

"The Golden Dozen: 12 Helpful Hints for a Happier Marriage" by Dr. Gerald Albert



BANNING BLAME BRINGS BLISS

When your marriage partner does something that hurts or offends you, do you react the way most people do? Do you blame? Do you criticize? Do you try to put your partner in the wrong? Do you seek to make your partner feel guilty or ashamed?

Stop and think for a moment. Is your real goal to build a warm, close, loving relationship--or to prove that you're in the right, and your partner is wrong?

Blaming and criticizing, or throwing guilt on the other person, pushes the other person away, causing anger, or defensiveness, or withdrawal--just the opposite of closeness and warmth.

But if you say instead, "I was unhappy about what you did, and I'd like to explain why"...or I'd like to talk about what you said that upset me"...then you work towards correcting the problem without harming the relationship.

Blaming and criticizing are simply taboo, if your real goal is a warm, loving relationship.

CRITICIZING RELATIVES = DISSING YOUR SPOUSE

In today's street jargon, "dissing" means criticizing, or putting down. How do you react when your marriage partner disses your parents--or some other loved relative?

This can be a real hot spot. If you're like most people, you probably get very upset. For psychological reasons that have a lot to do with the way we model ourselves after our parents in childhood, they become almost a part of us, in a certain sense. This may be true of other close relatives, as well. As a result, without fully realizing it, we react to the criticism as if we're being attacked ourselves.

Even if we agree with the criticism, we usually can't help feeling defensive. We get hurt and angry...And when you find fault with your partner's family, your partner likewise feels "dissed." In either case, if it happens often, your marriage takes a body blow.

It helps a great deal if you can both agree to be especially tolerant towards each other's family members. If something very upsetting has occurred because of them, discuss with your partner how--or if--the situation can be changed. (Sometimes it can't.) But don't make your partner feel responsible or blamed for their behavior.

Work with your partner, not against--even when it comes to in-laws!

SMOOTH THE FUR WITH POSITIVE STROKES

Did you know that the number of positive and negative "strokes" you give your marriage partner has a strong effect on the success of your marriage?

Scientific studies have shown that in really successful marriages the partners give each other at least five positive strokes for every negative.

Positive strokes come in many forms. Saying "I love you" is a positive, of course. Commenting favorably on something your partner says, or does, or wears, is a positive.

An unfavorable comment is, obviously, a negative. Looking bored when your partner talks is a negative. Listening attentively is a positive. Praising your partner is clearly a positive. Finding fault, or putting your partner down is a negative.

Accepting your partner's ways and habits is a positive. Seeking change in a gentle and respectful manner can be a positive...while seeking change in a critical or disrespectful manner is a negative.

Just remember: 5 to 1, positives-to-negatives, smooths the fur and helps make your marriage work!

CONSIDERATION PAYS!

Are you aware when you show less concern for the needs of your marriage partner than for those of other people?

This often happens without our realizing it, and it can be a real downer in an otherwise good marriage relationship.

Does your partner complain that you pay too much attention to other people, and not enough to the doings at home? If you heard the same thing said about someone else's marriage, would you think that a change should be made? If so, maybe you should make a change.

Too often it's the easiest thing in the world to take your partner for granted. He or she too easily becomes almost a part of your self. We often don't think we have to give the same concern to pleasing the one at home as we do to others outside. This can lead to the kind of simmering discontent or resentment

It pays to show more consideration at home than anywhere else!

BEING RIGHT CAN SOMETIMES BE WRONG!

Hint # 1 talked about the harm that can result from blaming your partner, as a way of retaliating against a hurt and proving yourself in the right. But let's look at this business of having to be right, as a problem in itself.

Most of us do have a strong need to be seen as right, when anyone disagrees with us. Our whole self-esteem system often seems to hinge on winning the argument. But you have to admit that it is possible to be wrong--even when you're sure you're not.

If you battle mightily to prove that your partner is wrong and you are right--and end up building frustration and resentment at the same time--haven't you indeed won the battle but lost the war?

If your real bottom line is not just being right, but--more important--having a loving, caring relationship, then, keep your partner's feelings in mind, work out compromises, listen sincerely to the other person's side of it--and don't insist on always being right even at times when it doesn't really matter.

It pays to keep your real goal in mind: What will work to make your marriage the best it can be? Hinge your self-esteem on that, not on being right or wrong!

CAN THE PAST HARM THE PRESENT?

How often do you bring up your marriage partner's offending actions from the past when the two of you are having a disagreement?

The more you mention the times your partner has stepped on your toes over the months and years, the more likely you are to spoil your chances of working out a close, loving relationship in the present.

The past can't be changed. Using it to clobber your partner today means you're hanging on to hurts and angers that can only push the two of you apart. Recalling past mistakes may help show how right you've been--but we've already seen how harmful that can be.

When you want something changed for the better, ask for it. Point out why it's important to you in the present. Put the past aside, and aim towards the future, where things can be made better.

That's where you want to go, isn't it?

THE INTENSITY INDEX: A VERY IMPORTANT TOOL

Most of us have trouble keeping things in perspective when we get upset. When we're very hurt or angry, we often seem to wear magnifying glasses *that* make mountains out of molehills. Then we brood or rage over small disturbances as if they were major catastrophes. But there's a psychological tool, the Intensity Index, that you can use to help yourself see things in a balanced way.

First, think of a very minor upset, such as being told that the bus you're waiting for is a minute late. In your mind, give that the lowest number on the scale--a one. Then think of a really bad event, perhaps a nearly fatal accident happening to someone you love. In your mind, give that the highest upset number--a ten.

Using that scale now: Is a failure to take out the garbage, or a slight lateness in preparing dinner, worth more than a two or three on the Intensity Index?

If you keep this Index in mind, and assign a carefully considered Intensity number, from One to Ten, to the things that go wrong in your marriage, you can help yourself react much more calmly and sensibly than ever before!

WHAT'S YOUR ROLE IN YOUR MARRIAGE?

People have surprisingly different views about what's expected of them in marriage. Without thinking about it, most of us usually see our roles pretty much as they were performed by our mothers and fathers--even if sometimes we think very differently from them. This can be a real source of trouble.

If you grew up in a household where fathers and mothers lived by traditional guidelines, you may become very resentful--without knowing why--if your marriage partner expects you to behave in a different way. One frequent problem: Should working husbands and wives share household chores and child care duties equally? Or should even a working wife still be the primary homemaker?

What about control of the family money? Or the decision-making authority--should it be shared equally or not? Conflicting views about these and similar issues often simmer under the surface and grow into serious marital difficulties.

The remedy? Recognize openly that those differences exist--don't bury them! Talk about them directly--and then find compromises you both can live with and accept.

ARE YOU "IN LOVE" WITH YOUR MATE?

Do you have to stay "in love" to have a happy marriage?

Most people do feel "in love" when they marry. They feel romantic towards their partner. They have intense feeling, both sexual and emotional. When the loved one is away, they usually feel a strong yearning to be together.

These emotions are extremely helpful early in marriage, because they help each partner overlook behaviors that might cause friction and disappointment, while they're learning to adjust to each other.

But feelings that intense can almost never be maintained over a long period. In successful marriages, these emotions most often settle gradually into less intense love feelings, based on mutual respect and consideration, on trust, on caring and thoughtfulness--on liking what the other person is and does.

Hollywood taught us for years that the only thing that counted was being "in love". Real life teaches us that success in marriage calls for something more solid and dependable. It calls for willingness to make compromises, avoid blaming, go more than half way, even give more than you get.

It calls for something described as friendship-love. That type of love can last!

MAKE YOUR NEEDS FULLY KNOWN!

Do you ever get annoyed when your marriage partner fails to know what you need without being told?

Husbands and wives often become hurt or offended when their partner fails to notice that some kind of helpful action is needed, and doesn't attend to it.

A husband may run out of shaving cream, and leave the can out of the closet, expecting it to be seen and replaced. The wife may not notice, and neglect to buy a replacement. But he could have specifically asked her to include it in her shopping list...Or a wife may need help in lifting a piece of furniture to clean under it--if she's the one in the family who does the cleaning. But if the husband's role does not include sharing in the cleaning, he may be nearby reading a newspaper, and not offer assistance--which may cause her to snap at him angrily. But she could have asked him to help before she began.

Assuming your partner should know what you want or need, just because it seems obvious to you, is a recipe for trouble in your marriage. When you need or want something, whether it involves a household chore, a phone call that should be made, a sexual preference, anything at all, it's not fair to assume your partner will know your wants.

Even if you think he or she should know--just ask!

BOTTOM LINE THINKING WARDS OFF MISTAKES

Have you ever been so upset in an argument with your spouse that you said or did something actually harmful to your marriage? We're all vulnerable to our emotions. Our feelings influence us much more than we usually like to admit--sometimes without our even knowing it. When they do, we frequently lose sight of the bottom line--the Consequences of our words and actions. And this may do severe damage to that goal we really seek--a close, warm, loving relationship.

For example: If your very busy spouse has failed to bring home something you requested, three days in a row, you can come out with enraged accusations of uncaringness and selfishness-or you can take a look at the bottom line, and recognize that a scolding (even if justified) might drive a stubborn wedge between the two of you.

Instead, you can talk about feeling hurt, even though you recognize it isn't really a big deal, and you'd like to remind your mate of your request one more time. It's likely to work much, much better.

And by the way...Bottom Line Thinking helps not only in marriage relations, but in all other relationships, as well. Every time you make a decision, think about all the consequences--in advance. Try it!

WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT TROUBLE?

When your partner comes to you, wanting to talk about hurtful problems in which you aren't directly involved--perhaps from the workplace, outside relationships or physical illness--how do you usually react?

Do you flinch from sharing your partner's pain? Do you take the attitude: "I have enough problems of my own...You'll have to handle this as best you can"?

Do you become impatient, expressing the feeling: "Why did you let this happen to you? If you'd acted differently, you could have prevented it"?

Or do you put everything else aside, offering your partner comfort and nurturance, providing an emotional shelter where wounds can be healed and strength renewed?

In trouble and pain we find the crucible for both testing the bonds of marriage and sealing any cracks that have formed in its structure.

When your partner turns to you in time of trouble, and you come through with comfort and support, that--to coin a cliché--is what marriage is all about!