

Making Long-Term Relationships Last: A Secret Weapon against Ongoing Conflict

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John Gottman is a nationally-known researcher who has studied the behavior of married couples since 1972. He has conducted research on the relationship styles of over 650 couples and tracked the outcome of their marriages for up to 14 years. One of his chief findings is that “successful conflict resolution isn’t what makes marriages succeed” (1999, p. 11). Based on his research, it’s apparent that the secret weapon, which reduces the negative effects of distress in long-term committed relationships, is the presence, cultivation, and maintenance of a *friendship* between partners. Partners who feel a mutual respect for each other and enjoy each other’s company have longer lasting more satisfying relationships. These folks still have conflicts! It’s just that the conflicts do not escalate to the point of destruction.

Gottman’s (1999, 2006) research led him to identify four behavioral patterns that lead to divorce and separation. He calls them “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” namely: 1) Criticism, 2) Contempt, 3) Defensiveness, and 4) Stonewalling. *Criticism* is an attack on your partner’s character or personality. *Contempt* is expressed through sarcasm and cynicism and fosters more conflict. *Defensiveness* is really a way to continue to blame your partner and avoid apologizing for your own mistakes. Lastly, *stonewalling* is purposely ignoring your partner by acting like you don’t care. If you see these qualities in yourself or your relationship, sound the alarm! It’s time to rebuild the friendship that you have or once had with your partner.

According to Gottman (1999) the way to enhance your friendship with your partner is to: 1) Enhance your love maps (use your knowledge of your life together to rekindle a connection), 2) Nurture your fondness and admiration for each other, 3) Turn towards each other rather than away, 4) Let your partner influence you, 5) Solve your solvable problems, 6) Overcome gridlock, and 7) Create shared meaning. According to Gottman’s research (1999), applying these principles can increase the stability and satisfaction of your committed relationship. **A basic step that you can take now** is to recognize and respond to *repair attempts* that are offered by your partner. If you’ve had an argument and your partner offers a kind gesture or remark, accept it! These attempts at repair can go a long way towards strengthening a relationship that is in peril.

If you would like help renewing or rebuilding your friendship with your partner, you might also consider counseling. *The UCSB Hosford Counseling & Psychological Services Clinic* offers low-cost individual, couples, child, and family therapy to members of the local community. For more information call, 893-8064 or go to our website at <http://www.education.ucsb.edu/ccsp/hosford.html>.

References

Gottman, J.M. & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. NY: Random House.

Gottman, J.M., & Gottman, J.S. (2006). *Ten lessons to transform your marriage*. NY: Crown Publishers.