



the DATE NIGHT
Opportunity

*What Does Couple Time Tell Us About
the Potential Value of Date Nights?*

Brad Wilcox & Jeffrey Dew

SECOND EDITION

 **Wheatley
Institute**

BYU BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

the NATIONAL MARRIAGE
project



at the UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Only About Half of Couples Go on Frequent Date Nights

In the second edition of *The Date Night Opportunity*, we examined the links between one-on-one couple time and relationship quality with data from a new survey, “The State of Our Unions Survey,” of 2,000 married, heterosexual men and women aged 18-55 in the United States. In the survey conducted by YouGov for the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute in the Fall of 2022, respondents were asked, “How often do you do the following: Go on date nights where you have a chance to talk, catch up, and do something fun with your spouse?”

- 52% of husbands and wives reported they “never” go out on date nights with their spouses or only went on date nights “a few times a year.”
- 48% had date nights “one or twice a month” or more frequently than that.

Husbands and Wives who Have Regular Dates More Likely to Be Happily Married

Husbands and wives who have frequent date nights were significantly more likely to report being “very happy” in their marriages, compared to those who did not.

- 83% of wives and 84% of husbands who had regular date nights were very happy in their marriages, compared to 68% of wives and 70% of husbands who did not have regular date nights.

Date Nights Linked to More Stable Marriages

In the 2022 State of Our Unions Survey, spouses who had frequent date nights were significantly more likely to report that divorce was “not at all likely” in their marriage compared to those who do not go on dates or only do so infrequently.

- Wives and husbands in the frequent date nights group were about 14 percentage points more likely to report that divorce “was not at all likely” in the future.

Husbands and Wives who Have Regular Dates More Sexually Satisfied

Husbands and wives who had regular date nights reported better communication, more commitment, and greater sexual satisfaction. For example:

- 68% of wives and 67% of husbands who had regular date nights were very happy with their sexual relationship, compared to 47% of wives and 47% of husbands who did not have regular date nights.

DATE NIGHT ON THE RISE

In recent years, a range of civic, corporate, and religious organizations have launched date-night initiatives in towns and cities across the nation. From the Date Night Challenge in Palm Beach to the Date Night Comedy Tour to the Chattanooga Date Night, these grassroots efforts represent new efforts to improve the quality and stability of marriages and other romantic relationships in communities across the nation.

Given the expressive focus of today's "soulmate" marriages, from which couples increasingly expect high levels of intimacy, communication, and personal fulfillment,¹ date nights may be particularly valuable to our contemporary cultural moment. Accordingly, the growing grassroots movement on behalf of date nights may be especially meaningful to today's couples who are often intent on cultivating and maintaining an intense emotional or romantic connection with one another.

In the face of this new movement, the second edition of *The Date Night Opportunity* report from the National Marriage Project and the Wheatley Institute seeks to answer two fundamental questions about the potential value of date nights for couples as these efforts emerge across the United States:

- 1 How might date nights improve the quality of relationships for couples?
- 2 Is one-on-one couple time associated with higher-quality relationships and lower divorce risks among couples?

To answer these questions, we review the social science literature on relationships and analyze data from the State of Our Unions Survey (SOUS) - a nationally representative survey of 2,000 married heterosexual men and women aged 18-55, conducted in the Fall of 2022 by YouGov for the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute.

DATE NIGHTS AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

In today's world, date nights are likely to strengthen relationships in a number of ways. The social science literature suggests at least five ways in which date nights may foster stronger marriages and relationships:

- 1 **Communication.** One of the crucial ingredients to a successful relationship is an open channel of communication.² By removing distractions such as children and employment responsibilities, date nights may afford couples the opportunity to discuss things that are important to them—from their shared dreams for the future to the state of their family finances. In the former case, a date represents time to reinforce mutual pursuits and aspirations; in the latter case, a date represents a type of private couple meeting where a concern or issue may be focused on constructively and proactively.

As spouses and partners communicate more, they may deepen their understanding of one another and the relationship.³ This is important because individuals continue to change, and as they and their relationships develop, they experience new challenges and problems over time. Date nights may help partners and spouses to "stay current" with each other's lives and offer one another support for meeting these challenges. Communication also can be an important vehicle for approaching mutual difficulties productively and for fostering intimacy between partners. Thus, date nights should foster much-needed communication, mutual understanding, and a sense of communion between spouses and partners.

¹Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *The State of Our Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, 2001).

²Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, *Between Husbands and Wives: Communication in Marriage* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1988).

³John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000).

2 Novelty. Most couples experience a decline in relationship quality after a few years, partly because they become habituated to one another and are more likely to take one another, and their relationship, for granted.⁴ The initial excitement associated with getting to know a person, growing in intimacy, and trying new things as a couple can disappear as the two people settle into a routine.

By contrast, a growing body of research suggests that couples who engage in novel activities that are fun, active, or otherwise arousing—from hiking to dancing to travel to card games—enjoy higher levels of relationship quality.⁵ Thus, date nights should foster this higher quality, especially insofar as couples use them to engage in exciting, active, or unusual activities. In other words, couples may be particularly likely to benefit from a regular date night if they use it as an opportunity to do more than that old standby: dinner and a movie. Is it also important that they choose activities that represent a balance of each partner's interests, rather than tending to do things (novel or not) that are desired more by the same partner each time.⁶

3 Eros. Most contemporary relationships begin with an element of eros—that romantic love that is linked to passion, excitement, and an overwhelming sense of attraction to one's beloved. But with time, the emotional and physical manifestations of erotic love tend to decline in most couples.⁷

Insofar as date nights allow couples to focus on their relationship, to share feelings, to engage in romantic activities with one another, and to try new things, date nights may strengthen or rekindle that romantic spark that can be helpful in sustaining the fires of love over the long haul. All of these things can foster higher levels of sexual satisfaction in their marriage or relationship.

4 Commitment. Husbands and wives, as well as other romantic partners, are more likely to enjoy stable, high-quality relationships when they experience a strong sense of commitment to one another and to their relationship.⁸ Specifically, partners who put one another first, who steer clear of other romantic opportunities, and who cultivate a strong sense of “we-ness” or togetherness are markedly happier than are less-committed couples.

Date nights may solidify an expectation of commitment among couples by fostering a sense of togetherness, by allowing partners to signal to one another—as well as friends and family—that they take their relationship seriously, and by furnishing them with opportunities to spend time with one another, to communicate, and to enjoy fun activities together.

5 De-stress. Stress is one of the biggest threats to a strong marriage or relationship. Stress related to work, finances, parenthood, or illness can prove corrosive to a relationship, insofar as it causes one or both partners to become irritable, withdrawn, violent, or otherwise difficult to live with.⁹

Date nights may be helpful for relieving stress on couples, as date nights allow them to enjoy time with one another apart from the pressing concerns of their ordinary life. (Indeed, for this reason, couples may be better served by date nights when they do not dwell on difficult topics—such as family finances—during these times together.¹⁰)

⁴ For a good discussion of this issue, see Arthur Aron et al., “Couples’ Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship Quality,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000): 273–284.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Duane W. Crawford et al., “Compatibility, Leisure, and Satisfaction in Marital Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002): 433–449.

⁷ Helen Fisher, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

⁸ W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, *When Baby Makes Three: How Parenthood Makes Life Meaningful and How Marriage Makes Parenthood Bearable* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2011); Scott M. Stanley, Galena K. Rhoades, and Sarah W. Whitton, “Commitment: Functions, Formation, and the Securing of Romantic Attachment,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 2 (2010): 243–257.

⁹ See, for instance, Rand Conger et al., “Linking Economic Hardship to Marital Quality and Instability,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52 (1990): 643–656.

¹⁰ Marital experts often recommend, in fact, that for most dates or time set aside specifically to improve the fun and positive connection between partners, conflicts and problems should be considered off-limit topics. See, for example, Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and S. L. Blumberg, *Fighting For Your Marriage* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010). Such authors recommend that couples also be intentional about setting aside time to deal with issues constructively. Some couples may be able to do this in a date-night format, but others may do well to refrain from all discussion of issues of concern during times planned specifically to join positively together.

Moreover, date nights may allow spouses and romantic partners to extend emotional support to one another in times of trial. For all these reasons, date nights may help couples by providing them with a buffer or an escape from the stresses that confront them or time to engage in collaborative coping that can reduce those stresses.

Date nights may be especially valuable in an era when married mothers and fathers devote so much time and attention to their children and are less likely to be connected to religious and secular communities that ground and guide their marriages. Because so many parents today invest substantial emotional energy and time in their children, sometimes as an expression of “helicopter parenting,”¹¹ they do not always make the effort to keep cultivating the romantic fires of their own marriage. Moreover, many couples are living more isolated lives, not benefiting from the marriage enrichment that can come from being connected to religious and other civic institutions that lend social and normative support to their relationships.¹² For both reasons, engaging in a regular date night may be particularly valuable for contemporary married men and women. Date nights both allow couples to keep the romantic embers of their relationship burning and get out into their local communities.

COUPLE TIME AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

In this report we examine the links between one-on-one couple time and relationship quality using the 2022 State of Our Unions Survey (SOUS). The SOUS survey asked respondents, “How often do you do the following: Go on date nights where you have a chance to talk, catch up, and do something fun with your spouse?” Participants could answer from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Daily*). About half (52%) of participants responded that they “never” went on date nights with their spouses or went on date nights “a few times a year.” The other 48% of participants suggested that they had date nights “one or twice a month” or more often. We used this halfway point to group participants into an “infrequent date nights” group and a “frequent date nights” group.

In the SOUS data set, more frequent date nights were associated with higher relationship quality. For example, **Figure 1** shows that husbands and wives who engaged in frequent date nights were 14 – 15 percentage points more likely to report being “very happy”¹³ in their marriages, compared to those who enjoyed infrequent date nights. (Note: All the analyses in this report control for factors such as age, education, ethnicity, race, and total household income.)

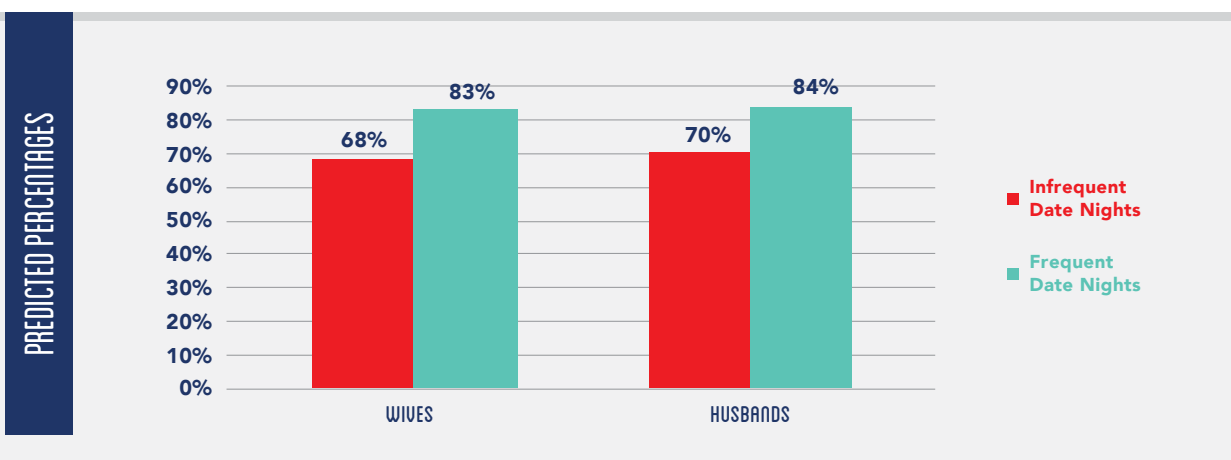


Figure 1. Predicted Percentages¹⁴ of Being Very Happy in Marriage, Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Date Night Frequency.

Source: 2022 State of Our Unions Survey – IFS/Wheatley.

¹¹ Garey Ramey and Valerie A. Ramey, *The Rug Rat Race* (Washington, DC: Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2010).

¹² Paul Amato, Alan Booth, David R. Johnson, and Stacy J. Rogers, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America Is Changing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹³ In the Survey of Marital Generosity, reporting being “very happy” in marriage is defined as reporting the highest level of happiness (5 on a scale from 1 to 5) on a question that asked participants how happy they were with their marriage “overall.” This is our SMG measure of relationship quality for this report.

¹⁴ We assume that the individual for whom these probabilities are predicted is 35 years old, attended some college but has no degree, is White non-Hispanic, and has a total household income of \$70,000 to \$79,999. All other predicted probabilities in this report share the same assumptions regarding the control variables. Making these assumptions does not change the percentage point differences between the “frequent” and “infrequent” dating groups.

So far, this figure tells us that regularly occurring date nights and marital happiness go together, but we need more information about whether one influences the other. We acknowledge that the SOTU 2022 data lack multiple time points tracking the same couples. The two phenomena are likely mutually enforcing. Furthermore, it is intuitively true that greater satisfaction with one's partner should also lead to more time spent in positive, shared activities like date nights. Nevertheless, it would be likewise intuitively plausible to assume that spouses who intentionally and regularly set aside time for date nights would benefit with increases in connection and happiness.

DATE NIGHTS AND PERCEIVED MARITAL STABILITY

Date nights also seem to foster more stable marriages. In the 2022 State of Our Unions Survey, spouses who had regular date nights were significantly more likely to report that divorce was “not at all likely.” For example, **Figure 2** shows that wives in the frequent date nights group were 13 percentage points more likely to report that divorce “was not at all likely” in the future. For husbands, the comparable result was 14 percentage points.¹⁵

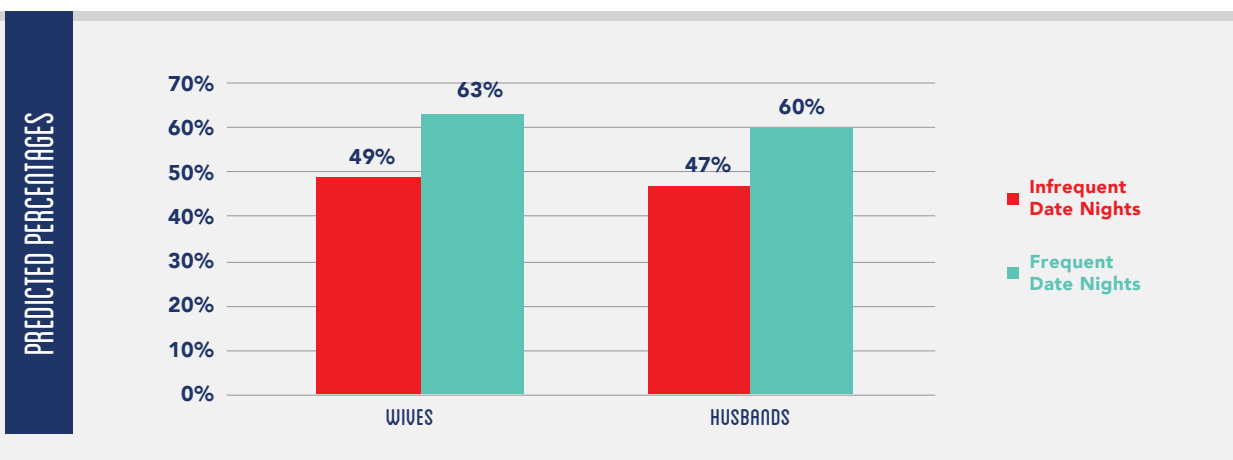


Figure 2. Predicted Percentages of Reporting Divorce is “Not at all Likely” Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Date Night Frequency.

Source: State of Our Unions Survey 2022 - IFS/Wheatley.

COMMUNICATION, SEXUAL SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT

Date nights appear to foster higher-quality and more stable marriages, judging by the results of this report. But how, precisely, does couple time do this? What are the mechanisms?

To answer these questions, we explored the ways in which date nights were linked to higher reports of better communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment, and what role these factors might play in the association between date nights and higher-quality marriages.

Our analyses indicate that date nights were indeed associated with higher reports of satisfaction with communication (**Figure 3**), sexual satisfaction (**Figure 4**), and commitment (**Figure 5**) for both husbands and wives. For instance, as **Figure 3** indicates, wives and husbands in the regular date night group were 21 percentage points more likely to enjoy above-average levels of sexual satisfaction, compared to spouses in the infrequent date night group.

¹⁵ In the SOUS 2022, above-average proneness to divorce or separation is defined as scoring from 4 to 10 on a question that asked participants to estimate their chances of divorcing (from 0 [very low] to 10 [very high]).

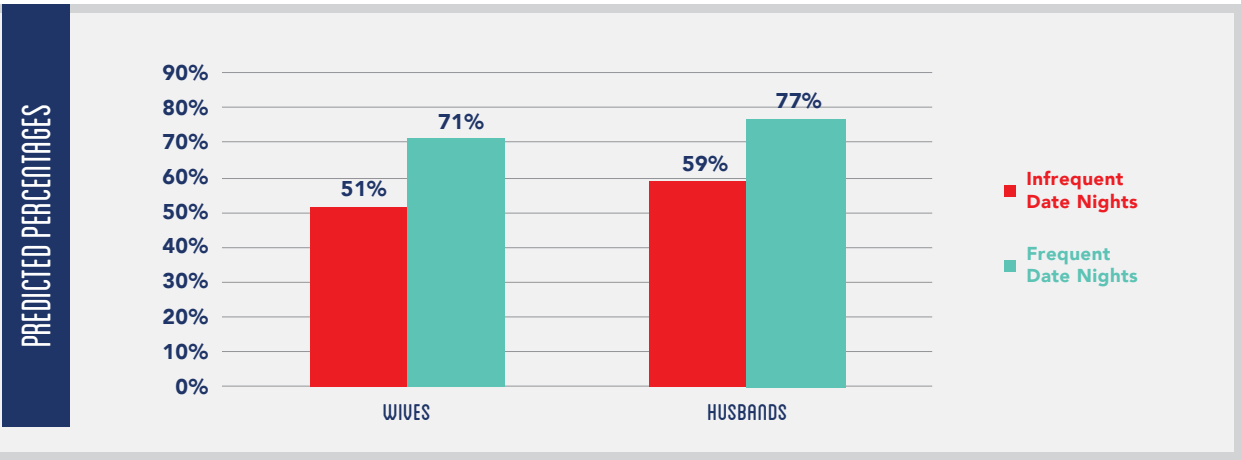


Figure 3. Predicted Percentages of Reporting Very Happy With Communication in Marriage Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Date Night Frequency.

Source: State of Our Unions 2022 Survey - IFS/Wheatley.

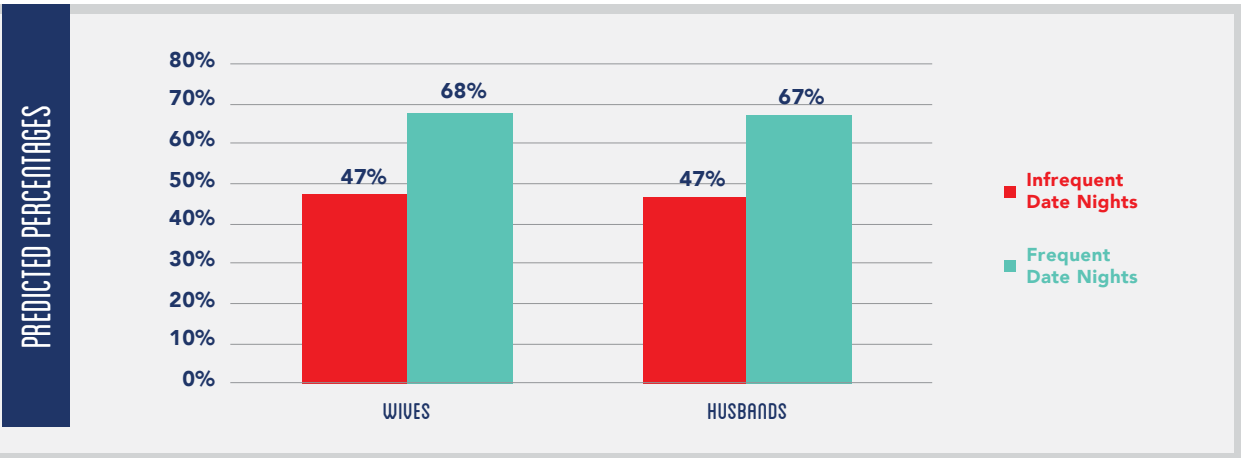


Figure 4. Predicted Percentages of Being Highly Satisfied With Sex in Marriage Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

Source: State of Our Unions 2022 Survey - IFS/Wheatley.

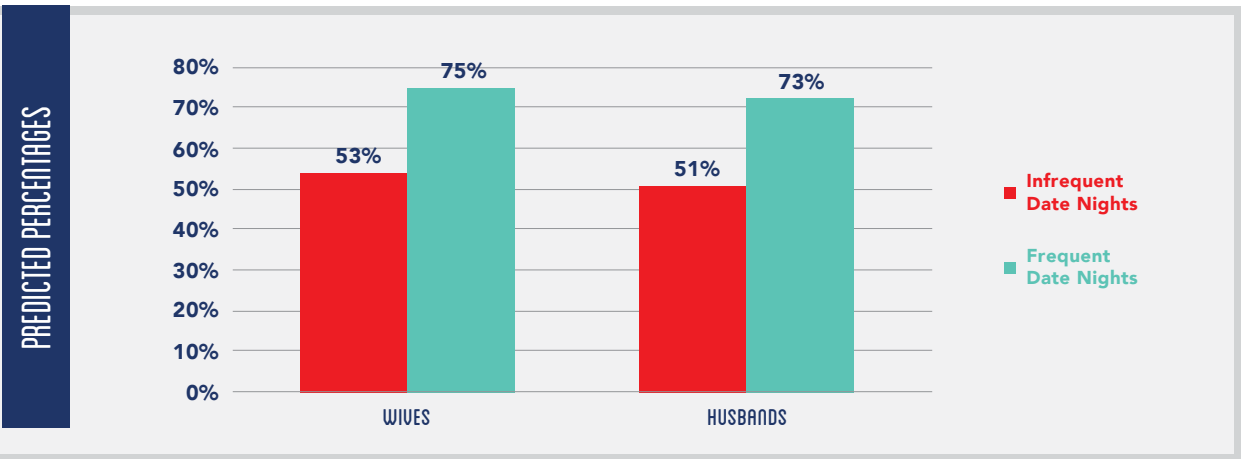
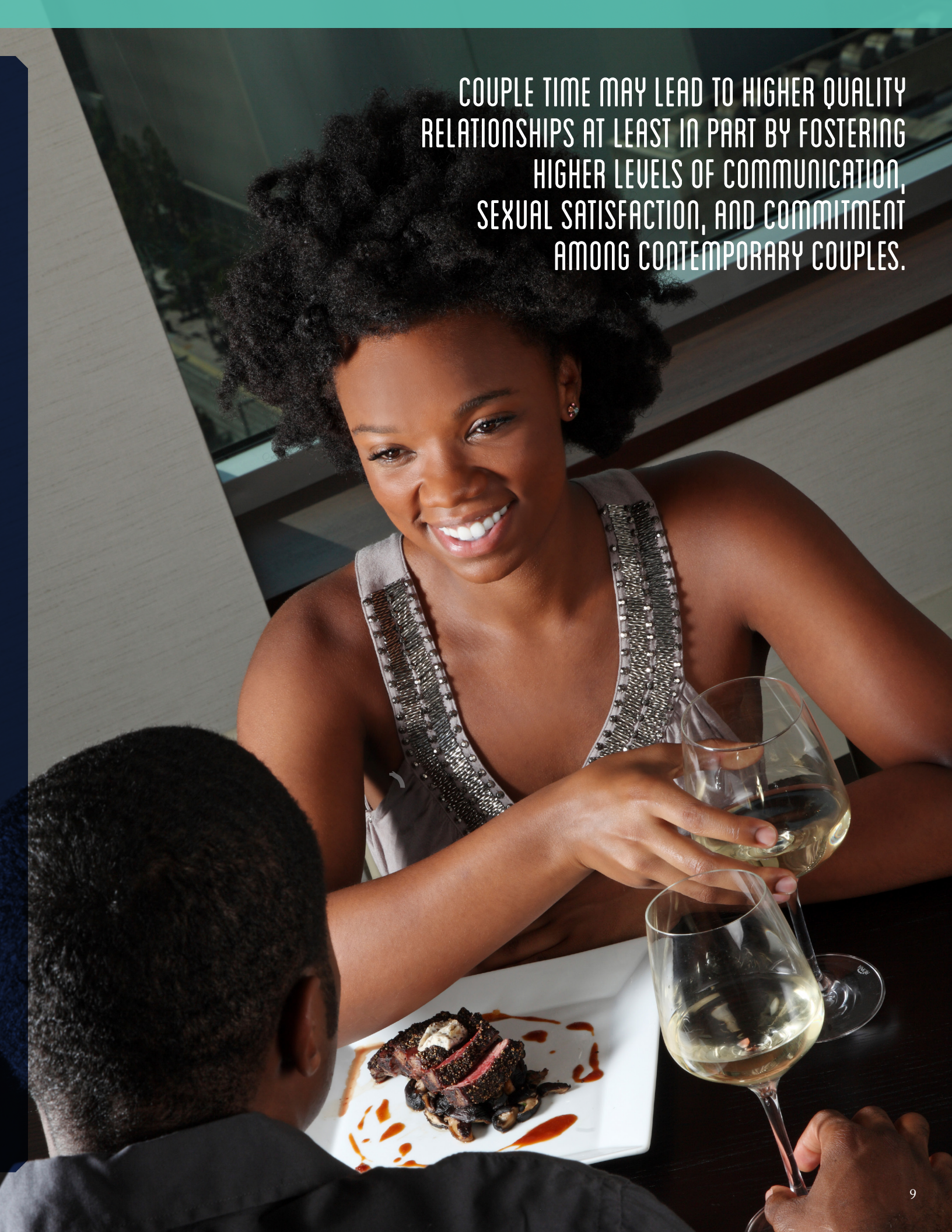


Figure 5. Predicted Probabilities of Being Highly Committed to Their Relationship Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

Source: State of Our Unions 2022 Survey - IFS/Wheatley.

COUPLE TIME MAY LEAD TO HIGHER QUALITY
RELATIONSHIPS AT LEAST IN PART BY FOSTERING
HIGHER LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION,
SEXUAL SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT
AMONG CONTEMPORARY COUPLES.



To test whether these three variables explained how couple time impacted marital satisfaction, we added communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment to the statistical models of marital happiness and perceived stability. When they were in the model, reports of couple time were no longer associated with wives' or husbands' marital happiness. The same thing occurred in the perceived marital stability model. Moreover, communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment were all strongly associated with higher levels of wives' and husbands' marital happiness. Consequently, these results suggest that couple time may lead to higher quality relationships at least in part by fostering higher levels of communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment among contemporary couples.

Of course, the arrow of causality may point in the opposite direction. That is, given that the SOUS 2022 data were obtained at a single point in time, it is also possible that married couples who are more committed, more sexually satisfied, and more committed to one another are more likely to frequently schedule date nights. We suspect marital happiness and date nights mutually reinforce one another to the benefit of the relationship.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This report indicates that date-night initiatives may be helpful for couples. Of course, the 2022 State of our Unions Survey can only provide a snapshot of married individuals' lives at one point in time. Thus, we cannot make any firm causal connection between date nights and better relationship quality. Accordingly, future research should directly test the effect of date nights by following couples over time and comparing those who have frequent date nights with those who do not. If such a longitudinal study finds that date nights are specifically linked to higher levels of relationship quality and lower levels of divorce, we will then have stronger evidence that date nights play a causal role in strengthening marriages and relationships.

Studies asking about date nights would also benefit from asking about the quality of those dates, particularly for couples in distress. The effect of date nights may vary by the level of distress that couples are in, and couples in distress may only benefit from date nights after they have worked with a counselor or other professional to address any underlying problems in their relationship.

Future research should also explore the role that relationship education can play in date nights. Date nights may be most beneficial to couples if they focus on fun activities and steer clear of marital challenges or other stressful topics for couples. If this is the case, couples may wish to focus on fun or engaging activities during their date nights.

Alternatively, couples may benefit from addressing important issues or exploring some relationship education when they are out for a date night. If this is the case, civic and religious groups sponsoring date-night initiatives may wish to incorporate relationship education into their efforts. Future research will have to determine whether relationship education and the discussion of serious issues helps or hinders the value potential of date nights for today's couples.

The studies that we have described in this paper represent first steps to understanding the connections between date nights/couple time and marital quality. Even stronger evidence will come from intervention studies. Couples who have frequent date nights are different from couples who do not (the selection factor). Therefore, the way to determine whether date nights actually increase marital quality is to conduct a randomized clinical trial in which some couples are assigned to a program that attempts to increase date nights, other couples are not assigned to this program, and still others are assigned to a program that attempts to increase other positive aspects of couple relationships but does not encourage (or discourage) date nights.

CONCLUSION

We know that while the divorce rate in the United States is no longer rising, yet 40 to 50 percent of married couples will dissolve their relationships, with an even higher proportion of cohabiting couples doing the same. In order to strengthen families, for the sake of both adults and their offspring, couples need help to make their relationships work.

The second edition of *The Date Night Opportunity* finds that couples who devote time specifically to dating one another at least once or twice a month are markedly more likely to report happier and more stable relationships, compared to couples who do not go on dates as often. Because date nights seem to be valuable for couples, grassroots efforts to promote them around the nation may also foster higher-quality relationships and lower divorce rates in their sponsoring communities.

Finally, because relationships are generally more fragile in working-class and poor communities and because working-class and poor couples are less likely to be integrated into the civic and religious fabric of their communities,¹⁶ efforts to promote date nights should provide couples with free or inexpensive options to rekindle the romance in their lives. From drive-in date nights at Sonic to free date night events in communities across the United States, date-night initiatives ought to target Americans of limited means. After all, the date-night opportunity should extend to Americans of all economic statuses.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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¹⁶ W. Bradford Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010).