

Marriage Success and Divorce

Scholars have for years been trying to uncover what makes a marriage successful. Many theories attempt to predict the key elements of a couple's relationship that determine its survival. If the elements of marital success could be determined then couples could be coached to improve their relationships' well-being.

Foremost in this field of study is John Gottman who provided an empirical foundation for understanding what makes a marriage work and what factors lead to divorce. Gottman's work focuses upon what he calls "The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse" – criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (listener withdrawal) (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Rather than anger, the use of these in negative interactions predicts divorce with 91 percent accuracy. A major finding of his work is that happy couples know how to resolve their disagreements while unhappy couples frequently envelop their relationship in negativity. Negativity escalates out of control when a couple reciprocates each other's negative attitudes, negative beliefs about their relationship and negative responses.

The role that each partner plays in the cascade of negativity is typically different. In almost all situations, it is the woman who raises the conflict issue. If done with a harsh start up that uses criticism of her mate, the cycle is put into place to escalate. Typically contempt follows through the use of sarcasm and cynicism. Contempt is poisonous to the relationship for with it disgust is conveyed. Contempt leads to more conflict, defensiveness and stonewalling. Men most typically use stonewalling as a protection against feeling flooded by negativity. Flooding occurs when the individual feels totally overwhelmed. In this state one has a physical reaction that elevates blood pressure and increases stress hormone secretion. As a protective reaction, the man shuts down and withdraws from the situation and interaction. Gottman has found that marriage meltdown can be predicted, by the woman using a habitual harsh startup and the man frequent flooding reaction brought on by the presence of "the four horseman" during disagreements (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When interactions typically lead to flooding, almost inevitably distancing between the couple occurs and that in turn leads to loneliness.

Once the relationship becomes engulfed in a negative perception, the individuals lose their positive perceptions of the relationship's history and each other. In this state negative behavior is attributed to the partner's negative traits and the positivity of the partner's behavior is minimized by attributing it to fleeting, situational causes (Gottman, 1993). Happy couples maintain a positive perception of their past and their mate's character. They maintain a fondness and admiration for each other that prevents them from using the "four horseman" to fan the flames of discontent.

Happy couples use techniques to protect their relationship when disagreement flares. They develop mechanism called "repair attempts" that signal the conflict is getting out of control. These can be silly or otherwise statements or actions that say "I love you," but

we need to take a break and stop this disagreement for now. In happy marriages these repair attempts are accepted and successful in decreasing emotional tension. In unhappy marriages they are not accepted or fail to stop the interaction which continues to escalate out of control. What Gottman has found is that most marital arguments cannot be resolved (Gottman, 1999). This is because deeply rooted fundamental differences of personality, lifestyle or values fuel these arguments. Happy couples have developed an understanding of what these differences are and develop a shared purpose for their marriage.

Men in happy couples have also learned to accept their wives influence. Men accept influence by sharing power and decision making. This is difficult for some men to accept because boys are raised in our culture to accept influence from other boys not girls. Research has demonstrated that wives of men who accept their influence are less likely to be harsh with their husband and are more willing to compromise (Gottman, 1999). Men who learn to yield will have far happier marriages.

Gottman's research found happy couples do not use active listening when upset and involved in disagreement (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). He suggests that couples be helped to increase soft and gentle start-up, de-escalating, changing the balance of power in favor of the husband's acceptance of influence from his wife and increasing soothing "repair attempts." These patterns of behavior appear to be what has assisted couples in strengthening and sustaining their relationship.

References

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