



SOLUTIONS TIPS: Making Marriage Work

People use the counseling services at SOLUTIONS for a wide variety of purposes. Some want to get ideas about ways to handle difficult work situations, some need input about resources for family members, some talk about substance abuse, parenting, or general stress management. However, the most common topic that folks come to EAP for help with is relationship concerns. This month our TIPS will focus on one type of relationship – marriage. The ideas come from John Gottman, Ph.D., and Nan Silver’s 1999 book entitled *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* is based on research with 700 couples in all stages of ‘relationship’.

When you are having relationship problems, advice is easy to find. Friends, popular magazines, and talk show all have a lot of suggestions about how to improve relationships. Most focus on one central credo – learn to communicate better! This certainly makes intuitive sense. It can help people feel better understood and decrease the frequency or escalation of fighting. Unfortunately, research about therapies emphasizing this alone, finds that it doesn’t improve the quality of the relationship. Gottman explains that the reason for this is that successful conflict resolution isn’t what makes marriages succeed, according to his studies. In fact, in watching couples who have maintained happy marriages, he found that they rarely do anything even resembling “active listening” (a technique often taught as a foundation for communication) when they are upset.

There are many other “**myths**” about what makes for successful marriages. They include the following:

➤ **Common interests will keep you together**

In fact, how the couple interacts while pursuing their interests is more critical than what those interest happen to be.

- **“You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”** philosophy for couples to respond in kind for each good deed by the other

It is more often a characteristic of unhappy marriages that each member of the couple keeps a ‘mental ledger’ of who has done what for whom.

➤ **Honesty and direct response is always the best policy**

Many lifelong relationships function well because of the discretion used in what to dialogue about openly. Couples have different conflict styles. Some avoid fighting at all costs, some regularly discuss their differences. No one style necessarily works better than the other.

➤ **Affairs are the primary cause of divorce**

When divorcing couples are asked what was the primary cause of the breakup, about 80% talk about a gradual growing apart and loss of closeness, or not feeling appreciated vs. about 20% stating that an extramarital affair was even partly to blame.

➤ **Men and women are “from different planets”**

“The determining factor in whether wives feel satisfied with the sex, romance, and passion in their marriage is, by 70 percent the quality of the couple’s friendship. For men, the

determining factor is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple's friendship. So men and women come from the same planet after all."

What makes a marriage work?

At the core of Gottman's research about what makes a happy marriage is that it is based on a deep friendship characterized by mutual respect and enjoyment of each other's company. With this backdrop couples are able to navigate all kinds of difficulties and repair problems. Gottman identifies Seven Principles that make marriage work. The first he calls "*Enhancing Your Love Map*". Try the following exercise. Both you and your partner can complete the questionnaire by responding to each statement as "true" or "false".

1. I can name my partner's best friend.
2. I can tell you what stresses my partner is currently facing.
3. I know the names of some of the people who have been irritating my partner lately.
4. I can tell you some of my partner's life dreams.
5. I am very familiar with my partner's religious beliefs and ideas.
6. I can tell you about my partner's basic philosophy of life.
7. I can list the relatives my partner likes the least.
8. I know my partner's favorite music.
9. I can list my partner's three favorite movies.
10. My spouse is familiar with my current stresses.
11. I know the three most special times in my partner's life.
12. I can tell you the most stressful thing that happened to my partner as a child.
13. I can list my partner's major aspirations and hopes in life.
14. I know my partner's major current worries.
15. My spouse knows who my friends are.
16. I know what my partner would want to do if he or she suddenly won the lottery.
17. I can tell you in detail my first impressions of my partner.
18. Periodically I ask my partner about his or her world right now.
19. I feel that my partner knows me pretty well.
20. My spouse is familiar with my hopes and aspirations.

Scoring – Give yourself 1 point for each "true" answer.

10 or above – This is an area of strength for your marriage.

Below 10 – Your marriage could improve in this area. Take the time to learn more about your spouse now. That knowledge will make your relationship stronger.

Next time we will focus on the 2nd and 3rd principles – Nurturing fondness and ways to turn toward each other instead of away.

According to Gottman, if a couple has a fondness and admiration for one another, their marriage is salvageable. That statement is an indication of just how critical this is in the success of a marriage. Often, it is easy to get a sense of whether fondness remains in a relationship by listening to how the couple talks about their past. Even when current conflicts seem pervasive, couples can often think of warm feelings they had for each other when they met, when they dated, or during important times in their relationship. Reminding yourself and your partner of fond memories of one another can spark positive feelings and counter negative ones. One way to actively engage in nurturing fondness is to think of several positive qualities characteristic of

your partner. Write down the qualities and then follow with a specific incident that illustrates each quality. Next, swap lists with your partner and talk about them.

Having been reminded of the fond feelings, it is important to attend to them in small ways every day. Partners who connect regularly through the mundane moments of life build on their mutual admiration. Examples of this type of connection include asking the others' opinion and listening to the response, checking in with each other during difficult times, planning an activity together and giving your partner a compliment. Often couples take each other for granted. They turn away from one another "not out of malice but out of mindlessness". Being aware of the importance of connecting regularly, in small ways, can have a big impact on the success of the relationship.

Solvable Problems and Creating Shared Meaning

Let's talk about ways to most effectively approach solving a couple's "solvable problems", and finally about building a lasting bond through "creating shared meaning" in the marriage.

To resolve marital conflicts Gottman suggests a process aimed at optimizing the atmosphere in which the couple can address specific problems. The atmosphere he describes is one in which you treat your spouse as you would treat guests – using the same social consideration and sensitivity. If a guest forgets something at your house, you might call to let them know, offer to drop it off for them or arrange a convenient time for them to pick it up. You would not likely point out that they are always forgetting things or admonish them with a comment like "what is the matter with you? I'm not your personal assistant with nothing better to do than to keep track of where you leave all your things". Try approaching your spouse with a direct statement of the problem, without sarcasm or overgeneralization. Next, talk to your partner politely, avoid insults, appreciate efforts made by your partner to deescalate tension, and stay open to constructive ideas toward resolution. Finally, accept that both you and your partner have faults and no conflict resolution will change that. One of the best features of a good marriage is that your spouse knows you well enough to know about your faults and still chooses to be with you!

Ultimately, a successful marriage involves a deep friendship that is nurtured regularly, and an ability to navigate difficult times large and small. The strongest marriages also embody a shared sense of purpose. Mutual support of each other's hopes and dreams, marital rituals, and certain common life values create a union with depth and endurance.

No marriage embodies all aspects of the principles at all times. Gottman provides a research-based approach to building and maintaining a successful relationship. When things are going well – enjoy and nurture them. When there are problems, try his guide to addressing them.

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