

# *the* DATE NIGHT *Opportunity*

*What Does Couple Time Tell Us About  
the Potential Value of Date Nights?*

*W. Bradford Wilcox & Jeffrey Dew*



*the* NATIONAL MARRIAGE  
*project*



at the UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

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the Potential Value of Date Nights?*

*W. Bradford Wilcox & Jeffrey Dew*

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## DATE NIGHT ON THE RISE

In the last year, a range of civic, corporate, and religious organizations have launched date-night initiatives in towns and cities across the nation. From the Date Night Challenge in Palm Beach to Yelp's Date Night Chicago to the Great Date Night in Chattanooga, these grassroots efforts represent a major new effort to improve the quality and stability of marriages and other romantic relationships in communities across the nation.

Given the expressive focus of today's "soul-mate" marriages, from which couples increasingly expect high levels of intimacy, communication, and personal fulfillment,<sup>1</sup> date nights may be particularly valuable to our contemporary cultural moment. Accordingly, the growing grassroots movement on behalf of date nights may be especially meaningful to today's couples, often intent on cultivating and maintaining an intense emotional or romantic connection with one another.

In the face of this new movement, *The Date Night Opportunity* report from the National Marriage Project seeks to answer three fundamental questions about the potential value of date nights for couples as these efforts emerge across the United States:

- 1 How might date nights improve the quality of relationships for couples?
- 2 Is one-on-one couple time associated with higher-quality relationships and lower divorce rates among couples?
- 3 Are particular types of couples more likely to benefit from regular date nights?

To answer these questions, we review the social-science literature on relationships and analyze data from the Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG)—a nationally representative survey of more than 1,600 married heterosexual couples aged 18–55, conducted in late 2010 and early 2011—and the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a nationally representative survey of more than 10,000 adults (some married, some cohabiting), conducted from 1987 to 1994.

## DATE NIGHTS AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

In today's world, date nights are likely to strengthen relationships in a number of ways. The social-science literature suggests at least five ways in which date nights may foster stronger marriages and relationships:

- 1 **Communication.** One of the crucial ingredients to a successful relationship is an open channel of communication.<sup>2</sup> By removing distractions such as children and employment responsibilities, date nights may afford couples the opportunity to discuss things that are important to them—from their shared dreams for the future to the state of their family finances. In the former case, a date represents time to reinforce mutual pursuits and aspirations; in the latter case, a date represents a type of private couple meeting where a concern or issue may be focused on constructively and proactively.

As spouses and partners communicate more, they may deepen their understanding of one another and the relationship.<sup>3</sup> This is important because individuals continue to change, and as they and their relationships develop, they experience new challenges and problems over time. Date nights may help partners and spouses to "stay current" with each other's lives and offer one another support for meeting these challenges. Communication

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *The State of Our Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, *Between Husbands and Wives: Communication in Marriage* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000).

also can be an important vehicle for approaching mutual difficulties productively and for fostering intimacy between partners. Thus, date nights should foster much-needed communication, mutual understanding, and a sense of communion between spouses or partners.

**2 Novelty.** Most couples experience a decline in relationship quality after a few years, partly because they become habituated to one another and are more likely to take one another, and their relationship, for granted.<sup>4</sup> The initial excitement associated with getting to know a person, growing in intimacy, and trying new things as a couple can disappear as the two people settle into a routine.

By contrast, a growing body of research suggests that couples who engage in novel activities that are fun, active, or otherwise arousing—from hiking to dancing to travel to card games—enjoy higher levels of relationship quality.<sup>5</sup> Thus, date nights should foster this higher quality, especially insofar as couples use them to engage in exciting, active, or unusual activities. In other words, couples may be particularly likely to benefit from a regular date night if they use it as an opportunity to do more than that old standby: dinner and a movie. It is also important that they choose activities that represent a balance of each partner's interests, rather than tending to do things (novel or not) that are desired more by the same partner each time.<sup>6</sup>

**3 Eros.** Most contemporary relationships begin with an element of eros—that romantic love that is linked to passion, excitement, and an overwhelming sense of attraction to one's beloved. But with time, the emotional and physical manifestations of erotic love tend to decline in most couples.<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as date nights allow couples to focus on their relationship, to share feelings, to engage in romantic activities with one another, and to try new things, date nights may strengthen or rekindle that romantic spark that can be helpful in sustaining the fires of love over the long haul. All of these things can foster higher levels of sexual satisfaction in their marriage or relationship.

**4 Commitment.** Husbands and wives, as well as other romantic partners, are more likely to enjoy stable, high-quality relationships when they experience a strong sense of commitment to one another and to their relationship.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, partners who put one another first, who steer clear of other romantic opportunities, and who cultivate a strong sense of “we-ness” or togetherness are markedly happier than are less-committed couples.

Date nights may solidify an expectation of commitment among couples by fostering a sense of togetherness, by allowing partners to signal to one another—as well as friends and family—that they take their relationship seriously, and by furnishing them with opportunities to spend time with one another, to communicate, and to enjoy fun activities together.

**5 De-stress.** Stress is one of the biggest threats to a strong marriage or relationship. Stress related to work, finances, parenthood, or illness can prove corrosive to a relationship, insofar as it causes one or both partners to become irritable, withdrawn, violent, or otherwise difficult to live with.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of this issue, see Arthur Aron et al., “Couples’ Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship Quality,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000): 273–284.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Duane W. Crawford et al., “Compatibility, Leisure, and Satisfaction in Marital Relationships,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002): 433–449.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Fisher, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, *When Baby Makes Three: How Parenthood Makes Life Meaningful and How Marriage Makes Parenthood Bearable* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2011); Scott M. Stanley, Galena K. Rhoades, and Sarah W. Whitton, “Commitment: Functions, Formation, and the Securing of Romantic Attachment,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 2 (2010): 243–257.

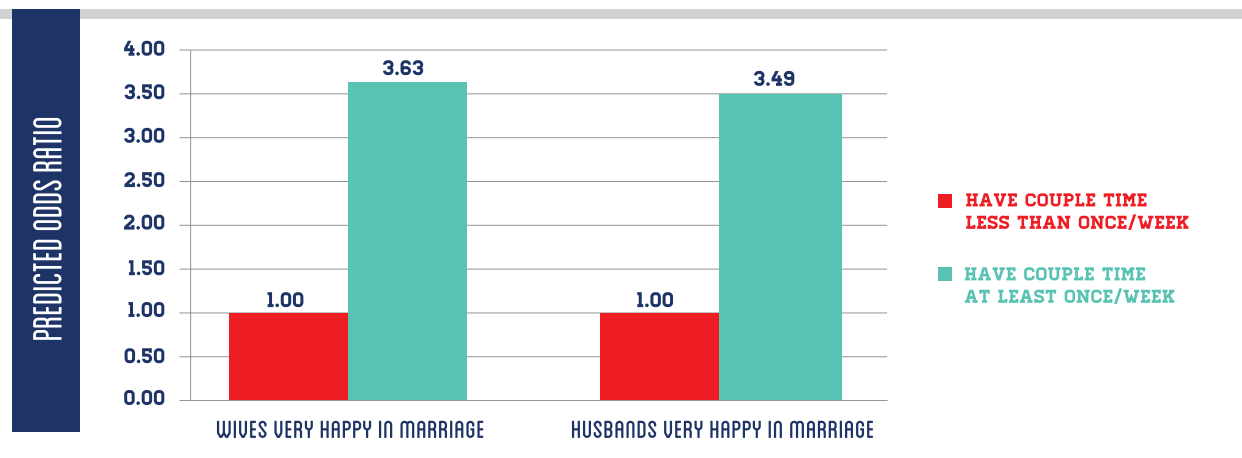
<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Rand Conger et al., “Linking Economic Hardship to Marital Quality and Instability,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52 (1990): 643–656.

Date nights may be helpful for relieving stress on couples, as they allow them to enjoy time with one another apart from the pressing concerns of their ordinary life. (Indeed, for this reason, couples may be better served by date nights when they do not dwell on difficult topics—such as family finances—during these times together.<sup>10</sup>) Moreover, date nights may allow spouses and romantic partners to extend emotional support to one another in times of trial. For all these reasons, date nights may help couples by providing them with a buffer or an escape from the stresses that confront them or time to engage in collaborative coping that can reduce those stresses.

## COUPLE TIME AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Because no nationally representative surveys have questions focusing directly on the impact of date nights, in this report we examine the links between one-on-one couple time and relationship quality using two data sets—the Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG) and the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Both surveys asked individuals how frequently they spent time in an activity alone with their spouse or partner. Specifically they asked, “During the past month, about how often did you and your husband/wife/partner spend time alone with each other, talking, or sharing an activity?” Participants could answer from 1 (never/rarely) to 6 (almost every day). We called this “couple time” and view it as the empirical indicator that comes closest to a date night that is available on a nationally representative data set. Hence, we note that we are not, here, measuring actual “date night” experiences but rather using shared time together as a proxy to examine the potential benefits from such time.

In these data sets, husbands' and wives' reports of couple time were associated with higher relationship quality. For example, **Figure 1** shows that husbands and wives who engaged in couple time with their mates at least once a week were approximately 3.5 times more likely to report being “very happy”<sup>11</sup> in their marriages, compared to those who enjoyed less quality time with their spouse. (Note: All of the analyses in this report control for factors such as income, age, education, race, and ethnicity.)



**Figure 1.** Odds Ratios of Being Very Happy in Marriage, Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.

Couple time is important for cohabiting couples, too. Data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households showed that cohabiting women who spent couple time with their partner at least once per week were over

<sup>10</sup> Marital experts often recommend, in fact, that for most dates or time set aside specifically to improve the fun and positive connection between partners, conflicts and problems should be considered off-limit topics. See, for example, Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and S. L. Blumberg, *Fighting For Your Marriage* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010). Such authors recommend that couples also be intentional about setting aside time to deal with issues constructively. Some couples may be able to do this in a date-night format, but others may do well to refrain from all discussion of issues of concern during times planned specifically to join positively together.

<sup>11</sup> In the Survey of Marital Generosity, reporting being “very happy” in marriage is defined as reporting the highest level of happiness (5 on a scale from 1 to 5) on a question that asked participants how happy they were with their marriage “overall.” This is our SMG measure of relationship quality for this report.

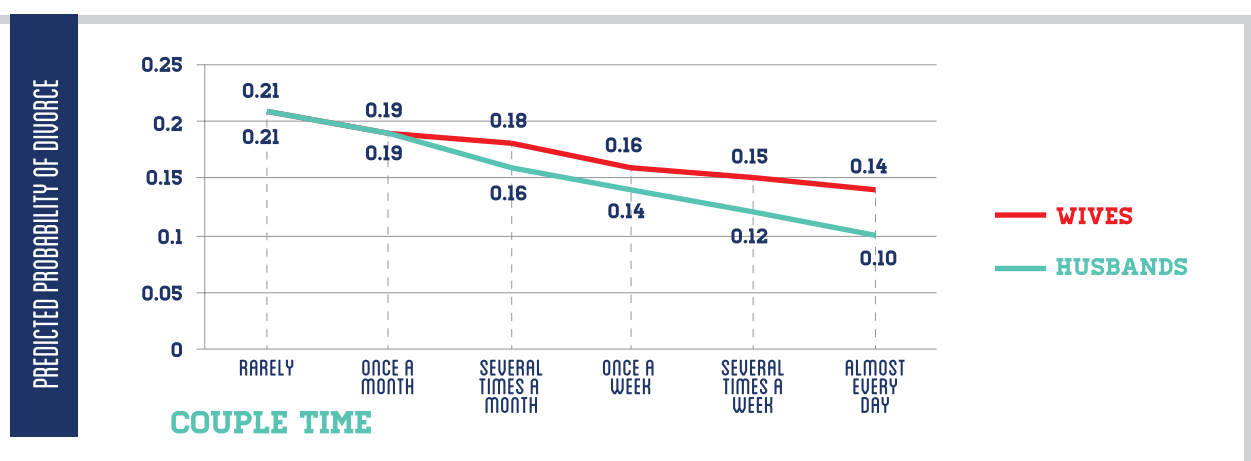
four times more likely to be very happy in their cohabiting relationship than were cohabiting women who spent less time with their partner.<sup>12</sup> Further, cohabiting men who frequently spent couple time with their partner were 2.5 times more likely to be very happy in their cohabiting relationship.

So far, these figures tell us that couple time and marital happiness go together, but we need more information about whether one influences the other. Because we had data from spouses at two time points in the NSFH, we were also able to examine the direction of effects—to determine whether or not couple time reported during the first wave of the survey was associated with marital quality at the second wave. Here, the more couple time individuals reported at the time of the first survey, the more likely they were to be very happy in their marriage at the second survey, five years later. Although the NSFH evidence does not provide us with definitive proof that couple time causes increases in marital quality, the longitudinal character of the data suggests that the relationship may indeed be causal. It is certainly intuitively true that greater satisfaction with one's partner should also lead to more time spent in positive, shared activities. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to assume that two partners who intentionally set out to increase positive couple time spent together would typically not benefit from such time with increases in connection and happiness.

## COUPLE TIME AND DIVORCE

Likewise, couple time seems to foster more stable marriages. In the Survey of Marital Generosity, spouses who experience high levels of couple time are significantly less likely to report that they are prone to divorce. For example, wives who reported having couple time less than once a week were nearly four times more likely to report above-average levels of divorce proneness, compared to wives who enjoyed couple time at least once a week with their husband.<sup>13</sup> Husbands who reported spending less than once a week in couple time were 2.5 times more likely to be divorce prone, compared to husbands who had couple time with their wife at least once a week.

Moreover, as **Figure 2** shows, the more couple time that wives and husbands reported at the first wave of the NSFH, the less likely they were to divorce in the intervening five years. Indeed, the predicted probability of divorce for those who rarely had couple time was 21% for both wives and husbands, but only 14% for wives and 10% for husbands who reported having couple time almost every day. Clearly, husbands and wives who enjoy high levels of couple time together are markedly less likely to divorce.



**Figure 2.** Predicted Probability of Divorce within Five Years Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–46, by Couple Time.

Source: National Survey of Families and Households.

<sup>12</sup> In our NSFH analyses, we relied on reports of being “very happy” in their relationship or marriage (7 on a scale from 1 to 7) to determine relationship quality for cohabiting and married couples in the NSFH.

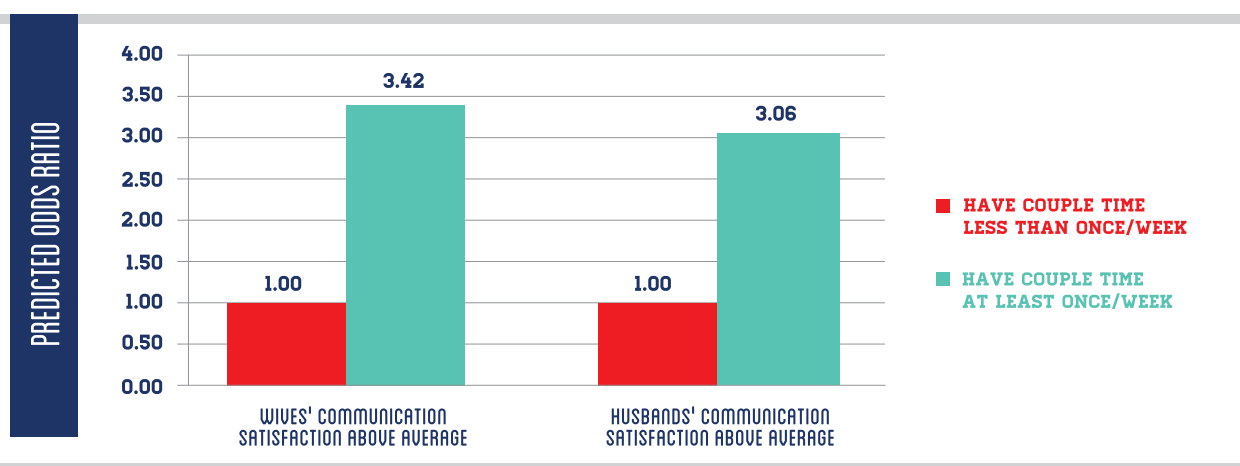
<sup>13</sup> In the Survey of Marital Generosity, above-average proneness to divorce or separation is defined as scoring from 4 to 10 on a question that asked participants to estimate their chances of divorcing (from 0 [very low] to 10 [very high]).

## COMMUNICATION, SEXUAL SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT

One-on-one couple time appears to foster higher-quality and more stable marriages, judging by the results of this report. But how, precisely, does couple time do this? What are the mechanisms?

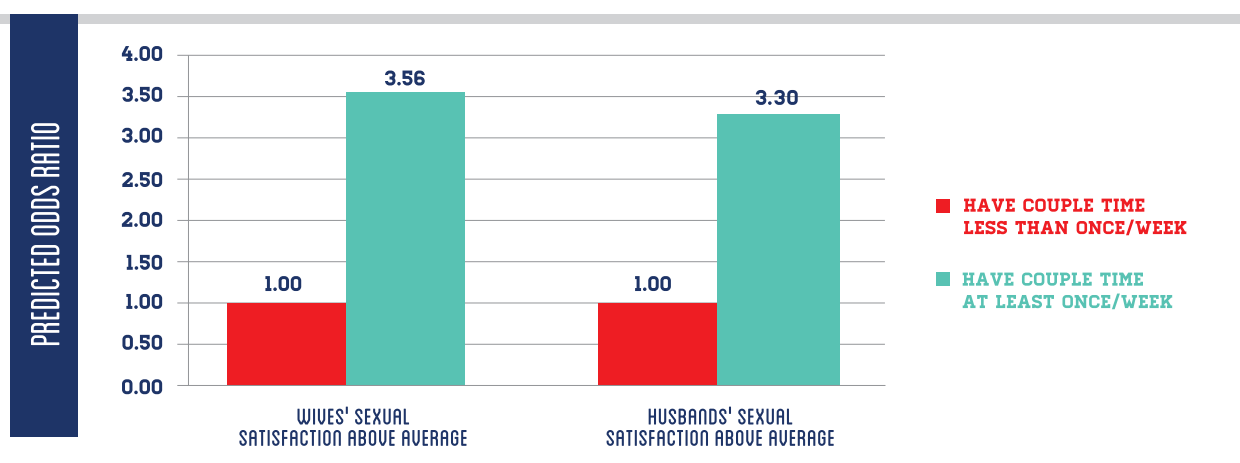
To answer these questions, we explored the ways in which couple time is linked to higher reports of better communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment (neither survey had data on the impact of novelty or stress on relationships) and what role these factors may play in the association between couple time and higher-quality marriages.

Our analyses indicate that couple time is indeed associated with higher reports of satisfaction with communication (Figure 3), sexual satisfaction (Figure 4), and commitment (Figure 5) for both husbands and wives. For instance, as Figure 4 indicates, wives who spend couple time with their husbands at least once a week are 3.5 times more likely to enjoy above-average levels of sexual satisfaction, compared to wives who have couple time less than once a week. Likewise, husbands who spend more couple time with their wives are 3.3 times more likely to enjoy above-average levels of sexual satisfaction, compared to their peers who have couple time less than once a week.



**Figure 3.** Odds Ratios of Being Highly Satisfied With Communication<sup>14</sup> in Marriage Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.



**Figure 4.** Odds Ratios of Being Highly Satisfied With Sex<sup>15</sup> in Marriage Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

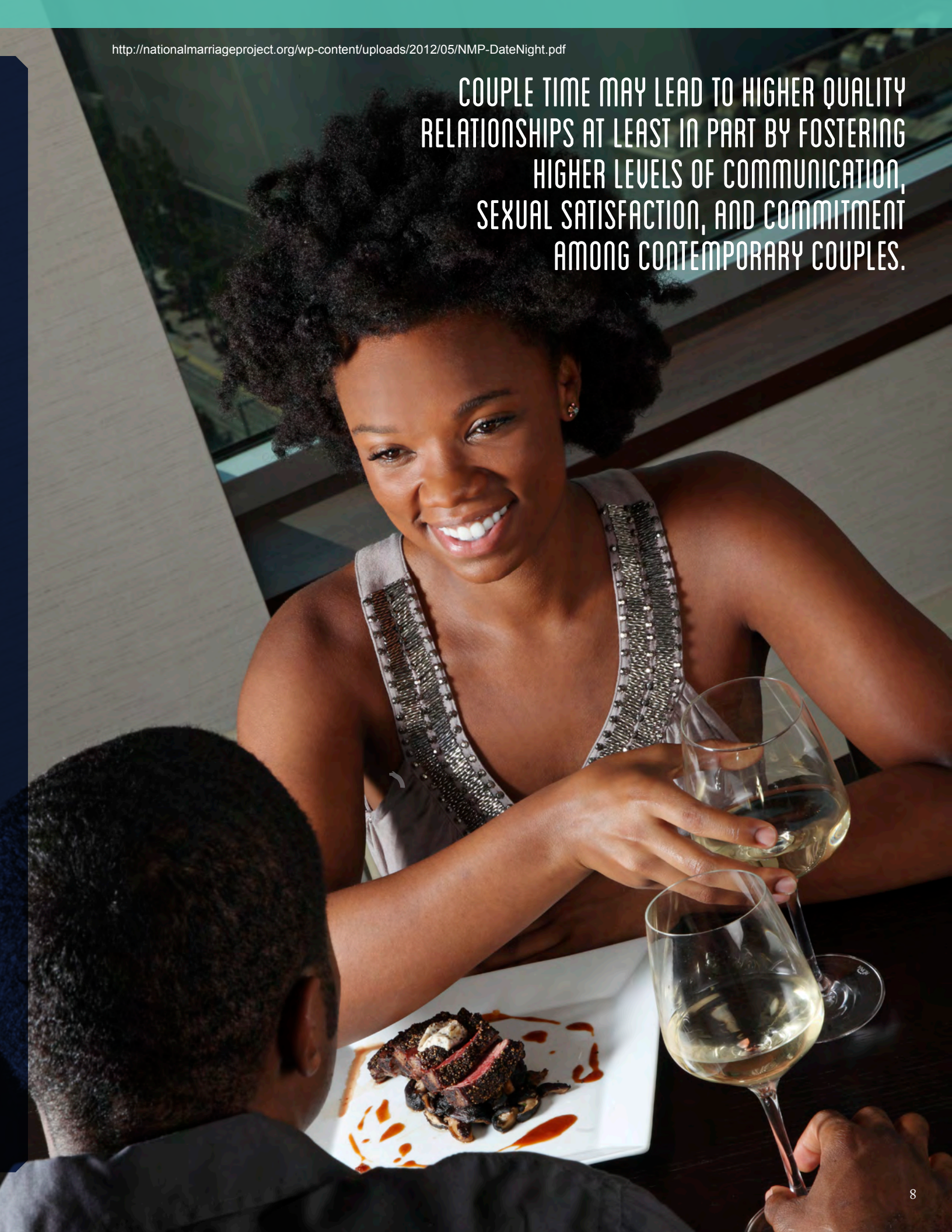
Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.

<sup>14</sup> In the Survey of Marital Generosity, above-average communication satisfaction was defined as scoring a 4 or 5 (on a scale from 1 to 5) on a question that asked participants how satisfied they were with the communication in their relationship.

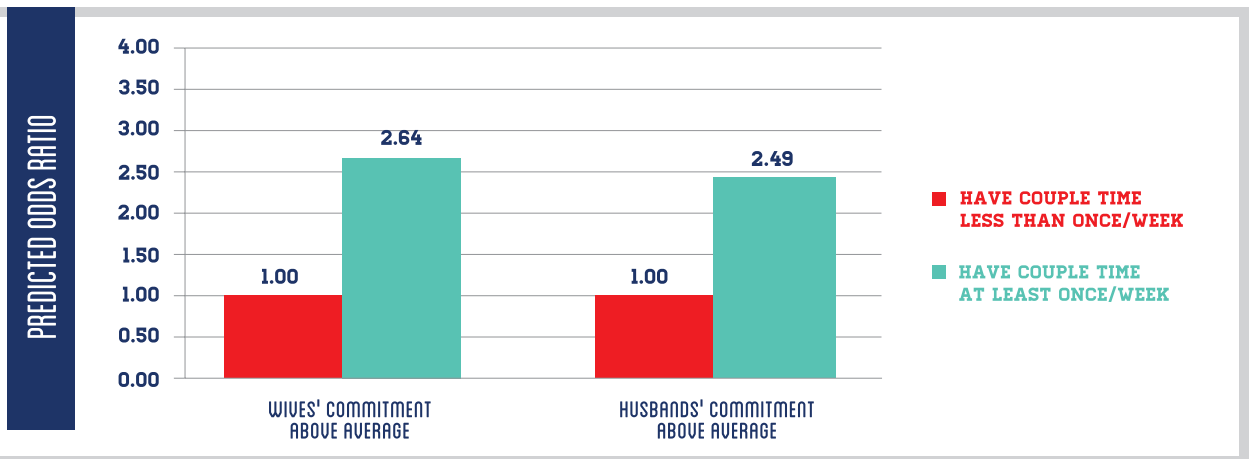
<sup>15</sup> In the Survey of Marital Generosity, above-average sexual satisfaction was defined as scoring a 4 or 5 (on a scale from 1 to 5) on a question that asked participants how satisfied they were with their sexual relationship.



COUPLE TIME MAY LEAD TO HIGHER QUALITY  
RELATIONSHIPS AT LEAST IN PART BY FOSTERING  
HIGHER LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION,  
SEXUAL SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT  
AMONG CONTEMPORARY COUPLES.







**Figure 5.** Odds Ratios of Being Highly Committed<sup>16</sup> to Their Relationship Among Married Women and Men Aged 18–55, by Couple Time.

Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.

To test whether these three variables explained how couple time impacted marital satisfaction, we added communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment to the statistical models. When they were in the model, reports of couple time were less strongly associated with wives' or husbands' marital quality. The association dropped by over half for wives and husbands. Moreover, communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment were all strongly associated with higher levels of wives' and husbands' marital satisfaction. These results suggest that couple time may lead to higher quality relationships at least in part by fostering higher levels of communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment among contemporary couples.

Of course, the arrow of causality may point in the opposite direction. That is, given that the SMG data were obtained at a single point in time, it is also possible that married couples who are more communicative, more sexually satisfied, and more committed to one another are more likely to spend couple time together.

## IS COUPLE TIME PARTICULARLY VALUABLE FOR CERTAIN GROUPS?

Spending time in one-on-one activities may be particularly valuable for certain types of couples. For this report, we investigated the possibility that couple time is especially valuable for parents, couples who do not have high levels of support from family and friends, couples who are not involved with civic organizations or a religious community, and less committed (versus highly committed) couples.

### PARENTHOOD

For many couples, the experience of becoming a parent can undercut or diminish the quality of married life.<sup>17</sup> This is partly because parenthood is stressful and partly because children often limit their parents' one-on-one couple time. In a recent study, for example, spouses with children at home reported spending nearly two hours less per day together than did those without children at home.<sup>18</sup> Thus, couple time might be particularly beneficial to couples with children at home, insofar as it is more of a precious commodity for these couples.

While the theory is compelling, our analysis of the SMG and the NSFH does not provide any evidence that couple time

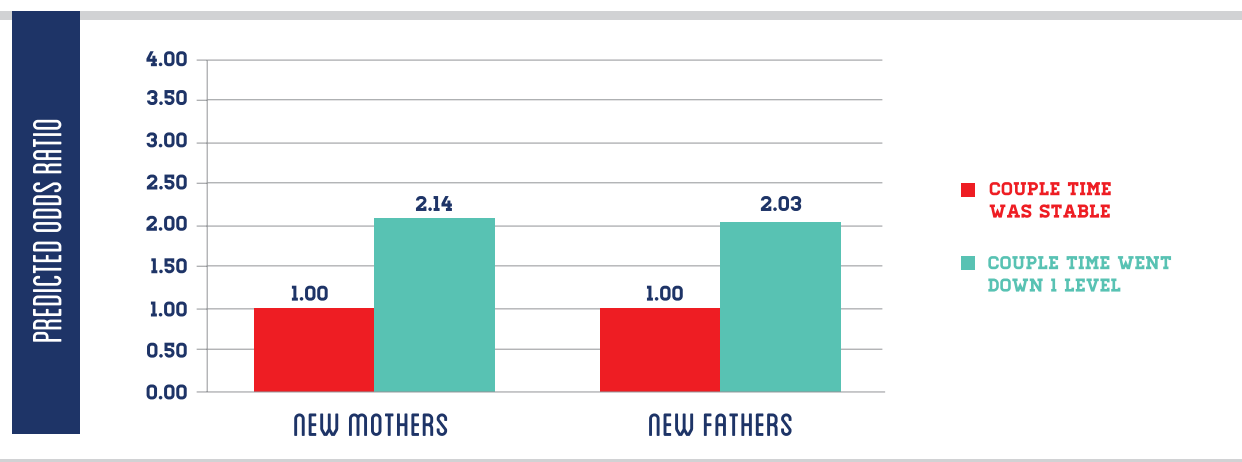
<sup>16</sup> In the Survey of Marital Generosity, above-average commitment was defined as scoring from 17 to 20 (on a scale from 1 to 20) on four items that asked participants about their commitment to their spouse and relationship. See note 22.

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Partners Become Parents* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000); Wilcox and Marquardt, *When Baby Makes Three*; Brian Doss et al., "The Effect of the Transition to Parenthood on Relationship Quality: An Eight-year Prospective Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (2009): 601–619.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Dew, "Has the Marital Time Cost of Parenting Changed Over Time?" *Social Forces* 88 (2009): 519–542.

is any more helpful to married couples with children than to those without children. Rather, couple time was equally important for both types of married couples.

Nevertheless, our analysis of the NSFH indicated that new parents who did not reduce their couple time together after the arrival of a baby were markedly less likely to experience a decline in marital quality.<sup>19</sup> For instance, as **Figure 6** indicates, new parents who saw their couple time decline across the transition to parenthood were about two times more likely to experience a decline in marital quality, compared to new parents who kept up their couple time.



**Figure 6.** Odds Ratios of Experiencing a Decline in Marital Quality Among Married New Parents, by Couple Time.

Source: National Survey of Families and Households.

Thus, couple time—and by extension, date nights—seems like an important resource to new parents seeking to keep the quality of their relationship high amid the joys, stresses, and challenges of parenthood. (It is also possible that couples who were intentional about spending lots of couple time together before they had a baby were naturally more likely to maintain high levels of couple time after a child arrived.) We should also note that the quality of the relationship between parents is one of the key factors associated with the cognitive, social, and emotional development of their children. Couples with high levels of marital conflict and tension are less likely to establish warm and effective relationships with their children, and their preschoolers, school-age children, and adolescents tend to have more academic problems, more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and more anger and aggression in their relationships with their peers. In short, date nights have the potential to make important contributions to the development of children.<sup>20</sup>

## COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam observed that Americans are now less connected to religious and civic organizations than they were a half-century ago.<sup>21</sup> Given the social, emotional, and moral direction and support that such institutions have long given to marriage and family life, we hypothesized that couple time would be particularly valuable to couples who have been swept up in the civic and religious disengagement that Putnam chronicles. Indeed, such couples might expect more of their relationship because of an absence of other forms of community integration.

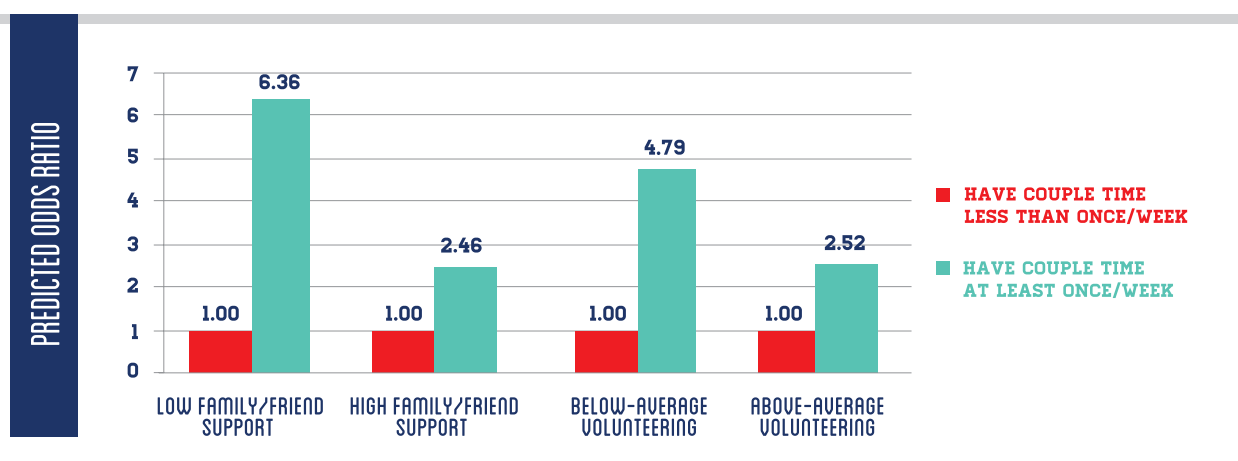
<sup>19</sup> See also Jeffrey Dew and W. Bradford Wilcox, “If Momma Ain’t Happy: Explaining Declines in Marital Satisfaction Among New Mothers,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73 (2011): 1–12.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Carolyn Pape Cowan, Philip A. Cowan, and G. Heming, “Two Variations of a Preventive Intervention for Couples: Effects on Parents and Children During the Transition to Elementary School.” In Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, J. Ablow, V. K. Johnson, and J. Measelle (Eds.), *The Family Context of Parenting in Children’s Adaptation to Elementary School* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005): 277–312; Frank D. Fincham, “Child Development and Marital Relations,” *Child Development* 69 (1998): 543–574.

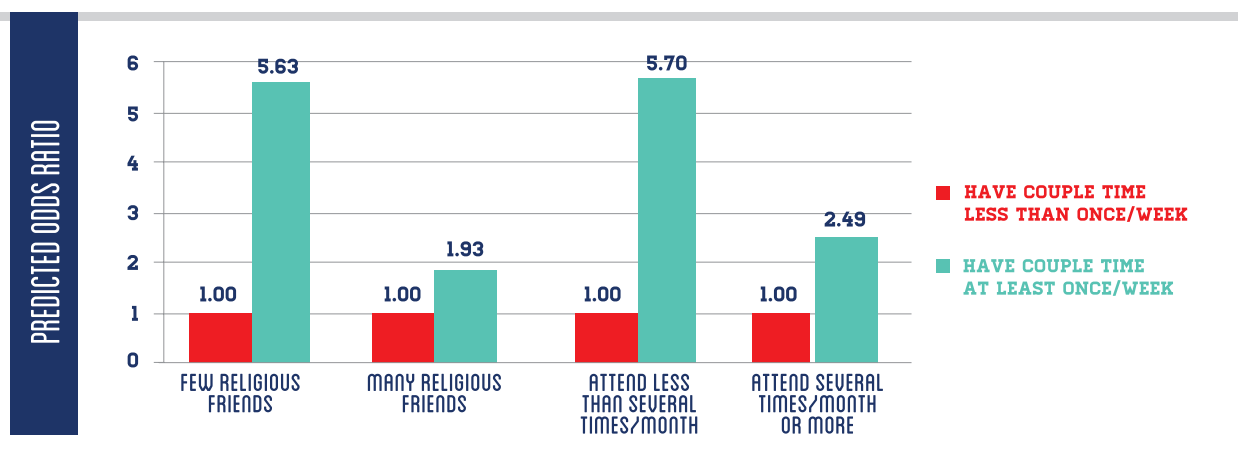
<sup>21</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

The Survey of Marital Generosity suggests that wives, but not husbands, who are less integrated into their community benefit more from couple time than do more socially integrated wives. **Figure 7a**, for example, shows that wives who report couple time at least once per week, but who have below-average support for their marriage from their friends and family, were over 6 times more likely to be very happy in their marriage, relative to their counterparts who had couple time less than once per week. By way of contrast, wives who reported couple time at least once per week and had high support from family and friends were only 2.5 times more likely to be very happy in their marriage, relative to wives with high support but low couple time.

**Figure 7b** also indicates that wives with few religious friends were markedly more likely to benefit from frequent couple time, compared to wives with many religious friends. This pattern was also seen when it came to religious attendance. Wives who attended rarely or never benefited more from couple time than did those who attended weekly.



**Figure 7a.** Predicted Odds Ratios of Being Very Happy in Marriage Among Married Women Aged 18–55, by Couple Time, Support from Friends and Family, and Community Volunteerism.



**Figure 7b.** Predicted Odds Ratios of Being Very Happy in Marriage Among Married Women Aged 18–55, by Couple Time, Friends Who Share Religious Faith, and Religious Attendance.

Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.



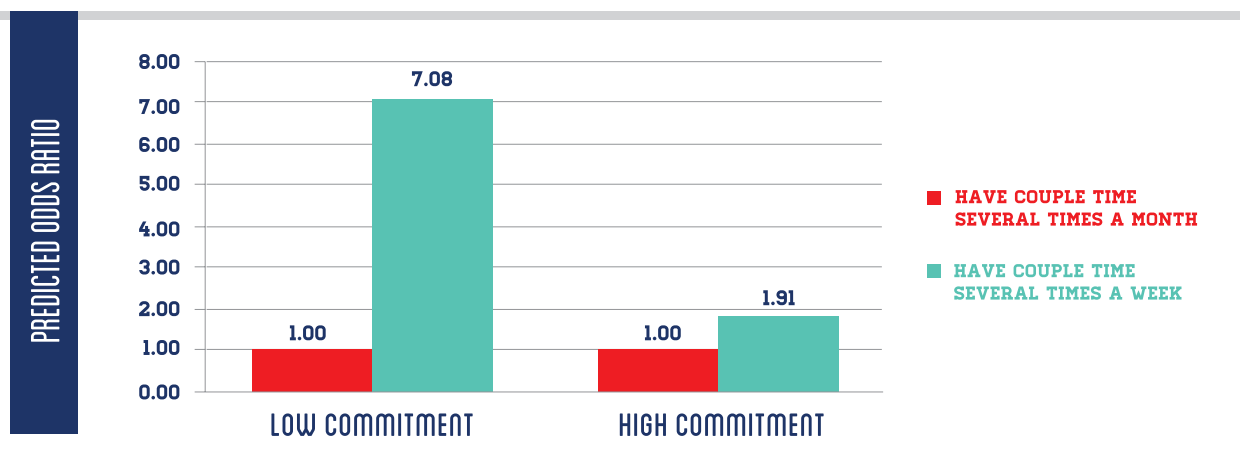
Perhaps more secular women take a more expressive view of marriage, or expect more from their marriages, or have fewer opportunities to spend time with their husbands in nonreligious settings. In any case, [Figure 7b](#) clearly shows that wives who attend religious services less are more likely to benefit from frequent couple time than are wives who frequently attend religious services.

## COMMITMENT

Similarly, we hypothesized that couple time might be especially important for couples with less commitment to one another and who therefore potentially depend more on one-on-one couple time to keep the spark alive in their relationship.<sup>22</sup>

Like religious attendance, the association between couple time and marital quality only varied by commitment to one's spouse when analyzing wives' marital satisfaction. For wives, but not for husbands, couple time was associated with relationship quality more among those with low marital commitment than among those with high commitment. In [Figure 8](#), highly committed wives increased their odds of being very happy in their marriage by about 91 percent if they enjoyed couple time at least once a week, compared to less than that. Among wives with low commitment, the same difference in couple time was associated with an over seven-fold increase in their odds of being very happy in their marriage.

Less-committed wives may expect more from their marriages, or be anxious about the current status or future of their marriages, and may therefore be more likely to benefit from couple time with their husband. In any case, this report suggests that wives who are less committed are more likely to benefit from one-on-one couple time than are wives who experience high levels of commitment.



**Figure 8.** Odds Ratios of Being Very Happy in Marriage Among Married Women Aged 18–55, by Couple Time and Marital Commitment.

Source: Survey of Marital Generosity.

However, one caveat is in order here. Wives with low levels of commitment, religiosity, or social integration benefit more from shared couple time but are not happier than wives with high levels of commitment, religiosity, or social integration and high levels of couple time. For instance, after controlling for socioeconomic factors, 52 percent of wives who frequently attend religious services and enjoy couple time with their husbands at least once a week are “very happy” in their marriages, whereas 46 percent of wives who attend religious services infrequently or not at all and enjoy couple time with their husbands at least once a week consider themselves very happy. Therefore, the evidence suggests that couple time is particularly valuable for wives who are less integrated into the social, civic, and religious fabric of their communities, but the data also suggest that more integrated wives who have high levels of couple time are the happiest of all.

<sup>22</sup> As noted above, in the SMG, above-average commitment was defined as scoring from 17 to 20 (on a scale from 1 to 20) on four items that asked participants about their commitment to their spouse and relationship. These items specifically measured how much spouses thought about their relationship in terms of “me” versus “we,” how committed they were to stay with their partner “no matter what,” their disinterest in romantic alternatives, and the relative importance of their relationship in their life.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This report strongly suggests that date-night initiatives may be helpful for couples, if couple time is indeed a good proxy for a date night in these analyses, and if increased time together in a date-night format truly increases couple time in a way similar to how couple time is measured here. Accordingly, future research should directly test the effect of date nights by following couples over time and comparing those who have frequent date nights with those who do not. If such a longitudinal study finds that date nights are specifically linked to higher levels of relationship quality and lower levels of divorce, we will then have stronger evidence that date nights play a causal role in strengthening marriages and relationships.

Studies asking about date nights would also benefit from asking about the quality of those dates, particularly for couples in distress. The effect of date nights may vary by the level of distress that couples are in, and couples in distress may only benefit from date nights after they have worked with a counselor or other professional to address any underlying problems in their relationship.

Future research should also explore the role that relationship education can play in date nights. Date nights may be most beneficial to couples if they focus on fun activities and steer clear of marital challenges or other stressful topics for couples. If this is the case, couples may wish to focus on fun or engaging activities during their date nights. Alternatively, couples may benefit from addressing important issues or exploring some relationship education when they are out for a date night. If this is the case, civic and religious groups sponsoring date-night initiatives may wish to incorporate relationship education into their efforts. Future research will have to determine whether or not relationship education and the discussion of serious issues helps or hinders the value potential of date nights for today's couples.

The studies that we have described in this paper represent first steps to understanding the connections between date nights/couple time and marital quality. Even stronger evidence will come from intervention studies. Couples who have frequent date nights are different from couples who do not (the selection factor). Therefore, the way to determine whether date nights actually increase marital quality is to conduct a randomized clinical trial in which some couples are assigned to a program that attempts to increase date nights, other couples are not assigned to this program, and still others are assigned to a program that attempts to increase other positive aspects of couple relationships but does not encourage (or discourage) date nights.

## CONCLUSION

We know that while the divorce rate in the United States is no longer rising, from 40 to 50 percent of married couples will dissolve their relationships, with an even higher proportion of cohabiting couples doing the same. In order to strengthen families, for the sake of both adults and their offspring, couples are going to need more help to make their relationships work.

If one-on-one couple time is any indication, date nights might play an important role in strengthening the quality and stability of these contemporary relationships and marriages. *The Date Night Opportunity* finds that couples who devote time specifically to one another at least once a week are markedly more likely to enjoy high-quality relationships and lower divorce rates, compared to couples who do not devote much couple time to one another. If date nights are similarly valuable for couples, then the recent grassroots efforts to promote them around the nation may also foster higher-quality relationships and lower divorce rates in their sponsoring communities. Here, it is important for us to underscore our belief that the value of date nights will also vary by the quality of those dates, with high-quality dates being most efficacious.

Moreover, couple time seems to be particularly valuable for couples who are less integrated into the local civic or religious fabric of their communities or for those less committed to one another. These couples may be especially likely to view their marriage according to a soul-mate model of married life that sees marriage as primarily an expression of romantic love, or to depend heavily upon their spouse for emotional support, given their relative social disengagement. Given that the social and normative foundations of such marriages may be particularly fragile, date nights may be especially powerful in shoring up the foundations of these marriages.

Finally, because relationships are generally more fragile in working-class and poor communities and because working-class and poor couples are less likely to be integrated into the civic and religious fabric of their communities,<sup>23</sup> efforts to promote date nights should provide couples with free or inexpensive options to rekindle the romance in their lives. From drive-in date nights at Sonic to free events like the Great Date Night in Chattanooga, date-night initiatives ought to target Americans of limited means. After all, the date-night opportunity should extend to Americans without regard to their means.

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<sup>23</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010).