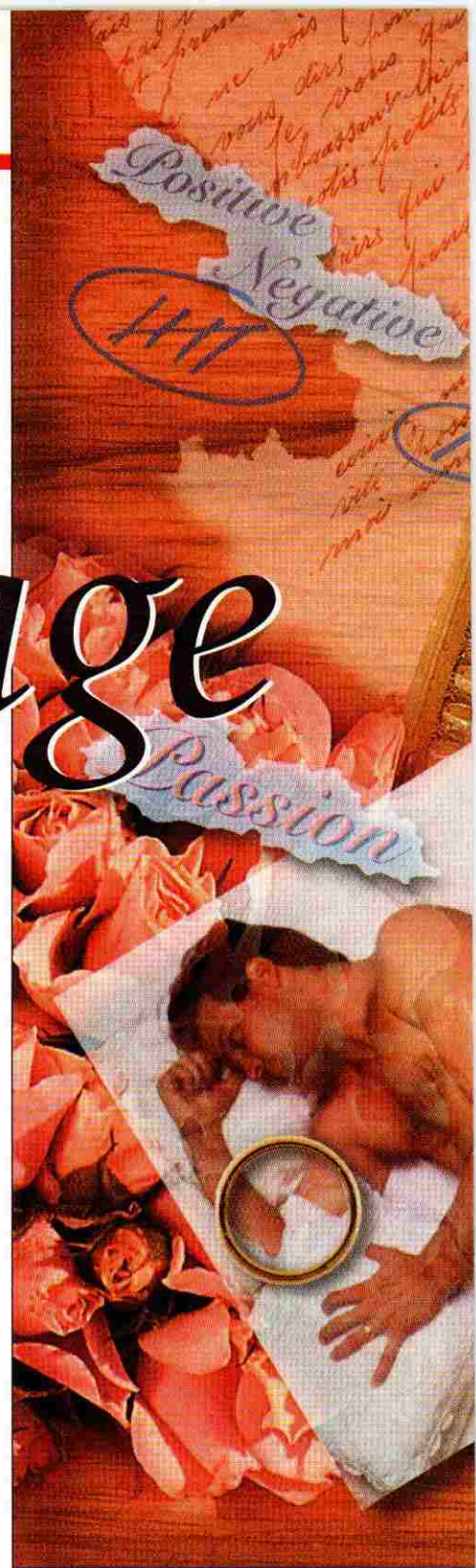


What *M*akes. Marriage Work?

If you are worried about the future of your marriage or relationship, you have plenty of company. There's no denying that this is a frightening time for couples. More than half of all first marriages end in divorce; 60 percent of second marriages fail. What makes the numbers even more disturbing is that no one seems to understand *why* our marriages have become so fragile.

In pursuit of the truth about what tears a marriage apart or binds it together, I have found that much of the conventional wisdom—even among marital therapists—is either misguided or dead wrong. For example, some marital patterns that even professionals often take as a sign of a problem—such as having intense fights or avoiding conflict altogether—I have found can signify highly successful adjustments that will keep a couple together. Fighting, when it airs grievances and complaints, can be one of the *healthiest* things a couple can do for their relationship.

If there's one lesson I've learned in my years of research into marital relationships—having interviewed and studied more than 200 couples over 20 years—it is that a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. Many couples tend to equate a low level of conflict with happiness and believe the claim "we never fight" is a sign of marital health. But I believe we grow in our relationships by reconciling our differences. That's how we become more loving people and truly experience the fruits of marriage.





Breakthrough research indicates you can get mad as hell or avoid conflict altogether. But the positivity must outweigh the negativity by five to one. By John Gottman, Ph.D.

Although there are other dimensions that are telling about a union, the intensity of argument seems to bring out a marriage's true colors. To classify a marriage, in my lab at the University of Washington in Seattle, I look at the frequency of fights, the facial expressions and physiological responses (such as pulse rate and amount of sweating) of both partners during their confrontations, as well as what they say to each other and in what tone of voice they interact verbally.

But there's much more to a successful relationship than knowing how to fight well. Not all stable couples resolve conflicts in the same way, nor do they mean the same thing by "resolving" their conflict. In fact, I have found that there are three different styles of problem solving into which healthy marriages tend to settle:

- *Validating.* Couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise.
- *Volatile.* Conflict erupts often, resulting in passionate disputes.

DAVID KAHL

• *Conflict-avoiding.* Couples agree to disagree, rarely confronting their differences head-on.

Previously, many psychologists might have considered conflict-avoiding and volatile marriages to be destructive. But my research suggests that *all three* styles are equally stable and bode equally well for the marriage's future.

"HEALTHY" MARRIAGE STYLES

One of the first things to go in a marriage is politeness. As laughter and validation disappear, criticism and pain well up. Your attempts to get communication back on track seem useless, and partners become lost in hostile and negative thoughts and feelings. Yet here's the surprise: There are couples whose fights are as deafening as thunder yet who have long-lasting, happy relationships.

Joe, 29, and Sheila, 27, said they thought alike about almost everything and felt "an instant comfort" from the start. Although they spent a good deal of time apart, they still enjoyed each other's company and fought very rarely. When tension did arise, both considered solo jogging more helpful in soothing the waters than talking things out or arguing.

Not surprisingly, Bert and Betty were still happily married four years after I'd first interviewed them. However, so were Max and Anita, as well as Joe and Sheila. Marriages like Bert and Betty's, though, which emphasize communication and compromise, have long been held up as the ideal. Even when discussing a hot topic, they display a lot of ease and calm, and have a keen ability to listen to and under-

stand each other's emotions. But we call those who do "volatile." Such couples fight on a grand scale and have an even grander time making up.

More than the other types, volatile couples see themselves as equals. They are independent sorts who believe that marriage should emphasize and strengthen their individuality. Indeed, they are very open with each other about their feelings—both positive and negative. These marriages tend to be passionate and exciting, as if the marital punch has been spiked with danger.

Moving from a volatile to an avoidant style of marriage, like Joe and Sheila's, is like leaving the tumult of a hurricane for the placid waters of a summer lake. Not much seems to happen in this type of marriage. A more accurate name for them is "conflict minimizers," because they make

Here's the surprise: There are couples whose fights are as deafening as thunder yet who have long-lasting, happy marriages.

The following three newly married couples accurately illustrate the three distinct styles of marriage.

Bert and Betty, both 30, both came from families that weren't very communicative, and they were determined to make communication a priority in their relationship. Although they squabbled occasionally, they usually addressed their differences before their anger boiled over. Rather than engaging in shouting matches, they dealt with their disagreements by having "conferences" in which each aired his or her perspective. Usually, they were able to arrive at a compromise.

Max, 40, and Anita, 25, admitted that they quarreled far more than the average couple. They also tended to interrupt each other and defend their own point of view rather than listen to what their partner was expressing. Eventually, however, they would reach some sort of accord. Despite their frequent tension, however, they seemed to take much delight in each other.



stand each other's emotions.

That's why I call such couples "validators": In the midst of disagreement they still let their partners know that they consider his or her emotions valid, even if they don't agree with them. This expression of mutual respect tends to limit the number of arguments couples need to have.

Anita and Max take a different approach to squabbling than do Bert and Betty, yet their marriage remained just as solid over time. How can people who seem to thrive on skirmishes live happily together? The truth is that not every couple who fights this frequently has a stable marriage.

light of their differences rather than resolving them. This type of successful coupling flies in the face of conventional wisdom that links marital stability to skillful "talking things out."

It may well be that these different types of couples could glean a lot from each other's approach—for example, the volatile couple learning to ignore some conflicts and the avoidant one learning how to compromise. But the prognosis for these three types of marriage is quite positive—they are each healthy adaptations to living intimately with another human being.

THE ECOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

The balance between negativity and positivity appears to be the key dynamic in what amounts to the emotional ecology of every marriage. There seems to be some kind of thermostat operating in healthy marriages that regulates this balance. For example, when partners get contemptuous, they correct it with lots of positivity—not necessarily right away, but sometime soon.

Keys to Improving Your Marriage

What really separates contented couples from those in deep marital misery is a healthy balance between their positive and negative feelings and actions toward each other.

Volatile couples, for example, stick together by balancing their frequent arguments with a lot of love and passion. But by balance I do not mean a 50-50 equilibrium. As part of my research I carefully charted the amount of time couples spent fighting versus interacting positively—touching, smiling, paying compliments, laughing, etc. Across the board I found there was a very specific ratio that exists between the amount of positivity and negativity in a stable marriage, whether it is marked by validation, volatility, or conflict avoidance.

That magic ratio is 5 to 1. As long as there is five times as much positive feeling and interaction between husband and wife as there is negative, the marriage was likely to be stable over time. In contrast, those couples who were heading for divorce were doing far too little on the positive side to compensate for the growing negativity between them.

WARNING SIGNS:

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

If you are in the middle of a troubled marriage, it can seem that your predicament is nearly impossible to sort out. But in fact unhappy marriages do resemble each other in one overriding way: they followed the same, *specific*, downward spiral before coming to a sad end.

Being able to predict what emotions and reactions lead a couple into trouble is crucial to improving a marriage's chances. By pinpointing how marriages destabilize, I believe couples will be able to find their way back to the happiness they felt when their marital adventure began.

When you're feeling overwhelmed, make a deliberate effort to calm yourself. This strategy eases the need to be defensive and to stonewall—two of the "Four Horsemen"—and undercuts the physical feelings that sustain the thoughts that maintain distress.

From the data gathered in our lab we've seen how quickly discussions fall apart as soon as one spouse's heart rate begins to soar. Learning how to calm down helps prevent unproductive fighting or running away from the important discussions you may need to have.

In addition, listening or speaking without being defensive helps to counter several destructive habits. If you happen to be a nondefensive listener, chances are it will make the cycle of negativity much less likely. And a nondefensive attitude on your part also helps to defuse the need to stonewall, particularly for men. But keep in mind that defensiveness is a two-way street; if you start

The first cascade a couple hits as they tumble down the marital rapids is comprised of the "Four Horsemen"—four disastrous ways of interacting that sabotage your attempts to communicate with your partner. As these behaviors become more and more entrenched, husband and wife focus increasingly on the escalating sense of negativity and tension in their marriage. Eventually they become deaf to each other's efforts at peacemaking. As each new horseman arrives, he paves the way for the next, each insidiously overriding a marriage that started out full of promise.

THE FIRST HORSEMAN: CRITICISM

When Eric and Pamela married fresh out of college, it soon became clear that they had different notions of what frugality meant. Pamela found herself complaining about Eric's spending habits, yet as time passed she found that her comments did not lead to any change on her husband's part. Rather, something potentially damaging to their marriage soon began occurring: instead of complaining about his actions, she began to criticize *him*.

On the surface, there may not seem to be much difference between complaining and criticizing. But criticizing involves attacking someone's *personality* or character rather than a *specific behavior*, usually with blame. When Pamela said things like "You always think about yourself," she assaulted Eric, not just his actions, and blamed him for being selfish.

Since few couples can completely avoid criticizing each other now and then, the



first horseman often takes up long-term residence even in relatively healthy marriages. One reason is that criticizing is just a short hop beyond complaining, which is actually one of the *healthiest* activities that can occur in a marriage. Expressing anger and disagreement makes the marriage stronger in the long run than suppressing the complaint.

The trouble begins when you feel that your complaints go unheeded and your spouse repeats the offending habits. Over time, it becomes more and more likely that your complaints will pick up steam. With each successive complaint you're likely to throw in your inventory of prior, unresolved grievances. Eventually you begin blaming your partner and being critical of his or her personality rather than of a specific deed.

it corrodes the marriage. When that happens it heralds the arrival of the next horseman that can drag you toward marital difficulty.

THE SECOND HORSEMAN: CONTEMPT

By their first anniversary, Eric and Pamela still hadn't resolved their financial differences. Unfortunately, their fights were becoming more frequent and personal. Pamela was feeling disgusted with Eric. In the heat of one particularly nasty argument, she found herself shrieking: "Why are you so irresponsible?" Fed up and insulted, Eric retorted, "Oh, shut up. You're just a cheapskate. I don't know how I ended up with you anyway." The second horseman—contempt—had entered the scene.

What separates contempt from criticism is the *intention* to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. With your words and body language, you're lobbing insults right into the heart of your partner's sense of self. Fueling these contemptuous actions are negative thoughts about the partner—he or she is stupid, incompetent, a fool. In direct or subtle fashion, that message gets across along with the criticism.

When this happened, they ceased being able to remember why they had fallen in love in the first place. As a consequence, they rarely complimented each other anymore or expressed mutual admiration or attraction. The focal point of their relationship became abusiveness.

What Pamela and Eric experienced is hardly uncommon. When contempt begins to overwhelm your relationship, you

“If there is five times as much positive interaction as negative between couples, the marriage is likely to be stable over time.”

One common type of criticism is to bring up a long list of complaints. I call this “kitchen sinking”: you throw in every negative thing you can think of. Another form is to accuse your partner of betraying you, of being untrustworthy: “I trusted you to balance the checkbook and you let me down! Your recklessness amazes me.” In contrast, complaints don't necessarily finger the spouse as a culprit; they are more a direct expression of one's own dissatisfaction with a particular situation.

Criticisms also tend to be generalizations. A telltale sign that you've slipped from complaining to criticizing is if global phrases like “you never” or “you always” start punctuating your exchanges:

Complaint: “We don't go out as much as I'd like to.”

Criticism: “You never take me anywhere.”

Being critical can begin innocently enough and is often the expression of pent-up, unresolved anger. It may be one of those natural self-destruct mechanisms inherent in all relationships. Problems occur when criticism becomes so pervasive that

Exercise: How Do We Compare?

This exercise gives you a chance to see the strengths of your marriage by comparing yourselves to other couples in your lives.

1. Each of you jot down the names of four different couples you both know. Two should be examples of “bad” marriages; two of “good” marriages.
2. Now share the names with one another and tell why you feel the good marriages work and the bad marriages don't. Perhaps you admire how one couple is raising their children, or you disapprove of the way another couple berates one another in front of company.
3. Talk about your own marriage in relation to these good and bad marriages. Compare the way you and your spouse manage to get through difficult times with the way each of these couples handle their challenges. Can you identify behaviors you want to avoid? Are there things you'd like to emulate?
4. Talk about your own ability as a couple to overcome hardship. Have you weathered episodes or incidents of which you're particularly proud? If so, how did you do it?

tend to forget your partner's positive qualities, at least while you're feeling upset. You can't remember a single positive quality or act. This immediate decay of admiration is an important reason why contempt ought to be banned from marital interactions.

Recognizing when you or your spouse is expressing contempt is fairly easy. Among the most common signs are:

- *Insults and name-calling*
- *Hostile humor*
- *Mockery*
- *Body language*—including sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip.

It is easy to feel overly critical at times, and it is human to state criticism in a contemptuous way now and then, even in the best relationships. Yet if abusiveness seems to be a problem in your relationship, the best way to neutralize it is to stop seeing arguments with your spouse as a way to retaliate or exhibit your superior moral stance. Rather, your relationship will improve if you approach your spouse with precise complaints rather than attacking your partner's personality or character.

THE THIRD HORSEMAN: DEFENSIVENESS

Once contempt entered their home, Eric and Pamela's marriage went from bad to worse. When either of them acted contemptuously, the other responded *defensively*, which just made matters worse. Now they both felt victimized by the other—and neither was willing to take responsibility for setting things right. In effect, they both constantly pleaded innocent.

The fact that defensiveness is an understandable reaction to feeling besieged is one reason it is so destructive—the "victim" doesn't see anything wrong with being defensive. But defensive

speaking nondefensively, you will lessen your partner's need to be defensive.

Letting your spouse know that you understand him or her is also one of the most powerful tools for healing your relationship. It is an antidote to criticism, contempt, and defensiveness. Instead of attacking or ignoring your partner's point of view, you try to see the problem from his or her perspective and show that you think his or her viewpoint may have some validity.

When you've had one successful fight using these techniques, you may think you've fully mastered the strategies. But these lessons have to be practiced often. So often, in fact, that they become completely automatic. Each time you rehearse being nondefensive or validating is a new and different experience and it's important to keep trying even when you're tired and don't feel like it. The idea is that if you overlearn a communication skill, you'll have ready access to it when you need it most—during a heated argument with your spouse when you are physiologically aroused.



phrases, and the attitude they express, tend to escalate a conflict rather than resolve anything. If you are being defensive, you are adding to your marital troubles. Familiarize yourself with the signs of defensiveness so you can recognize them for what they truly are:

• *Denying Responsibility.* No matter what your partner charges, you insist in no uncertain terms that you are not to blame.

• *Making Excuses.* You claim that external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way.

• *Disagreeing with Negative Mind-Reading.* Sometimes your spouse will make assumptions about your private feelings, behavior, or motives (in phrases such as "You think it's a waste of time" or "I know how you hate it"). When this "mind-reading" is delivered in a negative manner, it may trigger defensiveness in you.

• *Cross-Complaining.* You meet your partner's complaint (or criticism) with an immediate complaint of your own, totally ignoring what your partner has said.

• *Repeating Yourself.* Rather than attempting to understand the spouse's point of view, couples who specialize in this technique simply repeat their own position to each other again and again. Both think they are right and that trying to understand the other's perspective is a waste of time.

The first step toward breaking out of defensiveness is to no longer see your partner's words as an attack but as information that is being strongly expressed. Try to understand and empathize with your partner. This is admitted-

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Keys to better loving.

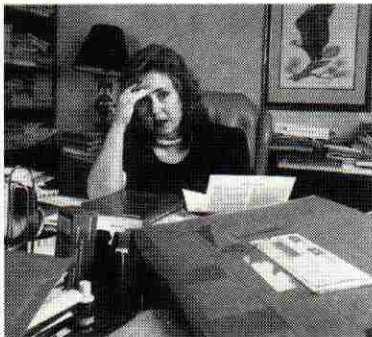
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Marriage

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ly hard to do when you feel under siege, but it is possible and its effects are miraculous. If you are genuinely open and receptive when your partner is expecting a defensive response, he or she is less likely to criticize you or react contemptuously when disagreements arise.

THE FOURTH HORSEMAN: STONEWALLING

Exhausted and overwhelmed by Pamela's attacks, Eric eventually stopped responding, even defensively, to her accusations. Their marriage went from being marred by poor communication to being virtually destroyed by none. Once Eric stopped listening to Pamela, their relationship became extraordinarily difficult to repair. Instead of arguing about specific issues, every confrontation degenerated into Pamela screaming at Eric that he was shutting her out: "You never say anything. You just sit there. It's like talking to a brick wall."

Stonewalling often happens while a couple is in the process of talking things out. The stonewaller just removes himself by turning into a stone wall. Usually someone who is listening reacts to what the speaker is saying, looks at the speaker, and says things like "Uh huh" or "Hmmm" to indicate he is tracking. But the stonewaller abandons these messages, replacing them with stony silence.

Stonewallers do not seem to realize

that it is a very powerful act: It conveys disapproval, icy distance, and smugness. It is very upsetting to speak to a stonewalling listener. This is especially true when a man stonewalls a woman. Most men don't get physiologically aroused when their wives stonewall them, but wives' heart rates go up dramatically when their husbands stonewall them.

The fourth horseman need not mark the end of a relationship. But if your interactions have deteriorated to this extent you are at great risk of catapulting even farther down the marital cascade—becoming so overwhelmed by the negativity in your relationship that you end up divorced, separated, or living lonely, parallel lives in the same home. Once the fourth horseman becomes a regular resident, it takes a good deal of hard work and soul-searching to save the marriage.

The four horsemen are not the end of the line. It is only after they turn a relationship sour that the ultimate danger arises: Partners seize on powerful thoughts and beliefs about their spouse that cement their negativity. Only if these inner thoughts go unchallenged are you likely to topple down the final marital cascade, one that leads to distance and isolation. However, if you learn to recognize what is happening to your once-happy marriage, you can still develop the tools you need to regain control of it. ■

—Excerpted from Why Marriages Succeed or Fail by John Gottman, Ph.D., with Nan Silver. Copyright © 1994 by John Gottman. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster.

Repairing the Damage

Fortunately, in most relationships, there are ways of fixing things. I call these "repair mechanisms." Often, they are needed most when people are frustrated and angry, so they are said with some irritation or hurt, or even accompanied by an insult or threat. But they are repair mechanisms nonetheless.

Happily married couples use certain phrases and actions during an argument that prevent negativity from spiraling out of control. In effect, these conciliatory gestures act as a glue that helps to hold the marriage together during tense times.

1. Try to make comments about the communication process itself, such as "Please let me finish," or "We're getting off the topic," or "That hurt my feelings."
2. Comment on what's happening while it's taking place, not afterward.
3. Remind your partner that you admire and empathize with them despite the conflict.
4. Use phrases such as "Yes, I see," "Uh huh," or "Go on." These are little psychological strokes at which stable couples are masters.