

Five Things Happy Couples Do

By Ty Wenger 8/08

Lord knows this is not the sort of thing guys brag about. But my wife and I have a ridiculously happy marriage. Really, it's almost disgusting.

We paw each other in public. We goof around like a pair of simpletons. We basically act like giddy newlyweds in the middle of happy hour. Sometimes we'll do something so revolting, like sitting on the couch and drawing smiley faces on the bottoms of each other's feet, that we're forced to make hacking, gagging noises to maintain our dignity. Actually, this happened just last week.

See, I told you it was disgusting.

It hasn't always been this way. In fact, I'm not ashamed to admit that our current marital bliss is the result of almost a year of counseling, a desperate effort undertaken several years ago, when we appeared destined for doom. What we learned then is something all happy couples eventually discover: A good marriage is a bit like a pet boa constrictor: either you feed it every day or bad things happen. Daily habits are extremely helpful in forging solid marriages, says couples therapist Tina Tessina, author of [*How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free*](#). "If you're really interested in making your relationship work, little rituals are a great way to do it."

Want examples? Look no further than Tessina and her husband, Richard, who have developed an array of daily relationship builders during their 19 years of marriage: Every morning, they repeat their wedding vows to each other; they hold regular state-of-the-union meetings; and (my personal favorite) Tina routinely leaves Post-it Notes for Richard ("Hi, honey! Have a great day!") stuck to the underside of the toilet seat (think about it).

"Every marriage has what I call a relationship reservoir, or the stored-up emotional energy of the relationship," says Tessina. And although these daily habits are all very simple things, they help fill that reservoir. When there's a lot of positive energy there, you give each other a little pat on the butt or say, "I'm so glad I'm sharing my life with you," and you're storing it up. Then when the relationship is under stress, you'll have the energy you need to get through.

We asked happy couples across the United States to tell us about marriage-strengthening solutions they've developed. Try your hand at incorporating a few into your daily life and maybe you can be as ridiculously, embarrassingly, revoltingly happily married as I am.

Daily Habit #1: Talk to Each Other

Want to know the one thing that's most important to a successful marriage? That's easy. Walk up to your husband and surprise him with this one-question relationship quiz:

You: "Honey, what do you think is the one thing most important to a successful marriage?"

Him: "Umm, uh did you say something?"

And, well, there you have it.

Happily married couples typically say their relationships work better when they can sit down and gab one-on-one, like thinking, feeling adults. But who's got time for that? Actually, anybody who sleeps at night, if you follow the lead of Julie and Thom and their nightly visits to their "igloo."

"It all started one winter night years ago, when Julie had had a really bad day," says Thom, 33, a marketing director in Columbus, Ohio. "We were huddled under the covers of our bed, and Julie was describing how all the people who made her day miserable were 'bad polar bears' and how she didn't want any of the bad polar bears coming into the bedroom and how the bed was our refuge from them. You realize how embarrassing it is to admit this, right? Anyway, that's when we started calling the bed the igloo."

"The igloo is a place to retreat to," says Julie, 31. "It's our little sanctuary; only nice things happen in the igloo."

Eventually Julie and Thom began holding a powwow in the igloo at the end of every day, making a nightly excursion that Julie says has become a vital part of their five-year marriage.

"It's funny, because I always thought that when you lived with somebody, you'd automatically know everything that was going on," she says. "But we find that if we don't take that time to connect with each other, it's really easy for life to get in the way. The igloo offers one of the few times in the day where there's not a whole heck of a lot else going on, so you're able to focus on each other in a deeper way."

Of course, you don't need to christen major pieces of furniture with cute nicknames to improve the communication in your marriage. You simply have to set aside a few minutes every day to remind each other of why you got married in the first place. And there are as many ways to do that as there are marriages in America.

Lori and Joe, who are happily married in Philadelphia, have a nightly ritual they call crook time. That's when Lori cuddles up in the "crook" of Joe's shoulder and they talk. "The name's a little sappy," Lori admits, "but it's always a nice way for us to catch up."

Every night, Angie and Bob walk their pet Chihuahua, Chachi, through the streets of Brookline, Massachusetts. In addition to keeping Chachi from picking dogfights he could never win ("He has a bit of a Napoleon complex," Bob says), they use the time to strengthen their 11-year marriage.

It may be going a bit far to emulate Tim and Jill, a Connecticut couple who somewhat sheepishly admit that they check in with each other from work "six, maybe seven times a day," Tim says, "sometimes a dozen times when we're really being crazy." (Jill says, slightly more defiantly,

"He's just my best friend, and our marriage is a great partnership, and there's no one I'd rather talk to.")

Then again, if you've been married 10 years and still want to talk to each other 10 times a day, you must be doing something right.

Daily Habit #2: Flirt

Back when you were 14 years old, you probably figured that once you got married, you'd have sex just about every day. (Well, maybe teenage girls don't think that way. But let me tell you, 14-year-old boys sure do.) And why not? Sex is free. It's fun. And it doesn't require the purchase of any equipment, besides the occasional bottle of vegetable oil and about 20 feet of nylon rope.

But as they get older, most couples realize that having sex every night isn't possible, let alone a worthy goal. Indeed, a 1994 University of Chicago survey of Americans' sexual habits found that only about a third of adults have sex more than once a week. Granted, that number might have been higher if all the couples having sex more frequently had stopped to take the surveyor's phone call, but clearly, sex for most married couples is far from a daily reality.

That doesn't mean, though, that you can't at least talk sexy every day, and that's the approach that Ed and Stephanie have taken in the more than six years they've been together.

"It's funny," says Ed, a 33-year-old San Francisco cab driver, "because we know plenty of married couples who fight, a lot, about how often they have sex. The wife's upset because all he ever wants to do is have sex; the husband's upset because he doesn't think they have sex enough. But this has never really been a problem with us, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that we're always talking sexy to each other."

"Absolutely," says Stephanie, a 32-year-old massage therapist. "We're always complimenting each other, tossing out fantasies, telling each other we're hot. He gets to feel like he can have sexual feelings, and I feel like I don't have to have sex all the time to appear attractive."

"Let's put it this way: The way I see it, sex is like chocolate cake. After five days of eating chocolate cake, even chocolate cake doesn't taste that great."

"Right," Ed says, "but after five days of talking about chocolate cake?"

"That cake tastes damn good."

Daily Habit #3: Get Stupid Together

Eavesdrop on a conversation between Bob and Angie concerning their favorite shared pastime.

"We are so disgusting. This is so pathetic. It's like a sickness."

"But it makes us happy!"

"It's so stupid it makes us laugh."

"We're yelling at people. High-fiving each other."

"Look, we get a kick out of it because it's so ridiculous. It's our guilty pleasure."

Forgive them if they seem somewhat shy, but they're merely ashamed to admit that the daily ritual that brings such joy to their 12-year marriage is none other than reality TV. That's right. They lived and died with *Survivor*. They've adopted *Big Brother*. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? They do.

"Honestly, I think we just need to be dumb for a while," says Bob, 37, a shoe designer for Reebok in Boston. "We're both very into our careers. And when you're at work, with any job there's going to be a certain amount of professional stress. You like to come home sometimes and, for that lousy hour or whatever, kick back and relax."

Or as Angie, 36, a marketing executive, says, "Life is serious enough, isn't it? Sometimes you need to do something stupid. And if you can't be stupid with your husband, who can you be stupid with?"

Daily Habit #4: Declare Your Independence

So hold on, then: Is domestic joy found in partners smothering each other in obsessive daily rituals ("Honey, don't forget, at 7:15 we have our nightly cuddle, followed by the affirmation of our vows, our 7:35 spontaneous flirtation, and then, of course, a new episode of *Deal Or No Deal* at eight")?

Hardly. In fact, Tessina says that sleepwalking through a series of hollow routines (although probably an apt description of your day job) is worse for your marriage than having no routines at all. The solution, she says, is to also make a daily habit of getting away from each other.

"You know that old saying, 'How can I miss you if you don't go away?'" Tessina asks. "Doing things separately gives you a chance to fill in the blanks that your partner can't fill in for you, for example, one of you likes classical music, the other one likes sports. Plus, taking a break from each other gives you more things to talk about, because when you're joined at the hip, what's to talk about? You've already seen it all."

The point, naturally, is not to make space for each other in that I-can't-wait-to-get-away-from-you sort of way but to pursue your own hobbies and interests. It's a distinction that Joe tried hard to make to Lori during their delicate pre-engagement negotiations four years ago.

"As a woman, you get this message that when you get married, you spend every single waking second with your husband and you're so unbelievably happy," says Lori, 34. "And my parents

actually do spend every single waking second together, and oddly enough, they are happy. So that's how I grew up thinking you were supposed to be. But when I told him this, Joe was like, 'I don't-think-so.'"

"Because I watched my parents," says Joe, 29, whose parents divorced when he was 22, "and yeah, they spent every moment together, but they spent every moment together at each other's throats."

"So Joe had to convince me that having our own lives was a good idea," Lori explains. "I'm thankful he did."

These days Lori and Joe are practically poster children for the power of independence. Joe, who works for a nonprofit agency, spends his nights taking painting classes, building youth centers, and recording his guitar sessions. Lori, a college professor, spends hers directing community-theater musicals and indulging in trashy movies on cable television, a passion that Joe (go figure) doesn't seem to share.

"It all brings a freshness to our marriage because we both continue to grow as people," Joe says.

"Plus," says Lori, "getting out of the house and out of each other's hair keeps us from going crazy."

And — we asked the experts, so we know — going crazy is definitely not one of the secrets of a happy marriage.

Daily Habit #5: Share a Spiritual Moment

In another University of Chicago survey, this one of married couples, 75 percent of the Americans who pray with their spouses reported that their marriages are "very happy" (compared to 57 percent of those who don't). Those who pray together are also more likely to say they respect each other, discuss their marriage together, and — stop the presses — rate their spouses as skilled lovers.

Not to say that prayer is a cure for all that ails you (were that the case, my beloved Oakland Raiders would have won the Super Bowl years ago). But whether they're talking about a simple grace at dinnertime or some soul-searching meditation, couples routinely say that a shared spiritual life helps keep them close. And as Doug and Beth say, even couples who are on different sides of the theological fence can benefit from praying together daily.

"We have been married for seven years, but praying together is something we didn't start doing until about a year ago," says Doug, a 32-year-old Salt Lake City biochemist. "In the past, whenever we faced big decisions, we'd have discussion after discussion about them, but we'd never really come to a resolution."

After two 1,000-mile moves, the birth of three children, and two job changes, all in the past four years, those difficult decisions had begun to take a toll. So when Beth asked Doug, a

nonreligious and self-proclaimed man of science, to try praying with her, he figured they had nothing to lose.

"I soon found that praying together brings out a real sense of selflessness and humility," Doug says. "When you're praying for each other, not yourself, you're focused together and speaking from the heart on a whole different level. I would never have predicted this for us, but it really works."

"As bad as any problem may seem at that moment," agrees Beth, "prayer always helps us see beyond it. It doesn't have to be a long-drawn-out scripture reading, just a few minutes a day. When we pray, it brings another level of honesty to our conversations. I think it's the most intimate thing you can do with another person."

Now they pray together every night, once the "urchins" are in bed, which puts them in the company of the 32 percent of American married couples who say they pray together regularly. It also puts them in the company of Julie and Thom, when the other couple isn't holed up in their igloo, of course.

"It's pretty short and not at all scripted," says Julie about their giving thanks before each meal. "We just join hands and let it rip. Whether we're asking for forgiveness or giving thanks, saying it out loud holds a lot of power."

"Besides, regardless of religion or spiritual preference, I think that most marriages require a ton of faith," Julie sums up. "You've got to believe that somehow the two of you are going to make it through things. You've got to believe that you're being blessed with this person. And even if the power we feel just comes from the strength of our love, even if we don't believe that it's God who is helping us, I still think that it's good to acknowledge that there's a force between the two of us that's helping us out."