

Ten Key Strengths of Happy Marriages

Dozens of books are written every year about the things that go wrong in marriage. One of America's foremost marriage researchers, David H. Olson, PhD, founder of *Life Innovations* and one of the creators of the *Prepare/Enrich* marriage enrichment tools, surveyed 21,501 married couples in all 50 states to identify the top ten strengths of happy marriages. Olson says the research has found the strongest couples are those who have strong communication skills, a clear sense of closeness as a couple, flexibility, personal compatibility, and good conflict resolution skills. "In strong marriages, there is a balance between separateness and togetherness," Olson said. "These couples make togetherness a top priority, ask each other for help, like doing things together, and spend most of their free time together." Olson's research identified some common factors in the relationship roles in strong marriages:

1. Partners are satisfied with communication
2. Partners handle their differences creatively
3. They feel very close to each other
4. Spouses are not controlling
5. Partners discuss their problems well
6. They are satisfied with the affection they show and receive in the marriage
7. There is a good balance of time alone and together
8. Family and friends rarely interfere
9. Partners agree on how to spend money
10. Partners agree on spiritual beliefs

"Both were equally willing to make adjustments in their roles as needed, both were satisfied with the division of housework, both work hard to have an equal relationship, and they make most decisions jointly," he said. Partners in strong marriages have strong communication skills, Olson found. The happiest couples said they were satisfied with the way they communicate, find it easy to express their feelings, and find their partner to be a good listener. They note that their partner doesn't use put-downs. Conflict resolution skills are crucial. In strong marriages, both partners say that their partner understands their positions, that they feel free to share their feelings and ideas, that they take disagreements seriously, and that they work cooperatively to resolve conflicts.

On the other hand, some common stumbling blocks are when one person feels most responsible for the problem, when the partners go out of their way to avoid conflict, and when serious disputes erupt over minor issues. Olson says that relationships in which differences are never resolved can get into trouble. The top ten problems in marriage identified in Olson's research are interesting as well:

1. Problems sharing leadership
2. One partner is too stubborn
3. Stress created by child-rearing differences
4. One partner is too negative or critical
5. One partner wishes the other had more time
6. One partner wishes the other was more willing to share their feelings
7. Feeling responsible for issues
8. Avoiding conflict with partner
9. Difficulty completing tasks
10. Differences never get resolved

"Building a healthy marriage means that you have learned to turn your stumbling blocks into stepping stones," Olson says. "Build on your strengths, while creatively addressing your differences."

