

The All or Nothing Marriage: How the Best Marriages Work

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Preface

“Between stimulus and response there is a space,” observes the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. “In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Part 1: Marriage Today

Chapter 1: Temperamental but Thrilling

Culture and History

Approximately 85 percent of the 1,231 cultures documented in the *Ethnographic Atlas Codebook* practice polygyny (multiple wives for a given husband).

America’s Two Great Marital Transitions

The Authenticity Transition

It had a major last gasp in the 1950s and early 1960s. Because television shows, including *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, first rose to prominence during this era, 1950s marriage has been enshrined in popular consciousness as the “traditional marriage,” even though it was, by historical standards, bizarre.

The erstwhile Harvard psychology professor Timothy Leary released the spoken-word album *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out* in 1967.

Echoes of Abraham Maslow

The Maslow analogy drives home that the major change over time is not an overall *increase* in how much Americans expect from their marriage (more versus less), but rather a dramatic *shift* in the substance of their expectations (from lower to higher altitudes). In contrast to our predecessors, who looked to their marriage to help them survive, we look to our marriage to meet our needs to passion and intimacy and to facilitate our voyages of self-discovery and personal growth. As we’ll soon see, success at these higher altitudes requires the investment of significant time and energy in the marriage.

The Michelangelo Effect

The idea that close relationship partners can help us grow toward our authentic self is a major theme in contemporary popular culture. In James Brook’s 1997 romantic comedy *As Good As It Gets*, Melvin (Jack Nicholson) is a misanthropic, obsessive-compulsive novelist, and Carol (Helen Hunt) is a plucky, down-on-her-luck waitress. Melvin pursues a relationship with Carol, but his self-centered insensitivity keeps putting her off. In the pivotal scene, he inadvertently insults her while the two of them are sitting down to dinner. She stands up to leave the restaurant - and the relationship. He begs her to stay. She tells him how much he hurt her feelings and that she’ll leave if he doesn’t offer her a nice compliment. The compliment, when it finally comes, is pretty great: “You make me want to be a better man.” She stays for dinner.

Sometimes, we see the Michelangelo effect in reverse - cases in which relationship partners bring out the worst in each other rather than the best. In Derek Cianfrance’s 2010 drama *Blue Valentine*, Dean (Ryan Gosling) is a high school dropout and house painter, and Cindy (Michelle Williams) is a nurse whose plans to become a doctor were derailed when she accidentally got pregnant with a former boyfriend. Dean is happy being married to Cindy, helping to raise his stepdaughter, and working in a blue-collar job without much opportunity for career advancement. Cindy is disappointed in his lack of ambition: “Isn’t there something you wanted to do? ...Doesn’t your career ever disappoint you? Because you have all this potential.” Dean gets defensive: “What does that mean, ‘potential’? Potential for what? To turn it into what?” The conversation deteriorates from there. His ideal for himself (to be a family man with a low-pressure job) misaligns with her ideal for him (to be ambitious in a way that capitalizes on his potential). According to research on the Michelangelo effect, misalignment of this sort is linked to relationship problems and unhappiness.

All or Nothing

As we’ve increasingly sidelined our other friends and relatives, we’ve expanded our spouse’s responsibility for helping us fulfill our deepest emotional and psychological needs.

In a cruel cultural twist, just as we have increasingly looked to our marriage to help us fulfill higher-level needs, we have decreasingly invested the time and energy required for the marriage to meet these expectations. According to one major study, the amount of time that childless Americans spent alone with their spouse declined from thirty-five to twenty-six hours per week from 1975 to 2003, with much of this decline resulting from an increase in hours spent at work. The decline for Americans with children at home was from thirteen to nine hours per week, with much of it resulting from an increase in time-intensive parenting.

The positive consequence is that the benefits of having a marriage that meets our expectations have grown. As Maslow noted, relative to meeting lower needs, meeting high needs yields “more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life.” This idea extends to the interpersonal case - relative to having a spouse help us fulfill our lower, more basic needs, having a spouse help us fulfill our higher, more emotional and psychological needs yields a more profound marital happiness, serenity in the relationship, and richness of our life together.

From Cabernet to Pinot

Marriage in America has changed from an institution approximating Cabernet to an institution approximating Pinot (at least as Miles characterizes these wine grapes).

Part 2: Historical Perspective

Chapter 2: The Pragmatic Marriage

The Colonial Era

The Pilgrims reached the New World on November 11, 1620. Of the 102 passengers who had embarked on the *Mayflower's* transatlantic journey, about half were dead come springtime.

Chapter 3: From Pragmatism to Love

The Love Based Marriage

A Haven in a Heartless World

In contrast, and as hilariously illustrated in Charlie Chalin's *Modern Times*, the factory worker might do little more than tighten a set of screws all day long, feeling disconnected from the final product.

In this context, the home took on new psychological significance. “Instead of being viewed as an integral component of the network of public institutions,” observe Mintz and Kellogg, “the family was beginning to be seen as a private retreat... It was a place for virtues and emotions threatened by the aggressive and competitive spirit of commerce, a place where women and children were secure and where men could escape from the stresses of business and recover their humanity... The values of independence, self-reliance, and ambition were appropriate for the marketplace and government, but within the home, a wholly different set of values reigned supreme: love, mutuality, companionship, selflessness, sacrifice, and self-denial. No longer a microcosm of the larger society, the family was now a counterweight to acquisitive values and a refuge from materialistic corruptions.” Masculine virtue began to focus less on honor, courage, and service and more on a parochial tendency to love and protect one's wife and children.

Five Challenges of the Love-Based Marriage

Women's Economic Dependence

Women were legally prohibited from taking out loans or credit cards in their own name. If they worked outside the home, they were routinely (and legally) paid less money than men for the same work.

The Often-Insubordinate Sex Drive

Sexual desire is frequently insubordinate to our moral and sociopolitical preferences for kindness, egalitarianism, and respect.

Sustaining desire in marriage requires the reconciliation of our deep-seated craving for safety and security with our deep-seated craving for mystery and adventure.

Chapter 4: From Love to Self-Expression

What her experience with Aleksandr illustrates is that developing such a relationship is extremely difficult if the partners don't prioritize each other. They must understand each other deeply, provide each other with sensitive support during difficult times, and help each other savor the good times. Ideally, they'll also have lots of hot sex.

The Self Expressive Marriage

In the words of one student, “I really feel like someone of ‘mate value’ would be someone who helps me become the best person I can be, the best version of myself.” This student’s definition, which mimics the definition of the Michelangelo effect, strikes to the heart of the self-expressive era: All of us have many possible selves, but most of them are inferior variations of our authentic or best self; we are looking for a spouse who elicits that version of ourselves.

The Decline of “Traditional Marriage”

An Institution in Flux

Even as divorce rates remain high, marriage rates have declined. Although the proportion of American women married at least once by their early forties remains high, the chart below reveals it has, for the first time in recorded history, dipped below 90 percent in the new millennium, and current trends suggest that it might continue to decline. This decline is driven primarily by people with less education.

Between 2002 and 2012, for example, the birth rate of unmarried women between fifteen and twenty-four years of age dropped, whereas the birth rate for unmarried women between twenty-five and forty-four years of age rose.

Five Challenges of the Self-Expressive Marriage

The Elusive Self

The take-home message is as simple to state as it is hard to implement: To achieve optimal communication in the self-expressive era, and to support each other effectively, we need to develop deep insight into our own and our spouse’s psychological experiences - needs, goals, anxieties, frustrations - and to harmonize our behaviors with them. To achieve long-term stability and success, we must remain compatible over time, even as we grow and change.

The Porcupine’s Dilemma

The level of mutual insight and interdependence such support requires can be scary. Spouses must navigate the *porcupine’s dilemma* - the desire to achieve deep intimacy while remaining invulnerable to pain. This term comes from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s famous parable.

The psychiatrist Sigmund Freud introduced this porcupine idea to psychologists in the 1920s, and a number of twenty-first-century psychologists have investigated it in the context of intimate relationships. These researchers are interested not only in how people achieve a safe, middle-ground solution that leaves both needs (for intimacy and security) partially satisfied, but also in how people can achieve deep intimacy while maintaining a strong sense of security. We want to be truly, deeply known without any concern about rejection or abandonment. We share the desire of the philosopher Howard Thurman: “I want to feel completely vulnerable, completely naked, completely exposed, and absolutely secure.”

I’m not proud to admit that I had considerable leanings toward emotional avoidance in my earliest dating relationships, and that these leanings haven’t entirely dissipated. Alison certainly didn’t ask for a husband with avoidant tendencies, and she’s had to adapt. She’s securely attached, so her natural impulse when someone she loves is hurting is to approach and nurture. Over the years, she’s learned to do the opposite with me - to give me space and let me heal myself. These days, if I double over in pain because I’ve slammed my fingers in a door or am unusually quiet following a setback at work, she hangs back. In our early years together, my independence under duress hurt her feelings, but she’s learned that my withdrawal has nothing to do with her. One metric of how much she understands and loves me is her willingness to let me recover on my own in those situations, at least for the first stage of the recovery.

The Struggle for Balance

Americans had traditionally blamed marital problems on the emotional immaturity of one or both of the spouses, but, during the self-expressive era, we increasingly blame such problems on poor communication.

According to a 2015 estimate, mothers and fathers in dual-income households spent an average of 33.5 hours parenting the newborn. If you’re married without children, it might be difficult to understand how much the arrival of the first baby changes things. Where would the two of you find an additional 33.5 hours per week?

Much of the work comes in the form of little, almost invisible tasks that collectively serve as a significant drain on time and cognitive resources.

Men's (Continued) Stunted Psychological Development

Research by the psychologists Jennifer Bosson and Joseph Vandello randomly assigned men to perform a masculinity-threatening task (publicly braiding hair) or a nonthreatening task (publicly braiding rope for structural reinforcement), and then offered them an opportunity to reassert their masculinity. Relative to men in the nonthreatening condition, men in the masculinity-threatening condition were more likely to choose to perform a punching bag task than a brainteaser task. They also punched with greater force, presumably because such behavior helped them reestablish their sense of masculinity. Fragile masculinity of this sort seems to be a major reason why men have been reluctant to enter female-dominated fields like nursing and elementary school teaching.

New Opportunities and the Ascent of Marriage

Richness of the Inner Life

Maslow is correct that making progress toward self-actualization yields “profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life,” but he underappreciates how essential significant others are in facilitating this process, how relationship partners can sculpt each other toward their authentic selves. As our intimate social networks have winnowed - as we look to our marriage to help us work toward a larger proportion of our self-expressive goals - our spouse plays an even larger role in the success versus failure of our self-actualization efforts. As such, our ability to achieve profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life depends, more than ever before, on the quality of our marriage, and a high-quality marriage today is uniquely fulfilling.

Part 3: The All-or-Nothing Marriage

Chapter 5: Personal Fulfillment and Marital Commitment: The Detente

Happiness Versus Meaning

A similar pattern emerged for participants who endured high stress levels and a large number of negative life events. In short, whereas the happy life is characterized by ease and pleasure, the meaningful life is characterized by generosity, deep engagement with difficult pursuits, and a coherent sense of how the self develops across time.

Happiness, Meaning, and Marriage

In the happiness-based model, individuals look to their marriage to promote their hedonic well-being (a high pleasure-to-pain ratio) and to feel good about themselves (high self-esteem). They believe that sustaining a happy marriage shouldn't require extensive endurance or forbearance. Consequently, when spouses undergo periods when their marriage is challenging or painful, divorce feels like a reasonable choice.

In the meaning-based model, in contrast, individuals look to their marriage to promote their eudaimonic well-being (their successful pursuit of meaning by excelling in the self-relevant domains) and their personal growth (high self-expression). They believe that sustaining a fulfilling marriage requires extensive endurance or forbearance, just as almost anything meaningful does. Consequently, when spouses undergo difficult periods in the marriage, they perceive opportunities for personal and relationship growth as a consequence of working through the challenges.

The Self-Expressive Marriage's Evil Twin

In their Commentary on our *Psychological Inquiry* Target Article, the psychologists Michelle vanDellen and Keith Campbell argue that the happiness-based model is both prevalent and harmful. By analogy, they discuss two hiking trails that visitors can take to garner a view of North Carolina's beautiful Linville Falls. The Plunge Basin Trail “is challenging but manageable. At the end of the trail, hikers can scramble onto giant boulders mere feet from the falls, ending up with not only a spectacular view but a total sensory experience of the falls.” The Upper Falls Overlook is an easier hike that affords a pretty view of the falls from a distance.

In this “tale of two hikes,” vanDellen and Campbell argue that the Plunge Basin Trail is like the meaning-based marriage - difficult and a bit hazardous, but highly immersive and fulfilling. The Upper Falls Overlook Trail is like the happiness-based marriage - easy and pleasant, but less immersive and not especially fulfilling. VanDellen and Campbell argue that many Americans are choosing the marital analogue of the Upper Falls Overlook Trail instead of the Plunge Basin Trail, and that doing so places their marriage at elevated risk for distress and divorce.

When the Going Gets Tough

Such results, which have been replicated many times, suggest that people who are highly committed to their relationship exhibit self-delusions that serve to reinforce that commitment. It's hard to reconcile such findings with the view that we tend to cut and run at the first opportunity to bolster our pleasure elsewhere. On the contrary, we tend to perceive our relationship and the world in a way that biases us toward sustaining commitment over time.

The Fork in the Road

But others have interpreted the rising status of selfhood in a very different way - as an opportunity to pursue a meaningful life. Those of us in this latter group experience much less conflict between personal fulfillment and marital commitment. Rather, we work hard to make our marriage strong, in part because doing so helps us become the best version of ourselves.

Chapter 6: Marriage at the Summit

The 2013 documentary film *Cutie and the Boxer* explores the marriage and careers of the Japanese-American spouses Ushio and Noriko Shinohara.

The “Freighted Marriage” Perspective versus the “All-or-Nothing Marriage” Perspective

The freighted marriage perspective, which I had accepted as true when I began working on the *Psychological Inquiry* Target Article, is the prevailing one. Consider this analysis from the sex therapist Esther Perel:

No longer obligated to marry who we must, we set out with a new ideal of what we want, and we want plenty. Our desiderata still include everything the traditional family was meant to provide - security, children, property, respectability - but now we also want our Joe to love us, to desire us, to be interested in us. We should be confidants, best friends, and passionate lovers. Modern marriage promises us that there is one person out there with whom all this is possible if we can just find her.

Margin note: How does Esther feel re: this

Technological advances that make housework less onerous - dishwashers, washing machines, microwaves, power drills - have also defreighted marriage. Even as homes have gotten larger and standards for cleanliness have soared, Americans do considerably less housework than they used to. Meanwhile, during the same time period, the fertility rate declined by about half - from a recent high of 3.65 children per woman in 1960 to a low of 1.74 in 1976 before stabilizing at around 2.0 - and meeting children's basic needs has become easier due to the advent of disposable diapers, prepared baby food, institutional child care centers, and so forth. Parents spend much more time caring for their children today than they did fifty years ago (a trend we'll discuss shortly), but that time investment has very little to do with ensuring children's basic survival.

Not Enough Oxygen

Even at the simplest level, we tend to experience greater happiness and meaning, and greater intimacy, when we're with our spouse than when we're not, and couples who regularly spend “time alone with each other, talking or sharing an activity” are much happier in their marriage than those who don't. But, alas, rather than oxygenating our marriage in this way, many of us are doing just the opposite.

The Assault on Psychological Bandwidth

One issue is that the pace of life has sped up. The journalist Brigid Schulte illustrates the pace of contemporary life by presenting her own experience of what she calls *the overwhelm*.

Maybe we're in a dual-income household with young children, or maybe we're taking on extra freelance work to save for retirement. Regardless of the details, life is getting faster, straining our *psychological bandwidth* - the brainpower available to focus on the task at hand.

Time Crunch

The charts on the previous page track the parenting activity of heterosexual fathers and mothers aged twenty-five to thirty-four from 1965 to 2008. (The temporal trends were similar across other age groups.) From 1965 until the early 1990s, fathers spent four to five hours per week, and mothers spent ten to fifteen hours per

week engaged in intensive parenting activities. Then, suddenly, both fathers and mothers sharply increased the time they spent in such activities; by 2008, fathers were up to eight to ten hours per week, and mothers up to fifteen to twenty hours per week. These effects were stronger among more-educated than among less-educated Americans, which dovetails with the sociologist Annette Lareau's suggestion that highly educated Americans are especially likely to adopt a *concerted cultivation* approach to childhood, in which parents facilitate their children's development via organized activities, language training, and active school involvement.

We saw in chapter 4 that the total amount of work new parents do (paid work + housework + child care) increases by an estimated 33.5 hours per week when the first baby arrives, with 63 percent of this increase absorbed by mothers. But even spouses without children are time-starved, in part because we work so much. For example, American workers generally get fewer vacation days than people in other Western nations, and yet we reliably forfeit some of our meager allotment because we feel like we have so much work to do.

In light of these recent parenting and work trends, is it any surprise that spouses are spending less time alone together than they did in the past?

The top panel reveals that, between 1975 and 2003, spouses without children at home endured a 30 percent decline in spousal time on weekdays and a 17 percent decline on weekend days.

Margin note: Time

Mental Fragmentation

The comedian Tina Fey summarizes her sense of overwhelm in her autobiography *Bossypants*: “‘Blorft’ is an adjective I just made up that means ‘Completely overwhelmed but proceeding as if everything is fine and reacting to the stress with the torpor of a possum.’ I Have been blorft every day for the past seven years.”

We find ourselves chronically interrupted, multitasking, or both, which makes us feel scattered and fragmented, especially as we increasingly mainline technology into every aspect of our lives. “All those stolen glances at the smartphone, the bursts of addictive texting and e-mail checking at all hours... the constant connection... don’t show up in time diaries,” observes Brigid Schulte. “Yet that activity splinters the experience of time into thousands of little pieces.” She calls those little pieces *time confetti*.

Scientific investigations confirm that little disruptions impair our ability to sustain attention. One study demonstrated that a four-second interruption triples error rates on an ongoing cognitive task. In another study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three interruption conditions as they performed an attention-demanding computer task: phone call, text message, or no interruption. In all conditions, participants performed the task without looking at their smartphone, even if they received a notification. Still, both types of notification impaired performance relative to the no-interruption condition.

Benjamin Hunnicutt observes that such lives don’t afford much ability to reflect, live in the present, or experience transcendence - and, consequently, “we starve the capacity we have to love.” More prosaically, such lives deprive spouses of time together. One spouse poignantly observes that her marriage has fallen to the “bottom of the family food chain.”

Bandwidth for Two?

The imbalance is created by our tendency to ask our marriage to fulfill our highest-altitude needs despite our limited investment in the marriage.

The Suffocated Marriage and the Spouse's Dilemma

If our spouse is to facilitate this pursuit, he or she might have to push us hard, challenging us to be the best versions of ourselves. Pushing and challenging of this sort can be priceless, but it's less likely to promote smooth marital dynamics than adopting a more easygoing interaction style would be.

Hosszu and Tusup are an extreme example, to be sure. Most of us aren't seeking to break world records in high-profile athletic competitions. But their dynamic illustrates the point that achieving ambitious goals is hard work, and helping a loved one do so can sometimes require criticism rather than warmth, challenge rather than comfort. It's hard to reconcile such treatment with the “haven in a heartless world” ethos.

Therein resides the spouse's dilemma: As we seek to help our partner become the best version of him- or herself, to what extent do we employ critical feedback in order to motivate versus supportive feedback in order to nurture? It's difficult to give complacency-shattering feedback while simultaneously making our partner feel competent, loved, and sexy.

The Enriched Marriage and Flourishing at the Summit

One tool that the best marriages keep in their tool kit is the temporary descent of Mount Maslow. Few of us can live at the summit full-time, so the ability to let go of summit aspirations - at least for a while - is a hallmark of most of today's best marriages. When our children are small, when we have a slow-burning work crisis, when we're entering our third year of infertility treatments, spouses in the best marriages are able to keep marital disappointment at bay by modulating their expectations to align with what the marriage can realistically provide. A great danger of the self-expressive era is that an inflexible, myopic focus on the top of Mount Maslow produces painful disappointment during periods when the marriage falls short of those expectations. The best marriages are able to enjoy exquisite connection at the highest altitudes, but also to lower their expectations as the circumstances dictate.

Chapter 7: For Richer or Poorer

What's Driving This Crisis?

A Fifth Hypothesis

This conclusion aligns with that from new research by the economist Raj Chetty investigating what happened when poor families were randomly assigned to receive a housing voucher that allowed them to move to a lower property neighborhood. Relative to poor families who did not receive a voucher, the children in the voucher families - especially the girls - grow up to be significantly more likely to marry in young adulthood. They were also more likely to go to college and less likely to become single parents, and they enjoyed greater earnings. Such effects, which only emerged if the residential move happened when the child was young (under age thirteen), suggest that poverty influences marital and other outcomes independent of any effects of inherent genetic or cognitive attributes.

Variation in American Marriage

With that ascent, fulfillment in virtually all groups depends more than in the past on investment in the relationship itself - time, mental bandwidth, effective emotional communication, and so forth.

Part Four: Toward Stronger Marriages

Chapter 9: Lovehacking

Time, the Life Cycle, and Life Events

"The early years of marriage correspond for most Americans to a life stage devoted to raising children and simultaneously to developing one's career." The writer Samantha Shanley refers to the early parenting years as "Phase I" of family life: "the part where we make babies and slog through first years of child rearing with one eye open and the other imitating sleep." As the kids get more self-sufficient, she suggests, a crucial new phase dawns. For Shanley and her husband, "this new phase... was like coming off a long winter and waiting to see if the leaves would grow back on the trees: Either two parents figure out how to come back together and have some kind of refreshed marriage after that insulated, self-propelled procreation frenzy, or they don't." Getting to this new phase, however, requires that we keep our marriage from capsizing during Phase I.

Lovehacks

Countering Weaknesses

Making External, Temporary Attributions for Negative Partner Behaviors

One approach is to train ourselves to adopt an if-then rule like this: *If* I start feeling frustrated or angry about something my spouse did (or didn't do), *then* I will take a few seconds to consider other explanations for his or her behavior.

Reappraising Conflict

One promising way of mitigating the damage is to reappraise, or reinterpret, the conflict. In one reappraisal procedure - the *marriage hack*, which my colleagues and I recently developed - spouses think about a conflict in their marriage from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved.

For each seven-minute interlude, participants wrote for two to three minutes in response to each of three

prompts. The first was designed to help participants adopt the perspective of a neutral, benevolent third party.

Adopting a Growth Mind-set

We have a wide latitude in considering whether problems in our marriage are fixable. According to the psychologist Raymond Knee, people with strong *destiny beliefs* think that partners either are or are not “meant to be.” They view conflict and other relationship difficulties and indicators that they may simply be incompatible with their partner. People with strong *growth beliefs*, in contrast, think that partners can cultivate a high quality relationship by working and growing together.

Savoring Strengths

Making Internal, Stable Attributions for Positive Partner Behaviors

We saw earlier that making external, temporary attributions for our spouse’s negative behaviors is linked to elevated relationship quality. It turns out that the inverse is true regarding our spouse’s positive behaviors: rather than separating our spouse from the behavior and treating it as a one-off event, relationships benefit when we link our spouse to the behavior and treat it as generally characteristic of him or her - when we make internal, stable attributions.

Consider the example of our spouse bringing us a surprise gift. Here, again, our attributions vary in the extent to which they explain his or her behavior as having been caused by internal versus external causes (locus of causation) and by stable versus temporary causes (stability of causation). As we consider these four types of attributions in the table on the following page, it’s clear once again that some of them are likely to be better for our relationship than others. In particular, the tendency to make internal and stable attributions for our spouse’s positive behaviors (upper-left quadrant) predicts greater happiness about those behaviors and greater improvement in relationship quality over time.

Cultivating Gratitude

A second lovehack for savoring strengths is the cultivation of gratitude. In recent years, a number of psychologists, including Sara Algoe, Amie Gordon, Emily Impett, and Samantha Joel, have conducted research demonstrating the power gratitude for strengthening emotional bonds in close relationships. Algoe argues that gratitude serves as a “booster shot” for romantic relationships.

All of us can find a few minutes per week - before going to bed or while showering, perhaps - to think about ways in which our spouse has invested in our marriage.

Celebrating Together

A third lovehack for savoring strengths involves helping each other celebrate life’s achievements and successes.

These salutary effects are especially strong when the listener responds in an enthusiastic, celebratory manner or in a manner that focuses on the potential downsides of the positive event. Enthusiastic responses are beneficial because they convey the listener’s shared joy in the event and appreciation of the personal significance of the event for the discloser.

Chapter 10: Going All In

Creating Time

But it’s possible to reverse, or at least mitigate, that mind-set. Rather than treating everything else as the priority and squeezing our marriage into the pockets of leftover time, we can seek to do the opposite. Given the psychological and physical benefits of a successful marriage, there’s an argument to be made that, where possible, we should make quality time for the marriage even if doing so requires that we transfer to a less stressful job or live in a home with dust bunnies or enroll our kids in fewer activities.

Serendipity

Bruni and his extended family of twenty take a weeklong beach vacation every year. He used to arrive a day or two late or leave a day or two early, because, let’s face it, a week of family time can feel interminable. But now he goes for the whole time. “With a more expansive stretch,” he writes, “there’s a better chance that I’ll be around at the precise, random moment when one of my nephews drops his guard and solicits my advice about something private.”

Attention

My Aunt, who's five-decade marriage was one for the ages, used to tell her husband: "You're either having dinner with your phone or with me, not with both of us." And she's onto something: Spouses who spend more time together engaged in actual conversation tend to be happier than those who spend less. Spouses who pursue more leisure activities together - including indoor activities, sports, card games, and travel - are at reduced risk of divorce.

Nourishing the Self-Expressive Marriage

Fromm, in contrast, favors the idea that love - which he defines in terms of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge - is a skill that we must cultivate. "The first step to take," he argues, "is to become aware that *love is an art*, just as living is an art; if we want to learn how to love we must proceed in the same way we have to proceed if we want to learn any other art, say music, painting, carpentry, or the art of medicine or engineering."

Communication

A defining feature of the self-expressive marriage is that spouses facilitate each other's self-discovery and personal growth.

Greater self-disclosure is linked to higher relationship quality.

Four particularly damaging behaviors are criticism (characterizing the conflict in terms of a fundamental flaw in our spouse), defensiveness (counterattacking rather than engaging with our spouse's concern), contempt (engaging in insulting, mocking, or hostile behavior), and stonewalling (clamming up when our partner raises a concern). In general, it's beneficial for each partner to try to respond generously when the other behaves badly, as doing so avoids the escalating cycles of negative reciprocity characteristic of unhealthy relationships.

Play

Socializing

People tend to be happier in marriages in which the spouses' social networks overlap a lot rather than a little. Experimental research by the psychologist Richard Slatcher demonstrates that certain types of socializing together are especially relationship enhancing. In one study, couples had a forty-five-minute double date with another couple whom they'd never met before. By random assignment, half of these double dates involve games (Jenga!) and a task that facilitates self-disclosure, whereas the other half involved small talk. In the self-disclosure task, participants took turns responding to questions like "for what in your life do you feel the most grateful?"; Those in the small talk condition took turns responding to questions like "when was the last time you walked for more than an hour? Describe where you went and what you saw." Not surprisingly, the couples in the first condition like each other more than the couples in the second condition, and we're more likely to meet up with them again following the study. But the key finding for our purposes is that the couples in the former condition also felt closer to *their own partner*.

Margin note: Talk Cards

Novel and Exciting Activities

Whether socializing with our spouse involves other people or not, we can pursue a vast range of activities together. When we're first dating a new person, we often generate fun ideas for shared activities, but we tend to get lazier as the relationship becomes more familiar. That's too bad, because engaging in novel and exciting activities together can keep our relationship fresh, satisfying, and passionate.

They listed activities like shucking oysters for the first time, taking ballroom dancing lessons, and taking a road trip. When participants reported greater self-expansion on a given day, both they and their partner reported experiencing greater sexual desire in - and greater satisfaction with - the relationship. They were also 36 percent more likely to have sex that day.

Immediately after completing the baseline measures, she assigned participants to one of three conditions:

- *No-Intervention Condition*: Participants didn't read an article.
- *Comfort Condition*: Participants read an experimenter-created article (designed to look like media coverage of scientific research) extolling the relationship-enhancing power of engaging in routine and

comfortable activities together.

- *Self-expansion Condition*: This condition was the same as the comfort condition, except that the article extolled the relationship enhancing power of novel and exciting activities, not routine and comfortable activities.

In both of the intervention conditions, participants were encouraged to engage in the relevant type of behavior with their partner over the next seventy-two hours.

Participants assigned to the self-expansion condition did indeed engage in more novel and exciting activities together during that time interval. And, as illustrated in the chart on the following page, doing so mattered. Relative to the control condition, both the self-expansion and the comfort manipulations bolstered relationship quality - and by about the same amount (left side of chart), but only the self expansion manipulation significantly bolstered sexual desire (right side of chart).

A study by the psychologist Charlotte Reissman included a more stringent control condition. All couples made a list of activities that they view as exciting and a separate list of activities that they view as pleasant. They were then assigned to engage in either an exciting or a pleasant activity for ninety minutes for each of ten consecutive weeks. Relative to couples in the pleasant condition, couples in the exciting condition were happier in their relationship at the study's conclusion.

What counts as a novel and exciting activity? The possibilities are practically infinite, and each couple's preferences are idiosyncratic. The only rules are (1) that it's an activity that both partners are happy to try and (2) that it takes us out of the mundanities of everyday life. Taking the time to develop a list of such activities with our spouse, and pursuing such activities every week or so, can yield significant benefits for our relationship.

Sex and Romance

Rules of thumb, such as 'have sex nightly, regardless of immediate desire,' may provide a better guide to behavior than momentary feelings."

For many couples, having sex every night is overkill. Although more frequent sex is generally linked to greater relationship satisfaction, once per week seems sufficient; more sex than that appears to have no additional benefit. But Loewenstein's broader insight is profound: Because our spontaneous desire for sex declines as the novelty of the relationship fades, and because life is busy and tiring, many of us fail to initiate sex even when doing so would have been physically pleasurable and emotionally connective - even when we would have been glad we'd done so. We settle for activities, like channel-surfing or reading, that take less initiative but also are much less beneficial for the relationship, and much less fun.

"Even people who look forward to being sexual with their partner must go through a transition from responsibility to pleasure," observes the sex therapist Esther Perel. "This is a difficult transition for many of us. There are two internal transitions that must occur before you can think about entering an erotic space: Professional -> Partner ->, then Partner -> Lover. Eroticism at home requires active engagement and willful intent; it doesn't just happen. It requires that you create your own demarcation between pragmatism and pleasure and that you cultivate a space where a sense of intrigue and curiosity can emerge."

Perel recommends several procedures for such cultivation. First, we can build anticipation throughout the day. Anticipating a sexy interlude that evening can fill the day with mischievous intrigue. One option is to send an afternoon text akin to "cue up the Marvin Gaye when you get home," or, less obliquely, "I can't wait to get you naked tonight." Second, as we transition from the day to the evening, we should connect with our partner first. Before we open the mail, take the dog for a walk, or turn on the news, we should probably give our partner a kiss and ask him or her about the day. Even if the kiss is more tender than hot, it facilitates the Professional -> Partner transition. Third, we can carve out time for activities that facilitate the Partner -> Love transition. We can play the Marvin Gaye, open a bottle of wine, or replace electric light with candlelight - or perhaps all of the above. As the wine kicks in, we can start singing along, perhaps using the wine bottle as a faux microphone. Irresistible, right?

Of course, getting into the mood won't be sufficient if the sex itself is unsatisfying. Dan Savage, author of the sex and relationships advice column "Savage Love," offers a guiding philosophy for people who want to sustain a satisfying sex life for the long run. According to this philosophy, we should strive to be "good, giving, and game," or GGG. *Good* means being sexually skilled. *Giving* means being sexually generous, ensuring that we are giving every bit as much time and pleasure to our partner as he or she is giving to us. *Game* means being up for anything, within reason.

The first two *G*'s (good and giving) are pretty straightforward, but it's worth unpacking the third - how does being game for sexual adventure influence relationship quality? Researchers have begun investigating this issue, with positive early results. In one study, the communications researchers Tricia Burke and Valerie Young examined *sexual transformations* - changing our sexual behavior for our partner. They found that our frequency of engaging in sexual transformations predicts our partner's relationship satisfaction without influencing our own. That means our sexual transformations are a collective win for the couple - our partner is happier and we are no less happy. If both of us engage in frequent sexual transformations, both can be happier.

Of course, the "within reason" caveat regarding being game has vast interpersonal latitude. Is spanking within reason? Asking your partner to tie you up and scold you for being disobedient? A threesome with a neighbor? There are no universal answers to such questions. The crucial element is to ensure the full consent of both partners, even as both are making a concerted effort to be open-minded about sexual exploration.

Chapter 11: Recalibrating

Coan, who knew that I was working on this book, channeled Gottman's critique of Maslow for me: "He'd agree with you that it's possible to build a great marriage, but he also feels that the pursuit of 'great' often stresses people out and causes more conflict and disappointment than it resolves." Gottman is right - looking to the summit makes profound fulfillment possible, but it also increases the likelihood that our partner will disappoint us.

The Conjugal Crucible

Our experiences during those difficult years point to a more general truth: The tendency of contemporary Americans to place so much responsibility for our social and psychological fulfillment on one relationship turns the marriage into something of a crucible.

Increasing Independence

Bolstering the Self

This is the idea underlying Shel Silverstein's illustrated book *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*, which argues that we are best equipped to love when we come from a place of completeness rather than from a place of incompleteness - that optimal relationships emerge when two fully functioning people seek to experience the world together rather than when two partially developed people look to each other to become whole.

Chapter 12: The Marital Buffet

The Hybrid Approach

Assess Resources and Skills

First, as we've seen, it's unlikely that any one person will have the optimal skill set for all of our needs, so it's wise to leverage the strengths of our broader social network. Second, our spouse will not always be available.

Climbing the Mountain

The self-expressive era began more than half a century ago, shattering the love-based, breadwinner-homemaker model of marriage that was ascendant in the 1950s - and dispensing marital chaos. But in recent decades, a new equilibrium has emerged. As more of us seek a form of personal fulfillment oriented toward self-expression and meaning rather than self-esteem and pleasure, as more of us make wise decisions about what we will and won't seek from our marriage, and as more of us find a way to invest the time and energy required to meet our higher-altitude marital expectations, more of our marriages will flourish.