

Will My Marriage Survive? Healthy Relationships

Do you ever wonder ...? “Will my marriage make it? Will it survive?” Considering that approximately 50% of all marriages in America end in divorce, this is a good question to contemplate.

What if I told you there is a man who can observe you and your partner arguing for just a mere 15 minutes and with 85% accuracy predict whether the two of you two will divorce or stay married. If he observes you for a longer period of time his prediction rate goes over 90%. AMAZING right? How does he do it? Crystal Ball? Tarot Cards? ESP? All good guesses, but not correct.

Dr. John Gottman, PhD and his colleagues observed thousands of couples and paired research techniques with mathematical calculations to devise a method to predict whether a couple would divorce or stay together. Lucky for us he published numerous studies, papers and created the Gottman Institute in order to teach couples how to stay happily married and avoid the pitfalls that often lead to divorce.

Through his research Dr. Gottman observed and noted several distinct negative behaviors that are destructive to a marriage and increased the likelihood of divorce. He also calculated positive behaviors that not only enriched the marriage but protected the couple from the impact of negative behaviors.

Dr. Gottman refers to the most destructive negative behaviors as The Four Horseman. (Yes, just like The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse in the New Testament.) The Gottman Four Horseman consist of:

- Criticism
- Defensiveness
- Contempt
- Stonewalling

Recognize any of these? Have you ever used one or two of them when in a heated argument? Most likely the answer is yes. According to Dr. Gottman all marriages use some negative behavior. “No relationship is negative free.” It is also helpful to note that all couples argue. The key is to be aware of The Four Horseman, reduce the number of times you use them, learn to repair after the argument and increase the positive behaviors (also called the Antidotes) which can protect the marriage.

Let's talk about Criticism:

Criticism blames the partner. It attacks their character. When we criticize, we tend to use YOU statements and allude that YOU are the problem. Criticism is different than a complaint. A complaint is about an issue or a situation whereas a criticism attacks the person.

One of the Antidotes to Criticism is to use “I” statements, and express what you feel and need. If you have a complaint, try to state it without blame.

Complaint: “I was worried when you did not call me each night to check in while you were traveling. I thought we had agreed on checking in nightly.”

Criticism: “You never think about me. You are so selfish. You don't think of anyone except yourself. What about me? You were probably having a great time why I was at home worrying.”

Be aware of a pattern of criticizing (blaming the other spouse, and/or attacking their character) because criticizing can be habit forming and an invitation to the other Horseman to operate.

The Second Horseman is Defensiveness. Many times when we feel criticized we react with defensiveness. A defensive comeback a type of self-protection which promotes reversing the blame onto the other partner. This type of communication can progress into finger pointing and very little resolution.

The Antidote for Defensiveness is taking responsibility. Even if it is for a very small part of the conflict. When we take responsibility it is like pouring water on fire. It puts out the burn of the conflict and the chance of escalation. It also sets a tone for cooperation or creating some type of solution.

Question: Did you make Lori's dentist appointment today?

Defensiveness: You know how busy I was today. You could have made it? Why didn't you just pick up the phone at make the appointment for her yourself?

Taking Responsibility: No, I didn't. I told you I would handle it but I got busy today and forgot. I will call right now.

The Third Horseman is Contempt. This Horseman is the deadliest of all the Horseman and the biggest predictor of divorce. Contempt is stronger and meaner than criticism. It involves sarcasm, disrespect, name calling, taking down to your partner, mockery, insults, eye rolling and hostile humor. Contempt is both destructive and defeating and contains a level of moral superiority. Contempt is fed by allowing yourself to think and ruminate about your partner in a negative manner for long periods of time. Pay attention when you are churning negative thoughts about your partner and bring the thoughts to a halt. Your partner or marriage doesn't have a chance against nonstop negative thoughts.

REMEMBER, negative thoughts breed Contempt and Contempt is the biggest predictor of DIVORCE.

The Antidote to Contempt is to create an environment of respect, gratitude, appreciation and fondness. Contempt cannot survive or thrive in an environment of respect. Make a habit of thinking kind thoughts about your partner. Make your eyes look for good in your partner's actions and appearance. Take time to notice how your spouse contributes to the marriage then compliment them and or say thank you. Making these positive changes to your pattern of thinking and responding positively can make a difference. Research states that healthy marriages have a ratio of 5 positive behaviors to every 1 negative behavior. Whereas the marriages that end in divorce have a ratio of .8 positive behaviors to 1 negative behavior (meaning they have more negative behaviors than positive behaviors).

The Fourth Horseman is Stonewalling. Stonewalling involves emotionally withdrawing from your partner, looking uninterested in their communication, or no longer responding verbally... to name just a few. Imagine someone walking out of the discussion, or crossing their arms and acting like they

are no longer listening. Or turning to their phone, while you are talking, and checking their e-mails. All these are a type of Stonewalling. The Fourth Horseman may show up when a partner becomes overwhelmed and begins to shutdown physically and emotionally.

The Antidote for Stonewalling is a Time-Out period. Research states that it takes approximately 20 to 30 minutes for a person who is overwhelmed to begin to regulate (or calm) their emotional state. When we get overwhelmed (and it does happen) it is difficult to think straight, to listen well or respond appropriately. When we feel overwhelmed it is best to verbalize that you are overwhelmed or agitated and need a little time to calm down. An agreement by both partners to return to the conversation after the time-out makes the time-out period more productive. During your time-out period choose an activity that helps calm you or soothe you: reading, exercising, stretching, breathing, watching tv, meditating, doing a simple chore etc. Remember, watch your thoughts. Try not to have thoughts of "I'm right." Or "Why does she always do this to me? These thoughts will not calm you down. They will keep you in a state of agitation. The key is to take the time to calm down so the two of you can think clearly and listen to each other.

Dr. Gottman noted that one way to protect your relationship is to strengthen your friendship. Knowing and being interested in your partner develops friendship and a deeper level of intimacy. What does he or she love? What's important to him/her? What stresses her/him out? What are their dreams? Taking time to really know them, understand them, and enjoy them increases the friendship and protects your marriage.

So to review..... To increase your odds of remaining together in a happy marriage and reduce your chances of getting a divorce.... Avoid using The Four Horseman (Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling) and increase your Appreciation, Fondness and Respect for each other on a daily basis.

For more information on the Gottman Institute go to <https://www.gottman.com/>