

A LINE ON LIFE

7/15/91

Why Marriages Last *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

(This article is dedicated to my wife — to let her know how much she is appreciated.)

One out of two marriages end in divorce. The average duration of a marriage in the United States is less than ten years. But what about the other half — the marriages that last? Why do they last?

To answer this question, psychologists Jeanette and Robert Lauer surveyed 351 couples that had been married 15 years or more. Of these, 300 said that they were happily married. Nineteen couples said they were unhappily married (but were staying together for a variety of reasons, including "*the sake of the children*"). The remaining 32 couples had one partner that said s/he was unhappy with the marriage.

In answering the questionnaire, each partner responded individually. Even so, partners showed remarkable agreement as to their **reasons for having an enduring relationship**. In fact, the top seven reasons were identically ranked for both men and women. They are listed below.

1. My spouse is my best friend.
2. I like my spouse as a person.
3. Marriage is a long-term commitment.
4. Marriage is sacred.
5. We agree on aims and goals.
6. My spouse has grown more interesting.
7. I want the relationship to succeed.

A common theme of the couples was the qualities that they really liked in each other — caring, giving, integrity, and a sense of humor. In essence, these couples said:

"I am married to someone who cares about me, who is concerned about my well-being, who gives as much or more than he or she gets, who is open and trustworthy, and who is not mired down in a somber, bleak outlook on life."

Does this mean that the lovers are blind to each other's faults? This is not what the Lauers found. The partners are aware of the faults of their mates and acknowledge the rough times, but they believe the likeable qualities are more important than the deficiencies and the difficulties.

To some, divorce was simply not an option — they would stay together no matter what. Others viewed their commitment differently. To them, marriage was not seen as a "chain" that binds people together despite intense misery. Instead they had a determination to work through the difficult times. In the words of a man married for over 20 years:

"Commitment means a willingness to be unhappy for a while. I wouldn't go on for years... being wretched in my marriage, but you can't avoid the troubled times.... That's when commitment is really important."

In addition, the spouses indicated that agreement about aims and goals in life, the desire to make the marriage succeed, and laughing together were really important. In listing reasons for a happy marriage, there was a surprising result -- agreement about sex was relatively far down the list.

Does this mean that sex is relatively unimportant in a happy marriage? The answer is complex. Though only a few (under 10%) of the happily married partners listed sex as a major reason for their happiness, most were still generally satisfied with their sex lives. Seventy percent said they always or almost always agreed about sex.

Some described a relatively stable sexual pattern, and a significant number indicated an improvement over time. As one wife said:

"Thank God, the passion hasn't died. In fact, it has become more intense. The only thing that has died is the element of doubt and uncertainty that one experiences while dating or in the beginning of a marriage."

Other couples said that they were satisfied with a less-than-ideal sex life. Typically men desired more sex than their partners. Does this dissatisfaction lead to affairs? Although this question was not asked directly, the high value placed on friendship and commitment by most subjects does not seem to suggest infidelity. One husband explained it this way:

"I get tempted when we don't have sex. But I don't think I could ever have an affair. I would feel like a traitor."

Those with a less-than-ideal sex life talked about adjusting to it rather than seeking relief in an affair. Most agreed that they would rather be with their spouse and have a less-than-ideal sex life than be married to someone else and have a better sex life.

Marriage is rarely a "50-50" proposition.

Typically, happily married couples don't see marriage as a "50-50 proposition." They think that each partner needs to be willing to give 60-70% some of the time. If either partner insists that all transactions must be equal, that marriage will suffer. As one husband puts it:

"Sometimes I give far more than I receive, and sometimes I receive far more than I give. But my wife does the same. If I weren't willing to do that, we would have broken up long ago."

To sum it up for partners in long term, happy marriages — "till death do us part" is not a binding clause, but rather a gratifying reality.

* Adapted from Jeanette and Robert Lauer's "Marriages Made to Last," *Psychology Today*, June, 1985, pages 22-26.