

# *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

by John Gottman and Nan Silver

summarized by Steve Hingle, MidlifeCrisisCoaching.com

## Introduction

**He predicts divorce or staying together with 91% accuracy by watching a five minute argument. The nationwide relapse rate for standard marital therapy is 30 to 50 percent. Gottman's is 20 percent.**

The book has a quiz for every area of discussion to self-assess whether it's an area of strength in your marriage or something to work on.

### Signs of trouble in a marriage:

- **Harsh start-ups** – complaints lead off with criticism of character or contempt
- **Criticism of character** - rather than a complaint
- **Contempt** - cynicism, sarcasm, rolling of the eyes
- **Defensiveness** – the problem isn't me, it's you
- **Stonewalling** – tuning out due to being flooded with emotion
- **Failed repair attempts** – Attempts to de-escalate a conflict aren't working

**The key to reviving a relationship is not in how you handle disagreements, but in how you are with each other when you're not fighting. The main determining factor in whether people are satisfied with their marriage is the quality of the couple's friendship, and strengthening this friendship is the foundation of the seven principles.**

### Principle one: Enhance your love maps

Love map: that part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner's life. The map includes their past difficulties, successes, family history, emotional history, career journey, their aspirations, values, as well as trivia-type info, like their favorite ice-cream. Explore these areas with each other.

### Principle two: Nurture your fondness and admiration

By focusing on the past, you can often detect embers of positive feelings. Fondness and admiration are antidotes to and prevention of contempt. One exercise includes a list of positive character traits. You pick out three traits of your partner and identify an incident that illustrates this trait, then share it with your partner. Another exercise has you discuss the history of your marriage. A third exercise asks you to consider a different positive thought about your marriage each day over seven weeks. Questions include things like, "I am genuinely fond of my partner," "We have the same general beliefs and values," "I was really lucky to meet my spouse." For each positive thought, you would come up with one specific example to support the thought.

### Principle three: Turn toward each other instead of away

You fill your emotional bank account by attending to each other in small ways throughout the day. Turning towards each other in small ways creates more romance than a candlelight dinner. Pick three (non-sexual) things you would like your partner to do with you, and ask them.

If one of you is not turning towards, each of you can ask: How am I feeling? What's triggering these feelings? What's this remind me of (past, shadows)? What's a general feeling or attitude of yours that might be

contributing to this mess? How can I make this better in the future? What could my partner do next time to improve things?

#### Principle four: Let your partner influence you

“When a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self-destruct.” Accepting influence is not necessarily about an equal decision-making, but is more about conveying honor, love, and respect.

#### Principle five: Solve your solvable problems

**Distinguish between perpetual problems and solvable problems.** Perpetual problems come up over and over again, are painful and intense, and you blame your partner, believing that something is wrong with them. **The key to all conflicts, whether perpetual or solvable, is to communicate basic understanding of your partner’s personality. You must communicate understanding, acceptance, respect, and appreciation.**

**Soften your start-up:** Discussions end on the same note or tone as they begin with. Women do more harsh start-ups than men. Suggestions: complain but don’t blame; make I statements; describe what is happening **without judging** or evaluating; be clear; be polite; be appreciative; don’t store things up.

**Learn to make and receive repair attempts** (attempts to de-escalate the conflict): Gottman lists over sixty repair attempt phrases such as, “I’m feeling scared / sad”; “I need to calm down”; “I’m sorry”; “I agree with part of what you’re saying”; “I need to take a break”; “I appreciate you.”

**Soothe yourself and each other:** Flooding is being overwhelmed emotionally and physically. Men are more prone to flooding than women. Flooding leads to stonewalling, or appearing to tune out, and can make it harder to hear repair attempts. Suggestion: Take a (at least 20 minute) break. Avoid negative thoughts during this time and do something distracting or soothing, such as a progressive muscle relaxation exercise. After soothing yourself, you can help soothe your partner with a massage or guided meditation.

**Compromise:** Search for the part of your spouse’s argument that is reasonable. Regarding the issue, write down what you can’t yield on, and what you’re willing to compromise on. Then, share with each other and look for common ground. Try out a solution for an agreed-upon time and revisit.

**Be tolerant of each other’s faults:** If only my spouse was more \_\_\_\_\_; if only my spouse would just \_\_\_\_\_. Until you accept your partner’s faults, you will not be able to compromise successfully.

**Regarding sex problems:** Learn to talk about sex in a way that lets you both feel safe. Ask for what you want. Respond to partner requests. Don’t take requests personally or see their requests as evidence of negative character. Don’t start with criticism or lack; instead start with good past history and “I want more of that.” Accentuate the positive. Instead of “don’t do this,” say “do this.” The person with the least interest needs to feel in control. Learn about each other’s likes; remember and use them.

#### Principle six: Overcome gridlock (perpetual problems)

The goal in ending gridlock is not to solve the problem, but to move from gridlock to dialogue. Gridlock is a sign that you have dreams for your life that aren’t being addressed or respected by each other. For example, a couple is gridlocked on going out to dinner every Sunday night. In uncovering what’s behind their positions, she reveals that her family went to dinner every Sunday, and it felt like a special time. For him, his family ate a special dinner at home every Sunday, which made him feel loved.

### **Step 1: Become a dream detective.**

Do this step alone with a journal. Some of these questions are asking the same question in different ways. Use them as prompts to tell your story around this problem. (Note, Gottman was not clear on this process. I made up this set of questions from his discussion plus my own experience. - SH)

1. What's the perpetual conflict?
2. How do you feel?
3. What's the story you tell yourself about this?
4. What negative judgment do you have about your partner?
5. How does this situation remind you of your childhood?
6. What's a deep need or longing (whether or not from childhood) that might be beneath this?
7. What essential values or beliefs of yours are at stake?
8. What hopes, aspirations, or desires of yours are at stake?
9. This is so important to me because \_\_\_\_\_.
10. What does this really mean to you?

For discussion with your partner, skip your answer to number 4 and any other criticisms of character.

### **Step 2: Work on a gridlocked marital issue**

Each of you write out your position and the dreams behind it. Don't criticize or blame your spouse. Once you both have done this, it's time to talk. Don't try to solve this problem. Attempting to do so now is likely to backfire. Your goal is simply to understand why each of you feels so strongly about this issue, to acknowledge and respect each other's deepest, most personal hopes and dreams.

Speaker's job: Talk as if you were explaining your position to a good friend or neutral party. Don't criticize or blame your spouse.

Listener's job: Listen the way a friend would listen. Be curious. Ask what this issue means to them.

### **Step 3: Soothe each other**

Take a break. See Soothe yourself and each other in principle five.

### **Step 4: End the gridlock**

Start with the compromise exercise from principle five. Use principle five to come up with a temporary compromise that honors both partner's dreams, and try it out for about two months. Then review.

### **Step 5: Say thank you**

Share three qualities you appreciate about each other.

Don't expect to have it all resolved in one session.

### **Principle seven: Create shared meaning**

Marriage can have a spiritual dimension together that has to do with creating an inner life together – a culture rich with symbols and rituals, and an appreciation for your roles and goals that link you, that lead you to understand what it means to be a part of the family you have become. A crucial goal of any marriage, is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her convictions.

**Rituals:** Gottman has an exercise about creating family rituals by first talking about your rituals growing up and then scripting what you want together. Rituals can be about how you start your day, reunite, eat dinner, go to bed, spend your weekends, spend holidays, and go on vacation.

**Roles:** Explore your history, meaning, and desires around your roles as spouse, parent, friend, son or daughter, and community member.

**Goals:** Explore your personal life missions and goals with each other, and your goals for your marriage.

**Symbols:** Explore the symbols (photos, objects, stories, ways of being and doing) from your past, from your marriage, and talk about what symbols stand for your shared values.

## Final Advice

### The Magic Five Hours

Couple whose marriages improve do the following:

**Partings:** In the morning, learn something that your partner plans to do that day.

**Reunions:** Engage in a stress-reducing conversation at the end of each workday.

**Admiration and appreciation:** Every day communicate affection and appreciation toward your spouse.

**Affection:** Kiss, hold, grab, and touch each other. Kiss each other before going to sleep.

**Weekly date:** You might spend some of this time updating love maps, turning towards each other, or working through marital issues.

Working briefly on your marriage every day will do more for your health and longevity than working out at a health club.

**Exercise in Thanksgiving:** Spend time daily searching for things in the world to praise and appreciate. Practice noticing and communicating the good qualities you see in others, including your spouse.

**Note:** Some of these notes are summarized in my words, and some are Gottman's exact words, but I didn't bother putting his words in quotes. Also, I strongly recommend buying the book.