



“Taking full credit for your successes means you should take full blame for your failures.”

Jeremy E. Sherman, Ph.D.





Child.ol'.a.try

Child.ol'.a.try: 1. Worship of one's children at the expense of one's marriage. 2. Why parenthood today kills sex and creates marital dissatisfaction.

By John Gartner, Ph.D., published on July 01, 2014 - last reviewed on September 01, 2014

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Frank and Gina* were the couple friends admired most—intellectual, funny, professors who taught on the same campus. They seemed perfectly matched. But after the birth of their first child, their sex life dropped out, they bickered incessantly, and both started taking antidepressants. Twenty years later, they're still married, with thriving careers and successful children, but privately they have been unhappy for a long time. "I used to feel that I was the light of her life, and now I feel as though she's annoyed that I'm still here," says Frank, who perpetually contemplates separating.

Close to half of today's marriages end in divorce, but that doesn't mean that couples who stay together are happy. "Even those marriages that remain intact have generally become less satisfying," says Eli Finkel, a professor of social psychology at Northwestern University.

Many couples carry on dutifully with the task of raising a family, showing a brave face to the world while secretly stuck in a mild but chronic depressive state I call "depressively married." Modern marriage, I believe, has hit a perfect storm—a collision between our biology and our contemporary values regarding marriage and child-raising.

Most unhappy marriages seem to founder on the same rocks: children. Noted marital researchers John and Julie Gottman, cofounders of the Gottman Institute in Seattle, conducted a long-term study of 130 newlywed couples. "The data shocked us," John says. Two-thirds of the new parents self-reported that they were "very unhappy after the birth of their first child."



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When the Gottmans taped couples interacting in the lab, couples with children treated one another with more contempt, belligerence, and sadness, as well as with less affection, humor, and empathy than did couples without children but married for the same amount of time. Using a self-report measure of marital adjustment, they found that over the next year, hostility between partners increased dramatically, while the romance dissolved. Three years later, there was little improvement.

More than a hundred studies show that marital satisfaction falls off a cliff after the birth of the first child and doesn't get much better until the last child leaves for college.

Couples have been having children since the beginning of time; why have they become such relationship-killers only now? According to Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, a History* and professor of history at Evergreen State University, until the 19th century, marriage served the purposes of reproduction, economic security, and the creation of alliances between families. No one would have dreamed of resting such a cornerstone of society on something as fickle as love. There was little room for feelings of disappointment.

By the 1950s, people married predominantly for love, although divorce was still rare. In the *Leave It to Beaver* marriage, men and women had separate roles, separate sets of friends, and separate leisure activities. Children were told to go out and play (and no one felt guilty about it). As long as women performed their "marital duty" (whether they enjoyed it or not), sexual adjustment in marriage was deemed good enough. And if either partner had an affair, it seemed easier to keep the fact secret than threaten the relationship.

In the 1970s, with the sexual revolution and the birth of modern feminism, marriage underwent a second transformation: Simultaneously, the bar of our expectations was raised while the resources we gave to our relationships were diminished.

In the contemporary era, couples expect to be best friends, to have complete equality in all spheres of life, and to sustain an ongoing romance with mutual sexual satisfaction—and an exclusive relationship at that.

At the same time, modern marriage is accompanied by ever more dedication of time and resources to children.

These are Olympian expectations, but you'd have a better chance of winning the actual Olympics. The new marital ideal is, observes Coontz, "like the little girl with the curl; when it works, it's really, really good. And when it doesn't, we feel deeply betrayed."

Orgasms for All

By the 1970s, Americans had discovered the female orgasm, and sex became an equal opportunity enterprise. While the shift has expanded human potential and produced richer sex lives for men and women, it has also made postbaby adjustment a more shocking disappointment and a recipe for depressive marriage. Sexual satisfaction is one of the best predictors of overall happiness. Yet in one study, only 12 percent of couples reported not having "serious sexual problems" after having children.

It's no one's fault. The abrupt change in sexual connection between partners is hormonally influenced. Throughout the nursing years, prolactin production depresses the sex hormones estrogen and testosterone, biologically encouraging women to de-emphasize mating and focus energy on keeping their newborn alive. Further, as breastfeeding stimulates the bonding hormone oxytocin, it prompts a shift in attention toward baby and away from husband.

A sexual chasm opens between partners that wasn't there before. The Gottmans found that a full three years after childbirth, women report feeling "not very sexual" and want sex no more than "every week or every other week," while men report feeling "extremely sexual," wanting sex "every day." And when couples do have sex, there is a great discrepancy in their enjoyment of it. Men have orgasms six times more often than their partners.

Many men suddenly feel undesired and unloved. "Something inside them just breaks," says Julie Gottman. The dramatic switch in women's attention from mate to baby, guided by oxytocin, may be "evolution at its best, but it is detrimental to intimacy between the partners." What's good for reproductive success is bad for 21st-century marital success.



The New Childolatry

Some couples survive the transition to parenthood happily. Those who do, the Gottmans find, put the brakes on being child-centered. Studies show that couples who do more things alone together are happier. Yet today's parents, by substantial margins, spend less time alone together, less time entertaining friends, and less time in leisure activity than their parents did—primarily because of an increase in time spent intensively parenting their children.

Here's the paradox: We expect more from our marriages but feed them less. As Maryland attorney and divorce mediator Nancy Caplan puts it,

"The end of the 'go out and play, and don't come home till dinner' era has sucked the life out of our marriages."

Perhaps it's time to consider taking a page from our parents' book on this: Take vacations without the kids and play tennis or golf—or anything—with our spouses instead of standing on the sidelines watching a pack of 8-year-olds swarm around a soccer ball.

Only in the past two decades have we developed the idea that children need an audience for their play. Are they really better off with hovering parents, or are we creating what PT Editor at Large Hara Estroff Marano calls "a nation of wimps"? Is it a coincidence that this generation of children, who have had to do almost nothing on their own, are returning home from college incapable of earning a living? Instead of blaming the economy, perhaps we adults should blame ourselves. Our overprotected children are like domesticated animals, incapable of surviving in the wild.



Happy Adults, Happy Children

To survive happily as couples, we need to put a higher priority on sex and erect boundaries to protect our intimacy. Parents might consider making it a ritual to lock their bedroom door after 10 p.m. so they can sleep naked without fear of exposing their children to the primal scene. The offspring of one longtime happily married couple reports, "In our family we learned that you'd better be bleeding badly before you knocked on our parents' bedroom door on the weekends. We thought it was because they needed their sleep. Only as we got older did it dawn on us, Ohhhh, they needed their sex."

If we require a more child-centered reason to attend to adult needs, consider that a happy marriage is win-win. "The love between the couple is the real cradle that holds the baby," says Julie Gottman. In the Gottmans' studies, couples who made a priority of rituals of romance and didn't focus 100 percent of their attention on the baby were happier—and so were their babies. The infants smiled more, laughed more, played more, cried less, and showed an increased capacity to self-soothe, as measured by their heart rate.

The alternative—depressive marriage—is grim for both adults and children. Children with a depressed parent are, on average, less socially competent, have lower self-esteem, are more likely to have behavioral and academic problems (even lower IQs!), and they are two to five times more likely to develop a psychological disorder.

Nobody tells you what to *really* expect when you're expecting. But in the 21st century, childbirth, predictably, prompts a mental health and relational crisis. On airplanes, in the event of an emergency, we are instructed to put the oxygen mask on our own faces first, and then on the children. Perhaps we need to do the same with our marriages.

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