The #1 Thing All Happily Married Couples Have in Common

No, it’s not “healthy communication” or “quality time together.”

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I read a lot about relationships.

Being a top writer in love, psychology, and relationships on Medium requires a lot of research when you’re not actually a psychologist (or married, for that matter).

Recently, I read a book called The Seven Principles for Making Marriage
Work by John Gottman and Nan Silver. Admittedly, I picked this title because my boyfriend and I plan on getting married soon, and, well, we’re really hoping to make it work.

The overall idea each of these principles (and every great psychology book I’ve ever read) boils down to this:

All happily married couples exhibit best friend behavior.

According to Gottman and Silver, “Friendship fuels the flames of romance because it offers the best protection against feeling adversarial toward your spouse.”

Think about it: when you identify your partner as a best friend before a spouse, positive thoughts about him/her become overwhelming disproportionate to the negative thoughts. If you meet a friend for lunch and she forgot to order your sandwich without onion, would you give her “the look” or start shouting about how “selfish and inconsiderate” she is for not remembering the way you like your sandwich? Of course not; you would you pick off the onions, make a joke about onion breath at the office, and thank her for buying lunch.

The positivity bias of a friendship makes it easy to look past mistakes or small frustrations. Positivity bias occurs when a relationship has had so many positive interactions that negative interactions can be chalked up to an anomaly. Instead of thinking your friend was careless enough to forget that you hate onions, you might attribute the careless mistake to the stress she’s been under at work lately instead.

Positivity bias makes it easy for both partners “to feel optimistic about each other and their marriage, to assume positive things about their lives together, and to give each other the benefit of the doubt” (source).
The human attachment theory helps to explain the need for best friend behavior in a marital partnership. Research conducted on the attachment theory suggests that humans tend to attach themselves to one primary person when they are upset or scared. “Relationship partners are especially important when people are faced with a stressful event,” says social psychologist Paula Pietromonaco of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, “because [partners] have the potential to comfort and calm the person who is experiencing distress or to hinder that person’s efforts to feel better.” (Science News)

In other words, happily married couples turn towards each other during an argument — even if the argument is about each other — because they prioritize each other’s sense of well-being.
Best friends don’t fight ‘til the death of their marriage because the point of the conflict is not to cause the other person pain — the point is to find a solution and move forward.

Happily married couples find a way to calm each other down when an argument is escalating, either by making a joke, apologizing, offering a warm embrace, or simply by acknowledging that you both need some time to walk away and cool down.

**When you’re married to your best friend:**

**Nobody cares who makes the money**

...as long as you’ve got enough resources to support each other’s dreams and sustain a desired quality of life. A best friend doesn’t mind paying for two concert tickets because he/she knows that a concert without their partner would suck. They also never make you feel bad if they pay more than you because they recognize the other ways you contribute to the partnership (i.e. manual labor, acts of kindness, doing the taxes...).

**Vacations are easy to agree on**

...because the most important part is simply hanging out together — whether you’re sipping insta-worthy cocktails at the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas or sharing leftovers out of a styrofoam box in a Motel 6.

**Chores are divided 50/50**

...or whatever split both partners see as “fair.” Some couples split household chores by task (I’ll take care of the laundry if you mow the lawn), by day of the week, time of day, or simply by who gets home first. The point isn’t that
the actual workload is split evenly between partners, but that there is a sense of equality in the effort contributed by each person. In fact, best friends may actually take on more chores voluntarily when their partner is feeling sick or stressed out, knowing that he/she would do the same if the roles were reversed. While it may seem uneven at the time, best-friend-first couples trust that this temporary imbalance of effort will even out over the course of their lifetime.

You have incredible sex

...because you can openly communicate what you like in the bedroom. Couples that are friends before lovers feel a sense of gratification when they play a role in their partner’s sexual satisfaction; they view sex as a two-player game where the object is not to ‘win’, but for both players to have as much fun as possible playing the game. What fun is it unless your best friend is having fun, too?

You feel understood

...and emotionally connected 99% of the time. There might be a few slip-ups here and there (even the most loyal friendships endure forgotten birthdays once in a while) but best-friend-first couples pride themselves on knowing details of one another’s individual lives. Best friends check in with each other daily to find out how they are feeling, what kind of stresses they’re facing, and if there is anything they currently need or want. Best friends know each other’s biggest dreams, inquire about their progress, and celebrate every win (big and small).

You still fight (a lot)

...because all couples argue, whether they are happily married or on the brink of divorce. Couples who identify as best friends first, though, fight productively — that is, they fight with the intention of resolving a conflict
instead of fighting solely to feel emotionally connected. Best friends also respect each other’s style of fighting as much as they can emotionally handle. The way best-friend couples fight is no different than any other marriage; some people like to retreat for clarity during conflict while others like to confront issues head-on until it’s resolved. The difference is that best-friend couples have found a way to fight about issues in a way that incorporates both partner’s style of processing emotions.

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Could it really be that simple, though?

**Does treating your spouse like a best friend guarantee a lifelong happily ever after?**

According to my grandma, a recent widow after 62 years of marriage with my grandfather, yes — as long as you work at remaining best friends throughout the years.
“I thought he was the cutest thing on earth,” she laughed, her eyes lighting up at the memory of meeting my grandfather back in 1956.

“But marriage isn’t heaven on earth all the time. You have to work at it, and that draws you together — the work. We had a lot of ups and downs, some worse than others, but I loved him. The more you love each other, the more you have to work at it.”

According to science — and my 86-year old grandmother — happily married couples commit to putting in the work required to maintain their friendship through the inevitable ups and downs of life.

If you feel like your relationship is more of a partnership than a friendship, shift your perspective to think, act, and respond the way you would to a best friend.

One of my favorite exercises for cultivating a sense of friendship in your relationship is to act like a puppy (i.e. man’s best friend) when your partner gets home from work. Get excited! Give them slobbery, passionate kisses, nuzzle your nose in the collar of their shirt, squeeze them in a hug until your arms ache, and tell them how glad you are to be reunited with your best friend in the whole wide world.

As an unknown source once said,

“a friend is someone who knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still, gently allows you to grow.”
Happily ever after doesn’t start with a champagne toast at a wedding; it starts the moment you turn towards your partner and realize you’re looking into the eyes of your very best friend.

Written by Rachel Clements, author of RELENTLESS LOVE: An Interactive Workbook for Couples in Pursuit of Lifelong Intimacy.