

For weekly News Column
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Focus on 80 Percent

“How do couples stay happy in a relationship?” asked a young mom in my recent co-parenting class. “They don’t,” chides another parent. “You really have to work at it,” I answered. “*Both* parents have to work at it,” I added.

I have considered her question a lot in the past weeks. So, in honor of February and Valentine’s week, I want to remind couples that it’s okay not to be “happy” all the time; virtually no relationship provides happiness 24/7.

However, experts say that in any good marriage, partners are in agreement about 80% of the time. The other 20% serves as the source of irritation and conflict. Happy couples manage the 20% well by minimizing and overlooking differences.

Take your average couple. At first, they are ecstatically happy, blissfully ignorant of each other's flaws. Oh, he knows that she tends to run a little late, but he doesn't mind waiting. She has some doubts about his choice of clothing, but she thinks it's kind of cute. Both are so focused on making the other happy, that overlooking the less attractive qualities of the other is easy to do. After all, no one is perfect and there's so much to like that focusing on that small percentage of unappealing characteristics seems like a waste.

With time, however, some couples shift their focus from the positive 80% to the less appealing 20% where they see their partner lacking in some way of significance in their relationship. The more they focus on the 20%, the larger those flaws appear to become.

Now she's not just late every now and then, she's late all the time. His sense of fashion isn't just "challenged," he's a total slob or geek. Resentment begins to grow as the distance widens between two people who were once very happy. This often brings greater harm than good in relationships.

The answer to this dilemma, however, is simple. Focus on the 80%. Really, really concentrate on what is good about your partner. Think of the things you

would miss about her. Think about what he does every day that makes life easier for you and your family. So much good is often overlooked when we focus on what irritates us. The solution to a happy relationship or marriage is often to stop thinking about what we *don't* like and *don't* have and recognize what we *do* have.

The happiest couples are those who insist on accentuating the good in each other, while minimizing the rest. So, accentuate the 80 % of what works and live with the other 20 %.

More information related to marriage and relationships can be sent to you by call MU Extension at 660-885-5556 and ask for publication GH6610, "Creating a Strong and Satisfying Marriage."