

How To Keep Love Going Strong

7 principles on the road to happily ever after.
by John M. and Julie Gottman

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? After years of research, we can answer these questions. In fact, we are now able to predict whether a couple will stay happily together after listening for as little as three hours to a conflict conversation and other interactions in our Love Lab. Our accuracy rate averages 91 percent. Gay and lesbian relationships operate on essentially the same principles as heterosexual relationships, according to our research. But the most rewarding findings are the seven principles that prevent a marriage from breaking up, even for those couples we tested in the lab who seemed headed for divorce.

1. Enhance your Love Map

Emotionally intelligent couples are intimately familiar with each other's world. They have a richly detailed love map—they know the major events in each other's history, and they keep updating their information as their spouse's world changes. He could tell you how she's feeling about her boss. She knows that he fears being too much like his father and considers himself a "free spirit." They know each other's goals, worries, and hopes.

2. Nurture Fondness and Admiration

Fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a long-lasting romance. Without the belief that your spouse is worthy of honor and respect, where is the basis for a rewarding relationship? By reminding yourself of your spouse's positive qualities—even as you grapple with each other's flaws—and expressing out loud your fondness and admiration, you can prevent a happy marriage from deteriorating.

3. Turn Toward Each Other

In marriage people periodically make "bids" for their partner's attention, affection, humor, or support. People either turn toward one another after these bids or they turn away. Turning toward is the basis of emotional connection, romance, passion, and a good sex life.

4. Let your partner Influence you

The happiest, most stable marriages are those in which the husband treats his wife with respect and does not resist power sharing and decision making with her. When the couple disagrees, these husbands actively search for common ground rather than insisting on getting their way. It's just as important for wives to treat their husbands with honor and respect. But our data indicate that the vast majority of wives—even in unstable marriages—already do that. Too often men do not return the favor.

5. Solve your Solvable Problems

Start with good manners when tackling your solvable problems:

- Step 1. Use a softened startup: Complain but don't criticize or attack your spouse. State your feelings without blame, and express a positive need (what you want, not what you don't want). Make statements that start with "I" instead of "you." Describe what is happening; don't evaluate or judge. Be clear. Be polite. Be appreciative. Don't store things up.
- Step 2. Learn to make and receive repair attempts: De-escalate the tension and pull out of a downward cycle of negativity by asking for a break, sharing what you are feeling, apologizing, or expressing appreciation.
- Step 3. Soothe yourself and each other: Conflict discussions can lead to "flooding." When this occurs, you feel overwhelmed both emotionally and physically, and you are too agitated to really hear what your spouse is saying. Take a break to soothe and distract yourself, and learn techniques to soothe your spouse.
- Step 4. Compromise: Here's an exercise to try. Decide together on a solvable problem to tackle. Then separately draw two circles—a smaller one inside a larger one. In the inner circle list aspects of the problem you can't give in on. In the outer circle, list the aspects you can compromise about. Try to make the outer circle as large as possible and your inner circle as small as possible. Then come back and look for common bases for agreement.

6. Overcome Gridlock

Many perpetual conflicts that are gridlocked have an existential base of unexpressed dreams behind each person's stubborn position. In happy marriages, partners incorporate each other's goals into their concept of what their marriage is about. These goals can be as concrete as wanting to live in a certain kind of house or intangible, such as wanting to view life as a grand adventure. The bottom line in getting past gridlock is not necessarily to become a part of each other's dreams but to honor these dreams.

7. Create Shared Meaning

Marriage can have an intentional sense of shared purpose, meaning, family values, and cultural legacy that forms a shared inner life. Each couple and each family creates its own microculture with customs (like Sunday dinner out), rituals (like a champagne toast after the birth of a baby), and myths—the stories the couple tells themselves that explain their marriage. This culture incorporates both of their dreams, and it is flexible enough to change as husband and wife grow and develop. When a marriage has this shared sense of meaning, conflict is less intense and perpetual problems are unlikely to lead to gridlock.