

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

Subjects: Others

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The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, by John Gottman is a book that sets forth what it describes as seven principles that can guide toward a harmonious and long-lasting relationship. The book attempts to debunk a number of what it describes as myths about marriages and why they fail. The seven principles Gottman sets out are for the partners to enhance their love maps; nurture fondness and admiration; turn toward each other instead of away; let their partner influence them; solve their solvable problems; overcome gridlock; and create shared meaning. The book was included in the Comprehensive Soldier fitness program. A follow-up to this book was the 2013 What Makes Love Last?

Keywords: marriage ; relationship ; fitness

1. Principles

According to Gottman, couples strengthen the friendship that is at the heart of any marriage by enhancing their love maps; nurturing their fondness and admiration; turning toward each other instead of away; letting their spouse influence them; solving their solvable problems; overcoming gridlock; and creating shared meaning.

1.1. Enhancing Love Maps

A "love map" is that part of one's brain where one stores all the relevant information about one's spouse's life, such as their worries, hopes, and goals in life; their history; and the facts and feelings of their world. According to Gottman, happily married couples use their love maps to express not only their understanding of each other, but their fondness and admiration as well.^[1]

1.2. Nurturing Fondness and Admiration

Nurturing fondness and admiration involves meditating a bit on one's partner and what makes one cherish him or her. Exercises the book suggests for doing this include, among other things, thinking about incidents that illustrate characteristics one appreciates in one's partner; talking about the happy events of the past; and completing a 49-item "Seven-Week Course in Fondness and Admiration".^[2]

1.3. Turning Toward Each Other

Turning toward each other means connecting with one's spouse; being there for each other during the minor events in each other's lives; and responding favorably to one's spouse's bids for attention, affection, humor or support.

1.4. Accepting Influence

Accepting influence means sharing power; making one's spouse a partner in one's decision making by taking their opinions and feelings into account.

1.5. Solving Solvable Problems

Gottman's model for conflict resolution involves softening the startup (i.e. leading off of the discussion without criticism or contempt, making a straightforward comment about a concern and expressing one's need in a positive fashion); learning to make and receive repair attempts (statements or actions that prevent negativity from escalating out of control; efforts the couple makes to deescalate the tension during a touchy discussion); soothing oneself and one's partner; compromising; and being tolerant of each other's faults.

1.6. Overcoming Gridlock

According to Gottman, gridlock occurs when a conflict makes one feel rejected by one's partner; they keep talking about it but make no headway; they become entrenched in their positions and are unwilling to budge; when they discuss the subject, they end up feeling more frustrated and hurt; their conversations about the problem are devoid of humor, amusement, or affection; they become even more unbudgeable over time, which leads them to vilify each other during these conversations; this vilification makes one all the more rooted in one's position and polarized, more extreme in one's view, and all the less willing to compromise; and eventually they disengage from each other emotionally. Gottman argues that no matter how entrenched in gridlock a couple is, all that they need in order to get out of it is motivation and a willingness to explore the hidden issues that are really causing the gridlock.

1.7. Creating Shared Meaning

Gottman describes shared meaning as a spiritual dimension to marriage that has to do with creating an inner life together — a culture rich with symbols and rituals, and an appreciation for the spouses' roles and goals that link them TOGETHER, that lead them to understand what it means to be a part of the family they have become. According to Gottman, when a marriage has a shared sense of meaning, conflict is much less intense and perpetual problems are less likely to lead to gridlock.^[3]

2. Reviews and Studies

The book was praised for being compatible with feminist principles and research stating that shared power is essential for a successful marriage, and was contrasted with *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, whose recommendations are based largely on opinion rather than research and serve to endorse and encourage power differentials between and traditional roles for men and women.^[4] One study showed that 63 percent of husbands and wives who read *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* reported that their marriages had changed for the better and were still improved a year later.^[5]

Andrew Keyt reviewed the book favorably, remarking,

"This reviewer feels that the predictors of divorce as well as Gottman and Silver's Seven Principles provide valuable lessons for family businesses as well as family business professionals. . . . Because of its commercial focus, this book does not contain the data necessary to evaluate the research methods used. Nevertheless, the authors' results make intuitive sense. The results show that it is the quality of the emotional connection between the couple and their respect for each other that influences their success. Given our role in serving families and understanding that the marital relationship often teaches the family system much about how to interact, this book is a must-read for the family business professional."

Linda Pounds wrote,

"I believe couples searching for ways to change destructive patterns will find this book a useful tool. The reminder to focus on positive feelings, which form the foundation of a relationship, and to examine our own behaviors within relationships suggests personal responsibility. The authors encourage us to spend time with partners. This book is a call to act with honor and respect within relationships."^[7]

3. Criticism

Milton Spett criticized Gottman's claims of low relapse from his marital therapy: "Gottman makes these claims without reporting any of the standard techniques of outcome research: no control group, no random assignment to treatments, no blind assessment of outcome."^[8] Gottman's criticism of active listening, which had been based partly on the results of the Munich Marital Therapy Study, was also countered by Robert F. Scuka, who argued that "a careful reading of the Hahlweg et al. (1984) study reveals that Gottman cites only certain (one-sided) results from the study. He also overlooks several important considerations that call into question his implied dismissal of the RE model as a legitimate therapeutic intervention for distressed couples."^[9]

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