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The 21st century marriage, for better or worse

Today, there's unprecedented potential for happiness — but it's going to take a lot of work

By Heidi Stevens, Tribune Newspapers
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Eli Finkel has a theory on marriage.

Who doesn't, right? Philosophers, romantics and comedians have, since the beginning of time, treated us to their musings on what Groucho Marx reportedly called "a wonderful institution ... but who wants to live in an institution?"

Finkel, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University, set out to determine whether today's American marriages are better or worse than previous generations' unions. After a yearlong analysis of literature from sociologists, economists, historians and psychologists — with research help from Northwestern graduate students Kathleen Carswell, Chin Ming Hui and Grace Larson — Finkel's theory was born.

First, the good news: We look to our marriages today to fulfill deeper and greater emotional needs than ever before. And when those needs are met, today's unions achieve "an unprecedentedly high level" of marital quality.

The bad news? It takes a whole heck of a lot of time and energy to meet these elevated expectations. And compared with the couples before us, we are investing less of both.

"The impact of a satisfying marriage on your global happiness is about twice as big in the new millennium as it was in the 1970s," Finkel explains. "But for a marriage to help us fulfill the sort of self-expressive goals set today takes real time and nurturance of the bond. And we are, on average, giving our marriages less and less."

Behind both the good and bad news is a complete cultural shift in how we view marriage and why we enter the institution in the first place. Because marriage is largely optional now — we don't need it for economic survival, it's not a prerequisite for parenting, forgoing it doesn't make us social pariahs — we've placed a new set of demands on it.

"When marriage changed from a 'have to' to a 'want to,' expectations changed," says cultural historian Pamela Haag, author of "Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses and Rebel Couples Who Are Rewriting the Rules" (Harper). "Expectations have always been pretty high; if you're relying on each other for survival, that's high. But today's expectations are mushier and more psychological."

They also require a different set of skills.

"Because we've changed what we're asking, the one thing that is required of marriage, more than ever, is a deep and abiding understanding of your partner — real insight into your partner's needs and psychological essence," Finkel says. "You didn't need that for food production, and you really didn't need to need it quite as much for love. Not having a very profound understanding of your wife or husband in the 1950s didn't mean there wasn't a real sense of cherishing."

That's no longer the case, Finkel argues, because marriage has entered a new stage — its third in American history.

The first stage was the institutional marriage, which lasted from the founding of the United States until around 1850.

"It would have been considered ridiculous to marry for love in 1800," Finkel says of stage one. "Marriage was oriented toward economic production, tending the animals, harvesting the crops, cementing familial bonds."

By the 1850s and into the 1960s, marriage was in its second stage: the "companionate marriage." The movement of wage labor away from the home and into masculine and feminine spheres, coupled with the advent of the automobile ("courtship no longer had to happen on the front porch," he says), meant romantic love overtook economic subsistence as a marital goal.

"The third model is a self-expressive marriage," Finkel says of today's construct. "As the idea that a major purpose of our lives is to self-discover and find the best version of ourselves became more prominent, we began to look to marriage to help us accomplish those things."

The stages echo psychologist Abraham Maslow's five-part hierarchy of human needs, first spelled out in the 1940s, Finkel says.

"The lowest need is that of physiological well-being — including the need to eat and drink — followed by the need for safety, then for belonging and love, then for esteem and finally for self-actualization," Finkel wrote in a recent New York Times essay on his marriage research. "The emergence of each need characteristically depends on the prior satisfaction of a more basic need. A person unable to satisfy the need for food, for example, is wholly concerned with meeting that need; only once it is met can he focus on satisfying the need above it."

So it is with marriage. The beauty of this new model is that the potential psychological benefits increase as you climb the hierarchy of needs.

"Satisfaction of our higher needs yields greater happiness and richness of love," Finkel says. "If you have a spouse who's helping you meet your most profound emotional needs, versus your food needs, the payoff is greater."

Many of us are failing to spend the time necessary to meet those needs, however.

"If you look at the time-use data comparing how much time people spent together in 1975 to 2003, there's been a substantial decline," Finkel says. "People without children are working more hours than people without children did several decades ago, and people with children are spending far more time in intensive parenting activities, driving kids places ... playing with kids, than ever before."

As a result, weekly hours spent with just your spouse went from 35 hours in 1975 to 26 in 2003 for couples with no children. For couples with children, the hours dropped from 13 per week to 9.

"That data certainly matches the majority of couples I see," says Andrew G. Marshall, a marriage counselor based in the United Kingdom and author of the newly released book, "I Love You But You Always Put Me Last: How to Childproof Your Marriage" (Macmillan). "Either work or the children come first. And yet we expect our partners to be not only our helpmates, but also to help us with our own self-development."

We ignore our unions at our own peril, Marshall warns.

"We have this notion that love is a magic cure for everything," he says. "We think, 'If my partner truly loves me, they won't mind if I put the children first. If my partner truly loves me, they won't actually mind if I'm at work all the time. After all, I'm doing this for the good of the family.'"

"But what we give our time and attention to is what thrives," he says. "And a marriage can't thrive if we put it last."

Healthy unions, Finkel hastens to add, allow for ebbs and flows.

"There are going to be times when it's pretty hard to prioritize attending a weekly art exhibit and sharing a leisurely dinner together," Finkel says. "If you're struggling financially. If you're a lawyer and you have a huge case coming down the pike. If you've just had infant twins."

"What you do during those times is calibrate your expectations. I don't mean lower them, but set other sorts of goals and expectations for that stretch of time so that you won't experience the disappointment and frustration you might otherwise experience."

And keep your sights set on the potential payoff of a successful, self-expressive marriage — even if it's down the road a bit.

"It's much better to aim high and not get there 100 percent of the time than to have low expectations and become strangers who pass each other in the kitchen," says Marshall. "It's an incredibly optimistic message to know that if you put the energy into your marriage, it really can help you become your very best self."

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Meeting marriage's new expectations. Experts say couples can take steps toward bolstering their unions in this era of the self-expressive marriage.

Create non-negotiable alone time. "One thing I have always kept up with my husband is going to bed together," says author and relationship consultant Hellen Chen. "There is never a time where he is already in bed and I am still up, and vice versa. This is our little action of being one with each other." Stop putting the kids first. "I encourage very simple things like always locking your bedroom door at night," says author and marriage counselor Andrew G. Marshall. "If you're talking to your partner, don't let your children interrupt you. When you enter a room, acknowledge your partner before you acknowledge your children."

Accept change as a certainty. "When big changes occur, those are the stress points when a marriage that might otherwise survive falls apart," says social historian and marriage researcher Pamela Haag. "It could be the advent of parenthood. It could be a spouse who gets really interested in work, or loses a job or stops drinking. The marriages that survive are the ones that are nimble and flexible and allow each person to change. I talked to numerous divorced couples who were compatible to the hilt but didn't know how to let the marriage change."

Take the long view. "I tell couples, 'Marriage is forever. Children are just passing through,'" says Marshall. "You didn't actually get together to have a child and then ignore each other for the next 20 years."

— H.S.