

WHY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGES ARE START-UPS, NOT MERGERS

The business world turns out to have a very useful metaphor for people thinking about how to find happiness in a romantic partnership.

By Arthur C. Brooks

OCTOBER 12, 2023

Want to stay current with Arthur's writing? [Sign up](#) to get an email every time a new column comes out.

REALITY TV IS NOT generally known for its wholesome content. An exception might be a new show called *The Golden Bachelor*. A variation on the popular original, in which a single young man is courted by several attractive, eligible women, *The Golden Bachelor* features a retired restaurateur named Gerry Turner, who is considering marriage to one of 22 aspiring women 60 or over (he is an athletic, tanned 72, and hasn't lost a single hair). The show creates a spectacle because, despite the fact that more Americans are getting married later in life, this potential match is much older than what is typical.

But this raises a question I commonly hear from my 20-something students, as well as from anxious parents (closer to my age) of single adult children: What is the ideal age to wed, in order to achieve happiness and marital success? Philosophers have weighed in on this. In his *Politics*, for example, Aristotle [offered](#) this advice: "It is fitting for the women to be married at about the age of eighteen and the men at thirty-seven or a little before." Social scientists see it differently. A researcher at the Institute for Family Studies [offered](#) a more social-scientific estimate of the optimal age for getting hitched: 28 to 32 for both partners. This is the "sweet spot," where divorce within the first five years of marriage is lowest.

[From the October 2023 issue: George Eliot's subversive vision of marriage](#)

Naturally, this finding might provoke angst among those who would like to be married but have passed the "ideal" window. But it shouldn't. By looking at why the 28-to-32 bracket appears to work best, we might be able to re-create those conditions for almost any age—even 72.

THE AVERAGE AGE of marriage in the United States has been rising for years. In [1980](#), the average meant that a man married at 25, a woman at 22. Today, those numbers are 30 and 28, respectively. There are still outliers on the low end—two of my kids married in their early 20s—but I meet many more young people on the other side of today's averages, who say they have no plans to marry before their mid-30s or even later.

Is this aging trend good or bad for marital happiness? The raw data are not very encouraging: Marital satisfaction is falling as marriage age rises, according to statistics collected over the past half century by the General Social Survey that I analyzed. Following a gradual but significant downward trajectory, the percentage of married Americans who say they're "very happy" with their union has fallen from more than 67 percent in the early 1970s to about 60 percent today.

FOLLOW THE ATLANTIC

Follow

But the analysis of [data from the National Survey of Family Growth](#) that examine age at marriage and likelihood of divorce reveals a more complicated story: The failure rate falls as people marry later in their 20s, but then it starts to rise again. After the 28-to-32 sweet spot, the odds of divorce [increase](#) by 5 percent each year. (In case you are wondering, the IFS researcher's excellent analysis of data from 2011 to 2013 controls for demographic variables such as education, religion, and sexual history.) The average age of marriage happens to be optimal, although this almost certainly won't remain the case as the average age continues to rise.

[Read: Seven books that explore how marriage really works](#)

Surprisingly little research has looked at exactly *why* marriages tend to struggle when they start earlier or later, so I looked at indirectly associated studies to find clues. One helpful line of research comes, believe it or not, from the success rate for different kinds of business formation.

Consider start-ups. According to a [study](#) published in 2006 in the journal *Strategic Organization*, one factor predictive of success is the level of experience—a feature of maturity—of the founders. Having taught social entrepreneurship and worked with nonprofit start-ups for many years, I can confirm that when founders are green, they are enthusiastic but tend to make errors that people with a little more experience would probably avoid.

So it is with marriages, I suspect: A bit of experience with life and relationships may increase the chances of success for the co-founders of a marriage start-up. (Notably, such experience might not include cohabitation before marriage: The sociologists Lyman Stone and W. Bradford Wilcox have [shown](#) that living together actually predicts longer-term lower marital success in the United States.)

On the other side of the age sweet spot, we find adults who might have a little too *much* experience, or who are entrenched in the ways of single life, making a shared life difficult. This risk sounds quite similar to the problems seen with a different kind of corporate arrangement: mergers, which usually seem logical but are rarely successful. A 2011 article in *Harvard Business Review* [reported](#) that 70 to 90 percent of mergers and acquisitions failed to live up to financial expectations.

[Read: The case for dating a friend](#)

This was because long-standing corporate cultures are very [hard to integrate](#), with the result that productivity and morale fall off after a merger. One company might have a warm, convivial culture, whereas the other is formal and hierarchical, for example. Mixing them can be difficult to impossible. This could be analogous to two independent 30-somethings—with established habits, tastes, beliefs, and careers—trying to become a single married unit.

THE SWEET SPOT for a durable romantic partnership, then, is a new venture between two mature co-founders who are not so set in their ways that they act like entrenched corporations. Although this typically implies a particular age band, it doesn't have to. Even people who have passed the 28-to-32 window can benefit by resisting the characteristics of a merger. Here are three practices they might keep in mind.

1. Bank on the partnership.

In a corporate merger, there must be financial integration. The same goes for a marriage: Maintaining separate finances lowers the chances of success. Keeping money apart might seem sensible in order to avoid unnecessary disagreements, especially when both partners are established earners. But research [shows](#) that when couples pool their funds and learn to work together on saving and spending, they have higher relationship satisfaction and are less likely to split up. Even if you don't start out this way and have to move gradually, financial integration should be your objective.

2. Forget 50–50.

A merger—as opposed to a takeover—suggests a "50–50" relationship between the companies. But this is rarely the case, because the partner firms have different strengths and weaknesses. The same is true for relationship partners. I have heard older couples say that they plan to split responsibilities and financial obligations equally; this might sound good in theory, but it's not a realistic aspiration. Worse, splitting things equally militates against one of the most important elements of love: generosity—a willingness to give more than your share in a spirit of abundance, because giving to someone you care for is pleasurable in itself. Researchers have [found](#) that men and women who show the highest generosity toward their partner are most likely to say that they're "very happy" in their marriage.

Of course, generosity can't be a one-way street. Even the most bountiful, free-giving spouse will come to resent someone who is a taker; a "100–0" marriage is surely even worse than the "50–50" one. The solution is to defy math: Make it 100–100.

3. Take a risk.

A common insurance policy in merger marriages is the prenuptial agreement—a contract to protect one or both parties' assets in the case of divorce. It's a popular measure: The percentage of couples with a "prenup" has increased [fivefold](#) since 2010.

[Arthur C. Brooks: The type of love that makes people happiest](#)

A prenup might sound like simple prudence, but it is worth considering the asymmetric economic power dynamic that it can wire into the marriage. As one divorce attorney noted in a 2012 [interview](#), "a prenup is an important thing for the 'monied' future spouse if a marriage dissolves." Some scholars have argued that this [bodes ill](#) for the partnership's success, much as asymmetric economic power between two companies makes a merger difficult.

TO HAVE A successful romantic partnership at any age, the trick is to act like a mature start-up, not like a merger. Being a business-school professor, I did consider some other corporate models as I thought about other ways to succeed in love. In truth, though, I couldn't find any that seemed promising.

Acquisition? That sounds weirdly transactional. And I have never had someone tell me, "I lured my spouse with money, and we lived happily ever after." Hostile takeover? I haven't found reliable data on the success of marriages that start out as extramarital affairs, but the premise seems pretty improbable. Whether you are 22 or 72, the best approach to a successful love start-up is one in which co-founders see each other as equals and walk confidently into the future together in a spirit of generous, golden collaboration.

Arthur Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the host of the *How to Build a Happy Life* podcast.

Twitter