

Seven principles For making marriage work

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The anecdotes in this book are based on Dr. Gottman's research. Some of the couples are composites of those who volunteered to take part in his studies. In all cases, names and identifying information have been changed. Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint from After the Honeymoon

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Wile is a genius and the greatest living marital therapist. I am blessed to have been able to exchange ideas with him.

I wish to acknowledge the work of Irvin Yalom and Victor Frankl on existential psychotherapy. Yalom has provided a great faith in the therapeutic process itself and in the human force toward growth. Frankl holds a special place in my heart. He and my beloved cousin Kurt Ladner were both residents and survivors of the Dachau concentration camp. Both found meaning in the context of intense suffering, tyranny, and dehumanization. I hope to bring their existential search for meaning into the marital context. Doing so can turn conflict into a new experience of revealing and honoring life dreams, finding shared meaning, and reaffirming the marital friendship.

I have come to the conclusion that many insightful writers in the marital field are basically correct. I hope my contribution will be to honor them all, adding a bit of precision and integration to the struggle to understand what makes close relationships work.

J.G.

Contents

1 <i>Inside the Seattle Love Lab: The Truth about Happy Marriages</i>	1
2 <i>How I Predict Divorce</i>	25
3 <i>Principle 1: Enhance Your Love Maps</i>	47
4 <i>Principle 2: Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration</i>	61
5 <i>Principle 3: Turn toward Each Other Instead of Away</i>	79
6 <i>Principle 4: Let Your Partner Influence You</i>	99
7 <i>The Two Kinds of Marital Conflict</i>	129
8 <i>Principle 5: Solve Your Solvable Problems</i>	157
9 <i>Coping with Typical Solvable Problems</i>	187
10 <i>Principle 6: Overcome Gridlock</i>	217
11 <i>Principle 7: Create Shared Meaning</i>	243
<i>Afterword: What Now?</i>	259

1

*Inside the Seattle Love Lab:
The Truth about
Happy Marriages*

It's a surprisingly cloudless Seattle morning as newly-weds Mark and Janice Gordon sit down to breakfast. Outside the apartment's picture window, the waters of Mont lake cut a deep-blue swath, while runners jog and geese waddle along the lakeside park. Mark and Janice are enjoying the view as they munch on their French toast and share the Sunday paper. Later Mark will probably switch on the football game while Janice chats over the phone with her mom in St. Louis.

All seems ordinary enough inside this studio apartment--until you notice the three video cameras bolted to the wall, the microphones clipped talk-show style to Mark's and Janice's collars, and the Holter monitors strapped around their chests. Mark and Janice's lovely studio with a view is really not their apartment at all. It's a laboratory at the University of Washington in Seattle, where for sixteen years I have spearheaded the most extensive and innovative research ever into marriage and divorce.

As part of one of these studies, Mark and Janice (as well as forty-nine other randomly selected couples) volunteered to stay overnight in our fabricated apartment, affectionately known as the Love

Lab. Their instructions were to act as naturally as possible, despite my team of scientists observing them from behind the one-way kitchen mirror, the cameras recording their every word and facial expression, and the sensors tracking bodily signs of stress or relaxation, such as how quickly their hearts pound. (To preserve basic privacy, the couples were monitored only from nine a.m. to nine P.M. and never while in the bathroom.) The apartment comes equipped with a fold-out sofa, a working kitchen, a phone, Tv VCR, and CD player. Couples were told to bring their groceries, their newspapers, their laptops, needlepoint, hand weights, even their pets-whatever they would need to experience a typical weekend.

My goal has been nothing more ambitious than to uncover the truth about marriage--to finally answer the questions that have puzzled people for so long: Why is marriage so tough at times? Why do some lifelong relationships click, while others just tick away like a time bomb? And how can you prevent a marriage from going bad--or rescue one that already has?

PREDICTING DIVORCE WITH 91 PERCENT ACCURACY

After years of research I can finally answer these questions. In fact, I am now able to predict whether a couple will stay happily together or lose their way. I can make this prediction after listening to the couple interact in our Love Lab for as little as five minutes! My accuracy rate in these predictions averages 91 percent over three separate studies. In other words, in 91 percent of the cases where I have predicted that a couple's marriage would eventually fail or succeed, time has proven me right. These predictions are not based on my intuition or preconceived notions of what marriage "should" be, but on the data I've accumulated over years of study.

At first you might be tempted to shrug off my research results as just another in a long line of newfangled theories. It's certainly easy to be cynical when someone tells you they've figured out what really makes marriages last and can show you how to rescue or divorce-proof your own. Plenty of people consider themselves to be experts

on marriage--and are more than happy to give you their opinion of how to form a more perfect union.

But that's the key word--opinion. Before the breakthroughs my research provided, point of view was pretty much all that anyone trying to help couples had to go on. And that includes just about every qualified, talented, and well-trained marriage counselor out there. Usually a responsible therapist's approach to helping couples is based on his or her professional training and experience, intuition, family history, perhaps even religious conviction. But the one thing it's not based on is hard scientific evidence. Because until now there really hasn't been any rigorous scientific data about why some marriages succeed and others flop.

For all of the attention my ability to predict divorce has earned me, the most rewarding findings to come out of my studies are the Seven Principles that will prevent a marriage from breaking up.

EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT MARRIAGES

What can make a marriage work is surprisingly simple. Happily married couples aren't smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others. But in their day-to-day lives, they have hit upon a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other (which all couples have) from overwhelming their positive ones. They have what I call an emotionally intelligent marriage.

I can predict whether a couple will divorce after watching and listening to them for just five minutes.

Recently, emotional intelligence has become widely recognized as an important predictor of a child's success later in life. The more in touch with emotions and the better able a child is to understand and get along with others, the sunnier that child's future, whatever his or her academic IQ. The same is true for relationships between spouses. The more emotionally intelligent a couple -- the better able they are to understand, honor, and respect each other and their marriage -- the

more likely that they will indeed live happily ever after. Just as parents can teach their children emotional intelligence, this is also a skill that a couple can be taught. As simple as it sounds, it can keep husband and wife on the positive side of the divorce odds.

WHY SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE?

Speaking of those odds, the divorce statistics remain dire. The chance of a first marriage ending in divorce over a forty-year period is 67 percent. Half of all divorces will occur in the first seven years.

Some studies find the divorce rate for second marriages is as much as 10 percent higher than for first-timers. The chance of getting divorced remains so high that it makes sense for all married couples--including those who are currently satisfied with their relationship--to put extra effort into their marriages to keep them strong.

One of the saddest reasons a marriage dies is that neither spouse recognizes its value until it is too late. Only after the papers have been signed, the furniture divided, and separate apartments rented do the exes realize how much they really gave up when they gave up on each other. Too often a good marriage is taken for granted rather than given the nurturing and respect it deserves and desperately needs. Some people may think that getting divorced or languishing in an unhappy marriage is no big deal--they may even consider it trendy. But there's now plenty of evidence documenting just how harmful this can be for all involved.

Thanks to the work of researchers like Lois Verbrugge and James House, both of the University of Michigan, we now know that an unhappy marriage can increase your chances of getting sick by roughly 35 percent and even shorten your life by an average of four years. The flip side: People who are happily married live longer, healthier lives than either divorced people or those who are unhappily married. Scientists know for certain that these differences exist, but we are not yet sure why.

Part of the answer may simply be that in an unhappy marriage people experience chronic, diffuse physiological arousal—in other words, they feel physically stressed and usually emotionally stressed as well. This puts added wear and tear on the body and mind, which can present itself in any number of physical ailments, including high blood pressure and heart disease, and in a host of psychological ones, including anxiety, depression, suicide, violence, psychosis, homicide, and substance abuse.

Not surprisingly, happily married couples have a far lower rate of such maladies. They also tend to be more health-conscious than others. Researchers theorize that this is because spouses keep after each other to have regular checkups, take medicine, eat nutritiously, and so on.

People who stay married live four years longer than people who don't.

Recently my laboratory uncovered some exciting, preliminary evidence that a good marriage may also keep you healthier by directly benefiting your immune system, which spearheads the body's defenses against illness. Researchers have known for about a decade that divorce can depress the immune system's function. Theoretically this lowering in the system's ability to fight foreign invaders could leave you open to more infectious diseases and cancers. Now we have found that the opposite may also be true. Not only do happily married people avoid this drop in immune function, but their immune systems may even be getting an extra boost.

When we tested the immune system responses of the fifty couples who stayed overnight in the Love Lab, we found a striking difference between those who were very satisfied with their marriages and those whose emotional response to each other was neutral or who were unhappy. Specifically, we used blood samples from each subject to test the response of certain of their white blood cells—the immune system's major defense weapons. In general, happily married men and women showed a greater proliferation of

these white blood cells when exposed to foreign invaders than did the other subjects.

We also tested the effectiveness of other immune system warriors—the natural killer cells, which, true to their name, destroy body cells that have been damaged or altered (such as infected or cancerous ones) and are known to limit the growth of tumor cells. Again, subjects who were satisfied with their marriage had more effective natural killer cells than did the others.

It will take more study before scientists can confirm that this boost in the immune system is one of the mechanisms by which a good marriage benefits your health and longevity. But what's most important is that we know for certain that a good marriage does. In fact, I often think that if fitness buffs spent just 10 percent of their weekly workout time—say, twenty minutes a day—working on their marriage instead of their bodies, they would get three times the health benefits they derive from climbing the Stair-Master!

When a marriage goes sour, husband and wife are not the only ones to suffer—the children do, too. In a study I conducted of sixty-three preschoolers, those being raised in homes where there was great marital hostility had chronically elevated levels of stress hormones compared with the other children studied. We don't know what the long-term repercussions of this stress will be for their health. But we do know that this biological indication of extreme stress was echoed in their behavior. We followed them through age fifteen and found that, compared with other children their age, these kids suffered far more from truancy, depression, peer rejection, behavioral problems (especially aggression), low achievement at school, and even school failure.

One important message of these findings is that it is not wise to stay in a bad marriage for the sake of your children. It is clearly harmful to raise kids in a home that is subsumed by hostility between the parents. A peaceful divorce is better than a warlike marriage. Unfortunately, divorces are rarely peaceful. The mutual hostility between the parents usually continues after the breakup. For that reason, children of divorce often fare just as poorly as those caught in the crossfire of a miserable marriage.

INNOVATIVE RESEARCH, REVOLUTIONARY FINDINGS

When it comes to saving a marriage, the stakes are high for everybody in the family. And yet despite the documented importance of marital satisfaction, the amount of scientifically sound research into keeping marriages stable and happy is shockingly small. When I first began researching marriage in 1972, you could probably have held all of the "good" scientific data on marriage in one hand. By "good" I mean findings that were collected using scientific methods as rigorous as those used by medical science. For example, many studies of marital happiness were conducted solely by having husbands and wives fill out questionnaires. This approach is called the self-report method, and although it has its uses, it is also quite limited. How do you know a wife is happy just because she checks the "happy" box on some form? Women in physically abusive relationships, for example, score very high on questionnaires about marital satisfaction. Only if the woman feels safe and is interviewed one on one does she reveal her agony.

To address this paucity of good research, my colleagues and I have supplemented traditional approaches to studying marriage with many innovative, more extensive methods. We are now following seven hundred couples in seven different studies. We have not just studied newlyweds, but long-term couples who were first assessed while in their forties or sixties. We have also studied couples just becoming parents and couples interacting with their babies, their preschoolers, and their teenagers.

As part of this research, I have interviewed couples about the history of their marriage, their philosophy about marriage, how they viewed their parents' marriages. I have videotaped them talking to each other about how their day went, discussing areas of continuing disagreement in their marriage, and also conversing about joyful topics. And to get a physiological read of how stressed or relaxed they were feeling, I measured their heart rate, blood flow, sweat output, blood pressure, and immune function moment by moment. In all of these studies, I'd play back the tapes to the couples and ask them for an insiders' perspective of what they were thinking and

feeling when, say, their heart rate or blood pressure suddenly surged during a marital discussion. And I've kept track of the couples, checking in with them at least every year to see how their relationship is faring.

So far my colleagues and I are the only researchers to conduct such an exhaustive observation and analysis of married couples. Our data offer the first real glimpse of the inner workings – the anatomy--of marriage. The results of these studies, not my own opinions, form the basis of my Seven Principles for making marriage work. These principles, in turn, are the cornerstones of a remarkably effective short-term therapy for couples that I have developed along with my wife, clinical psychologist Julie Gottman, Ph.D. This therapy, and some briefer workshops that follow the same principles, are intended for couples who find that their marriage is in trouble or just want to ensure it stays strong.

Our approach contrasts dramatically with the standard one offered by most marriage therapists. This is because as my research began to uncover the true story of marriage, I had to throw out some long-hallowed beliefs about marriage and divorce.

WHY MOST MARRIAGE THERAPY FAILS

If you've had or are having troubles in your relationship, you've probably gotten lots of advice. Sometimes it seems like everybody who's ever been married or knows anyone who's ever been married thinks he holds the secret to guaranteeing endless love. But most of these notions, whether intoned by a psychologist on TV or by a wise manicurist at the local mall, are wrong. Many such theories, even those initially espoused by talented theorists, have been long discredited--or deserve to be. But they have become so firmly entrenched in the popular culture that you'd never know it.

Perhaps the biggest myth of all is that communication--and more specifically learning to resolve your conflicts --- is the royal road to romance and an enduring, happy marriage. Whatever a marriage therapist's theoretical orientation, whether you opt for short

term therapy, long-term therapy, or a three-minute radio consultation with your local Frasier, the message you'll get is pretty uniform: Learn to communicate better. The sweeping popularity of this approach is easy to understand. When most couples find themselves in a conflict (whether it gets played out as a short spat, an all-out screaming match, or stony silence), they each gird themselves to win the fight. They become so focused on how hurt they feel, on proving that they're right and their spouse is wrong, or on keeping up a cold shoulder, that the lines of communication between the two may be overcome by static or shut down altogether. So it seems to make sense that calmly and lovingly listening to each other's perspective would lead couples to find compromise solutions and regain their marital composure.

The most common technique recommended for resolving conflict--used in one guise or another by most marital therapists--is called active listening. For example, a therapist might urge you to try some form of the listener-speaker exchange. Let's say Judy is upset that Bob works late most nights. The therapist asks Judy to state her complaints as "I" statements that focus on what she's feeling rather than hurling accusations at Bob. Judy will say, "I feel lonely and overwhelmed when I'm home alone with the kids night after night while you're working late," rather than, "It's so selfish of you to always work late and expect me to take care of the kids by myself."

Then Bob is asked to paraphrase both the content and the feelings of Judy's message, and to check with her if he's got it right. (This shows he is actively listening to her.) He is also asked to validate her feelings--to let her know he considers them legitimate, that he respects and empathizes with her even if he doesn't share her perspective. He might say: "It must be hard for you to watch the kids by yourself when I'm working late." Bob is being asked to suspend judgment, not argue for his point of view, and to respond non-defensively. "I hear you" is a common active-listening buzz word. Thanks to Bill Clinton, "I feel your pain" may now be the most notorious.

By forcing couples to see their differences from each other's perspective, problem solving is supposed to take place without anger.

This approach is often recommended whatever the specific issue—whether your conflict concerns the size of your grocery bill or major differences in your lifelong goals. Conflict resolution is touted not only as a cure-all for troubled marriages but as a tonic that can prevent good marriages from faltering.

Where did this approach come from? The pioneers of marital therapy adapted it from techniques used by the renowned psychotherapist Carl Rogers. For individual psychotherapy Rogerian psychotherapy had its heyday in the 1960s and is still practiced in varying degrees by psychotherapists today. His approach entails responding in a nonjudgmental and accepting manner to all feelings and thoughts the patient expresses. For example, if the patient says, "I just hate my wife, she's such a nagging bitch," the therapist nods and says something like "I hear you saying that your wife nags you and you hate that." The goal is to create an empathetic environment so the patient feels safe exploring his inner thoughts and emotions and confiding in the therapist.

Since marriage is also, ideally, a relationship in which people feel safe being themselves, it might seem to make sense to train couples to practice this sort of unconditional understanding. Conflict resolution is certainly easier if each party expresses empathy for the other's perspective.

The problem is that it doesn't work. A Munich-based marital therapy study conducted by Dr. Kurt Hahlweg and associates found that even after employing active listening techniques the typical couple was still distressed. Those few couples who did benefit relapsed within a year.

The wide range of marital therapies based on conflict resolution share a very high relapse rate. In fact, the best of this type of marital therapy, conducted by Neil Jacobson, Ph.D." of the University of Washington, has only a 35 percent success rate. In other words, his own studies show that only 35 percent of couples see a meaningful improvement in their marriages as a result of the therapy. A year later, less than half of that group--or just 18 percent of all couples who entered therapy-- retain these benefits. When *Consumer Reports* surveyed a large sample of its members on their experience with all kinds of psychotherapists, most got very high customer satisfaction

marks--except for marital therapists, who got very poor ratings. This survey may not qualify as rigorous scientific research, but it confirms what most professionals in this field know: In the long run, current approaches to marital therapy do not benefit the majority of couples.

When you really think about it, it's not difficult to see why active listening so often fails. Bob might do his best to listen thoughtfully to Judy's complaints. But he is not a therapist listening to a patient whine about a third party. The person his wife is trashing behind all of those "I" statements is *him*. There are some people who can be magnanimous in the face of such criticism--the Dalai Lama comes to mind. But it's unlikely that you or your spouse is married to one of them. (Even in Rogerian therapy, when the client starts complaining about the therapist, the therapist switches from empathy to other therapeutic approaches.) Active listening asks couples to perform Olympic-level emotional gymnastics when their relationship can barely walk.

If you think validation and active listening will make conflict resolution easier for you and your spouse, by all means use it. There are circumstances where it can certainly come in handy. But here's the catch: Even if it does make your fights "better" or less frequent, it alone cannot save your marriage.

*Even happily married couples can have
screaming matches--loud arguments
don't necessarily harm a marriage.*

After studying some 650 couples and tracking the fate of their marriages for up to fourteen years, we now understand that this approach to counseling doesn't work, not just because it's nearly impossible for most couples to do well, but more importantly because successful conflict resolution isn't what makes marriages succeed. One of the most startling findings of our research is that most couples who have maintained happy marriages rarely do anything that even partly resembles active listening when they're upset.

Consider one couple we studied, Belle and Charlie. After more than forty-five years of marriage, Belle informed Charlie that she wished they had never had children. This clearly rankled him. What followed was a conversation that broke all the active listening rules.

This discussion doesn't include a lot of validation or empathy—they both jump right in, arguing their point.

Charlie: You think you would have been better off if I had backed you in not having children?

Belle: Having children was such an insult to me, Charlie.

Charlie: No. Hold on a minute.

Belle: To reduce me to such a level!

Charlie: I'm not redu-

Belle: I wanted so much to share a life with you. Instead I ended up a drudge.

Charlie: Now wait a minute, hold on. I don't think not having children is that simple. I think that there's a lot biologically that you're ignoring.

Belle: Look at all the wonderful marriages that have been childless.

Charlie: Who?

Belle: The Duke and Duchess of Windsor!

Charlie (deep sigh): Please!

Belle: He was the king! He married a valuable woman. They had a very happy marriage.

Charlie: I don't think that's a fair example. First of all, she was forty. That makes a difference.

Belle: She never had children. And he fell in love with her not because she was going to reproduce.

Charlie: But the fact is, Belle, that there is a real strong biological urge to have children.

Belle: That's an insult to think that I'm regulated by biology.

Charlie: I can't help it!

Belle: Well, anyway, I think we would have had a ball without children.

Charlie: Well, I think we had a ball with the kids, too.

Belle: I didn't have that much of a ball.

Charlie and Belle may not sound like June and Ward Cleaver, but they have been happily married for over forty-five years. They both say they are extremely satisfied with their marriage and devoted to each other.

No doubt they have been having similar in-your-face discussions for years. They don't end off angrily, either. They go on to discuss why Belle feels this way about motherhood. Her major regret is that she wasn't more available to spend time with Charlie. She wishes she hadn't always been so cranky and tired. There's a lot of affection and laughter as they hash this out. Neither of their heart rates or blood pressures indicate distress. The bottom line of what Belle is saying is that she loves Charlie so much, she wishes she had had more time with him. Clearly, there's something very positive going on between them that overrides their argumentative style. Whatever that "something" is, marriage counseling, with its emphasis on "good" fighting, doesn't begin to help other couples tap into it.

EXPLODING MORE MYTHS ABOUT MARRIAGE

The notion that you can save your marriage just by learning to communicate more sensitively is probably the most widely held misconception about happy marriages--but it's hardly the only one. Over the years I've found many other myths that are not only false but potentially destructive to a marriage because they can lead couples down the wrong path or, worse, convince them that their marriage is a hopeless case. Among these common myths:

Neuroses or personality problems ruin marriages. You might assume that people with hang-ups would be ill suited for marriage. But research has found only the weakest connection between run-of-the-mill neuroses and failing at love. The reason: We all have our crazy buttons—issues we're not totally rational about. But they don't necessarily interfere with marriage. The key to a happy marriage isn't having a "normal" personality but finding someone with whom you mesh. For example, Sam has a problem dealing with authority--he

hates having a boss. If he were married to an authoritarian woman who tended to give commands and tried to tell him what to do, the result would be disastrous. But instead he is married to Megan, who treats him like a partner and doesn't try to boss him around. They've been happily married for ten years.

Contrast them with another couple who do run into marital problems. Jill has a deep-seated fear of abandonment due to her parents' divorcing when she was very young. Her husband, Wayne, who is truly devoted to her, is a debonair ladies' man who flirts shamelessly at parties. When she complains, he points out that he is 100 percent faithful to her and insists she lighten up and let him enjoy this harmless pleasure. But the threat Jill perceives from his flirtations--and his unwillingness to stop--drives them to separate and eventually divorce.

The point is that neuroses don't have to ruin a marriage. What matters is how you deal with them. If you can accommodate each other's strange side and handle it with caring, affection, and respect, your marriage can thrive.

Common interests keep you together. That all depends on how you interact while pursuing those interests. One husband and wife who love kayaking may glide smoothly down the water, laughing, talking, and concentrating together. Their love of kayaking enriches and deepens their fondness and interest in each other.

Another couple may equally share a love of kayaking but not the same mutual respect. Their travels may be punctuated with "That's not the way to do a J-stroke, you idiot!" or irritated silences. It's hard to see how pursuing their common interest is in the best interest of their marriage.

You scratch my back and... Some researchers believe that what distinguishes good marriages from failing ones is that in good marriages spouses respond in kind to positive overtures from the other. In other words, they meet a smile with a smile, a kiss with a kiss. When one helps the other with a chore, the other intentionally