

Matrimoniology with Dr. Benjamin Karney

Ologies Podcast

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Oh heeey, it's that lady in the hotel lobby who just took an apple from the bowl of decorative fruit and feels only partly guilty about it, Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*. Oh, love! Who doesn't love Love? This episode is coming out a few days before Valentine's Day. Love is in the air and on the shelves at Walgreens. Soon it will be in the discount aisle at Walgreens, but it will still be in our hearts and on our minds until probably the day we're dead and returned to the Earth as scattered molecules, ready to be a frog that loves another frog. But frogs don't get married and some people do. So let's learn about it. But first, little business.

Thank you, as always, to the *Ologies* patrons. I am your grateful, humble servant. This podcast would not exist without the folks on [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://www.patreon.com/Ologies). A dollar a month gets you in that club. Thanks to everyone for sporting *Ologies* merch from [OlogiesMerch.com](https://www.OlogiesMerch.com). I've said it before, I hope you wear an *Ologies* shirt, or pin, or hat and you find your soul mate and then I officiate your wedding and I eat free cake.

Thanks to everyone who rates the show and hits "subscribe." Bonus points for leaving a review for me to creepily lurk and read on the show, such as this week's. Let's do it. Ariel Leen [phonetic] says,

This podcast is 100% worth writing my first ever review. I've gotten sucked into topics that I never thought I would be interested in. (I'm looking at you, postcards.) The episodes on somnology inspired me to take the leap of faith and eliminate two of the three sleeping medications I had been taking for years. I feel better than ever. So thanks, Alie, for putting your heart and soul and a few bra crystals into bringing all of us so much joy.

Thank you, Ariel. Everyone else, consult a doctor before changing medications. Please don't sue me. Yay!

Okay, Matrimoniology. Is it a word? Come on, DadWard, don't go pulling legs here. Hot damn, is it ever! Kind of. First off, the term 'matrimony' comes from the Latin for 'mother'. As in, 'to make a mother out of someone'. Gross! But now matrimony is used as a catchall for marriage stuff. A now-deceased psychologist from the Czech Republic coined the term 'matrimoniology', wrote several books on marriage and relationship psychology, so it exists in the literature. I say it counts. So I enlisted the help of new intern Haeri Kim. They helped me track down one of the foremost American experts in the field who happens to teach, not in Prague, but in LA. So I just shimmied over to UCLA on a sunny morning, and I set up a few mics. I asked this Ologist questions that had both adorable and also sometimes very uncomfortable answers. Just like a relationship: adorable, sometimes uncomfortable.

He is a Professor of Social Psychology and a researcher at UCLA's Marriage Lab. There's a marriage lab! And he's a co-author of the textbook *Intimate Relationships* and has written innumerable papers on the topic, many of which have juicy as hell titles, such as: "To Know You Is to Love You: The Implications of Global Adoration and Specific Accuracy for Marital Relationships," and "How stress hinders adaptive processes in marriage." Oooh, this is the good stuff.

We sat down to discuss romantic intimacy, how marriage differs from non-married relationships, what to do if your partnership is going through a little bit of a rough patch, why divorces happen, how movies could save your relaysh, strategies for popping the question, the darker historical side of marriage, and then, maybe per usual, I have a life-changing epiphany. No spoilers.

Sit back, commit to this amazing and wild ride with someone who, technically speaking, in some parts of the world would be considered a Matrimoniologist, Dr. Ben Karney.

Alie Ward: You are sort of a matrimoniologist?

Dr. Ben Karney: I mean, technically I'm a psychologist. If you want to get more specific, I'm a social psychologist. There's lots of different kinds of psychology at universities. And social psychology is the study of how human beings, individual human beings are affected by the imagined or real presence of other human beings, which is to say it's the study of the human condition.

Alie: Oh, that sounds so poetic.

Ben: But it's true. We are the ones who study scientifically what it means to be a human being on the planet Earth. Within social psychology and all these different ways that human beings interact, my own interest has always been in intimacy and how people develop and maintain intimate connections, specifically romantic connections. And I have studied that in the context of marriage, but my interest is broader than just marriage. Marriage is a very convenient place to study adult intimacy because it's where a lot of adults will end up practicing their adult intimacy for large portions of their lives.

So I've studied marriage my whole life... my whole professional life, the last 25 years. But for me, marriage is a specific case of a broader interest in intimacy, in how people experience love and what happens to that experience over time.

Aside: Quick background on Ben. He grew up in LA but he got his Bachelor's in Psychology from just this little college called fricken' Harvard, then came back to California to get his PhD in Social Psychology from UCLA, where he's now, of course, a professor who studies intimate relationships. But how did he know that this field was "the one"?

Alie: And of all the different facets of social psychology, why intimacy?

Ben: Honestly, because that's what I was naturally thinking about when it came time to think, "What am I going to study?" What actually happened is that I got to graduate school in 1990, and I actually went to graduate school here at UCLA where I ended up many years later on the faculty. And I didn't know what I wanted to study. I knew I loved this idea of social psychology. I knew that the ways that human beings interact was fascinating, and puzzling, and compelling for me. But I didn't know what I was going to really study and I kind of drifted.

A very kind faculty member noticed that I was drifting. Her name was Anne Peplau. She's still around, although she's retired. Anne Peplau called me into her office and said, "Hey, how's your first year of grad school going?" which she didn't have any obligation to do. She didn't need to do that, but she was just very kind. I said, "I don't know. I'm studying different things." And she said, "Well, are you studying what you want to study? What do you... what is it that you actually came here to study?" I said, "I don't know." She goes, "Well, why don't you go think about it for a while?"

Alie: [laughs] And how could she tell you that you were drifting?

Ben: I don't know. I think because... I don't know why she took an interest. It was one of the most generous things anyone's ever done for me, though.

Alie: And so what did you do when you went and thought about it? Were you dating someone at the time? Were you single? Were you struggling in that area?

Ben: That's a good question. I had just started dating someone that I'd had a long-term crush on in college. After college, we had gotten together, so I was thinking about intimacy. I was thinking, "How do we fall in love with people? How do relationships change? How does someone that you know for a long time suddenly become your partner? How do two people who are strangers to each other, go from strangers to needing each other?" That seemed like a miraculous... it *is* a miracle, right?

If you're a single person right now, somewhere on the planet, there's someone, and probably close by, who some years from now you'll say, "Oh my god, that person touched me. That person is so important to me, I couldn't live without that person." And yet, now you have no idea who that person is. It's insane.

Alie: I know! I have a friend named Kathy who, she was at a birthday party, her future husband was there, they never even talked! They met online a year later. They were at the same birthday party!

Aside: So yes, my friends Kathy and Sandin, [ph.] they're in the same photos of this birthday party. This was a year before they met and started dating via OkCupid. So now they're married. They have a rescue poodle. Life is wild, is all I am saying. Just go talk to everyone at every party. Maybe you can smell them, see what that does for you. I don't know. I'm not a doctor.

Also, on my way to this interview, I took a Lyft because UCLA parking is just a dystopian hellscape. You can see the microbiology episode for more on that. And I was talking to the driver about this episode on the way to record it and I promised him that I would ask his question right away and not chicken out. So boy howdy, did I.

Alie: What about you? My Lyft driver, Nicholas, wanted me to ask: Are you married? You have a wedding ring on. How many times have you been married?

Ben: Me? I am married. I have been divorced. I was divorced. I was married to my first wife and we got divorced after I had been studying marriage for a long time, like many, many years. And then I married again. And I'm very happily married.

Alie: So you've experienced literally all sides of this dice.

Ben: Yes. I have been a participant in the whole phenomenon. And people ask me, of course. They say, "So you study marriage. You literally have written a book on intimacy. So, how is it that you got divorced?" And my response to that, I have a ready one, is, "Oh, I understand why I got divorced." [laughs] And one of the things that I studied for a long time is that not everything about your relationship, our relationships, are controllable. Things happen in relationships that are beyond your control, and the idea that "if you just work hard enough you can make any relationship work," is not true. I don't believe that's true.

Alie: And you can say that from a personal and from a scientific perspective.

Ben: Yes. It turns out I could say it... I was saying it for a long time from a scientific perspective and then I experienced it.

Alie: That is great, as a scientist, that you have experienced all those facets. I'm sure that it is not easy as a person, but as an actual, kind of, objective observer to other people's behavior, that must be very helpful.

Ben: I would have preferred not to experience it. [*laughs*] If I could have chosen, I would have preferred very strongly not to have experienced that.

Alie: Now, what about when you were a graduate student? You started turning your eye toward intimacy, and then at what point did the marriage lab here at UCLA exist? How did you get involved?

Ben: Well, it's interesting. It's fortuitous. It's luck. My career is a cascade of lucky breaks that I didn't do much to create or that I just fell into and am grateful for every day. I'm a big believer in luck and circumstance, and that is my scholarly interest in the effect of luck and circumstance on marriage, and I've definitely experienced that.

So what happened is, I came back to Anne Peplau after a week or so, and I said, "If I could be paid to think of something that I already think about, that'd be pretty great. If my whole life... if my job could be to ponder systematically and professionally something that I would already ponder, that'd be awesome!" And what I find myself thinking about all the time, that I don't have to be encouraged to think about, that I already think about, is love. How do people fall in love? How do we fall out of love? And that latter question is really the one that really puzzles me because nobody wants to fall out of love.

Everyone wants to find love. No mystery there. [*clip from Sex and the City: Carrie, "I am someone who is looking for love. Real love."*] The mystery is that once two people find that, how is it so fragile? That's the mystery. Because two people who fall in love experience, "This is amazing! This is great! Do you want to keep feeling this way? I do! Let's both do that!" And if you get married, for example, you don't just want that, you actually promise to do that, and you don't promise it privately, you promise it publicly in front of everybody.

Alie: In front of everyone. Everyone you've ever met that means anything to you.

Ben: ... is now listening to you say, "This is it! Count me out of the dating market. I'm going to be with this person here forever!" [*clip from The Princess Bride: "Mawage. Mawage is wot bwings us togevah todaaay."*] It would be a terrible idea to change your mind. It'd be costly; financially costly, emotionally costly, and it's embarrassing.

Alie: You're wearing the most expensive pants you have ever worn.

Ben: Very expensive pants! And people are giving you monogrammed stuff. You can't return it.

Alie: I know! So then what happens from a neurological perspective, in terms of, like, do our dopamine levels go crazy and then they wane naturally? How do you figure that out?

Ben: You know, my interest is not in the neurological level. There are people who study the neurological level and they're saying, "Here's what goes on... here's what brain regions activate." I'm more interested in the phenomenological level of experience. So I'm interested in: How do people experience a change that they don't want that happens anyway?

Aside: In case you are like "Shoot! What *is* the brain cocktail that's making me feel like a walking heart-eyed emoji/eggplant emoji/peach emoji/ very creepy newish drooling face emoji?" (which they shouldn't have green-lit. Why did they make that one? It's so gross.) Well, neurobiologists at the Loyola Sexual Wellness Clinic say that dopamine, adrenalin, and norepinephrine increase when two people get really smitten with each other. And then our buddy dopamine makes you feel euphoric, kinda like Tom Cruise jumping on a couch. While adrenaline and norepinephrine make your heart literally go pitter-pat, faster, and they focus your attention on this crush you have.

So evidently, love lowers your serotonin levels, which these researchers say is common in people with obsessive-compulsive disorders, which tracks if you've ever refreshed someone's Instagram like you're being paid to monitor them, and said, "Why, why, why, why am I doing this? Why am I doing this, why am I doing this, stop doing thiiiiissss."

So Dr. Ben Karney also says that minds are very hard to change and we've known this for, like, all of time. But in the 1950s a psychologist named Leon Festinger studied this and dubbed it 'cognitive dissonance' which is that excruciating discomfort when you're holding two very conflicting thoughts.

Festinger and colleagues studied a cult that was started by a midwestern housewife-cum-doomsday prophet who kept promising all of her followers that spacemen were coming very soon, any minute, to take them all away. And her followers kept believing in her even though, like, "Where are these spacemen?" She was like "Mmm... They're stuck in, like, *so much* space traffic." Anyway, this woman's name was Dorothy Martin and I really wish that for branding purposes, she had just popped an extra 'a' in that name and just went for Dorothy Martian. Can you imagine? That would have been so sick.

Anyway, people never tend to change their minds except anything about, I guess, love.

Ben: About people's love relationships or let's say their marriages, people *do* change their mind.

Alie: About their partner

Ben: About their partner. "I said I was going to love you forever. I thought I was going to love you forever. I thought this is the best relationship ever. I'm totally going to never change," and then people do, even though it's costly, even though they don't want to, even though it's embarrassing. That's a real mystery. And people do change their minds, all the time, about their love relationships. "I thought you were the one. I thought you were my soulmate. Surprise, surprise. I must have a different soulmate because you ain't it."

Alie: Do you even think, as a social psychologist, that soulmates exist? Or is that a convenient thing that we apply to one person so that we don't think about the soulmate that might be on the next train car even though we're married?

Ben: I do not believe that there are soulmates. I believe that relationships are processes that people work at, and people can work hard to have a good relationship with a variety of different people and those relationships will be different. So the good relationship you have with some person is different than the good relationship you might have with another person. There's some research on: What's the impact on a relationship of thinking about soulmates? Of believing in soulmates?

Alie: And?

Ben: It's not that great. [*Oh no.*] For example, if you really believe in soulmates and then you and your partner, who you think is your soulmate, are having a fight, it might lead you to say, "Uh oh, maybe you're not my soulmate." [*Price is Right loser horns*]

Alie: And now, what was your PhD work geared toward? What was your dissertation about?

Ben: So after I went back to Anne Peplau and said, "I think I want to study love relationships," she said, "Oh, that's an interesting coincidence because there's this guy that was just hired here at UCLA named Thomas Bradbury." Young guy. It was his first job, and he actually studies marriages. Tom Bradbury was studying newlyweds in the community, and then following them over time to see, in the first few years, who stayed – you know, newlyweds are pretty

happy – which ones of them stay happy, which ones get less happy, which ones get divorced, and he was also videotaping them. So it wasn't just asking them questions, he was videotaping them and coding what he saw in the video tapes.

I met him and said, "Hey, can I work with you?" And he said, "Sure." And that was 26 years ago and we're still working together because he's still on the faculty here. We write books together, and we get grants together, and we are still working together.

Alie: What's the secret to that healthy partnership?

Ben: Gee... It is probably the longest successful adult relationship I've had. And the secret is, I think, that I lucked out; that Thomas Bradbury happens to be a fantastic person.

Alie: Well, I guess that's part of selection.

Ben: It's totally selection. Yes! Actually, that's a very good point! One of the things that's coming out from the work that we've been doing the last few years is, it really matters who you choose. Because where your relationship begins says a lot about where it's going to go. [*clip from Rihanna song Work: Drake, "If you had a twin, I would still choose you."*] I do think that some people are less fortunate and that the person that you meet when you're feeling ready to get married and you're like, "Oh, wait a minute, I'm ready to get married, and you're here and available, and we get along well enough..." I think a lot of people get married that way, and you want to be lucky.

Alie: So the selection of partners sometimes is based on opportunity and not compatibility?

Ben: So, the only people you can possibly judge your compatibility with are the people that you meet, the people you have the opportunity to meet. So opportunity comes first, and *then* selection and compatibility. And I truly think that we've, as a culture, emphasized selection as if it's a much more active process than it is.

Alie: What *is* happening then? When someone picks a partner, what is really going on socially, emotionally? What is falling in love? What is that process?

Ben: All right, let's talk about that because I think there's a lot of confusion about that process even though people experience it. If you believe, for example, what dating sites tell you, or what matching sites tell you, then you would think that finding a partner is about measuring somebody and measuring their, sort of, qualities and finding someone whose qualities are compatible with your own qualities.

Aside: I started wondering what... let's not say the weirdest or creepiest dating sites are, let's say the most niche. I mean sure, you've got your DateaGolfer.com. There's GlutenFreeSingles.com. But what if you only want to date someone with, like, a speak-to-the-manager haircut up front, but a smokin' pony in the back? Well, you can head on over to MulletPassions.com. You can date a goth at AltScene.com. There's NaturistPassions; they might have your future significant other who is currently nude but wearing sandals.

There's also a site for horse lovers [*silly voice*] looking for a *stable* relationship, as endorsed by Oprah herself. [*clip from Oprah: female guest, "... I knew from the time I had the idea, it would put people together who love horses, and it's a perfect match."* Oprah: "*EquestrianSingles.com.*"]

Cat enthusiasts can cuddle up via PURRsonals.com. Can you even? Maybe you're looking for love but everyone around you is dead, because you are a professional in the death industry. Well don't let your heart grow cold, just go meet someone new at DeadMeet.com, who's alive.

If you are sick of clowning around on Tinder because there aren't enough clowns on it, you can flop those big ol' feet over to ClownDating.com, whose website makes the resonant imperative, "Everyone loves a clown. Let a clown love you." So go on, get your horn honked. [*hand horn honking*]

Ben: It turns out that a lot of those assumptions are just false. For example, one of the assumptions of those algorithms is that similarity is a good thing and it's easily measured. In fact, if you think about just a little bit, you realize that similarity doesn't help us very much because people are so complicated. I can always find ways that I'm similar to somebody if I like that person and I can find ways I'm dissimilar to somebody if I don't like that person.

Aside: So we can find similarity where we want to find it, essentially. Similarities aren't what's at the heart of attraction and romance. So what is?

Ben: The best research says that initial romantic chemistry comes from an interaction between two people that involves responsiveness, that makes both people feel understood, and heard, and excited. But it is a behavior. It's a dance. So it's not that "there's a kind of person in the world that always makes me feel excited," but there might be a sequence of behaviors that makes me feel good, and if you and I, or me and somebody, or you and somebody, show up at the right context and have the right interaction, you might say, "Hey, this interaction is making me feel interesting, and excited, and aroused." But if I had met you at a birthday party with kids around, we wouldn't have had that interaction and I wouldn't have had that feeling. You see the point.

Alie: Yes. So it's really about, kind of like, a feedback loop?

Ben: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. [*DJ airhorn*] That leads... the best dating advice nowadays, based on research, is "Don't worry about people's profiles. Find somebody that you think is cute enough, and go and interact with them as soon as possible," because the way you evaluate... The way that people naturally evaluate romantic chemistry is through how an interaction makes them feel. We don't choose partners the way we choose furniture, because furniture doesn't have to choose us back. But partners do, so it has to be an interaction; a give and take.

And that's actually where romantic chemistry emerges from. I said something, I disclosed something: "I come from LA." "Oh you come from LA?" And your enthusiasm, or your lack of enthusiasm, makes me feel a certain way about the fact that I disclosed something. And maybe if you're enthusiastic in the right way, it makes me feel good about the fact that I shared something. It makes you want to share something else. And then if I go too long without asking you a question, you might say, "Huh, I was enthusiastic, but now I'm not so enthusiastic." But if I then ask you a question and now you've shared something, now suddenly we're building a little bit of the beginnings of intimacy because it feels good to share. And now we're doing the dance. But it can break down so many different ways.

Alie: Well, is that what happens in marriages that are maybe starting to crumble, is you're not getting the feedback loop that you expected to get? Maybe your partner seems disinterested or you're disinterested so you're not giving back to them and they pick up on that? Is that kinda what happens?

Ben: That's a great question. So we're talking about: How does romantic interest emerge? And your question is, is it the same process in reverse as romantic interest declines?

Aside: Sorry, I don't mean to bum you out. This might just be good to know for long-term relationships. I'm sorry. I'm being a realist here.

Ben: My sense is there's a lot going on as romantic interest declines. And here's one of the things. One of the things is that the same behaviors that can be exciting when they're new are not necessarily exciting when they're old. First kiss, it doesn't feel the same as the 500th kiss, if you're lucky enough to get to the 500th kiss. If what you're in it for is the sense of escalating excitement, escalating excitement is likely to fade. Now, what happens in good marriages is two things. So let's talk first, not about marriages that decline, but marriages that last.

Alie: Yeah, that's a good way of looking at it.

Aside: Yes, let's look at the positive. How do we keep things cute?

Ben: One thing that happens is happy couples find ways to keep the excitement alive. They keep growing together, they keep exploring both each other and the world together. And that keeps... they're always, "Wait a minute. Even though we've been together 15 years, even though we've been together 50 years, we still did something yesterday we'd never done before." So there's still something new, there's something new that's possible. But that takes effort. It takes effort and opportunity, right? Like, if you're working very, very hard, if you're struggling financially, you don't have time to say, "Hey, let's go do something we've never done before!"

Alie: Right!?! "Let's go horseback riding!"

Ben: "Ooh, that'd be so fun!" And you know, rich people do that. But people who are struggling can't do that. They have to... just getting by is hard. But that means that opportunities for novelties are hard. So another thing that successful couples do in the long term is they find other bases for their bond.

Aside: The doc says that thinking someone is foxy is nice, but "Eh."

Ben: But that's not the only thing people want from their companions. I also want someone who's dependable. I want someone who's reliable, someone who understands me and will support me when I'm sick, when I'm really in trouble, when it's the middle of the night and our kids are throwing up because they're sick. I want to know that you're going to be there and can watch my back. So good marriages can both keep excitement alive, that's totally possible, but also can find a broader base for why the relationship is around, the functions the relationship serves.

Alie: And is it good for partners to sit down and make lists of those interests or check in?

Ben: It's great, but most people don't do that. Most people don't do that for a couple reasons. Maybe a handful of reasons. One is: A lot of people think, "Oh, this just should come naturally. We shouldn't have to talk about it." And I don't think that's true. It is in the culture that "Why should we have to talk about it? A good relationship just happens," as opposed to a good relationship... So if you believe in soulmates and like, "Well, if we're soulmates, why should we have to discuss it? [*snobby hipster tone*] My soul should just recognize your soul."

But if relationships are an action, a process that you have to contribute to, then... if you're a whole different person, I need to understand who you are, and that's going to take work. It's going to take communication. Another reason people don't do it is it can be scary. "I'm assuming that we agree about a lot of things. I don't necessarily want to know if we don't, because that'd be a hard conversation." When's the right time to have a hard conversation?

Alie: Never.

Ben: Never. “Let’s see, we can watch *The Great British Baking Show* tonight, or we can have possibly a really difficult conversation. Ya know, I think Netflix is better.” [clip from *The Great British Baking Show: Paul Hollywood, “Slight soggy bottom there.”*]

Alie: There are so many people out there who think that you’re just a witch who’s read their mind.

Ben: They’re like, “Wait a minute! You watch *The Great British Baking Show*?” Of course!

The third reason is that lots of people don’t have the time. The truth is that life is very hard and challenging for many, many people. It’s a privilege to have the time to look at your partner and say, “Hey, let’s... let’s talk for a while.” That happens when your life is under control. Many people have multiple jobs, bills to pay, sick family, all sorts of stress in their lives that they’re barely staying on top of. And now it’s a lot to ask to say, “Okay, by the way, put all that aside and have a heart-to-heart talk with your partner about their hopes and dreams.” There’s many people in the world for whom that would be a luxury that they cannot afford.

Aside: So as Tegan and Sarah have asked: Where does the love go?

Ben says that, day by day, other things just take priority like work, and paying bills, and taking care of the kids, and then at the bottom, the dusty end of the to-do list is “connect on a meaningful level with your life partner.”

Ben: So my memories of the excitement of the things that kept us together are fewer and farther between. I still remember them, but I’m like, “Wow, it’s actually been a while since we’ve been intimate, [sexy music] since we’ve laughed or told a joke because life has been hard for us, [record scratch] or we’ve done other things. Then if that’s true, if our connection is weaker, then when something’s hard or when we disagree, now it’s harder to have those disagreements. My empathy for you is weaker. If I’m stressed, I’m paying more attention to my own needs. It’s harder for me when I’m stressed to get out of my own head and into your head.

All these factors combine. And so now we’re busy. I’m less empathetic. I’m very aware of my own unmet needs. I can’t read your mind. I’m not trying to read your mind, so I don’t know what your unmet needs are. It’s easy to say, “If my needs are unmet, whose fault is it? It’s not my fault. I know I’m working hard. I don’t know what’s in your head, but I can tell you’re right here. It must be your fault.” So now I’m mad at you, and now the next time we disagree, well, I get madder, and instead of each interaction building us up, making us more connected, each interaction breaks us down. It makes us feel a little bit less connected.

And unless we make explicit efforts to try to restore that connection, and unless we’re able to make those efforts... Again, the world has to be supporting us. We might come to a point where I don’t feel what I felt, and you don’t feel what you felt, and we don’t feel like we can connect even if we wanted to, and so now we feel helpless. Eventually, the costs of staying in the relationship, the emotional costs, outweigh the cost of leaving, and for different people, that calculus is different.

Some people will stay in a bad relationship for a long time because they have nowhere to go, or because they have kids, or they have financial connections or they feel like, “I’ll never find another partner, so I’d rather stay with this partner even though I’m not very happy.” It takes two people to get together, only takes one person to break up.

Alie: Oh, that’s true. And where is the line there? Because I think everyone probably thinks, “No relationship is perfect.”

Ben: True.

Alie: So everyone probably thinks that about their own relationship, right?

Ben: I would hope so. I think that is true actually. You can evaluate a relationship on two levels, and what we find is that people... like newlyweds, if you ask them very specific questions about their partner, even newlyweds are willing to say, "Well, my partner is good at some things, not so good at others." Knowing somebody means knowing that person's strengths *and* their limitations.

Aside: Ah that old adage. The advice handed down countless generations: To truly love someone is to know in what ways areas they are useless pains in the ass.

Ben: So most people will say, "Oh yeah, yeah, our relationship isn't perfect, but it's a great relationship. I love the imperfections of this relationship."

Alie: Like 4.5 stars on Yelp, maybe.

Ben: Exactly. Or something like, "I wouldn't want..." A very, very smart couple's therapist. My wife is a couple's therapist and she...

Alie: Oh my god! Your wife is a couple's therapist and you're a marriage researcher?

Ben: I know. We have some interesting conversations.

Alie: Oh my god! You guys are never getting divorced!

Ben: I hope that's true. I think that's true. I think that it's a great relationship.

Alie: That's amazing.

Ben: It took a long time for us to get to this point, but we have good conversations, and one of the things that she says is, "You know, when you commit long-term to a partner, you're committing to a set of strengths and limitations." So if we get back to the idea that, to the extent that you have a choice and that you make choices, one of the things to think about is "Can I live with these limitations forever?" [*clip from The Simpsons: Mr. Burns. "Don't forget. You're here forever."*]

Another insight, I think, mostly from talking to my wife, not from research, is... I used to think that the purpose of communicating in relationships was to solve problems, to solve disagreements. I now think that disagreements do not get solved. They just get managed.

Aside: Okay. But what, in a scientific, matrimoniological sense, does that mean?

Ben: The purpose isn't that I'm ever... I'm *never* going to convince you or anyone else of anything. So once you decide, "Okay, convincing another person is just off the table," then it's just a matter of saying, "How will we deal with our disagreement? How will we manage? Yes, we're going to always disagree about this and how are we going to manage that?" Maybe we'll take turns, maybe we'll compromise on this issue in my way, but we'll compromise on this other issue in your way and hope it balances out. But once you realize... I think it takes a lot of pressure off of a relationship to say, "Oh, we are not in the convincing business." [*Alie laughs*]

Aside: Oooo, let's repeat that:

Ben: We are not in the convincing business.

Alie: Ahhaha.

Ben: We are not in the convincing business.

Alie, slowed and distorted to make fun of herself: "Aaahaahaa."

Ben: We are not in the resolving problems business. Like, “Oh, this is going to go away and then we’ll never talk about this again.” No, no, no. *This is the thing we talk about.* That’s what kind of relationship this is. “This is the relationship where this is our issue.” If I had been in another relationship, we’d have a different issue, but this is our issue. And as you think about the future, you think, “Can I live with this? Because we’re going to be talking about this fa eva? [male voice over romantic violin music, “Forever, beloved.”] I can. This is a good... I’m very happy with *this* set of limitations and strengths.”

Alie: But I feel like a lot of people find that their marital discord is financially based, or at least that’s what I hear from people. I’m not married, but do you find that in your research? Or do you find that finances are really just kind of like a red herring for other lifestyle choices people make?

Ben: There’s two ways to answer that. I do a lot of research on the effect of financial circumstances on marriage, and the effects are enormous. *Enormous.* We live in a country where there’s a great deal of income inequality that has been increasing over my adult lifetime. What we’ve shown in multiple studies is that where you are on the socioeconomic ladder greatly affects the nature of your intimacy.

Aside: Whaaat? Oh shiiiiit. Also, no surprise.

Ben: Like in very specific, private ways, the way people interact with their partners very privately is affected by where they are socioeconomically. So people who are affluent, who have good jobs and good educations, they can evaluate their relationships in a different way than people who are financially struggling, and disadvantaged, under-resourced. They can evaluate their relationships in different ways.

That doesn’t mean that it’s fundamental to specifically talk about finances, like “How are we going to spend money?” Because even couples that are financially struggling... If you’re financially struggling, every disagreement is more of a struggle. And if you’re affluent, you might talk about finances, but you might also... whatever you disagree about is going to be what you disagree about. I would say that the context of having or not having adequate resources in your life is fundamental. It changes the kind of time you have together. It changes what you do with the time you have together, and it changes the personal resources you have to do the work of empathy and the work of understanding and compromise.

Everything, all the work that we would call intimate work: trying to get outside your own head and capture your partner’s perspective, deciding when to compromise and when not to compromise. All that work is harder if you’re financially strapped, which is why divorce rates are much higher in low-income communities than in upper-income communities.

Alie: Oh, I didn’t know that.

Ben: It’s a huge effect.

Aside: So one of Ben’s studies titled “Communication that is maladaptive for middle-class couples is adaptive for socioeconomically disadvantaged couples” showed that depending on where you are socioeconomically, different intimate behaviors produce negative or positive results. So middle-class couples who withdrew in conflict had worse conflicts later, while socioeconomically disadvantaged couples who withdrew found more comfort in that as a de-escalation technique.

As for divorce stats, they are definitely higher in lower-income families. And some folks would try to say that must be because those demographics don’t value marriage as much.

That is a crock of horse shit. So, low-income and high-income people value marriage similarly, but being broke and working several jobs, and being stressed, and not being privileged is just really hard on people.

Ben: What's striking is that poor communities have lower rates of marriage. When they do marry, they have higher rates of divorce. So, intimacy is challenged by challenging circumstances, and intimacy is encouraged by good circumstances, which is why people fall in love on cruise ships, because it's easy to have a relationship on a cruise ship! It's much easier to feel romantic when someone's giving you a cocktail that has an umbrella in it!

Alie: *[laughs]* Well, what about the fact that... or at least a study I read, that the more expensive a wedding is, the more likely a couple is to get a divorce. Is that flimflam?

Aside: This news broke in 2014 with a published paper entitled "'A Diamond is Forever' and Other Fairy Tales: The Relationship between Wedding Expenses and Marriage Duration." Researchers studied 3,000 couples in the US and they found that marriage duration is inversely associated with spending on the engagement ring and the wedding ceremony. So spending between two and four grand on the engagement ring is associated with a 1.3x greater hazard of divorce.

Same goes for the ceremony. Weddings that cost less than a thousand dollars were significantly less likely to end in divorce than nuptials costing twenty grand and up. Now, \$20,000, remember from the paleontology episode, could fund two dinosaur digs. I'm just saying. Two dinosaurs!

Now, don't tell this to a guy named Said Gutseriev, son of a Russian oligarch, who married his 20-year-old sweetheart, Khadija Uzhakhovs, in a celebration that cost one billion – yes, with a 'b' – dollars in 2016. So instead of having your college roommate make a Spotify playlist, their reception entertainment included Jennifer Lopez and Sting, which was definitely selected by their parents. (I mean c'mon.) Also, Enrique Iglesias, who according to some blurry Instagram photos, was wearing jeans and a wallet chain to a billion-dollar wedding. Enrique Egregious!

Also, I googled 'how to even get married for under a thousand dollars'. Mostly just came up with articles that said literally, like, "Take the bus to the courthouse dummy" or "Elope in secret like a celebrity for whom money is no object," or "Get married in the backyard and have your cousins bring a salad."

So, is starting things off without a lot of money stress and debt a good strategy for staying married?

Ben: It doesn't feel fundamental to me. I haven't gone over those data. But it's unlikely... whatever's going on there, it's not about spending money on a wedding. It's about other things. So, maybe if you have a lot of money to spend on a wedding, then you also have a lot of financial independence, and people who are financially independent are able to leave their marriages when they go bad, should they go bad. Nobody's arguing that, "Uh oh, don't spend a lot of money on your wedding because that's going to break up your marriage." That's unlikely to be true.

Alie: Are marriage rates going up? Are divorce rates going up? What's happening now in the year that we're in, 2019?

Ben: The year that we're in, 2019, here's the trend. The trends are very different for college-educated and non-college-educated people. So if you look at the national trend, it would be misleading because there's two totally different trends happening. College-educated people

are marrying at high rates. They're delaying marriage, so they're marrying later, and that has to do with people postponing childbearing and family formation in order to get their education and their careers on track. The evidence of this is pretty clear. So still high rates of marriage, relatively low rates of divorce, even declining rates of divorce, but it's all happening later.

So people who went to college are saying, "Hey," and men and women are doing this, "I have a good education. That means I can set myself up for a good career. I know that if I can get that career up and running, it's going to have benefits for my family, so I'm going to get that career up and running, and then once I have enough money and my career is where I want it to be, then it's time to settle down." That's what the college-educated people are doing.

Non-college educated people are doing something totally different. They're less likely to marry at all. When they do marry, they marry earlier. They have kids prior to marriage at high rates. They have very high rates of divorce, and re-partnering, and what's called 'marital churning', which is multiple long-term partners. A totally different thing is happening there. And why? Because people who didn't go to college, they have less reason to invest in education and employment because their opportunities are much more constrained. So they're like, "Well, why should I postpone fertility? What am I waiting for? Why should I postpone parenthood?" So they're much more likely to have kids early. But having kids early and marrying early is associated with higher rates of divorce.

Alie: Oh, I didn't know that... Getting married early and having kids early... I didn't know that.

Ben: It's true. It's very strong. These are big effects. It's not psychological effects, it's sociological that people who marry younger... As you can imagine, if you marry in your very early 20s... I was a puppy when I was in my early 20s.

Alie: I was a garbage fire. *[laughs]*

Ben: People are still figuring things out. So if you get married at that age, there's still a lot of change happening that your relationship might not survive. People who marry later are more stable. Their personalities are more stable, their careers and more stable, so the person that they meet at a later point is... the relationships are less likely to be buffeted by significant change.

Alie: Now, what about the difference between getting married versus just long-term partnership? What happens in the brain once there's a certificate, and a ring, and pictures, and a photo album, and a registry? What happens to people's relationships?

Ben: Okay. So, I think that there's a lot of continuity. So personally, again, as I said from the very beginning, I care about intimacy and I think that people can have intimacy that feels the same if we defined it as, "I'm committed to somebody. I support that person. I care about that person." And that can happen inside or outside of marriage. So what does marriage do? What does marriage do to change intimacy? Mostly, it changes how you as a couple are treated by the world around you.

Aside: This revelation is something that even the most well-meaning hetero couples likely take for granted all the time: just how important outside support is. And it applies to married and non-married couples, as well.

Ben: So if you present as, "We're partnered but we're not married," then the world says, "Oh, well then, you're not participating in an institution, and it's hard for us to know what to do with you at the hospital when you're visiting your sick partner. Legally, what is your responsibility?" The world is structured in a way that privileges marriages. And people know

this. Also, it's harder to break up a marriage than to break up an intimate partnership. [*Bill Lumbergh from Office Space: "Uhh... yeeah."*] You can walk away from an intimate partnership, but a marriage, you've got to fill out paperwork and it's an extremely expensive and unpleasant process.

Alie: [*laughs*] From a scientific perspective?

Ben: From every perspective. [*laughs*] It sucks. Avoid it if you can. So what does it do to get married? Well, one thing it does is it declares to the world, "We want to be treated as a couple. As a legal unit. As a social unit." Also, from the couple's perspective, if I get married, I'm saying "I *want* it to be harder to leave. I want it to be harder to leave." Which says something about your level of commitment. [*"Fiiight!"*] Like, I'm more motivated to work through it because...

Alie: Divorce sucks?

Ben: Divorce sucks. Exactly! Whereas my motive to work through the hard parts that come up in relationships might be a little weaker. Not necessarily, but it might be a little weaker on average for people who are not participating in the legal institution. So the process of: What does it mean to connect to somebody, to understand somebody? That's the same in any intimacy, but the institutional context makes a difference, makes certain behaviors harder and certain behaviors easier.

Alie: And how have you seen in your research, because you've been researching this for 20 years, but same-sex marriage, hasn't been legal the entire time, so in the LGBTQ community, how have you seen changes sociologically?

Ben: Well, I wish I knew more about that. When I started studying intimacy and marriage, same-sex marriage was not legal anywhere in the United States.

Alie: Which is crazy.

Ben: Which is crazy. But it all happened in my lifetime, which is terrific and a welcome development. One of the interesting things about the rapid change and rapid acceptance, the legal acceptance of same-sex marriage, is that lots of same-sex couples who were together for a long time, who never had the option of getting married, suddenly had the option of getting married. And so there was an interesting process, which is "If we've already been together 20 years, I knew I was going to be with you forever, but marriage wasn't on the table. Now that marriage is on the table, do we do it or do we not do it?" And there is a study that is left to be done. There's a study that needs to be done there about how that decision is made. I haven't gathered that data.

Aside: Ben does say that other countries have gathered data on this and, overall, same-sex marriages are much less likely to end in divorce than opposite-sex marriages. In Belgium, between 2004 and 2009, the average annual divorce rate for same-sex marriages was less than 2% and the total rate of divorce was 11%. Now in Norway and Sweden, the same-sex marriage divorce rates are 50% lower than opposite-sex marriages, but among those, lesbian couples do divorce more than same-sex marriage among men.

Researchers find that women across all types of marriages tend to be the ones to initiate splits because their needs typically aren't being met. So in the US, over 2/3 of all divorces in all couples are initiated by wives because, they think, women are more socialized to pay attention to their relationships, and are more financially dependent on a partnership, so being in a bad marriage has greater emotional consequences for women, essentially.

Also, if you're wondering where the data is, the 2020 Census will at long last have a space for same-sex couples to mark for marriages, which is a tiny victory, especially in light of the current US administration trying to add in a question about citizenship while leaving out questions about sexual orientation and gender identity, which leaves a lot of LGBTQ people, especially the unmarried folks, unrepresented and under-funded. Essentially invisible. Which sucks and needs fighting.

Speaking of fighting, but in a less-valiant sense, I also asked him about what happens when any couples, any couples, get back together and break up, and back and forth, back and forth. Kind of like a Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor married-and-divorced situation. Elon Musk married actress Talulah Riley twice. Divorced her twice also.

So, as a person who has gotten back together with my exes, I asked him for selfish reasons. Ben said that beyond the obvious reasons of absence making the heart grow fonder and forgetting how boring or annoying someone is when they're not around to bore or annoy you, there are some other factors at play when you break up and get back together with someone.

Ben: Another explanation is there are certain people who, between themselves, are struggling to balance closeness versus independence. So there are people who struggle... There's another theory called attachment theory. The idea that different people have different comfort levels with closeness and independence. Some people want really a lot of closeness and some people really aren't comfortable with being too close and too dependent on another person, really value their independence.

So there are some people who, in their struggle to balance that, find themselves drawn to a person, but they don't want to be too close. They push away, but they don't want to be totally close, so they come back together, and those people often dance around each other for a long time trying to form that balance.

Alie: How important is humor and laughter in easing conflict and establishing those bonds and that feedback?

Ben: It's really important. Some of our research has touched on that. What we did in one of our studies was videotape newlyweds talking about problems and you can code these tapes. You can watch the tapes and actually count how many positive behaviors and how many negative behaviors. You can even say how many positive verbal behaviors and you can also code that sort of nonverbal behaviors, the emotional expressions.

Generally, people who exchanged negative behaviors – anger, blaming, insults – well, that's going to be a bad thing. But what we found was that if those negative behaviors happen in the same interaction where people are being positive as well, and most of the positivity we see is humor and affection, the negative behaviors had much less of an effect.

Alie: Really?

Ben: And why? Here's why. If we're disagreeing and I'm mad at you, I'm Super Mad, but at the same time that we're having this mad disagreement, I'm definitely angry, I can also throw in a little joke or a little affection. What's the message? The message is: the fact that we're mad doesn't mean I don't still like you. But that's the point. That's an incredibly important message, which is, "You've hurt me. You've disappointed me, but obviously we're still connected." The positivity is a reminder of that connection.

I think humor can serve an incredibly important function, and positivity can be especially important if you can manage to find it where it's most needed, which is in the context of a

disagreement. Being able to say, “Yes, we’re disagreeing and I don’t want to let this go, but I am keeping it in perspective. But still, I think you’re cute and I think that this is fun. And obviously, we’re going to be dealing with this forever because I’m not going anywhere.” That can be a very powerful message. That is a way of reassuring your partner even in the midst of the hard part. So, again, it’s complicated, but humor is potentially an incredibly powerful tool along with affection that can help people through the rockiest parts of relationships.

Alie: I bet. My parents have been married for 49-and-a-half years.

Ben: That’s incredible.

Alie: I know, and they’re still... I hear ‘em yuckin’ it up, laughing to themselves, joking with each other.

Ben: That’s amazing.

Alie: I know. They’ll go to bed and then I’ll hear them giggling, laughing. I’m like “What are they talking about?”

Ben: The other thing is, think about what a joke is. A joke is something that surprises you. Like a good joke is something that is a novelty. So what they’re doing is they’re surprising each other, right? They’re still telling you that, like, if I can make each other laugh... they’re saying, “It tickles me because you’re telling me something I didn’t know.” So they’re still finding new things 49-and-a-half years later. That’s amazing! They’re amazing! Bottle it up, sell it!

Alie: I know. Well, the reason why they got married is my mom just thought my dad was hot and then it turned out they were both good people.

Ben: Okay. So they’re lucky too.

Alie: I know. They got engaged after a month. What am I supposed to do with that?

Ben: Well, be lucky. Try to be lucky. Of course, you can’t try to be lucky so you do what you can.

Alie: You just appreciate when you are I guess.

Ben: But I think the story... There’s been lots of research asking long-term married couples, “What’s the secret to your success?” And I think long-term couples will say “Sense of humor. We worked really hard at it. We just decided we’re going to be together and we were committed and we would never let anything break us up.” That’s all true and it’s all good, but what’s hard to recognize is how lucky the long-term couples are.

I really try to not say, “Well, it’s all hard work” because the implication then is, if your relationship went bad, you didn’t work hard enough, or maybe you’re too stupid, you just didn’t know how to have a better relationship. Believe me, if it’s all about knowing what to do, relationship scientists would all have perfect relationships. I know a lot of relationship scientists, my best friends are relationship scientists, and we don’t always have perfect relationships because it’s not only about knowing. It’s about being able to. It’s not enough to have read the book and say, “Well, it says here I should tell a joke.” It’s about being able to actually find that joke in the moment, about having problems that you can joke about. Not everyone’s lucky.

Alie: Can I ask you questions from listeners?

Ben: Okay.

Alie: Oh my gosh. Okay. I’m going to run through it because I know that you’re busy.

Ben: Go for it. Lightning round!

Alie: Okay. Lightning round. You ready?

Ben: Yeah.

Aside: Before this lightning round with listener questions from Patreon, a quick break to chat about *Ologies'* sponsors. So, you may hear a few phone calls in which I ring up a patron, one-on-one, to tell them about the amazing, hand-picked, and Ward-approved sponsors of the show. Also, please know that a portion of the proceeds from ads goes to a cause of the Ologist's choosing. I'm going to tell you about this week's in the show outro so you have more context because it does matter this week. I encourage you to listen to the whole episode, including the outro. It's really important stuff.

[Ad Break]

Now, on to your matrimoniological questions.

Alie: These are from patrons. So many *great* questions. Savannah Martin-Collins, Sonya Carperlovik, [ph.] and some other people wanted to know: What's up with common law marriages? Do you see any differences between people who are common law and people who aren't?

Ben: Not a lot of great research on that. But let's speculate for a second. What is the common law marriage? It's a marriage that is recognized as a legal partnership even though they've not... because of the length of time people have been together. Not every state recognizes common law marriages. I think California, where we're currently having this conversation, doesn't, but I could be wrong about that.

Alie: I'll look into it.

Aside: According to LegalZoom, who I imagine is just helping folks navigate through Splitsville, most states do not recognize common law marriages. This was news to me. So the states that right now do recognize common law marriages include... And I encourage you to do a tiny but acceptable butt dance if you feel excited to hear your state called. Ready? Alabama, Colorado, District of Columbia, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah.

Buzzkill: same-sex relationships are never recognized as common law. Also, there's no such thing as a common law divorce, so you need not bellow in the public square, [*old-timey voice*] "Thou hast been ousted from my heart!" The law still doesn't care. Just pack up and go. Just divvy up the Blu-rays, cry into some nachos, spend what you would have spent on legal fees on a solo trip to Cancun. Don't get beach braids.

Ben: We were talking about this, essentially, that the intimacy is the same. Two people who've never had a wedding ceremony but decided, "You're my person and I'm just not going anywhere." The challenges of "How are we going to understand each other? How are we going to address our disagreements? How are we going to compromise?" The same. Intimacy is the same, but the support you get is probably less, because if you're not wearing a ring, if you haven't been saying to the world, "My wife. My husband," then the world doesn't treat you as a social unit or legal unit, which means you don't have that kind of support. So that's going to be, I think, a challenge.

The challenges come from outside, and they might be more challenging for common law marriages than for a legal, and... I don't know what the alternative phrase is. Again, the

challenges of intimacy are the same, but you're at slightly different circumstance because people don't recognize the institution you're participating in.

Alie: That makes sense. On the topic of intimacy, many people had this question. Carla Kennedy and Wendy Fick said: Any helpful tips for salvaging sexual intimacy if one partner isn't interested anymore? Wendy asked: What typically happens to the physical part of a relationship? Do some relationships become platonic?

Ben: Well, clearly some do because the answer to the question, "Does this ever happen?" is always, "Yes." If two people are okay with that, then no problem. But if two people aren't okay with that, then a big problem. So then the first step, it seems to me, is to figure out... is to communicate, is to talk.

There's a lot of research that shows that sexual connection is a subset of emotional connection. And so developing an emotional connection is one really important way to develop, to revive a sexual connection and say, "Hey, what's going on? Are we emotionally connected?" There's research that shows that people who can communicate more effectively have more sex. So if one partner is unsatisfied with the amount of sex that they're having or the quality of their sex life, communication is going to be the first step.

The other thing that comes up with sexual connection is the role of novelty and expansion. There's a theorist guy named Arthur Aron, a social psychologist, who has a theory called self-expansion theory. Self-expansion theory is the idea that the thrill of relationships comes from the thrill of becoming more than we are. That's a fundamental motivation, says Dr. Aron. And when I get to know somebody else and we become a unit, well, I used to be me, now I'm us. So now I'm more than I was and that's thrilling. But once I become 'us', if we don't continue to grow, well then we're not expanding anymore. I've expanded, I'm definitely a part of us, but we're just who we've always been and that can get boring.

So, the way to deal with that is, "How can we become more? What can we do that's new? What can we do that's different?" And that often is a place where sexual excitement comes from too. Like, "Wow, I see you in a new light because we've done something new that we haven't done before, even if it's not necessarily something sexual that we haven't done before." So seeing opportunities for growth, seeing opportunities for connection, that's a good way. Talking directly.

The other thing that often gets in the way of sex is that people are tired. People are stressed. And if I say, "Hey, how come we're not having enough sex?" and I'm not acknowledging what the obstacles that are getting in the way for you, well then that's not going to be a great route because now I'm making another demand. Sex is now another demand. So sometimes you have to take a step back and say, "Well, hey, what's going on with my partner?" And sometimes sex is really a side issue to other issues. People are unhappy, or tired, or overburdened, and those are the obstacles that have to be addressed first before we can deal with sex.

Alie: Which dovetails to a great question from Jessica Chamberlain, Kjersti Chippindale, Elizabeth Gonye, and Lauren Kelly: What role do you find children or the lack thereof playing in marriage? Do you find them more rewarding with or without children? And that other people are like, "What do you do when your kids are draining you of your energy?"

Ben: The transition to parenthood is one of the most profound changes that a person can experience. Let alone a marriage. So it is a profound change. There's research on the effect of the transition to parenthood on relationships. One of the findings of that research is that the

early years of having kids... it's very challenging because kids are very demanding, [*pleading, whiny voice, "I hate it. I fucking hate it."*] and that most relationships bounce back after a while and return to where they were prior to the transition to parenthood.

An implication of that is that having a strong, solid connection prior to becoming parents is a great thing. Like, that becomes a really important resource because even though you're like, "Well, this is a difficult period. We're up all night, our kids are not sleeping, we have a lot of demands. I'm with one kid, you're with the other kid, but we're connected. I know that this is relatively temporary."

The other thing that's true nowadays is the expectations for parents, especially college-educated parents, are higher now than they were a generation or two ago. Parents expect to spend more time with their kids and do more with their kids. And that means that there's less time for the adult relationship. There's less time for the parental relationship. There are only 24 hours in a day. So something has to give. So the question is... Let's say you're a great parent, you want to be a great parent, you want to say, "I want to give my kids as many hours as I can, but I also want to give my kids access to a great adult relationship between me and my other caregiver." So that might mean investing in the relationship and putting my kids somewhere, you know, with a grandparent, if you're lucky enough to have a grandparent that you trust, or another kind of caregiver if you're lucky enough to have one.

Alie: Let 'em go run in a field.

Ben: Or let 'em go run in the street! Exactly right. So this is the thing... of course we don't let kids run in the street anymore.

Alie: Right. That's how I grew up. [*laughs*]

Ben: It's how I grew up! And yet that's not considered... A lot of things that I did as a kid would be considered neglect now.

Alie: We just ran into a field and scraped our knees on barbed-wire fences and...

Ben: Nobody knew where we were! Exactly. So this is the challenge, it really is a challenge. And so modern parents, especially college-educated parents, really do have to struggle with, "How am I going to invest each hour?" And the investment in the relationship is still vital. And it takes investment. You have to find time to maintain that connection so that you will have that connection to show your kids and to make you better parents for your kids.

Alie: Right? Because it's going to be harder for them to model a good relationship if they didn't see one.

Ben: Exactly. So people think, "Oh well it's now all about the kids and I owe that to my kids." You also owe to your kids having a good relationship.

Alie: That's good advice. That's great advice!

Ben: I try not to be in the advice business, but I think that's consistent with research.

Alie: I got a few questions about proposing. Tina Rautio wants to know: Why won't my partner of four years propose? And then Kelli Brockington asks: Why doesn't Tina propose? And also Madalyn Rogers says: This isn't a question, but it would be pretty great if someone proposed to their certain significant other in a Patreon question for this episode. Also, someone wrote in saying that she is proposing to her partner today!

Ben: Congratulations! That's exciting!

Alie: I know. So Lexi Gagne is getting proposed to by Shelise today.

Ben: Good job. Lexi and Shelise. That's wonderful.

Aside: PS: I called that listener Shelise after we recorded this. Lexi said Yes! They sound amazing and adorable. Yay!

Alie: But in proposing, how does a partner, especially in a patriarchal society, who maybe is a woman or is waiting to get proposed, like how do we decide who decides it's time to ask?

Ben: Yeah. Not a lot of good research on this. My research always takes place with couples that are married. A lot of my work is on newlyweds, so recently married. We asked them though, "How'd you propose?" And the couples that we talked to say this, they say, "Oh, we knew we were going to get married. And the proposal was essentially, you know, theater. Like the proposal was a ritual that we liked, but it wasn't fundamental to the relationship, or rather, it was a symptom of the relationship. We have a relationship where he does romantic things to me all the time or she does romantic things and the proposal was another romantic thing, but it wasn't *the* romantic thing."

So I think we've built up proposals in the same way we have built up weddings, and proms, and a lot of sort of rituals as if, "Oh, that's got to be special." And there's nothing wrong with it being special, but a relationship is not about one day, no matter how special it is. It's not about what happened on your wedding day. It's not about even what happened on your proposal day, you know. It can go great or can go poorly, but what keeps the relationship alive is the day-to-day process of connection, of managing difference.

I fundamentally don't think it matters that much. It's nice, it's wonderful and if you celebrate Valentine's Day and it's nice and wonderful, that's great. And if you celebrate Valentine's and it doesn't work and it rains, that's also okay because that's not where the relationship rises and falls. The relationship rises and falls on what happens each day.

Now that doesn't address the question of why people propose or not propose, or what happens when one partner says, "I want a proposal," and the other partner says, "I'm not ready." And that's an old story, and that's a story about different people being at different places in terms of escalating commitment and different levels of comfort with participating in the institution of marriage.

It's a complicated institution. It's been many times a very, very patriarchal institution. And different people are like, "How are we going to define it? What's it going to mean? Is our relationship going to change?" These are hard conversations to have. It's often the case that one person's ready and the other person isn't ready, and that's a difference that has to be managed, like any other difference. And some people will say, "I can't handle this difference and I'm going to leave. I don't want this. This difference is too much for me." And other people are going to say, "I can handle this difference."

But I do think, and this is now me speaking not as a scientist but as a person who thinks a lot about relationships, we can't be in the convincing business with our partners. And if you need to convince your partner about committing to the relationship, that's probably not a game you want to be in.

Aside: Okay. Two side notes. I will say that New Year's seems to be a time when ol' Instagram just fills up with a bunch of marriage proposal pictures. And I was so tickled this year to see two of my dude friends proposed to by their ladies. And they both said Yes and it was so cute. And I asked Ben if he had heard any crazy engagement stories at the UCLA

marriage lab because, you figure, tons of 'em. And he said, "Nnhhh..." Because of scientific confidentiality, he couldn't tell me!

So I asked the internet and found stories online of folks who proposed these ways: Asking 48 friends to dress up in carrot costumes and chant, "Marry him" in unison. There was a zero-gravity proposal on a vomit comet plane. So hopefully no onlookers were just kinda "barf" from the sentimentality of it. A professional stunt person lit himself on fire, safely. But still... And then the worst proposals, the ones I couldn't ever even dream up, involved, ([*whispered*] oh my god,) partners faking their own deaths and then having their beloveds called to the scene of this fake motorcycle or pedestrian crash, and then springing up, alive, with a ring, on one knee.

And yes, more than one asshole on planet Earth thought this was charming and cute to make his future spouse grieve above his fake blood-smeared body before just asking for her hand. They go from crying, to awkwardly really angry, to crying again. It's just too much of a whirlwind. It's too much for the human nervous system. But that being said, I do cry at every wedding I attend. All of 'em.

Alie: Do you cry at weddings?

Ben: I cried at my wedding.

Alie: You did? Aww, that's great! That's a good sign, right?

Ben: I did. I was crying with joy, and gratitude, and just emotion because I was very, very grateful and I'm grateful today. I'm very, very... I feel very, very lucky that I've found someone who I think is an incredible person and I'm grateful every day.

Alie: How did you propose?

Ben: I proposed privately in her house.

Alie: No Jumbotron? [*laughs*]

Ben: There was no Jumbotron. There was no flash mob. I had given the matter a great deal of thought. I felt like, you know, as a scholar of marriage, I had to make a good case because we were already together. We were already having a good relationship and I had to say, "I now have to... I don't want to... I'm not trying to convince you because I'm not in the convincing business, but here's why I think we should do this, and why I'm dying to do it. I want to do it so bad."

Alie: Emma Fiori, first-time question-asker: What do you think the essential things a couple must know about each other before getting married?

Ben: I think that... of course, more is better. It's good to know about your partner. But the most important thing you need to know about your partner is how you and your partner interact together. And I would actually say that the most important thing is how you manage difference. It's easy to get along on the things you care about the same. It's easy to get along on a cruise ship with a cocktail, right? As we've already covered. So in terms of the future of the relationship, what you want to know is, "How do we disagree? Are you able to compromise?" What you want to know about your partner is: Is your partner capable of empathy? [*crowd: "Aaoooh."*] That's what you want to know.

In other words, the most important thing to know about your partner is how your partner engages in the process of intimacy with you. It's not about your partner's sexual history, it's not about your partner's score on a personality scale. It's not about whether your partner

likes Chinese food, or opera, or ball games. None of that is the most important thing. To answer your question, Emma, is: What you want to know about your partner is, how does your partner do intimacy? And the fundamental part where intimacy is tested is in difference, and you will be tested because you are different from your partner. Everyone is different from everyone. So how does your partner manage difference with you, and how do you feel in those moments? That's the most important thing you can know.

Alie: Empathy. That's such a good point. I mean, that's such a good point. That's such a fundamental thing. Liz Tong, also a first-time question-asker: Why does everyone say the first year of marriage is the hardest? Do you find that that's true in studying newlywed development?

Ben: Yes. It's hard because circumstances tend to be hard. So the transition into marriage involves challenges that, once they're overcome, sort of fade away. So what are those challenges? A lot of times it involves some kind of move. Moving is always stressful. A lot of people get married like, "Oh, we both got jobs in the same city, so we're going to get married, and we're going to move into the same place", or "We're both graduating from college or grad school and so we're getting married and moving into the same place."

So that first year, you're not just getting married, not only are you often planning a wedding, but you've got other transitions. So the first year often has other transitions in it that make it challenging. That's one. Number two, when people get married, they're not just merging two people, they're merging two big social networks and especially their families.

We haven't talked about in-laws, but in-laws are a big issue. So a lot of times when people get married that first year is where you suddenly think, "Oh wait a minute, where are we going to spend Thanksgiving? Where are we going to spend Christmas? Whose family?" So there's things to negotiate in that first year that some couples have never negotiated. When couples get married, they often will, to some degree, merge finances. And so now they've got to have conversations about finances that perhaps they didn't have before.

So there's all sorts of new issues raised by getting married that have to be addressed for the first time during the first year, and that's what makes the first year challenging. What we see is newlyweds tend to be very happy and then it tends to decline. It doesn't necessarily become unhappy, but it declines from its peak. And the biggest declines are early on. And then couples sort of find their level, and many couples still find a very high level. It's great that newlyweds are as happy as they are because that happiness helps them through those inevitable challenges of that first year of transition.

Alie: And then if you are, maybe, in a little bit of a slump, say you've been married for a while, try to find new experiences together.

Ben: New ways of connecting. Yes. New ways to discover your partner and to discover the capabilities of yourself as a couple. Now again, that's kind of a bourgeois piece of advice because it implies all sorts of flexibility that many people do not have, which is why, for many people, marriage is hard. It's hard to keep it fresh and exciting. But if you are privileged and you have the capability, remembering to invest in your marriage, remembering to nurture that connection is a very important thing.

Alie: And how do you feel about movie tropes where at the end there's a marriage? Or are there any movies about marriage that you think are really valuable for people to watch?

Aside: There was a study conducted by some friends of Ben at the University of Rochester and Ron Rogge was the lead author on this study, which had 174 couples watch romantic movies and then talk about them after. This sounds like a genius, cunning plan, right?

Ben: The interesting thing about that study is... What they did was they tested three different kinds of marital interventions; one that focused on conflict resolution skills, one that focused on social support skills like, "How do you support each other?" And the third one was just a trivial intervention that they made up. And they said, "You know what, for the third one, just as a comparison group, we'll just make up the stupidest intervention we can. And what we'll do is we'll just say, 'Oh, here's a list of romance movies. Just watch them and talk about them. We're not going to give you any other advice.'" Whereas the other two interventions, they gave people a lot of advice: "Here's how to deal with conflict. Here's how to do social support..." Hours and hours of advice. The third one was this silly one and it worked just as well as the other two.

Aside: The result: the divorce rate for those couples was cut in half. So, I dunno, watch movies and just talk about 'em, ya love birds. Now, are there any romance movies that he likes?

Ben: Well, there's a movie called *The Five-Year Engagement* with Emily Blunt and Jason Segel, and the director of that movie, as he was making it, came to our lab and hung out, and we talked to him a little bit and he got to see... And so in the movie, the Emily Blunt character is a social psychologist, so she has a lab. She goes to her lab meeting. She's a grad student in social psychology, she goes to a lab meeting, and he wanted to see what an actual lab meeting was like so he sat in. So I liked that film. It was pretty fun.

Alie: Oh, that's good to know. I've never had an ologist who's had a personal connection like that.

Ben: Well, it's fun to be in LA because when Hollywood wants relationship scientists, they occasionally give us a call because we're local. Not because we're the greatest, but because we're lucky enough. This was just another example of luck.

Alie: What do you hate the most about partnership? About your work? About marriage? What is the shittiest thing about the institution of partnership or studying it?

Ben: The shittiest thing about marriage or about studying marriage? It's a tough question. Generally speaking, I am pro-marriage when it's good. The shittiest thing about marriage is that it occasionally traps people in bad relationships, and that's super shitty. Like, the worst thing about the institution is that it can be a trap.

There are privileges that we associate with marriage because we privilege marriage over other relationships legally, and there's lots of evidence that that's true, but it means that there are people... And the shittiest thing about marriage is that for a lot of its history, it's been a pretty oppressive institution for women. And in lots of parts of the world, it still is, where women are treated as property of their husbands. The fact that for so long, men who are married to their wives had a right to sexually molest their wives and abuse their wives. The fact that still to this day, you know, a ton of abuse happens in secret in marriage. So I mean, seriously, the shittiest things about marriage are incredibly bad, are fatal, and especially to women.

Aside: Obviously, marriage is different in so many parts of the world, and because Ben studies essentially Westernized thoughts on marriage and intimacy, we focused on that. Still, in so many countries, marriage law contradicts basic international human rights laws with wives needing permission from husbands to work a job or sign legal documents. Even in the

1970s, in France, and Spain, and America, husbands had to give permission for things like applying for credit cards, or a business loan, or just a woman's right to leave the house alone.

This aside gets even harder to hear, so a little warning for the next minute or so. In the 1800s here in the US, husbands were entitled to 'domestic discipline' of their wives. And judges were fine with it just as long as the whip or stick they used to beat their wives was no wider than a judge's thumb. This was called 'the rule of thumb'.

Now in some countries, it's still legal and acceptable for a husband to use violence to discipline his partner. A UNICEF study showed that large percentages of women in Afghanistan, Jordan, Mali, Laos, have been socialized to agree that a husband is justified in beating his wife if she argues or goes out without asking him. And of course, there are practices like child marriages and other brutalities. Women and girls are forced to marry their sexual abusers to save their reputations.

So while one person's associations of marriage might be just Pinterest wedding boards of rustic mason-jar cocktails, another's association could be financial tension or deep commitments to not only a partner but to a shared religion, or the celebration of having their love finally legally recognized, or trying to change the expectations of both partners to a union that is more balanced and safe. Ben continues...

Ben: I'd like to believe that as a society we are moving away from that, maybe not quickly enough, but still substantially so that more and more people believe that marriage should be an institution of equality, where both partners are treated as independent human beings who are choosing to connect to each other, but neither one is property of the other. I do think that many people would describe their marriages that way and try to live that way, but it's not true for everyone, and that is a bad thing. As far as the worst things about studying marriage, that'd be much harder because it's a privilege to study marriage. I am super lucky.

The theme of this conversation is that I just feel fortunate, like the luckiest guy in the world that I get to do this. That I get to think about and talk to people like you about something that I care about and that everybody cares about. I don't have to convince anybody. "What do you study? Marriage? Ah, that doesn't matter. Why would you do that?" No. Everyone cares! People really care about marriage. I'm not studying, you know, some weird thing I have to even define, that you didn't even know exists. Everyone knows that relationships matter. Everyone's thinking about them. They're surrounded by them. And I could do that for a living!?! That's only good.

Alie: You get to study other people's distractions. Other people's distractions are your focus.

Ben: Yes, it's true. Well, again, I don't think that relationships are a distraction. I think that's where most people live, and work is a distraction.

Alie: Oh, right. That's a great point.

Ben: For many people, their work is a distraction. What they care about is their family. They care about their love. They care about the connection. "I want to get back to the couch where I can cuddle with the person that I'm closest to." Work is a means to that end.

Alie: We just exposed a fundamental flaw in my whole paradigm. *[laughs]*

Ben: *[laughs]* "Oh wait, I thought relationships were a distraction?" I don't think they are. Life is complicated and people can care about... I also love my job. I do. I love my job, but I wouldn't pick it over my relationship.

Aside: Please picture me right now with those black-and-white hypnosis spirals for eyes falling down a thought chasm reflecting on my life. Okay, let's move on.

Alie: And what is your favorite thing about relationships? Your work? Marriage? Best thing?

Ben: The best thing about my job is that I get to ask the questions that occur to me and somehow I have the freedom and flexibility to pursue them in any way that I want. It's, again, an incredible privilege that I feel grateful for every day. The best thing about intimacy is that it solves sort of an existential problem, which is that each of us is alone.

The truth is, I can't escape my own skin; fundamentally there's a separation between me and the rest of the world that ends at my epidermis. But intimacy is a way of emotionally bridging the gap of connecting, of being not just in my own head, but somehow connecting through our skin to somebody else and even across space with somebody else. And that's a miracle, and it's kind of a miracle that it exists, but that we've evolved to have that happen. That right now, there's people in the world that I'm connected to, that I can feel. I mean, not in a supernatural way, but that they matter to me right now even as I'm sitting in a room far away from them. And that's an incredible metaphysical miracle.

Alie: It's a little magic.

Ben: It's a little bit magical and I believe that a lot of the natural and material world is magical. Not because it's supernatural, but because the natural world is pretty amazing.

Alie: Where can people find you? Where can they read your words and see your studies?

Ben: They can find me at UCLA. They can google my name, Benjamin Karney. Our lab is the UCLA Marriage Lab, and that's also googleable, and we have a website where a lot of our work is published.

Alie: Cool. And for every episode I donate to a particular charity or nonprofit that's related to your field.

Ben: I would be delighted to do that. And there are a lot of charities that I think help victims of abuse escape bad relationships, and I would love to be able to support them.

Alie: Okay, great. Well good. Oh, well thank you so much for doing this.

Ben: My pleasure, Alie.

Alie: Oh, I love this.

So once again, Dr. Ben Karney of the UCLA Marriage Lab. He's the co-author of *Intimate Relationships*, and all-around fascinating, cool dude so google his work. You can look in the show notes and I've put links to find him. Also, more links about things we've discussed are up at AlieWard.com/Ologies.

This week, per his directive, a portion of ad proceeds was donated to Care.org to support their work to end gender-based violence which affects at least one in three women worldwide. Care.org says that ending poverty requires addressing the power inequalities between women and men, girls and boys that underpin gender-based violence. And Care.org supports the empowerment of poor women and girls in their challenges to enjoy happy and healthy lives and to change the context in which they live, learn, work, and raise families. You can find out more about their programs at Care.org or at the link in the show notes. Thank you Ben Karney for choosing that.

You can find *Ologies* @Ologies on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). I'm [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). Thank you to everyone on [Patreon](#) for making this podcast possible. Thanks to the sponsors. You can find links to them in the show notes too. And to everyone getting *Ologies* merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thanks, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch for managing that.

Thanks, Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow, for adminning the Ologies podcast [Facebook group](#) full of wonderful people. The theme song was written and performed by Nick Thorburn of the band Islands. Interns are the wonderful Haeri Kim and Caleb Patton who hosts the *You're Never Too Old* podcast about anime and comics. Also, I accidentally called Caleb Patton Caleb Finch last week, because my brain was done with thinky time at that point. Assistant editing and clutch research this week was done by Jarrett Sleeper of Mindjam Media. Thanks, of course, to my right-hand man, editor Steven Ray Morris, for piecing this all together. What would I do without you?

At the end of the show, I tell you a secret, and this week's secret is that your Ol' Dad has been to a lot of weddings, and I'm usually very, very shy about dancing, like weirdly so. Like, you can't make me do it. I'll hide behind a plant or I'll grab onto a doorway. I cannot be dragged. I am mortified. And then, I swear to god, one-and-a-half chardonnays later, I can't stop dancing. I don't know chemically how that happens. That is not enough chardonnay to change someone's behavior so drastically, but when it's on, it's just *on*. So thank you and I'm sorry if I've ever danced in the back of your wedding videos.

Okay. Berbye.

Transcribed by:

Deborah Ward

Amy Congdon

Some links which you may find of use:

This week's donation was made to [Care.org](#), which works to end gender-based violence.

[What keeps us ... together ... today](#)

[Starry-eyed brain soup: your chemicals in love](#)

[More about falling in loooove](#)

[You mind does not want to change](#)

[...Even when spacemen stand you up on a date](#)

[Find a mullet lover](#)

[Dategolfer.com](#)

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[Equestriansingles.com founder goes on Oprah](#)

[Get a goth in your life](#)

[Or a nude person](#)

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[Perhaps a fellow death industry professional?](#)

[Just let a clown love you](#)

[Soggy Bottoms hit the spot](#)

[Millennials and marriage rates](#)

[What you need to know about common law marriage](#)

[Elon Musks' marriage woes](#)

[Take the bus to the courthouse, I guess](#)

[A billion dollar wedding](#)

[Communication that is maladaptive for middle-class couples is adaptive for socioeconomically disadvantaged couples](#)

[Love your honey? Fake your death!](#)

[Oh look another fake death](#)

[The 2020 census leaves a bit to be desired](#)

[Divorce rates in same-sex marriages](#)

[Watch a movie, save a marriage](#)

[Marriage rights for women](#)

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