



Give It to Me, Often: The Surprising Secret to a Happy Marriage

by Rita Watson

What makes [marriage](#) work? What can married people do to stay that way—and feel happy? In an age of cohabiting, non-marital childbearing, single [parenthood](#) by choice, and having the baby (or two) before the wedding, this question might seem as quaint as a gingham apron.

But that doesn't stop researchers from wondering—and us from wanting to know the answer. Google "predictors of happy marriage" and more than 33,000 entries pop up, including the 1938 research by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman (he discovered that frequency of intercourse had nothing to do with it); John Gottmans' contemporary outline of the predictors of marital doom in his "Four Horseman of the Apocalypse" (stonewall, express contempt, act defensive toward, and criticize your spouse at your peril); and Tara Parker-Pope's recent book on the "science" of happy marriages.

Researchers have delved into the role of [personality](#) and temperament in a happy union; the importance of sharing chores; the negative effect children of any age from a previous union or marriage have on a marriage; and arguing styles, to name just a few predictors of marital [stress](#) and bliss. Sometimes the study results are surprising. Several have found that shared exercise and leisure pursuits are top predictors of a happy marriage, while a 2009 DePauw University study found that the past matters: Kids who don't smile in school photos, or who smile "weakly," these researchers found, are most likely to experience [divorce](#) and unhappy marriages in [middle age](#).

And now the latest entry in the field: a large randomized study funded by Notre Dame University and undertaken by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. In their analysis of 3,146 married respondents, *sexual intimacy* and the rather vaguely delineated *commitment* are the top predictors of a successful and happy marriage. No surprises there. However, the third ingredient in the happy marriage mix is more unexpected. It turns out that generosity—small acts of giving our spouses things like affection, [forgiveness](#), an opportunity to [sleep](#) in late, even making him or her a cup of coffee—effectively predicted [happiness](#) in a marriage with children in the study.

As a woman who recently toilet trained her toddler, let me first just say, *Duh*. And also, *Thank you for this. Thank you so much!* A highly unscientific survey of friends and the popular

literature of motherhood, not to mention thousands of posts on internet boards for parents, suggests that stay-at-home or work-from-home mothers (and stay-at-home fathers, of whom there are fewer, but who are growing in number) are beyond exhausted. And from the clinical and lay literature as well as anecdotal evidence, we know that parents, particularly mothers, who feel tired and depleted are specially primed to slip into rumination, resentment, [depression](#), and [anger](#). At our kids, the world, and of course our spouses. Thankfully, for at least the last few decades men have been learning, one sex-deprived day at a time, that doing the midnight diaper change or feeding, helping pack the kid's lunch, ferrying children to and from school, throwing in a load of laundry or wiping the pee off the toilet goes a very long way.

Interestingly, the Notre Dame/Marriage Project Study found that making "large sacrifices" for a spouse (for example, turning down a job promotion) adversely affected self-reports of marital satisfaction. So don't go thinking you have to do a lot, or put yourself out in profound ways, to make us happy. Merely giving a hug, giving a pass ("I know you're in a bad mood, and it's okay") or giving your spouse the benefit of the doubt ("You're a good dad, you just yelled at the kids because you had a tough day") can lead to and reinforce feelings of connection that offset the difficulties of parenting in a partnership, the study found.

Now the hunch that letting me sleep in serves you well has been scientifically proven. All over America, women with children are starving, tired and grouchy. So give it to us. Your [generosity](#) and your small acts of kindness and your compliments. Often. You will find that in doing so, you give to yourself and to your marriage as well.

And you will probably get some. Generosity back, that is. And who knows what else.

Further reading/sources:

Dew, J; Wilcox, BF, "Give and You Shall Receive?: Generosity, Sacrifice, and Marital Quality," Marriage Project Working Paper 11-1, University of Virginia National Marriage Project publication. ssrn.com

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