

## 11 Skills That Predict Success In Marriage And Relationships

By Terry Gaspard, MSW, LICSW

What can you do to improve your marriage or relationship when you feel that it's heading for divorce or breakup? While this is a common problem, the solutions are far from ordinary. The good news is that you're in a good position to turn around your relationship since it's usually the person who seeks advice that's motivated to set change in motion.

The number one thing that seems to be breaking up many couples is difficulty bouncing back from a conflict or disagreement in a healthy way. According to Dr. John Gottman, the number one solution to this problem is to get really good at repair skills. He tells [Business Insider](#) that you've got to get back on track after a fight if you don't want issues to fester.

The most common reason why couples develop serious difficulties is because one or both partners withdraw and go into the "silent treatment" mode due to feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment. In a recent landmark study of 14,000 participants conducted by [Schrodt](#), women are usually (but not always) the ones who demand or pursue and men tend to withdraw or distance.

Then what couples tend to do is blame the other person and a distance-pursuer dance follows – which intensifies the pattern. Couples literally report having the same fights over and over again. After a while, you are no longer addressing the issue at hand and it becomes a vicious cycle of negative feelings that never gets resolved.

A typical example is Sam and Kendra, both in their mid forties and married for eleven years. "I've been miserable for some time," complains Kendra. "I feel rejected by Sam emotionally and sexually. I can't remember when the last time was when we had sex or a good laugh." Sam responds: "Kendra loves to criticize me and she's relentless. She keeps talking about leaving, and honestly splitting up may be the best option."

Unfortunately, the common theme in their remarks is focusing on each other's flaws rather than ways they can repair the relationship. Relationship expert [Dr. Harriet Lerner](#) explains that the recipe for failure in a marriage is waiting for the other person to change. Rather than giving up on their relationship, couples need to lean toward each other. She writes, "It's the dissatisfied partner who usually is motivated to change. If you don't take some new action on your own behalf, no one else will do it for you."

While it's natural to want to throw in the towel when your partner becomes distant, reacting in kind furthers the divide between you. Instead, Dr. Lerner recommends that you take responsibility for warming things up and increase positive reinforcement. This can be done by saying things like "You're so thoughtful to clean the kitchen" which highlights their positive qualities and things you admire about them.

Further, practicing what Dr. John Gottman calls [emotional attunement](#) while relaxing together can help you stay connected in spite of your differences. This means "turning toward" one another and showing

empathy rather than “turning away.” [Dr. Gottman](#) recommends a five-to-one ratio of interactions – meaning for every negative interaction, you need five positive ones.

### **11 Skills to promote success in marriage based on the work of [Dr. John Gottman](#) and other experts:**

- 1. Don't criticize your partner.** Have you developed a habit of criticizing your partner? Dr. Gottman reminds us that criticism is damaging to a marriage. Talking about specific issues will reap better results than attacking your partner. For instance, a complaint is: “I was worried when you didn't call me. We agreed that we'd check in when one of us was running late.” Versus a criticism: “You never follow through, you're so selfish.”
- 2. Resolve conflicts skillfully.** Don't put aside resentments that can destroy your relationship. Experiencing conflict is inevitable and couples who strive to avoid it are at risk of developing stagnant relationships. Avoid defensiveness and showing contempt for your partner (rolling your eyes, ridicule, name-calling, sarcasm, etc.).
- 3. Avoid character assassinations and attempt to stay in the present.** Stay focused on the issues at hand. Ask yourself: what am I trying to accomplish? Avoid name-calling and don't attack your partner personally. Remember anger is usually a symptom of underlying hurt, fear, and frustration so keep things in perspective.
- 4. Boost up physical affection.** According to author [Dr. Kory Floyd](#), physical contact releases feel good hormones. Holding hands, hugging, and touching can release oxytocin (the bonding hormone) that reduces pain and causes a calming sensation. Studies show that it's released during sexual orgasm and affectionate touch as well. Physical affection also reduces stress hormones – lowering daily levels of the stress hormone cortisol.
- 5. Spend time with your partner.** Try a variety of activities that bring you both pleasure. Have fun courting your partner and practice flirting with him or her. Don't forget to cuddle on the couch and surprise your partner with a kiss. Even if you're not a touchy-feely person, increasing physical affection can help you to sustain a deep, meaningful bond.
- 6. “Nurture fondness and admiration”:** Dr. John Gottman's principle works like a charm. Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities – even as you grapple with their flaws – and express your positive feelings out loud several times each day. Search for common ground rather than insisting on getting your way when you have a disagreement.
- 7. Communicate honestly about key issues in your relationship.** Be sure to be forthcoming about your concerns. Express thoughts, feelings, and wishes in a respectful way. Resentment can build when couples sweep things under the rug, so be vulnerable and don't bury negative feelings.
- 8. Take responsibility for your part in the conflict or dispute.** One person's ability to do this can change the dynamic of the relationship. Dr.'s [Julie and John Gottman](#) write: “one person's response will literally change the brain waves of the other person.” Apologize to your partner when appropriate. This will validate their feelings and promote forgiveness and allow you both to move on.

9. **Don't allow wounds to fester.** Challenge your beliefs and self-defeating thoughts about holding onto hurt feelings. When we listen to our partner's side of the story and process it briefly with them, we no longer need to hold onto hurt feelings.
10. **Develop a Hurt-Free Zone policy.** This term coined by author [David Akiva](#) refers to a period when criticism is not allowed. Without it, couples usually feel less defensive and feeling so hurt and rejection dissolve. Akiva writes: "Your prime directive right now is to eliminate the most toxic negative communication and reduce intense negative emotions for 3 to 4 weeks."
11. **Practice forgiveness.** Forgiveness isn't the same as condoning the hurt done to you but it will allow you to move on. Try to remember you are on the same team. Accept that people do the best they do and try to be more understanding. This doesn't mean that you accept your partner's hurtful actions. You simply come to a more realistic view and give them less power over you.

It's understandable that you might feel hurt, frustrated, resentful, or rejected if you perceive that your partner has checked out of your relationship. Instead, the next time you have a disagreement with him or her, stop second-guessing their reactions and examine your own responses. Your focus needs to be on working on ways to repair hurt feelings and to get back on track. Breaking the cycle of an unhappy relationship dynamic requires a radical shift in mindset.