

Why Arranged Marriages Work: An Interview With Dr. Robert Epstein

Jack LaValley
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Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of Psychology Today and a Ph.D. in psychology of Harvard University, exchanges ideas on the topic of arranged marriages with Jack LaValley, founder of true4ever, an information-based business that helps men and women learn how to create romantic partnerships that grow in love and intimacy over a lifetime. Dr. Epstein is the author of Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence; The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen; and The Big Book of Creativity Games: Quick, Fun Activities for Jumpstarting Innovation.



Jack LaValley

LaValley: Welcome, Dr. Epstein. I was very inspired to learn that you were exploring ways in which love can arise outside of romantic relationships, with which westerners are mostly involved. I myself was involved in an arranged marriage, and I happen to believe that the principles and insights within the culture of arranged marriages can make a significant contribution to people who want to be successful in their relationships. So, when I found your research about arranged marriages combined with your behavioral studies, studying how people can learn how to love, I felt the call to reach out to you and have an opportunity to learn from your research, which could really help people at this time.

I want to start with the “science” part. Through the research that you’ve done, you say that science can help us fall in love. Could you tell us what you mean by that?



Dr. Robert Epstein

Dr. Epstein: I mean two different things. As a scientist, I have been studying how love arises in arranged marriages, and I’ve been trying to figure out how that happens. It doesn’t happen in every arranged marriage, but it happens. Sometimes people are very conscious of wanting to build love over time. In Indian culture for example, they say, “First comes marriage, then comes love.” So, there is a consciousness there that it is possible to build love. I’ve been studying this by interviewing people in arranged marriages, having them fill out certain forms and analyzing the data.

The other part is that for decades western researchers have been studying processes in which emotional bonds are created. In the laboratory, you can actually get two total strangers to suddenly like each other or even love each other in just a few minutes by putting them through various exercises. We don’t have to leave our love lives entirely to chance. We can do A and B all the way up to Z and be very deliberate about building love in our relationships. There’s a huge advantage to figuring this out, because this means that there’s a possibility for us in the West, for the first time in hundreds of years, to actually get together with someone who’s suitable for us and build love over time with that person.

LaValley: I’m sure everybody wants to make the right choice and have it work out the first time. You said that in various exercises and activities people were able to experience feelings of love. Could you give us a couple examples of what happened and how that manifested?

Dr. Epstein: I did a course a few years ago at the University of California in San Diego that was on this topic, and I thought it would be fun for the students to see how this process of deliberately building love works. So, I would bring people up to the front of the room in pairs or I would ask people in the audience to turn to their neighbor and do the exercises. In every exercise I asked the students, “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you like this person, how much do you love this person, how much are you attracted to this person, how close do you feel to this person?” We’d get the numbers before we’d do the exercise, then after the exercise. The results were just spectacular. The simplest exercise of all, I called “soul-gazing.” You simply look very deeply into the person’s eyes and you try to look past the flesh, deep into the person’s soul. Doing that for just two minutes dramatically increases the four measures of emotional bonding. You can actually get people to feel much closer to someone in just two minutes. So that’s the simplest of the exercises. You can get bigger results with other exercises.

LaValley: Did any of the students in the exercise fall in love with each other and get married? [Laugh]

R: I didn’t really track that for this particular course, but it turns out that in the published literature on this topic, the very first couple [that participated in such an experiment] by this researcher named Arthur Aaron fell in love and got married. So I have no doubt that I created a lot of deep, long-term relationships in that course.

LaValley: That’s very interesting. You mention in your study of arranged marriages cases in which love has grown over time. You mentioned a few elements you found. Could you talk about those?

The Power of Commitment

Dr. Epstein: I’ve done two studies now on people in arranged marriages. In the first one, I ask them open-ended questions just to get them to talk. This was an exploratory study on my part; no one’s ever looked at how love arises in arranged marriages. We do know that when it does arise it might even be more stable than the kind of love that emerges in love marriages. There’s a very interesting study done in India comparing the love in “love” marriages to the love in arranged marriages that found something quite spectacular. In the love marriages, there’s a lot of love at first, but then it weakens over time. In arranged marriages, there’s not that much love at first, but it tends to grow over time, and it surpasses the love in the love marriages about five years out. Ten years out it’s twice as strong. So, in my first study I simply ask people in arranged marriages, “How much did you love your spouse when you got married? How much do you love him or her now? What do you think happened that made the love grow?”

The second study is more rigorous and is mainly conducted online at a website called arrangedmarriagesurvey.com. In this study we’re comparing 36 different factors that might contribute to the growth of love over time. In both studies, the biggest result or insight we got was that commitment is a factor that seems most responsible for the growth of love. That has to mean real commitment, not the kind we so often make in our marriages here, almost as if we’re keeping our fingers crossed behind our backs. Real commitment meaning, “I’m really going to be with you through thick and thin, through sickness and in health.” This has led me to develop a theory called the Vulnerability Theory of Emotional Bonding. These factors make people feel vulnerable to the other person and two people feeling vulnerable at the same time brings them together. So the reason commitment is so powerful in creating an emotional bond is because it’s the ultimate expression of vulnerability. When you make a strong commitment to be with someone no matter what, what you’re saying is, “I am entirely vulnerable to you. No matter what is happening, I will be there for you.” And if two people are making that kind of expression of commitment to each other, that brings people very close, and if they each live up to the commitment, that brings them even closer over time.

I was interviewing a highly-educated woman from Pakistan and I said to her, “On a scale of one to ten, where one is the lowest and ten is the highest, how in love were you with your husband the day you got married?” She said, “Zero.” I asked, “How in love are you with him now?” and she said, “Eleven.” I asked, “How long have you been married?” and she said, “45 years.”

Keeping Expectations Realistic

LaValley: I want to flesh this out a little more. People go before a priest or rabbi or minister and read the vows that explicitly state, “Through sickness and in health, for better or for worse,” but do they actually not know how to make the commitment? Do people not know what that means when they enter into marriage and utter those words?

Dr. Epstein: Close to 50 percent of first marriages fail. Two thirds of second marriages fail, and almost three-quarters of third marriages fail. Practice doesn’t help us, apparently. You have to realize that when people utter those words, they actually mean them – at the moment. Generally speaking, people have high hopes when they’re going into it. Where it all falls apart is in regards to expectations that people have in marriages. The notion that we get from movies and fairytales and novels say that love lasts forever, that

the person you marry is the one, your soul mate and that you live happily ever after. We have the notion that the good feelings will continue. All those expectations are wrong.

People I've interviewed in arranged marriages laugh at us, because we're so naïve about what happens over time in a relationship. We go in with very unrealistic expectations and in a few years we're disappointed, our expectations have not been met, and we often say, "I made a mistake, and you're just the wrong person." We wake up one day and we say, "Who are you?" or "You've changed." And that's all nonsense.

First of all, if we went in with the realistic expectation that we actually have to do some work to keep the relationship going and make it strong over time, that would help a lot. The other issue is that we're so blinded with love at first, we really don't know the person we're marrying. The strong emotions that we have sometimes make us blind to the characteristics of our partner.

LaValley: Arranged marriages usually take place in religious environments, with people of the same faith, and they know that they're going to get married because they want to have children, they expect love to grow in the family context and they're often not overly fantasizing about what it's all supposed to look like. They're more practical and down to earth in some respect.

Dr. Epstein: I agree completely. They have much more realistic expectations heading into it. Very often, because they're immersed in a certain community, they have role models around them. Sometimes the parents are in successful arranged marriages themselves. And they have the support from that religious community or cultural niche that they're in. So, there are a lot of factors regarding why they're almost certainly going to do better than love marriages. [One survey said that] in India, roughly 90 percent of the people were arranged, and the country had one of the lowest divorce rates in the world, even though divorce was legal there. I do not believe that in the U.S. we're ready to embrace arranged marriage, but I do think we can learn a lot from what happens in successful arranged marriages.

Marriage: An Adventure in Getting To Know Each Other

LaValley: You say in the West we fail partly because we enter into relationships with poor skills for maintaining them, and we have highly unrealistic expectations. We pick unsuitable partners, mistakenly believing that we are "in love" simply because we feel physical attraction. In a way it seems almost to be a cruel trick of nature. Without these chemicals' beings released and these euphoric highs, many people wouldn't feel attracted to begin with, but when they do, they want to bond. But what you're saying is that's essentially part of the problem.

Dr. Epstein: It does seem like cruel trick. Here's this person that makes butterflies in your stomach and that person's not a good partner for you. Those butterflies mislead you.

I spent several years developing a test of compatibility; it's online now at areyougoodtogether.com. It's the most comprehensive compatibility test that's ever been developed and it's possible for two people who like each other or are in love to take the test. I've taken it with my wife, with four ex-girlfriends, and it's very illuminating, because it shows you where your partner does and does not meet your most important relationship needs. It gets things right on the table, right up front, right now. Sometimes you're with the wrong person, sometimes you're with someone with potential but there are road blocks. You have to make a plan and fight the demons that might destroy your relationship.

LaValley: But that requires a certain level of maturity and consciousness where both partners can actually sit down and have that sort of give and take. I think that goes back to how two people who are in love with each other go about making a commitment. You said it's more than just uttering the words at the altar. There needs to be time spent beforehand getting to know each other.

Dr. Epstein: Yes, but also the recognition that when you make a marriage commitment, that process of getting to know the person is going to continue. You have to understand that people keep changing, people are very complex, and that process is going to continue. For one couple I had in my study, one reason their love is developing over time is because they're committed to getting to know each other. That's partly what their marriage has been – an adventure in getting to know each other. And I really like that image. Again, we have these illusions that we're in love because we know the other person. That's simply not true. There's actually laboratory research about people who are deeply in love and who are blind to the very important characteristics of the other person.

LaValley: Speaking for myself, it's harder for me to know me.

Dr. Epstein: Exactly. That's so well put. Over the course of our own lives we're learning about ourselves.

Eastern Practices vs. Western Practices

LaValley: Some authors and researchers talk about this primary fantasy many people have, and if they're not able to get beyond that fantasy, as you were saying earlier, it's very likely that the relationship will go through hard times. [The primary fantasy is a term that refers to the idea that there will be a certain type of person who will magically appear in one's life with whom the subject will fall in love and remain in love forever.]

Dr. Epstein: But I think there are solutions here to these problems. If you think back to the 1950s, 1960s, generally speaking, we knew nothing about eastern methods of meditation and yoga and tai chi, and so we had very limited ways in which we could work on our wellbeing and peace of mind. One of the main ways was drinking alcohol, actually – we had few, positive, constructive ways of altering our wellbeing. But groups like the Beatles and the Beach Boys brought pieces of eastern culture into western culture, wonderful techniques for creating a sense of wellbeing. We didn't adopt the religion, the culture – we adopted the practices. I think we can learn from successful arranged marriages and adopt the practices. We can use our heads a little bit more, looking beyond just the physical characteristics, and then we can develop skills and an awareness that can help us not only keep love going but also make love deeper over time.

LaValley: I completely support that perspective. I want the romanticism that involves men and women coming together in love, and I also want it to be deeply rooted, so it's able to grow over time. My wife and I entered into our relationship with shared expectations, similar values and compatible world views. Some of these insights and lessons that arranged marriages can teach us are deeply embedded within the cultural context that's still very unfamiliar to westerners. But I think pulling those things out and putting them in a way that people can get their heads around can really benefit the enterprise of marriage significantly.

Dr. Epstein: I feel very strongly that this can be done, and I have found some ways to get the word out. In 2010, Maria Shriver invited me to be one of the speakers at a conference of 14,000 women. Michelle Obama spoke there and so did Oprah Winfrey. Maria herself entitled my talk "It's Time To Take Control Over Your Love Life." I focused on what I call the "last form of empowerment for women," because women have made a lot of progress in education and in the work domain, but still are victims to fairytales and fantasies that end up hurting them and their families. I asked the women to believe in a better fantasy, which is that you can take control over your love life, you can be with someone you're compatible with, and the two of you can build love that will actually get stronger over the years. I become more convinced over the years that this can be done, and it would help millions of people create a stability that we have lacked for many decades.

LaValley: I resonate with that because in my case, it was a choice. I chose to love the woman I'm currently with.

Dr. Epstein: That very strong commitment you made, which was the commitment to open your heart, is a choice people can make. We've got to increase that awareness and give people the tools that they need so they can do what you have done, and what millions of people do, because most marriages around the world are still arranged.

We have to use our heads more than we have been using, not just our heart and certainly not just our reproductive organs. We have to be a little more conscious of who it is we're getting together with, and we have to be a little more realistic about what's going to happen in the future. We have to be open to the idea that we can take control over what happened, that we can not only be in love but that we can build love, make love stronger over time.

Dr. Epstein's website can be found at: drrobertepstein.com