

What's Your Relationship IQ?

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Tango June 2007

Questions:

1) The number one predictor of divorce is:

- a) Ongoing disagreement over money and financial issues.
- b) The habitual avoidance of conflict.
- c) Yelling and screaming during fights.

2) Couples that "go the distance"—whose marriages are successful—have fewer disagreements about the three core issues: sex, money, and housework.

True or False?

3) Couples that are constantly yelling or complaining are doomed.

True or false?

4) When discussing a problem or disagreement, it is important to:

- a) Keep feelings out of the discussion, and try to stick to the facts.
- b) Be sure you can accurately state your partner's position, including his or her feelings and fears about the issue being discussed.
- c) Focus on practical solutions—on solving the problem. Too much discussion can sidetrack you.

5) Extramarital involvement occurs in happy marriages and is not necessarily a symptom of a distressed relationship. True or False?

6) After the birth of the first child:

- a) There is little impact on the marriage; the quality of a marriage depends more on issues of couple compatibility.
- b) The marriage enters the "warm glow" stage and stays there for several years.
- c) Marital satisfaction drops.

7) Couples should try to resolve most of their disagreements as soon as they come up. True or False?

Answers:

1) b. Which is sad, because we usually avoid conflict precisely because we are so much in love, and we fear that disagreeing or fighting might cause a divorce. We're aware that there has been a 50-percent divorce rate for 30 years, and we're scared. But the way to have a happy marriage is to understand that disagreement is a normal and expected part of any loving relationship and to learn how to handle the inevitable disagreements that will come up.

2) False. Research shows that the couples that make it and the couples that fail disagree the same amount. They also disagree about all the same issues, and there are five core issues, not three—add children and in-laws/friends to the list. It turns out it's not whether you disagree that makes a difference (that's normal and very much to be expected); it's how you handle your disagreements that matters.

3) False. Yelling, complaining, crying, and even revisiting the same issue "over and over and over" might be annoying, but it's behaviors like avoidance, disengagement, contempt, blame, criticism, and "the silent treatment" that lead to divorce. Complaining is saying, "It drives me totally crazy when you call and get the answering machine, and don't leave a message!" Criticism is, "You are so inconsiderate! You never leave a message when you call." Contempt is deadly: "Some people know what an answering machine is for. I guess

that takes a brain. More proof that you're as dumb as your mother." Complaining—even if you yell, even if it's the same old complaint—brings up the issues. That's a good thing. Criticism and contempt erode love.

4) b. Many disagreements have nothing to do with the facts, and everything to do with our feelings about them. It is crucial that you understand each other's positions—both what you think about the issue, and also how you feel about it, your fears, ambivalence, and dreams. Oftentimes understanding and mutual respect are all you really need; some issues don't have solutions. In fact, most disagreements in a marriage have no solution—they are chronic or "irreconcilable." Couples simply need to know how to manage them and keep them from contaminating the rest of the marriage. Mary Matalin and James Carville are the poster couple for how this can work.

5) True. Many people who have affairs report that their marriage is fine, they love their spouse and family, and they don't love their paramour—they just wanted excitement or variety and deluded themselves into thinking that if they were clear about that then it wouldn't hurt anyone. Frank Pittman, M.D., author of *Private Lies* and *Grow Up!*, says a man's male relatives' and buddies' views on monogamy are a better predictor of affairs than the quality of the marital relationship. For example, if a Kennedy was faithful for too long, his dad might have asked if he was eating his Wheaties. Barry McCarthy, Ph.D., author of *Rekindling Desire*, agrees. McCarthy also believes that a commitment to honesty is as important as a commitment to monogamy. Often couples discuss how they will deal with money, kids, and housework before they marry, but not what they're going to do when sex gets stale or someone is attracted to a coworker or neighbor.

6) c. There is so much more to disagree about. This is when couples really need skills. In 70 percent of couples, marital satisfaction drops during the three months before and the three months after the birth of the first child.

7) False. All couples have approximately ten issues they will never resolve. If you switch partners you'll just get ten new issues, and they are highly likely to be more complicated the second time around—especially if kids are involved. What's important is to develop a dialogue or "dance" with your particular set of irreconcilable differences, just as you would cope with a chronic bad back or trick knee. You don't like them, you wish they weren't there, but you keep talking about them and learn how to live with them.