

# An Arrangement of Marriages

*The seven basic types of marriages and what they're built on.*

Reprinted courtesy Psychology Today



Tolstoy wasn't even half right. Happy couples are not all alike. Nor is every unhappy family unhappy in its own way.

If David H. Olson, Ph.D., is correct, there are seven basic types of marriage. In three of them, where happiness abounds, couples held together by the smooth working of most or all factors intrinsic to relationships - personality compatibility, communication, conflict resolution, and sexuality. In the other four, the marriage hinges more on external elements, leisure activities, religious attitudes, financial management, children, family and friends, and distress predominates.

Unfortunately, Olson finds, most people today live in distressed marriages. But his studies of over 15,000 couples point the way to happier futures for many.

Head of family social science at the University of Minnesota, Olson evaluated marital partners - both as individuals and the consensus between them - along the nine dimensions that previous studies had shown to be areas of trouble and conflict. He also looked at their global assessment of satisfaction, and their cohesion and adaptability. When he compiled all the data, families naturally clustered into seven distinct profiles.

Type 1 - Devitalized marriage: 40 percent of couples. There is pervasive unhappiness with all relationship dimensions and considerable instability. Both partners have considered divorce. They are critical of each other's personality. Their marriage is strictly utilitarian. They tend to be younger, married a shorter time, and have a lower income than other couples. Many are minorities. More of them come from divorced homes, and more of them were previously divorced themselves. They stay together for lack of alternatives.

Type 2 - Financially focused: 11 percent of couples. These couples have conflict and are unhappy in their communication and the way conflicts are resolved. They are dissatisfied with the personal characteristics of their partner, and there may be bitter personal attacks. Their careers come before the relationship, and money or financial rewards hold them together. Their single relationship strength is financial management. A high number of husbands and wives in such utilitarian relationships have considered divorce.

Type 3 - Conflicted: 14 percent. They are dissatisfied in many facets of the relationship - personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, and sexuality - and they may avoid or fail to settle issues between them. Instead, they focus on and gain satisfaction from outside experiences such as leisure, the children, religious life. But a high percentage of both partners have considered divorce.

Type 4 - Traditional: 10 percent. They are moderately satisfied with many relationship elements, while their sexual relationship and the way they communicate are sources of distress. They are not as critical of each other's personality as Types 1, 2 and 3. Their strength lies in a satisfying religious life and good interaction with extended family and friends. The marriages are relatively stable. These couples tend to be older, married longer, white, and Protestant.

Type 5 - Balanced: 8 percent. They are moderately satisfied with most relationship areas, with real strengths in communication and problem-solving. The biggest problem is financial management. They have higher than average agreement on leisure, child-rearing, and sexuality. They place a high value on the nuclear family. Still, over a quarter have considered divorce.

Type 6 - Harmonious: 8 percent. They are highly satisfied with each other, the expression of affection, and their sexual life. But they are self-centered, viewing children as a burden and parenting as a source of distress. It may be that, when a problem develops in this family, it shows up in the child.

Type 7 - Vitalized: 9 percent. They are highly satisfied with almost every dimension of their relationship and get along well. They are personally integrated, have strong internal resources, and agree in most external areas. They develop difficulties but resolve them well. They are economically better off than most others, and tend to be older, married longer, white, Protestant. They tend to be in their first marriage and come from intact families.

There were a few surprises in the study. Even the best-adjusted couples are not immune to marital shakiness; nearly one in four wives in Type 7 marriages had at some point considered divorce. In fact, wives were generally less satisfied than husbands in all seven marriage types.