



“Happily Ever After” Doesn’t Simply Happen – Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

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For most of us, the most important key to happiness is achieving **closeness** with at least one other person. We all want someone to journey with through life in a committed relationship.

But as our ever-increasing rates of committed relationship failures and increasing rates of loneliness evidence, being close is easier said than done. Ironically, many clients coming to my counselling practice share with me their loneliness, despite living in a committed relationship, something I have also felt. I would argue that success doesn’t come from how long we stay together, but what we do when we are together.

“Happily ever after” doesn't simply happen and good relationships are no accident. So how do we nurture closeness in our relationship?

Dr. John Gottman and Nan Silver, in their book *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*, combine research and practical applications for creating long lasting, fulfilling committed relationships. Their principles stem from decades of solid longitudinal studies on couples. Applying their principles takes practice but can be pivotal to creating a healthy partnership.

I became a Gottman Institute trained couples therapist because I was so impressed with their deep 40-year research base, including their innovative campus ‘Love Lab’ at Washington University. I learnt to teach practical skills needed by couples to nurture closeness in their relationship – communication, trust, respect, and conflict skills.

The Gottman Method can predict divorce with 91% accuracy. Perhaps surprisingly, Gottman and Silver’s research found that every couple has “irreconcilable differences”, which has often been used as **the** code for divorce. It also found that 69% of conflict in our partner relationships centres around perpetual problems based on lasting differences between a couple that they’ll never likely resolve. This is common for ALL couples, and doesn’t change if you change partners. So, to have a successful partner relationship we would be wise to learn how to navigate these differences.

This is what Gottman trained therapists like myself teach couples to do - how to navigate these many natural differences between two adults. Differences like genes, personality, culture, family, values, life experiences, past traumas, beliefs, needs, which form the imprint of each person’s identity, can often lead partners into gridlocked conflict. With training, couples can learn skills that enable them to have a successful dialogue about, navigate through, and value and welcome these differences.

When couples are in long-term relationships, including marriages, it's very common for romance to wear off. Often, it's hard to pinpoint exactly what or how to fix it. John Gottman researched hundreds of couples over more than a decade, trying to discover the common behaviours that interfered with affection, love, and gratitude in each pair. Combining the research with practical applications, Gottman identified the seven principles of a healthy marriage – and how you can turn resentment and despair into renewed love and commitment.

Gottman argues that the basis for a happy marriage is a deep friendship with mutual respect and a positive attitude. He also emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence in couples. As the book title evidences, Gottman details seven key principles for couples to improve their marriage.

1. Share Love Maps

A “love map” is a deep understanding of your partner’s inner world and history. It means knowing what makes them tick, what makes them happy, what they like, what happened in their past, and what they want for the future.

Gottman’s research indicates that developing love maps for each other is a crucial part of a healthy and mutually fulfilling relationship and can increase connection and stimulate care for each other.

So, how well do you ‘really’ know your partner? Test each other by asking these questions.

- What stresses are facing your partner in the immediate future?
- Describe in detail your partner’s day – today and yesterday.
- What are your partner’s top two dreams for the future?
- Who is your partner’s favourite relative?
- What is your partner’s biggest fear?
- What makes your partner feel most competent?

Enriching your love maps is not hard; it just takes a little honest conversation. The Gottman Method provide exercises that help partners to enhance their love maps, to develop a better understanding of each other and build a deeper connection.

2. Nurture Your Fondness And Admiration

Relationships start in friendship but it is essential to keep romance alive by showing affection – and showing it often. This demonstrates care for and affinity with your partner, based on an inner belief that they’re worthy of respect. Building your partner up, showing your appreciation for each other, giving enthusiastic compliments, and so on, are good examples of this.

Gottman suggests that a good way of evaluating whether you have fondness and admiration for your partner is to recount the story of your first meeting and courtship. His older research found that the way couples recount their relationship origins story predicted divorce or marital stability with a 94% accuracy. This is because such a story shows whether we respect and admire our partner or resent their impact on our lives. If you ask people who have divorced or left long-term relationships what the main problem was, there’s a good chance that “lack of respect” will be mentioned.

Gottman provides some great ideas for nurturing your relationship.

- Planning date nights together.
- Trying a new hobby or activity together.
- Expressing appreciation for your spouse.
- Complimenting your partner.

Gottman research clearly shows the importance of nurturing a positive relationship mind-set where each partner's positive sentiments or feelings about the relationship and about their partner override negative things that the partner might do.

With a positive mind-set, we tend not to take negativity personally, but see it as indicators that our partner is stressed. We also tend to notice negative events but not take them very seriously. We tend to accurately see the positive things our partner is doing and minimise the negative (perhaps even distorting toward the positive) and seeing even negative interactions and gestures as neutral.

When we have a negative mind-set about our relationship and about our partner this will likely override anything positive our partner might do that is good. We are likely hyper-vigilant for put downs; we tend not to notice positive events. We tend to distort positive events and see them as neutral or sometimes even as negative, and we tend to minimise the positives and maximise the negatives in our relationship. We might even re-write history about our relationship's beginnings and important events. This is not something that one chooses, rather it is something that happens to us when the relationship hasn't been going well for a long time.

Gottman and Silver explain that the relationship may no longer be salvageable when relationship positivity, fondness and admiration are lacking. So, if nurturing fondness toward your partner isn't currently a priority, I recommend you seek counselling as soon as you can manage it.

3. Turn Towards Each Other Instead Of Away

In a healthy relationship, partners make bids for each other's attention and make a habit of turning towards these. This is doing things together and showing your partner that they are valued, taking the time to be present, listen and support them rather than avoiding the conversation.

When you reach out to your partner, how does it feel when they push you away? For example, if you tell your partner, "I'm feeling upset," and your partner replies, "I don't have time to talk right now", you might feel isolated or unappreciated. When no space is made for one another, and little effort is made to be present or listen, that is "turning away".

Choosing to purposely and consistently be present in your partner's life lets them know that they can rely on you, enhancing intimacy and trust. This foundation makes it much easier to weather adversity and come out the other side, stronger than before. The Gottman Method can teach couples skills for "turning toward" each other.

4. Let Your Partner Influence You – Create "Team Us"

Letting your partner influence you isn't the same as allowing someone else to control you, but more about communicating and involving your partner in decisions. Allowing someone to have an impact

on you is another form of respect, showing that you value their input and are considering their feelings and opinions. In addition, when one person has all the power in a relationship, it creates an unhealthy hierarchical difference.

In an equal partnership, both partners should have the ability to inform and influence the other, coming to compromises and effectively communicating about big decisions and emotions. Couples are more likely to stay together when they work as a team, including sharing decision-making, both being willing to make decisions, and respecting their partner's decisions.

This doesn't mean you always need to agree on everything – there will always be disagreements now and again. But being able to have calm, productive discussions about such topics will vastly affect how “heard” you feel, and vice versa. Even if you disagree, there are still ways to have calm, rational discussions that show respect toward your significant other.

Couples can strengthen their “Team Us” by learning the Gottman Method.

5. Solve Your Solvable Problems

According to Gottman, in every long-term relationship, there are two types of problems - perpetual problems and solvable problems. Recall the Gottman research found that 69% of conflict in our partner relationships centres around perpetual problems, which are complex and occur because of lasting differences between a couple that they'll never likely resolve. **All** couples have these, so this principle is about realising which problems are solvable problems and finding solutions.

Solvable problems are usually more straightforward, can be tackled directly, and can be remedied with a little bit of effort from both sides. They might be about domestic duties, relatives, children, or sex. There typically isn't any underlying conflict or resentment, only the challenge at hand. It is important to understand that solvable problems for one couple could be perpetual problems for another couple.

Gottman suggests five steps to handle solvable issues.

1. **Soften Your Start-Up** - Start from a calm, respectful place that allows you both to feel heard.
2. **Make And Receive Repair Attempts** - Make actions or comments that keep conflict from escalating, such as like inside jokes or special communication methods.
3. **Calm yourself and each other.** Take a 20-minute break if you need to, and help calm down your partner if they need it.
4. **Compromise** - Find a solution you can both live with, instead of insisting on all-or-nothing.
5. **Tolerate imperfection** - Your partner isn't perfect, and neither are you. Accept each other's flaws and cherish each other anyway.

By choosing to address solvable problems, couples can remove many overwhelming roadblocks and pave the way to less stress and conflict overall. The Gottman Method offers training on de-escalation and communication skills to unravel solvable issues.

6. Overcome Gridlock

Perpetual problems can result in communication gridlock, and feel like “ground-hog day” where a productive resolution about an ongoing problem is impossible and a couple can’t even seem to agree to disagree. But just because you have recurring issues with your partner doesn’t mean you can’t have a thriving marriage. Gottman’s research from 2017 suggests that happy couples who stay together can move from gridlock to dialogue about their perpetual problems not by solving the problem but having a healthy conversation about the situation. First, we have to understand what’s causing the problem.

Gottman believes that unrealized dreams create gridlock, and suggests four steps to overcoming it.

- Try to understand the root of the issue.
- Communicate calmly.
- Identify and express your non-negotiable and flexible areas of the conflict.
- End the discussion on a calm note, expressing thanks and appreciation for your partner.

Identifying gridlock, having faith in your partner’s willingness to cooperate and compromise, and being appreciative of their efforts to do so will go a long way in resolving whatever the underlying issue is.

7. Create Shared Meaning

This principle is about creating a life journey together that is shared and meaningful for both of you.

“Marriage isn’t about just raising kids, splitting chores, and making love. It can also have a spiritual dimension that has to do with creating an inner life together – a culture rich with symbols and rituals, and an appreciation for your roles and goals that link you, that lead you to understand what it means to be part of the family you have become” (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 261).

A committed, long-term relationship is a union of two people – which means your goals, rituals, beliefs, and perspectives should complement each other as well. This extends from small gestures, like planning your partner’s favourite meal after a hard day, to large, lifelong journeys, such as encouraging each other to follow passions and dreams. Sharing these meaningful experiences constantly and consistently builds intimacy and affection for one another, and learning the Gottman Method can facilitate couples to create shared meaning going forward.

Post-Script: What About The “Four Horsemen”?

In addition to learning how to apply the “Seven Principles”, John Gottman also encourages couples to be extra vigilant in looking out for the “Four Horsemen”. These define four common relationship behaviours that often herald the end of a marriage - criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling – and the Gottman Method can help couples to identify and defuse them.

Gottman noted that contempt, where one partner views themselves as better than the other partner, is the highest predictor for divorce. Criticism - verbally attacking a partner's personality or

character – is defined in contrast to complaints, which are a healthy form of communication. Defensiveness he defines as victimising the self to ward off perceived verbal attacks, and it is really a way for a defensive partner to blame the other. Finally, there's stonewalling, which Gottman says is withdrawal from interaction to avoid conflict. Stonewalling often manifests as silent treatment, conveys disapproval, and is an unwillingness to properly communicate during contention.

So, What Now?

Successful relationships don't simply happen; they take a lot of effort!

In *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*, Gottman and Silver have provided us with a roadmap to guide us in our efforts to forge stronger connections with our partners. The rewards of a close and loving committed relationship are well worth it. Sharing our deepest dreams, interests, and desires with another person can be one of the most fulfilling experiences in life, and research clearly shows it also adds many years to our life.

If you think you and your partner could benefit from Gottman Method training or relationship counselling, contact Tony Vickers-Willis, a Level 2 Gottman therapist and Gottman Leader at www.eurekapsychology.com.au, and take the next step in your journey today.