



Building Strong Relationships

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

John Gottman studies married couples. He probably knows more about marriage than any other researcher in the United States. After a one-hour interview with a pair of newlyweds, he can predict with great accuracy whether they'll still be together in five years.

How does he do it?

He evaluates how couples communicate. He has identified a few key factors that can make or break the relationship. More importantly, he has found that couples who pay attention to these factors can actually change their relationship and improve their chances of staying together for the long haul. Through the words we use with one another, we influence behavior. What we say has a powerful impact.

How you talk to your partner, and how he or she talks to you, reveals a lot about your relationship. Positive comments help to keep relationships alive while negative comments spell trouble.

The more negative comments between partners in a relationship, the greater the threat to the relationship. Gottman uses the analogy of banking and finances. He views any positive comment between partners as a deposit in the bank and any negative comment as a withdrawal. Positive comments help to build your funds and provide security. Ongoing negative comments create a constant draw on your account. No relationship can continue very long on deficit financing.

In his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman reveals various problems couples might have and what they can do to solve them. He also offers ways to make good relationships even better.

He notes first and foremost that if there's violence or substance abuse in a relationship, these problems take priority. Couples must deal with these before they can work on the finer points of their relationship.

So what are the finer points? How can partners improve the way they talk with each other?

Improving Relationships

As a starting point, take a look at the negative comments made by each partner in the relationship. How many harsh statements do you say to each other? Gottman has classified these harsh statements into four categories. He calls them the four horsemen:

- 1) Criticism – This negative comment personalizes a complaint. A complaint is a behavioral description of the problem such as, “You haven't been doing any dishes this week.” This becomes a criticism when you say, “You are really lazy! You haven't been doing any dishes.”

- 2) Contempt – This is a put-down of the other person. You show contempt by adding a negative emotion. Example: “You are really lazy! You haven’t been doing any dishes. The way you are really disgusts me!”
- 3) Defensiveness – This is a reaction, in kind, to criticism or contempt. Example: “Oh shut up! You’re much lazier than me. When’s the last time you picked up after yourself in the living room? I hate that! You’re such a slob.”
- 4) Withdrawal – One partner turns away from the other, often after a period of criticism, contempt, and defensiveness. In this case the withdrawing partner believes it’s better to be apart than to endure the fighting. A planned withdrawal for cooling down is OK, but when there is no attempt to get back together later to work on the issues – that’s a problem.

These four harsh statements often evoke strong negative responses. This becomes a problem in itself as the pattern—one negative response after another—can be hard to break.

But for marriages to be successful, this pattern must be broken. What people can do, Gottman says, is begin making more “repair attempts.” Every time we hear a harsh comment from our partner, we have the option of responding harshly back or attempting to “repair” the situation.

Instead of saying, “You lazy bum. You haven’t been doing any dishes. The way you are really disgusts me!” you can say, “I am concerned that the dirty dishes are piling up, is there a problem?” This is much less likely to provoke an angry response. Even if the response is a lame excuse, you are still talking about it rather than fighting about it, so you can still focus on the issue of getting the dishes washed as opposed to getting sidetracked into a fight that leaves each of you unhappy.

In his extensive research, Gottman has found that partners in successful marriages routinely make repair attempts. They make enough repair attempts to keep things on a friendly basis.

So successful repair attempts help couples to maintain their friendship. In fact, this is the secret to successful relationships. “The simple truth,” says Gottman, “is that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship... Friendship is the foundation of the love.”

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