

Normal marital hatred is real. Here's what to do about it.

No relationship is perfect. Try to start thinking of yours as an ecosystem that you share with someone else.



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(Chelsea Conrad/iStock/The Washington Post)



Do you know what “normal marital hatred” is? If you’ve been married or in a long-term relationship, then you probably do.

“I’ve been talking about this around the country for decades,” said Terrence Real, a best-selling author and family therapist who offers couples workshops. “Not one person has ever come backstage and said, ‘What do you mean by that?’ Everybody knows what it is.”

Even so, the idea that hating your romantic partner is “normal” may come as a bit of a shock to those who have idealized romantic relationships. One conversation with Real, and you will be cured of any notion that real life looks like a rom-com.

“No one acknowledges the underbelly of relationships,” said Real, author of [“Us: Getting Past You & Me to Build a More Loving Relationship.”](#) “Nobody acknowledges the darkness.”

Relationship experts have tried for years to unlock the mystery of how couples resolve conflict and learn to stay together. John Gottman, a University of Washington marriage researcher, pioneered the study of relationships by recording couples during conflict and monitoring positive and negative words, facial expressions and body language. He calculated that strong relationships have a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions.

Another researcher, retired University of Virginia professor [E. Mavis Hetherington](#), studied 1,400 heterosexual couples over three decades and found a type of marriage most prone to divorce. She called it the pursuer-distancer marriage, in which one person typically presses to solve problems, but the other dismisses the concerns.

Real said he thinks the real problem is that many couples turn conflict into a power struggle, and nobody wins. “In normal circumstances, if you’re unhappy with me, that is not the time for me to talk to you about how unhappy I am with you,” he said. “Everybody gets that wrong.”

So here’s what you should know about normal marital hatred, and what you can do about it.

It’s okay to hate your partner. “There are going to be moments when you look at your partner, and at that moment, there is a part of you that just hates their guts,” Real said. “You’re trapped with this horrible human being. How did you wind up here? What I want to say is, ‘Welcome to marriage. Welcome to long-term relationships.’”

But don’t despair, he said. “The question is: Now what? How do I deal with it?”

Stop idealizing relationships. Real notes that we wrongly celebrate an idealized version of commitment, like that “cute couple” we see at a party who seem to have a perfect relationship.

“Just once at a cocktail party, I wish someone would say: There’s Harry and Shirley. For the first 20 years, they fought like cats and dogs. He actually left her for a year and took up with another woman. Then they managed to work on it and settled down, and now they’re pretty okay. Aren’t they adorable?”

Normal marriages or long-term partnerships are not happy all the time. After four decades of counseling couples, Real has seen that all

relationships follow a consistent cycle: harmony and closeness; disruption; and repair and a return to closeness. “This pattern of closeness, disruption and returning to closeness can play out at the micro level 20 times in the course of one dinner conversation. It can also play out over the macro level over decades,” he said.



(Chelsea Conrad/The Washington Post)

Your relationship is an ecosystem. Real said traditional therapy, which can teach us to assert ourselves, set the record straight, set boundaries and push back, can actually add to the dysfunction of marriages.

He knows people don't always like to hear it, but it's healthier to start thinking of your relationship as an ecosystem where any disruption hurts you just as much or worse than it affects your partner. “Stop thinking like two individuals, and start thinking ecologically,” he said. “Your relationship is your biosphere. You're not above it. You're in it. You breathe it.”

Once you realize that it's in your self-interest to help your partner feel better, it's easier to de-escalate conflict. Save the constructive conversation for later, when you're both open to listening, instead of in the middle of a fight.

“This is not the time to say, ‘Well, let me tell you about all my issues with you!’ Everybody gets that wrong,” Real said. “Put objective reality aside. Enter into your partner's subjective experience with compassion and curiosity. Say, ‘I'm sorry you feel that. Is there anything I could say or do that would help you feel better?’ ”

Real said it can be a tough pill to swallow, especially when you think your partner is in the wrong. But helping your partner get to an emotionally better place is the best way to protect the ecosystem.

Real cautions that this advice is helpful for managing the normal arguments and disruptions that occur in every relationship. It does not apply to abusive situations or relationships in which there is a power imbalance, major psychiatric disorder, addiction or another issue that may require putting your own safety first and seeking professional help.

Learn how to repair. Real said successful couples learn how to talk to each other during and after conflict. Instead of saying, “Don’t talk to me like that,” Real suggests something closer to, “I want to hear what you have to say, so could you speak to me differently so I can hear it?”

“I want both partners to be fully voiced, but you have to do it skillfully,” he said. “People have to learn to speak up for themselves and be loving at the same time. Nobody knows how to do that.”

Discover real intimacy. Real said we all long for a perfect relationship. But real intimacy actually happens when we learn to accept the imperfections of our partner.

“That’s the character of couple-hood,” he said. “You’re clear about your partner’s imperfections, and you feel the pain and frustration of it, but you choose to love them anyway. That’s mature love.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2022/09/23/marriage-relationships-conflict/>

I don’t have my eleven-foot pole with me, so I won’t touch this one!

An old farmer looked at me across the kitchen table once and said “We’ve never considered divorce, but murder many times!” His smiling/glowing wife shot him a look that would have incinerated him right there and then.

We ask too much of the nuclear family and the marital dyad. Before, extended families, real communities, and maybe a God met many psychological, emotional, and relational needs; a variety of figures played important roles. Now, one’s spouse is supposed to be “everything” and inevitably ends up not being “enough” and thereby “family” with children becomes “inadequate” too.

I wonder about someone terming “hatred” in a marriage “normal.” Perhaps this is why I am divorced. Maybe it is also why I am no longer a counsellor. TJB