
Secret to a happy marriage? Delusion

Posted by Deborah Kotz

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We've all seen those mismatched couples -- where the husband is ten times better looking than the wife. Or where she's an absolute sweetheart, and he's a total jerk. What does she see in him?, we think. What does he see in her?

If the couple is happily married, it could be that the better half of the couple has an idealistic vision of the lesser half. New research published in Psychological Science oddly enough finds that people who were, well, a bit delusional about their partners when they got married were more satisfied with their marriage three years later than those see-it-like-it-is realists.

University of Buffalo researchers lassoed 222 couples heading in to apply for marriage licenses for recruitment into their study and convinced them to fill out surveys on themselves, their partner, and their marriage every six months for three years. They then compared the self-ratings of respondents in terms of intelligence, creativity, athletic skills, etc., with how their spouse rated their attributes.

Those who inflated their partner's assets also reported being more happily married. "People are very good at changing their definitions to match how they want to see themselves or how they want to see others," said lead study author Sandra Murray in a statement. They can decide their spouse is the perfect match for them, even if they clash pretty badly.

Seeing a partner with rose-colored glasses could help protect against that decline in marital satisfaction that sets in almost as soon as the honeymoon bags are unpacked. "Seeing a less-than-ideal partner as a reflection of one's ideals predicted a certain level of immunity to the corrosive effects of time," write the researchers in the study.

They say there's a case to be made for encouraging couples to maintain "positive, even unrealistic, perceptions" of each other to stay satisfied over the long haul.

And I have to admit, it does make sense. Thinking your partner isn't good enough for you may entice you to seek out a better partner. Thinking that person is better than what's out there might encourage you to stay and be more satisfied.

By the same token, inflating an insecure partner's sense of self -- by expressing your own delusional beliefs -- will lessen that person's fear of abandonment.

I'm just wondering if couples heading for a breakup can really transform that contempt into starry-eyed romance. The researchers say yes. "People have the power to shape their romantic fates through their behavior," they write. "Indeed, the behaviors that sustain relationships (e.g., being supportive) and the behaviors that undermine relationships (e.g., being critical) are controllable ones."

Are you a realist or an idealist when it comes to relationships? Has it served you well or not?