

The Gottman Institute : a research-based approach to relationships

Dr Edwards-Skadowska curated reading/blog

Gottman's groundbreaking ideas about bids were born from his 40-year-long quest to answer one question: What separates the relationship masters from the relationship disasters?

He conducted this research with his colleague Robert Levenson at the University of Washington. He brought couples into an observation facility, dubbed the [Love Lab](#) by the media, and recorded them discussing their relationship. He asked them to share the story of how they met and then to recount a recent fight. He even had some couples spend a week in an apartment decked out with cameras (with their permission) to see how they interacted during everyday moments.

Six years later, the researchers followed up with the couples and divided them into two camps: the masters, couples who were still happily married, and disasters, couples who had either broken up or remained together but were unhappy.

When he studied the tapes of these two types of couples, he looked for differences in the content of their conversations. What did the masters discuss that the disasters didn't?

In his book "[The Relationship Cure](#)", Gottman writes, "But after many months of watching these tapes with my students, it dawned on me. Maybe it's not the depth of intimacy in conversations that matters. Maybe it doesn't even matter whether couples agree or disagree. Maybe the important thing is how these people pay attention to each other, no matter what they're talking about or doing."

Simply put, successful couples are attentive. They listen, and they put their phones down when the other person wants to chat.

This research led Gottman to develop one of the core tenets of his philosophy for building successful relationships: healthy couples constantly make and accept bids to connect.

What's a bid?

Gottman refers to bids as "the fundamental unit of emotional communication." Bids can be small or big, verbal or nonverbal. They're requests to connect. They might take the form of an expression, question, or physical outreach. They can be funny, serious, or sexual in nature.

For example, your partner might say, "Hey, whatever happened with that situation at work with your manager?" or, "Do you want to talk about our plans this weekend?" or simply, "Can you pass the water?"

They could also give you a loving squeeze, pat you affectionately on the head, or tease you with a wink.

Bids are often purposely subtle because people are afraid to be vulnerable and put themselves out there. It's scary to say, "Hey! I want to connect! Pay attention to me!" so instead, we ask a question or tell a story or offer our hand for connection. We hope we'll receive connection in return, but if not, it's less scary than pleading, "Connect with me, please!"

How should I respond to a bid?

There are three ways you can respond to a bid:

1. Turning towards (acknowledging the bid)
2. Turning away (ignoring or missing the bid)
3. Turning against (rejecting the bid in an argumentative or belligerent way)

When your partner reads their email and sighs audibly, they're making a bid. You could turn towards them and ask, "What's wrong?"

Now imagine you're tidying up the kitchen and your partner asks you how your day was. You could pause, look up from what you're doing and respond with details about the challenging phone call you had that day. That's turning towards. You're telling your partner you see and value them.

Turning away from your partner, in the same situation, would be ignoring them or just grunting and continuing what you were doing.

Turning against them takes the form of an attack, such as replying, "Why are you always interrupting me when I'm trying to get things done?"

Why do bids matter?

A tendency to turn towards your partner forms the basis of trust, emotional connection, passion, and a satisfying sex life.

Gottman found a critical difference in how masters and disasters respond to bids for connection. In the Love Lab, masters turned towards each other 86% of the time. Disasters turned towards each other only 33% of the time.

None of us are perfect at accepting all of our partner's bids, but the masters are better at it than the disasters.

Some people think they can put their relationship on ice and then thaw it out with the occasional romantic date night. But relationships are built and maintained with daily attention, not grand gestures.

It was the bids we made and received at dinner in New York, not the fancy dinner itself, that saved my relationship with my boyfriend.

How often should I make bids?

Bid often. Master the art of the tiny moment. Reach out to show you care. Send a good luck message before a meeting. Leave an encouraging note on the fridge. Kiss your partner when they walk in the door—Gottman recommends a kiss that lasts at least six seconds.

Bids can be super short and simple, but they hold great power. The key is to make many bids per day to show your partner you want to connect.

In fact, happy couples bid all the time. Gottman found that at the dinner table, masters bid as many as one hundred times in a ten-minute period, while disasters engaged each other only sixty-five times.

What happens when bids are ignored?

When our partner denies our bids, we internalize the experience. Our brains subconsciously keep track of how many bids are accepted or rejected by our partners. When our partner constantly turns away or against our bids, we begin to feel frustrated. We are more inclined to criticize our partners, which pushes them to be defensive and may result in an argument.

Gottman found when couples break up, it's usually not because of issues like big fights or infidelity. More often, it's a result of the resentment and distance that builds up over time when partners continually turn away from bids for connection.

The lesson here is to make many small bids every day. Pay attention and turn towards your partner's bids. Listen for their sighs and look out for their winks. Make eye contact when they ask you a question. Engage with them when they point something out.