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Commitment to the Commitment

I recently gave a program where a couple shared with me that they have been married 67 years. It reminded me that my in-laws made it over 50 years and my own parents made it to 30. I am convinced that both of those marriages would have also made it to 67 years had it not been for the death of one of the partners in each relationship. I admire and respect couples who are able to make it work that long. I think it gets harder and harder for couples to show the resiliency that it takes to celebrate a silver or golden anniversary. Being in a committed long term relationship takes a lot of hard work and sacrifice.

What can a couple do to increase the potential success of their relationship as it relates to duration? A recent study conducted by the Dr. Galena K. Rhoades and Dr. Scott M. Stanley of the National Marriage Project explored the connection between premarital experiences and post-marital quality among young adults. The study "Bigger Weddings, Fewer Partners, Less 'Sliding' Linked to Better Marriages" found three key points:

- 1) **The phrase "What happens in Vegas..."** This phrase doesn't necessarily hold true when it comes to marriage quality. In fact, the study found that past relationship experiences and the related outcomes have a direct link to future marital quality. For example, a couple who had a child before marriage is not as likely to have a high-quality marriage.
- 2) **Sliding versus deciding.** The study found that couples who make intentional decisions about major relationship transitions are more likely to experience higher marital satisfaction than those who simply slide in to them. For example, a couple that decides to live together before marriage through intentional decision-making is more likely to enjoy a happy marriage than those who slide into living together.
- 3) **The Big Fat Greek Wedding Factor.** American couples who had more guests at their wedding ceremony report higher satisfaction with their marriage than those with a small wedding, even when factoring in their education and income.

Keep in mind that with any study, there are extremes on both ends. So anybody reading this article can think of exceptions to these findings. However, if a young couple considers these three keys while they are yet unmarried, perhaps that awareness may help ensure their marital success.

Let's go back to our couple that has been married 67 years. What is it about their marriage that has helped it last so long? Although I didn't directly ask them this question, there has been a lot of research conducted on long-lasting marriages and several characteristics emerged. If you are in a satisfying marriage, chances are that you and your spouse share a high level of positivity, empathy, commitment, acceptance, love, and respect. Sharon J. Leigh, Program Assistant and Janet A. Clark, Program Leader and Associate State Specialist with the University of Missouri Extension Service offer the following about these characteristics:

**Positivity:** A leading expert on marital relationships, John Gottman, has found that the main difference between stable and unstable marriages is the amount of positive thoughts and actions spouses engage in toward each other. Having observed hundreds of couples, Gottman has come to the conclusion that successful spouses have far more positive than negative interactions. Too much negativity – criticizing, name-calling, holding grudges – damages the relationship. However, ignoring problems can also result in relationship problems. Find a balance and stay positive.

**Empathy:** Empathy occurs when one person is able to understand another person's perspective, i.e. putting oneself in her or her own shoes. When your partner expresses empathy toward you (or you toward them), you are more likely to feel good about the marriage and your partner. Husbands and wives are more content in their relationships when they perceive that their spouses truly understand their thoughts and feelings.

**Commitment:** I have a friend who has shared with me that she believes a good marriage isn't just about the commitment, but rather the "commitment to commitment." When two people are deeply and firmly committed to making their marriage work regardless of the challenges life throws their way (hence, commitment to commitment), they are much more likely to have a relationship that lasts. Putting the other person first, without sacrificing your own identity is an important part of commitment. When partners are committed to the marriage and capable of putting their spouses need ahead of their own wants, a more satisfying marriage exists.

**Acceptance:** Feeling accepted is one of the most basic needs in a relationship. One of the most basic needs in a relationship is acceptance. Everyone wants to feel valued and respected. The acceptance of each spouse helps each person feel more secure and confident in the relationship. When one partner cannot accept the individual preference of the other, conflict often occurs. There tends to be a demand for change that is met with resistance. However, when partners respect each other and their individual preference, change may come as needed without putting stress on the relationship.

**Mutual love and respect:** Closely related to acceptance comes love and respect. These are perhaps the most important components of successful. As a marriage matures, life becomes increasingly complicated. Too often the marriage suffers, as a result. Keeping a culture of love and respect for each other in the relationship will help ensure that their relationship will remain strong.

To my friends who have been married 67 years and still share an intimate loving smile with each other, Thank You. For those reading this column who may want to boost their marriage relationship, begin by improving the love and respect you have for each other. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!