

Newlyweds know on subconscious level whether marriage will be unhappy, new study says

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Credit: Jeff Belmonte / Wikipedia

Although newlyweds may not be completely aware of it, they may know whether their march down the aisle will result in wedded bliss or an unhappy marriage, according to new study led by a Florida State

University researcher.

Associate Professor of Psychology James K. McNulty and his colleagues studied 135 heterosexual couples who had been married for less than six months and then followed up with them every six months over a four-year period. They found that the feelings the study participants verbalized about their marriages were unrelated to changes in their marital happiness over time. Instead, it was the gut-level negative evaluations of their partners that they unknowingly revealed during a baseline experiment that predicted future happiness.

"Although they may be largely unwilling or unable to verbalize them, people's automatic evaluations of their partners predict one of the most important outcomes of their lives—the trajectory of their [marital satisfaction](#)," the researchers wrote in a paper published in the Nov. 29 issue of the journal *Science*.

The paper, "Though They May Be Unaware, Newlyweds Implicitly Know Whether Their Marriages Will Be Satisfying," outlined two important findings. First, people's conscious attitudes, or how they said they felt, did not always reflect their gut-level or automatic feelings about their marriage. Second, it was the gut-level feelings, not their conscious ones, that actually predicted how happy they remained over time.

"Everyone wants to be in a good marriage," McNulty said. "And in the beginning, many people are able to convince themselves of that at a conscious level. But these automatic, gut-level responses are less influenced by what people want to think. You can't make yourself have a positive response through a lot of wishful thinking."

To conduct the experiment, the researchers asked the individuals to report their [relationship satisfaction](#) and the severity of their specific

relationship problems. The participants also were asked to provide their conscious evaluations by describing their marriage according to 15 pairs of opposing adjectives, such as "good" or "bad," "satisfied" or "unsatisfied."

Most interesting to the researchers, though, were the findings regarding another measure designed to test their automatic attitudes, or gut-level responses. The experiment involved flashing a photo of the study participant's spouse on a computer screen for just one-third of a second followed by a positive word like "awesome" or "terrific" or a negative word like "awful" or "terrible." The individuals simply had to press a key on the keyboard to indicate whether the word was positive or negative. The researchers used special software to measure reaction time.

"It's generally an easy task, but flashing a picture of their spouse makes people faster or slower depending on their automatic attitude toward the spouse," McNulty said. "People who have really positive feelings about their partners are very quick to indicate that words like 'awesome' are positive words and very slow to indicate that words like 'awful' are negative words."

That's because positive gut-level attitudes facilitate congruent cognitive processes and interfere with incongruent cognitive processes. In other words, McNulty explained, people with positive gut-level attitudes were really good at processing positive words but bad at processing negative words when those automatic attitudes were activated. The opposite was also true. When a spouse had negative feelings about their partner that were activated by the brief exposure to the photo, they had a harder time switching gears to process the positive words.

Both the explicit and implicit experiments were performed only once, at the baseline, but the researchers checked in with the couples every six months and asked them to report relationship satisfaction. The

researchers found that the respondents who unwittingly revealed negative or lukewarm attitudes during the implicit measure reported the most marital dissatisfaction four years later. The conscious [attitudes](#) were unrelated to changes in marital satisfaction.

"I think the findings suggest that people may want to attend a little bit to their gut," McNulty said. "If they can sense that their gut is telling them that there is a problem, then they might benefit from exploring that, maybe even with a professional [marriage](#) counselor."

More information: "Though They May Be Unaware, Newlyweds Implicitly Know Whether Their Marriage Will Be Satisfying," by J.K. McNulty et al., *Science*, 2013.

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