

Love Secret of Happily Married Couples

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Feb. 9, 2006 -- Want a better love life that goes beyond Valentine's Day romance? Prize your partner's happiness and well-being above your own, a new survey suggests.

Those feelings -- called altruistic love -- are at the heart of the survey, which included more than 1,300 people, 60% of whom were married.

The findings:

- Married people with lots of altruistic love for their spouse had happier marriages.
- Married or not, altruistic love for a significant other was tied to higher levels of general happiness.

The survey was part of the General Social Survey, directed by Tom W. Smith, PhD, of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Rate Your Own Altruistic Love

Curious about your own level of altruistic love? Rate how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements:

- I would rather suffer myself than let the one I love suffer.
- I cannot be happy unless I place the one I love's happiness before my own.
- I am usually willing to sacrifice my own wishes to let the one I love achieve his/hers.
- I would endure all things for the sake of the one I love.

By a long shot, the majority of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with those statements.

Nearly nine in 10 agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement. About seven in 10 agreed or strongly agreed with the second statement. About eight in 10 agreed or strongly agreed with the last two statements.

Happier in Marriage

Married people "that express a high sense of altruistic love toward their significant other turn out to have much happier marriages," Smith tells WebMD.

Altruism is usually defined as helping others without getting anything back, Smith notes. "In this case, it turns out there is a positive payback," he says.

Married people get a "significant increase" in marital happiness if they have "this kind of self-sacrificing, put-the-interest-of-the-other-before-my-own-interest perspective on their romantic and close relationships," says Smith.

Altruistic love can create a positive cycle in relationships, he adds.

"I'll say I put my wife's interests ahead of mine," Smith explains. "Well, she appreciates that and she does the same back to me, and it strengthens the relationship and it leads to a happier marriage. So, I think that's the mechanism."

More studies are needed to check that theory, Smith says.

Not Just for Married People

Married people were more likely to rank high in altruistic love than the unmarried. But altruistic love was a boon for everyone -- no wedding band required.

"Having feelings of altruistic love toward the significant other -- a spouse, co-habiting partner, a simple romantic interest, which hasn't gone as far as either of those relationships -- not only leads to greater marital happiness but general increase in general happiness in one's life," Smith says.

Humans are "both self-interested and self-sacrificing," he notes. "I think sometimes we think of us as only in competition and material benefit and whatnot, and there's clearly more to human psychology than that."

SOURCES: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago: "Altruism and Empathy in America: Trends and Correlates." Tom W. Smith, PhD, director, General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. News release, University of Chicago.

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