

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING MARRIAGE WORK

by

John M. Gottman, Ph.D.

Conclusions based on 16 years of research, including observation of married couples throughout weekends in a University of Washington lab, have led Dr. Gottman to a different understanding of what a healthy marriage consists of.

Some signs of a troubled marriage include 1) “harsh start-up”, or opening a discussion with criticism or contempt for the other, and 2) the “four horsemen” of criticism (which goes beyond a specific complaint referring to an action, and include “negative words about your mate’s character or personality,” contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (lack of feedback.)

The encouraging news, according to Gottman, is that while successfully married couples often have intense conflict, and even may lack strong common interests, they virtually always have one thing in common. Their marriage is rooted in a strong friendship.

Gottman says couples who have a happy marriage *aren’t smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others. But in their day-to-day lives, they have hit upon a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other (which all couples have) from overwhelming their positive ones. They have what I call an emotionally intelligent marriage.*

After observing many married couples in his “lab” over a period of at least 16 years, Gottman concluded that strengthening a marriage needs to be based on strengthening the friendship between husband and wife, which he has distilled to 7 principles:

1. *Enhance Your Love Maps* – Study each other; learn what makes the other happy or sad or nervous, or what makes them “tick.”
2. *Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration* – Remember happier times in your relationship. Think of and express why you value your mate. What are his/her best qualities?
3. *Turn toward Each Other Instead of Away* – *...real-life romance is ...kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life.* It may mean responding to, instead of ignoring the most humdrum comment.
4. *Let Your Partner Influence You* – It is always appropriate to honor your spouse, and show respect for his/her opinion.
5. *Solve Your Solvable Problems* – Some disagreements may stay that way – Gottman uses the term *perpetual* to describe those. For most disagreements, couples can learn to soften their approach to the discussion (use a “soft start-up” – combine honesty with kindness) as well as learn to compromise and find common ground. A “harsh start-up” to a discussion of a conflict unfortunately produces even further distance and hurt.

6. *Overcome Gridlock* – The idea for this is to honor each other’s dreams, and to increase flexibility with each other to try to lessen long-time hurts. The goal is not necessarily to resolve the unresolvable, but *to move from gridlock to dialogue*.
7. *Create Shared Meaning* – Develop rituals and traditions; highlight the aspects of your roles that you agree on; collect shared symbols, such as objects that have significance, or stories of family history.

Much of the book consists of ways to implement the seven principles. Those who love to learn and study and are energized to work on their marriage, may want to go through many or all of the exercises. Others may want to choose just one exercise from one principle above and spend a few minutes working on it together, just to see what happens. Even in a healthy marriage, most of us could probably increase our expressions of fondness and admiration for our spouse. Day 1 of Week 1 of Gottman’s exercise for this purpose lists one task: *List one characteristic you find endearing or lovable*. That doesn’t sound overwhelming to me, and might even be fun! Small steps can yield great dividends toward increasing emotional intelligence in the marriage. *Even making just a small and gentle change in the trajectory of your marriage can have a dramatic, positive effect over time*. That sounds worth the effort.

John M Gottman, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and cofounder and codirector of The Gottman Institute.