

21 minutes to marital satisfaction: Study shows how minimal intervention can preserve marital quality over time

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Marital satisfaction—so critical to health and happiness – generally declines over time. A brief writing intervention that helps spouses adopt a more objective outlook on marital conflict could be the answer.

New Northwestern University research shows that this writing intervention, implemented through just three, seven-minute writing exercises administered online, prevents couples from losing that loving feeling.

"I don't want it to sound like magic, but you can get pretty impressive results with minimal intervention," said Eli Finkel, lead author of the study and professor of psychology at Northwestern.

The study involved 120 couples, half assigned the reappraisal intervention and the other not. Every four months for two years all spouses reported their [relationship satisfaction](#), love, intimacy, trust, passion and commitment. They also provided a fact-based summary of the most significant [disagreement](#) they had experienced with their spouse in the preceding four months.

The reappraisal writing task asked participants to think about their most recent disagreement with their partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved.

Replicating prior research, both groups exhibited declines in marital quality over Year 1. But for the spouses who experienced the reappraisal intervention—who completed the writing exercise three times during Year 2—the decline in [marital satisfaction](#) was entirely eliminated. Although couples in the two conditions fought just as frequently about equally severe topics, the intervention couples were less distressed by these fights, which helped them sustain marital satisfaction.

"Not only did this effect emerge for marital satisfaction, it also emerged for other relationship processes—like passion and [sexual desire](#)—that are especially vulnerable to the ravages of time," Finkel said. "And this isn't a dating sample. These effects emerged whether people were married for one month, 50 years or anywhere in between."

This finding may be especially important given that low [marital quality](#) can have serious health implications, according to Finkel.

Finkel cites data that among coronary artery bypass patients, those who experienced high marital satisfaction shortly after the surgery were three times more likely to be alive 15 years later than those who experienced low marital satisfaction.

"Marriage tends to be healthy for people, but the quality of the marriage is much more important than its mere existence," Finkel said. "Having a high-quality marriage is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and health. From that perspective, participating in a seven-minute [writing exercise](#) three times a year has to be one of the best investments married people can make."

More information: "A Brief Intervention to Promote Conflict Reappraisal Preserves Marital Quality Over Time" will be published in *Psychological Science* later this year.

Provided by Northwestern University

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