

It Takes Two:

Both Life Satisfaction and Depressive Symptomatology Explain Variations in Marital Quality

Victor A. Kaufman, Lisa C. Walsh, and Anthony Rodriguez

Abstract

Happy marriage, happy life? When relationship researchers study marital quality, they often focus on the influence of depressive symptomatology (a negative measure of well-being), while ignoring life satisfaction (a positive measure of well-being). How are both life satisfaction and depression linked to marital satisfaction, and do they each have independent effects? Is one variable more influential than the other? Do associations differ depending on whether the spouses studied are husbands or wives, maritally satisfied or dissatisfied, or in the early or later years of marriage? To address these questions, the present study evaluated self-reports in a sample of 494 low-income, continuously married spouses across 5 waves spanning 11 years. Using correlations, multiple regressions, autoregressive cross-lagged panel models, and longitudinal latent profile analyses, we found that the associations among marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, and depressive symptomatology are robust, significant, and bidirectional over time, but differ in specific, nuanced ways depending on specific characteristics (e.g., gender, marital trajectory subgroup). Along the way, we observed that a happy marriage is not necessarily a requirement for a happy life (23.1% of couples with low marital satisfaction had moderate life satisfaction), and 47.1% of couples rate their marital quality differently (e.g., one spouse was satisfied with the marriage while the other spouse was dissatisfied). Most importantly, we find that life satisfaction is a better predictor of marital quality than depressive symptomatology. However, models that include both positive and negative measures of well-being provide a better explanation of variations in marital satisfaction over time.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, depression, well-being