



The Pursuit of Happiness

If you ask most people, being “happy” is high up on their list of life goals. As a soon-to-be couple you are likely hoping for a “happy marriage.” But what does that really mean and how can you make it happen?

Let’s talk about the idea of happiness in general. Feelings or emotions, such as happiness, don’t spontaneously happen, they are created. We cannot *will* ourselves into happiness but we can indirectly influence how we feel by how we *think* and *act*. For example, when you think about the fun time you had with your partner at the beach last weekend this might trigger a feeling of happiness. When you are doing something you enjoy, like reading a good book or playing a good round of golf, you may feel happy.

Let’s also make one thing clear. No one is happy all of the time, even those people who are generally content with their lives. Life is a tapestry of moments – moments of happiness, sadness, anger, anxiety, disappointment, embarrassment, etc. This is actually more important than most people realize because you need contrast to know the “other.” Here’s what I mean: You *wouldn’t* really understand happiness if you had never felt sadness. You need both experiences to truly appreciate the other.

I think it’s helpful to think about the concept of being “content” or “satisfied” as a springboard towards achieving happiness. We typically feel positive emotions, including happiness, when we are content with ourselves or our lives. For example, if you handle a tough situation well or master a new skill, you will likely feel good about yourself. If you behave in a way that does not feel consistent with your true self (e.g., lying or being inconsiderate, assuming these are values you think are important), you will likely feel one of the negative emotions. The more your behavior and surroundings look consistent with your “ideal” picture of life, the more content, satisfied and happy you are likely to feel.

So now that we know all of that, how do we translate that into having a happy marriage?

Firstly, have a clear understanding of your “ideal” world. Glasser (1998) calls it the “quality world picture.” This is usually made up of a combination of things – people you enjoy spending time with, material possessions, your needs/wants, beliefs, morals, etc., and your ideal self. I suggest sorting these components into categories or tiers. The first tier is your “deal-breakers.” These are your “must-haves,” the things you are not willing to live without or compromise about. The next category is “priorities.” What are the more important things you want to have in your life? These items are “up there” but there is usually still room to negotiate. The last category is “preferences,” those things that are important but you could give up more easily if you had to.

The more you can get your reality to look like your ideal, the more content you are likely to be, and hence, the greater happiness. Naturally it will be easier to do this with someone who has more similar needs, wants and values.

Opposites may attract but they don’t often make for good life partners. Don’t be fooled by the romantic notion that love will conquer all because sometimes it isn’t enough to get you through the day-to-day stresses of life.

Secondly, have realistic expectations. As a society we seem to be placing greater expectations on our marriage these days. We want it all – passion, romance, great sex, financial security, successful children, dream house, etc., and we sometimes unrealistically expect that this one person is supposed to provide it all. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with striving for the best life you can live, but if you expect more than what is realistic, you are setting yourself up to fail. It comes back to the notion that when your ideal picture and reality don’t match, you are likely to be unhappy. As much as we want it all, there is a real elegance to learning to be content with what you do have.

Thirdly, there is no real substitute for real emotional connection. We feel truly “seen,” known and understood by another, alive and yes, happy, when it’s there. We are unhappy when it’s not there or when we had it and we lost it. We may try to substitute for it by chasing after status, money, wealth, power or other material things but few find that the need for emotional connection is met by such things. Our material goods may certainly enhance our quality of life but when that is all that there is, there is usually a real emptiness. The important thing to remember is that a satisfying connection to someone else, including a happy marriage, is not magic or fate – it’s entirely within your grasp and within your control. You just need to be willing to create it and then cherish it, protect it and nurture it.

How do you do that? Research has identified two key ingredients for strong, happy connections – *responsiveness* and *accessibility*. Responsiveness is basically the ability to tune into someone else – i.e., to understand his/her point of view (even if we don’t agree with it) and to think about someone else’s needs besides our own. Accessibility is having access to the person with whom we want a relationship. I like to teach couples about the “Seven Caring Habits of Relationships” (*Choice Theory* by William Glasser, M.D.) because these habits embody responsiveness and accessibility. The habits are: *listening, supporting, encouraging, respecting, trusting, accepting, and always negotiating differences*. If you use these habits in your marriage you will increase the likelihood of feeling connected, and therefore content, satisfied and happy.

Lastly, happiness comes from within. When you accept that no one else can *make* you happy or sad or angry, etc., you will have taken your first step towards personal freedom and happiness. Sure, we may feel happy in someone’s company or when they do something nice for us, but that is because we *think* about that action in a positive way.

Remember that a happy marriage is not a “perfect” marriage – that doesn’t exist. Happy marriages are based in reality, they are messy, and they embrace the ups and downs of being two unique, imperfect people!

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