

New research sheds light on how happy couples argue

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Credit: UT Knoxville

In marriage, conflict is inevitable. Even the happiest couples argue. And research shows they tend to argue about the same topics as unhappy couples: children, money, in-laws, intimacy.

So, what distinguishes happy couples? According to "What are the Marital Problems of Happy Couples? A Multimethod, Two-Sample Investigation," a study published this August in *Family Process*, it is the way happy couples argue that may make a difference.

"Happy couples tend to take a solution-oriented approach to conflict, and this is clear even in the topics that they choose to discuss," said lead author Amy Rauer, associate professor of child and [family studies](#) and director of the Relationships and Development Lab in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences.

Rauer and three colleagues—Allen Sabey of Northwestern University, Christine Proulx of the University of Missouri, and Brenda Volling of the University of Michigan—observed two samples of heterosexual, mostly white, educated couples who

describe themselves as happily married. Fifty-seven of the couples were in their mid- to late 30s and had been married an average of nine years; 64 of the couples were in their early 70s and had been married an average of 42 years.

Couples in both samples similarly ranked their most and least serious issues. Intimacy, leisure, household, communication, and money were the most serious, as well as health for the older couples; couples in both samples ranked jealousy, religion, and family as the least serious.

When researchers observed couples discussing [marital problems](#), all couples focused on issues with clearer solutions, such as the distribution of household labor and how to spend leisure time.

"Rebalancing chores may not be easy, but it lends itself to more concrete solutions than other issues," Rauer said. "One spouse could do more of certain chores to balance the scales."

The couples rarely chose to argue about issues that are more difficult to resolve. And Rauer suggests that this strategic decision may be one of the keys to their marital success.

"Focusing on the perpetual, more-difficult-to-solve problems may undermine partners' confidence in the relationship," Rauer said.

Instead, to the extent it is possible, focusing first on more solvable problems may be an effective way to build up both partners' sense of security in the relationship.

"If couples feel that they can work together to resolve their issues, it may give them the confidence to move on to tackling the more difficult issues," Rauer said.

As to which issues may be more difficult to resolve, couples avoided discussing challenges regarding

their spouse's health and physical intimacy. These issues may be more difficult to address without challenging their partner's sense of competence or making the partner feel vulnerable or embarrassed, resulting in more conflict.

"Since these issues tend to be more difficult to resolve, they are more likely to lead to less marital happiness or the dissolution of the relationship, especially if couples have not banked up any previous successes solving other marital issues," Rauer said.

Researchers also found that couples who were married longer reported fewer serious issues and argued less overall. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that older partners' perceptions of spending less time with each other may lead them to prioritize their marriage and decide some issues are not worth the [argument](#).

In other words, couples may want to choose their battles wisely, according to Rauer.

"Being able to successfully differentiate between issues that need to be resolved versus those that can be laid aside for now may be one of the keys to a long-lasting, happy [relationship](#)."

More information: Amy Rauer et al, What are the Marital Problems of Happy Couples? A Multimethod, Two-Sample Investigation, *Family Process* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/famp.12483](https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12483)

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