

International Survey Shows Habits of Happy Couples

Hi there. Nice to have you with us again on As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Christopher Cruise.

I have a question for those of you in a relationship. How "normal" are you and your partner as a couple? I mean, are you like most other couples when it comes to things like how much you trust each other, how often you hold hands, how much you share the housework?

How would you know, right?

Well, two social scientists and a "wellness entrepreneur" decided a few years ago to try to understand what most couples are really like. They asked over 100,000 people around the world questions about their relationships. Then they analyzed the answers and wrote a book about what they found. The book is called "The Normal Bar." It was published this spring.

Pepper Schwartz is a sociologist at the University of Washington and one of the authors of the book. She explains what the title "The Normal Bar" means.

"The normal bar is about what is the sort of normal day-to-day way that couples handle things. And we're particularly interested in the way really, extremely happy couples handle things in America and around the world."

Professor Schwartz says there is no universal standard for "normal." In other words, people can be happy with different normals. But she did find that couples who described themselves as happy had a lot of things in common.

Normal Couples and Household Chores

Pepper Schwartz says normal for happy couples is helping. That means that neither person does all the cooking or cleaning. About 42 percent of men and women globally said they share chores equally.

But there's a bigger point. She says happy couples see their partner as a whole person—not just as the one who does all the housework, or the one who earns all the money.

"For example, something like 89 percent of couples in America, and Spain, and Canada, Philippines, China, you name it, they support their partner's growth."

In other words, she says most happy couples allow their partner to change — for instance, to try a new job or a new hobby. No one has to be stuck doing the same thing over and over, either inside or outside the home.

And there's another thing, too. Dr. Schwartz says happy couples do not focus on work. The laundry and email can wait, they say. The relationship is what is important.

Secrets

Even among the happiest couples, not everything is perfect. For instance, Pepper Schwartz says she was surprised by how many people keep secrets. I mean, major secrets, like getting into serious debt and not telling their partner. Or having an affair. One woman in the survey had never been to college but told her husband that she had. And one man said he knew that his wife's dad was not her real father, but did not tell her.

"So I do wonder about that part. You know, I wonder what it is that we're afraid of telling our partners and if that's always justified, or if we could communicate even better by telling those things that you know we worry about, or embarrassed of, or part of our past that maybe we haven't shared."

Professor Schwartz found that in France and Italy, 75 percent of people said they had kept a major secret from their partner. In America, 20 percent of even the happiest couples said they did.

International Differences

Sociologist Pepper Schwartz describes Spain as the most romantic country. In terms of other international differences...

"One of the big ones, wonderful ones for the Europeans is that they show a lot more affection, outward affection, more spontaneous kissing. The Asians actually showed less, and we were sort of — the United States was sort of in the middle."

Some differences in how much public affection people show is probably cultural. But Professor Schwartz noted that loving acts like holding hands can actually make couples happier—not just show how happy they are. She says that in general, everybody wants romance. Women often expect men to buy flowers or plan a nice evening. But...

“They don’t realize that he’s even more needy than she is.”

Pepper Schwartz says many of the men she surveyed said they were starved for romance. They wanted their partners to make them feel special. And men said they felt more criticized than women did.

“A lot of what women do, they think they’re just making him better, helping him out. You know, oh, he could dress better, he would look better, he could be neater, that would help him more, you know if he spoke up. I mean, all that stuff. And they perceive it as not help, but criticism.”

She says trying to be a little kinder may increase romance in the relationship.

Happily Ever After

Pepper Schwartz has studied relationships for most of her career. She says many popular books and movies tell about how bad relationships are. But her data tell a different story. She says the majority of couples do not seem to come out of the newspaper headlines.

“Most people are happy with the choice they made, like their partner, as you say, love their partner, and also would make that choice again. I think something like 78 percent of our couples said they’d do it again, do it all over again, they’d choose the same person.”

Of course, people do not always want the same things when they are 20-years-old that they do when they are 60. But sociologist Pepper Schwartz says one of her team’s most important findings is that couples can change. They can talk about what they want. And even more important than that — they can listen to each other.

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