

Key Evidence Messages on Relationship Quality

September 2013

Welcome to the first bulletin from the Relationships Alliance!

The Relationships Alliance comprises organisations working to strengthen couple relationships. Alliance members are Relate, OnePlusOne, The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships and Marriage Care.

What is the purpose of this bulletin?

This monthly bulletin, produced by OnePlusOne, delivers a set of Key Evidence Messages (derived from recent research) that are of relevance to those interested in strengthening couple relationships including practitioners, policy-makers, commissioners, and Local Authorities to help them make informed and evidence-based decisions.

The Key Evidence Messages represent a summary of high quality and robust research and are drawn from a wide range of sources including recent research papers, latest statistical releases, unpublished literature, and research in progress. The evidence is carefully selected on the basis of its high quality research scope (e.g. reviews of reviews, meta-analyses), research design, methodology, and analyses.

First and subsequent bulletins

This first bulletin presents Key Evidence Messages in the area of Relationship Quality. It focuses on:

- the importance of understanding relationship quality over relationship status;
- how relationship quality can be measured;
- and how and why it may change through time or over the course of a relationship.

Following our focus on understanding Relationship Quality in this first bulletin, provisional ideas for future messages include::

- parental conflict and its impact on children;
- relationship difficulties faced by new parents and ways in which these can be alleviated;
- the impacts of parental separation on children and ways in which this can be managed;
- use and attitudes to relationship support;
- factors contributing to relationships stability; and
- the benefits of stable relationships;

Relevance to policy and Practice

The bulletins will close by including implications for research, policy, and practice and a full reference list. Please note that the full journal papers will not be available due to Copyright restrictions.

Get in touch

Research@oneplusone.org.uk

Feedback on these Key Evidence Messages is always welcome, as is interest in hearing about how they may have been used. We would also be like to hear suggestions of relationship topics where Key Evidence Messages would be beneficial.

KEY EVIDENCE MESSAGES – RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

1. What is relationship quality?

Although there is little consensus around its definition, relationship quality generally refers to how happy or satisfied an individual is in his or her relationship (1, 2). This lack of consensus is reflected in the different ways relationship quality is measured (see How do we measure relationship quality?). This, in itself, reflects the growing need to develop a standardised measure that encapsulates contemporary trends in family formation and values.

2. Why does the quality of the relationship matter?

Poor quality relationships are associated with higher risk of a range of negative experiences, such as depression and ill-health, affecting both couples and their children (3, 4). There are also wider implications for society, including the economic and social costs of relationship breakdown, which currently costs the tax payer £46 billion a year in the UK (5).

By contrast, parents in a happy relationship tend to report a number of benefits to their physical and psychological health, including more health-promoting behaviours. The support provided by a high quality couple relationship has been shown to affect well-being by mediating stress (6). Good relationship quality also affects the wellbeing of children as parents tend to interact more positively with their children and provide sensitive, warm and accepting parenting (7).

Further research has also shown that parents in higher quality relationships have better adjusted children, who themselves are likely to have good quality relationships in the future (8, 9).

3. Why should we be interested in relationship quality rather than relationship status?

Although most research explores the link between relationship status and outcomes (usually because people are easily distinguished by their relationship status, e.g. through marriage records), emerging research has paid increasing attention to the quality of the relationship and whether it differs across diverse family forms. These new studies have demonstrated that rather than relationship status, it is the quality of the relationship that matters. As Holt-Lunstad et al. (10) conclude in reference to levels of blood pressure, “marriage must be of a high quality to be advantageous. In other words, one is better off single than unhappily married” (p. 243).

Furthermore, recent evidence shows that children whose parents have poorer relationship quality have more externalising behaviour problems (such as hyperactivity-inattention) than children whose parents have better relationship quality (11). The research demonstrates that the effect of couple relationship quality on child behavioural outcomes is the same for children from different marital status backgrounds. However, children from households with low income are affected more by distressed parental relationships than children who are financially better off. This impact of relationship quality exists irrespective of the nature of the parent-child relationship.

Similarly, the research demonstrates that a high quality parental relationship may be a protective factor for children's well-being even when there is high-level conflict in the parent-child relationship (11).

Moreover, there are a number of reasons why people may remain in a low quality couple relationship such as 'staying for the sake of the children', not wanting to break up mutual friendships, or not having sufficient financial resources to find alternative housing (12). The latter may be particularly pertinent given the current economic climate.

4. How do we measure relationship quality?

There are various ways to measure relationship quality. Some measures can be used as diagnostic tools (to demonstrate if someone is experiencing higher or lower relationship quality) and others can be used to show change over time (e.g. as a before and after intervention impact measure). As there is still some disagreement in what actually constitutes relationship quality, there is no universally accepted measure (see implications for research, policy and practice).

One measure of relationship quality, often used in surveys, is based on people's response to a simple statement about their relationship. For example, the participants in the National Child Development Study (a longitudinal cohort study that follows all those born on a given day in 1958 over their lifetimes), in 2008 were asked: 'all things considered, how happy is your relationship with your partner?'. They were asked to respond on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy. Other measures of relationship quality have used a scale or series of scales to assess different elements of relationship quality such as sensitivity, excitement, affection and loneliness (see below)

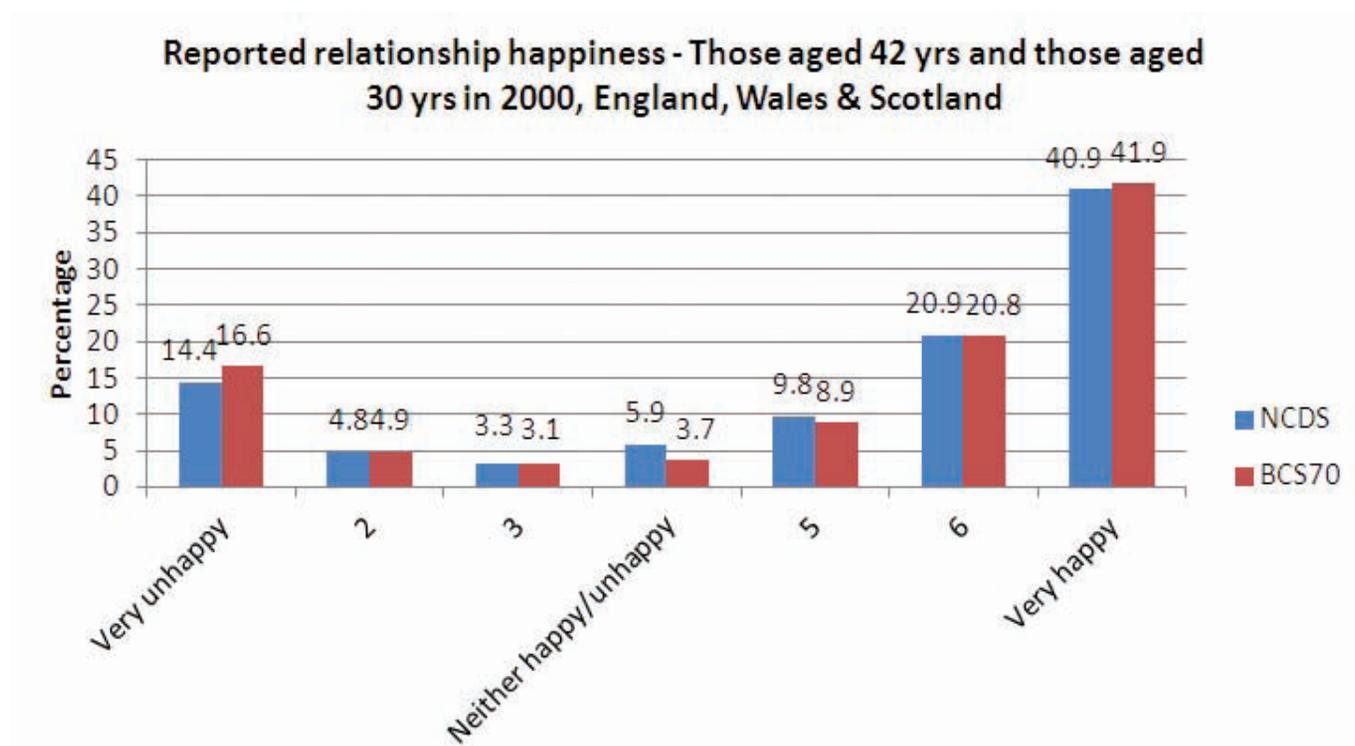
5. Where can I find out more detail on the measures of relationship quality?

More information about the various available scales to measure relationship quality can be found here: <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Healthy-Marriages-Part-II.pdf> (13). These scales have been tested to show robust assessments of relationship quality. Creating new scales may not show such reliability or validity and so it is encouraged to use these existing measures. However, scales are often protected by copyright and some can only be used with permission, with acknowledgement of authorship or for a fee.

Some recommended scales, given their reliability and validity and their brief number of questions, are as follows:

- The Abbreviated Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7) (14): 7-item version of the longer DAS scale. Items focus on 'levels of agreement and disagreement' in the relationship.
- The Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) (15): 6-item scale focusing on the degree of happiness with marriage.
- Relationship Dynamics Scale (RDS) (16): 8-item scale focusing on the negative aspects of a relationship.
- The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) (17): 32, 16 or 4-item scale. Focuses on positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

At present, there is no universally accepted measure of relationship quality (see implications for research, policy and practice).



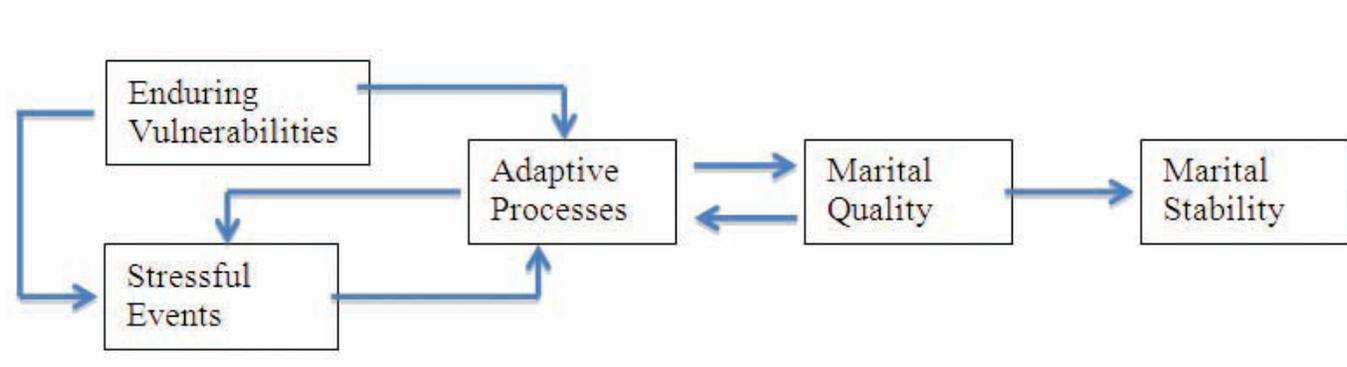
6. How happy are people with their relationship?

The chart above provides a snapshot of relationship happiness from two studies; the British Cohort Study and National Child Development Study. Participants rated their relationship happiness at ages 42 and 30, respectively. These ratings were similar across both age groups. If we take responses either side of the neutral response as being moderately to very 'happy/unhappy', around one-quarter are moderately to very 'unhappy' in their relationship compared to around 70% being moderately to very 'happy' in their relationship. At the extreme ends of the scale, approximately 40% report being 'very happy' in their relationship compared to approximately 15% who report being 'very unhappy'.

7. Do people experience changes in relationship quality through time?

Research has suggested that the extent to which relationship quality changes through time is linked to the initial levels of relationship quality. People with relatively high levels of satisfaction in the first few years of their relationship see a very modest or no decline in relationship quality over the years. However, those who start with a relatively low level of relationship quality experience steeper and more rapid declines in satisfaction (18, 19, 20).

Nonetheless, the research evidence is still inconsistent across the different studies, with some studies showing an average decline in quality through time (21) and others showing evidence of a curvilinear pattern for some couples i.e. steady decline in quality followed by a steady increase in quality (22). There is also mixed evidence as to whether relationship quality through time is experienced differently by men and women (19). These inconsistencies may reflect the different ways in which relationship quality is measured as well as other research design issues such as the duration of follow up.



8. What affects relationship quality?

A well-respected conceptual representation of relationship quality is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model (VSA). The VSA was developed by Karney and Bradbury in a study of approximately 45,000 marriages (23, 24). The results demonstrated that relationship quality depends on three interrelated factors: the personal traits and experiences that partners bring to a relationship (their Enduring Vulnerabilities such as childhood experiences or personality); the life events they encounter on the way (Stressful Events such as unemployment or becoming parents for the first time); and how they communicate and cope during difficult times (Adaptive Processes such as active listening skills, seeing other people's points of view, and arguing more constructively rather than destructively).

Couples vulnerable or 'at risk' in one area, such as adaptive processes, are also more likely to be vulnerable in another. For example, couples with negative

communication styles (Adaptive processes) may also experience more stress (Stressful events), report more aggression, and are characterised by a range of difficult personality traits (Enduring vulnerabilities) (25). As an example of the link between these influences, a person's adaptive processes (such as seeing things from a partner's point of view) is likely to be affected by any stress they may be experiencing at that time. Also, those with numerous enduring vulnerabilities may be more affected by stressful events (26).

The VSA model also highlights areas where interventions can be made to improve relationship quality. Improving people's abilities to adapt is the most dominant approach (such as how to resolve disagreements constructively), however, making life easier for families through wider policy initiatives also has a great potential (e.g. childcare subsidies to reduce financial stress) (27).

9. What makes relationship quality suffer?

Relationship quality can be affected by the difficult events or circumstances couples encounter (18). How couples cope with and respond to these events affects the quality of the relationship. Certain events are of particular importance for informing practice and policy:

Becoming parents for the first time – referred in the literature as the ‘Transition to Parenthood’, this is widely recognised as a time of relationship stress. Studies that compare relationship quality before and after having children, as well as studies that compare couples with and without children, both find a general decline in relationship quality following the birth of a child (27, 28, 29). Due to the importance of this transition, a future bulletin from the Relationships Alliance will focus exclusively on this issue and will expand on the main reasons for new parents’ stress, on how people may be affected differently, and on interventions that aim to reduce this stress.

Work stress – A recent survey found that individuals experiencing high work-family conflict (where work life impacts detrimentally on home life) were more likely to report poorer relationship quality (30).

Unemployment – Loss of work can be damaging to self-esteem and financial stability. In conjunction, poverty is associated with poorer relationship quality (2), principally since it is linked with a range of stressors that increase family conflict and instability (31).

Other factors associated with poor relationship quality include drug and alcohol abuse (32); partner ill-health, including depression and caring for a sick partner (33, 34); and caring for children with special needs (35, 36).

10. What maintains good relationship quality?

The existing research evidence on maintaining good relationship quality focuses on three key aspects: individuals’ own assessment of positive practices, the ratio of positives to negatives in the relationship, and the overall development of relationships over time.

In terms of people’s own views, a study of 112 people in couple relationships, revealed that the most valued aspects of a relationship were closeness, independence, having children, and support (37). Another study of over 1,000 people, found that the most important ways to deal with relationship problems or to improve relationship quality were finding ‘couple time’; talking to each other; developing respect and trust; and sharing responsibilities and outlooks (38). Finally, an interesting study among 1,000 young people aged 16-24 years focusing on ‘the most important thing in a successful relationship’ found that ‘trust’ and ‘love’ were the top ranked factors. ‘Respect’ was ranked third, at 14 percentage points lower than the two top ranked factors (39). This demonstrates that the top rated aspects contributing to relationship quality may vary depending on age and stage of life.

The second approach focuses on the ratio of positives to negatives in the relationship to distinguish happy partnerships from unhappy partnerships (40). In happy couples, the ratio of agreements to disagreements is greater than 1 (i.e. generally more agreements than disagreements) and for unhappy couples less than 1 (40). Couples in unhappy or dissatisfied relationships tend to engage in more negative ways of communicating, such as complaining, criticising, blaming and denying responsibility, and in fewer positive ways of communicating, such as agreeing, laughing, using

humour and smiling (40, 41). For happier couples, the converse is true and they generally display more positive ways of communicating. Recent research has also shown that simple caring gestures, such as saying 'thank you', making a 'cup of tea', and saying 'I love you', can help maintain a strong relationship (42). Perceiving partners as interested and enthusiastic in the face of triumph, and as caring and supportive in the face of difficulties, serve important and independent relationship maintenance functions (43). Whilst this evidence highlights the importance of open and problem-solving communication as the primary determinant of quality, other evidence suggests that this has to be considered alongside the traits people bring to the relationship, as well as the stresses experienced (as in the VSA model above) (41).

The third approach highlights the different ways people perceive relationship 'development' and how this has a bearing on relationship quality. Individuals can be distinguished based on whether they hold more of a 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' view of relationships. Those with a 'developmental' perspective recognise that relationships do change, evolve and grow, and that working on a relationship to keep it strong or to improve things can really make a difference. In contrast, those with a 'non-developmental' perspective see the relationship as a more 'fixed' entity, and the outcome over whether a relationship works out is more down to fate rather than relationship 'work' (40, 44). Those with a 'developmental' perspective are more inclined to seek out support to maintain the quality of their relationship or if troubles arise.

To help maintain or improve relationship quality, people may seek relationship support from a number of sources. These might include marriage preparation and marriage enhancement courses, interventions at the time of relationship transitions (such as becoming new

parents), couple counselling and therapy, support from telephone helplines, mediation, or from the recent wave of more innovative, web-based services. A later bulletin will summarise the extensive evidence on types, use and attitudes to relationship support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY & PRACTICE

These key evidence messages on Relationship Quality have a number of implications for policy-makers and practitioners:

1. These key evidence messages on Relationship Quality have a number of implications for policy-makers and practitioners:
2. Relationship quality is linked to a number of social and health outcomes and other aspects of a person's life such as work engagement. Those people experiencing poor relationship quality are at increased risk of having detrimental outcomes.
3. Relationship quality provides a better account of a person's relationship rather than relationship status. Relationship quality also applies to all types of relationships whether married, cohabiting, or 'living apart together'. To pre-empt the outcomes noted above, understanding more about the quality of a person's relationship is important.
4. Accounts of people experiencing poor relationship quality are a reality. Longitudinal data (that follows people across several years) show that around one-quarter are moderately to very 'unhappy' in their relationships, and around 15% are 'very unhappy'. These percentages may increase due to the structural restrictions to separation (such as finding new housing) that are compounded by the current economic climate.
5. Measuring relationship quality is important both for diagnostic use (to provide support) and to show change through time (for example, when measuring changes in relationship quality following an intervention). Hence, developing a robust measurement of relationship quality that is psychometrically validated is important
6. It is important to recognise times at which relationships face pressure. Factors such as becoming a parent for the first time, facing unemployment or financial constraints, having and raising a child with additional needs, and dealing with ill-health can all put relationships under pressure. However, these factors do not exert the same pressures on different people – some fare better than others and it is important to understand more about why this may be the case.
7. Finally, relationship quality can be improved or the erosion of diminishing quality stemmed. Underpinning this point is the awareness that people have a degree of control over the course of their relationships; that they understand that relationships change through time; and that they recognise the importance of adequate, appropriate and timely support before problems arise or escalate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Johnson, D. R. (1995) Assessing marital quality in longitudinal and life course studies. In J. C. Conoley & E. B. Werth (Eds) *Family assessment* (pp. 155–202). Lincoln, NE: Buros Institute of Mental Measurements, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
2. Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (2010) Marriage in the new millennium: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 630–649.
3. Glenn, F., & Coleman, L. (2009) *Measurement of relationship satisfaction: A report for Parenting Fund*. London: OnePlusOne.
4. Reynolds, J., Houlston, C., Coleman, L., & Harold, G. (in press) *Parental conflict: outcomes and intervention for children and families*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
5. Relationships Foundation (2013) *Counting the cost of family failure 2013*, <http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/web/OnlineStore/Product.aspx?ID=156>
6. Murphy, M. J. (2007) Family living arrangements and health. In S. Smallwood & B. Wilson (Eds), *Focus on families* (pp. 55–70). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Carlson, M., & McLanahan, S. (2006) Strengthening unmarried families: Could enhancing couple relationships also improve parenting? *Social Service Review*, 80(2), 297–321.
8. Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (2001) The legacy of parents' marital discord: Consequences for children's marital quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(4), 627–638.
9. Cunningham, M., & Thornton, A. (2006) The influence of parents' marital quality on adult children's attitudes toward marriage and its alternatives: Main and moderating effects. *Demography*, 43(13), 659–673.
10. Holt-Lunstad, J., Birmingham, W., & Jones, B. Q. (2008) Is there something unique about marriage? The relative impact of marital status, relationship quality, and network social support on ambulatory blood pressure and mental health. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 35(2), 239–244.
11. Garriga, A. & Kiernan, K. (unpublished paper) *Parents' relationship quality, mother-child relations and children's behaviour problems: evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study*.
12. Johnson, M. P., Caughlin, J. P., & Huston, T. L. (1999) The tripartite nature of marital commitment: Personal, moral, and structural reasons to stay married. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 160–177.

13. Carrano, J., Cleveland, K., Bronte-Tinkew, J., & Moore, K. A. (2003) Conceptualising and measuring “healthy marriages” for empirical research and evaluation studies: A compendium of measures – Part II. Washington DC: Child Trends Inc.
14. Hunsley, J., Best, M., Lefebvre, M., & Vito, D. (2001) The seven-item short form of the dyadic adjustment scale: Further evidence for construct validity. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29(4), 325–335.
15. Norton, R. (1983) Measuring marital quality: A critical look at the dependent variable. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45(1), 141–151.
16. Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1997) *Marriage in the 90s: A nationwide random phone survey*. Denver, CO: PREP, Inc.
17. Funk, J. L., & Rogge, R. D. (2007) Testing the ruler with item response theory: Increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the Couples Satisfaction Index. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21(4), 572–583.
18. Umberson, D., Williams, K., Powers, D. A., Chen, M. D., & Campbell, A. M. (2005) As good as it gets? A life course perspective on marital quality. *Social Forces*, 84(1), 493–511.
19. Lavner, J. A., & Bradbury, T. N. (2010) Patterns of change in marital satisfaction over the newlywed years. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(5), 1171–1187.
20. Birditt, K. S., Hope, S., Brown, E., & Orbuch, T. (2012) Developmental trajectories of marital happiness over 16 years. *Research in Human Development*, 9(2), 126–144.
21. Van Laningham, J., Johnson, D. R., & Amato, P. (2001) Marital happiness, marital duration, and the U-shaped curve: Evidence from a five-wave panel study. *Social Forces*, 79(4), 1313–1341.
22. Anderson, J. R., Van Ryzin, M. J., & Doherty, W. J. (2010) Developmental trajectories of marital happiness in continuously married individuals: a group-based modeling approach. *Journal of family psychology*, 24(5), 587–596.
23. Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995) The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: a review of theory, method, and research. *Psychological bulletin*, 118(1), 3–34.
24. Bradbury, T. N., & Karney, B. R. (2004) Understanding and altering the longitudinal course of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(4), 862–879.
25. Bradbury, T. N., & Lavner, J. A. (2012) How can we improve preventive and educational interventions for intimate relationships? *Behavior Therapy*, 43(1), 113–122.
26. Karney, B. (2010) Keeping marriages healthy, and why it's so difficult. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2010/02/sci-brief.aspx>.
27. Twenge, J. M., Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2003) Parenthood and marital satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(3), 574–583.
28. Lawrence, E., Rothman, A. D., Cobb, R. J., Rothman, M. T., & Bradbury, T. N. (2008) Marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(1), 41–50.
29. Hirschberger, G., Srivastava, S., Marsh, P., Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (2009) Attachment, marital satisfaction, and

- divorce during the first fifteen years of parenthood. *Personal Relationships*, 16(3), 401–420.
30. Burnett, S. B., Coleman, L., Houlston, C., & Reynolds, J. (2011) *Happy Homes and productive Workplaces*. London: OnePlusOne and Working Families.
 31. Conger, R., Rueter, M., & Elder, G. Jr. (2002) Couple resilience to economic pressure. In P. Boss (Ed.) *Family stress: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 292–319). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
 32. Floyd, F. J., Cranford, J. A., Daugherty, M. K., Fitzgerald, H. E., & Zucker, R. A. (2006) Marital interaction in alcoholic and nonalcoholic couples: Alcoholic subtype variations and wives' alcoholism status. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 115(1), 121–130.
 33. D'Ardenne, P., & Mordod, D. (2003) *The counselling of couples in healthcare settings: A handbook for clinicians*. London: Whurr Publishers.
 34. Proulx, C. M., Helms, H. M., & Buehler, C. (2007) Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(3), 576–593.
 35. Berant, E., Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (2003) Marital satisfaction among mothers of infants with congenital heart disease: The contribution of illness severity, attachment style, and the coping process. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 16(4), 397–415.
 36. Glenn, F. (2007) *Growing together, or drifting apart: Children with disabilities and their parents' relationship*. London: One plus One.
 37. Ramm, J., Coleman, L., Glenn, F., & Mansfield, P. (2010) *Relationship difficulties and help-seeking behaviour: Secondary analysis of an existing data-set*. London: One Plus One.
 38. Walker, J., Barrett, H., Wilson, G., & Chang, Y.-S. (2010) *Relationships matter: Understanding the needs of adults (particularly parents) regarding relationship support* (Research Report DCSF-RR233). London: Institute of Health & Society, Newcastle University, Family & Parenting Institute.
 39. One Plus One (2013) ICM report. London: One Plus One
 40. Bradbury, T., & Karney B. (2010) *Intimate relationships*. New York, NY: Norton.
 41. Lavner, J. A., & Bradbury, T. N. (2012) Why do even satisfied newlyweds eventually go on to divorce? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(1), 1–10.
 42. Gabb, J., Klett-Davies, M., Fink, J., & Thomae, M. (2013) *Enduring-love? Couple relationships in the 21st century. Survey findings. An interim report*. Open University. Retrieved from <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/files/enduringlove/file/ecms/web-content/Enduring-Love-Interim-Survey-Report.pdf>
 43. Logan, J. M., & Cobb, R. J. (2013) Trajectories of relationship satisfaction: Independent contributions of capitalization and support perceptions. *Personal Relationships*, 20(2), 277–293.
 44. Coleman, L. M. (2011) Improving relationship satisfaction--Qualitative insights derived from individuals currently within a couple relationship. *The Family Journal*, 19(4), 369–380.

