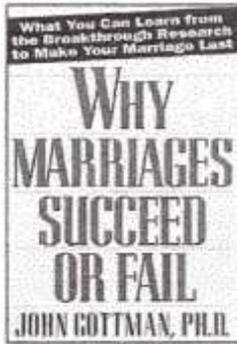


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## Why Marriages Succeed or Fail

... And How You Can Make Yours Last

by John Gottman, Ph.D  
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 240 pages

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### Take-Aways

- A study of more than 2,000 couples revealed why some marriages last while others fail.
- A stable, happy marriage is the result of how a couple resolves conflict.
- Disagreements, arguments and conflict are unavoidable in any marriage.
- Three kinds of marriages work well: "validating, volatile and conflict-avoidant."
- The four signal destructive forces in a relationship are "criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling."
- "Repair mechanisms" are phrases a couple uses to prevent an argument from escalating, such as, "Go on. I'm listening."
- A negative inner dialogue will corrode a marriage.
- "Flooding" occurs when one partner feels overwhelmed by negative emotion.
- Your marriage is in trouble when you "rewrite history," that is, cast the early days of your relationship in a negative light.
- To break the negativity cycle, remain calm, speak nondefensively and validate your partner's emotions. Practice these techniques repeatedly.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	9	6	7

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why the way a couple communicates and resolves conflict is the key to a solid marriage; 2) What four forces can corrode the foundation of your marriage; and 3) How to argue constructively, communicate effectively and combat negativity in your relationship.

### Recommendation

If you and your spouse are screaming at each other over what color to paint the downstairs bathroom, it might be a sign that your marriage is in danger - but then again, it might not. The fact that you argue is not the issue. Problems, conflicts and disagreements are inevitable and unavoidable in life and in a marriage. The key to a stable, healthy marriage is the way you air and resolve conflict. Dr. John Gottman studied hundreds of couples for more than 20 years to identify what, if anything, healthy and failing marriages have in common. Based on his research, the most innovative part of the book, he believes that he can predict with 94% accuracy which couples will stay together and which ones will fall apart. Failing marriages tend to follow the same downward spiral, a path that leads to loneliness, anger, negativity and, eventually, dissolution. Recognizing these destructive communication patterns is the first step back to a healthy relationship. Gottman's research, conclusions and recommendations hold up surprisingly well. *getAbstract* recommends his timeless advice to couples who want to avoid - or address - marital pitfalls.

## Abstract

### "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail"

You walk down the aisle planning to stay married "until death do you part." Yet, the reality is that more than half of first marriages fail and the statistics for second marriages are even worse. Why do so many marriages end up in divorce? Extensive research into this question showed that most ordinary marital advice is based on a combination of speculation and intuition, and that conventional wisdom, even among marriage therapists, is wrong. A study of hundreds of couples over the course of more than 20 years identified several specific behaviors and interactions that signal the future of a marriage. By becoming aware of these patterns, you can alter the course of your relationship.

So, what makes a marriage work? To build your marriage, find a way to resolve conflicts productively. Avoid the four calamities of "criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling." And, try to follow a simple mathematical equation: Married couples must share five positive moments for each negative experience for the relationship to remain strong and stable.

### Marriage Styles

A solid marriage "results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship." Relationships grow through the process of resolving disagreements. Different couples approach conflict different ways, but people in successful marriages tend to work out quarrels by using three types of problem-solving patterns: "validating, conflict-avoidant and volatile."

"I believe an accurate diagnosis of the fault lines in a marriage can help any couple build a stronger union."

"The balance between negativity and positivity seems to be the key dynamic in what amounts to the emotional ecology of every marriage."

"Anger only has negative effects in marriage. It is expressed along with criticism or contempt, or irritability. It is defensive."

"Negativity, a marriage's major predator; can overgrow and eventually kill it. The positive reasons husband and wife bonded in the first place."

"In marital relationships, women tend to be the emotional managers."

"Like a person thrown overboard without first being taught how to swim; the average man is understandably fearful of drowning in the same whirlpool of emotions that a woman easily glides through everyday."

- Validating couples appreciate each other's points of view - Even in the midst of arguments, they can choose their battles rather than fight over every little thing. During disagreements, they hear each other out and endeavor to persuade one another. Usually, they can negotiate compromises. Validating couples value their relationships over their individual needs. They are affectionate and friendly; they enjoy spending time together.
- Volatile couples love a good fight - They argue passionately about anything and everything. Each partner is impatient with the other's point of view. Both husband and wife do everything they can to win an argument. In spite of this, they can usually resolve their differences. Volatile couples enjoy making up as much as they do arguing. Their passions fuel their interactions, and they tend to have warm and dynamic relationships.
- Conflict-avoidant couples try to ignore problems as long as possible- They often "agree to disagree" rather than working things through to a mutually acceptable solution. Yet, standoffs don't seem to bother them. They value their marriages. see the best in each other and tend to look at the bright side of contentious situations. Conflict-avoidant couples feel good in a calm, quiet relationship. They tend to spend time pursuing their own interests, but they are comfortable with this mutual autonomy.

### The Five to One Ratio

Regardless of your marital style, the equation of five positive experiences for every negative one holds true. How do you achieve this "magic ratio"? Try these approaches:

- "Show interest"- Listen attentively to your partner.
- "Be affectionate"- A small tender gesture, like holding hands, can go a long way.
- "Show you care"- Seemingly insignificant things you do daily express your love.
- "Be appreciative"- Take the time to be grateful for your partner's positive attributes. Count your blessings.
- "Be accepting"- You don't always have to agree with your partner, but you do have to respect his or her feelings.

"Share your joy"- Let your partner in on the good things and celebrate.

Understand that love and respect are the pillars of your marriage.

### "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"

Troubled marriages follow a similar pattern, featuring four ruinous ways of interacting that undermine communication. One negative path leads to the next, wreaking increasing levels of harm to the relationship. These "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

Criticism, the first damaging process in a marriage, is defined as "attacking someone's personality or character - rather than a specific behavior - usually with blame." For instance, instead of saying, "Please rinse out your dirty coffee cup and put it in the dishwasher," you say, «You are such a slob! You can't even wash a cup properly." Do not confuse criticism with complaining. Some complaining is actually healthy for a marriage. You express dissatisfaction and hope your partner responds. However, when complaints go unanswered, bad feelings build up; the result is criticism, a destructive behavior.

Contempt is the second horseman. Unresolved issues stealthily permeate other aspects of a relationship. The resulting anger creates a negative thought pattern. Soon, the spouses begin to forget what attracted them to each other in the first place. Contempt is "the

"Formerly  
chilly mood.  
boys  
learn to suppress  
their emotions  
while girls  
learn to express  
and manage  
the complete  
range of feelings."

"Remember that  
it takes some  
effort to protect  
even the happiest  
marriage from  
starling to slide  
down the marital  
rapids. The key  
is managing your  
disagreements  
well."

"Dwelling on what  
is wrong in your  
marriage; it's easy  
to lose sight of  
what is right"

"Letting your  
spouse know  
in so many little  
ways that you  
understand him  
or her is one of  
the most powerful  
tools for healing  
your relationship."

intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner." Your words and actions are meant to hurt. Signs of contempt include «insults and name-calling, hostile humor and mockery." Body language that communicates disgust, such as eye-rolling or sneering, is also contemptuous.

The third destructive horseman is defensiveness. When one partner acts contemptuously, the other naturally becomes defensive. This victim mentality can harm the relationship. Defensiveness takes many forms. In its simplest, it is the act of making excuses for your actions or refusing to accept responsibility. Defensive people assume their partners are judging them. Such "negative mind reading" might go something like this:

- Wife- "You hate when I go out to dinner with my sister. You think I should stay home with the kids."
- Husband - "That's not true .. Thursday is a problem because I have a business dinner."

Some defensive couples fall into one-upmanship. They trade escalating complaints:

- Wife- "You never want to have people over for dinner. You're too lazy."
- Husband - "If you would clean the house once in a while, we could have people over."

The final horseman is stonewalling, which occurs when one partner, usually the man, withdraws completely from an interaction. Often, stonewallers say they are trying to be neutral and keep an argument from escalating. But the message they send is that they don't care enough to engage.

### "Repair Mechanisms"

Couples in healthy marriages use "repair mechanisms" during disagreements to prevent arguments from spinning out of control. Repair mechanisms are usually simple phrases that serve as bridges over the rifts caused by anger and anxiety. Examples include:

"Editing" your snappy comebacks and being responsive instead, for example by saying, "Yes, I see. Go on.."

"Gate-keeping" by staying on point in a dispute, perhaps by noting, "That's off the subject. We're talking about painting the house, not whether we can afford a vacation." Focus your discussion; don't drift.

- Using deliberate peace-making tactics, such as: saying something funny, asking how your spouse is feeling, examining the interaction instead of the issue ("When you say that, it hurts my feelings") and temporarily backing away from a contentious stance.

### Negative Thinking

The way you think about your partner and your marriage can influence its condition. If your internal dialogue constantly emphasizes the negative, it can further the dissolution of your marriage, causing you to enter the "distance and isolation cascade." Distressing thoughts fall into two basic categories: "innocent victimhood and righteous indignation." The innocent victim's thoughts reinforce the feeling that he or she is being attacked and put upon by an unfeeling monster. The righteous indignation script is similar, but it includes contempt. The consequence of negative thinking is feeling "flooded," the sensation that happens when you become so distressed, upset and overwhelmed that you almost shut down. Your heart races, your mouth goes dry and you can no longer function properly.

### The Four Final Stages

Once you have fallen down the distance and isolation cascade, your marriage is on shaky ground. The final four stages in a dying marriage are: 1) "You see your marital

problems as severe"; 2) "Talking things over with your spouse seems useless"; 3) "You start leading parallel lives"; and 4) You are filled with "loneliness." You know your relationship is in its death throes when you begin to "rewrite history" by telling the story of your relationship in a way that is devoid of any happiness, love or joy, even when recounting your courtship and early days together.

"To improve or save your marriage you must remind yourself that your mate's negative qualities do not cancel out all the positives that/ed YOH to fall in love."

"The foundation of a lasting marriage rests on two kinds of bedrock: agreeing with your spouse on which style for handling disagreements you both can live with, and a large dose of positivity."

"Many marriages are salvageable even when they seem hopeless."

### "The Four Keys to Improving Your Marriage"

Arguments do not mean that your marriage is in trouble. Disagreement is inevitable. What matters is how you discuss and solve your disagreements. Use four strategies to break patterns of negativity and take a positive approach to solving problems:

1. **"Calm down"** - You can't resolve your differences productively if your heart is racing and you feel overwhelmed. When things start to get out of hand, ask for a "time out." Taking five to 20 minutes off will calm you enough to allow you to listen better and discuss the subject objectively rather than emotionally. Soothe yourself by taking deep breaths, a short drive, a walk or even a bath. Halt the negative cycle of your thoughts by replacing "distress-maintaining thoughts" with positive ones such as, "He's (she's) frustrated at the moment, but is not always like this," or "He's (she's) not really mad at me. He (she) just had a bad day at work."
2. **"Speak nondefensively"** - Listen and speak to your spouse in a way that does not engender defensiveness but, instead, fosters healthy discussion. "Praise and admiration" are the best weapons against defensiveness. Remind yourself of your spouse's wonderful qualities to help keep negative thoughts at bay. Empathize. Realize that your partner's anger might be an effort to get your attention. Adopt a receptive body posture and an open facial expression. Limit yourself to a specific complaint rather than a multitude of criticisms. Try these approaches:
  - "Remove the blame from your comments."
  - "Say how you feel."
  - "Don't criticize your partner's personality."
  - "Don't insult, mock or use sarcasm."
  - "Be direct."
  - "Don't mind-read."
3. **"Validation"** - Validate your spouse's emotions by looking at the situation from his or her viewpoint. Often, simply empathizing is enough. You don't have to solve the problem. Validation foils criticism, contempt and defensiveness. Validate by taking responsibility for your words and actions, and by apologizing when you are at fault.
4. **"Overlearning"** - Once you learn the techniques of fighting fair, practice them over and over until they become second nature. Your objective is to be able to use these techniques during the heat of a battle instead of resorting to your old, ineffective ways. Try to rediscover your delight in each other.

## About The Author

Marriage and relationship researcher John M. Gottman, Ph.D., conducted the breakthrough study cited in this book. It is partially responsible for modern relationship counseling that emphasizes behavioral modifications. His other books include *The Relationship Cure* and *The Marriage Clinic*. He is a psychology professor emeritus at the University of Washington, where he founded the "love lab."