

7 Principles of Effective Relationships

1. *Enhance your Love Map*

Love is in the details. That is, happy couples are very much familiar with their partner's world. According to Gottman, these couples have "a richly detailed love map — my term for that part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner's life." You know everything from your partner's favourite movies to what's currently stressing them out to some of their life dreams, and they know yours.

How well do you know your partner's dreams and desires? How well do you know their interests, from favourite films to favourite foods? Do you know your partner as well as his/her best friend?

2. *Nurture Fondness & Admiration*

Happy couples respect each other and have a general positive view of each other. Gottman says that fondness and admiration are two of the most important elements in a satisfying and long-term relationship. If these elements are completely missing, the marriage can't be saved.

Gottman includes a helpful activity to remind couples of the partner they fell in love with called "I appreciate." He suggests readers list three or more of their partner's positive characteristics along with an incident that illustrates each quality. Then read your lists to each other.

Do you have a positive, deep appreciation for your partner? Do you express this?

3. *Turn TOWARD instead of Away during Times of Stress*

Romance isn't a Caribbean cruise, an expensive meal or a lavish gift. Rather, romance lives and thrives in the everyday, little things. According to Gottman, "[Real-life romance] is kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life."

For instance, romance is leaving an encouraging voicemail for your spouse when you know he's having a bad day, Gottman says. Or romance is running late but taking a few minutes to listen to your wife's bad dream and saying that you'll discuss it later (instead of saying "I don't have time").

Gottman acknowledges that this might seem humdrum, but turning toward each other in these ways is the basis for connection and passion. Couples that turn toward each other have more in their "emotional bank account." Gottman says that this account distinguishes happy marriages from miserable ones. Happy couples have more goodwill and positivity stored in their bank accounts, so when rough times hit, their emotional savings cushion conflicts and stressors.

You want your partner to be your confidant.

4. *Let your Partner Influence You*

Happy couples are a team that considers each other's perspective and feelings. They make decisions together and search out common ground. Letting your partner influence you isn't about having one person hold the reins; it's about honoring and respecting both people in the relationship.

Do you make important decisions autonomously? Do you think, decide, and live as a single-person would?

5. *Solve the Solvable Problems*

Gottman says that there are two types of marital problems: conflicts that can be resolved and perpetual problems that can't. It's important for couples to determine which ones are which. Sometimes, though, telling the difference can be tricky. According to Gottman, "One way to identify solvable problems is that they seem less painful, gut-wrenching, or intense than perpetual, gridlocked ones." Solvable problems are situational, and there's no underlying conflict.

Gottman devised a five-step model for resolving these conflicts:

- In step 1, soften your startup, which simply means starting the conversation without criticism or contempt.
- In step 2, make and receive "repair attempts." Gottman defines repair attempts as any action or statement that deescalates tension.
- In step 3, soothe yourself and then your partner. When you feel yourself getting heated during a conversation, let your partner know that you're overwhelmed and take a 20-minute break. (That's how long it takes for your body to calm down.) Then you might try closing your eyes, taking slow, deep breaths, relaxing your muscles and visualizing a calm place. After you've calmed down, you might help soothe your partner. Ask each other what's most comforting and do that.
- In step 4, compromise. The above steps prime couples for compromise because they create positivity, Gottman says. When conflicts arise, it's important to take your partner's thoughts and feelings into consideration. Here, Gottman includes a valuable exercise to help couples find common ground. He suggests that each partner draw two circles: a smaller one inside a larger one. In the smaller circle, make a list of your nonnegotiable points. In the bigger one, make a list of what you can compromise on. Share them with each other and look for common ground. Consider what you agree on, what your common goals and feelings are and how you can accomplish these goals.
- In step 5, remember to be tolerant of each other's faults. Gottman says that compromise is impossible until you can accept your partner's flaws and get over the "if onlies." (You know the ones: "If only he was this" "If only she was that.")

6. *Overcome Gridlock*

Gottman says that the goal with perpetual problems is for couples to “move from gridlock to dialogue.” What usually underlies gridlock is unfulfilled dreams. “Gridlock is a sign that you have dreams for your life that aren’t being addressed or respected by each other,” Gottman writes. Happy couples believe in the importance of helping each other realize their dreams.

So the first step in overcoming gridlock is to determine the dream or dreams that are causing your conflict. The next steps include talking to each other about your dreams, taking a break (since some of these talks can get stressful) and making peace with the problem.

“The goal is to ‘declaw’ the issue, to try to remove the hurt so the problem stops being a source of great pain,” Gottman writes.

What typically underlies or causes conflicts? What causes unfulfilled dreams? Can you clarify and make peace with differences?

7. *Create Shared Meaning*

“Marriage isn’t just about 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 rituals, and an appreciation for your roles and goals that link you, that lead you to understand what it means to be a part of the family you have become,” Gottman says.

What rituals (big and small) do you have to help build a bond with your partner?