

The Gottman Institute: a research-based approach to relationships

Dr Edwards curated reading/blog for couples therapy

The Magic Relationship Ratio, According to Science

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Whether it’s about not having enough sex, the dirty laundry, or spending too much money, conflict is inevitable in every marriage.

To understand the difference between happy and unhappy couples, Dr. Gottman and Robert Levenson began doing longitudinal studies of couples in the 1970s. They asked couples to solve a conflict in their relationship in 15 minutes, then sat back and watched. After carefully reviewing the tapes and following up with them nine years later, they were able to predict which couples would stay together and which would divorce with over 90% accuracy.

Their discovery was simple. The difference between happy and unhappy couples is the balance between positive and negative interactions during conflict. There is a very specific ratio that makes love last.

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“When the masters of marriage are talking about something important,” Dr. Gottman says, “they may be arguing, but they are also laughing and teasing and there are signs of affection because they have made emotional connections.”

On the other hand, unhappy couples tend to engage in fewer positive interactions to compensate for their escalating negativity. If the positive-to-negative ratio during conflict is 1-to-1 or less, that’s unhealthy and indicates a couple teetering on the edge of divorce.

So what’s considered a negative interaction?

The One Negative Interaction

Examples of negative interactions include another predictor of divorce, The Four Horsemen as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation. While anger is certainly a negative interaction and a natural reaction during conflict, it isn't necessarily damaging to a marriage. Dr. Gottman explains in "Why marriages succeed or fail" that *"anger only has negative effects in marriage if it is expressed along with criticism or contempt, or if it is defensive."*

Negative interactions during conflict include being emotionally dismissive or critical, or becoming defensive. Body language such as eye-rolling can be a powerful negative interaction, and it is important to remember that negativity holds a great deal of emotional power, which is why it takes five positive interactions to overcome any one negative interaction. And these negative interactions happen in healthy marriages, too, but they are quickly repaired and replaced with validation and empathy.

The Five Positive Interactions

Couples who flourish engage in conflict differently than those who eventually break up. Not only do the Masters of marriage start conflict more gently, but they also make repairs in both minor and major ways that highlight the positivity in their relationship. Below is a list of interactions that stable couples regularly use to maintain positivity and closeness.

Be Interested

When your partner complains about something, do you listen? Are you curious about why he or she is so mad? Displaying interest includes asking open-ended questions, as well as more subtle signals such as nods, making eye contact, and timely "uh-huhs" that show how closely you are listening.

Express Affection

Do you hold hands with your partner, offer a romantic kiss, or embrace your partner when greeting them at the end of the day? Expressions of affection can happen in small ways both within and outside of conflict.

Within conflict, displays of physical and verbal affection reduce stress. If you're having a difficult conversation and your partner takes your hand and says, "Gosh, this is hard to talk about. I really love you and I know we can figure this out together," you will likely feel better because their display of affection is bound to reduce tension and bring you closer together.

Demonstrate They Matter

Our motto for making marriage last is “small things often.” The small acts that demonstrate you care are powerful ways to enhance the positivity in your marriage.

Bringing up something that is important to your partner, even when you disagree, demonstrates that you are putting their interests on par with yours and shows your partner that you care about them. And how you treat each other outside of conflict influences how well you’ll handle your inevitable disagreements.

For example, if your partner is having a bad day and you stop to pick up dinner on the way home, you’re showing him that he is on your mind. Those small gestures accumulate over time and will provide a buffer of positivity in your marriage so that when you do enter a conflict, it will be easier to engage in positive interactions that outweigh the negative.

Intentional Appreciation

How you think about your partner influences how you treat them. By focusing on the positives of your marriage such as the good moments from your past and your partner’s admirable traits, you put positive energy into your relationship.

Negativity is bound to enter your thoughts, especially during conflict. Intentionally focusing on the positive will counterbalance any of the moments when you struggle to find something good about your partner.

Now turn your thoughts into action: every time you express your positive thinking and give your partner a verbal compliment, no matter how small, you are strengthening your marriage.

Find Opportunities for Agreement

When couples fight, they focus on the negative parts of the conflict and miss the opportunities for what they agree on. When you seek opportunities for agreement and express yourself accordingly, you are showing that you see your spouse’s viewpoint as valid and that you care about them. An alliance in conflict, even minor, can fundamentally shift how couples fight.

Empathize and Apologize

Empathy is one of the deepest forms of human connection. When you empathize with your spouse, you show that you understand and feel what your partner is feeling, even if you express empathy nonverbally through a facial expression or a physical gesture.

Saying things like, “It makes sense to me that you feel...” will help your partner see that you are on their team. Empathy is a profound connecting skill that all romantic partners can and should improve, and there is no limit to the amount of empathy you can express.

And, if your partner is upset with something you said or did, simply apologize. If you can find a moment during conflict to say "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. That makes me sad," you will provide a positive and empathetic interaction that reinforces your bond.

Accept Your Partner's Perspective

An approach that drastically improves conflict is understanding that each of your perspectives are valid, even if they are opposed to each other.

While you may not agree with your partner's perspective, letting them know that their perspective makes sense will show them that you respect them. One of the best ways to do this is to summarize your spouse's experience during a conflict, even if you disagree. Remember that validation doesn't mean agreement, but it does signal respect.

Make Jokes

Playful teasing, silliness, and finding moments to laugh together can ease tension in a heated conflict. Most couples have inside jokes they only share with each other. This highlights the exclusivity a couple has.

However, a word of caution: remember to find a way to joke around that maintains respect and appreciation for your spouse and that serves to bring you both closer together.