

Choices Happy Couples Make

Introduction. We control far more than we realize. While there are times in which it feels like life is happening to us, far more often life is a byproduct of the decisions we make. Some live in continual denial of this truth and suffer because of it. Some embrace this truth and are empowered by it.

The satisfaction of happy couples has little to do with what they cannot control. While circumstances beyond their control may influence their immediate sense of contentment, their overall sense of well-being is determined by themselves, not outside circumstances. Those decisions can be narrowed down.

I. They Choose To Be Intentional

- A. They know a good marriage is not an accident. It is a byproduct of hard work and wise choices, the fundamental decision of marriage (cp. Proverbs 1:7-9). E. Stanley Jones said, “If you don’t make up your mind, your unmade mind will unmake you.”
- B. By choosing intention, a couple is taking control of their relationship. They are refusing to be passive within their own story. They are determined to create the relationship and life that God desires. Every other choice flows from this one.

II. They Choose To Be Happy

- A. Their happiness is not determined by external circumstances (cp. Philippians 4:4, 10-13). Their sense of identity and satisfaction comes internally. They define themselves. Happy couples bring their individual happiness to the marriage rather than expecting their spouse to make them happy. This does not mean they are happy all the time, but their general disposition in life is bent toward contentment and happiness.
- B. Part of happiness is being respectful of one another and the institution of marriage (Ephesians 5:28-29; 1 Peter 3:5-7). Respect is both earned and given. Happy couples work hard to treat their spouse with respect and to earn their spouse’s respect. They act like married people — being one another’s first person, carefully communicating to others their allegiance to one another, and honoring one another both publicly and privately.

III. They Choose To Communicate Well

- A. Communication is a process. We listen, read body language, understand tone, and determine context. We have to be willing to speak when we are tempted to remain silent, to keep quiet when we desire to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Good communication requires courage, humility, and self-control.
- B. Instead of avoiding or blowing up at one another, happy couples learn to listen, talk, negotiate, and find a common ground in order to move forward (Ephesians 4:29, 5:4). Let me show you what to avoid in good communication:
 - 1. Avoid judgment words and loaded terms.
 - a) When you are having a heated argument with your significant other, it can be very tempting to level a real zinger at them — to use words and putdowns you know will wound them and push their buttons: “Oh boo-hoo.

I'm tired of your perpetual 'poor me' attitude" or "Maybe if you were more of a man, you'd be able to handle this."

- b) Such zingers aim to point out their flaws and tear down their worth. They accomplish this mission — but at the expense of trust and intimacy.
2. Avoid "global" labels.
 - a) There are two ways to criticize someone — you can critique their character or their behavior. In criticizing behavior, you are calling out something specific and temporary — something the person can realistically change. But in assailing someone's very identity, you are issuing a global label — a blanket condemnation of who they are at the core; they do not just do bad stuff, they are a bad person.
 - b) Global labels can feel highly satisfying to hurl at someone when you are angry and can seem completely justifiable at the time. In writing the person off as incorrigible, you also essentially absolve yourself of any responsibility for your issues as a couple: "We wouldn't have this problem if you weren't so selfish or helpless."
 3. Avoid "you" messages of blame and accusation.
 - a) The essence of a "you" message is simply this: "I'm in pain and you did it to me." And there is usually this subtext: "You were bad and wrong for doing it to me." When people slight us, it may be true that they are entirely, or almost entirely, to blame.
 - b) But when you lead with that blame, the instigator will instantly be defensive, and that will make working through the issue together impossible: "You always leave the house such a mess" or "You're always late and it's driving me crazy." This does not mean you have to pretend your significant other is not at fault when they are, it just means you use language that communicates the message in a different way.
 4. Avoid old history.
 - a) When you are addressing a certain problem, stick with the issue at hand instead of slinging mud, or reaching back into the closet of your past for old grievances to buttress your current accusations.
 - b) Resurrecting old problems will ratchet up the intensity of your discussion, and will invariably send it off in a different direction and away from resolving the original issue. Plus, your partner will likely be hurt that you are still holding onto something she thought you had forgiven.
 5. Avoid negative comparisons.
 - a) Being compared negatively to someone else sure can sting. We oftentimes want to think we have evolved past the flaws of our parents, so to hear "You're just like your dad" feels like a punch to the gut.
 - b) Our identities are very much based on comparing ourselves to our peers, and to have the person we love say we do not stack up to them cuts at our sense of worth. It can also provoke hurt feelings and jealousy.
 6. Avoid threats.
 - a) Too often people resort to a threat as an easy way to resolve problems, and will even drop the word "divorce" to scare their spouse into compliance.

- b) The basic message of a threat is: “You’re bad and I’m going to punish you.” It is a way of trying to compel desired behavior, but since it shuts down the whole discussion, even if it works in the short term, the underlying issue will remain unresolved. If your partner complies, she will only be doing it to avoid the consequences of your threat, and if she does not, the argument is going to escalate and/or keep reoccurring.
- 7. Avoid attacking with your feelings.
 - a) Your demeanor can truly be wielded like a weapon. When we raise our voice, withdraw into cold hostility, adopt a sneering tone, or employ biting sarcasm, we can wound those we love. Especially when it comes to communicating with women, you would be surprised how a cutting tone of voice can make them feel almost physically hurt. Instead, do your best to keep your voice level and calm.
 - b) As you discuss what is bothering you, describe your emotions specifically: “I feel disrespected when you make jokes at my expense when we’re out with your friends;” “I feel jealous when I see you texting your ex;” and, “I feel hurt when you ignore me when I come home from work.”
- 8. Avoid negative body language.
 - a) Even more than what we say, our body language conveys how we are actually feeling. You may tell your significant other that you are not angry and are willing to talk the issue through, but if your posture and facial expressions say otherwise, they will assuredly pick up on it.
 - b) To keep everything amicable, adopt an open, rather than closed posture. Folding your arms, tensing your jaw, squinting, looking disgusted, balling up your fists, fidgeting in an irritated way, and rolling your eyes are all behaviors that make you seem closed off, hostile, and unwilling to communicate. Create sincere, inviting body language by relaxing your face, making warm eye contact, leaning forward, keeping your arms uncrossed, and nodding to show you are listening.

IV. They Choose To Be Good Parents

- A. This choice does not guarantee they will have great children. Each person has to make their own decisions and that includes children. No matter how good their background is, they can be wicked. On a more positive note, if they have terrible backgrounds, they can still be great children.
- B. However, by choosing to be good parents they determine to put one another before their kids. They determine to love their children even when difficult days come and they do not feel like loving. They choose to be on the same team when it comes to raising children (Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:11; 2 Timothy 3:15; Titus 2:3-5).

V. They Choose To Live For A Higher Purpose

- A. Happy couples are content with one another, but they see their relationship as also having a higher purpose. They benefit communities, extended family, and bring glory to God (Matthew 6:33; 1 Peter 2:12).

- B. When the love of money is not a point of contention within a relationship, a higher purpose, and therefore happiness, is much more attainable (1 Timothy 6:10). By living beyond themselves, couples can place what they want in a larger picture of who they want to be.

Conclusion. Each of these choices are important to a happy marriage, but they do not happen in one moment. While it is important to have a pivotal moment in which you choose to do or be each of these things, for a happy marriage, a couple must continually make these choices. Every day they must recommit themselves to living the choices they have made.

Happy couples do not simply make these good choices. They make these these choices over and over again throughout their lives. They make thousands of choices, but many of them can be narrowed down to these five basic decisions.

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