

1 Almost 50 years ago, psychiatrists Richard Rahe and Thomas Holmes developed an
2 inventory of the most distressing human experiences that we could have. Number one on
3 the list? Death of a spouse. Number two, divorce. Three, marital separation. Now,
4 generally, but not always, for those three to occur, we need what comes in number seven
5 on the list, which is marriage.

6 Fourth on the list is imprisonment in an institution. Now, some say number seven has
7 been counted twice.

8 I don't believe that.

9 When the life stress inventory was built, back then, a long-term relationship pretty much
10 equated to a marriage. Not so now. So, for the purposes of this talk, I'm going to be
11 including de facto relationships, common-law marriages and same-sex marriages, or
12 same-sex relationships soon hopefully to become marriages. And I can say from my work
13 with same-sex couples, the principles I'm about to talk about are no different. They're
14 the same across all relationships.

15 So, in a modern society, we know that prevention is better than cure. We vaccinate
16 against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, measles. We have awareness
17 campaigns for melanoma, stroke, diabetes -- all important campaigns. But none of those
18 conditions come close to affecting 45 percent of us. Forty-five percent: that's our current
19 divorce rate. Why no prevention campaign for divorce?

20 Well, I think it's because our policymakers don't believe that things like attraction and
21 the way relationships are built is changeable or educable. Why? Well, our policymakers
22 currently are Generation X. They're in their 30s to 50s. And when I'm talking to these
23 guys about these issues, I see their eyes glaze over, and I can see them thinking, "Doesn't
24 this crazy psychiatrist get it? You can't control the way in which people attract other
25 people and build relationships." Not so, our dear millennials. This is the most
26 information-connected, analytical and skeptical generation, making the most informed
27 decisions of any generation before them. And when I talk to millennials, I get a very
28 different reaction. They actually want to hear about this. They want to know about how
29 do we have relationships that last?

30 So, for those of you who want to embrace the post- "romantic destiny" era with me, let
31 me talk about my three life hacks for preventing divorce. Now, we can intervene to
32 prevent divorce at two points: later, once the cracks begin to appear in an established
33 relationship; or earlier, before we commit, before we have children. And that's where I'm
34 going to take us now.

35 So, my first life hack: millennials spend seven-plus hours on their devices a day. That's
36 American data. And some say, probably not unreasonably, this has probably affected
37 their face-to-face relationships. Indeed, and add to that the hookup culture, ergo apps
38 like Tinder, and it's no great surprise that the 20-somethings that I work with will often
39 talk to me about how it is often easier for them to have sex with somebody that they've
40 met than have a meaningful conversation.

41 Now, some say this is a bad thing. I say this is a really good thing. It's a particularly good
42 thing to be having sex outside of the institution of marriage. Now, before you go out and
43 get all moral on me, remember that Generation X, in the American Public Report, they
44 found that 91 percent of women had had premarital sex by the age of 30. Ninety-one
45 percent. It's a particularly good thing that these relationships are happening later. See,
46 boomers in the '60s -- they were getting married at an average age for women of 20 and
47 23 for men. 2015 in Australia? That is now 30 for women and 32 for men. That's a good
48 thing, because the older you are when you get married, the lower your divorce rate.
49 Why? Why is it helpful to get married later? Three reasons.

50 Firstly, getting married later allows the other two preventers of divorce to come into
51 play. They are tertiary education and a higher income, which tends to go with tertiary
52 education. So, these three factors all kind of get mixed up together. Number two,
53 neuroplasticity research tells us that the human brain is still growing until at least the
54 age of 25. So that means how you're thinking and what you're thinking is still changing
55 up until 25. And thirdly, and most importantly to my mind, is personality. Your
56 personality at the age of 20 does not correlate with your personality at the age of 50. But
57 your personality at the age of 30 does correlate with your personality at the age of 50. So
58 when I ask somebody who got married young why they broke up, and they say, "We grew
59 apart," they're being surprisingly accurate, because the 20s is a decade of rapid change
60 and maturation.

61 So, the first thing you want to get before you get married is older.

62 Number two, John Gottman, psychologist and relationship researcher, can tell us many
63 factors that correlate with a happy, successful marriage. But the one that I want to talk
64 about is a big one: 81 percent of marriages implode, self-destruct, if this problem is
65 present. And the second reason why I want to talk about it here is because it's something
66 you can evaluate while you're dating. Gottman found that the relationships that were the
67 most stable and happy over the longer term were relationships in which the couple
68 shared power. They were influenceable: big decisions, like buying a house, overseas
69 trips, buying a car, having children. But when Gottman drilled down on this data, what
70 he found was that women were generally pretty influenceable. Guess where the problem
71 lay?

72 Yeah, there's only two options here, isn't there? Yeah, we men were to blame. The other
73 thing that Gottman found is that men who are influenceable also tended to be
74 "outstanding fathers." So, women: How influenceable is your man? Men: you're with her
75 because you respect her. Make sure that respect plays out in the decision-making
76 process.

77 Number three. I'm often intrigued by why couples come in to see me after they've been
78 married for 30 or 40 years. This is a time when they're approaching the infirmities and
79 illness of old age. It's a time when they're particularly focused on caring for each other.
80 They'll forgive things that have bugged them for years. They'll forgive all betrayals, even
81 infidelities, because they're focused on caring for each other. So, what pulls them apart?
82 The best word I have for this is reliability, or the lack thereof. Does your partner have
83 your back? It takes two forms. Firstly, can you rely on your partner to do what they say
84 they're going to do? Do they follow through? Secondly, if, for example, you're out and
85 you're being verbally attacked by somebody, or you're suffering from a really disabling
86 illness, does your partner step up and do what needs to be done to leave you feeling
87 cared for and protected? And here's the rub: if you're facing old age, and your partner
88 isn't doing that for you -- in fact, you're having to do that for them -- then in an already-
89 fragile relationship, it can look a bit like you might be better off out of it rather than in it.

90 So, is your partner there for you when it really matters? Not all the time, 80 percent of
91 the time, but particularly if it's important to you. On your side, think carefully before you

92 commit to do something for your partner. It is much better to commit to as much as you
93 can follow through than to commit to more sound-good-in-the-moment and then let
94 them down. And if it's really important to your partner, and you commit to it, make sure
95 you move hell and high water to follow through.

96 Now, these are things that I'm saying you can look for. Don't worry, these are also things
97 that can be built in existing relationships.

98 I believe that the most important decision that you can make is who you choose as a life
99 partner, who you choose as the other parent of your children. And of course, romance
100 has to be there. Romance is a grand and beautiful and quirky thing. But we need to add
101 to a romantic, loving heart an informed, thoughtful mind, as we make the most
102 important decision of our life.

103 Thank you.