The All-or-Nothing Marriage (excerpted)

By ELI J. FINKEL FEB. 14, 2014

ARE marriages today better or worse than they used to be?

...Our central claim is that Americans today have elevated their expectations of marriage and can in fact achieve an unprecedentedly high level of marital quality — but only if they are able to invest a great deal of time and energy in their partnership. If they are not able to do so, their marriage will likely fall short of these new expectations. Indeed, it will fall further short of people's expectations than at any time in the past.

Marriage, then, has increasingly become an "all or nothing" proposition...

...TO understand marriage today, it is important to see how we got to where we are. Throughout America's history, its populace has experienced three distinct models of marriage, as scholars like the sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin and the historian Stephanie Coontz have chronicled. In the era of the ***institutional marriage***, from the nation's founding until around 1850, the prevalence of individual farming households meant that the main requirements Americans had for their marriage revolved around things like food production, shelter and protection from violence. To be sure, Americans were pleased if they experienced an emotional connection with their spouse, but such affinities were perquisites of a well-functioning marriage rather than its central purpose.

In the era of the ***companionate marriage***, from roughly 1850 until 1965, American marriage increasingly centered around intimate needs such as to love, to be loved and to experience a fulfilling sex life. This era overlapped with the shift from rural to urban life. Men increasingly engaged in wage labor outside of the home, which amplified the extent to which the two sexes occupied distinct social spheres. As the nation became wealthier and its social institutions became stronger, Americans had the luxury of looking to marriage primarily for love and companionship.

Since around 1965, we have been living in the era of the ***self-expressive marriage***. Americans now look to marriage increasingly for self-discovery, self-esteem and personal growth. Fueled by the countercultural currents of the 1960s, they have come to view marriage less as an essential institution and more as an elective means of achieving personal fulfillment. "You make me want to be a better man," from the 1997 movie "As Good as It Gets," could serve as this era's marriage ideal. In the words of the sociologist Robert N. Bellah, love has become, in good part, "the mutual exploration of infinitely rich, complex and exciting selves."

As a psychologist, I could not help noticing that this history of marriage echoes the classic "hierarchy of needs" outlined in the 1940s by the psychologist Abraham Maslow. According to Maslow, human needs fit into a five-level hierarchy: The lowest need is that of physiological well-being — including the need to eat and drink — followed by the need for safety, then for belonging and love, then for esteem and finally for self-actualization. The emergence of each need characteristically depends on

the prior satisfaction of a more basic need. A person unable to satisfy the need for food, for example, is wholly concerned with meeting that need; only once it is met can he focus on satisfying the need above it (safety), and so on.

My colleagues and I contend that an analogous process has occurred in our expectations about marriage. Those expectations were set at the low levels of Maslow's hierarchy during the institutional era, at medium levels during the companionate era and at high levels during the self-expressive era.

This historical ascent is, on its own, neither good nor bad. But it has major implications for marital well-being: Though satisfying higher-level needs yields greater happiness, serenity and depth of inner life, people must invest substantially more time and energy in the quality of their relationship when seeking to meet those higher-level needs through their marriage. To be sure, it was no small feat, circa 1800, to produce enough food or keep a house warm, but the effort required to do so did not require deep insight into, and prolonged involvement with, each other's core essence.

As the expectations of marriage have ascended Maslow's hierarchy, the potential psychological payoffs have increased — but achieving those results has become more demanding.

HERE lie both the great successes and great disappointments of modern marriage. Those individuals who can invest enough time and energy in their partnership are seeing unprecedented benefits. The sociologists Jeffrey Dew and W. Bradford Wilcox have demonstrated that spouses who spent "time alone with each other, talking, or sharing an activity" at least once per week were 3.5 times more likely to be very happy in their marriage than spouses who did so less frequently. The sociologist Paul R. Amato and colleagues have shown that spouses with a larger percentage of shared friends spent more time together and had better marriages.

But on average Americans are investing less in their marriages — to the detriment of those relationships. Professor Dew has shown that relative to Americans in 1975, Americans in 2003 spent much less time alone with their spouses. Among spouses without children, weekly spousal time declined to 26 hours per week from 35 hours, and much of this decline resulted from an increase in hours spent at work. Among spouses with children at home, spousal time declined to 9 hours per week from 13, and much of this decline resulted from an increase in time-intensive parenting…

What can be done? …First and foremost, couples can choose to invest more time and energy in their marriage, perhaps by altering how they use whatever shared leisure time is available. But if couples lack the time and energy, they might consider adjusting their expectations, perhaps by focusing on cultivating an affectionate bond without trying to facilitate each other's self-actualization.

The bad news is that insofar as socioeconomic circumstances or individual choices undermine the investment of time and energy in our relationships, our marriages are likely to fall short of our era's expectations. The good news is that our marriages can flourish today like never before. They just can't do it on their own.

Finkel, Eli J. "The All or Nothing Marriage." *The New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2014. Eli J Finkel is a professor of psychology and a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University.