

john gottman seven principles for making marriage work

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Comprehensive Guide

john gottman seven principles for making marriage work offers a scientifically validated roadmap for couples seeking to build and sustain a strong, lasting, and fulfilling marital bond. Developed through decades of rigorous research at the University of Washington and the Gottman Institute, these principles provide actionable strategies to navigate the inevitable challenges of married life. This article delves deeply into each of the seven principles, exploring their underlying psychology and offering practical advice for implementation. We will examine the importance of building love maps, fostering fondness and admiration, turning towards instead of away, letting your partner influence you, solving solvable problems, overcoming gridlock, and creating shared meaning. Understanding and applying these principles can transform a struggling marriage into a thriving partnership, characterized by deeper connection, greater intimacy, and enduring happiness.

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Understanding the Foundation: Love Maps

The first of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work centers on the concept of "Love Maps." These are not literal maps, but rather the rich, detailed internal representations each partner has of the other's inner world. A strong Love Map means you know your partner's history, their hopes and dreams, their fears, their friends, their stressors, and their joys. It's about truly understanding the landscape of your spouse's life. Couples with strong Love Maps have a deeper sense of connection and are better equipped to navigate life's challenges because they understand the context and nuances of their partner's experiences and reactions.

Developing and maintaining these Love Maps is an ongoing process. It requires genuine curiosity and a commitment to actively learn about your partner. This isn't about superficial knowledge; it's about

understanding the deeper currents that shape their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. When you know your partner's internal world, you can respond more empathetically and effectively to their needs, concerns, and aspirations. This foundational principle is crucial because it lays the groundwork for all subsequent principles, enabling a more profound understanding and connection.

The Importance of Detailed Knowledge

The depth of a couple's Love Maps directly correlates with their relationship satisfaction. When partners possess detailed knowledge of each other's inner lives, they are less likely to misunderstand or misinterpret each other's actions. This detailed understanding allows for more compassionate responses to conflict and a greater ability to support each other during stressful times. It's akin to having an intimate understanding of a complex system; the more you know about its workings, the better you can maintain and optimize it.

Building these maps involves actively asking questions, listening intently to the answers, and remembering the details your partner shares. It's about making mental notes of their favorite things, their biggest anxieties, their childhood memories, and their professional ambitions. This continuous exploration fosters a sense of being seen, heard, and truly known by one's spouse, which is a cornerstone of marital intimacy and resilience. Couples who neglect their Love Maps risk growing apart, their internal worlds becoming foreign territory to each other.

Cultivating Connection: Fostering Fondness and Admiration

The second principle in John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work emphasizes the critical role of "Fostering Fondness and Admiration." This principle highlights the importance of regularly expressing positive feelings towards your partner. It's about consciously focusing on and verbalizing the things you appreciate, respect, and love about them. This isn't just about saying "I love you"; it's about articulating specific qualities and actions that evoke positive emotions and reinforce the bond between partners.

A strong sense of fondness and admiration acts as a buffer against negativity. When couples regularly engage in positive affirmations, they build a reservoir of goodwill that can help them weather difficult times. This principle is about actively nurturing the positive aspects of the relationship, ensuring that the good feelings outweigh the bad, especially when conflict arises. It's the antidote to contempt and criticism, two of the four horsemen of the apocalypse that Gottman identified as highly destructive to relationships.

The Power of Positive Reinforcement

Regularly expressing fondness and admiration can significantly enhance marital satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of divorce. When partners feel genuinely appreciated and admired, their sense of security and emotional connection deepens. This principle encourages couples to make a conscious effort to notice and comment on the positive attributes and actions of their spouse, no matter how small. It might be praising their patience, acknowledging their hard work, or simply expressing gratitude for their presence.

This principle also involves actively reminiscing about positive shared experiences and the early days of the relationship. Recalling happy memories and the initial attraction can help reignite feelings of love and connection. By deliberately focusing on the good, couples build a more robust and resilient relationship, one that is better equipped to handle the inevitable ups and downs of married life. This practice acts as a continuous renewal of the couple's commitment and affection.

Responding with Intention: Turning Towards Instead of Away

The third principle of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work is "Turning Towards Instead of Away." Gottman observed that in everyday interactions, couples make thousands of "bids" for connection. These bids can be as simple as a glance, a comment about the weather, or a sigh expressing fatigue. The partner's response to these bids—whether they "turn towards" (acknowledging and responding positively) or "turn away" (ignoring or responding negatively)—profoundly impacts the relationship's emotional climate.

Turning towards bids is about showing interest, engagement, and responsiveness. It signifies that you are present and invested in your partner's emotional state and experiences. When partners consistently turn towards each other's bids, they build trust, emotional intimacy, and a sense of being a team. This creates a positive feedback loop where partners feel more comfortable reaching out, knowing they will be met with support and connection. Conversely, repeatedly turning away erodes trust and can lead to emotional distance and resentment.

The Significance of Small Moments

The accumulation of how couples respond to these small bids significantly determines the success of their relationship. Each turned-towards bid is like depositing into an "emotional bank account." When this account is full, the couple has a strong reserve to draw upon during times of conflict or stress. These moments might seem insignificant in isolation, but their cumulative effect is profound. They signal to your partner that you are paying attention, that you care, and that you are there for them.

Conversely, ignoring or dismissing these bids, even unintentionally, can create a sense of loneliness and disconnection. It can make a partner feel invisible or unimportant. The principle encourages conscious awareness of these bids and a deliberate effort to respond positively. This might involve looking up from your phone when your partner speaks, asking a follow-up question, or offering a supportive comment. It's about actively engaging with your partner's attempts to connect, no matter how minor they may seem.

Embracing Partnership: Letting Your Partner Influence You

The fourth principle of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work is "Letting Your Partner Influence You." This principle is particularly crucial for men, as Gottman's research indicates that men who are open to their wives' influence tend to have more stable and happy marriages. Letting your partner influence you means being open to their perspective, their opinions, and their needs when making decisions, even when they differ from your own. It involves a willingness to compromise and to consider your partner's feelings and desires as equally important to your own.

This principle is not about surrendering your will or becoming a doormat. Instead, it's about showing respect for your partner's thoughts and feelings and recognizing that they have valuable insights and perspectives to offer. When one or both partners resist influence, it often leads to an imbalance of power and a breakdown in communication, creating an environment where one partner feels unheard or devalued. Embracing influence fosters a sense of partnership and mutual respect, strengthening the marital bond.

The Dynamics of Influence in Marriage

When a partner feels influenced, it signals that their perspective is valued and that they have a genuine voice in the relationship. This creates a positive feedback loop where both partners are more likely to be open to each other's influence. It's a demonstration of trust and a commitment to a shared decision-making process. Gottman emphasizes that this principle is most effective when it's reciprocal, with both partners being willing to be influenced.

Understanding and practicing this principle can transform how couples navigate disagreements. Instead of viewing differences as a battle to be won, partners can approach them as opportunities for collaboration and mutual understanding. This requires humility, empathy, and a genuine desire to find solutions that work for both individuals. By allowing your partner's influence, you are demonstrating a commitment to the health and longevity of the marriage, fostering a deeper sense of teamwork and shared responsibility.

Navigating Conflict: Solving Solvable Problems

The fifth principle of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work addresses "Solving Solvable Problems." Gottman distinguishes between solvable problems and perpetual problems, which are issues that are unlikely to be fully resolved. For solvable problems, Gottman offers a structured approach to conflict resolution that aims to address the issue without damaging the relationship. This involves clear communication, active listening, and finding mutually agreeable solutions.

The key to solving solvable problems lies in approaching them with a spirit of collaboration rather than confrontation. This involves using gentle speech, avoiding criticism and contempt, and taking breaks when emotions run too high. The goal is not necessarily to "win" the argument but to understand each other's perspectives and find a compromise that respects both partners' needs and desires. Effective conflict resolution builds trust and reinforces the couple's ability to handle challenges together.

Strategies for Effective Conflict Resolution

Gottman suggests several key strategies for addressing solvable problems effectively:

- **Start Softly:** Begin discussions about sensitive issues gently, avoiding accusatory language.
- **Learn to Repair:** When conflict escalates, learn to de-escalate by apologizing, offering comfort, or making a joke.
- **Soothe Yourself and Each Other:** During heated moments, take a break to calm down before continuing the discussion.
- **Compromise:** Be willing to find common ground and meet in the middle.
- **Be Tolerant of Each Other's Faults:** Recognize that no one is perfect and focus on resolving the issue at hand.

By implementing these strategies, couples can transform conflict from a destructive force into an opportunity for growth and deeper understanding. This principle underscores the importance of developing healthy conflict resolution skills as a vital component of a thriving marriage.

Breaking the Stalemate: Overcoming Gridlock

The sixth principle of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work focuses on "Overcoming Gridlock." Gridlocked perpetual problems are issues that couples repeatedly argue about without progress, often stemming from fundamental differences in dreams, values, or life experiences. These conflicts can become a source of significant frustration and emotional distance if not addressed effectively. Gottman's approach emphasizes understanding and respecting the underlying dreams and needs that fuel these perpetual conflicts.

The aim of overcoming gridlock is not to eliminate the issue entirely, but to learn to talk about it without causing further damage to the relationship. It involves understanding the deeper meaning and aspirations behind each partner's position. By acknowledging and respecting these underlying dreams, couples can move from a place of conflict to a place of acceptance and dialogue. This process can be challenging but is essential for preventing perpetual problems from derailing the marriage.

Understanding the Roots of Perpetual Problems

Perpetual problems often represent deeply held values, core beliefs, or unmet needs. For example, a conflict over finances might be rooted in one partner's fear of scarcity from their childhood, while the other's desire for security might stem from a different experience. Understanding these underlying narratives is key to moving beyond gridlock. It requires empathy and a willingness to listen to your partner's deeper story, even if you don't agree with their perspective.

The process of overcoming gridlock involves creating a dialogue where each partner can share their deepest hopes and fears related to the issue. The goal is to develop empathy and understanding for each other's positions, even if a full resolution isn't possible. By learning to live with these differences respectfully and constructively, couples can significantly reduce the stress and negativity associated with these ongoing conflicts, thereby protecting the overall health of their marriage.

Building a Shared Life: Creating Shared Meaning

The seventh and final principle of John Gottman's seven principles for making marriage work is "Creating Shared Meaning." This principle is about building a life together that is rich with shared goals, values, rituals, and symbols that are meaningful to both partners. It's about developing a sense of shared purpose and creating a common culture within the marriage that reflects your unique journey as a couple.

Shared meaning goes beyond simply coexisting; it involves actively co-creating a life that is fulfilling and

deeply connected. This can manifest in various ways, such as establishing family traditions, supporting each other's individual goals, and developing a shared understanding of what constitutes a good life. When couples successfully create shared meaning, they foster a stronger sense of "us" and a deeper appreciation for the unique life they are building together.

The Significance of Shared Rituals and Symbols

Shared meaning is often built through rituals, traditions, and symbols that are unique to the couple. These can range from regular date nights and family traditions to shared spiritual practices or inside jokes. These elements create a sense of continuity, connection, and belonging. They serve as anchors in the relationship, reminding partners of their shared journey and their commitment to one another.

Actively cultivating shared meaning requires ongoing effort and intentionality. It involves discussing your dreams and aspirations for the future, supporting each other's personal growth, and finding ways to integrate your individual lives into a shared narrative. When couples have a strong sense of shared meaning, they are more resilient in the face of adversity, as they have a common purpose and a deep understanding of what their life together represents. This principle highlights the importance of a marriage being more than just the sum of its parts; it is about the creation of a unique and enduring legacy.

FAQ

Q: What are the seven principles for making marriage work according to John Gottman?

A: The seven principles for making marriage work, as identified by Dr. John Gottman, are: 1. Enhance your love maps, 2. Foster fondness and admiration, 3. Turn toward each other instead of away, 4. Let your wife influence you (and vice versa), 5. Solve your solvable problems, 6. Overcome gridlock, and 7. Create shared meaning.

Q: How can I enhance my "love maps" with my spouse?

A: Enhancing your love maps involves actively and continuously learning about your spouse's inner world. This includes understanding their history, their current stressors, their hopes and dreams, their friends, their values, and their fears. Ask open-ended questions, listen attentively to their responses, and remember the details they share. Make it a practice to check in regularly about what's happening in their life.

Q: Why is fostering fondness and admiration so important for a marriage?

A: Fostering fondness and admiration is crucial because it builds a positive emotional bank account. Regularly expressing appreciation, respect, and affection for your partner creates a buffer against negativity and conflict. It helps couples remember why they fell in love and can prevent contempt, one of the most damaging forces in a relationship.

Q: What does it mean to "turn toward" instead of "turn away" in a marriage?

A: "Turning toward" means responding positively to your partner's "bids" for connection, which are small attempts to get your attention or engage with you. This could be a glance, a comment, or a sigh. Turning away means ignoring, dismissing, or responding negatively to these bids. Consistently turning toward builds trust and emotional intimacy, while turning away erodes it.

Q: How can I let my partner influence me in our marriage?

A: Letting your partner influence you means being open to their perspective, needs, and opinions when making decisions. It involves respecting their point of view and being willing to compromise. This principle emphasizes the importance of a balanced partnership where both individuals feel heard and valued, rather than one person dominating the decision-making process.

Q: What is the difference between solvable and perpetual problems in a marriage?

A: Solvable problems are issues that can be resolved through compromise and effective communication. Perpetual problems, on the other hand, are ongoing issues that stem from fundamental differences in personality, values, or dreams. The goal with perpetual problems isn't to solve them, but to learn to manage them without damaging the relationship.

Q: How can couples overcome gridlock on perpetual problems?

A: Overcoming gridlock involves understanding and respecting the underlying dreams and needs that fuel perpetual conflicts. Couples need to move beyond arguing about the surface issue and explore the deeper meaning and aspirations behind each person's position. The goal is to develop empathy and learn to talk about these issues respectfully, rather than letting them create constant conflict.

Q: What is involved in creating shared meaning in a marriage?

A: Creating shared meaning involves building a life together that is rich in shared goals, values, rituals, and symbols. It's about developing a common culture and a sense of purpose as a couple. This can be achieved through establishing traditions, supporting each other's individual aspirations, and developing a shared vision for the future.

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