



# The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship

By Chrisanna Northrup, Pepper Schwartz, James Witte

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**Based on data obtained from nearly 100,000 respondents, here is the ultimate resource for anyone who wants to learn the relationship-tested ways couples can achieve satisfaction and contentment in areas such as communication, sex, affection, and financial cooperation.**

What constitutes “normal” behavior among happy couples? What steps you should take if that “normal” is one you want to strive for? To help answer those questions, wellness entrepreneur Chrisanna Northrup teamed with two of America’s top sociologists, Yale Ph.D. Pepper Schwartz and Harvard Ph.D. James Witte, to design a unique interactive survey that would draw feedback from around the world.

What has resulted is the clearest picture yet of how well couples are communicating, romancing each other, satisfying each other in the bedroom, sharing financial responsibilities, and staying faithful – or not. Since the *Normal Bar* survey methodology sorts for age and gender, racial and geographic differences and sexual preferences, the authors are able to reveal , for example, what happens to passion as we grow older, which gender wants what when it comes to sex, the factors that spur marital combat, how kids figure in, how being gay or bisexual turns out to be both different and the same, and –regardless of background -- the tiny habits that drive partners absolutely batty.

The book is dense with revelations, from the unexpected popularity of certain sexual positions, to the average number of times happy – and unhappy -- couples kiss, to the prevalence of lying, to the surprising loyalty most men and women feel for their partner (even when in a deteriorating relationship), to the vivid and idiosyncratic ways individuals of different ages, genders and nationalities describe their “ideal romantic evening.”

Much more than a peek behind the relationship curtain, *The Normal Bar* offers

readers an array of prescriptive tools that will help them establish a “new normal.” Mindful of what keeps couples stuck in ruts, the book’s authors suggest practical and life-changing ways to break cycles of disappointment and frustration.

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## **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #730577 in Books
- Published on: 2014-01-07
- Released on: 2014-01-07

- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.01" h x .76" w x 5.16" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 304 pages

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

**"Masters and Johnson, it's time to move over. *The Normal Bar* mixes together sex, savvy insights and science, making you laugh while you learn. Bet you haven't done that in a while."**

--Nancy L. Snyderman, MD, NBC News Chief Medical Editor

**"Money? Sex? Deep dark secrets? If you wonder how your relationship compares with the rest of the world, *The Normal Bar* offers you a comprehensive heads up -- most important, it suggests that growing healthier and happier may not be mission impossible."**

--Gina Ogden, PhD, LMFT, author of *The Return of Desire*, *The Heart & Soul of Sex*, and *Women Who Love Sex*

**"*The Normal Bar* is an innovative, easy to read book filled with novel findings about relationships and helpful suggestions on making relationships better. I will use the important findings from *The Normal Bar* in my classes, in my papers and in my clinical work."**

--Howard J. Markman, Ph.D., author of *Fighting for Your Marriage*

**"*The Normal Bar* is more than a collection of surprising information--it's one of the most insightful guides to building happier, healthier relationships that I've ever read. I was encouraged and comforted by the authors' findings. Simply terrific."**

-- Marci Shimoff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Happy for No Reason* and coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*

**"Facts trump opinions every time, and there are an amazing number of surprising facts in this book. Thanks to the authors' survey—which takes a quantum leap beyond any relationship survey ever undertaken—*The Normal Bar* marks a turning point in relationship advice books. In my 30 years as a professional student of romantic relationships, this is the only book that's actually taught me something new."**

--Greg Godek, author of the national bestseller *1001 Ways to be Romantic*

**"This outstanding book draws on thousands of surveys to find out what makes couples happy. Besides being entertaining and edifying, *The Normal Bar* can actually help most couples improve their relationships."**

--Barbara Reskin, Past President of the American Sociological Association

**"A fascinating international compendium on women, men, sex and love that -- thank goodness -- busts some entrenched myths about men. In the book you'll learn whether simple things such as reading to your partner can build deep intimacy, and whether date nights, compliments and laughter can truly keep love alive. You'll also learn about 'pet names' and public displays of affection, and whether they spark romance. This book is scholarly, humorous and wise; above all, it gives superb advice. Indeed, after reading *The Normal Bar*, you'll have no excuse if your partnership isn't a dream come true."**

--Helen Fisher, Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University and author of *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*

"I'm obsessed with this page-turner of a book! After nineteen years of marriage, I faced divorce and entering the dating world with a whole lot of questions about what was and was not *normal*. **Not only did this book answer everything I'd ever wondered about relationships and what people *really* want, but it restored my faith in the essential sweetness of humankind. Hot damn!"**

--Linda Sivertsen, award-winning author of *Generation Green* and co-author of the bestselling *Your Big Beautiful Book Plan*

## About the Author

CHRISANNA NORTHRUP created The Normal Bar project and is the CEO of YOU Got Challenged! Inc., a customized online program that motivates people to change their normal to a healthier one. PEPPER SCHWARTZ received her Ph.D. in sociology from Yale University, is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington, and is the author of 16 books. JAMES WITTE, a Harvard Ph.D., is the Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Social Science Research at George Mason University.

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## Chapter 1

### The Normal Bar Is . . .

Are you normal in the way you conduct your relationship?

If you're like most of the people we asked, the answer is no--or at least you hope you're not. "Being normal is boring, and I'm not boring," was the sentiment we heard most often. Many people, in fact, told us they'd do almost anything to avoid being "normal."

But suppose we asked, "In your interaction with your significant other, are you extremely happy and sexually satisfied the majority of the time?" If normal means being happy and sexually satisfied, you'd probably like to be able to answer yes. So the next question is, how can you attain--and sustain--this kind of normal? Or, put another way, what are the real life keys to a happy relationship?

These questions lie at the heart of The Normal Bar. We set out to ask people around the world, first, what are the most common attitudes and practices in relationships, or what constitutes the "bar" of normalcy; second, how do the "normal bars" of satisfied and dissatisfied couples typically differ; and, finally, what can we learn from these different understandings of normal to help people change their relationships for the better?

As you'll see from our findings, what people are assumed to be doing in private often bears little or no resemblance to what they actually do. Cultural stereotypes and the media's fantasies of romance and lust have little to do with what really goes on in relationships, especially since conduct varies over time and across geographic boundaries. Our goal, then, was to drill deep, through and beyond common assumptions, to find out just how typical different romantic and domestic habits truly are--and how different interpretations of behavior correlate with personal and relationship happiness. For instance:

\* Does the average couple kiss once a day, once a week, once a month, or even less--and how does the frequency of kissing line up with their satisfaction in the relationship?

\* Is everyone having a lot of sex--or is that level of intimacy pretty rare for everyone except newlyweds?

\* Does money still predict who makes the rules in a relationship, or have things changed radically as women have become an increasingly important part of the workforce?

\* How often do we lie to our partners; and is honesty really the best way to keep peace in the household?

We created an unprecedented interactive relationship survey (see our Appendix for details about the precise methodology) that asked each participant hundreds of questions about the inner workings of compatibility, romance, affection, communication, sex, money, daily decision making, and emotional connection. Then, by linking the survey through Web sites with millions of viewers--such sites as AARP, Huffington Post, Reader's Digest, and AOL--we collected data from more than 70,000 men and women around the world (in countries including Canada, England, France, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and China). Finally, as the data streamed in, we mapped behavior globally and tracked the patterns and averages, so that readers could pinpoint exactly where they lined up on the Normal Bar of personal and relationship happiness.

Think of the Normal Bar as a tool you can use to compare different areas of your relationship with typical behavior among others in your age, gender, or cultural group. (We'll break these group norms down for you, and you may be surprised to see how they differ.) Each of the chapters to come will examine aspects of couples' lives that affect their happiness and overall satisfaction, from their first weeks and months together, through the day-to-day strains of living together, to the challenges that may threaten their staying together long term. If you find that your own normal in a particular area isn't working for your relationship, look to the Normal Bar to see what typically works best for others.

To maximize the usefulness of this information, in each chapter we'll also suggest simple tools or exercises that can help you and your partner reduce conflict, resentment, and stress. "Normal" habits often outlive their usefulness, but the good news is that most couples can, if they choose, rejuvenate their love at any age by creating a new normal. The Normal Bar offers the practical advice you'll need to make this shift.

Don't worry: We're not saying that you have to be "normal" to have a thriving love life, but we will show you which behaviors tend to make for the happiest and strongest couples. You can then use this information to reassess and refine your relationship to your own specifications. Our goal is simply to give you a compass and a toolbox to help move your personal normal into the zone your heart desires.

### How Does the Normal Bar Work?

"If I don't do everything, nothing gets done."--?female, 38, separated after a 12-year marriage

Let's look at a simplified real-life example of how the Normal Bar process works. Behold Bob and Andrea, the full-time working parents of twelve-year-old Jack. Every day for the last thirteen years, Andrea has done all the family laundry. She thought that was normal, so her position on the Normal Bar for laundry is clear: she bears 100% of her family's laundry duty. Bob and Jack, on the other hand, are sitting pretty at 0% of that responsibility.

Over the years, however, Andrea has become resentful of this norm. She doesn't complain or say anything about it, but she's started to snap at Jack and Bob whenever they ask for clean socks. The guys, meanwhile, have no idea what's gotten into Andrea. It seems like such a minor issue. They dismiss her growing agitation, but that only increases Andrea's resentment. When Bob can't find his boxers, she lays into him for

even asking where they are. The emotional climate in the house is getting worse, but to Andrea, Bob, and Jack it's a mystery why. They all assume it's normal for the wife and mother to do all the laundry, so this can't possibly be the real problem--or can it?

Desperate, Andrea takes a poll of her girlfriends, asking if they do all the laundry in their households. She learns that, while a majority of the wives do all the laundry, there are actually a handful of husbands who do it, and some husbands and wives split the chore--in a few cases, the older kids in the house even help. Most important, from just this small sampling, Andrea learns that a lot of the couples who share the chore seem to have happier relationships than those in which the wife bears the whole burden 100% of the time. Not only is a different normal possible, but it looks like a different normal might be a better normal all around! Armed with this insight, Andrea sees a new way forward.

She gathers her courage and tells her husband and son what she's learned from her friends and how she feels about doing the laundry. To her surprise, Bob and Jack are relieved that the problem isn't something more serious. Bob was starting to think that Andrea was unhappy with him or the relationship, not ever imagining that she was just sick of doing the laundry every day. The solution? Bob and Jack agree to share the responsibility, and Andrea's new normal becomes just a third of her previous duty. This is a norm she can happily accept on an ongoing basis.

## Opening the Normal Bar Tool Kit

The smallest issue can erode or even destroy a relationship if it becomes a norm that one of the partners resents. Realizing that a different normal is possible is a vital first step toward addressing the issue and having a clear alternative in mind always makes the process of change less intimidating. But it's not always easy to make the leap from a long-established norm to a preferable one. Old habits sometimes die hard, and your partner might not be as willing to change as you are. That's why we offer true stories, advice, and tools in every chapter in this book to help you and your partner get to your new normal.

These suggestions are culled from the tactics and exercises our respondents have used most effectively to improve overall satisfaction and sexual connection in their relationships. After analyzing our data and hearing how our happiest couples solved problems, we were astounded by the simplicity of many of these practices and the ease with which they can be woven into daily life. Even a small adjustment can make a big change and can turn a pattern of habits that couples don't like into one that supports them and their relationships. Some of the tools might seem obvious to you when you read about them, but what's not obvious is the critical difference they can make to a relationship when actually used. For instance, knowing that your partner likes to be told "I love you" is one thing; actually saying "I love you" is quite another. Seemingly minor changes can make the difference between living happily ever after together, breaking up, or, worse, staying together and never feeling completely fulfilled.

Think of personal hygiene as an analogy. We've all been told that people who floss their teeth are less likely than non-flossers to have plaque buildup and cavities. But let's pretend that we've surveyed thousands of people and learned that those who don't floss every day have a 75% greater chance of having their teeth fall out. Maybe because you knew flossing was good for your teeth you normally flossed from time to time, but after hearing this startling data, wouldn't you consider making daily flossing part of your normal routine? Minor adjustments in your "relationship hygiene" can also make a big difference in your health as a couple.



Emphasizing the importance of certain behaviors by presenting new and convincing data about those behaviors is the heart and soul of this book. We'll share the insights and experiences of people all over the world. And while the advice and strategies for constructing a new normal may appear simple, never doubt their potential to help you achieve real change.

Let's get started!

## PART I

### Getting Together

#### Chapter 2

##### Are You the One for Me?

The instant I saw her I knew we were meant for each other. It was love at first sight.

Doesn't that sound romantic? Such electric moments are a staple of love stories, and many of us grow up believing they're the truest sign of "true" love. So we wanted to know: Do these moments actually occur in real life?

Yes! At least they did for 28% of women and 48% of men in our survey. The sharp difference between the sexes might surprise you, but it's actually in line with other research that shows men are more romantic than women, more likely to fall in love because of the way a potential partner looks, and more likely to feel love when there is extreme sexual attraction. Women tend to be more wary, and most need to know more about a partner's character and background before they'll allow the deeper emotions to develop.

But what about the premium we place on love at first sight? Does this immediate charge correlate to happier long-term relationships? Not in overall contentment, according to the Normal Bar. Those who have eased into love gradually are just as likely to be happy together as those who were hit by a lightning bolt of passion on day one.

There is, however, one critical area where that initial lightning bolt seems to leave an enduring impact: People who fell in love at first sight are more likely than gradual lovers to claim satisfaction with their present sex life--even after decades together! In fact, the group most likely to report this sexual boon was middle-aged men and women between the ages of 45 and 54. This might indicate that intense attraction early on in the relationship was especially important for the last group of baby boomers. More likely, it means that love at first sight is a strong gauge of sexual interest that will stand the test of time.

##### Are You with Your Soul Mate?

Love, of course, involves more than attraction--more even than sexual satisfaction. Compatibility is a crucial element as well. Many of us grew up absorbing the message--from fairy tales, Disney movies, romance

novels, and perhaps our families--that “true” love depends on finding the one “true” mate who is meant for us: our “soul mate.” But what does this mean?

The term soul mate has become a popular concept relatively recently and is now widespread--and aspirational. We found that most people think of soul mates as two people who are “right for” each other and belong together. But beyond this sense of belonging, there are some important conceptual variations.

Those who are religious might add more spiritual--and permanent--criteria. “Till death do us part,” after all, is standard language in marriage vows exchanged in most churches. We compared people by religion and found that people of all faiths believe in this concept. Furthermore, most religious people believe that they have found and are with their own soul mates!

Curiously, the percentage of soul mates drops significantly among nonbelievers and those not affiliated with a particular religion. Or perhaps they’re just less inclined to identify their partners by that term. But while the religious divide is intriguing, the much more important news is that more than half of all people we asked said their current partners are their soul mates. Some believe in the one true soul mate concept, while others believe there could be several “true” mates for each person. Either way, a solid majority believe they’re with the person they’re meant to love.

So . . . are the people who believe they’re with their soul mate more satisfied with their sex lives? Yes! Among the soul mated, 82% of men and 83% of women said they’re very satisfied with their sex lives. Of course, first-rate sex could be one of the criteria for identifying your partner as a soul mate in the first place, but general happiness plays an important role as well. If having a soul mate means that your sexual and emotional lives are well in sync, then our findings suggest that there are a lot of very contented couples in the world.

We Are So Connected . . .

We’ve all seen couples who appear to be obvious soul mates--who finish each other’s sentences, look at each other lovingly, and just seem to be perfectly matched. Then there are those other couples, who always seem to be bickering, talking over each other, gesturing angrily or accusingly, couples we assume to be miserable only to find out this is just how they relate, and somehow it works for them. The truth is, none of us can judge another couple’s happiness or know, from the outside, whether they should be together. So we decided to ask couples to tell us from their own perspectives what connects them.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Frances Temple:**

Here thing why this The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship are different and trusted to be yours. First of all reading through a book is good but it really depends in the content from it which is the content is as yummy as food or not. The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship giving you information deeper since different ways, you can find any e-book out there but there is no guide that similar with The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Couples and What They Reveal About Creating a New Normal in Your Relationship. It gives you thrill

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