Are you a CONSCIOUS COUPLE?

Partners who make thoughtful decisions together stay together.
Jan Tuckwood
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Do you have a decisive marriage?

Research shows that how thoughtfully couples make decisions can have a lasting effect on the quality of their romantic relationships. Couples who are decisive before marriage — intentionally defining their relationships — appear to have better marriages than couples who simply let inertia carry them through major transitions.

"Making decisions and talking things through with partners is important," said Galena K. Rhoades, a relationship researcher at the University of Denver and co-author of the report. "When you make an intentional decision, you are more likely to follow through on that."

While the finding may seem obvious, the reality is that many couples avoid real decision-making. Many couples living together, for instance, did not sit down and talk about cohabitation. Often one partner had begun spending more time at the other's home, or a lease expired, forcing the couple to formalize a living arrangement.

"Couples who slide through their relationship transitions have poorer marital quality than those who make intentional decisions about major milestones," Rhoades and her colleagues wrote.

The research stems from Connie Ingram makes her living helping people improve their lives, so you'd think her life just falls into place, right?

Actually, the Royal Palm Beach psychotherapist applies as much thought to her own contentment as she does to that of her clients.

She lives with intention, setting goals each year in five areas: emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual and physical.

What's that mean? Ingram, who's been in private practice for 25 years, gave us a couple of examples: "My social goal for this year is to be the initiator of social activities with people who are not the best at initiating.

"A study that began with 1,294 young adults ages 18 to 34 recruited to the Relationship Development Study in 2007 and 2008. Over the next five years, 418 of the individuals in the study married, offering the researchers a glimpse into the lives and decision-making of couples before and after marriage. The researchers collected data on prior romantic experiences, whether the relationship started by "hooking up" in a casual relationship, whether the couple had a big or small wedding, and what the overall quality of the marriage was.

Notably, they found that the decisions and experiences with others before marriage had a lasting effect on the relationship. In the study group, most people had had sex before marriage, reporting an average of five sexual partners. But 23 percent of the subjects had only one sexual partner, their eventual spouse. Those individuals reported higher marriage quality than people who had had multiple sexual partners.

People who lived with another person before marrying also reported a lower-quality relationship. In that group, 35 percent had higher-quality marriages. Among those who had not lived with another romantic partner before marriage, 42 percent had higher-quality marriages.

The finding is counterintuitive, given that experience navigating relationships should leave one better equipped to manage conflict and sustain a marriage. But past romantic experience can also be a reminder that there are other options.

"Prior relationship experience leaves some kind of imprint on us that we carry forward," Rhoades said. "We compare new partners to old partners."

In the study, having a big wedding also was related to a stronger marriage. Not everyone can afford a

large wedding, of course, but the finding held even after the researchers controlled for differences in income.

It may be that couples who plan big weddings have more family support and friendships, both of which are good for a marriage. But the discussions and decision-making that go into planning such a large event also may be a sign that the couple have made conscious decisions about the relationship. Couples who started out in a casual sexual relationship were less likely to have a high-quality marriage. Among these couples, 36 percent had high-quality marriages, compared with 42 percent of couples who said they did not "hook up" before dating.

Most of the couples in the study who lived together before marriage said they actively discussed the decision; however, 37 percent said cohabitation was something that "just happened" to them. Overall, couples in the first group had better marriages than those in the second.

"Sliding through life-altering transitions leads to a worse outcome," said Scott Stanley, a research professor at the University of Denver and co-author of the study.

Stanley said that many couples end up sliding into big decisions — rather than making them — as a way to avoid "the talk" that helps define a relationship and shared commitment.

"Relationships today are much more ambiguous," said Stanley, who writes a blog about relationships for Psychology Today. "If you define things, you risk breaking up. Maybe you don't really want to know how committed they are, and it feels safer not to have the talk."

In our culture, many couples spend a lot of time together and have sex, but they may not be sure where they stand. Stanley noted that the very first "talk" couples may need to have is to answer the question, "Is this a date?"

"People are not even clear now on what's a date, what's not a date, what are the rules," Stanley said. The larger lesson from the study, the authors say, is that couples should make active decisions about their relationships and major life events, rather than drifting through one year after another. Showing intent in some form — from planning the first date, to living together, to the wedding and beyond — can help improve the quality of a marriage overall.

"At the individual level, know who you are and what you are about, and make decisions when it counts rather than letting things slide," Stanley said. "Once you are a couple, do the same thing in terms of how you approach major transitions in your relationship."