

The Good News: We're No Longer Guessing (A Primer to Gottman's Findings on Successful Marriage)

John Gottman, Ph.D. has been conducting marital therapy research for over 30 years and is the leader in the field. He has developed a highly predictable theory of why some marriages last and some do not, as well as an effective model for marital therapy. Gottman has studied what he calls the "masters" and "disasters" of marriage and the lessons learned from each to both replicate and avoid.

Marital Myths

Myth 1: Affairs cause divorce. While 20-25% of mediation groups state that an affair was the cause, 80% report that the real reason for divorce was a deterioration of intimacy.

Myth 2: Gender differences cause divorce. If this were true then 100% of heterosexual couples would be divorced and all gay and lesbian couples would stay together.

Myth 3: Communication problems cause marital conflict. The truth is upset people communicate very clearly what they feel and mean.

Myth 4: A lack of 50/50 causes unsuccessful marriage. While it makes sense that doing good for your partner will help you get good things back, the truth is that the research shows this is not the case for failing couples, nor is it the case for happy couples.

Marital Truths

Truth 1: Positivity in interactions in happy couples is 20 to 1, in conflicted couples is 5 to 1, and in soon-to-divorce couples is 0.8 to 1. Watching a couple interact when they are not in conflict is the best way to predict their risk for divorce

Truth 2: Marriages tend to end at one of two times:

- 5-7 years due to high conflict;
- 10-12 years due to the loss of intimacy and connection;
- While marriages certainly end before 5-7 years, as well as between 7-10 years, Gottman argues these are critical or high risk times for marriages.

Truth 3: When it comes to arguments, the type of person one partners with (attacker, soother, avoider) is not so important as the mismatch between the couple:

- Soothers overwhelm avoiders, and you get the distancer-pursuer dynamic;
- Soothers and attackers have little ability to influence each other, little positive sentiment, and a great deal of emotional tension;
- Avoiders and attackers are the worst pairing, with severe distancer-pursuer dynamic.

Truth 4: Most problematic issues (69% in fact) don't get solved, they get managed

States Of Relationships

Basically, Gottman offers that there are two kinds of states that marriage can exit in - Positive Sentiment Override and Negative Sentiment Override:

Positive Sentiment Override - PSO

Positive comments and behaviors outweigh negative ones about 20:1. This means that there is a positive filter that alters how couples remember past events and view new issues. When you dislike someone you fight over which way the toilet paper rolls. When you like them you just find it quirky or cute. PSO makes the difference. PSO is developed through:

- An intact **Fondness and Admiration System**, in which the couple is affectionate and clear about the things they value and admire in the other. Remember Oprah's idea of a "thankfulness log," or a daily list of things you appreciate and are thankful for? "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways..." is simply a good practice.
- **Love Maps** is having a good knowledge of the partner's world (work, family, self) and showing an interest in that world during non-conflict times. Couples who have well-defined Love Maps know the answers to quizzes about their partner's likes and dislikes.
- **An absence of serious conflict**, marked by:
 - **Softened Startups**, or tactful ways to bring up a problem;
 - **Soothed Physiology** during the argument so no one gets "emotionally overheated";
 - **Acceptance of Influence**, so partners (typically men) can accept the desires and wishes of their partners (typically women);
 - **Repair Attempts** or efforts to make up by using humor or conceding a point (there's about one effort every three minutes for most couples);
 - **De-escalation** of hot emotions and efforts to compromise;
 - **Bids for Affection** or efforts to connect through a shared joke, a quick kiss, or a quiet smile that is returned;
 - **Lack of Gridlock** on problem issues by finding the underlying reason for the conflict and finding a way to meet both partner's needs.

Negative Sentiment Override - NSO

Negative comments and behaviors just about equal positive ones, with five or fewer positive comments for every negative one. However, couples showing about one positive for one negative comment are on the path to divorce. This means that there is a negative filter that screens out the few positive events that exist, and may cause the couple to "rewrite" their history together. Ask them what drew them together in the first place, and listen for a negative emotional tone to see this.

- You can not confront NSO directly
- Rather, you have to build the infrastructure for PSO first, and slowly shift the couple to building it further.
- NSO is based on a few basic processes that spiral out of control:
 - Conflict shows a pattern of **Demand Change** and **Withdraw** from the discussion;

- **Diffuse Physiological Arousal (DPA)** is needed as physiological arousal is high especially during arguments, with elevated heart rate, perspiration, and pulse;
- Women are more likely to begin with **Harsh Startups**, while men are more likely to become **Flooded** and **Stonewall**, and to rehearse stress-inducing thoughts. Some (such as Rampage) criticize Gottman for not realizing that gender differences in most relationships make women less powerful, and thus more likely to begin an argument more harshly as a way to communicate "I can't take it any more"; however, such criticisms often ignore why gender differences that leave men feeling they have to "Buckle down and take it" when arguments become emotionally overwhelming or even abusive to them;
- This leads to **Gridlock**, which is often resolved in either: **Disengagement**, which results in a slower divorce that ends at 12+ years; or a high conflict period marked by the **Four Horsemen**, which spells a faster divorce in 5-7 years;
- The **Four Horsemen** are so destructive that Gottman will cut-off couples immediately when they do one of them, and confront them with how harmful this behavior is. While everyone engages in these negative communication patterns some of the time, distressed couples do them more, and couples who do them a lot are on the fast track to divorce:
 1. **Criticism**: "What kind of person are you?"
 2. **Contempt**: "I would never be so low as to do something like that!"
 3. **Defensiveness**: "Yeah? Well what about what you did?"
 4. **Stonewalling**: shutting down, associated with high physiological arousal and efforts to self-soothe with thoughts like "I can't believe she's saying this!"

Basic Marital Therapy Model

Note: Please DON'T try to be the therapist if you aren't a therapist. I spend too much time undoing well-intentioned but all the same erroneous and even damaging counsel that has to be undone and corrected. Please DO provide spiritual counsel, support and direction. I don't have the ability or authority to provide the counsel you have. This clarity of differences and strengths allows pastoral counseling and professional therapy to benefit each other greatly. I share the model with you so when you are working with a therapist you can have an idea if you are working with a well-trained therapist or not.

Gottman follows a clear but flexible model of what to do:

- **Move Gridlock to Dialogue.** While of course you want to solve some problems, and so teaching the couple to use basic compromising skills, avoiding crazy buttons that instantly escalate the argument

("You are just like your mother!"), and using video review of the couples' arguments in the office are all important. However, since over 60% of marital problems are not solved, but managed, you want to start them talking about ways to manage these issues in the future, just as you manage a chronic illness like diabetes. The conflict is not about the topic they are discussing; rather, the real problem is some underlying or symbolic meaning, tied to a dream or fantasy of their future, that they feel they simply can not compromise on without invalidating their dreams.

- **Teach recovery after a fight.** While sure, you would prefer they avoid nasty fights, but Gottman has found in his research that fighting in and of itself is not the problem. In fact, couples who do not fight at all are more likely to end up divorced. You may not be able to teach them to avoid fighting anyway, and reflective listening skills ("What I hear you saying is...") likely won't help since no one uses them in a fight. Instead, the best bet is to teach them how to recover after a fight.
- **Teach six basic social skills**
 1. Recognizing (and avoiding) the Four Horsemen;
 2. Softening startups;
 3. Accepting influence (especially for men);
 4. Soothing physiological arousal (relaxation techniques can help partners calm down during heated arguments, but once they are upset, it may take over 20 minutes for the body to slow itself down to calm levels);
 5. Recognizing (and responding to) repair attempts;
 6. Compromise.
- **Effective repair** is easier to accomplish when there are **Rituals of Connection**, or standard and every-day ways the couple connects and feels bonded to each other. This means decreasing negativity during and after fights, as negativity is the best predictor of divorce over six years (85% accuracy), and effective repair skills increases prediction accuracy (97% accuracy), as among even highly negative newlyweds, 85% of those who effectively repair stay happily married.
- **Fade out the therapist.** As the therapist I am here for triage, training, coaching and support. Gottman starts with 90 minute sessions, then eventually moves to once every two weeks, then month, and finally to "therapy checkups" to help the couple function on their own without the therapist, and avoid relapsing into previous problems. "The best therapist is an informed partner."

Resources

www.gottman.com

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