

It's time to accept this fact: A really great marriage is rare



Greater gender equality [leads to divorce](#). Women's [increased earning power](#) leads to divorce. Men shouldering the burden of [household chores](#) leads to lower marital satisfaction and increased risk of divorce.

These are just a few examples of handwringing in the popular press about why women, and to a lesser extent men, are choosing divorce over what seem to be perfectly good marriages. It used to be that a woman would stick with her husband unless he was abusing her or cheating on her. Nowadays, women leave perfectly kind, helpful husbands for reasons that seem mysterious.

There are many theories floating around about why greater gender equality has not put an end to divorce in America. Underlying most of these theories is an acknowledgment that expectations about marriage have changed. Prior to the late 20th century, it was difficult for women to prosper financially, express their sexuality or have children outside of the context of marriage. Single and divorced women were also stigmatized. Wives, therefore, were willing to put up with a lot more unhappiness in marriage to avoid the social consequences of being unmarried or getting a divorce.

The situation for women is radically different in the 21st century. Women do not need to marry in order to achieve financial stability, sexual satisfaction, social approval, or even to have children. Women (and men) now marry overwhelmingly for nebulous reasons like [love and self-fulfillment](#). But here's the problem: our social narratives have not caught up with this cultural change.

As a society, we encourage marriage by filling our children's heads with images of true love and happily-ever-after. They grow up expecting to find a soulmate who will be kind, loving, romantic, sexually appealing and, of course, own a castle or two. We don't promote happily-ever-after cynically; most of us, at least on some level, buy into the narrative. We know that some couples are still deeply in love after decades of marriage.

On the other hand, there are married individuals—an awful lot of them—who are disappointed with their relationships. Some of them feel lonely, some feel forced into celibacy, some just don't enjoy the companionship of their husband or wife anymore.

How should we, as a society, react to married people who feel that they have not found happily-ever-after? We could stick with our original narrative and tell them, "That's a bummer that you haven't found your true love yet. You should try again." That would lead to a lot more divorces, however, and we don't like divorces.

Or we could also say, "Remember that thing we told you—about it being possible to be in love for a whole lifetime? That was a lie." This message would discourage people from getting married, which we don't want either. And if we acknowledge that happily-ever-after is a lie, it would be sad for all of us.

What we do tell people is that happy couples are really no different from unhappy couples. Either they have found some secret formula for happiness (and if you buy the right book/attend the right seminar/take the right product, you will be happy too!), or they have learned to lower their expectations to the point where they don't feel the sting of disappointment from incompatibility, loneliness, sexlessness or boredom. The first case is [akin to Senator Marco Rubio](#) testifying that America is "a nation of haves and soon to haves." It is theoretically possible for any single individual to become wealthy, but it is unlikely that we are all going to be rich anytime soon. The second is like saying that rich people don't have more money than poor people, just a better attitude.

This narrative is not entirely without value. It is certainly true that marriages have ups and downs, and just because the passion has cooled temporarily, that is not a good reason to throw in the towel. Moreover, even the best marriages are not perfect. Every couple has problems. The flaw in this narrative is that it doesn't acknowledge that even though no relationship is perfect, not every relationship has the same potential to be great.

The painful truth is that really great marriages exist, but they are rare. What we as a society should probably be telling married people is, "If you have love, passion, companionship and equality in your marriage, you are wealthy beyond words. If you don't, you have two choices. You can decide that your marriage is the best you're going to get and try to be content. Alternatively, you can leave your marriage to play the lottery of finding that perfect partner, accepting that you are unlikely to win and may have to stay single for the rest of your life."

This is not a cheerful message to deliver, and it certainly wouldn't work in a Disney movie. Just as most Americans want to believe that they will get rich someday, most Americans want to think that they will have a marriage of far-above-average quality. People who don't understand the odds of getting what they want are unlikely to make wise choices. On the other hand, people who believe that success is beyond their reach may also make bad choices. Understanding that great marriages exist but are not the most likely outcome could help people considering marriage or divorce to make better informed choices.

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