

*Why Rate Your Marriage? A Numerical Score Can Help Couples Talk About Problems.*

## **Therapists Say They Learn a Lot When Couples Commit to Numbers in Areas Like Trust, Teamwork, Physical Intimacy**

By Elizabeth Bernstein

Couples therapists and marriage researchers, who study why some marriages last while others crumble, believe spouses should **score their marriage**. Elizabeth Bernstein and marriage and family therapist Dr. Karen Ruskin discuss on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

When marriage therapist Sharon Gilchrest O'Neill met with new clients recently, she asked them why they were seeking therapy. The couple told her they'd spent years arguing over finances and recently had their worst-ever blowup. The husband complained about how much money his wife was spending; the wife said her husband was controlling. They hadn't slept in the same room for months.

Ms. O'Neill, whose practice is in Mount Kisco, N.Y., then asked the question she often poses in a couple's first session of marriage therapy: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you each rate your marriage?"

The spouses' answers? "7.5" and "almost an 8."

"Whoa," Ms. O'Neill remembers thinking. "What they are saying doesn't match those numbers." She would have given their marriage a 4, she says. "Those scores are very telling."

How would you rate your relationship?

### **Rate Your Marriage**

By giving each of the following 40 statements a rating from 1 (least agree) to 5 (most agree), a couple can get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses in their marriage in eight categories. The quiz, while unscientific, can be a useful tool for gaining insight or sparking discussion.

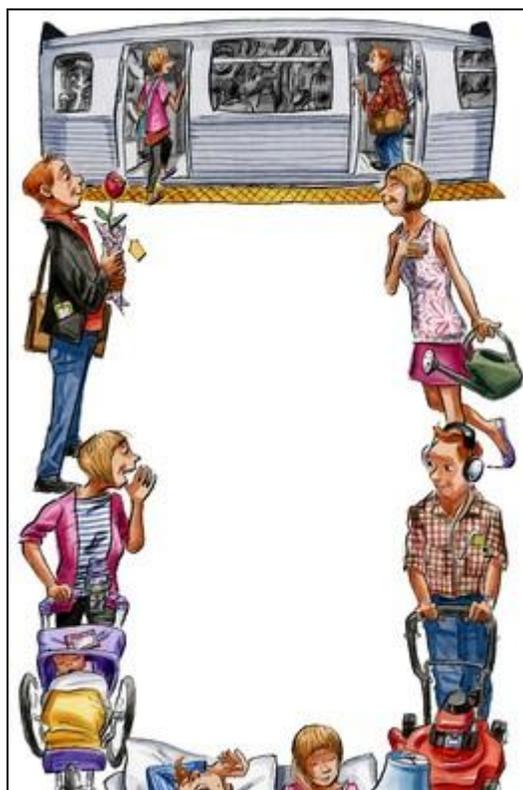
Researchers often rely on rate-your-relationship questionnaires in studies of why some marriages last while others crumble. Therapists say couples can benefit from occasionally using these tools to step back and get a clinical view of behaviors, healthy and unhealthy, in their relationship. The rating process can help start a discussion, clarify strengths and weaknesses and, hopefully, lead to marital growth.

**"Rating helps you be honest with the reality of what you are feeling," says Karen Ruskin, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Sharon, Mass. "And the only way to fix something is to first know what the problem is." Some experts, rather than assign one overall number to a relationship, encourage couples to examine and rate a number of aspects of the marriage that researchers and clinicians agree are most important.**

**Clinicians say they learn an enormous amount of information by asking a couple to rate their relationship—including the spouses' individual perceptions about the level of crisis they have reached, and their willingness to be honest. It is helpful to see which partner states the number first: Often, it is the person who is angrier. The order in which a couple presents their problems suggests the order in which the problems should be addressed, like a road map. "That's worth six months of therapy right there," says Paul Hokemeyer, a licensed marriage and family therapist in New York and Boca Raton, Fla.**

**Attaching hard numbers to the most important relationship in your life comes with some risk, of course. It can be sobering to actually quantify which areas aren't working well. "You can't hedge a number," Dr. Hokemeyer says.**

**But for couples seeking help for a troubled relationship, a rating serves as a baseline, Dr. Hokemeyer says, a point from which to move upward.**



**What does it mean when two partners' scores don't match? Ms. O'Neill, the Mount Kisco therapist, estimates that 25% of the couples she sees disagree on the score. In those cases, it**

is often the spouse who rates the marriage very low who has already mentally detached from the relationship, she says, while the spouse who rates it high is "totally clueless."

The couple she saw recently who gave their troubled marriage such high scores is somewhat typical, she says. "It's a defense mechanism," she says. "People are afraid to say their marriage is on the rocks or isn't happy until they really want out."

Why is it so hard to clearly see and analyze the health of one's own marriage? One reason is we don't have many role models. We don't know very much about other people's marriages—the only real one we ever see from "the inside" (sort of) is our parents'.

**Each person brings different expectations to the partnership. And most people—even our closest friends—don't usually publicly air their marital problems, so we have no idea how our relationship stacks up next to others' relationships.**

Research shows that when a couple compares their own marriage with others, they typically judge their own to be better. They focus selectively on what is bad in others' marriages and what is good in theirs. This is called a Superiority Bias, and couples tend to do it even more when they feel threatened in the relationship, to give themselves a boost of confidence.

"When we want to maintain our own relationship, we distort things," says Arthur Aron, a relationship researcher at Stony Brook University, in Stony Brook, N.Y., and the University of California, Berkeley. "We overrate the qualities of our partner and underrate other people's marriages to systematically devalue our alternatives."

So if you think you would like to try rating your own relationship, how should you go about it? Experts suggest evaluating specific areas that researchers agree are important to a marriage or romantic relationship, including trust, companionship, physical intimacy and teamwork. Readers may want to determine for themselves whether some areas are more important than others.

Some partners won't want to assign numerical values to aspects of their personal lives. But there is merit even if only one partner completes the test for him- or herself. When you have the results, look at the low scores. Do they occur in areas you and your partner agree are important? "One or two low scores you can use as a signal to improve your relationship," says Terri Orbuch, a psychologist and research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

If there are more than a few, it's probably time for a talk. "Start with the positives," says Dr. Ruskin, the marriage therapist in Sharon, Mass. She suggests an opening line: "I love you and I love us. I would like our relationship to be enhanced and grow for many years. So I've been thinking about how to do that."

**Take ownership, Dr. Ruskin says. Tell your spouse you know there are things you can do to improve the relationship, and things the spouse can do, as well. Say, "I know we will want to do these things because we love each other."**

**Here's where you talk about the quiz. You might want to say that at first you thought it was silly and that your spouse may think so, too. This might make the results seem less threatening, Dr. Ruskin says. Explain that you think there are some areas that could use improvement, and ask what your spouse thinks. Make it clear that it's OK if you have a difference of opinion.**

**Ask your partner if he or she thinks you two can handle working on the relationship together. Can you each think of one thing per category that you can do to improve? If the problems seem overwhelming, it may be time to seek professional help from a counselor.**

**Whatever you do, don't compare yourself to other couples, the experts advise. "Evaluate your own expectations," says Lisa Neff, social psychologist in the department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Texas, Austin.**

**"We often compare what we are getting in a relationship to what we think we should be getting. To the extent that what we are getting exceeds our expectations, we are going to be happier."**

### **Rate Your Marriage**

**By giving each of the following 40 statements a rating from A (least agree) to E (most agree), a couple can get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses in their marriage in eight categories. The quiz, while unscientific, can be a useful tool for gaining insight or sparking discussion.**

#### **Trust**

- 1 There is a sense of trust in my relationship.**
  
- 2 My partner doesn't keep any big secrets from me.**
  
- 3 I don't keep any big secrets from my partner.**
  
- 4 My partner would think about me before making any big decisions.**

**5 I would think about my partner before making any big decisions.**

**Companionship**

**6 My partner and I spend leisure time together.**

**7 My partner and I share everyday news and experiences with each other.**

**9 My partner and I enjoy spending time alone together.**

**10 My partner and I enjoy doing things together with other people.**

**Physical Intimacy**

**11 My partner and I have sex often.**

**12 My partner and I have a good sex life.**

**13 My partner and I connect through touch.**

**14 My partner and I hug, kiss or cuddle often.**

**15 Our bodies respond when we see each other.**

**Affirmation and validation**

**16 My partner and I are responsive to each other's needs and wishes.**

**17 I understand my partner's feelings.**

**18 My partner understands my feelings.**

**19 I listen and hear my partner.**

**20 My partner listens and hears me.**

**Dealing with stress or conflict**

**21 My partner and I deal with stress and differences well.**

**22 When there is conflict, my partner and I can usually compromise.**

**23 When I bring up an issue in the relationship, my partner is able to fully engage in the conversation.**

**24 When my partner brings up an issue in the relationship, I fully engage in the conversation.**

**25 My partner and I are able to focus on the conflict at hand, rather than bringing in other issues and escalating our disagreement.**

**Support and assistance**

**26 My partner and I understand what each other's needs are in terms of support.**

**27 My partner supports me when something bad happens to me (such as a job loss, illness or death in the family).**

**28 I support my partner when something bad happens to my partner (such as a job loss, illness or death in**

the family).

**29 My partner celebrates with me when something good happens to me.**

**30 I celebrate with my partner when something good happens to my partner.**

### **Partnership/Teamwork**

**31 My partner and I share each other's values and priorities.**

**32 My partner and I support each other's work-life balance.**

**33 My partner and I equitably share household, family and/or parenting responsibilities.**

**34 My partner and I agree on financial budgeting.**

**35 My partner and I present a united front (to the family/in-laws, friends or children).**

### **Boredom and Excitement**

**36 My partner and I share exciting experiences together.**

**37 My partner advances my personal growth and development.**

**38 I advance my partner's personal growth and development.**

**39 My partner and I like to try new hobbies and**

**activities together.**

**40 My partner and I learn a lot from each other.**

*Source: Arthur Aron, Stony Brook University and the University of California, Berkeley; Lisa Neff, The University of Texas at Austin; Terri Orbuch, The University of Michigan*