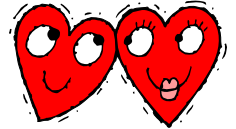




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WHAT MAKES LOVE LAST?

- John M Gottman, PH.D.



My old friends Karen and Bill, married since 1955, recently celebrated another anniversary. "I wore the same nightgown I wore on our wedding night," confessed Karen to me over the phone. "Just as I have every anniversary for thirty-nine years."

"I wore pyjamas on our wedding night," offered Bill. "But last night I didn't wear nothin'." They laughed, and even over three thousand miles of telephone wire I felt the strength of their love for one another.

Long-lasting marriages like Bill's and Karen's are becoming increasingly rare. Not only do more than 50 percent of all first marriages in North America end in divorce (make that 60 percent for repeat attempts), but fewer people are even bothering to tie the slippery knot in the first place.

But even while millions of couples march down the aisle only to pass through the therapist's office or into divorce court, a quiet revolution is taking place when it comes to understanding how long-term love really works. Inside the laboratories of the Family Formation Project at the University of Washington in Seattle - affectionately dubbed the Love Lab - research psychologists are putting our most cherished relationship theories under the scientific microscope. What they're discovering is that much of what we regard as conventional wisdom is simply wrong.

What Love Lab's head, John Gottman, an award-winning research psychologist trained both as a therapist and a mathematician, and his colleagues have discovered - and summarized for popular audiences in a new book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (Simon and Schuster) - is mind-boggling in its very simplicity. His conclusion: couples who stay together are ... well ... *nice* to each other more often than not. "Satisfied couples", claims Gottman, "maintained a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative moments" in their relationship. Couples heading for divorce, on the other hand, allow that ratio to slip below one-to-one.

If it's hard to believe that the longevity of your relationship depends primarily on you being five times as nice as you are nasty to each other, some of Gottman's other conclusions may be even more surprising.

For example:

- ▶ Wildly explosive relationships that vacillate between heated arguments and passionate reconciliations can be as happy - and long-lasting - as those that seem more emotionally stable. They may even be more exciting and intimate.
- ▶ Emotionally inexpressive marriages, which may seem like repressed volcanoes destined to explode, are actually very successful - so long as the couple maintains that five-to-one ratio in what they do express to each other. In fact, too much emotional catharsis among such couples can "scare the hell out of them", says Gottman.
- ▶ Couples who start out complaining about each other have some of the most stable marriages over time, while those who don't fight early on are more likely to hit the rocky shoals of divorce.
- ▶ Fighting, whether rare or frequent, is sometimes the healthiest thing a couple can do for

their relationship. In fact, blunt anger, appropriately expressed, seems to immunize marriages against deterioration.



- ▶ Men who do housework are likely to have happier marriages, greater physical health, even better sex lives than men who don't. (This piece of news alone could cause a run on aprons.)
- ▶ Women might become physically sick because of an unresponsive or emotionally withdrawn husband.



Successful marriages come in not one but three different varieties, largely determined by how a couple handles their inevitable disagreements. Gottman calls these three types of stable marriages *validating*, *volatile*, and *conflict-avoiding*.

Validating couples are what most people have in mind when they think of a "good marriage". Even when these couples don't agree, they still let their partner know that they consider his or her options and emotions valid. They compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise. And when they fight, they know how to listen, acknowledge their differences, and negotiate agreement without screaming at each other.

Volatile couples, in contrast to validating ones, thrive on unfiltered emotional intensity. Their relationships are full of angry growls and passionate sighs, sudden ruptures and romantic reconciliations. They may fight bitterly (and even unfairly), and they may seem destined for divorce to anyone watching them squabble. But Gottman's data indicates that this pessimism is often misplaced. These couples will stay together if for every nasty swipe, there are five caresses. In fact, the passion and relish with which they fight seems to fuel their positive interactions even more. Such couples are more romantic and affectionate than most - but they are also more vulnerable to a decay in that all-important five-to-one ratio (and at their worst, to violence). Trying to change the style of their relationship not only isn't necessary, Gottman says, it probably won't work.

Conflict-avoiding couples, the third type of stable marriage, may not necessarily benefit from an increase in their emotional expression. Gottman likens such unions to "the placid waters of a summer lake," where neither partner wants to make waves. They keep the peace and minimize arguments by constantly agreeing to disagree. In these relationships, solving a problem usually means ignoring the difference, one partner agreeing to act more like the other ... or most often just letting time take its course. The universal five-to-one ratio must still be present for the couple to stay together, but it gets translated into a much smaller number of swipes and caresses (which are also less intensely expressed). This restrained style may seem stifling to some, but the couple themselves can experience it as a peaceful contentment.

Things get more complicated when the marriage is "mixed" - when, say, a volatile person marries someone who prefers to minimize conflict. But even in these cases, it may be possible to borrow from each marital style and create a viable mixed style. The most difficult hurdle faced by couples with incompatible fighting styles lies in confronting that core difference and negotiating which style (or combination of styles) they will use. If they can't resolve that primary conflict, it may be impossible to tip the overall balance of their relational life in the direction of five-to-one.

The important thing here is to find a compatible fighting style - not to stop fighting altogether. Gottman is convinced that the "one" in that ratio is just as important as the "five". What may lead to temporary misery in a marriage - disagreement and anger - may be healthy for it in the long run.

Couples who never disagree at all may start out happier than others, but without some conflict to resolve their differences, their marriages may soon veer toward divorce. Even the most stable marriages of any style can fall apart, with the use of a dangerous quartet of behaviours. These Four

Destructive Behaviours are:

- ▶ **Criticism:** "attacking someone's personality or character" rather than making some specific complaint about his or her behaviour. The difference between saying, say, "I wish you had taken care of that bill" (a healthy and specific complaint) and "You never get the bills paid on time!" (a generalizing and blaming attack) is very significant to the listener. Criticism often engenders criticism in return and sets the stage for the second destructive behaviour.
- ▶ **Contempt:** What separates contempt from criticism is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. Negative thoughts about the other come out in subtle put-downs, hostile jokes, mocking facial expressions, and name-calling ("You are such an idiot around money"). By now the positive qualities that attracted you to this person seem long ago and far away, and instead of trying to build intimacy, you're ushering in the third destructive behaviour.
- ▶ **Defensiveness:** comes on the heels of contempt as a seemingly reasonable response to attack - but it only makes things worse. By denying responsibility, making excuses, whining, tossing back counter-attacks, and other strategies ("How come I'm the one who always pays the bills?!"), you just accelerate your speed down river. Gottman also warns that it's possible to skip straight to the third destructive behaviour by being oversensitive about legitimate complaints.
- ▶ **Stonewalling:** Once this fourth destructive behaviour shows up, things are looking bleak. Stonewallers simply stop communicating, refusing to respond even in self-defense. Of course, all couples use these behaviours once in a while. But when a partner habitually shuts down and withdraws, the final rapids of negativity can quickly propel the marriage through whirlpools of hopelessness, isolation, and loneliness over the waterfall of divorce. With the arrival of the fourth destructive behaviour, one or both partners is thinking negative thoughts about his or her counterpart most of the time, and the couple's minds - as well as their bodies - are in a perpetual state of defensive red alert.

The stress of conflict eventually sends blood pressure, heart rate, and adrenaline into the red zone - a phenomenon Gottman calls *flooding*. "The body of someone who feels flooded", he writes, "is a confused jumble of signals. It may be hard to breathe.... Muscles tense up and stay tensed. The heart beats fast, and it may seem to beat harder." Emotionally, the flooded person may feel a range of emotions, from fear to anger to confusion.

The bottom line is that flooding is physically uncomfortable, and stonewalling becomes an attempt to escape that discomfort. When flooding becomes chronic, stonewalling can become chronic, too. Eighty-five percent of the time the stonewaller (among heterosexual couples) is the man. The reason for this gender discrepancy is one of many physiological phenomena that Gottman sees as critical to understanding why marriages go sour, and what people can do to fix them.

Though flooding happens to both men and women, it affects men more quickly, more intensely, and for a longer period of time. "Men tend to have shorter fuses and longer-lasting explosions than women," says Gottman. Numerous observations in the laboratory have shown that it often takes mere criticism to set men off, whereas women require something at least on the level of contempt. The reasons for this are left to speculation. "Probably this difference in wiring had evolutionary survival benefits," Gottman conjectures. An added sensitivity to threats may have kept males alert and ready to repel attacks on their families, he suggests, while women calmed down more quickly so they could soothe the children.

Whatever its origin, this ancient biological difference creates havoc in contemporary male-female relationships. Men's bodily sensitivity translates into greater physical discomfort during conflict. In short, arguing hurts. The result: Men are more likely to withdraw emotionally when their bodies are telling

them they're upset. Meanwhile, when men withdraw, women get upset, and they pursue (the issue) - which gets men more upset.

Here is where physiology meets sociology. Men, says Gottman, need to rely on physiological cues to know how they're feeling. Women, in contrast, rely on social cues, such as what's happening in the conversation.

In addition, men are trained since early childhood not to build intimacy with others, while women are given intense schooling on the subject from an equally early age. Socially, the genders are almost totally segregated (in terms of their own choices of friendships and playmates) from age seven until early adulthood. Indeed, it would seem that cross-gender relationships are set up to fail. "In fact," Gottman writes, "our upbringing couldn't be a worse training ground for a successful marriage."

Married couples who routinely use the four Destructive Behaviours face enormous physical and psychological consequences. Gottman's studies show that chronic flooding and negativity not only make such couples more likely to get sick, they also make it very difficult for couples to change how they relate. When your heart is beating rapidly and your veins are constricting in your arms and legs (another evolutionary stress response), it's hard to think fresh, clear thoughts about how you're communicating. Nor can the brain process new information very well. Instead, a flooded person relies on "over-learned responses" - old relationship habits that probably just fan the flames.

Chronic flooding short-circuits a couple's basic listening and empathy skills, and it undermines the one thing that can change the four Destructive Behaviours: the **REPAIR ATTEMPT**.



- Repair attempts are a kind of "meta-communication" - a way of talking about how you're communicating with each other. "Can we please stay on the subject?" "That was a rude thing to say." "We're not talking about your father!" "I don't think you're listening to me." Such statements, even when delivered in a grouchy or complaining tone, are efforts to interrupt the cycle of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling and to bring the conversation back on track.
- In stable relationships, the other person will respond favourably: 'Alright, alright. Finish.' The agreement isn't made very nicely. But it does stop the person. They listen, they accept the repair attempt, and they actually change the way they're relating.
- Repair attempts are "really critical", says Gottman, because "everybody screws up." Everybody gets irritated, defensive, contemptuous. People insult one another, especially their spouses. Repair attempts are a way of saying "we've got to fix this before it slides any deeper into the morass." Even people in bad marriages make repair attempts; the problem is, they get ignored.
- Training people to receive repair attempts favourably - even in the middle of a heated argument - is one of the new frontiers in relationship therapy. According to Gottman, "Even when things are going badly, you've got to focus not on the negativity but on the repair attempt. That's what couples do in happy marriages." He's convinced that such skills can be taught: One colleague has even devised a set of flash cards with a variety of repair attempts on them, ranging from "I know I've been a terrible jerk, but can we take this from the top?" to "I'm really too upset to listen right now." Even in midtempest, couples can use the cards to practice giving, and receiving, messages about how they're communicating.

Breaking the Destructive Behaviour cycle is critical because the more time couples spend in that negative perceptual state, the more likely they are to start making long-lasting attributions about this marriage as being negative. Such couples begin rewriting the story of how they met, fell in love, made commitments. Warm memories about how "we were so crazy about each other" get replaced with "I was *crazy* to marry him/her." And once the story of the marriage has been infected with negativity, the motivation to work on its repair declines. Divorce becomes much more likely (and predictable - consider

that 94 percent accuracy rate in the oral history study).

Of course, not all relationships can, or should, be saved. Some couples are trapped in violent relationships, which "are in a class by themselves." Others may suffer a fundamental difference in their preferred style - validating, volatile, or conflict-avoiding - that leaves them stuck in chronic flooding. With hard work, some of these marriages can be saved; trying to save others, however, may do more harm than good.

In the end, the hope for repairing even a broken marriage is to be found, as usual, in the courage and effort people are willing to invest in their own growth and change. "The hardest thing to do," says Gottman, "is to get back the fundamentals that really make you happy." Couples who fail to do this allow the Four Destructive Behaviours to carry them far from the fundamentals of affection, humour, appreciation, and respect. Couples who succeed cultivate these qualities like gardeners. They also cultivate an affirming story of their lives together, understanding that that is the soil from which everything else grows.

The work may be a continuous challenge, but the harvest, as my long-married friends Bill and Karen would say, is an enormous blessing: the joy in being truly known and loved, and in knowing how to love.

Four Keys to a Happy Relationship

Despite all his sophisticated analysis of how relationships work (and don't work), researcher John Gottman's advice to the lovelorn and fight-torn is really quite simple.

Learn to Calm Down.

This will cut down on the flooding response that makes further communication so difficult. "The most brilliant and philosophically subtle therapy in the world will have no impact on a couple not grounded in their own bodies to hear it," he says. Once couples are calm enough, suggests Gottman, they can work on three other basic "keys" to improving their relationship.

Learn to Speak and Listen Non-defensively.

This is tough, Gottman admits, but defensiveness is a very dangerous response, and it needs to be interrupted. One of the most powerful things you can do - in addition to working toward the ideal of listening with empathy and speaking without blame, - is to "reintroduce praise and admiration into your relationship." A little appreciation goes a long way toward changing the chemistry between people.

Validate Your Partner.

Validation involves "putting yourself in your partner's shoes and imagining his or her emotional state." Let your partner know that you understand how he or she feels, and why, even if you don't agree. You can also show validation by acknowledging your partner's point of view, accepting appropriate responsibility, and apologizing when you're clearly wrong. If this still seems too much of a stretch, at least let your partner know that you're *trying* to understand, even if you're finding it hard.

Practice, Practice, Practice.

Gottman calls this "over-learning", doing something so many times that it becomes second nature. The goal is to be able to calm yourself down, communicate nondefensively, and validate your partner automatically - even in the heat of an argument.