

Marital Therapy Guide

John Gottman has been conducting marital therapy research for 25 years, and is a well-respected leader in the field. He has developed his own understanding of why some marriages last and some do not, as well as an effective model for marital therapy. Gottman has studied what he calls “masters” and “disasters” of marriage, and offers that there are a number of myths about why marriages actually fail that need to be cleared up.

Myths and Truths of Marital Dysfunction

- **Myth 1** Affairs cause divorces—20–25% of mediation groups say an affair was a reason, but the reason given by 80% is deterioration of intimacy. Further, 70% of men and 40% of women had affairs in the 1970s, but the numbers are now about equal, largely due to women moving into the work force and having greater access to partners.
- **Myth 2** Gender differences cause divorce—if this were so, the divorce rate would be 100% for heterosexual couples, and 0% for gay and lesbian couples.
- **Myth 3** Communication problems cause marital conflict—actually, distressed people communicate quite clearly what they feel and mean.
- **Myth 4** No quid pro quo makes for an unsuccessful marriage—the idea is that doing good things for your partner is contractual on getting good things back; research shows this is not the case for ailing couples, but neither is it the case for happy couples either.

So What IS True?

- **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 .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.
 - (There is some disagreement with Gottman on this issue, as marriages certainly end before 5–7 years, as well as between 7 and 10 years, but 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

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. Have you ever heard the saying, "If you dislike someone, the way they hold their fork will make you furious. But if you like them, they can turn their plate over in your lap and you won't even mind." That's because of PSO. PSO is built on a few basic processes:

- 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? This is how it helps marriages.
- Love Maps or a good knowledge of the partner's world (work, family, self) and showing an interest in it during non-conflict times. Have you ever seen those marriage quizzes that ask things like, "True or False: I know what my partner wants to be doing in five years" or, "True or False: I know my partner's most painful childhood memory"? These are the kinds of things that people know about their partners when they have well-defined Love Maps.
- 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 cannot 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 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 may be resolved in one of two ways: disengagement, which spells a slower divorce that ends at 12+ years, or a high conflict period marked by the 4 Horsemen, which spells a faster divorce in 5–7 years.

4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse

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:

- **Criticism**—“What kind of person are you?”
- **Contempt**—“I would never be so low as to do something like that!”
- **Defensiveness**—“Yeah? Well what about what you did?”

- **Stonewalling**—Shutting down, associated with high physiological arousal and efforts to self-soothe with thoughts like “I can’t believe she’s saying this!”

A Clear and Flexible Model of What To Do

- Move gridlock to dialogue—Sure, 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 like 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 cannot compromise on without invalidating their dreams.
- Teach recovery after a fight—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:
 - Recognizing (and avoiding) the 4 Horsemen.
 - Softening startups.
 - Accepting influence (especially for men).
 - 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).
 - Recognizing (and responding to) repair attempts.
 - Compromise.
- Effective repair is easier to accomplish when there are Rituals of Connection, or standard and everyday 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.

Guidelines

1. Know each other. Learn all about each other's likes, dislikes, wishes, hopes, dreams, etc.
2. Focus on each other's positive qualities, positive feelings for each other, and the good times you have shared with each other.
3. Interact frequently, tell each other about your day, your thoughts, your experiences. Romance is fueled not by candlelight dinners, but by interacting with your partner in numerous little ways.

But the book title refers to seven principles, not three, what about the other four? Oddly, Gottman's last four principles are the traditional communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution principles with cute new names:

4. Let your partner influence you. Translation: share power.
5. Solve your solvable problems. Translation: communicate respectfully, use "I" statements, criticize behavior without criticizing your partner, take a break when you're getting too upset, and compromise. Gottman asserts that in both happy and unhappy marriages, more than 80% of the time the wife brings up marital conflicts while the husband tries to avoid discussing them.
6. Overcome gridlock. Translation: understand your partner's underlying feelings which are preventing resolution of the conflict.
7. Create shared meaning. Translation: share values, attitudes, interests, traditions.

Problematic Behaviors

1. Constantly criticizing your partner; the tendency to feel criticized when you are not being criticized, and emotional overreaction when you are being criticized.
2. The inability to communicate positive emotion; the tendency to feel unloved.
3. Being domineering and unable to see others' viewpoints; unassertiveness, over concern with pleasing your partner, and the resulting tendency to feel obligated and controlled.

Resources

<https://www.gottman.com/>

<https://www.gottman.com/how-well-do-you-know-your-partner/>

Gottman, John, [*Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*](#) book