

The Busy Couples' Guide To A Very Happy Marriage

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A strong marriage depends on an understanding of unconscious techniques to resolve conflict and draw partners closer together.

The system I have developed has turned around thousands of couples—many on the verge of divorce—to appreciate each other and settle their differences, establishing relationships that satisfy each person's need for healing and wholeness.

The Stages of Love

We all bring unresolved childhood “wounds” to relationships—from emotional repression to fear of abandonment, etc.—that we subconsciously expect our partners to heal. Romantic love grants our wishes as needs are filled willingly. But when romantic love faces away, couples too often shift into a power struggle.

Each pushes ever harder, yet unsuccessfully, to make the mate meet his/her expectations. Mutual failure results in feelings of betrayal, despair and hostility and a breakdown of the partnership.

Couples can struggle for years. Or they can strive for real love, becoming what I call passionate friends, consciously nurturing and caring for one another.

Taking the First Steps

- Close the exits. Many couples avoid marital power struggles because such battles are so demoralizing. When they do, however, the next major step is often divorce or destructive behavior.

Even minor distancing events, such as overwork or a devotion to sports, can drain energy from the relationship.

Helpful: As yourself, *Am I indulging in work, TV, sports, etc, to avoid speeding time with my spouse?* If you answer yes, begin to cut back, say from an evening of TV to one hour a night.

- **Become active listeners so each feels valued.** Marital power struggles generate what I call an attack-defense-

counterattack response, an exchanging of salvos because each spouse resents the other for not meeting his/her needs.

Better: Lower your defenses and only make statements that maintain connection, no matter how disruptive our partner maybe. Keep in mind that you want you and your partner to be passionate friends. To do that, you have to maintain connection. You can do that by learning a three-step process that I call the *couple's dialogue* process. It includes mirroring, validating and empathizing.

- **Mirror your partner's statement.**

Repeat back to your partner what was said to you to be sure that you heard him correctly.

Example: You felt angry and abandoned when I didn't call to say I would be late.

- **Validate your viewpoint.** When you don't want to surrender to your partner by acknowledging what was said, simply recognize the other person's feelings.

Example: I see why you feel my behavior was inconsiderate.

- **Empathize with the feelings.** You need not experience the emotion, only value it.

Example: I can understand that my not calling made you feel abandoned.

Feeling heard—rather than ignored or negated—raises the speaker's energy. The message got through. That leads to an acceptable resolution.

Creating Positive Change

Use these conscious techniques to meet subconscious needs...

- **Combine your desires with your spouse's desires—and develop a vision.**

Write our own list of short sentences describing deeply satisfying, loving relationship.

Examples: Keep ideas in the present tense, such as *we are affectionate with each other...*and positive, such as, *We settle differences peacefully*, rather than *We don't fight*.

Share your lists...mark items in common...and rank all in importance. Then

design a mutual vision, omitting any non-resolvable issues and noting the most difficult changes. Post the list where you both will see it daily, and even read it to each other weekly.

- **Convert your criticism into requests for behavior changes.**

Repetitious, emotional criticisms are disguised statements of your own unmet needs.

Trap: We believe if we inflict pain, the other person will feel so guilty or sorry that we'll get what we want and the attention we need. However, criticism usually produces the opposite result—defensiveness and stubborn resistance to change.

Better: Since every criticism contains a desire, identify your wish and state the behavior you would like instead.

Example: Your partner fills the evening with business calls, leaving you feeling angry and abandoned. The critical voice wants to say, "You are so selfish and tied up in your work that I don't matter. But this will lead to an argument."

Since your true desire is to spend more time together in the evening. The behavior change you need to request is, *Please reschedule business calls for the daytime so that we can spend more time together.*

A partner who feels safe from attack is more willing to meet your needs. Changing a specific behavior, rather than one's total character, is a reachable goal.

Falling in Love Again

Trapped in the marital power struggle, each partner believes that getting one's needs met necessitates putting those needs first.

Helpful: Putting the other's needs first, as you did during romantic love, is the true solution because it establishes a mutually nourishing environment.

However, expecting the other person to anticipate your needs—and feeling betrayed if your partner doesn't—is unrealistic and self-defeating. We must talk about feelings and desires.

Once needs are identified, love and fulfillment should be given unconditionally. Trading favors makes even honest affection seem insincere. Exercises to help each partner fill the other's needs...

- **Employ loving behavior to feel more loving.** Make separate lists of the specific pleasing gestures you would like—sending flowers, reading aloud, etc.

Then agree to provide one another with two or three favors per day—as gifts, not barter—and to acknowledge each gift with an appreciative comment.

- **Enhance caring behavior with unanticipated pleasures.** Make your own catalog of what has pleased your partner in the past, such as theater or sports tickets, a romantic brunch or jewelry. Then randomly surprise your partner with one item a week.

- **Intensify your emotional bond with high-energy fun.** Make separate lists of physical activities, such as dancing, biking, massage and tennis. Combine them into an inventory of acceptable activities. Choose one each week.

A conscious marriage goes through cycles. You may feel you are dealing with the same issues again. Remember that each time you return to them, you bring more understanding and grow closer. ♦



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