



# the surprising secrets of highly happy marriages

*the little things that make a BIG difference*

After ten years of interviews and nationally-representative surveys with 15,000 men and women, millions of lives have been touched by Shaunti Feldhahn's research. In her most recent research project, Shaunti spent three years studying 1,000 couples to uncover the most important habits of the most happily married couples. What are they doing differently that is making them so happy? Where her books *For Women Only* and *For Men Only* revealed the most important inner needs of men and women, *Surprising Secrets* reveals what matters most in the *process* of relationships.

It turns out, there are 12 little habits that most highly happy couples share, regardless of age, racial background or any other factor – little things that they are doing that many other couples (even those in pretty good marriages) may *not* do. And these habits yield gold for those who are willing to apply them.

This research dovetails with Shaunti's book for leaders *The Good News About Marriage*, and provides a follow up for any leader who wants to provide a popular resource for his or her network, clients or congregation. *Good News* shows that more marriages are happy than most people realize, and *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages* shows how.

**Here are a few of the high-impact habits, from national surveys of the happiest couples:**

## 1. Believing the best of your spouse's intentions when hurt

**The finding:** When highly happy spouses are legitimately hurt, they refuse to believe their mate *intended* to hurt them, and look for the most generous explanation instead. For example, a wife stops herself thinking, "He knew how that would make me feel and he said it anyway," and instead thinks, "He cares about me, so he must not have known how that would make me feel--or he wouldn't have said it."

This isn't just wishful thinking: The vast majority (97-99% even in troubled marriages) deeply care about their spouse. But to be happy in marriage, you have to believe it is true rather than believing it isn't!

## 2. Doing the "five little things" that always matter to men, or always matter to women

**The finding:** For nearly every man or woman, the same few small actions not only matter but have a huge impact on a couple's level of happiness. For example, a wife will have a big impact on her husband's happiness when she notices his effort and sincerely thanks him for it. (For example, she says "Thank you for mowing the lawn even though it was so hot outside" or "Thanks for playing with the kids, even when you were so tired from work."). This pleases 98% of men (deeply pleasing 72%!).

On his end, a husband will have a big impact on his wife when he does something as simple as reaching out and taking her hand when walking through a parking lot, or putting his arm around her in church. This pleases 96% of women (deeply pleasing 82%!). Women and men tend not to do these things because they don't realize they will have such an impact – but they do!

### 3. Going To Bed Mad – And Working It Out In the Morning

**The finding:** Highly happy couples find that when they can't resolve conflict and anger before bedtime, they choose to sleep on it. If anger remains in the morning, they don't let it go unresolved; they deal with it. Although many happy couples *advise* others not to go to bed mad, in practice most of them sometimes do – and find that things are better in the morning. In their practical experience, they have found that trying to 'force' resolution at midnight, with two exhausted people, can sometimes make things worse. The key is for the partner who needs the processing time to tell his/her spouse, "We're okay." And then if anger/hurt remains the next day, the key is to not let it go unresolved the next day. (Less-than-happy couples were eight times more likely to hope the issue just went away!)

In the Bible verse commonly cited about this ("Be angry and yet do not sin; don't let the sun go down on your anger," Eph 4:26), Paul was actually quoting Psalm 4:4 which says, "Don't sin by letting anger gain control over you; think about it overnight and remain silent!"

### 4. Keeping Score – Of What the Other Person Is Giving

**The finding:** Happy spouses keep track of what their mates are giving and what they need as a result, and deliberately try to give back. Many people advise couples to not 'keep score' – but the happiest couples absolutely keep score... they just keep score of the good, not the bad. And as a result, they are very aware of what they "owe" their spouse and try to do things for them in return – which creates a very positive cycle for both partners. Nearly 80% of the happy couples do these daily little things back, where only 23% of struggling couples do.

### 5. Bossing Their Feelings Around

**The finding:** Highly happy couples quickly stop a negative train of thought, replacing unhappy or angry thoughts or actions with positive ones, in order to change their feelings. Every couple – happy or not – experiences times of conflict. Those happiest in their marriages, though, talk themselves out of being mad or stop a negative train of thought to begin with (64% of the happy spouses do that, where only 27% of struggling couples do!). Focusing on the good things their spouse usually does (as opposed to this current thing that hurt them) usually changes their feelings quite dramatically and softens their heart toward their mate.

### 6. Getting In Over Their Heads

**The finding:** Highly happy couples take the risk of getting their hearts broken or looking like fools, and fully invest emotionally instead of holding back to protect themselves; and because they are "all in," they have dramatically increased security and happiness. Many people in marriage (46% among struggling couples) protect themselves emotionally by holding back just a bit, "just in case." But the happiest couples (72%) often became so happy because they committed fully with no thought of protecting themselves in any way. They keep no secret bank accounts "just in case," and vow never to use the "D word" again. Instead of being "risky," these actions make them far happier.

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**About Shaunti Feldhahn:** Shaunti received her graduate degree from Harvard and started out on Wall Street. She unexpectedly became a social researcher and best-selling author equipping people with eye-opening, life-changing truths about relationships, through books such as *For Women Only* which have sold 2 million copies in 23 languages. Her research is regularly featured on media as diverse as *The Today Show*, *Focus on the Family*, and the *New York Times*. See [Shaunti.com](http://Shaunti.com) for more.

Interested in having Shaunti share these truths with your event or congregation?  
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