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### Relationships

# You know in your gut if your marriage will be a happy one, study suggests



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How can anyone know whether their marriage, years down the road, will be a truly happy one? According to one new study, we already do.

We know in our gut whether or not we're happy in our relationship—even if we can't, or won't, admit those feelings to ourselves on a conscious level, suggests the new research, led by James McNulty, a Florida State University psychologist. McNulty writes in the paper, published Thursday in the journal **Science**, that "even though people may be unwilling or unable to recognize any deep-seated discontent they have toward their partners, that discontent may nonetheless shape their relationship outcomes.

For the study, 135 newlywed couples from eastern Tennessee were first asked directly to rate their attitude toward their partner; they were then given a test to measure their unconscious, or implicit, attitudes. Researchers showed the volunteers a photo of their partner, and then asked them whether a series of words were positive or negative. The words were things like awesome, or awful—easily identified as good or bad—and the participants were timed on how long it took them to say whether the word was positive or negative. The couples came back and answered these questions every six months for four years.

Some of the people took longer to identify a word like awesome as positive—and as the years went by, those people started telling the researchers they were less and less happy in their relationships. Others took more time to say that a word like awful was negative, and those people were generally happier with their partners.

The study design is a little "convoluted," says Dr. Gail Saltz, a New York City psychiatrist and frequent TODAY contributor, adding "I think it's reasonable to question if this is a reliable measure."

But she says the findings bring to mind similar research from the Gottman Institute, led by Drs. John and Julie Schwartz Gottman, and featured in Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller, "Blink." The Gottmans have found that later happiness in a relationship can be predicted by the way each person talks about the early days: they way they met, their first date. Describing that time a negative light—like focusing on the chaos and exhaustion of the wedding planning rather than the excitement of the day itself—doesn't bode well for happiness later.

McNulty defends the study methodology: The theory suggests why that would happen—it's not necessarily the answers that they're giving, McNulty says. Everybody recognizes that awesome is a positive word. It's the speed with which they did it, because their positive attitude interfered with their response time. He says that this test was initially designed by social

psychologists who were studying racial prejudice: They thought that this would be a way to get at people's deeply held beliefs, even if they were unwilling to report those beliefs to the researchers, or to themselves.

The idea is that it's hard for our minds to switch gears once we're already thinking positive or negative thoughts. Showing people a photo of their partner sparks some sort of attitude—whether it's positive, negative, or just ambivalent. And if we're feeling happy, it takes us a little longer to recognize things that are unhappy, is the basic concept here.

Imagine you had a bad day; it's easier to think of another bad thing, but it's harder to remind yourself of a good thing that happened, McNulty says.

To apply this idea to your own relationship, it's not like you need to take part in a multi-year study or give yourself some crazy word association tests. But when your instincts tell you something, make sure to listen.

And, Saltz says, if your relationship gives you a bad feeling in your gut, it doesn't necessarily mean it's doomed. "It might be something that's not even about your partner, but is about yourself, either of which need to be addressed," she says.

Newlyweds especially may have a harder time listening to their instincts about their new marriage, Saltz says, because there's more at stake: They may be more likely to squash down any negative thoughts toward this person they've just promised to spend the rest of their lives with. But left to their own devices those bad feelings can evolve into disdain, or contempt.

If there's an issue in the relationship, and it's making someone have this more negative gut-level feeling, they might be able to do something before it starts to erode the relationship, McNulty says.

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