



All couples want their marriages to succeed. But what makes for a happy and lasting marriage? Is it just luck—a matter of finding the right spouse? Is each marriage unique, or do happy marriages have certain elements in common? Perhaps most important, what can spouses do to improve their chances of marital success?

Social science research offers some helpful answers. It reminds us, for example, that couples build “multiple marriages” over the course of a marriage. Common transitions such as the birth of a child, relocation, and the empty nest require couples to adjust their behaviors and expectations. Transitions can threaten marital stability, but they can also provide an opportunity for growth.

Here are several key findings from the social sciences that can help couples to navigate these transitions and build a lasting marriage.

- Couples who know what to expect during common transitional periods in a marriage are less likely to be blindsided when changes occur. Couples can acquire proactive resources to prepare for relationship shifts. **See Stages of Marriage.**
- The three most common reasons given for divorce are “lack of commitment,” “too much conflict and arguing,” and “infidelity.” (With This Ring: A National Survey on Marriage in America, 2005)
- In contrast, the most common reasons couples give for long-term marital success are commitment and companionship. They speak of hard work and dedication, both to each other and to the idea of marriage itself. (The Top Ten Myths of Marriage)
- Qualities that a couple can acquire and/or strengthen in order to save or improve their marriage include: positive communication styles, realistic expectations, common attitudes concerning important issues and beliefs, and a high degree of personal commitment. (Scott Stanley, “What Factors are Associated with Divorce and/or Marital Unhappiness?”)
- Married couples make a dual commitment. The first, of course, is to each other. The second is to the institution of marriage. This includes support for marital childbearing, openness to children, and a belief that marriage is for life. Such commitment results in high levels of intimacy and marital happiness. (Brad Wilcox,

Seeking a Soulmate: A Social Scientific View of the Relationship between Commitment and Authentic Intimacy)

-Couples who stay married and happy have the same levels and types of disagreements as those who divorce. The difference stems from how they handle disagreements. The good news is that communication and conflict resolution skills can be learned.