

shaunti feldhahn

best selling author of *for women only*

the surprising secrets of

highly happy
marriages

the little things
that make a
big difference



Praise for
The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages

“I am thrilled with the findings, clear reporting, and explanations. Shaunti is tireless at tracking down the truths that matter to relationships—and countless men and women have benefitted as a result. I have already started using some of this new data at my conferences!”

—EMERSON EGGERICHS, best-selling author
of *Love and Respect*

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Association of Christian Counselors

“One of my favorite things about this book is how practical these secrets are. These are things anybody can do to make their marriage even more satisfying!”

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“Shaunti is one of those rare communicators who really gets marriage and all the give-and-take that’s required. You’re holding months’ worth of marital counseling in your hands!”

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of the Every Woman’s Battle series

“The entire time I was reading this book I kept stopping and saying to my wife, ‘Oh, wow! Listen to this!’ The great truth within these pages is that little things do indeed mean a lot.”

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“Shaunti is one of the best researchers in the field today, and I’m always encouraged and surprised by her findings and how practical they are. I will be recommending this book to the women I minister to.”

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“What an important and desperately needed book! Shaunti debunks so many of the marriage myths that we have taken as gospel and shares the real secrets to happily ever after.”

—KATHI LIPP, author of *The Husband Project* and *Praying God’s Word for Your Husband*

“Shaunti has done the research, dissected the results, and delivered to us the proven recipes for success. Even after thirty years of marriage, I learned so much! This is a book every married person should read!”

—JILL SAVAGE, CEO of Hearts at Home and author of *No More Perfect Moms*

“Every married person and every person who wants to be married needs to read this book. It’s a fun and surprising journey that can totally transform your marriage—I promise.”

—VALORIE BURTON, author of *Happy Women Live Better*

“This book takes the mystery out of happy marriages by boiling it down to some key attitudes and actions that can make all the difference between a mediocre marriage and a magnificent one.”

—LESLIE VERNICK, licensed counselor, relationship coach, speaker, and best-selling author of *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*

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highly happy
marriages

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by Shaunti and Jeff Feldhahn

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

THE SURPRISING SECRETS OF HIGHLY HAPPY MARRIAGES

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-60142-121-0

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-360-3

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Cover design by Lucy Iloenyosi

Published in association with the literary agency of Calvin Edwards, 1220 Austin Glen Drive, Atlanta, Georgia 30338.

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, New York, a Penguin Random House Company.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Feldhahn, Shaunti Christine.

The surprising secrets of highly happy marriages : the little things that make a big difference / Shaunti Feldhahn. — First Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60142-121-0 — ISBN 978-1-60142-360-3 (electronic) 1. Marriage.

2. Man-woman relationships. 3. Happiness. I. Title.

HQ503.F45 2013

306.81—dc23

2013037194

Printed in the United States of America

2014—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Excerpted from *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages* by Shaunti Feldhahn
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For Jeff:

*My beloved, my friend...and my secret
weapon in every research project.
This book is as much yours as it is mine.*

And for our children:

*May you know the joy of a Yes! marriage in
His time.*

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The Truth About Highly Happy and You

How a Handful of
High-Leverage Secrets
Unlocks Delight in Your Marriage

The very first e-mail I received after the release of *For Women Only* came from an anonymous woman. I'll never forget her note. It was just one line:

I got a divorce five years ago, and now I know why.

I read it and gasped. I knew the book revealed some surprising insights about men that most women just didn't get. I had been continuously shocked myself during my years of research!

But her e-mail brought home the importance of this knowledge in a whole new way.

That was nearly ten years ago. Since then, my husband, Jeff, and I have researched and written *For Men Only* and other books. We have spoken at hundreds of conferences, seminars, churches, simulcasts, and stadium events. And during that time, literally thousands of men and women have come up to us at the book table or stopped us in a hallway. With a stunned look in their eyes, they say things like “I wish I had known this before I got married!” or “This book saved our marriage” or even “I’m going to cancel the divorce filing on Wednesday.”

I’m not making this up.

Trust me, they’re not talking about any special wisdom that Jeff or I have conjured up. They’re talking about a before-and-after experience. What they mean is “I used to be clueless about what my spouse needed, and I didn’t realize it.” What they mean is “Knowing now what I totally missed before—about my spouse’s inner fears and needs and desires—changes everything.”

And they are right.

I started calling these breakthroughs of sudden insight “light bulb on!” moments. They land in your relationship like a bright orange marker. Before, you thought and acted one way. After, you think and act differently. You suddenly see what you didn’t

before. How you do a relationship—how you feel about it, what you expect, and what you get from it—changes. Light bulb on!

This book on highly happy marriages is packed with moments like that.

Without a doubt, the dream of a happy marriage is one of the most consistent longings of the human heart. Most of us deeply want to experience an abundant, delightful, lifelong companionship that we can thank God for every day. Forget the bleak statistics we've seen, forget the bad rap that committed, lifelong marriage gets in the media—we want to marry our best friend, then *enjoy* our spouse and *enjoy* being married. And many people do!

But I've also noticed that many others feel stuck in a rut and don't know how to get out of it. Some not-yet-married couples aren't sure they can navigate the transition to a lifetime commitment—or whether the dream of a forever marriage is even realistic. And many married couples—especially in times of heartache—harbor secret doubts about whether a great marriage is possible for them. Some have stopped hoping for better.

Instead of highly happy, they've settled for sometimes happy or even mostly mediocre.

But it doesn't have to be that way. You'd be surprised what a few sudden flashes of insight can do for a couple. Let me show you what I mean.

Why Do Some Marriages Turn...Good?

You may have noticed that many marriage books and efforts at relationship improvement try to increase a couple's happiness by digging into key relationship problems. Essentially, they're asking things like, "What's the underlying reason for this particular problem?" Or, bigger picture: "Why do marriages turn bad?" Identify the reason, identify the problem—and fix it. Indeed, this is great because all of us need that sort of help sometimes.

For this book, though, I aimed my research in a different direction. I wanted to know: *Why do marriages turn good?*

If a so-so union became delightful, I wanted to know what made the difference. Millions of couples truly enjoy each other in strong, rewarding relationships. What do they do right, and what can we learn from them that would make our relationships just as strong and rewarding?

It makes a lot of sense to study the winners. Aspiring athletes who want to improve how they throw a ball, swing a racket, or twist gracefully in the air to land at just the right angle on the ice spend hours studying those who do it best. Psychologists, change-management experts, and counselors have consistently found that in any endeavor of life, if we want to change, improve, or be inspired, we have to study what some call the bright spots, not

just the problems. After all, if you want to be more like Jesus, you don't spend the bulk of your time studying the Pharisees, His religious-leader opponents, in order to figure out how to *not* be like them. You study Jesus.

If we want to change, improve, or be inspired, we have to study the bright spots, not just the problems.

So for the last few years, I've been studying the bright spots in exceptionally happy marriages. Regardless of the age, cultural background, or economic situation of these lovebirds, I went looking for the answer to one overarching question:

What simple, learnable habits are common to highly happy couples—habits that they may not even realize are making them so happy, and that others can replicate?

In other words, what are the surprising secrets of highly happy marriages?

Of course, to have any hope of uncovering their secrets, we first had to identify the highly happy couples—ones who could

truly inspire and educate the rest of us (whether married or not). So we went on a national search.

It happened like this.

Identifying the Yes! Couples

We started by casting a wide net. Working with more than a dozen researchers, analysts, and various specialists over the course of three years, I conducted and analyzed interviews, surveys, and focus groups with more than two thousand married men and women.¹ I gathered input from couples of different ages, ethnic groups, stages of life, cultural backgrounds, geographical areas, and religious beliefs. My interview subjects ranged from people sitting next to me on airplanes, to dozens of police officers and their spouses on a weekend getaway, to couples referred to me by counselors and community groups and readers, to hundreds of couples on a week-long marriage cruise—and many others in between. For a researcher on a mission, the world is a smorgasbord of people to hit up with questions!

Then I began to focus on what I could learn from the happiest couples. Of the roughly 1,000 couples that I interviewed and surveyed, 350 clearly revealed themselves to be bright spots, the most happily married couples whose habits I most wanted to study. To identify these role models, I asked a simple question:

Are you, personally, generally happy in your marriage these days and enjoying being married? (Choose one answer.)

1. Yes!
2. Yes, most of the time.
3. It depends—sometimes yes, sometimes no.
4. Not really.
5. No! I am really unhappy.

Most answers fell into the “Yes, most of the time” category, with a bell curve on either side. For many couples, the answers were split. For example, one spouse might answer “Yes!” while the other picked “Yes, most of the time,” or even one of the negative answers.

The couples I most wanted to study and learn from, however, were those where *both* the husband and the wife independently and anonymously chose “Yes!” As you will see from the survey results, there is a significant difference between a truly Yes! couple and a couple where one or both spouses answered “Yes, most of the time.” You wouldn’t think that there would be such a difference in how they do things in their relationship, but there is. And that difference yields gold for us as we investigate what the Yes! couples have to teach us.

First, though, we had to extract the gold. And this brings us to one of my biggest surprises about researching happy marriages:

Happy couples can rarely identify what *exactly* it is that is making them so happy! Not without some purposeful digging, that is.

Happy couples can rarely identify
what exactly it is that is making
them so happy!

Maybe you've already noticed. When you ask a happy couple what they are doing that makes them so happy, they tend to smile and say something sweet and even inspiring but, honestly, not all that helpful. "Communication is absolutely vital," they'll say. Or "We learned how to fight fair." Or "We just love being with each other."

Sure, but what can you do with those comments? "Communication" or knowing how to "fight fair" sounds great but...what does that *mean*? What are they doing differently from what you are trying to do? More to the point, what is it, specifically, that *you* can do differently if you want to get their results?

In those conversations, you often walk away wishing you were more like them but not any more clear on how to get there.

A huge part of our challenge as researchers, then, was to ask the specific questions—and the telling follow-up questions—that would pull into the spotlight their hidden habits of success.

Most of the time, those critical differentiating habits were nearly invisible to the happy couple because they were actually quite...small.

Most of the time, those critical differentiating habits were nearly invisible to the happy couple because they were actually quite...small.

It's true. In our happiness research, Jeff and I discovered again and again that contrary to popular belief, it's usually not the biggies—in-laws, money, sex—that determine the level of day-to-day mutual happiness in a marriage. Much more often, it's daily unspoken beliefs, assumptions, and practices that make the difference *regardless* of the big issues. In other words, it is *how* we handle those issues that determines how much we enjoy marriage.

Small difference makers, maybe. But immensely powerful, and—for you and me—nearly priceless. Because once you know that they make a difference, you can do them on purpose. And even though most of us overlook them, they tend to be as close as the end of your nose. I'll give you an example.

Priceless Discoveries Just Out of Sight

At one marriage conference Jeff and I did for dozens of first responders and their spouses, we conducted a real-time keypad survey and (as we always do) had spouses sit on opposite sides of the room so they could be completely candid in their answers about what were largely high-stress marriages. After the group came back together, we projected the answers on the screen.

The final slide, which we left up on the screen, showed the results to a question asking how they felt about their spouses. Fully 95 percent of those in the room answered that they “absolutely” cared about their spouses (just 5 percent answered “sometimes,” with zero saying that they didn’t really want the best for their spouses anymore). But when the respondents were asked if they *knew* their spouses wanted the best for them, only about half answered yes.

One of the conference organizers came up to us afterward and said, “What I really loved was that you left that last graph up on the screen through the rest of the talk so the good news was right in front of people, including all the hurting couples who were there. It points out that no matter how you might *feel*, this is the reality, people!”

Did you catch the powerful surprise in the data? Here it is:

 Nearly everyone cares about his or her spouse (100 percent of the people in that room), but only half of those spouses *actually believe it*.

That's why we left that whopping 95 percent / 5 percent / 0 percent finding up in front of that group—to reveal what so many well-intentioned spouses miss or somehow forget, especially in the heat of the moment. Because here's the happiness secret that arises from it:

 Highly happy spouses *choose* to believe their mate cares for them—no matter what they're seeing from their spouse or feeling at the time—and they act accordingly.

As you'll discover in just a few pages ahead, this one small choice makes a world of difference.

I found a dozen of these high-leverage secrets—little habits that bring big benefits to a marriage. Amazingly, most of these actions are truly simple. They are not always easy, mind you—some require serious self-discipline at first—but I can assure you that not even one is out of reach for the average couple. You just first have to know they matter in order to be purposeful about trying them!

Finding the Patterns, Conducting the Surveys

Although these secrets are simple to understand, they weren't simple to uncover. Here's how we did it.

In every survey throughout our process, respondents were anonymous and the spouses never saw each other's answers so everyone could be completely candid. In every interview and focus group, participants were assured anonymity so they could be direct and honest. So very early on, patterns began to emerge and important distinctions surfaced. For example, the things that the happiest couples tended to do that helped *make them* so happy as opposed to things they did solely *because* they were happy.

To investigate those patterns further and to test whether they were indeed common and effective to creating happy couples, we did two different types of surveys, turning to a team with whom I have worked on six different books and studies. (You can see the other studies at www.shaunti.com.) Dr. Chuck Cowan, the former chief of survey design at the US Census Bureau and the founder of the highly regarded company Analytic Focus, helped me create well-designed surveys.

The first were independent surveys of 796 people (398 couples); these were paper-based, direct-response (keypad), or online

surveys in many different marriage-related venues. Since many such arenas tend to be associated with churches, this group had a high percentage of churchgoers.

Then it was time for the nationally representative survey. To conduct the survey itself, as I have many times in the past, I relied on the team at Decision Analyst, one of the top companies in the world for conducting this type of reliable online survey. The survey was nationally representative across all demographic categories, assessed 508 men and women (254 married couples), and provided a confidence level of 95 percent, plus or minus 5 percent.² (For more details, see the methodology chapter written by Chuck Cowan at the website for this book, www.surprisingsecrets.com.)

Although I primarily relied on this survey, in a few cases, under Chuck's guidance, I wanted to do a type of meta-analysis and look at the results of *all* the data sets I had gathered—both the nationally representative and churchgoers' results together. I will refer to that as the combined survey.

Also, unlike in most of my past books, there is another type of research included. Several of the habits I identified in happy couples intersect with subjects that have been independently studied by other researchers, particularly Dr. Brad Wilcox of the University of Virginia and the National Marriage Project. I was

grateful Dr. Wilcox and several other researchers were willing to conduct specialized runs of their survey data for inclusion in this book. You'll see those findings in four of the chapters to follow.

How to Read This Book

This book describes the simple, often-overlooked but vitally important habits that help create happy couples. To get the most out of the material, here are a few things you need to know.

1. Know What This Book Is...and Isn't

This is a bit different from most other marriage and relationship books. For one thing, it is not designed to cover everything that will help you have a good marriage. Many excellent books already go into great depth about communication skills, for example, or principles for handling conflict, or how to handle specific problem areas. But this book focuses on the little things that make a big difference *regardless* of the other challenges you might be facing—and even (in most cases) regardless of whether you're already married or simply in a serious relationship.

Keep in mind that I never intend to suggest that there is always a quick fix for marital happiness. And I don't want to make light of the many truly difficult relationship situations that couples find themselves in. Some will require professional counsel-

ing. And for some couples, the issues they are facing go far, far beyond the scope of this book.

So in an imperfect world with imperfect people, the operative words about the impact of these habits are *often* or *likely*, rather than *always* or *guaranteed*. I wish everything would turn out right when we try to do the right things, but we all know it just doesn't always happen that way. (And as you will see in chapter 11, it is so important to keep a good perspective about marital happiness, anyway.)

But these cautions notwithstanding, my research consistently shows that many marriages that have become deeply unhappy don't have to be. Not to mention that many marriages are already good and looking to be great! The key is that no matter the state of your marriage, small changes in awareness and action truly can change everything.

2. Recognize That the Research Was Rigorous Regardless of Belief System, but There Are Certain Faith-Based Applications

As some of you know, I come at life (and this book) from a Christian worldview. But, as always, the research in this book was rigorously conducted with people of all demographic and religious backgrounds, and the nationally representative survey clearly showed that the conclusions apply to everyone.

In several cases I make faith-based references where my research found the same conclusion that is discussed in the Bible, or where the application clearly parallels Judeo-Christian beliefs. I start from the assumption that given the rigor of the research, most readers will be fine with faith-based references, even if they may not personally share those beliefs.

3. Understand How to Read the Survey Responses and Compare Them to Your Own Relationship

Within each chapter, and in the more detailed Survey Says section at the end of each chapter, I present the survey results so you can not only see how the happiest couples handle things but so you can easily compare their answers to those in other types of marriages—such as, perhaps, yours.

Instead of presenting an average of all the survey responses as I have done in my other books, I slot the survey takers (and their answers) into three groups. These three groups are based on their answers to the “Are you generally happy and enjoying being married?” question:

1. **Highly happy couples**—where *both* the husband and wife, taking surveys separately, independently answered “Yes!” to that question. These are the role-model “Yes! couples” that I refer to throughout the book.

2. **Mostly happy couples**—where one spouse answered “Yes!” and the other “Yes, most of the time,” or both spouses answered “Yes, most of the time.”
3. **So-so or struggling couples**—where one or both spouses answered “Sometimes yes; sometimes no,” “Not really,” or “No!” to that question. If one partner answered that they were happy but the other partner chose one of those three “no” answers, the couple was put in the so-so or struggling category. For simplicity, we are labeling these as struggling couples, although many of these couples wouldn’t think of themselves as struggling as much as simply not being as happy as they would like to be.

Each time I show a survey result in the pages that follow, I show the answers of each of these three groups.

4. **Understand How to Read and Apply These Truths**
The goal of this book isn’t academic; it’s personal. I want to show you what matters—that you didn’t realize mattered!—so you see what you can do to improve your marriage *a lot*. To this end, you’ll see ideas and suggestions from me or the people I interview scattered throughout the chapters. You may want to read with a pen or pencil in hand so that you can circle the insights that seem especially important to you. Make notes on how you could apply

those ideas to your life. Our concluding chapter will give you some specific, practical ways to put these ideas to work, starting with giving yourself credit for what you are already doing well (very important!), picking just one or two habits that you want to start working on, and then being aware of the cool things that happen next so you are incentivized to keep trying.

This leads me to caution: Don't try to apply every new idea at the same time! Couples applying these findings have found that tackling too many at once results in getting overwhelmed enough not to do *any* of them. Pick one idea first, and try it for a week or two or five. Then when that action becomes a habit, start on another.

“But Is a Happy Marriage in the Cards for Me?”

Maybe you've read this far with a nagging doubt in your heart that says, *But, Shaunti, what about me? I'm not sure we're a Yes! couple or ever could be. To put it bluntly, you've never met Henry!* (Or maybe it's Henrietta.) *Are you saying a happy marriage is possible? Even for me?*

My friend, I understand your hesitation. I've heard from hundreds of sincerely motivated spouses whose hope for a happy

marriage has been badly shaken. But I strongly encourage you to read on. *This book was written with exactly you in mind*—and many of the husbands and wives who poured out their hearts to me in my research had you in mind too. In fact, many of them started where you are today. That is why I'm so eager to share the hidden little habits that can change a contentious marriage into a delightful one!

It turns out that positive changes in a marriage rarely depend on one difficult spouse suddenly becoming an altogether different person. Usually, the opposite is true. Change—even in challenging marriages—most often starts with one immediate, practical, and surprising choice. A choice made by *just one* partner. And you can make it. The day you put one surprising secret to work in your relationship—and then another—may go unnoticed by your partner. But you have launched an insurrection against mediocrity and unhappiness.

Our research clearly shows that if *one* spouse commits to applying the simple but powerful habits we describe in this book—and does them sacrificially and for as long as it takes—most marriages end up being transformed. And it is because of this fact that I can assure you that a delightful, strong, happy marriage is not only *possible* but *likely*. Not guaranteed, but certainly likely. Our Yes! couples have convinced us of that.

And, thankfully, getting to highly happy is actually a lot simpler and easier than you probably realize. By the time you are done with this short book, I hope you agree with me.

Even if just one spouse commits to applying these simple but powerful habits, most marriages end up being transformed.

So are you ready to learn the eyeopening secrets of highly happy couples and experience them in *your* marriage? Let's look at the first one together.



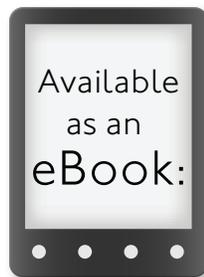
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