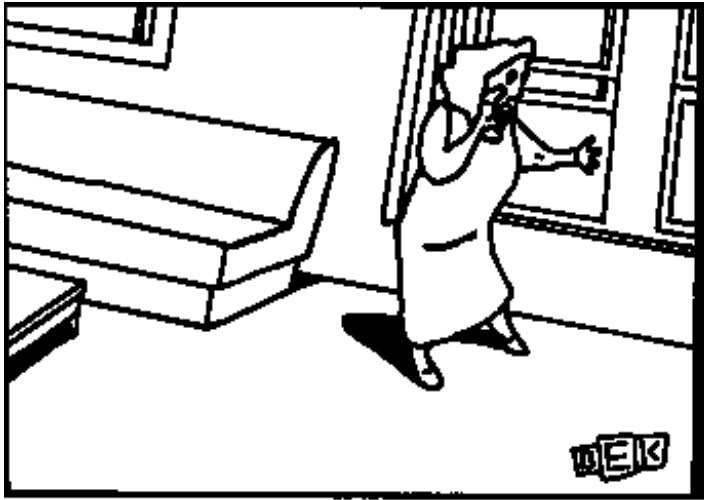
Many wives (but no husbands) reported their own threats of divorce to be a useful tool in improving the marriage (and husbands also sometimes reported that the wives’ threat of divorce was key to changing their behavior). Wives were far more likely than husbands to report attempting to enlist the help of outsiders, from divorce attorneys to in-laws, marriage counselors, and psychologists (and in one case a bankruptcy attorney), to solve marital problems. Many wives but no husbands saw themselves as vulnerable to exploitation by their spouses, unless they stood up for themselves and got help from others. Independence, especially financial independence, was mentioned by many wives, but no husbands, as an essential ingredient to a happy marriage.

Marie, who believed her husband was having an affair, left him and was only persuaded after much effort on her husband’s part to return. “He knows I would walk out,” if he has an affair, she says. (Marie, who struck us as head-over-heels in love with her husband, now rates her marriage a seven.) Mona, whose husband started running an unsuccessful limo business out of their home over her express objections, eventually issued an ultimatum and moved out. Faced with her credible threats of divorce (“He has a being-the-father-in-the-home-with-the-kids thing”), her husband eventually got a job and they reunited, happily. Ann’s husband agreed to counseling only because “he knew he was living on borrowed time.” She was only waiting for some litigation money to come in, she warned him, before leaving, and she frequently mentioned her lawyer to him. “He wasn’t a divorce lawyer but [my husband] didn’t know that.” Ann’s husband agreed to marriage counseling, and the counselor helped him take more responsibility for household and childcare chores. Lisa told a dramatic tale of her husband chasing after her as she drove to the divorce attorney’s office. “I went to a lawyer and the shock woke him up,” she reports. He stopped being so critical, started being so appreciative. “Now he’s a B+” she reports. Virginia warned her alcoholic husband, “If you go out that door, this is the last time.” She says, with a catch in her throat, “He hasn’t had a drink for the last six years.” Daniel, who told a story of extended depression following a job loss, also began turning his life around when his wife mentioned divorce as an option. “I didn’t think she was serious, but just the fact that she brought it up was serious, like, ‘Whoah,’” he said.

DIVORCE THREATS, particularly as a constant threat embedded in marital arguments, are likely to erode marital happiness and increase the risk of divorce, because they undermine the sense of a secure future that seems fundamental to happy marriages. Also, couples who ended up divorced drop out of this sample of unhappy marriage survivors, so we report this finding with some caution. Nonetheless, many of the wives in our focus groups reported using divorce threats successfully to initiate important changes in the behavior of their husbands, changes that ultimately led to happier and more stable marriages.

In most of these cases, the wives’ clearly articulated goal was not divorce, but marital change. When they consulted divorce attorneys, they were fortunate in finding lawyers who listened closely and supported their goals, acting as dire warning signals to husbands

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Eric Kaplan.
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"Wait! Come back! I was just kidding about wanting to be happy."

about their wives' unhappiness, instead of actively moving their clients down the path to divorce. (One wife, Jill, did try to file for divorce immediately. But the servers could not find her husband for more than three months, after which she apparently rethought her decision to file for divorce.)

What About Counseling?:
"Counselors are like ball-players. Some are good and some aren't."

How important a role did marriage counseling play in these formerly unhappily married spouses' accounts of getting happier? We gathered information about experiences with marriage counseling in two ways: We asked spouses on the written questionnaire whether they or their spouse had sought counseling. And in asking our focus group participants how marriages got happier, we probed for help from outside others, including counselors.

Only in a minority of cases did one or both spouses seek counseling, either religious or secular. Overall, a little more than a third of focus group participants (38 percent of the Virginia sample and 32 percent of the New Jersey sample) indicated on their written questionnaire that either they or their spouse had sought marriage counseling. When asked to explain how their unhappy marriages became happier, few participants described marriage counseling, particularly secular marriage counseling, as having played a primary, instrumental role in preventing divorce or rebuilding marital happiness.

Some spouses did see counseling as having an important role in helping prevent divorce, improve relationship satisfaction, or cope with a spouse's ongoing defects. Jonathan's wife asked him to go a counselor and he agreed. He had had a bad experience with a counselor in his first marriage but this time the "counselor was helpful. He showed us both how we could be smarter in respecting each other." Asked for an example, he offered this: "She'd say before church, 'How do I look?' 'You look fine,' I'd say. 'You don't like what I'm wearing?' she'd respond." And they'd fight. Now, says Jonathan, "I've learned from the counseling to say things more in line with what a woman thinks. 'Yes, I like what you're wearing. I especially like the dark blue dress.' Something more detailed."

Jonathan gave equal billing in preventing divorce to his son ("I fell in love with him") and to his church ("just being in an environment with other families. Everyone has problems, you just work things out").

But perhaps surprisingly, in a relatively well-educated, affluent sample of married people selected for having survived serious marital unhappiness, accounts like these were a distinct minority. Of the minority who went to counseling, most reported it was helpful, but relatively few saw it as the key to turning their marriages around or avoiding divorce.

A large number of husbands, especially in northern New Jersey, saw counseling in a negative light, as a threat to their marriages. If you go to a counselor “you end up divorced,” said one husband. Several husbands told us they didn’t like to speak about their intimate problems to somebody who is “watching the clock.” One husband hated the idea of “paying someone to listen to your problems.” It is different if it’s a “friend who is religious” or who has a counseling degree. One man reported long conversations with a Bronx boyhood friend who had become a Catholic priest. Another said he went to a “friend who was a counselor” who turned out to be a clergyman in his church (nondenominational Christian).

On the other hand, consistent with the moral mandates of the marital work ethic, these husbands mostly agreed to counseling if the wife requested it. One man, dragged to a counselor by his wife’s divorce threat, told us, “the counselor sided with me so my wife stopped going.” “Counselors are like ballplayers,” said another husband, “some are good and some aren’t.”

The northern Virginia husbands, consistent with their very high levels of education, did not seem to have the same marked aversion to marriage counseling as the New Jersey husbands. However, they did not make use of it to any markedly greater degree. Five out of 15 men indicated in the focus groups that they or their spouse used a marriage counselor (including clergy). Most of these indicated the counseling was useful, but only one husband considered it as one of the main ways his marriage got happier. One husband in this group (Sanjay, an Indian immigrant) did portray secular marriage counseling in a negative light, using very similar language to that used by New Jersey husbands: “I have talked to [Hindu] priests. It is always very helpful, so consoling, peace-giving, that you have shared with somebody who does not have money, cab meter running, ten sessions.” (In a gesture also common to New Jersey men, at this point, he glanced at his wrist, indicating his distaste with the idea that counselors are “watching the clock” while you share your intimate problems.)

In general men showed a strong preference for religious over secular counseling. This preference appeared to stem from two sources: First husbands had greater confidence that religious counselors would not purposefully or inadvertently encourage divorce. They saw religious counselors as actively rooting for the marriage to succeed. Second, husbands more often saw religious counselors or clergy as being truly interested in them and their marriage, instead of listening to their intimate problems for money.

While men and women differed on how useful various outsiders might be, both husbands and wives indicated that they wanted to get help from someone who wanted their marriages to succeed. Marriage neutrality — often seen by counselors and attorneys as ethical — was not what unhappy spouses seeking help told us they wanted.

Summary of Focus Group Interviews

Many happily married spouses have experienced extended periods (typically two years or more) of marital unhappiness, often for quite serious reasons, including alcoholism, infidelity, verbal abuse, emotional neglect, depression, illness, and work reversals. Many of the spouses in these marriages contemplated or threatened divorce, and given

the seriousness of the marital unhappiness reported, it is easy to imagine many of these marriages dissolving. Why did they survive where other marriages did not? Spouses who stay married often described marital unhappiness as caused by outside tensions, rather than internal relationship dynamics, even when those outside tensions caused considerable marital friction, thoughts of divorce, and marital unhappiness. The marital endurance ethic appears to play a big role. Many spouses said their marriages got happier, not because they and their partner resolved problems, but because they stubbornly outlasted them. With time, they told us, many sources of conflict and distress eased: financial problems, job reversals, depression, child problems, even infidelity.

Only a minority of spouses who turned their marriage around reported that counseling of any kind (including religious counseling) played a key role. When husbands behaved badly, value-neutral counseling was not reported by any spouse to be helpful. Instead the wife in these marriages appeared to seek outside help from others (family, clergy, divorce attorneys, counselors), to pressure him to change his behavior; the help of these outside others played a key role in turning unhappy marriages around.

The Uses of Commitment: "The Grass Looks Greener, but It's Astroturf."

Our findings are consistent with other research demonstrating the powerful effects of marital commitment on marital happiness. When people have a strong preference for marriage and marital permanence, more marriages take place,³⁵ more marriages last³⁶, and more marriages are happier.³⁷ One longitudinal study found that when married people adopt attitudes more accepting of divorce, their marriages subsequently tend to deteriorate in quality.³⁸

Commitment, it turns out, is not just a side effect; it is also a *cause* of relationship happiness. Commitment includes both constraint (or barriers to divorce) and what some scholars call "dedication," or a deeper intrinsic commitment to the partner and the relationship. Marriage increases commitment in part because it symbolizes and reinforces dedication: Two become one, the future is definitely going to be shared, and spouses are, by common consent and acknowledgement, each others' first responsibility and closest adult family member. Marriage thus points the couple toward greater dedication as well as imposing constraints on leaving.³⁹

How might constraints on divorce serve to increase dedication and improve marital quality? First, tolerant attitudes towards divorce make marriage less satisfying, by making the future less certain. Partners who feel secure that their marriage will last are free to specialize and invest in different skills and areas of life in ways that leave both of them better off.⁴⁰ Adopting a permissive divorce ethic means substituting uncertainty for a sense of secure identity and belonging formerly associated with marriage. As Berscheid and Lopes put it, "The freedom of perpetual choice means that the individual must continually expend time and energy to reevaluate the wisdom of the previous choice through monitoring his or her satisfaction with the relationship, the quality of the available alternatives and the depth of his or her investment. Moreover, the individual must perform this decision analysis not only for himself or herself but for the partner as well, in order to arrive at a probability estimate of the partner's leaving the relationship. If this latter analysis

reveals that the partner, like the individual, has few barriers to dissolution, then the costs of insecurity and anxiety are added to other costs the individual is currently experiencing in the relationship.”⁴¹

As marital commitment declines, the danger is that more spouses become, as William Doherty has put it, consumers of their marriages.⁴² The marital work ethic — the idea that spouses should strive to build a satisfying relationship together — has many attractive and important qualities. More research on the kinds of counseling and/or education that helps adults avoid divorce and build happier marriages is key. But when the work ethic is viewed as the substance of the marriage vow — when marriage becomes a promise to work on the relationship until satisfaction is achieved or until one person becomes convinced that satisfaction is not possible — it too may contribute in subtle ways to making marriage less happy and less stable. The problem with making satisfying interactions the main criteria of marital success is that it plunges partners into a permanent state of uncertainty about the future of the relationship, undermining the very good — both emotional and practical security — that moves men and women toward marriage. Continually wondering whether your marriage is good enough to keep can be exhausting, especially when compounded by the worry of wondering whether your spouse considers you good enough to keep.⁴³

AS **DON BROWNING** reminds us, theories of good communication skills cannot, by themselves, tell an unhappy spouse why he or she should work to build a good marriage, “it simply increases the chances for achieving a good one for those already committed to that goal.”⁴⁴ While negotiation and compromise are important skills in marriage and life, the “analogy to a business negotiation,” he points out, is deeply misleading. Indeed, such a mindset, when applied to marriage, is antithetical to the kind of couple identity (a vision of life from the vantage of “we”) that is associated with solid and happy marriages.⁴⁵ There is a growing literature on sacrifice, suggesting that couples who are doing well include partners who are willing to sacrifice for one another and “us.”⁴⁶ Further, the degree to which males are willing to sacrifice for females, without feeling they are being personally harmed by doing so, is strongly related to whether or not they see their relationships as a life partnership.⁴⁷

A strong commitment to marriage as an institution, and a powerful reluctance to divorce, do not merely keep unhappily married people locked in misery together. They also help couples form a happier bond. To avoid divorce, many assume, marriages must become happier. But it is at least equally true that in order to get happier, unhappy couples or spouses must first avoid divorce. When people are intensely committed to their marriages, they invest more in the relationship, they minimize the importance of difficulties they can’t resolve⁴⁸, and they actively work to derogate the attractiveness of alternatives.⁴⁹ When people commit themselves to a marriage for life (barring unusual circumstances), they also have a powerful incentive to understand their partner’s actions in the best possible light, and to be an advocate for their spouse as well as for themselves. A spouse who, in the interests of minimizing his own frustration and resentment, consistently puts his spouse in the best possible light, may well evoke more desirable behav-

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iors than a spouse who, continually wondering whether his or her marriage is “good enough” to continue, evaluates his spouse’s behavior in a more neutral, negative, or judgmental light.⁵⁰

These kinds of active psychological processes of managing alternative desires in the service of commitment were evident in our interviews with marriage survivors, especially among men. Among the long-married men in New Jersey, for example, a significant minority, when asked about the downside of marriage, spoke of ongoing sexual temptation — largely the fantasy of enjoyment that might be available if they were not tied down by duty, affection, religion, and their children to one woman. One husband mentioned the

second thoughts prompted by the idea of meeting an old girlfriend at a class reunion. At this point the men took the conversation out of our hands. “Suppose this girl is divorced,” proposed one, “you dance.” Interrupted another (Greg, who told us his wife’s lack of desire for frequent and inventive sex was a real problem for him): “Just forget about it and go back to your wife.” He launched into the story of a dear friend who fell in love with another woman. “This is my soul mate, this is the girl I love,” his friend had told Greg. “He takes his wife to a counselor, spends \$20,000 to get a divorce. She gets the house, he gets a Secaucus apartment.” His friend broke up with his girlfriend five years later. “He came to me and asked, ‘When I told you that, why didn’t you hit me in the head?’ I said, ‘Paul, I did.’” Another husband chimes in, “The grass looks greener but it’s Astro turf.”

Marriage as a Shared Story

Finally, the satisfaction one finds in staying married depends not just on the quality of one’s own personal interactions with the spouse, but how spouses and others view marriage in general. Marriage is not just the sum of the personal interactions that individuals find either satisfying or distressing. Marriage is a social status and a shared ideal — a story people have about their own life, their family, their spouse, and their love. The attitudes and values that individuals, families, and societies have about marriage and divorce in general affect how satisfying Americans find being married in particular. In communities where marriage is highly valued, husbands and wives get more from marriage than they would in a community where marriage is seen as a merely private matter.⁵¹ People who are deeply committed to marriage as a lifelong vow have happier marriages not only because of what they do in their relationships, but because of what they think about being married in general. The happiness anyone gets from any role in life — being a parent, holding a job, being married — depends in part on how satisfying one finds the day-to-day interactions and tasks. But it also depends on whether one sees the role itself as important and valuable.

The Future of Unhappy Marriages

WITH THE IMPORTANT EXCEPTION of helping spouses escape violent marriages, divorce typically failed to deliver the promised psychological benefits for adults. Five years later, unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were, on average, no happier, no less depressed, had no higher self-esteem, no greater sense of personal mastery, and showed increased alcohol use compared to unhappily married adults who stayed married. Almost two-thirds of unhappy spouses who stuck with the marriage forged happy marriages down the road. Of course, these averages likely conceal important individual variation and further research is needed to determine under what circumstances divorce boosts or depresses adult well-being.

Americans have many goals for their own marriages and those of others: We want marriage to last, we want children to enjoy living with their own two married parents, we want these marriages to be happy, and we don't want unhappily married people trapped in miserable lives. Over the past 40 years, Americans have increasingly viewed these goals as in conflict: We fear discouraging divorce lest we create lasting marriages at the high cost of individual misery — almost certainly for adults and often for the children.

This, the first full-scale study of the relationship between divorce and personal happiness for unhappily married adults, casts deep doubt, from an empirical standpoint, on this conventional wisdom. Does divorce typically make unhappily married people happier than staying married? No. Does a firm commitment to staying married, even though unhappy, typically condemn adults to lifelong misery? No.

What are the implications of this finding? Is divorce always wrong and staying married always right? We cannot draw so simplistic a conclusion. What we do know is this: Both divorce and marriage initiate complex chains of events whose outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty at the outset. Marriages are not happy or unhappy — spouses are. And with the passage of time, the feelings of spouses about their marriages can and do change. The bad marriage and the good marriage are not always fixed opposites, but the same marriage at two different points in time (or in the eyes of two different spouses). Divorce may make an unhappy spouse happier, but there is no guarantee (and much doubt) that it will. If marriage is no panacea, neither is divorce.

Marital stability and marital quality are not the opposites we have assumed. On the contrary, they serve to reinforce one another. Both people and marriages are likely to be happier in communities with a strong commitment to marital permanence. While some marriages are so destructive that divorce or separation is the best outcome, marriages are more likely to be both happy and stable when marriage is highly valued — a key relation in whose success family, friends, faith communities, counselors, family-law attorneys, and the wider society have an important stake. ■

Endnotes

1. There is, of course, a body of research on the consequences of divorce in general on adult well-being. For example, Mavis Hetherington recently compiled the results of 20 years of research into the consequences of divorce for both adult and child well-being. In her judgment, divorce made about 20 to 30 percent of adults better off than they had been in the marriage. About 40 percent were in second marriages of similar quality with similar problems. About 30 percent of divorced adults appeared to be worse off. However, Hetherington and other researchers (to our knowledge) have not systematically compared outcomes for unhappily married adults who stayed married versus unhappily married adults who divorced or separated. See E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, 2002. *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
2. Spouses were asked to rate their overall marital happiness on a seven-point scale. For this study, spouses who rated their marriage at least a five are categorized as happy spouses, or happily married adults. Those who rated their marriages a four or less are considered unhappy spouses, or unhappily married adults.
3. A one or a two on a seven-point marital happiness scale.
4. See for example William J. Doherty et al. 2002. *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. New York City: Institute for American Values; Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth. 1997. *A Generation At Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
5. Time/CNN poll of 1,278 adults by Yankelovich Partners, Inc. September 6-7, 2000. (Thirty-three percent is an increase from 1981, when only 21 percent of Americans agreed parents should stay together even if the marriage is not working.) Walter Kirn, et al. 2000. "What Divorce Does to Kids." *Time*, September 25, 2000, 42ff.
6. T.B. Heaton and S.L. Albrecht. 1991. "Stable Unhappy Marriages." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53(3): 747ff.
7. Karen S. Peterson, 2001. "The Good in a Bad Marriage: Studies Say Many Can Be Salvaged," *USA Today*, June 21, 2001.
8. Allan V. Horwitz and Helen Raskin White. 1991. "Becoming Married, Depression, and Alcohol Problems Among Young Adults." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 32: 221-37; Catherine E. Ross. 1995. "Reconceptualizing Marital Status as a Continuum of Social Attachment." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57: 129-40.
9. New Jersey Family Policy Council. 1999. *New Jersey Marriage Report: An Index of Marital Health*. Parsippany, NJ: New Jersey Family Policy Council.
10. Alan J. Hawkins et al. 2000. *Minnesotans' Attitudes about Marriage and Divorce*. Provo, UT: Family Studies Center, Brigham Young University.
11. Minnesota Family Institute. 1998. *Minnesota Marriage Report*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Family Institute.
12. Alan Booth and Paul R. Amato. 2001. "Parental Predivorce Relations and Offspring Postdivorce Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63(1): 197-212.
13. Donna Ruane Morrison and Mary Jo Coiro. 1999. "Parental Conflict and Marital Disruption: Do Children Benefit When High-Conflict Marriages Are Dissolved?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61: 626-637.
14. Joseph Hopper. 1993. "The Rhetoric of Motives in Divorce." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55(4): 801ff.
15. In addition to standard demographic variables (such as age, race, gender, income and education), the NSFH contains measures of marital happiness, domestic violence, conflict and a wide variety of measures of psychological well-being including: global happiness, depressive symptoms, sense of personal mastery, and self-esteem. In the second wave, additional measures of psychological well-being were added, including hostility, autonomy, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, sense of personal growth and measures of alcohol use. See Linda J. Waite and Ye Luo. Forthcoming. "Marital Quality and Marital Stability: Consequences for Psychological Well-Being." Paper prepared for the 97th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association to be held in Chicago, IL on August 16 to 19, 2002.
16. For these analyses, happy spouses are those that rated their marriages at least a five on a seven-point marital happiness scale.

17. F.D. Fincham et al. 1997. "Marital Satisfaction and Depression: Different Causal Relationships for Men and Women?" *Psychological Science* 8(5): 351-357; S. R. Beach et al. 1990. *Depression in Marriage: A Model for Etiology and Treatment*. New York: The Guilford Press.

18. Seventy-nine percent of unhappily married adults who divorced reported no husband-to-wife violence, as did 91 percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married. Ninety-five percent of unhappy spouses who stayed married reported the wife did not hit the husband, compared to 80 percent of unhappy spouses who later divorced or separated.

19. Using continuous measures of well-being. When dichotomous variables are used, divorce was not associated with any statistically significant change in the psychological well-being of unhappily married adults.

20. These four measures of psychological well-being were available at both time periods, allowing us to determine how divorce changed levels of well-being, controlling for initial levels of well-being.

21. There was a trend towards separated adults being significantly worse off than either of the other two groups (divorced and single, or divorced and remarried) but it did not reach statistical significance. Larger samples might yield a different result.

22. Other measures of violence produced similar results: Twenty-one percent of unhappy spouses who divorced reported that in the first marriage the husband hit the wife. Of those who remarried five years later, only six percent reported husband-to-wife violence. Twenty percent of unhappy spouses who divorced or separated reported the wife hit the husband in the first marriage. Of those who had remarried, eight percent reported the wife hit the husband in the second marriage.

23. Our analyses do not tell us how many divorced or separated spouses experience violence from non-marital partners. More research is needed to determine the overall likelihood of reducing domestic violence through divorce or separation, including violence from dating and cohabiting partners.

24. Very unhappy spouses were categorized as those who rated their marriage either a one or a two on a seven-point marital happiness scale. Happy spouses (five years later) rated their marriage a five, six, or seven on the same marital happiness scale.

25. Note that those who give their marriages either very high or very low ratings have more opportunity to moderate their ratings later than those who give moderate ratings initially. This phenomenon is called "regression toward the mean." Since the mean level of marital satisfaction is relatively high, regression toward the mean would result in somewhat higher scores at time two. However, the magnitude of the changes we observe quite probably reflect substantial true change, and are unlikely to result entirely from regression toward the mean. Furthermore, however one labels the phenomena, the basic finding remains: Extreme marital unhappiness is not a steady and static state. It is likely to change, strongly for the better, among spouses who stay married. Ratings of marital happiness could also be affected by another type of bias, social desirability bias, in which respondents give answers that are too positive in an effort to portray themselves in a positive light. While social desirability bias could lead some spouses to increase their ratings of their marriage, it would also have biased people not to have made such low rating in the first place, unless they were truly unhappy at the time of the first survey.

26. N=32.

27. A one or a two on a seven-point marital happiness scale.

28 F. Fincham and K.D. O'Leary. 1983. "Causal Inferences for Spouse Behavior in Maritally Distressed and Nondistressed Couples." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 1: 42-57.

29. Husbands are four times more likely than wives to say they had had an outside sex partner in the past year. See Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher. 2000. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday: 91.

30. Linda K. Acitelli and Toni C. Antonucci. 1994. "Gender Differences in the Link Between Marital Support and Satisfaction in Older Couples." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 67(4): 688-698

31. Mari L. Clements, Allan D. Cordova, Howard J. Markman, Jean-Phillipe Laurenceau. 1997. "The Erosion of Marital Satisfaction over Time and How to Prevent It." In *Satisfaction in Close Relationships* edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Mahzad Johhat. NY: Guilford Press: 335-355.

32. M.P. Johnson et al. 1999. "The Tripartite Nature of Marital Commitment: Personal, Moral, and Structural Reasons to Stay Married." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61: 160-177; S.M. Stanley and H.J. Markman. 1992. "Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships." *Journal of Marriage and The Family* 54: 595-608.

33. See Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher. 2000. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday: 65-77 and 165-170; Scott Stanley and Howard J. Markman. 1997. *Marriage in the '90s: A Nationwide Random Phone Survey*. Denver, Colo: PREP, Inc.
34. Steven L. Nock. 1998. *Marriage in Men's Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press: 43-62.
35. Sharon Sassler and Robert Schoen. 1999. "The Effect of Attitudes and Economic Activity on Marriage." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61(1): 147ff.
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38. Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers. 1999. "Do Attitudes Towards Divorce Affect Marital Quality?" *Journal of Family Issues* 20(1): 69-86.
39. S.M. Stanley and H.J. Markman. 1992. "Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 54: 595-608.
40. Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher. 2000. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday. See especially chapters 2 and 3.
41. Ellen Berscheid and Jason Lopes. 1997. "A Temporal Model of Relationship Satisfaction and Stability." In *Satisfaction in Close Relationships* edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Mahzad Johhat. NY: Guilford Press: 129-159.
42. William J. Doherty. 2001. *Take Back Your Marriage*. New York: Guilford Press.
43. Scott Stanley. 1998. *The Heart of Commitment: Compelling Research that Reveals the Secrets of a Lifelong, Intimate Marriage*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
44. Don Browning, 2001. "What is Marriage: An Exploration." In *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions* edited by Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans: 1-9.
45. Scott M. Stanley and Howard J. Markman. 1992. "Assessing Commitment in Personal Relationships." *Journal of Marriage and The Family* 54: 595-608; G. Levinger. 1979. "A Social Exchange View on the Dissolution of Pair Relationships." In *Social Exchange in Developing Relationships* edited by R.L. Burgess and T.L. Huston. New York: Academic Press.
46. For example, P.A. Van Lange et al., 1997. "Willingness to Sacrifice in Close Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72: 1373-1395.
47. S.W. Whitton, S. M. Stanley, and H.J. Markman. 2002. "Sacrifice in Romantic Relationships: An Exploration of Relevant Research and Theory." In *Stability and Change in Relationship Behavior across the Lifespan* edited by H.T. Reiss et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 156-181.
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49. See, for example, Sandra L. Murray and John G. Holmes. 1993. "Seeing Virtues in Faults: Negativity and the Transformation of Interpersonal Narratives in Close Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65(4): 707-722; Jeffrey A. Simpson et al. 1990. "Perception of Physical Attractiveness Mechanisms Involved in the Maintenance of Romantic Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59(4): 1192-1201; Dennis J. Johnson and Caryl E. Rusbult. 1989. "Resisting Temptation: Devaluation of Alternative Partners as a Means of Maintaining Commitment in Close Relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57(6): 967-980.
50. Bradbury and Fincham argue that negative attributions may give rise to negative behaviors that in turn reduce marital satisfaction. See T.N. Bradbury and F.D. Fincham. "A Contextual Model for Advancing the Study of Marital Interaction." In *Cognition in Close Relationships* edited by G.J.O. Fletcher and F.D. Fincham. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum: 127-147.
51. William J. Doherty. 2001. *Take Back Your Marriage*. New York: Guildford Press.

Appendix: The Focus Group Sample

These husbands and wives (not married to each other) were recruited by phone by two different focus group firms. We sought spouses who had “marital turnaround” narratives that might be similar to those found in the NSFH data. Individuals were screened by answering the seven-point marital happiness scale used in the NSFH. Those who answered at least a four in current marital happiness, and who agreed that in the past they had been either very unhappy or had seriously considered divorce, were recruited. Almost all currently rated their marriages a five, six, or seven.

On a scale of one to seven, like that used in the NSFH, what does a happy marriage look like? In general, we found that any person who rated his or her marriage as less than a five appeared to face fairly serious marital discontents. A spouse who described his marriage as a six or a seven usually gave an account of a marriage that was solidly satisfying (although in a few cases, married people appeared to rate their overall marital happiness high as a way to “pat themselves on the back” for building happy lives despite mediocre marriages). Spouses who rated their marriages a five appeared to have “good enough” marriages, working partnerships with basic affection and respect, despite some important stresses and strains. We collected marital turnaround narratives from a total of 55 spouses, 28 husbands and 27 wives.

Demographically, the best way to describe the New Jersey sample is “affluent blue collar.” Every participant had at least a high-school education; eleven of 26 had a four-year college degree. Income ranged from \$42,000 a year to \$200,000. The men had jobs ranging from “cop” to “retired, New Jersey Bell” to “insurance executive.” The majority of wives were homemakers, and the working wives tended to occupy traditionally female professions, such as “nurse,” “bookkeeper,” and “fitness instructor.” All but three of the participants were white. All the participants had children, and the majority still had children under 18 living at home. Most were in their first marriage, and the majority of marriages had lasted at least 20 years at the point of interview.

The northern Virginia sample contained more minorities (including three African-American husbands) but was also predominantly white, affluent, and even better educated. Husbands and wives (who worked) are best described as “affluent knowledge-workers,” with jobs such as “attorney,” “military officer,” and “IT professional.” Working wives’ jobs included: “technical editor,” “teacher,” “librarian,” “IT manager,” and “tax accountant.”

Because our first set of focus groups (in New Jersey) contained what seemed an unusually large proportion of marriages with homemaking wives (and no truly dual-career couples), we required at least half the focus group participants in the northern Virginia sample to be in marriages where wives worked full-time. Nonetheless, the majority of the working wives in the northern Virginia sample were secondary earners, rather than part of dual-career couples. This may reflect the bias of our catchment areas (suburbs); it may also reflect a “selection bias”: two-career marriages, like childless marriages, may be more likely to divorce given marital unhappiness, and so select out of our sample of “marital turnaround” narratives. Further, more rigorous qualitative and quantitative research on the relationship between marital unhappiness and divorce for different demographic and ethnic groups is needed.

Twenty-two of the 29 northern Virginia focus group participants had at least a four-year college degree, and ten husbands and four wives interviewed had graduate degrees. Household income ranged from \$45,000 per year to \$300,000 per year. All but one of these married people had children, and the majority had children under 18 currently at home, and most had been married at least 15 years.

This focus group research is limited in several ways. First, our sample is not nationally representative, consisting largely of affluent, white, well-educated, long-married parents with high-earning husbands and a low proportion of dual-career couples. More research is needed on other demographic and ethnic groups. Second, unlike NSFH data, our measure of marital unhappiness was retrospective, i.e., participants were asked whether they had been very unhappy or had considered divorce in the past. We do not know how recall biases might affect selection into our samples. Third, interviews were conducted in focus groups, not individually. While we believe the focus of these interviews (recalling specific personal narratives of marital unhappiness) are less likely to be contaminated by the presence of others than questions about opinions or attitudes, it would be preferable to explore these hypotheses further using more rigorous qualitative research methods.

Names of the spouses interviewed have been changed, but no other details.

About the Authors

Linda J. Waite is the Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and the co-author most recently of *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000).

Don Browning is the Alexander Campbell Professor of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is the co-editor of a series of books about marriage and the family produced by the Religion, Culture, and Family Project. With Brian Boyer of Boyer Productions, he recently produced the national PBS documentary, *Marriage — Just a Piece of Paper?*

William J. Doherty is a professor at the University of Minnesota, where he also directs the Marriage and Family Therapy Program. He is a past President of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). Professor Doherty's most recent publication is *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World that Pulls Us Apart* (Guilford, 2001).

Maggie Gallagher is an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values and the co-author of *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000).

Ye Luo is a research associate at the Sloan Center On Parents, Children and Work of the University of Chicago. One of her current studies examines how work and family environments affect parents' emotions and well-being.

Scott Stanley is the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. He is the co-author of *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love* (Jossey-Bass, 2001). He is currently engaged in research with Howard Markman on the effectiveness of premarital preparation, funded by NIMH, which also provided funding in support of his time contributing to this project.

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Institute for American Values

1841 Broadway

Suite 211

New York, NY 10023

Tel: (212) 246-3942

Fax: (212) 541-6665

Email: info@americanvalues.org

Web: www.americanvalues.org

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