

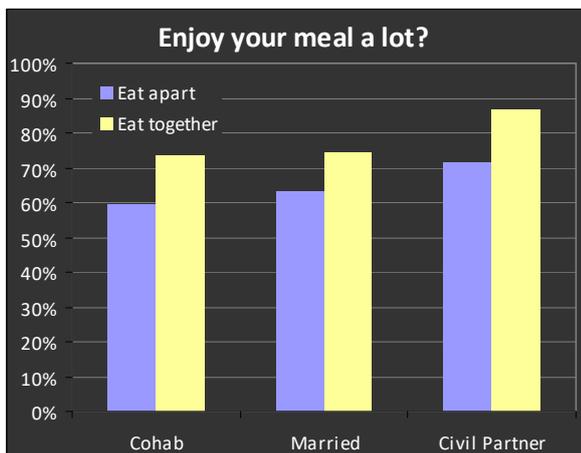


# Marriage Foundation

## Happy Eaters

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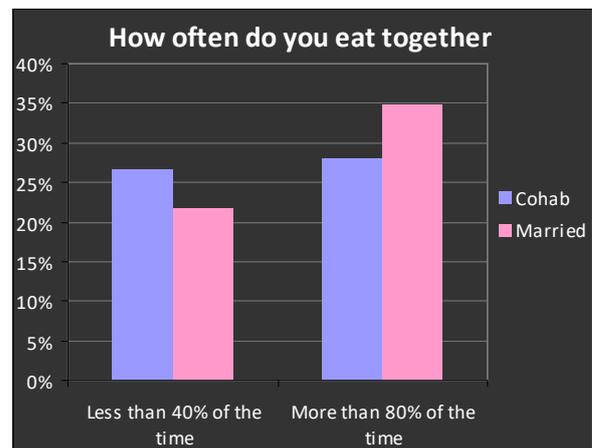
- Couples who eat together are more likely to enjoy their meal and be happy in their relationship compared to couples who eat apart.
- These are the findings from our analysis of data from the UK Time Use Survey 2014-15 especially for [Marriage Week UK, 13-19 May](#).
- Participants overall were 19 per cent more likely to report that they enjoyed their meal if eating together with their spouse or partner. In contrast, they were also 8 per cent more likely to enjoy their meal if they *did not* use a smartphone while eating. Similar proportions said they enjoyed their meal, whether or not they ate with their child.
- More couples enjoy their meal a lot if they eat together: 18 per cent more married couples, 23 per cent more cohabiting couples, and 21 per cent more civil partners.
- Married couples are 24 per cent more likely than cohabiting couples to eat together regularly, more than 80 per cent of the time.
- Couples in general are 15 per cent more likely to be happy with their relationship if they eat together. However it is also possible that this is because happy couples eat together.



73 per cent of cohabiting couples enjoyed their meal a lot (scoring 6 or 7 out of 7) if they ate as a couple, compared to 60 per cent of couples who ate separately.

For married couples, the figures were 74 per cent compared to 63 per cent.

For civil partners, the figures were 87 per cent compared to 71 per cent.



35 per cent of married couples ate together often (more than 80% of the time) compared to 28 per cent of cohabiting couples.

22 per cent of married couples ate together rarely (less than 40% of the time) compared to 27 per cent of cohabiting couples.

67 per cent of married couples who ate together were very happy with their relationship compared to 58 per cent of those who ate apart.

## Introduction and Method

There are any number of articles and books that have investigated the recipe for a happy marriage.

But is the eating of food together itself part of the recipe?

This study addresses a simple question.

Do couples who eat together have better quality relationships?

It is already well established that quality time spent together as a couple improves marital quality, especially among women (*Wilcox & Nock, 2006*).

Our own research has also shown that married parents – but not cohabiting parents – with young children who went out for occasional ‘date nights’ were 14 per cent less likely to split up during the next decade, compared to those who went out weekly or rarely (*Benson & McKay 2016*).

Although there is a great deal of research into the outcomes of children, depending on whether they eat with their parents or alone, there is little to none of which we are aware that investigate the link between eating together as a couple and relationship quality.

Ideally, questions about eating habits in families could be tracked longitudinally over time to determine their possible effects. Alas the two main UK longitudinal studies that do ask about eating habits – Millennium Cohort Study and Understanding Society – tend to focus on whether the parent eats with their child.

The United Kingdom Time Use Survey 2014-2015 (*Gershuny & Sullivan 2017*) is the only survey of which we are aware that covers whether couples eat together or apart.

The strength of this survey is that it details eating habits on one weekday and one weekend day among more than 7,600 people in over 4,000 households. With time divided into ten minute slots, this has produced over 46,000 data points.

The weakness is that as a snapshot, it is impossible to disentangle cause and effect. So any correlations between eating together as a couple, with enjoyment of the meal or quality of relationship could be due to the meal or the relationship, or both.

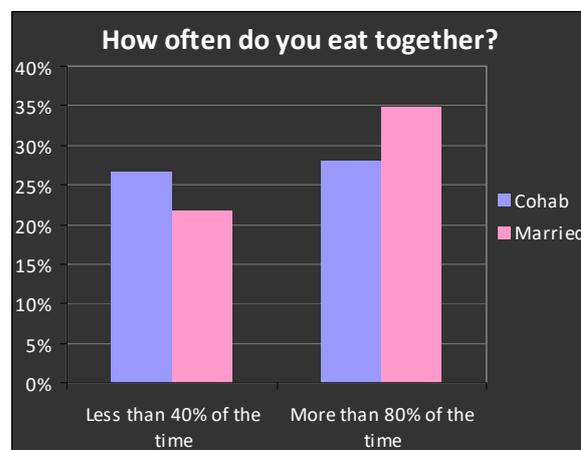
## Results and Discussion

Overall, roughly one in three couples – whether married, cohabiting or civil partners – eat together most of the time or always whereas roughly one in four couples eat together rarely or not at all.

Married couples are 24 per cent more likely than cohabiting couples to eat together often as a couple – see **TABLE 1** below – whereas cohabiting couples are 23 per cent more likely than married couples to eat together rarely as a couple.

**TABLE 1**  
How often do you eat together?

	Married	Cohab	Civil Partner
Never	4%	5%	6%
Up to 40%	18%	22%	n/a
40-80%	43%	45%	58%
80<100%	19%	15%	16%
Always	15%	13%	20%
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Less than 40% of the time	22%	27%	
More than 80% of the time	35%	28%	36%



**TABLE 2** details how happy married couples specifically were with their relationship, depending on whether they ate together or apart.

Overall, those who ate together were 15 per cent more likely to say they were happiest with their relationship compared to those who ate apart.

Whereas 67 per cent of those who ate together scored 7 out of 7 for relationship happiness, only 58 per cent of those who ate apart were similarly happy.

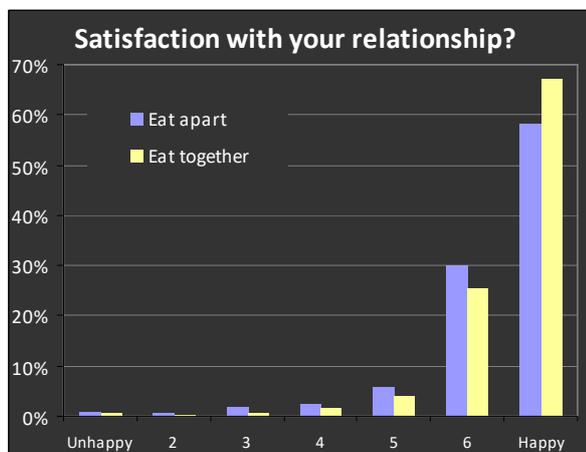
Slightly counterintuitively, couples who were the least happy in their relationship – scoring 1 out of 7 – were just as likely to eat together as those who were pretty happy – scoring 5 or 6 out of 7.

Those least likely to eat together were those of moderate happiness – scoring 3 out of 7 – whereas those most likely to eat together were also those who were also happiest – scoring a maximum 7 out of 7.

However this mirrors our various findings that it is not those who are unhappiest who have the worst family outcomes but those who report they are only moderately happy (*Benson & McKay 2017a, 2017b*). Note that these are small groups.

**TABLE 2**  
How happy are you with your relationship?

	Eat		% who eat together
	Eat apart	together	
<b>Unhappy</b>	1%	1%	57%
<b>2</b>	1%	0%	47%
<b>3</b>	2%	1%	38%
<b>4</b>	2%	2%	51%
<b>5</b>	6%	4%	55%
<b>6</b>	30%	25%	59%
<b>Happy</b>	58%	67%	66%
<b>Overall</b>			63%



**TABLE 3** details how much people enjoyed their meal depending on whether they ate together as a couple or not.

Married or cohabiting couples who ate together were 19 per cent more likely to say they enjoyed their meal very much compared to couples who ate apart.

Whereas 74 per cent of couples who ate together enjoyed their meal very much – scoring 6 or 7 out of 7 – only 62 per cent of couples who ate apart enjoyed their meal similarly.

**TABLE 3**  
Did you enjoy your meal, with partner or not?

	Eat		% who eat together
	Eat apart	together	
<b>Not at all</b>	1%	0%	36%
<b>2</b>	1%	0%	42%
<b>3</b>	3%	2%	49%
<b>4</b>	10%	6%	51%
<b>5</b>	22%	17%	58%
<b>6</b>	29%	32%	66%
<b>Very much</b>	33%	42%	69%
<b>6 or 7</b>	62%	74%	68%
<b>Overall</b>			64%



**TABLE 4** details how much people enjoyed their meal, depending on whether they used their smartphone during the meal or not.

Overall 14 per cent of people reported using their phones while eating. These proportions did not vary substantially with meal enjoyment, except among those who did not enjoy their meal at all, where only 9 per cent used their phone.

Those who did not use their phone were 8 per cent more likely to report that they enjoyed their meal. Whereas 69 per cent of those who did not use their phone scored 6 or 7 out of 7 for meal enjoyment, only 64 per cent of those who did use their phone enjoyed their meal similarly.

**TABLE 4**  
Did you enjoy your meal, using phone or not?

	Without phone	With phone	% who eat & use phone
	<b>Not at all</b>	1%	
<b>2</b>	1%	1%	19%
<b>3</b>	3%	4%	18%
<b>4</b>	8%	9%	16%
<b>5</b>	19%	22%	16%
<b>6</b>	30%	29%	14%
<b>Very much</b>	39%	35%	13%
<b>6 or 7</b>	69%	64%	13%
<b>Overall</b>			14%

And finally **TABLE 5** details enjoyment of meal, depending on whether parents of children aged 0-7 ate with their child or not.

Overall 12 per cent of parents ate with their child, with very little variation depending on whether they enjoyed the meal or not.

There did not appear to be any relationship between eating with a child and enjoyment of the meal.

Whereas 70 per cent of those who ate with their child enjoyed their meal very much – scoring 6 or 7 out of 7 – 68 per cent of those who did not eat with their child also enjoyed their meal.

**TABLE 5**

**Did you enjoy your meal, with child or not?**

	Without child	With child	% who eat with child
<b>Not at all</b>	1%	0%	10%
<b>2</b>	1%	1%	10%
<b>3</b>	3%	2%	10%
<b>4</b>	8%	8%	12%
<b>5</b>	20%	19%	12%
<b>6</b>	30%	29%	12%
<b>Very much</b>	38%	41%	13%
<b>6 or 7</b>	68%	70%	13%
<b>Overall</b>			12%

These results show a clear link between eating together, meal enjoyment and relationship satisfaction. Because of the cross-sectional nature of the survey, it is impossible to determine whether eating together improves relationships or simply that those who already have good relationships are then more likely to eat together.

However because those who eat together are more likely to enjoy their meal, it seems more plausible that the act of eating together adds to the overall enjoyment.

Similarly it seems more likely that using a phone while eating detracts from enjoyment of the meal, rather than the other way round.

So if it is more plausible that eating together and not using a phone makes a meal more enjoyable, it seems similarly plausible that eating together also makes for happier couples.

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