

High standards produce mixed effects on marriages

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There is a tension between what spouses demand from their marriages and what they are capable of attaining from those marriages, according to recent psychology research. The results are published in the April issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

High standards, whether in caring, support, or independence, improve satisfaction only in strong marriages. For less strong marriages, such as those involving higher levels of indirect hostility or more severe problems, high standards further erode the relationship.

"Some people demand too much from their marriages because they are requiring that their marriages fulfill needs that they are not capable of achieving, either because they have limited time, energy, effort, or skills to apply to their marriages," says Dr. James McNulty, Professor of Psychology at Florida State University and author of the study.

"But other people demand too little from their marriages. Their marriage is a potential source of personal fulfillment that they are not exploiting," says McNulty. "Ultimately, spouses appear to be best off to the extent that they ask of their marriages as much as, but not more than, their marriages are able to give them."

The researchers utilized data from 135 newlywed [couples](#) living in eastern Tennessee. To start, each partner separately completed surveys to measure several aspects of their own standards as well as the severity of relationship problems and marital satisfaction.

The newlyweds also participated in marital discussions that were video recorded, where researchers studied various aspects of verbal communication to assess the couple's indirect hostility with each other. The couples continued to report their [marital satisfaction](#) via a questionnaire every six months for four years.

"When it comes to verbal problem-solving, indirect hostility is more destructive than direct hostility," says McNulty. "Prior work by our lab and others indicates that direct hostility, such as blaming the partner for a problem and demanding that the partner change, can have important benefits to some couples, specifically those who need to change. The key

is that direct hostility communicates that there is a need for change and even how each partner wants things to change. Our prior research indicates indirect hostility is harmful for all couples."

As newlyweds, husbands and wives reported being relatively satisfied with their [marriages](#) and relatively high standards. Yet their reports also indicated that some couples were less happy and demanded less than others. Initially, spouses were observed to have engaged in relatively low levels of indirect hostility on average, yet there was substantial variability in these, as well.

The extent to which spouses' standards were associated with changes in satisfaction over time depended on the couples' tendencies to engage in indirect hostility. Couples that worked well together, as indicated by low levels of indirect hostility, were better able to meet higher standards and thus showed high satisfaction to the extent that they held such standards, but lower satisfaction to the extent that they held lower standards.

The opposite was true for couples that didn't work well together. Those couples did poorer to the extent that they held high standards because they were unable to meet them, but better to the extent that they held lower standards that they were able to meet.

"Each marriage is different; people differ in their compatibility, their skills, and the external stressors they face," says McNulty. "All of these play an important role in determining how successful a marriage will be and thus how much people should demand from it."

"This research suggests people need to have some idea of what they can get from marriage before they get it. That is obviously difficult, which may explain why couples experience a mismatch between what they demand and what they can actually attain," says McNulty.

Although high standards may motivate partners to work to improve or maintain their relationships, this research highlights the fact that various constraints prevent some spouses from meeting higher standards despite even the highest motivations; indeed, some relationships face larger obstacles to success than do others and some [spouses](#) possess more and better interpersonal skills than do others.

"Couples need to realize their strengths and weaknesses and calibrate their standards accordingly," advises McNulty.

More information: J. K. McNulty. Should Spouses Be Demanding Less From Marriage? A Contextual Perspective on the Implications of Interpersonal Standards, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167216634050](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216634050)

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