THE SOULMATE TRAP

Why Embracing Agency-Based Love is the Surest Path to Creating a Flourishing Marriage

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Executive Summary

Recent surveys show that many Americans continue to believe in the idea that they have a "One-and-Only" soulmate.

A recent YouGov poll of nearly 15,000 adults in the United States found that 60% of respondents believe in the idea that they have a one-and-only soulmate waiting for them. This confirms that the quest to find one's soulmate plays a significant role in our modern dating culture. Leading relationship experts, however, have found that this destiny-based "**soulmate model of marriage**" complicates healthy relationship formation and stunts the development of mature, lifelong love.

Soulmate thinking ultimately makes the quest to "find the One" a more elusive goal, not an easier one.

The strong desire to be connected to "the One" in a special and enduring marriage is a powerful and positive aspiration. Humans have a unique capacity for deep attachment in long-term relationships, and each person can come to regard another person as uniquely special in their lives. The soulmate model of marriage, however, provides a flawed notion of how to achieve this aspiration. Soulmate beliefs can become fatalistic in nature and place relationship success outside of individual choices, behaviors, and virtues. This is particularly problematic as couples transition out of the early phases of initiation and attraction in their relationship (e.g., "falling in love"). If trapped in soulmate thinking where fate decides destiny, couples may fail to develop behaviors for enduring partnership and romantic companionship.

Soulmate thinking diverts attention away from a fundamental truth of loving and lasting marriage: that oneness is made, not found.

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, oneness in marriage is made, not found. Someone becomes your One because of your commitment, not before. This type of "**Only-One Marriage**" happens over time as two people devotedly choose each other, prioritize their relationship, and live with complete fidelity to one another. An Only-One Marriage flips the equation in the proper direction and encourages individuals and couples to focus on the true **roots** of enduring marriage, such as shared values, equal partnership, devotion to each other, healthy communication, and personal virtues that paradoxically make the **fruits** of a special-love marriage much more likely to achieve.

The science against soulmates: a new study finds that flourishing marriages are founded on proactive factors like personal virtues and responsible actions.

Recent research studies challenge the notion that loving and lasting marriages are founded on spontaneous love and connection. Rather, studies confirm that enduring connection in marriage results from the **personal virtues** and **intentional efforts** of the spouses. This report presents extended analysis from a recent study involving 615 couples (1,230 individuals) in the United States and Canada. In support of other studies, we found that couples who have a high level of connection in their marriage are significantly more likely to engage in **proactive behaviors** such as showing compassion to each other, spending meaningful time together, regularly engaging in acts of kindness for each other, and participating in regular relationship maintenance to improve their relationship. In fact, high-connection couples report scores that are typically three times higher than lower connection marriages on these intentional aspects of relationships.

The rising generation needs to set aside soulmate thinking and embrace agency-based approaches to relationships

We need to foster a new ideal of marriage that acknowledges single adults' desire to have a special love relationship but sets aside the myth of soulmate marriage in favor of creating a marriage based on agency, commitment, and intentional actions. This report suggests **five solutions to soulmate thinking**. These include: (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.

Only-One marriages are true partnerships in which spouses devote themselves to creating a shared life together that is deeper than the emotional payoff of the marriage.

The notion of soulmate marriage has elevated how much our culture today deeply values the fruits of a good marriage, such as love and happiness. But these beliefs have also contributed to how our culture is increasingly disconnecting these fruits from the true roots that make them possible. **Only-One marriages** are true partnerships in which spouses devote themselves to creating a shared life together that is larger than the emotional payoff of the marriage. This view of marriage gives us more than feelings of happiness; it helps make our relationships rich and meaningful.

So instead of discarding the common desire to be connected to the One in a special and enduring marriage, we will benefit from deeper cultural thinking cultural thinking about love and what a good marriage is, and—most importantly—how such marriages come to be. Understandings of a good marriage should include feelings of love and happiness, but we need to make sure that we also emphasize the far richer and more enduring aspects of relationships that paradoxically make the special marriage bond we yearn for even more possible to achieve.

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Introduction: Destiny or Agency?

Soulmate thinking diverts attention away from a fundamental truth of loving and lasting marriage—that oneness is made, not found.

Even though many leading relationship experts have expressed concerns about the potential negative effects of the "**soulmate model of marriage**," a recent poll shows that an astonishing number of Americans continue to believe in the idea that they have a "one-and-only soulmate" waiting for them somewhere out there.

A 2021 YouGov poll of nearly 15,000 adults in the United States found that 60% of respondents believe in the idea of soulmates, with women being slightly more likely to endorse the notion of a soulmate (64%) compared to men (55%).[1] To be fair, these numbers do appear to indicate that soulmate thinking may be diminishing compared to previous survey results,[2] but these findings also confirm that the quest to find one's soulmate continues to play a significant role in how many people approach dating and marriage.

> **Soulmate thinking ultimately makes the quest to find the One a more elusive goal, not an easier one.**

While we are also concerned about the risks soulmate thinking poses for healthy relationships, especially among young adults, we also believe that the root desire to be connected to the One in a special and enduring marriage is a healthy aspiration. In fact, the evidence is quite clear that humans are purposely designed with a unique capacity for deep attachment in long-term relationships, and each of us has the capacity to come to regard another person as uniquely special in our lives.[3]

The problem with the soulmate model of marriage is that it provides a deeply flawed conception of how to achieve this aspiration. Despite promising an easy path to lasting love, soulmate thinking ultimately makes the quest to find the One a more elusive goal, not an easier one. This is because soulmate beliefs are often deeply paradoxical in nature and tend to place relationship success outside of one's agency. This is particularly problematic as couples transition out of the early phases of initiation and attraction in their relationship and may not be prepared to create enduring patterns of partnership and romantic companionship.

> **Soulmate beliefs are often deeply paradoxical in nature and tend to place relationship success outside of one's agency.**

The focus of this report is to examine more deeply the effects of soulmate thinking on the landscape of modern dating and marriage relationships. Specifically, we hope to illuminate the ways that soulmate beliefs diminish the significance of agency and intentional actions in healthy relationships—which makes loving and lasting marriages less likely to be formed and sustained. We will also share some new research findings from a study on flourishing marriages that contribute to the growing science against soulmates.

We believe that we will all benefit from helping the rising generation broaden and deepen their thinking about love and what a good marriage is, and—most importantly—how such marriages come to be. Their understandings of a good marriage should include feelings of love and happiness, but we need to make sure that they also emphasize the far richer and more enduring aspects of relationships that paradoxically make the special marriage bond they yearn for even more possible to achieve.

Why the Soulmate Myth Endures

Not long ago, Dr. Brad Wilcox, Director of the National Marriage Project, predicted that the soulmate model of marriage will eventually die off in our culture because of a renewed emphasis on pragmatic partnership in marriage due to the global pandemic and recent economic downturns.[4] While time will tell if current economic and social conditions will further change the meaning and practice of marriage in our society, there are also ways that these modern struggles may reinforce soulmate thinking in the years to come.

> **The soulmate myth promises that amidst the dizzying and often confusing landscape of dating apps there is one match out there that will make sense of it all.**

Specifically, soulmate thinking may function as an emotional survival strategy for young people facing an eroded dating culture with increased loneliness and declining marriage rates. In a recent BBC interview, Professor Bradley Onishi pointed out that believing in a soulmate allows someone to construct a coherent and hopeful narrative within the unpredictable landscape of modern dating.[5] He said,

> *"The soulmate myth is really good at taking all the bad first dates, the breakups, the dashed hopes, and disappointments and putting them into a story that says 'someday all of this will fall into place'…the soulmate myth promises that amidst the dizzying and often confusing landscape of dating apps there is one match out there that will make sense of it all. It promises an anchor to modern life that many find appealing."*

While soulmate thinking may temporarily soothe the disappointments of dating for some young people, these modern realities reinforce why it is so important for us to educate the rising generation about the true foundations of enduring marriage—and to provide them with better cultural portrayals of how real-life marriages succeed while confronting these modern struggles, not in spite of them. We need to help young people understand that the type of enduring love they yearn for happens when couples shift their focus from trying to find emotional gratification within a relationship to creating meaningfulness and belonging within the partnership of marriage.
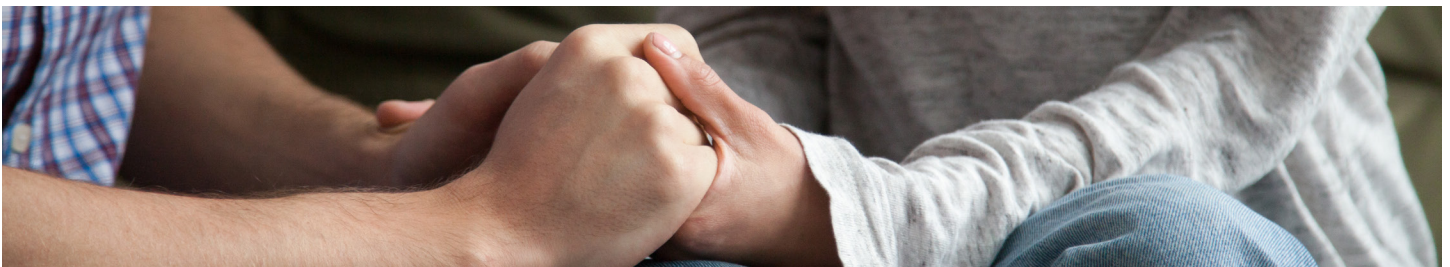
Shifting from "One and Only" to "The Only One"

At their core, soulmate beliefs provide a backwards depiction of the sequencing of healthy relationship development. They suggest that someone exists as your One-and-Only before you have even met; therefore, relationship success is primarily about simply finding that person. Soulmate thinking diverts attention away from a fundamental truth of loving and lasting marriage—that oneness is made, not found. Someone becomes your One because of your commitment, not before. This type of "**Only-One Marriage**" happens over time as two people devotedly choose each other, prioritize their relationship, and live with complete fidelity to one another.

> **Someone becomes your One because of your commitment, not before.**

There is no doubt that, in time, spouses can become uniquely suited for each other. But this kind of meaningful connection grows out of adapting to each other, caring for one another's needs, and developing a shared history of experiences. This process is not one of finding your One-and-Only out there in the world; rather, it is about making someone the Only-One of your heart—and then keeping him or her there as you navigate the ups and downs of life together. Knowing the difference between finding a soulmate marriage versus creating an Only-One marriage can make all the difference in how people pursue love—and ultimately whether or not they are likely to attain it.

The model of soulmate marriage fails because it promises the fruits of fulfillment, connection, and intimacy, without providing the roots needed to make those fruits possible. An Only-One marriage flips the equation in the proper direction and encourages young people to focus on the true roots of enduring marriage, such as shared values, equal partnership, devotion to each other, healthy communication, and personal virtues that paradoxically make the fruits of a special-love marriage much more likely to achieve.

> **An Only-One marriage flips the equation in the proper direction and encourages young people to focus on the true roots of enduring marriage.**

Embracing Agency in Dating and Relationships

As we have studied modern dating patterns over the last 30 years, we have noticed that people often approach dating in different ways. Among the shared approaches we have witnessed, we believe that there are two overarching approaches to dating—and which approach someone follows often makes quite a difference in how they go about the whole dating process.

A Destiny Approach to Dating

The first approach to dating is what could be called the "**Destiny Approach**" to dating. This approach is very popular in our contemporary culture and focuses on "finding" as the primary, if not sole, purpose of dating. This approach is often emphasized in commercials for dating websites that promise to help soulmate seekers find "that one special person" who is right for you. In fact, we should not underestimate the impact of the dating sites industry on our current relationship culture. The focus of these sites is not to educate young adults about healthy relationships or to encourage needed personal growth, but rather to emphasize that the "right match," which their service promises to provide, is all that is needed for relationship success.

The primary question that orients the destiny approach to dating is, "How do I find the person I am supposed to be with?" In sum, the focus in this style of dating is on finding "THE right person." Not only does this approach often create feelings of anxiety about dating as singles feel overwhelmed with the prospect of finding their one destined match, but the implicit message is that a successful marriage is first and foremost about "making a good match." If marriage success is all about matching, then finding is the only process that matters. Is it any wonder that so many young adults struggle to commit deeply to a promising relationship opportunity?

Because of these beliefs, many single adults come to view dating and courtship as a process of finding the "person they are supposed to be with" who is already determined to be the love of their life. The unspoken assumption of this type of approach to finding love is that people are already personally prepared for marriage or that marriage should not require any personal change, growth, or development on the part of the spouses. Simply put, love fits itself to you, you do not fit yourself to love.

An Agency Approach to Dating

By contrast, others adopt a style of dating that can be called an "**Agency Approach**" to dating. While this approach appreciates that finding is an important part of dating, the primary question is, "How can I be prepared to form and nurture a flourishing marriage?" The primary difference is that this approach primarily emphasizes priorities, choices, personal preparation, and intentional actions to initiate and foster healthy relationships.

While an agency approach to dating still recognizes the importance of finding a well-suited person to marry, finding is not the sole, or even primary, focus of dating. Rather, singles put their main emphasis on becoming ready for marriage and creating healthy relationship patterns in dating, engagement, and then marriage. And, in fact, an agency approach to dating recasts the finding process from the search for your soulmate to identifying a promising partner.

This is a healthy distinction, because it shifts the focus to finding "A right person," rather than finding "THE right person." This distinction is much more than a semantic difference. In our experience, if single adults only focus on finding the right person, their anxiety about dating increases as they become preoccupied with making "the right" decision in choosing a partner.

Adopting an agency-based approach to love and relationships brings balance to dating. Anxiety decreases as young adults realize that there will likely be several people they will meet in their social circles and dating opportunities who could be a good marriage partner for them. This is particularly true if young people make intentional efforts to regularly engage in social communities with other young people who have shared commitments to marriage and family life.

> **An agency approach to dating recasts the finding process from the search for your soulmate to identifying a promising partner.**

From this perspective, finding in dating then becomes a process of making a series of wise, well-informed decisions, not a single decisive decision that determines one's entire relationship destiny. An agency approach to dating embraces the deep significance and importance of finding and choosing a spouse, but also emphasizes that each of us must do our part in creating a lasting relationship and then be willing to commit ourselves to that relationship when the time is right.

The Science Against Soulmates

Studies consistently find that flourishing marriages are founded on proactive factors such as personal virtues and loving responsible actions.

One of the most enduring features of the scientific study of marriage over the last 70 years has been the use of measures of personal "marital happiness" or "relationship satisfaction" to assess the quality of a marriage.[6] This has largely happened because most relationship researchers live in cultures that stress **expressive individualism**, a worldview that promotes self-expression and personal fulfillment as the highest aspirations of a life well lived. This is the same worldview that undergirds and fosters the myth of soulmate marriage.

Because individual happiness and fulfillment are paramount, expressive individualism portrays marriage as a choice based on current satisfaction and perceived future gratification within the relationship. Commitment to the relationship largely depends on the rewards that it offers compared with alternatives. Soulmate thinking reinforces this way of thinking about romantic relationships by promising a relationship that will always be satisfying, and any diminished happiness is a sign that someone is in the wrong relationship and their soulmate alternative is waiting for them out there.

> One of the most enduring features of the scientific study of marriage over the last 70 years has been the reliance on personal measures of marital happiness.

In this section of the report, we briefly highlight how traditional relationship science has often reinforced the ethic of soulmate love by overly emphasizing personal happiness and communication patterns in couple relationships. Next, we highlight how new emerging theories of marriage are evolving beyond the focus on personal happiness in marriage and emphasizing flourishing in marriage—and how these new perspectives support an agency-based approach to love and marriage. Finally, we share some new findings from a recent study that we conducted on flourishing marriages that demonstrate how happiness is best understood as a fruit, rather than a root, of a good marriage.

How Research Has Contributed to the Soulmate Myth

As noted, our individualistic culture often focuses on the benefits partners derive from their romantic relationships and views the contributions partners make to the relationship as investments that will provide a return of satisfaction, support, and reward. Relationship experts have also traditionally emphasized that these contributions occur primarily through satisfying communication patterns. Thus, relationship happiness is seen as being the natural result of satisfying communication and interaction, and dating is framed as the search for someone with whom you enjoy being with in these ways. We have previously called this the "**communication-satisfaction model of marriage**."[7]

To the degree that the social science of marriage is primarily focused on the personal satisfaction of the spouses, relationship experts may find themselves in the problematic position of not simply observing this cultural view of marriage, but rather promoting and encouraging it. To the extent that soulmate-driven expectations and dating disappointments play a role in frustrated relationship histories or divorce decisions, the professional emphasis on the emotional side of marriage may even exacerbate the already inflated expectations of marriage. In other words, experts may often be throwing gasoline on the fire with our cultural obsession with relationship happiness rather than providing a fuller, more realistic account of marriage.

If personal happiness is the ultimate outcome of marriage, then marriage will become a consumer good for individuals, evaluated and appraised through the lens of personal happiness. This view reinforces soulmate thinking in troubling ways. We highly recommend Dr. Blaine Fowers' book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness* for a detailed discussion of this trend and new ways to break out of the communication-satisfaction model of marriage.[8]

A New Study of Flourishing Marriages

Despite the widespread use of personal happiness in couples research, a growing number of scholars and experts are expressing concern that marital satisfaction may be an "overly narrow and perhaps shallow metric," and that casting relationship quality solely in terms of satisfaction "assumes that what matters most in relationships is the gratification of each partner's self-interests."[9] Other experts are

> **New models emphasize flourishing in marriage, rather than just satisfaction or happiness.**

also suggesting that using the same criteria of relationship quality for newly-formed couples and longer-term marriages may not be appropriate because couples who have lived together for years create a shared history and identity that often transcends individual satisfaction.[10]

Reflecting on these critiques, many scholars are now testing new theoretical models of marriage that explicitly challenge the assumptions of expressive individualism. By extension, this also challenges the soulmate model of marriage.[11] The emphasis of these new models of marriage is that a shared history and couple identity make the marriage relationship an entity itself, and that flourishing marriages not only meet the basic human need for satisfaction, but also satisfy and promote the human need for safety, growth, meaning, and connection. As such, flourishing marriages include deeper elements such as personal virtues, life meaning and purpose, a sense of belonging, growth and improvement, and a couple identity that includes a sense of togetherness and permanence.

Thus, newer research has started to offer alternatives to the communication-satisfaction model of marriage. Most notably, these new models emphasize flourishing in marriage, rather than just satisfaction or happiness. We refer to the collective emphasis of these models of marriage as the "**virtues-flourishing model of marriage.**"

A Model of Flourishing Marriage

Of particular significance in these new models of marriage is the Strong Relationality Model of Relationship Flourishing developed by Dr. Adam Galovan and Dr. David Schramm.[12] This model sets out to more fully describe and explain couple relationship quality across the life course. While arguing that relationship satisfaction is an insufficient indicator of relationship quality, they suggest that an additional construct that they call "**relational-connectivity**" may provide a more holistic vision of what constitutes relationship quality. Relational-connectivity focuses on indicators of the strength of a couple's relationship, rather than simply an individual's sense of personal satisfaction from the relationship.

Specifically, Dr. Galovan and Dr. Schramm propose that **personal virtues** are a key factor leading to relational-connectivity. Due to the inherent relationship context of dispositional virtues such as humility, compassion, and positivity, they may be more closely linked to relational-connectivity than to relationship satisfaction. Their model also proposes that dispositional virtues lead people to engage in **responsible actions**. They note that when individuals are virtuous, they will often acknowledge their limitations, observe the strengths and challenges of others, have a desire to help others, find joy in the moment, and be optimistic about the future. They argue that in a relationally-connected marriage, spouses feel responsibility for the good of the other. They suggest that relational-connectivity may be more closely linked than satisfaction with factors such as time together and shared meaning, kindness, gratitude, appreciation, admiration, and forgiveness.

> Relational-connectivity focuses on indicators of the strength of a couple's relationship, rather than simply an individual's sense of personal satisfaction from the relationship.

Testing the Model: What Makes a Marriage Flourish?

Recently, our team conduct a large-scale study designed to provide preliminary evidence for the value of the concept of relational-connectivity in comparison to relationship satisfaction.[13] In a study of 615 couples (1,230 individuals) in the United States and Canada, we used a newly developed measure of relational-connectivity to test two aspects of the model.

First, we used the new measure to identify couples who are truly flourishing in their relationships and are connected, not just satisfied. Our measure of flourishing marriage evaluates three components of relational-connectivity: couples' sense of **belonging**, **friendship**, and **intimacy**. Example items include "I feel loved and cared for in this relationship," "My partner and I share many positive memories," and "To what extent do you feel like you and your partner are one?"

Next, we then compared flourishing and non-flourishing couples on other relationship factors, including personal virtues, responsible actions, and relationship outcomes to see what makes

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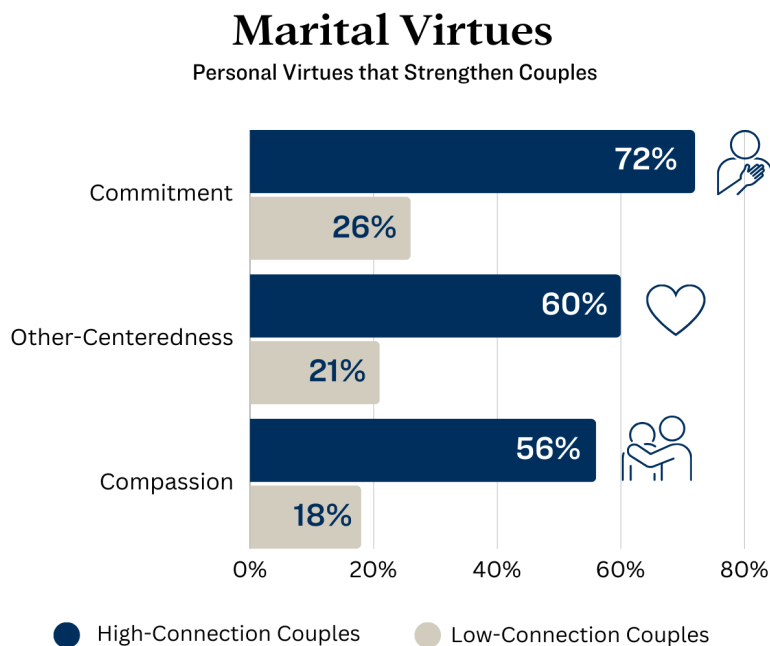
flourishing couples different than other couples (see Galovan, et al., 2022 for the full details of the study). Here we provide some new, extended analyses from our original study.

Marital Virtues

First, as displayed in the figure below, we calculated the average percentile score for "high-connection" couples (63% of the sample) versus "low-connection" couples (37% of the sample) on a series of measures of personal virtues. There is a growing attention to "virtue science" in the social and relationship sciences as scholars are finding that newly developed measures of personal virtues are stable, reliable, and highly predictive of individual and relationship outcomes.[14]

For these analyses, we compared high-connection and low-connection couples on the virtues of commitment, other-centeredness, and compassion. The **virtue of commitment** entails full fidelity to one's spouse and a long-term devotion to fostering the permanence of the relationship. This virtue stands in direct contrast to expressive individualism in that it involves expressly not only turning towards one's spouse, but also turning away from and avoiding consideration of other

> The average percentile score on personal virtues for high-connection couples is nearly three times higher than low-connection couples.

alternatives. The **virtue of other-centeredness** entails not being self-centered or selfish, while being kind to others. To foster this virtue, spouses need to learn to value and prioritize each other and seek for ways to be a true support to each other. The **virtue of compassion** involves being there for others in times of difficulty. Due to the natural challenges of marriage and family life, spouses need to become an enduring support to one another to provide help and assistance to one another.

Marital Virtues
Personal Virtues that Strengthen Couples

Virtue	High-Connection Couples	Low-Connection Couples
Commitment	72%	26%
Other-Centeredness	60%	21%
Compassion	56%	18%

● High-Connection Couples   ○ Low-Connection Couples

Source: Galovan, Carroll, et al. (2021). Satisfaction or Connectivity? Implications from the Strong Relationality Model of Flourishing Couple Relationships. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy.

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As can be noted, high-connection couples have significantly higher average scores on these **personal virtues** than low-connection couples do. In fact, the average percentile score on personal virtues for high-connection couples is nearly three times higher than low-connection couples. These patterns are similar to what other studies have found in the significant ways that personal virtues can influence relationship trajectories. Leading marriage scholar, Dr. Blaine Fowers, once shared what years of counseling and research have taught him to be the foundation of a successful marriage. In simple terms he says, "the best way to have a good marriage is to be a good person."[15]

Responsible Behaviors

We also compared high-connection and low-connection couples on the level of **responsible actions** in their relationships. These are proactive actions that spouses can engage in to foster and strengthen their relationship. Specifically, we examined differences between high-connection and low-connection couples on how frequently they engage in four responsible behaviors:

1. **Spending Meaningful Time Together**
   "We make regular time to just be together and focus on each other."

2. **Acts of Kindness**
   "We regularly do random acts of kindness for each other."

3. **Forgive Offenses**
   "My partner is quick to forgive me when I make mistakes."

4. **Relationship Maintenance**
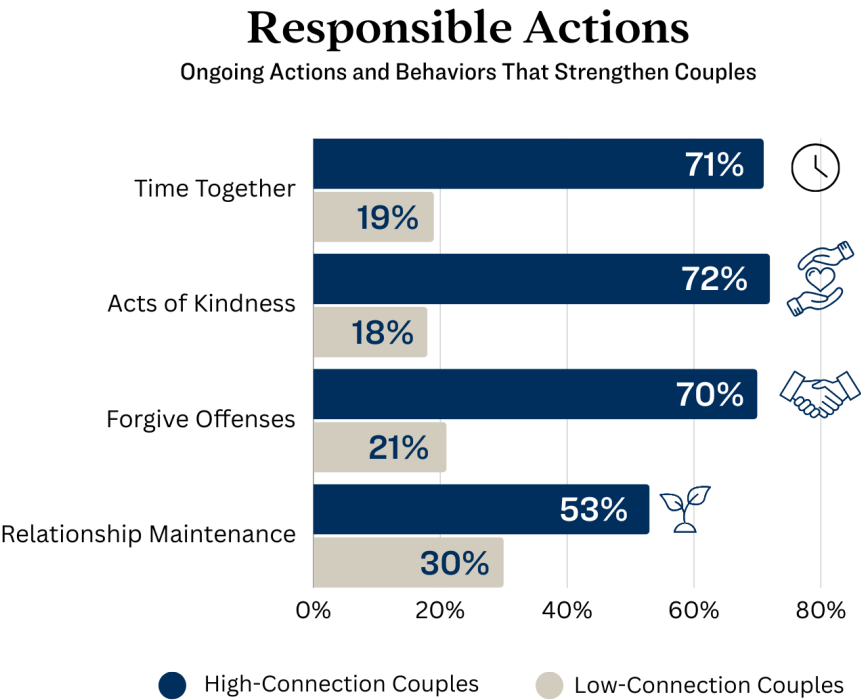   "We work on our relationship and tell each other what we want or need."

Similar to personal virtues, there are significant differences between high-connection and low-connection couples on how frequently they engage in responsible actions to strengthen their relationships. High-connection couples have three times higher scores on the amount of relationship-focused time they spend together. This fits with other recent studies that have shown that couples who go on regular dates together have stronger marriages than those who do not have a similar ritual of couple time together.[16]

Spouses in high-connection relationships also have three times higher scores on doing regular **acts of kindness** for each other and **forgiving offenses** in their marriage. This combination of adding positive investments, while productively moving on from negative interactions keeps a relationship vibrant through the seasons of their relationship.

> Spouses in high-connection relationships have three times higher scores on doing regular acts of kindness for each other and forgiving offfenses in their marriage.

And high connection couples are also significantly more likely to engage in **relationship maintenance behaviors** in their relationship, such as expressing needs, discussing problems, and setting goals for improvement. Again, these findings show a clear distinction between couples who engage in these proactive behaviors and those who do not. And while relationship quality can certainly influence these behaviors in the reverse direction, mature couples deepen these behaviors in times of relationship struggle, rather than letting their efforts decrease. So, whether it is to prevent relationship struggles from starting or to respond to them when they come along, couples who maintain high levels of responsible actions are more likely to flourish together.

Responsible Actions
Ongoing Actions and Behaviors That Strengthen Couples

Behavior	High-Connection Couples	Low-Connection Couples
Time Together	71%	19%
Acts of Kindness	72%	18%
Forgive Offenses	70%	21%
Relationship Maintenance	53%	30%

● High-Connection Couples   ○ Low-Connection Couples

Source: Galovan, Carroll, et al. (2021). Satisfaction or Connectivity? Implications from the Strong Relationality Model of Flourishing Couple Relationships. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy.

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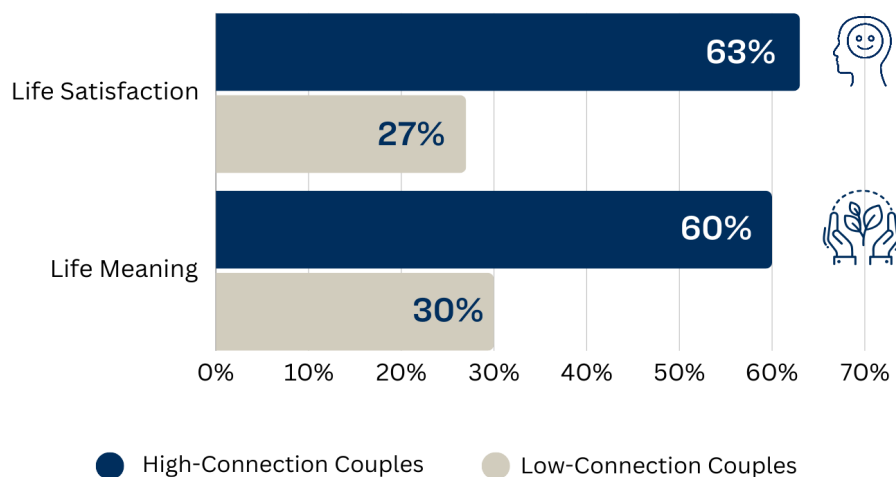
Relationship Outcomes

Finally, we also compared high-connection and low-connection couples on measures of overall life satisfaction and life meaning. As expected, high-connection couples reported two times higher average percentile scores than their low-connection counterparts on both life satisfaction and life meaning. These findings also have important implications for how couples achieve the happiness they desire in their marriage and in their overall lives. In particular, these findings highlight the value of helping couples view their happiness and personal satisfaction as a **fruit** of their relationship connection, rather than being the **root** of it.

In fact, it may be helpful to encourage partners to reconsider the wisdom of making the pursuit of happiness the focus of their relationship-strengthening efforts. There is compelling evidence starting to emerge that there is a "**paradox of pursing happiness**" in that the more people value and focus on happiness, the less happy they tend to be.[17] New studies are showing that directly pursuing happiness can paradoxically impair well-being. In particular, they find that when happiness is pursued in individualistic ways, the pursuit of happiness is linked with lower well-being.[18] To be clear, the evidence does not suggest that the pursuit of happiness itself is the problem, but rather how it is pursued. When happiness is pursued directly and in individualistic terms, this is linked to lower well-being, but when it is pursued indirectly, and as the by-product of deeper relationship foundations, it improves well-being.

> There is compelling evidence starting to emerge that there is a "paradox of pursing happiness" in that the more people focus on happiness, the less happy they tend to be.

Fruits of Connection in Couples
Life Happiness and Sense of Meaning and Purpose in Life

Life Satisfaction — High-Connection: 63%, Low-Connection: 27%
Life Meaning — High-Connection: 60%, Low-Connection: 30%

● High-Connection Couples   ○ Low-Connection Couples

Source: Galovan, Carroll, et al. (2021). Satisfaction or Connectivity? Implications from the Strong Relationality Model of Flourishing Couple Relationships. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy.

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In the context of working with couples, Dr. Blaine Fowers has emphasized this paradox of pursuing happiness for many years.[19] He warned that our individualistic culture is defined by a prevailing paradox where partners' deep desire for a happy marriage leads to a strange situation where marriage is both more valued and more fragile than ever before. To overcome this paradox, he suggests that we need to foster a culture that helps couples focus on creating a shared life that is deeper than the emotional payoff of the marriage.

He emphasizes that this can happen as couples' focus on creating a true equal partnership and focus on practicing personal virtues for the good of their marriage. Dr. Fowers remarked,

> *"The popular and professional literature seems to miss the real sources of strength in marriage: the shared goals, the necessary struggles and sacrifices, the calm joy of teamwork, and the comfort of two people carrying out mundane tasks together—all these elements forge the profound bonds that characterize a strong marriage."*

Therefore, in addition to teaching couples important life skills and helpful communication patterns, it will deeply benefit all of us if we deepen our cultural discussion of marriage to include ways of being and seeing others [20] and a focus on broader principles, virtues, and responsible actions that undergird successful relationships.[21]

Setting Aside Soulmate Thinking

On the surface, soulmate thinking may appear harmless, but there is evidence throughout the relationship sciences that soulmate beliefs create real troubles for both dating individuals and married couples.

We have frequently had people ask, "Does believing in a soulmate really cause any harm?" On the surface, soulmate thinking may appear harmless, but there is evidence throughout the relationship sciences that soulmate beliefs can create real troubles for both dating individuals and married couples.

In this final section, we suggest some ways to set aside soulmate thinking and ground our relationships on the foundations of agency-based love. Ideally, these **solutions to soulmate thinking** will be adopted at a broad social level and be reflected in our culture narratives and depictions of romantic relationships and marriages. However, even if these solutions are not embraced at the full cultural level, these ideas provide a roadmap for young adults to chart a counter-culture path to love and relationships. A path that acknowledges their desire to have a special love relationship but sets aside the myth of soulmate marriage in favor of creating a marriage based on agency, commitment, and intentional relationship fostering behaviors.

Solution #1: Avoid a Consumer Approach to Relationships

Over 20 years ago, leading marriage and family therapist Dr. William Doherty cautioned that our culture of expressive individualism was spilling over into our views of romantic relationships and leading to what he called the "**consumer culture of marriage**."[22] Specifically, he said,

> *"My concern is less with consumer culture in the marketplace, but with how it has invaded the family. Consumer culture teaches us that we never have enough of anything we want, that the new is always better than the old—unless something old becomes trendy again. It teaches us not be loyal to anything or anyone that does not continue to meet our needs at the right price."*

Dr. Doherty emphasizes that in practice, most couples embrace a variety of values for their marriage, including the values of responsibility and commitment that are needed for a stable and enduring marriage. However, he observes that in our modern relationship culture, "these values are always in danger of being trumped by the consumer values of personal gain, low cost, entitlement, and keeping one's options open." The risk becomes that in consumer culture, the exit door is always available, and commitments are always provisional, as long as we are satisfied that the other person is meeting our needs. Soulmate thinking is truly troublesome when it is wed to a consumer view of relationships (pun intended!).

> The risk becomes that in consumer culture, the exit door is always available, and commitments are always provisional, as long as we are satisfied that the other person. is meeting our needs.

The solution to the consumer culture of relationships is to foster a new ideal of marriage that is similar to the one we are calling for here. This new ideal needs to re-emphasize the ideals of agency, commitment, and responsibilities that are the bedrock of institutional notions of marriage while also embracing the personal well-being and emotional satisfaction elements of newer individual notions of marriage. Dr. Doherty expresses this new ideal well when he says,

> *"We need an ideal of marriage that fosters commitment and individual well-being, both permanence and equality between men and women. An ideal that accepts divorce but sees it as the tragic exception and not the norm. I call this Modern Covenant Marriage...*
>
> *Modern Covenant Marriage requires the habits of the heart and mind to cultivate a lifelong relationship that is loving and fair to both partners, where the well-being of your spouse and your marriage is as important as your own well-being, where the soft reasons for divorce are off the table, and where efforts for continued improvement of the marriage are tempered with acceptance of human limitations."*

As we have argued here, the key is to help a rising generation realize that these two notions of marriage, devoted commitment and personal well-being, need to actually be fused together rather than being seen as antitheses of each other. The myth of soulmate marriage is that the fruits of the **individual view of marriage** can come without the roots of the **institutional view of marriage**. The roots provide the fruits and without them the promise of marriage is on a shaky foundation.

Solution #2: Foster Realistic Expectations About Relationships

One of the greatest risks of soulmate thinking is the way that it shapes young adults toward unrealistic expectations about how healthy relationships come together and what makes them succeed. In particular, soulmate beliefs orient individuals toward what Professor Raymond Knee calls "**destiny beliefs**" that are based in the core idea that relationships are either meant to be or they are not.[23] Thus, people with destiny beliefs are satisfied in their relationships as long as their partner matches their vision of an ideal partner.

Destiny beliefs cause people to focus their energy on constantly evaluating the person they are with, asking themselves, "Is this the person I am supposed to be with?" or "Can I find a better partner?" and "Is my partner making me happy?" This type of alternative-seeking behavior makes it difficult for people with destiny beliefs to initiate dating opportunities, and it makes any relationships they establish fragile. Experts point out that these beliefs tend to make individuals disengage, shut down, or distance themselves in response to conflict, and if satisfaction ever drops in the relationship, they will be more likely to end it, rather than work on it. [24]

In contrast, others adopt what Dr. Knee calls "**growth beliefs**" about relationships that are based on the core idea that relationships develop over time, involve working together as partners,

> **Growth beliefs about relationships that are based on the core idea that relationships develop over time, involve working together as partners, and are strengthened through the process of overcoming problems.**

and are strengthened through the process of overcoming problems. Growth beliefs promote a "**work-it-out approach**" that focuses on addressing problems, using healthy coping strategies, and shared problem solving in response to negative experiences that come up in the relationship. These individuals ask themselves, "How can I strengthen our relationship?" or "How can I be a better partner?" and "What can we do together to make this situation better?"

A growth orientation to relationships helps couples see compromise and sacrifice in a relationship as a chance for self-improvement, rather than a sign that something is amiss. Of course, everyone needs to have healthy boundaries when it comes to mistreatment or abuse, but partners with growth beliefs are more likely to work through everyday difficulties, and to feel stronger about their relationship and grow closer to their partners through facing challenges.

Solution #3: Develop a Mature Understanding of Love

In our modern culture, we use the word love to describe our relationship to our spouse, but we also use the word love in referring to our grandma and our newborn baby daughter. We also say that we love double fudge chocolate ice cream and receiving a foot massage. Clearly the love that sustains a marriage is a different type of love than someone's love for ice cream!

To help young people better understand love, we need to help them appreciate that there are different types of love. Furthermore, they need to understand that some types of love are better than others in forming and maintaining a strong marriage relationship. In fact, the type of love a couple bases their marriage on will be one of the most important determinants of whether their relationship will last or not. Marriages based on **mature love** will almost always be more stable and enduring than a marriage founded on **immature love**.

Mature Love vs. Immature Love

While fuzzy definitions of love are problematic in everyday conversation, they are an extreme problem in social science research. To conduct meaningful research, scholars must have clear definitions of what they are studying in order to measure the phenomenon in a meaningful way. In a landmark article, leading family psychologist Dr. Patricia Noller examined dozens of studies to identify the type of love that supports marriage and family relationships—she calls this "mature love."[25]

This distinction provides some key insights into how young adults can reliably distinguish mature from immature forms of love in their own dating and marriage experiences.

Mature Love vs. Immature Love

Three Aspects of Mature Love

- Cognitive (attitudes - mind)
- Emotions (feelings - heart)
- Behavior (actions - hands)

MIND

HEART

HANDS

From her extensive review of research on love, Dr. Noller concluded that in couple relationships, "mature love may be best conceptualized as creating an environment in which both the lovers and those that depend on them can grow and develop." She also concludes from her review that love is an attitude toward a particular person that has **emotional**, **cognitive**, and **behavioral** components, and all three of these aspects of love can be mature or immature in nature. Dr. Noller explains,

> *"The way these three aspects of love are manifested in each individual will determine whether an experience of love involves a stable, healthy, growth promoting relationship or an immature, over-dependent, and growth-stifling relationship."*

The first thing we can learn is that **mature love is multidimensional**. Love involves our feelings, attitudes, and actions. Our experience is that when young people use the term "falling in love" they are typically referring to only the emotional aspects of love. While there needs to indeed be a meaningful emotional connection between two people in their dating and marriage, there are other parts of love that are needed for their love to be mature. In addition to falling in love, each of us needs to be "choosing in love" and "doing in love" as well.

> In addition to falling in love, each of us needs to be choosing in love and doing in love as well.

These distinctions are important because the emotional aspect of love is the most unstable. Emotions by their nature ebb and flow and go up and down. Our priorities, choices, and behaviors, on the other hand, can be stable and consistent. Plus, when a couple feels the emotional feelings of love waning in their relationship or strained because of conflict, a mature view of love recognizes that they can continue to choose to love their partner and restore their feelings of love by doing loving proactive behaviors and engaging in loving service.

Solution #4: Follow Healthy Dating Trajectories

Sometimes, soulmate perspectives create a sort of **dating paralysis** among young adults. The crushing quest to find "the one person" they are supposed to be with makes them fearful of making a wrong decision. Even as a promising relationship is developing, soulmate believers are often worrying about whether they are on the right track or not.

> Many young adults are not struggling with knowing when a relationship is a bad one, what they struggle with is determing whether a relationship is "good enough."

Our experience is that many young adults are not struggling with knowing when a relationship is a bad one, what they struggle with is determining whether a relationship is "good enough." Soulmate logic assures young people that they "will be sure" when they have found their soulmate, so any indecision or lack of certainty means it's safer to end the relationship rather than risk not being with your true soulmate. As a result, many young people simply "lock up" in dating—neither

moving ahead nor back. We are seeing this type of dating paralysis more and more in the rising generation. This makes dating very challenging. It leads many singles to pass up promising dating opportunities before they have a chance to blossom and mature into their full potential.

For others, soulmate thinking can also have the opposite effect. They become convinced very quickly that their partner is their soulmate, so they jump into **rushed dating** or a rapid courtship. This can lead to a lack of careful consideration of a partner or relationship. While it is healthy for couples to have a growth orientation toward relationships, enduring marriages are best started on shared values, healthy interaction patterns, and a mutual view of what constitutes a good life. Careful dating that evaluates these aspects of compatibility is needed.

Reversing the Erosion of Courtship

Numerous scholars have noted that the culture of dating young adults experience today is markedly different than the one experienced by their parents and grandparents. Our culture has experienced an erosion of shared courtship patterns, and single adults today often find themselves navigating a dating culture that lacks socially defined norms, rituals, and relationship milestones to guide them toward marriage.

> One of the main risks in today's dating culture is that young people often lack much dating experience before they get involved in an exclusive dating relationships.

One of the main risks in today's dating culture is that young people often lack much dating experience before they get involved in exclusive relationships. It is important to help young people gain greater experience with non-exclusive dating and other young adult social experiences that will help them learn more about themselves and the type of people who complement them in their lives. This will lead them to make wiser decisions in choosing a marriage partner and foster greater preparation for marriage when the time comes. Dating and other social experiences provide them with greater self-awareness, greater appreciation of the range of potential partners, and greater confidence in later courtship.

A Developmental Model of Dating

For years now, some of the most common questions we have been asked about relationships involve the timing of dating. These involve questions such as, "How long should a couple date before becoming exclusive with each other?," "How long should you be exclusive before you get engaged?," or "How long should a couple be engaged before they get married?"

Our answer to these questions is always—"Why are you asking this question on the basis of time?" Are you suggesting that every couple that has been together for six months or a year has the same relationship as every other couple that has been together for that same length of time? Of course, this is not the case, but culturally we often continue to think about dating in terms of timing alone.

So, what is the alternative? The key is to switch from a simple timing metric to a developmental one. So instead of asking "how long?" we should help young people ask, "what are the signs that a couple is ready to be exclusive?" or "What are the milestones a couple should reach before they get engaged?" While

sufficient time is clearly needed to reach some developmental milestones, the passage of time alone does not necessarily mean that a couple is reaching the needed maturity and growth as a couple to progress to the next stage of dating and courtship. While a complete discussion of these matters is beyond the scope of this report, it is helpful to think about ways that we can all help promote a developmental perspective of dating and not simply a timing one.

Solution #5: Maintain Optimism While Resolving Breakups

While we have seen many risks that soulmate thinking poses for ongoing relationships, we are becoming convinced that one of the greatest harms occurs when relationships end. We have counseled dozens of young adults who are unable to successfully cope and move forward in healthy ways after a serious dating or engaged relationship has ended due to the belief that their soulmate is walking away from them and there are no other options for their future.

For many, a breakup is a sign that their ex-partner was not their soulmate. But for others, they can't shake their conviction that their One-and-Only is slipping away. What do you do when the person you believe to be your One-and-Only is no longer an option for you? This can lead to serious hopelessness, obsessive clinging, and other unhealthy coping mechanisms. Embracing agency and believing in multiple marriage options becomes the key to successfully resolving breakups and moving forward with optimism and confidence that a successful relationship is still available in one's future.

> **Embracing agency and believing in multiple options becomes the key to succesfully resolving break ups.**

Recent research has found that the breakup of a romantic relationship is often associated with both declines in life satisfaction and with increases in psychological distress.[26] However, studies also show that there are different trajectories through the breakup process and not all individuals experience breakups in the same way. Because of this, experts suggest that individuals experiencing a breakup may benefit from reflecting on how it is affecting the way they think about themselves and their future. Some may also benefit from learning skills to cope with feelings of distress or dissatisfaction.

One recent study found that young adults who can make sense of and understand a breakup experience less distress and were able to move on in helpful ways.[27] The researchers highlighted that their findings shed light on the potential for breakups to prompt personal growth and improved relationship skills, if young adults can make sense of and come to terms with their breakups. Their findings highlight the importance of creating a coherent narrative following a romantic breakup and that the ability to make sense of a difficult situation can increase single adults' potential to learn and grow from the experience.

Soulmate thinking can disrupt the process of understanding the reasons for a breakup and gaining a sense of closure. An agency-based view of love and relationships can help young people cope with the normative experience of breakups during young adulthood and give them a useful way to frame the experience as a time for personal growth and renewed optimism about their future relationship prospects.

Agency-based views of love and relationships can help young people cope with the normative experience of breakups during young adulthood.

Conclusion: Finding Love vs. Creating a Marriage

Our understandings of a good marriage should include feelings of love and happiness, but we need to make sure that we also emphasize the far richer and more enduring aspects of relationships that paradoxically make a special marriage bond even more possible to achieve.

The notion of soulmate marriage has elevated how much our culture today deeply values the fruits of a good marriage, such as love and happiness. But these beliefs have also contributed to how our culture is increasingly disconnecting these fruits from the true roots that make them possible. Only-One marriages are true partnerships in which spouses are devoted to creating a shared life together that is larger than the emotional payoff of the marriage. This view of marriage gives us more than feelings of happiness; it helps make our lives rich and meaningful.

So instead of discarding the common desire to be connected to the One in a special and enduring marriage, we are suggesting that we will all benefit from helping the rising generation broaden and deepen their thinking about love and what a good marriage is, and, most importantly, how such marriages come to be. Their understandings of a good marriage should include feelings of love and happiness, but we need to make sure that they also emphasize the far richer and more enduring aspects of relationships that paradoxically make the special marriage bond they yearn for even more possible to achieve.

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Appendix: Study Sample, Measures, and Methods

The analyses presented in this report are an extension of a previously published study. For full details please see the full article:

Galovan, A. M., Carroll, J. S., Schramm, D. G., Leonhardt, N. D., Zuluaga, J., & Mckenadel, S. E. (2022). Satisfaction or Connectivity?: Implications from the Strong Relationality Model of Flourishing Couple Relationships. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 48 (3), 883-907.

Study Sample

Participants were recruited through a U.S. research firm that specializes in data collection for researchers, non- profit organizations, and corporations. Drawing from an online panel in the United States and Canada, participants were recruited using a national quota sample for each country based on their age and race/ ethnicity. Participants were compensated through points (to use toward various goods or services), gift cards, or cash payments (a value of between $5 and $10 US). Responses were given online. Participants indicated at the beginning of the survey that they were "currently in a romantic relationship" and were asked not to discuss the survey with their partner until after they had completed the survey. Ethics approval was granted by the ethics board at the University of Alberta.

The data from 615 couples (N = 1230 individuals) for this study were weighted by country to be nationally representative in terms of age, race/ethnicity, education, income, geographic region, and religious affiliation. Just over half of participants (52.0%) were female. The overall sample was primarily non- Hispanic White (76.2%), followed by 8.1% Latino, 7.0% African American/Black Canadian, 5.4% Asian, and 3.3% mixed and other races. In terms of education, 5.9% did not complete high school, 22.8% were high school graduates, 18.7% had completed some college, 15.0% had associates or trade degree, 25.3% had a bachelor's degree, and 12.3% had a graduate or professional degree. There was also significant diversity in U.S. Dollar (USD) annual income (Mdn = $50,744; M = $64,361; SD = $65,135; Range = $0 to $1,000,000), age (M = 45.5 years; SD = 16.9 years; Range = 18– 89 years), and sexual orientation (16.3% same- sex couples). All participants were in romantic relationships, and the average length was 18.5 years (SD = 15.2; Range = less than 1 year– 66 years) with 21.4% in a relationship for <5 years, 20.8% for 5– 10 years, 20.5% for 11– 20 years, 18.0% for 21– 35 years, and 19.3% for 36 years or longer.

Measures

Relational-Connectivity

The Relational-Connectivity scale developed for this study evaluates three components of **relational-connectivity**: couples' sense of belonging, friendship, and intimacy; it is composed of 12 items with some adapted from Braiker and Kelley (1979), Gottman and Silver (2016), Rubin (1970), and Rusbult et al. (1998). Example items include "I feel loved and cared for in this relationship," "My partner and I share many positive memories," and "To what extent do you feel like you and your partner are one?". All items were measured on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 9 (Very much), which item response theory analysis found should be collapsed to a 7- point scale. For all items, higher scores indicate more feelings of relational- connectivity. Cronbach's α = .95. The IRT analysis also illustrated the effectiveness of the items in

discriminating between those with differing levels of relational- connectivity, and an exploratory structural equation model found the relational-connectivity items to be distinct from the satisfaction items.

Personal Virtues

Participants' **commitment** was assessed using 6 items from the Dimensions of Commitment Inventory (Adams & Jones, 1997). Participants responded to items such as, "I want to grow old with my partner," and "When I imagine what my life will be like in the future, I always see my partner standing next to me," on a 7- point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree (Cronbach's α = .85). Participants' partners also responded to two scales assessed the virtues of **other-centeredness** (11 items on a 10- point semantic differential scale; e.g., "Self- centered" and Other-centered" as anchors; Cronbach's α = .96) and **compassion** (4 items; e.g., "He she likes to be there for others in times of difficulty; Cronbach's α = .95).

Responsible Actions

Participants responded to scales that assessed their responsible actions including **time together** (5 items; e.g., "We make regular time to just be together and focus on each other."; Cronbach's α = .82.), their **kindness** (3 items; e.g., "We regularly do random acts of kindness for each other"; Cronbach's α = .90.), and **forgiveness** (4 items; e.g., "My partner is quick to forgive me when I make mistakes"; Cronbach's α = .94.) on a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree. Participants also responded to Braiker and Kelley's (1979) 4-item **relationship maintenance scale** (e.g., "How much do you tell your partner what you want or need from the relationship?") on a 9-point scale with responses ranging from 1 = Not very much or just a little to 9 = Very much or a lot (Cronbach's αs = .80).

Life Satisfaction and Life Meaning

Participants indicated their **life satisfaction** by responding to two items from the satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1985): "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?" and "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?" The satisfaction item was answered on a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Very dissatisfied to 7 = Very satisfied, while the happiness item was answered on a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Very unhappy to 7 = Very happy. Correlation r = .82. Participants indicated the degree of **meaning in their life** with the 4- item meaning in life questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaier, 2006), on items such as, "I understand my life's meaning" and "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose," on a 7- point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Absolutely untrue to 7 = Absolutely true. Cronbach's α =.79.

Methods

In the original study, we used the 95% confidence intervals of the mean satisfaction and connectivity scores to categorize individuals as significantly lower or higher than the mean level of relationship satisfaction and relational- connectivity. Then, using the higher or lower categorizations for relationship satisfaction and relational-connectivity as training variables in an a priori confirmatory latent profile analysis, we placed each individual in one of four quadrants: Languishing (i.e., lower satisfaction / lower connectivity), Flourishing (i.e., higher satisfaction / higher connectivity), Satisfied, Less- Connected (i.e., higher satisfaction / lower connectivity), or Connected, Less- Satisfied (i.e., lower satisfaction / higher connectivity). For those who were within the 95% confidence interval of the mean for either construct (n = 112 individuals), a priori categorization was not specified; we allowed the LPA to estimate the likelihood of each individual being classified in each quadrant and to model the uncertainty of the classification, which accounted for the "fuzziness" of the boundary between quadrants.

For the analyses in this report, only the relational-connectivity measure was used to collapse the four groups into two groups. The first group used in these analyses consisted of **high connection couples** who reported relational connectivity scores above the mean. This included the couples classified as "Flourishing" and "Connected, Less Satisfied" in the original study. The second group used in these analyses consisted of **low connection couples** who reported relational connectively scores below the mean. This included the couples classified as "Satisfied, Less-Connected" and "Languishing" in the original study. Then the z-scores for the selected study variables that were reported in the original study (see Figure 1) were converted into percentile scores and combined at proper ratios to calculate the average percentile scores for each of the two groups.

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