

Report: Flourishing Romances are More the Result of Proactive Behaviors Than Soulmate Spark

Flourishing couples score three times higher on proactive loving behaviors and personal virtues than do less-connected couples

PROVO, Utah, February 8, 2024 – [Sixty percent of Americans](#) believe in the idea that true love is found in a one-and-only soulmate relationship, confirming that the quest to find one’s soulmate continues to play a significant role in our modern dating culture. However, a new report finds that enduring connection in romantic relationships results more from the personal virtues and intentional efforts of the partners, than it does from spontaneous love and emotional spark.

The report, “The Soulmate Trap: Why Embracing Agency-Based Love is the Surest Path to Creating a Flourishing Marriage,” from the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University, presents extended analysis from a recent study involving 615 couples (1,230 individuals) across the United States and Canada. The report challenges the notion that loving and lasting relationships are founded on the idea of a soulmate love. Instead, the study finds that couples who are flourishing are significantly more likely than other couples to engage in proactive behaviors such as showing compassion to each other, spending meaningful time together, regularly engaging in acts of kindness, and participating in regular maintenance behaviors to improve their relationship. In fact, flourishing couples report scores that are typically three-times higher than other couples on these intentional aspects of relationships.

“While I believe that the root desire to be connected to the One in a special and enduring marriage is a healthy aspiration, I am concerned about the risks soulmate thinking poses for healthy relationships, especially among young adults, said Jason Carroll, the Director of the Family Initiative at the Wheatley Institute and lead author of the report. “The problem with the soulmate model of marriage is that it provides a deeply flawed conception of how to achieve this aspiration. This is because soulmate beliefs tend to place relationship success outside of one’s agency or choices.”

The report examined how personal virtues and proactive behaviors are closely associated with the quality of relationships using data from the recently published [study](#) “Satisfaction or Connectivity?: Implications from the Strong Relationality Model of Flourishing Couple Relationships” published in the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. The study compared high-connection and low-connection couples to see what makes high-connection couples different than other couples. Couples were compared on relationship factors including: (1) *personal virtues* including, commitment, other-centeredness and compassion, (2) *responsible actions* such as acts of kindness, quality time together, and relationship maintenance, and (3) *relationship outcomes* including satisfaction and meaning in life.

Among the report's findings:

- Spouses in high-connection marriages have a nearly three times higher average percentile score on commitment to their relationship than do spouses in low-connection marriages (72% vs. 26%).
- The average percentile score on personal virtues, such as other-centeredness and compassion, is nearly three times higher for spouses in highly connected marriages compared to those in low-connection marriages (other-centeredness = 60% vs. 21% and compassion = 56% vs. 18%).
- High-connection marriages have more than three times high scores on proactive behaviors than low connection couples, specifically in spending meaning time together (71% vs. 19%), doing acts of kindness for each other (72% vs. 18%), and forgiving offenses in their marriage (70% vs. 21%).
- Spouses in high-connection marriages score nearly twice as high as spouses in low-connection marriages on relationship maintenance behaviors, such as addressing problems and finding ways to strengthen their relationship together (53% vs. 30%).
- Spouses in high-connection marriages score more than twice as high as spouses in low-connection marriages on their ratings of their current levels of life satisfaction (63% vs. 27%) and the amount of meaning and purpose they have in their lives (60% vs. 30%).

“At their core, soulmate beliefs provide a backwards depiction of the proper sequence of healthy relationship development. Such beliefs suggest that someone exists as your One-and-Only before you have even met. However, the findings of our study illustrate that oneness in marriage is primarily made, not found,” said Adam Galovan, a professor at the University of Alberta and a co-author of the report.

In other words, rather than finding your soulmate, Galovan suggests finding someone that you like and get along with and seeing how the relationship develops rather than worrying about finding “the One.” Then once both partners have committed to the relationship, he says, “They should put effort into building a ‘soulmate’ relationship with the person they’ve committed to.”

“Agency-based understandings of love are particularly important as couples transition out of the early phases of initiation and attraction in their relationship and need to create enduring patterns of partnership and romantic companionship,” added David Schramm, an associate professor at Utah State University and co-author of the report. “Our research shows that lasting marriages tend to be true partnerships in which spouses are devoted to creating a shared life together that is deeper than the emotional payoff of the marriage.”

The authors of the report recommend that single adults shift their thinking from finding a “One-and-Only” relationship to creating what they call an “Only-One” marriage. The report details five solutions for setting aside soulmate thinking: (1) avoiding a consumer approach to relationships, (2) fostering realistic expectations about relationships, (3) developing a mature understanding of love, (4) following healthy dating trajectories, and (5) maintaining optimism while resolving break-ups.

Evidence shows that humans have a unique capacity for deep attachment in long-term relationships such as marriage. The report's authors conclude that cultural myths surrounding the search for “the One” may be undermining the quality and longevity of these relationships while a focus on personal virtues and purposeful behaviors has been found to help couples achieve higher rates of relational connectivity and flourishing in marriage.

You can read the full report at:

<https://wheatley.byu.edu/The-Soulmate-Trap>

About the Wheatley Institute

The Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion and constitutional government.