

**OPINION**

DAVID BROOKS

# To Be Happy, Marriage Matters More Than Career

Aug. 17, 2023



Credit...Elliott Erwitt/Magnum



By **David Brooks**

Opinion Columnist

When I'm around young adults I like to ask them how they are thinking about the big commitments in their lives: what career to go into, where to live, whom to marry. Most of them have thought a lot about their career plans. But my impression is that many have not thought a lot about how marriage will fit into their lives.

The common operating assumption seems to be that professional life is at the core of life and that marriage would be something nice to add on top sometime down the road. According to an analysis of recent survey data by the University of Virginia professor [Brad Wilcox](#), 75 percent of adults ages 18 to 40 said that making a good living was crucial to fulfillment in life while only 32 percent thought that marriage was crucial to fulfillment. In a [Pew Research Center survey](#), 88 percent of parents said it was "extremely or very" important for their kids to be financially independent, while only 21 percent said it was "extremely or very" important for their kids to marry.

It's not that I meet many people who are *against* marriage. Today, as in the past, a vast majority of Americans would like to tie the knot someday. It's just that it's not exactly top of mind.

Fewer people believe that marriage is vitally important. In 2006, 50 percent of young adults [said](#) it was very important for a couple to marry if they intended to spend the rest of their lives together. But by 2020 only 29 percent of young adults said that.

Many people have shifted the way they conceive of marriage. To use sociologist Andrew Cherlin's language, they no longer view it as the "[cornerstone](#)" of their life; they view it as the "capstone" — something to enter into after they've successfully established themselves as adults.

Partly as a result of these attitudes, there is less marriage in America today. The marriage rate is close to the lowest level in American history. For example, in 1980, only 6 percent of 40-year-olds had [never been married](#). As of 2021, 25 percent of 40-year-olds have never been married.

As I confront young adults who think this way, I am seized by an unfortunate urge to sermonize. I want to put a hand on their shoulder and say: Look, there are many reasons you may not find marital happiness in your life. Maybe you won't be able to find a financially stable partner, or one who wants to commit. Maybe you'll marry a great person but find yourselves drifting apart. But don't let it be because you didn't prioritize marriage. Don't let it be because you didn't think hard about marriage when you were young.

My strong advice is to obsess less about your career and to think a lot more about marriage. Please respect the truism that if you have a great career and a crappy marriage you will be unhappy, but if you have a great marriage and a crappy career you will be happy. Please use your youthful years as a chance to have romantic relationships, so you'll have some practice when it comes time to wed. Even if you're years away, please read books on how to decide whom to marry. Read George Eliot and Jane Austen. Start with the masters.

This is not just softhearted sentimentality I'm offering. There are mountains of evidence to show that intimate relationships, not career, are at the core of life, and those intimate relationships will have a downstream effect on everything else you do.

Last month, for example, the University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman published a study in which he found that marriage was ["the most important differentiator"](#) between happy and unhappy people. Married people are 30 points happier than the unmarried. Income contributes to happiness, too, but not as much.

As Wilcox writes in his vitally important forthcoming book, ["Get Married"](#): "Marital quality is, far and away, the top predictor I have run across of life satisfaction in America. Specifically, the odds that men and women say they are 'very happy' with their lives are a staggering 545 percent higher for those who are very happily married, compared to peers who are not married or who are less than very happy in their marriages."

"When it comes to predicting overall happiness, a good marriage is far more important than how much education you get, how much money you make, how often you have sex, and, yes, even how satisfied you are with your work."

Economists Shawn Grover and John F. Helliwell studied two groups of adults over time, some who married and some who didn't. They found that marriage caused higher levels of life satisfaction, especially in middle age, when adults' average level of satisfaction tends to be at its lowest. It wasn't only the traits people brought into the marriage; marriage itself had positive effects.

We could do a lot to raise the marriage rate by increasing wages — financial precarity inhibits marriage. But as a culture, we could improve our national happiness levels by making sure people focus most on what is primary — marriage and intimate relationships — and not on what is important but secondary — their career.