

People Who Think Their Partners Are a Perfect Fit Stay Happier—Even if They’re Wrong

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Conventional wisdom says that if you idealize the person you marry, the disappointment is just going to be that much worse when you find out they aren't perfect. But research published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, challenges that assumption; people who were unrealistically idealistic about their partners when they got married were more satisfied with their marriage three years later than less idealistic people.

For the study, 222 couples were recruited as they applied for their marriage licenses at the Buffalo, New York, City Hall. "We've never had trouble getting people involved in our research, because people are interested in relationships and in understanding their own relationship," says Sandra Murray of the University of Buffalo, a coauthor of the study. The participants filled out surveys on themselves, their partner, and their marriage every six months for three years.

Murray and her colleagues examined what people said about their hopes for an ideal partner, how they described their partners, and how the partners described themselves. From this, the researchers developed a ranking of how idealistic, and how based in reality, each person's perception was. Some people were unrealistically idealistic; others were less idealistic. For example, say Joanne describes her ideal partner as athletic and smart, but not necessarily very creative. Her husband, Frank, is smart and

creative, but not very athletic. If Joanne ranks him as more athletic than he is, then she's being unrealistically idealistic about him.

People who had an unrealistically idealistic view of their spouse actually stayed happier over the next three years than people who were the least idealistic. Murray says she and her colleagues weren't surprised to see this, even though it's counter to conventional wisdom, because they have years of research pointing in this direction.

"People are very good at changing their definitions to match how they want to see themselves or how they want to see others," Murray says. "Someone can decide they're a good driver—even if they've had speeding tickets—if they've never been in an accident." In the same way, people might be able to decide that their spouse matches their ideal, even if it's not really true.