

SCOTT HALTZMAN, M.D.  
with THERESA FOY DIGERONIMO

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AUTHORS OF  
*The Secrets of Happily Married Men and The Secrets of Happily Married Women*

*The* **SECRETS**  
*of* Happy  
Families



Eight Keys to Building  
a Lifetime of Connection  
and Contentment

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# More Praise for

## ***The Secrets of Happy Families***

*"The Secrets of Happy Families* is a gift! Family life today is so complicated, how could one book possibly sum up all the common factors? But Dr. Scott does it again. Incorporating important research, real-life stories based on an extensive survey, along with personal and professional experiences, this book can help anyone who is looking for keys to strengthen their family bonds. With a state-of-the-art 'positive psychology' approach, this book goes beyond the common sense that having a happier family comes from being constructive and loving; it provides many concrete, practical ways to get started immediately. And, for those who may be struggling but have the wish for a happy family, this book is full of gems that are presented in a clear and often touching way that is inspirational. *The Secrets of Happy Families* is one of those rare books that you can start anywhere, that you won't want to put down, and that you will want to keep close by."

—**Rita DeMaria, Ph.D.**, coauthor, *The 7 Stages of Marriage*

"What's the secret to a successful family? A wise man once said the most important thing a father can do for his children is love their mother. Haltzman spells it out brilliantly and shows step-by-step how the parents' commitment and attachment—their marital bond—is the key to the successful family kingdom. Kids imitate what they see—they bond to the bond between the parents—and that secure attachment frees them to love, grow, play, thrive, and recover from whatever life throws them."

—**Diane Sollee, MSW**, founder and director, Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE), [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)

*“The Secrets of Happy Families is a well-researched and compelling guide for today’s families. I highly recommend it!”*

—**Joshua Coleman, Ph.D.**, author, *When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies When You and Your Grown Child Don’t Get Along*

*“The Secrets of Happy Families offers families a number of important and timeless lessons that we need to relearn. First, money doesn’t buy families happiness. What does? Service to others, commitment to a family mission, unique family rituals and traditions, and a good measure of (mostly nonelectronic) family fun. Second, couples who acknowledge, appreciate, and work with—rather than fight against—the gender differences that characterize their relationship styles are more likely to enjoy their interactions with one another. Finally, and most importantly, Scott Haltzman reminds us that the foundation of any good relationship, and especially a strong family life, is commitment. Spouses, parents, and children thrive when they know that they will survive the inevitable ebbs and flows of family life and still have one another for the journey of life, come what may.”*

—**W. Bradford Wilcox, Ph.D.**, associate professor, Department of Sociology, University of Virginia; author, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*

*“According to Dostoyevsky, ‘Happy families are all alike.’ In his recent book on the family, Scott Haltzman reveals their secrets. Based on clinical experience and research, the*

author provides all types of families with clear information and guidance on how to create a sustainable connection. This is a wonderful book. I recommend it to all families as required reading.”

—**Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.**, author, *Getting the Love You Want* and *Giving the Love That Heals: A Guide for Parents*

“The secrets that Dr. Scott offers to create a happy family need to be revealed to all stepfamilies because their transition and normal development is challenging and takes a long time. Adults who consider remarriage with children need to read this book because any secrets, trail maps, workshops, books, or other guidelines are essential for building the complex stepfamily into a strong, successful one.”

—**Elizabeth Einstein, LMFT**, cofounder, Stepfamily Association of America (now the National Stepfamily Resource Center); author, *Strengthening Your Stepfamily*

“This book is the natural progression from *Secrets of Happily Married Men* and *Secrets of Happily Married Women*. Dr. Haltzman’s clear and engaging writing style reflects the range of his roles as a psychiatric clinician, researcher, astute observer, and family man. Based on wider definitions of ‘family’ and the potential complexity of current domestic households, this book embellishes the cited maxim ‘Happiness is not a destination.’ That trip, and the reader’s course in the book, are guided by theories, many illustrative examples, and plenty of direct findings and recommendations. The humanity of the process is always central, and a gentle sense of humor is never too far away.”

—**Chandran Kalyanam, M.D.**, assistant professor of clinical psychiatry,



Ohio State University; author, *Seeking an Alliance:  
A Psychiatrist's Guide to the Indian Matrimonial Process*

"Reading this book is like listening to a wise and caring uncle—who also happens to be a terrific therapist. *The Secrets of Happy Families* is upbeat, grounded, and relevant to all kinds of today's families. Scott Haltzman has delivered again!"

—**William J. Doherty, Ph.D.**, professor of family social science,  
University of Minnesota; author, *Take Back Your Marriage*

# The Secrets of Happy Families

*Eight Keys to Building a Lifetime of  
Connection and Contentment*



Scott Haltzman, M.D.  
with Theresa Foy DiGeronimo

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The anecdotes in this book are based on the life experience of the authors and the clinical work and research of Dr. Haltzman. To protect confidentiality, names and identifying characteristics of clients have been changed, or represent composite identities of clients.

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*HB Printing*

*To Susan, Matthew, and Alena*

*For all that you have taught me about family*

## *Acknowledgments*

Whenever I get my hands on a book, I flip to the acknowledgments page, just to see if there's a name there I'll recognize. Kind of like the credits at the end of the movie: just who was the key grip, anyway (and, as important, just what *is* a key grip)?

So to the readers who look over this page, recall that although these names may not be recognizable to you, they played a huge part in the formation of this book.

In order of appearance, thanks to:

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# Introduction

It's about 11:30 P.M. My wife, Susan, and I are still awake, waiting to hear our seventeen-year-old daughter's car pull into the drive-way. We had planned a calm evening; after all, Alena had called to tell us she was going to sleep over at a friend's house. Before the evening got too late, we tried to reach her on her cell phone, but she didn't answer. About five phone calls later to different households, and after another parent's drive around the block, we finally tracked our daughter down, at the house of another friend the next town over!

When Alena got on the phone, we barked, "Get home right this minute!" She put up a weak struggle, then agreed to come home. So, here we are now, prepared to talk to her about what happened and what we plan to do about it.

Is this the portrait of a happy family? By anyone's definition, the Haltzmans ought to be. We live in a small suburban town that, in 2005, was voted by *Money* magazine as one of America's ten best towns to live in. I earn a respectable income, and our home is solidly constructed. I have a wife of twenty-one years, two healthy and well-educated children, and a pet rabbit who is trained to go in one little corner of his cage. (We tried a dog once, but it didn't work out. That's another story.)

So if the Haltzmans fit such a perfect profile of a happy family, why are we all feeling so unhappy now?

That's the question I ponder as I sit down to write this book. What makes a happy family? Is it living in a good home? Making lots of money? Is it being warm, connected, trusted and trusting from cradle to grave? Must a happy



home be conflict free, or can it include clashes and periods of discontent?

These aren't easy questions to answer for any of us.

## **ESSENTIAL FAMILY INGREDIENTS**

As I attempt to reason through these questions, I find myself stuck on a key point: before I can answer questions about happy families, I first have to rethink my definition of *family*.

I've got a wife and two children, so just about anyone on the planet would agree that I'm part of a family. But mine isn't the only kind of family on this planet. Just last week, a client came into my office expressing real pleasure that I wrote a book called *The Secrets of Happily Married Women*, but she was a bit dismayed when she found out that the book focused solely on women's relationships with men. After all, she had been legally married to a woman for nearly two years and has now been trying to get pregnant through donor sperm. She wondered when I planned on writing a book for her.

Around the same time, I interviewed a client who, now a father himself, reflected back on his experience of being raised by his grandparents. When he celebrates Mother's Day, he sends a card to his grandmother. He still calls his mother every now and then, but feels no special connection to her. He and his grandparents were a family.

If there's any doubt that the definition of family is in flux, the point was brought home to me in late summer 2007 when I was invited to my son's college early in his freshman year. In years past, this special weekend event to check out your freshman's progress was called Parents Weekend. My weekend invitation, however, arrived with the following information:

*University College will host its annual LSU Family Association Weekend, formerly called 'Parents' Weekend.*

My theory about this change of wording: it just won't do, in this day and age, to assume that a family consists of two biological parents. Want a stat to back that up? According to the U.S. Census Bureau's *2004 Household Economic Studies*, only 61 percent of children are raised from birth to age eighteen in a home with both of their birth parents.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

What this statistic tells us is that if we as a society don't open our eyes to new ways of defining family, we'll miss a real opportunity to make our families and our communities stronger. Throughout the pages of this book, you'll see that the secrets of happy families apply to all shapes, styles, and sizes—and certainly you!

This book will explore the many ways in which humans (and occasionally house pets) come together to form a family. But keep in mind that this book is about happy—not perfect—families. When I tell you that we were up past midnight talking to my daughter about the importance of letting us know where she goes, you know we've got potential problems. Everyone does. No family is perfect.

## **GETTING TO THE HEART OF REAL FAMILIES**

As my wife and I dealt with our own family problems, I again wondered about this happy family idea. I have had a gut feeling for a long time that there is a difference in the happiness levels of families that join together in times of trouble to strengthen each of the individual members, and families that are so unwieldy that the members don't know from one day to the next where they are headed.

Although I'm a practicing clinician, I'm also a researcher, so when I have a gut feeling about something, the next step is to do some investigating to find out if it's true. I wanted to expand on my office-based experience and provide something concrete about families to share with you—something supported by data collected from all kinds of families from all over the country. So I created an online Happy Family Survey to help me gather hard numbers and real stories to back up the perspectives I've collected from hundreds of family members over the years.

The survey was advertised through various Web sites, including my own at [DrScott.com](http://DrScott.com) and other Internet outlets, and it received mention in *Redbook* magazine. I distributed circulars to therapists in my community and at conferences, and I pitched my survey on several radio stations throughout the United States and Canada.

Word spread quickly, and between February 1 and December 5 of 2008, 1,266 family members completed the form.

I then sifted through mounds of data and used the information provided by the participants to gain a clearer understanding of the behind-the-scenes working of families. Because the participants were self-selected to take my survey, the results cannot be considered statistical proofs. (When possible, however, I matched my information against published data, and in almost every case, the statistics yielded in my survey matched national averages.) Yet the results have given me an open and honest look inside the heart of today's families.

## **SHARING REAL SECRETS**

Psychiatrists are trained to hold closely to a code of confidentiality. When I invite people into my office, I find that they share with me experiences, insights, and events that have never been imparted to anyone else. It's the nature of the therapeutic process that when a person is given a venue to discuss his or her inner world, that person gains a new and better understanding of himself or herself.

Through my years of doing Internet research, I have found the same phenomenon. I was intrigued with how willingly those who participated in my online Happy Family Survey shared their family secrets under the cloak of Internet anonymity. Even the 2 percent of respondents who ranked "keeping family secrets" as a top priority filled out the survey!

Given an opportunity to "talk" online about their lives, their thoughts, and their passions, individuals freely shared family details. They shared information about roles in the household, from who initiates sex (men: 83 percent of the time) to who primarily buys relationship books (women: 65 percent of the time).

Beyond this kind of general information, people also willingly shared very personal experiences and insights that they had gathered over years of living as members of their families—things they would probably not reveal about themselves in general conversation. Some acknowledged that they were "extremely unhappy" in their family life and explained exactly what was missing in their relationships. Others wrote about the painful impact on the family of heartbreaking life events. All the respondents opened up their inner world and shared their secrets in the hopes that the readers of this book would reap the benefits.

The final results of this survey have shown me that there is no easy one-size-fits-all path to familial bliss. There is no Fam-o-Matic that will chop, slice, dice, and ripple-cut your

way to happiness. But there are some fundamental things that you can do to get more of what you want from your life. Those who characterized their families as happy tended to agree that this state comes not from being the person with the most money on the block or by having the most trophies on the mantel, but by applying certain principles and behaviors that give them a sense of shared identity and commitment.

## **AN INVITATION**

I'm hoping that by the end of this book, you will have an insider's understanding of how the secrets of other families can help your family. You will read the stories of others who have worked hard to establish identifiable family values, make a long-term and unbreakable commitment to each other, support each other through difficult times, expect and accept that kids change everything, work to find unity and common ground when they create a blended family, learn how to fight fair, bounce back when life gets tough, and take time to relax, enjoy, and breathe.

I now invite you to share in the secrets that can give you the kind of family life that you've always dreamed of.

# ***Chapter 1***

## **What Is a Family?**

Every morning in homes across America, alarm clocks blare on bedside stands, showers fill with steam, and coffeemakers spew out fresh java. As the day passes, front doors open and shut, mail slots open and close, and dishes slowly pile up in sinks waiting once again to be washed and returned to cabinets. As the evening winds to a close, lights turn on and off, television channels flip, computers click and clack, and, finally, alarms are again poised to blare the next day.

While all the events of day-to-day life pass routinely from sunup to sundown in these houses and apartments across the land, it's the people within—the members of the family—who make these rooms a home for all who dwell there. We all know what we mean when we talk about family, but we may not all mean the same thing. What exactly is a family? Answering this question is my first challenge in writing this book. And I've learned that it's not as easy as I had first thought to clearly define this word.

In my years as a psychiatrist, I've evaluated thousands of individuals and spent countless hours interviewing hundreds of family members. By now, you would think, I'd have it all figured out. Well . . . actually . . . no, I don't. At least not that simply. Through the course of my clinical experience, one glaring truth emerges: no two families are the same. And certainly no two families function in exactly the same way. There's something both frightening and inspiring in that finding. Frightening because it means that as a psychiatrist

and researcher of human behavior, I cannot apply one standard or formulaic set of techniques to my work with the many families who come to me for help. Inspiring because it demonstrates the diversity and breadth of experience, culture, and style that define the uniqueness of the word *family*.

## **FAMILY THROUGH THE AGES**

Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* has twenty-seven entries for the word family.<sup>1</sup> The definition "a group of persons of common ancestry" is as clear and acceptable a definition as any, I suppose. But in her article "Family Versus Familia, Historical Definitions of the Family," Rachael Hughes reminds us that "our modern usage of the word family as a unit of relatives is relatively new." She explains further that the word grew from the Latin term *familia*, meaning "household," which included everyone—friends, relatives, servants, and slaves—living in that domicile.<sup>2</sup>

This is interesting stuff. It means there was a time when the word family did not apply to pesky in-laws who lived in their own household in another city, two days' wagon ride away. Or even to a beloved brother who established his own family two doors down. A little more research, and I found that it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that family began to connote the intimacy of what we now call a nuclear family.

Before we move forward to discuss *happy* families in Chapter 2, I think there's something to be learned about our own families by taking an historical look at the family unit.

## **EVOLUTION OF THE FAMILY**

A brief overview of family life through the ages makes it clear that one definition of family does not fit all. We could begin in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel as our first family and find lies, betrayal, and murder—a rocky start to unity and happiness. In prehistoric times, the so-called family unit existed purely for survival purposes; during their short and brutish lives, the men were hunters and warriors who spent much of their time away from home and hearth, and the women bore children and died young. Jumping forward to the Middle Ages, in upper-class families, marriage was commonly a strategic arrangement to promote military, economic, or political goals. And then during the Industrial Revolution, factories lured fathers, mothers, and even children out of their homes with the promise of economic stability. The evolution of society and civilization has routinely changed the purpose, structure, and definition of the family.



## **SECRETS FROM RESEARCH**

### **Family Buzzwords**

These popular terms regarding the family were introduced to our language only over the last two hundred years or so:<sup>3</sup>

*1796: in a family way* (pregnant)

*1809: family circle*

*1856: family man* (one devoted to wife and children)



### *1966: family values*

I readily admit that I'm not an historian. I'm a shrink. But I find that diving into the history of the formations of families is critical for a good understanding of why and how families function. My search through the history books makes one thing glaringly clear: families adapt to and are defined by the culture that surrounds them. The meaning of family and the behavior expected within a family are very closely tied to their historical context.

This evolution of the family image continues even today. Many people challenge the notion that the family is composed of a husband and wife with biological children, and perhaps a grandparent or two. Although this depiction certainly does fit the Merriam-Webster definition of "a group of persons of common ancestry," the twenty-first-century family is that and then some. An increasingly large proliferation of types, dynamics, and relationships based on sexuality, culture, religion, ethnicity, ideology, and other crucial variables can be seen all around us and is also quite evident in my own clinical practice.



## **SECRETS FROM RESEARCH**

### **Women in the Mosou Chinese Culture**

What we might think of as the conventional male-headed household is not conventional for everybody. In the Mosou culture of Himalayan China, for example,

women are considered leaders in the community, are granted special status when they reach thirteen years of age (as well as a house of their own), and can choose sexual mates at will. In this culture, when women give birth to a child, the father has no ownership of the child at all. As women grow in status, they pass on their power to other women, including the power to have or reject a man in their lives.

## **THE MODERN FAMILY**

The most recent and obvious shifts in today's modern family have occurred in the changing of gender roles within the family. In many families, the male is no longer the unquestioned head of the tribe—nor does he wish to be. He and his female partner more equitably divide the household roles—both taking greater responsibility for the care of the home and the children. Also, today both the male and female heads of the family may choose to work outside the home to earn a living, leaving the care of the children to caretakers who may or may not be related or members of the household.

Further, not all of today's families are bound by a common ancestry. Consider stepparents and stepchildren; adoptive parents and children; foster parents and children; childless married couples; unmarried but cohabiting couples; infertile couples with egg- and sperm-donor children; same-sex couples; same-sex couples and their adopted, foster, or egg- and sperm-donor children. Whew!

This extended view of the family begins to look more like the pre-seventeenth-century version of the family as “everyone living in the household,” regardless of ancestry.

So again, I face the dilemma of defining family before I can move on to Chapter 2!



## **SECRETS FROM RESEARCH**

### **Commodore Perry's Unavailable Wife**

In our society, monogamy between committed partners is considered an essential element in a happy family. But that's not the case in all cultures. Stories of early expeditions to the North Pole tell us that when Commodore Perry arrived with his wife to set up base camp in the Arctic, an Eskimo chief commented on how attractive Mrs. Perry was. Later, Perry was surprised to find that this chief was insulted when Perry thanked him for the compliment and continued his work. It turns out that in Eskimo culture, if someone compliments your wife, you're supposed to offer her up to have sex with the flatterer.<sup>[4](#)</sup>

Why do I suspect that this quaint idea will never catch on in twenty-first-century Western culture?

## **WHAT A FAMILY IS *NOT***

As I was writing *The Secrets of Happily Married Men* and *The Secrets of Happily Married Women*, I tried my best to include what I felt was a representative view of married couples. I made an effort to include stories of clients who weren't

necessarily white or middle or upper class, but who instead were representative of a cross section of American life. I patted myself on the back, convinced that I had a broad worldview. Yet as I spent more time talking to my clients, meeting with trainees in psychiatry programs in New England, and traveling around the country giving lectures, an unsettling realization began to set in.

Whereas I thought I had taken an inclusive approach to discussing how to have a happy marriage, it was clear that there was a lot more to this “family” thing than I realized. Certainly, I can say without hesitation that many, many people experienced relationship issues very much like those I wrote of. There are male husbands and female wives who formally married and sought and found ways to balance home life and work life. Some are struggling to manage the care of children, some deal with in-laws, sex, money . . . all the things I had written about.

But just as often, people would approach me and ask why I didn’t write about something other than the conventional cliché Norman Rockwell version of family. Here are some of the questions I fielded as I traveled the country:

“Why don’t you write a book about families who don’t fit the traditional mold?”

“Why don’t you write about families that include a stepparent?”

“Do you think you’ll ever write books for people who just live together?”

“How come when you write a book for happily married women, you assume they’re married to men?”

“Can’t my husband and I be considered a family even though we don’t have any children?”

“I may be raising my children without a spouse, but don’t we still count as a family?”

The more I talked to people from all walks of life, the less certain I became about how to define a family. One thing that did become glaringly clear to me was that I could not write a book about happy families by focusing only on the typical and traditional Western version of family. To do so would be to turn a blind eye to the many, many variants of the unit called family today.

So, thought I, perhaps I could begin to define a family by first defining what it is not. Surely it is now obvious that family *cannot* be defined strictly as comprising one biological father, one biological mother, and 2.4 children all lovingly going to church in their Buick on a Sunday morning in spring.

There. That’s a start.

## **MOVE OVER, MRS. CLEAVER**

Acknowledging that this stereotypical definition is no longer valid is, I suppose, an invitation for criticism. There is a concern in this country that the decline of the family institution embodied by the likes of Beaver, Wally, June, and Ward Cleaver is the direct result of our accepting attitude toward divorce, shared custody, cohabiting without a marriage license, single parenting, same-sex couples, and other new, “far-out” untraditional departures from old-fashioned conventions.

Certainly these changes in the family structure have caused societal, economic, and personal problems. But as our brief historical overview of the family has demonstrated, these types of big shifts have happened before, and a

broader and more encompassing definition is simply another inevitable step for the ever-evolving family unit. We could not have expected time to stand still or to embrace the Cleaver family model as the only legitimate family structure forever.

So, realizing that I want this book to be useful for individuals in all types of families, I had hoped that I was ready to move on to Chapter 2. But . . . not so fast.

How do I address you, the reader? If I talk about “you, your mate, and your children,” I stumble on the first and most challenging hurdle in this book. Why, you might ask, do I say “your mate” instead of “your spouse”? Do I assume that you are living with someone, rather than married? In fact, why do I mention a mate at all? Can’t families have just one adult? Moreover, you might also inquire why I write “your children”; many families have no children, and others claim their house cat or guard dog as bona fide family members. And another thing (since I’m on the topic), why do I assume that you are the head of household at all? Couldn’t I also have written “Your mom, your dad, and your siblings” to acknowledge the very real possibility that young adults may choose to read a book about creating a happy family?

My own online survey further added to the possibilities (and the confusion). When asking participants to choose a “family type,” I offered these eight options:

1. Spouse (opposite sex)
2. Unmarried companion (opposite sex)
3. Same-sex romantic companion or spouse
4. Biological child(ren) of current spouse/companion
5. Stepchild(ren)
6. Foster child(ren)
7. Parent(s) or other family members
8. Pets