



So what do you think we really need  
to talk about, hmm?

Maybe I do. Maybe I just enjoy being quiet.

NO

YES

Welcome to t

**Words can heal an ailing relationship—or seal its negative fate.**

**By John Gottman, Ph.D. and Sybil Carrere, Ph.D.**

**T**he way a couple argues can tell you a lot about the future of their relationship. In fact, just three minutes of fighting can indicate whether the pair will flourish with time or end in ruin.

The 10-year study that led to this discovery was one of many we've conducted over the years. John Gottman began his groundbreaking research on married couples 28 years ago. Since then, his University of Washington laboratory—dubbed the "Love Lab"—has focused on determining exactly what makes marriages thrive or fail. With the help of a remarkable team and hundreds of couples, we can now predict a relationship's outcome with 88% to 94% accuracy.

To do this, we watch couples during spats and analyze partners' communication patterns and physiology, as well as their oral descriptions of their relationship histories. We then follow the pairs over time to see whether their patterns and descriptions lead to happy outcomes or breakups. We have learned that some negative emotions used in arguments are

**NO**  
**YES**

**You never ask me what's wrong. Seriously, I think that as long as we've been married, you still don't know very much about me at all.**

**No, I think it's true, about both of us, maybe.**

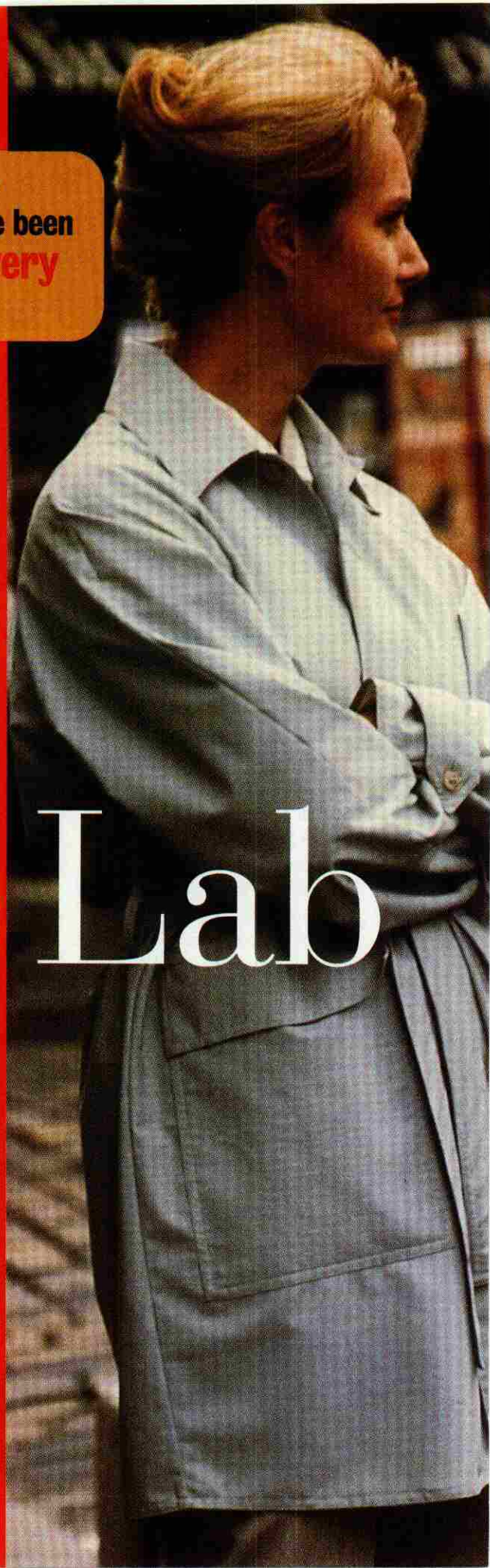
# The Love Lab

more toxic than others: Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (withdrawing from a discussion, most frequently seen among men) are all particularly corrosive. On the other hand, we have repeatedly found that happy couples use five times more positive behaviors in their arguments than negative behaviors. One way they do this is by using humor to break the tension in an argument. This is a kind of a "repair" effort to mend conflict. We find that happy couples also use expressions of affection for their partner and acknowledge their partner's point of view ("I'm sorry I hurt your feelings") in order to keep quarrels from getting too heated.

We have learned much from our couples over the last 11 years that we try to bring to our own marriages. Two things: One is the importance of building and maintaining a friendship in your marriage so that you give your partner the benefit of the doubt when times are tough. This takes constant work. The second thing is that you have a choice every time you say something to your partner. You can say something that will either nurture the relationship or tear it down. You may win a particular fight with your spouse, but you could lose the marriage in the long run.

In this article, we show just how we diagnose the health of a marriage. Using three examples of dialogue from real couples discussing their problems, we will illustrate how reading between the lines of people's arguments can predict where some marriages have gone wrong—and why others have stayed strong. Welcome to the "Love Lab!"

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**Susan, 45, and Bob, 47, have been married for 23 years.**

**Bob:** Um, communication. The question is...

**Susan:** How we disagree.

**B:** On communication?

**S:** You don't see a need for it.

**B:** Oh yeah.

**S:** You just said you kept to yourself.

**B:** Well, yeah, I just...I dunno. Idle chitchat, I guess.

**S:** You what?

**B:** Idle chitchat, I guess, if that is what you refer to as communication.

**S:** What do you mean, chitchat?

**B:** General run-of-the-mill bull.

**S:** There's nonverbal communication if you're tuned in.

**B:** (Nods head)

**S:** Like that man said in that canoeing class, as they went over the rapids, that they were still communicating.

**B:** That's true. What do you think we need to talk about more then? Huh?

**S:** Well, I think when there's a problem, or I'm trying to tell you something, sometimes I shouldn't have to say anything. You can know when I'm in a hurry or tired.

**B:** I just take communication as being, uh, should we sit down and discuss things more fully.

**S:** We don't sit down and discuss anything unless it's a problem, or if somebody gets mad. You know lots of families have what they call, which is kinda silly, but a weekly meeting or some time when they just sit down and talk about everything that has been going on there all week, what they like and don't like.

**B:** We used to have those at home.

**S:** That's a little far-fetched, maybe, but I'm just saying.

**B:** I know. I just...



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pattern of unhappiness, although this couple did not break up.

This couple is also in a state of gridlocked conflict. Susan and Bob keep coming close to resolving their issue, which is that Bob would rather keep to himself

than communicate. But they don't—they keep recycling it over and over again. Emotional disengagement is often a later stage of continued gridlock. After a while, a "hot" couple begins polarizing their positions, digging in and becoming more stubborn, vilifying one another, then trying to isolate the problem. Unfortunately, most gridlocked conflict cannot be permanently enclaved, and negotiations to fix a problem reach a stalemate.

The reason gridlocked conflicts don't get resolved is because there is an underlying life dream within each person that isn't being fulfilled. Susan's dream is expressed when she says, "You never ask me what's wrong." Bob responds that "maybe I just enjoy the quietness"—that he prefers emotional distance to fighting—but she sadly replies that he doesn't know her at all. They are lacking in what we call "love maps," which spouses construct by being interested in each other and tracking each other's stresses, hopes, dreams, concerns, etc. Her latent wish for love maps keeps them from agreeing to the weekly meeting plan.

This couple is still married, but unhappily so.

**Valerie, 24, and Mark, 25, have a young baby. They have recently moved, and both have new jobs.**

**Valerie:** (Laughter) We don't go that long without talking.

**S:** It makes sense.

**B:**...you know what major problem we have at work is communication.

**S:** It's a problem everywhere.

**B:** Yeah. Yeah.

**S:** People don't say what they mean.

**B:** Or assume that people know what they mean or want.

**S:** Well, how many times have I asked you what's wrong, and you say nothing. And then a month later you say what was wrong and I couldn't have guessed it in a million years.

**B:** I don't know why that is. Why, you know, you can ask almost anybody at work what's bothering them.

**S:** But you never ask me what's wrong.

**B:** Maybe I know.

**S:** No, I don't think you do.

**B:** Maybe I just enjoy the quietness of it. I don't know.

**S:** Well, seriously, I think that as long as we've been married that you don't know very much about me at all.

**B:** No, I think it's true, about both of us maybe.

**GOTTMAN SAYS:** This couple rates quite low in marital satisfaction. They are also emotionally disengaged, with high depression in addition to marital distress. The marriage has generally low conflict, but also low positivity (shared romance, humor, affection)—the best marker of emotional disengagement. Our findings suggest that, in general, emotionally disengaged couples divorce later in life than those who have a "hotter," more explosive

**Defensiveness;  
Tension**

**Expressing Hidden Life Dream: Wants  
Husband To take Active Interest**

## Despite Initial Humor, The Problem Surfaces

**Mark:** I know, I just start going stir-crazy.

**Valerie:** The problem...

**M:** Huh?

**V:** ...is, you told me that when you took the job as manager at Commonwealth that you'd come home in the afternoons and spend some time with us.

**M:** That's right, but I did not say that it would start in the first week when I'm trying to do two different jobs. I gotta get myself replaced. Right now, I'm not just a manager.

**V:** It's been three weeks.

**M:** Well, I just don't go out on the street and say "Hey you. Want to sell insurance?" It's not that easy. There's two people in the program. One of them is probably gonna be hired within the next couple weeks. But in the meantime it's tough. It's just the way it's gotta be.

**V:** I realize that.

**M:** Okay.

**V:** But.

**M:** At midnight when you get off work and you're all keyed up, I'm all worn out. I haven't been stimulated for two hours.

**V:** I realize that. That doesn't bother me that much, you going to sleep at night.

**M:** I'll just be starting to go to sleep and you'll go "Are you listening to me?" I'll be trying to stay awake...

**V:** I'm laughing about it usually. I'm not upset about it.

**M:** I don't know by then. I'm half out.

**V:** But now with me having a car, you'll be able to go to sleep early and get up with Stephanie a little bit. That's one of my big problems. I'm not getting any sleep. I don't get to sleep until two.

**M:** I've been getting up with her.

**V:** You've been real good about that.

**M:** Okay.

**V:** I guess I just wish that you didn't

have to go in early.

**M:** Yeah, we don't get a whole lot of time together.

**V:** When I have the car, I can get out and get stuff then. I feel like I'm stuck at home and here you are...

**M:** I'll be able to meet you for lunch and stuff. I guess that wasn't any big problem.

**V:** It is a problem. It seems like we talk about it every day.

**M:** Yeah, we do.

**V:** That's about the only thing we really complain about.

**M:** Yeah. The last couple nights I tried to take you out to the lake and look at the stars and stuff, so...

**V:** I know.

**M:** We just need to get used to our schedules.

**V:** That first week I was so, I was real upset cause it seemed like all I did was stay home with Stephanie all morning till three and just work all evening. I wasn't doing anything. It didn't seem like we had family gatherings every weekend. We never had time to go out, just the two of us.

**M:** I got a little surprise for ya next weekend.

**V:** Yeah, it's always next weekend. It's never this weekend.

**M:** Eight weekends in a row.

**V:** I just went from not working at all and being home. We've both been through major job changes and all.

**M:** And I can't breathe.

**V:** But we're getting used to it and I feel so much better about going to work at three (o'clock), three-thirty now than I did that first week.

**M:** Um.

**V:** I just wish I had more time to do what I wanted to do. I, it's just being...

**M:** I'll, I'll be able to stay...

**V:** ...a wife and mother.

**M:** ...to stay at home during the days a little bit more or I'll have to go in early but then I can take a couple of

## Criticism; Conflict Renewed

## Retaliation With Anger

hours off in the afternoons.

**V:** Do you have to go in early every day?

**M:** I'm going to go in early every day.

**V:** Why?

**M:** 'Cause there are things I need to do every morning.

**V:** I think you just like going in to your office.

**M:** You don't know a thing about it then. Randy was in there early every day, tell me why?

**V:** Yeah, but he was home at a decent hour too.

**M:** He stays out late.

**V:** Eight to eight or eight to nine every day.

**M:** Every day.

**V:** Now, then, I don't want you taking that job. You forget it.

**M:** No.

**GOTTMAN SAYS:** This couple also has low levels of marital satisfaction. Unlike the previous couple, they have the "hot," corrosive kind of marital conflict characterized by what I call the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse": criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. This type of conflict tends to lead to early divorce. However, also unlike the previous couple, there is still a lot of strength in their relationship. Their friendship is intact. There is humor and affection, and they are confident that they can resolve their conflict.

Though the couple begins their discussion very well, by laughing, Valerie soon expresses anger because Mark's new job is demanding so much of his time. She then repairs this with humor and more affection. This shows that there is still quite a bit of strength in this marriage. The respite is only temporary; Valerie raises the family issue again. But Mark agrees af-

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fectionately, showing another strength: He makes her problems "their" problems.

They are doing very well discussing the problem until Valerie's angry line about going in early every day. This leads to a pattern of her anger and his defensiveness in response. So there is still a lot of strength in their interaction, but something is keeping him from fully understanding how hard it is for her to have him gone so much. Something is deteriorating in this relationship and it's exemplified by her ultimatums and his resistance.

When we were doing this research, we didn't intervene to help couples, and this one, unfortunately, divorced after seven years of marriage. Now I think we can prevent this type of marital meltdown. The secrets are in keeping fathers involved with their babies so they make the same kind of philosophical transformation in meaning that their wives are probably making; in teaching couples what to expect during this transition to parenthood; and in helping them with the inevitable marital conflict, sleepless irritability and depression that often follow a new baby.

### Wilma, 31, and Harris, 35, have been married 11 years.

**Wilma:** The communication problem. Tell me your feelings. (Both laughing)

**Harris:** A lot of times I don't know. I've always been quiet.

**W:** Is it just because you have nothing to talk about, or is it because you don't want to talk about it?

**H:** A lot of times I don't know.

**W:** Okay. Example: when we went to Lake Bariessa. I mean, I can understand that you couldn't find your way around and everything, that was fine. But it still doesn't hurt to open your lips, you know?

**H:** I was kind of burned out that day...

**W:** Well, you suggested we go...

**H:** I was trying to take you out somewhere, then I was trying to figure out my money in the bank and I end up coming short...

**W:** You did all that driving up there...

**H:** Yeah. And I was trying to figure out my bank account and how I was going to, you know, have the gas money for the week.

**W:** But, like, when we got there, you didn't

## Playful Acceptance of Differences

want to talk. We got off the truck, we got set up and you ate your sandwich. Your little bologna sandwich. (Both laughing)

**H:** Yeah. I was starving. (Laughing)

**W:** I didn't know you were. And then it was like, you still didn't want to talk, so Dominique and me started playing tennis.

**H:** It was almost time to go then and I had to drive back. I didn't want to check it out.

**W:** Yeah. I thought it was such a nice drive.

**H:** I didn't know it was going to be that far.

**W:** And I really appreciate that.

**H:** Thank you very much.

**W:** You're welcome. I don't mind you talking about bills all the time, but we can only pay what we can pay, so why worry?

**H:** 'Cause that's how I am.

**W:** You shouldn't do that.

**H:** Well, I can't help it. I'm always trying to be preventive. ←

**W:** Okay, "Preventive." (Laughter)

**H:** I can't help it. I have learned from my mistakes. Have you ever heard of people worried about bills?

**W:** I've heard of those people. I'm one of those people.

**H:** And I'm one of those people, whether you know it or not.

**W:** The thing is, I just pay what I can. You can't give everybody money at the same time when you don't have it to give.

**H:** The only thing I can do is have life insurance for me and you. I paid the kids'. Now I can't pay ours.

**W:** So you haven't paid the insurance in a month and a half?

**H:** I paid the kids', but I haven't been able to pay ours.

**W:** You see, you don't say anything, so I've been thinking that everything is okay.

**H:** Yeah, I gathered that. (Laughter)

**W:** (Laughter) Honestly. We need to figure out how we can pay that before it's due.

I mean, the same thing with the phone bill. **H:** But you haven't been trying to keep that down. Yappity yappity yap!

**W:** Well, we'll try to figure it out. We'll both of us try to take something out.

**H:** Right. That's what I'd like.

**W:** All right. Work with me, baby. And

now maybe you'll start talking more. See, now you're sitting up here talking about this. And like that day at the park. We could have talked about that. It was a nice relaxing moment to discuss things.

**H:** I don't know what happened then. When I got there, I was blown out.

**W:** If you sit and talk with me like this...

**H:** When do we have a chance to sit down?

**W:** On weekends.

**H:** I don't think we have enough time on weekends to sit down.

**W:** See, that's why I said we need to take a day for ourselves. Momma would keep Dominique for a day. We've got to start focusing on ourselves more.

**H:** Mmm-hmm.

**W:** Just every now and then so we can do something for ourselves, even if it isn't anything more than taking in a movie.

**H:** Yeah.

**W:** Or go have dinner. When was the last time we had dinner in a restaurant?

**H:** That would be nice. Or go to a movie. How do you do it? First you go have dinner, then you go to a movie. (Laughter)

**W:** Or if you go to a movie early enough, you can go have dinner afterwards.

**H:** Right.

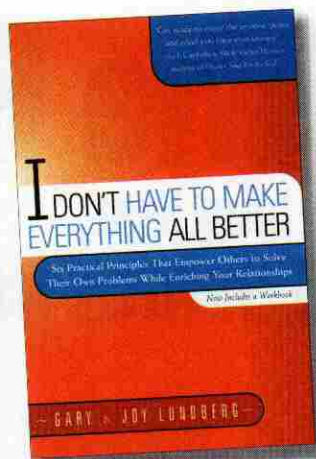
**W:** Right.

**GOTTMAN SAYS:** Wilma and Harris have a long-term, stable and happy marriage. They easily discuss two long-standing marital issues: the fact that he doesn't talk very much and she wants him to, and their financial differences. These issues are never going to change fundamentally. Our research has revealed that 69% of couples experience "perpetual problems"—issues with no resolution that couples struggle with for many years. Our data now lead us to believe that whenever you marry someone, your personality differences ensure that you and your partner will grapple with these issues forever. Marriages are only successful to the degree that the problems you have are ones you can cope with.

For most perpetual conflicts in marriages, what matters is not conflict resolution, but the attitudes that surround discussion of the conflict. Wilma and Harris both basically accept that there will always be differences between them, and

(continued on page 87)

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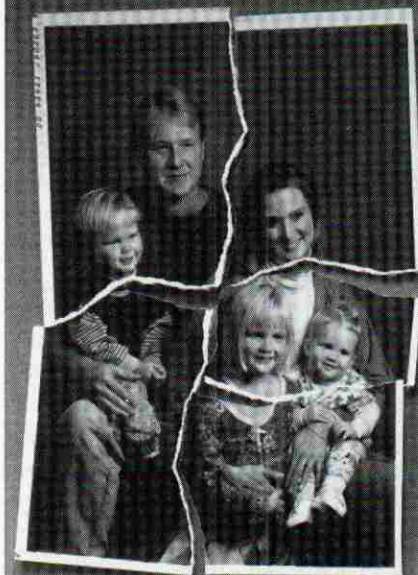
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# Welcome To The Love Lab

(continued from page 47)

they essentially accept one another as they are. Still, it is their ability to exchange viewpoints, making each other feel comfortable and supported all the while, that keeps them from getting gridlocked.

This couple, which is typical of our long-term couples, are real pros at being married and at using positive affect—like humor and gentle teasing—to de-escalate conflict. This is likely a sign that they are keeping their arousal levels low. Notice the wide array of strategies used to alleviate potential tension, such as expressing appreciation, softening complaints, responding nondefensively, backing down and using humor. The two of them do this together.

What these middle-aged spouses do is exactly what newlyweds who wind up stable and happy do, and this process moves them toward some semblance of problem-solving. What this master couple has effectively accomplished is to actualize the great marital paradox: that people can only change if they don't feel they have to.

Harris and Wilma make it look easy, just like a high-wire act makes it look easy. They are "athletes" at marriage, and that is one reason we study long-term marriages. There is a marital magic in what they do. The only function of my research is to make this marital magic clear so therapists can teach it to other couples.

*John Gottman, Ph.D., is William Miffitt Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle. Sybil Carrere, Ph.D., is a research scientist at the University of Washington in Seattle.*

**READ MORE ABOUT IT**

*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, John Gottman, Ph.D. (Crown, 1999)*

*The Marriage Clinic, John Gottman, Ph.D. (W. W. Norton, 1999)*

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