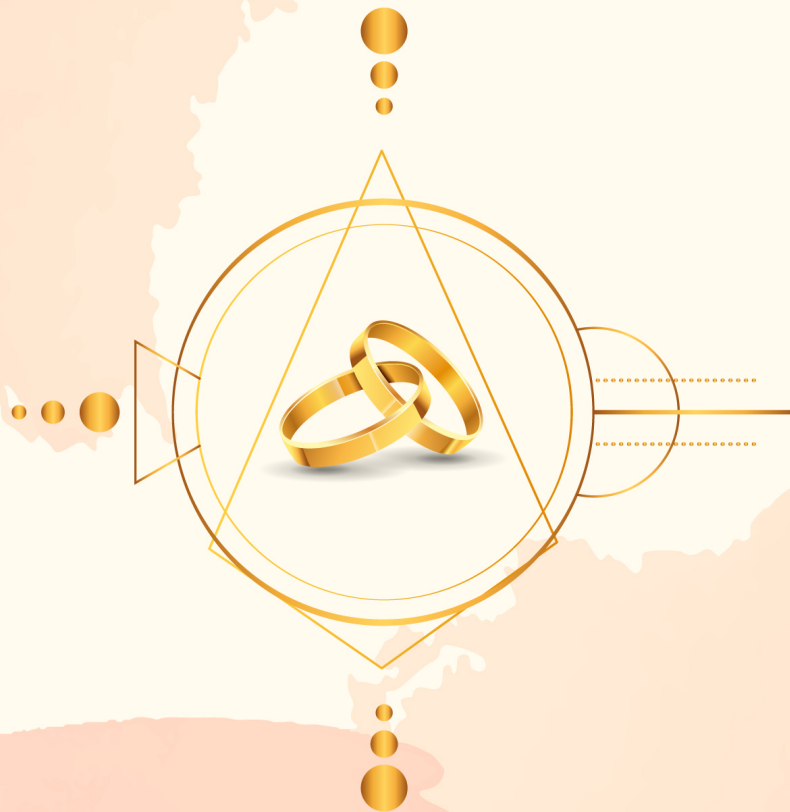


# SUMMARY

## THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING MARRIAGE WORK

JOHN GOTTMAN, Ph.D.



# **Summary of «The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work» by John Gottman**

Written by Lea Schullery

The revolutionary guide for learning the seven principles for creating a happy marriage that will last a lifetime.



# QuickRead

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# Introduction

Conflict in marriage is inevitable. Whether it's arguments over who is going to cook dinner tonight or perpetual conflicts about how you're going to raise the kids, there are key factors that determine the success or failure of such discussions. The success or failure of these conversations then determines the future of a marriage. To dig deeper into the truth about happy marriages, Dr. Gottman created the "Seattle Love Lab" to study hundreds of couple interactions. Throughout his research, Gottman recognized the seven principles for making a marriage work. In fact, he claims that he can predict whether a couple will stay together or divorce after watching them for only five minutes in the Love Lab. Happy couples practice the seven principles including taking the time to get to know their spouse, nurturing their admiration for one another, turning toward one another, and letting their partner influence them.

Throughout *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, you can learn why boring conversations are the key to a happy marriage, what the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" are, and how to solve both solvable and perpetual conflicts within your relationship.

# How to Predict Divorce

How can you tell that a marriage is doomed? You may have your reservations about a loved one or a friend's marriage, but is there a true way to identify a doomed relationship? Well, John Gottman has successfully predicted divorce simply by watching them argue for 15 minutes. However, the arguments aren't the issue, it's *how* they argue. By seeing how couples argue, Gottman was able to pinpoint a few factors that he used to predict the success or failure of a marriage.

The first is a harsh startup. By beginning an argument harshly, Gottman could quickly recognize that the argument was not going to end well. But he also identifies what he considers the four horsemen of the apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Criticism is usually the first of the horsemen to appear within a marriage. Complaints will inevitably arise and mistakes will happen like forgotten anniversaries or arguments about chores. However, once those turn to criticism, the beginnings of a doomed marriage start to appear. For instance, it's normal to complain about your partner for forgetting to do the dishes. But that complaint turns to criticism when you find yourself saying things like "You forgot to do the dishes again? You're so lazy!"

While criticism may happen occasionally, if left untreated, it can turn to the next dangerous horseman: contempt. Contempt involves mocking behavior and expressions of disgust designed to make your spouse feel useless or small. If your partner is consistently making you feel useless, you might find yourself becoming angry over time and lash out. This then turns into the next horseman: defensiveness. For instance, if a criticizing partner scoffs at your spending habits, you may reply "I don't spend that much! I know lots of people who spend more than I do." This defensiveness won't solve any problems and will eventually turn into the fourth horseman: stonewalling.

Stonewalling is when a partner has received so much criticism and contempt that they detach themselves from the conversation and respond with phrases like “uh-huh” or “sure.” They will even avoid face-to-face interaction to avoid their partner. These four horsemen are the signs of a troubled marriage and should be dealt with when they begin to appear. This isn't to say that a marriage can't be saved if they have hit the stonewalling stage, Gottman believes that marriage that seems to be doomed can be revived, but with the proper help.

# Principle One - Enhance Your Love Map

How much do you know about your spouse? Perhaps you know exactly what makes them tick, what motivates them, and what makes them truly happy. Couples that know everything about the other person have what Gottman considers a detailed love map. Similar to how a road map tells you how to get to your destination, a love map shows you how to know and love your partner. The more detailed the map, the stronger the love. I mean, if you don't know your partner, how can you love them?

The author tells us the story of Rory and Lisa, a couple who became distant from each other over the years. Rory, a pediatrician, ran an intensive care unit for babies and had several stresses that came with work. He would even stay overnight at the hospital, making for a strong work-life but a rocky home life. Rory spent so little time at home that he didn't even know the family dog's name or where the backdoor to his house was located. His love map was sparse and he was missing critical details that would strengthen his home life and marriage.

Couples who take the time to establish a detailed love map are much better prepared for stress and conflict when they arise. For instance, a new baby can drastically change the dynamic of a relationship and can change a partner's aspirations and life philosophies in an instant. A study showed that 67 percent of couples experienced dissatisfaction in their relationships after the arrival of a new baby, whereas 33 percent did not. Why such a difference? Well, those who stayed strong had detailed love maps that didn't allow them to lose their way. The lesson here is that the more you know and understand about your spouse, the easier it is to stay connected throughout life's seasons.

It's also important to remember that love maps never stay the same. Just as a baby can change the dynamic of the relationship, a baby can also alter a partner's love map. Take the example of Maggie and Ken who quickly jumped into marriage and started a family. Despite their short relationship,

they understood the ins and outs of one another: their fears, hopes, and dreams. At the time of marriage, Maggie was dedicated to her career as a computer scientist; however, once Maggie gave birth to her daughter, she put aside her career to stay home and take care of her. You see, having a baby can change your identity and values. This is incredibly common and Maggie was no different. With new priorities, Maggie's love map changed and Ken had to realign his own to stay on the same path as Maggie.



## **Principle Two - Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration**

How can you tell if your marriage is truly over? Is there a sign that there is still something left to hold on to? According to Gottman, there is! Let's take a look at Rory and Lisa again. Because of their struggles, they decided to see a counselor. While they thought all hope was lost, they were then asked to recall the early moments of their relationship. This exercise made them discover a glimmer of hope as they realized they still had some fondness and admiration for one another.

If a couple can look past their struggles and still speak fondly of each other when speaking of early memories, the relationship is still salvageable. The best test is to ask the couple to recall their past. If they can still put a positive spin on their past, they can certainly still have a happy future. However, if their memories are negative and distorted, then the marriage needs some serious help. We can look back at Rory who still spoke of Lisa with admiration and wanted to experience those feelings with her again. The key was to figure out how to get back to those feelings, so he changed his work schedule, trained someone to assist him at the hospital, and made sure to be home for dinner every night.

Fondness and admiration are fragile, but if you can remind yourself of your spouse's positive qualities even when your thoughts spiral to negativity and contempt, then you can keep your marriage above water. Simply assess your relationship by determining what you think of your spouse while they are away, do you think of him or her positively? Next, list three characteristics that describe your spouse. For each one, recall an incident that shows that characteristic in action. You can share this list with your spouse and communicate why you value those traits. You can do this as often as you like and choose different characteristics each time.

## **Principle Three - Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away**

What is romance to you? Hollywood makes it seem that romance is planning grand gestures like spending an exorbitant amount of money on a surprise trip or having extravagant dates; however, those gestures aren't what keep a marriage intact. Instead, it's the small, everyday mundane exchanges that keep the romance and passion alive. This means things like boring conversations are the key to a happy marriage.

You see, as humans, we often make "bids" for our partner's attention, support, humor, and affection. The other partner responds by either turning toward or away from their spouse. Those who turn toward their partner tend to have higher satisfaction in their relationship with romance, passion, emotional connection, and a good sex life. In other words, if you take a brief moment to pause and turn toward your partner at the end of the day when they want to unload their stresses, you'll likely have a more successful marriage.

Turning toward your partner can look like many small gestures. Perhaps you call your partner in the morning after a stressful meeting, check in on them during their lunch break, or give them a quick call on your way home from work. These small gestures, which can turn into a habit, should never be taken for granted. Remember these small moments of gratitude and appreciate your partner for taking the time to pay attention to you.

The more you turn toward each other, the more you invest in your emotional bank. This simply means that as you fill up your emotional bank with positive experiences, you build a cushion to help you maintain your positivity during times of conflict and stress. In other words, you can afford to lose more than other couples. To help build your emotional bank, keep a mental account of your emotional connections with your partner. You can certainly keep a physical account as well, give yourself a point each time you turn towards your partner and take a point each time you turn away.

It's important to avoid turning this physical account into a competition, instead, you should simply focus on what you can do for your marriage, not on what your spouse is or isn't doing.

Another way to build up your emotional bank is to have a conversation each evening about your day. For this to work, you both must be in the frame of mind to have this conversation. Some are ready to talk as soon as they walk in the door while others may need to decompress after the day. Some rules include:

- Spend 20-30 minutes talking
- Take turns throughout the conversation
- Avoid advising unless asked
- Be genuinely interested
- Show that you understand
- Take their side at all times
- Express a united front attitude. In other words, "we're in this together."
- Show affection
- Validate how they feel

Lastly, remember that marriage is a dance. Sometimes you feel drawn to your partner while other times you need to pull away. Everyone has different needs, some need connection and others need independence. Even if you and your partner have different needs, your marriage can work if you're willing to put in the time and effort to talk things through.

## **Principle Four - Let Your Partner Influence You**

As society moves to a more egalitarian culture rather than a male-dominated one, relationships are reflecting this change. It is shown that marriages who value one another equally and allow one another to influence their decisions turn out to be happier and more successful. For instance, one study revealed that when wives express negativity, they typically de-escalate the situation; however, when men express negativity, it often escalates the situation as they often use the “four horsemen” in an argument.

An example of this situation might be when a husband says “You’re not listening to me,” the wife typically responds with “Sorry, now I’m listening.” Whereas if the wife tells the husband that he is not listening to her, he will likely ignore her or get defensive by saying “Yes I am!” He may become critical and say “I never listen because you never make any sense.” Or the husband will display contempt and say something like “This is a waste of my time.” All of these reactions escalate the situation and can create more conflict and tension. These reactions should be avoided by both spouses but men must be aware of how detrimental these reactions are in a marriage.

Marriages where partners accept each other’s influence see success because they understand how to compromise and share their power. Some men openly admit and refuse to share their power, and while some claim this is due to religion, no religion says a man should be a bully. On the other hand, many men don’t even realize they are struggling to share their power with their wives. Research has suggested that women are much more emotionally intelligent than men, which is true in most cases. Of course, some women can have little or no emotional intelligence as well; however, this research simply proves that men who honor, respect, and recognize their wives’ intellectual strengths are more likely to listen to them.

We can look at the example of Jack. Jack was in the market to buy a used car and took an interest in Phil's car because it was a good deal. When they met up, Jack told Phil that he promised his wife that he would have it looked over by a mechanic before purchasing it. Phil openly scoffed at Jack's allowance for his wife to have a say in how he should purchase a car. He even stated that he would never have allowed his ex-wife to influence his decision. Jack jokingly wonders aloud if perhaps that's the reason his marriage ended in divorce. In the end, the mechanic found issues with the transmission, so Jack had his wife's influence to thank for preventing him from buying a faulty car.

An exercise in seeing how you balance the power of your relationship is to imagine you and your spouse as the only survivors after your cruise ship sinks. You find yourself on a deserted island and decide that you need to survive as long as you need, as well as make sure you are visible for when the search parties come. Gottman provides a list of twenty-six items (which can easily be found by googling 'Gottman Island Survival Game'). Independently, look over the list and choose the ten you feel are necessary. Then, rank them in order of importance. Next, share your list with your spouse and come to an agreeable list of ten. Play an active role in this conversation and make the final decision together. Once completed, evaluate how the game went and if either of you is having trouble accepting the other's influence. If there is, it's best to acknowledge the problem and talk it over.

## Principle Five - Solve Your Solvable Problems

Conflicts arise in every marriage, if they don't, then you're simply lying to yourself. Marriage involves the merging of two unique individuals, so it's unrealistic to think that spouses will agree in every situation. In every marriage, there are two types of conflicts. Those that can be resolved or are solvable, and those perpetual or ongoing conflicts. In fact, 69 percent of marital conflicts fall under the perpetual or ongoing category. The five main ongoing conflicts include:

- One partner wanting a baby and the other not being ready.
- One partner wants sex more frequently than the other.
- One partner rarely does the chores until the other nags them.
- One partner has a different faith than the other and both want to raise the children in their faith.
- One partner thinks the other is too critical of the children.

Though they disagree on these topics, these couples remain happy because they have found a way that works for them to deal with the differences. Sometimes it only takes bringing up the conversation calmly and paying attention to the physical signs of flooding to overcome the conflicts within a marriage. This simply means to pay attention to your facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice and make sure that they are appropriate throughout the conversation. For instance, if your wife is in tears, don't continue to raise your voice at her, instead, keep calm and soften your tone.

The model for resolving conflicts simply begins with softening your startup. If you bring up a touchy subject, like asking your partner to help with housework, a soft startup allows your partner to accept your influence and the conversation is more likely to be successful. Some ways to soften your startup is by avoiding blame. Make "I" statements, not "you." Don't judge. Be clear, polite, and appreciative. Lay everything out, don't store things up inside.

The second step is to learn to make and receive repair attempts. This simply means you should learn how to stop or pump the brakes when an argument gets out of hand. For instance, perhaps when you see your wife become flooded with anger and emotion, you put your arms around her to make her feel safe and repair the situation. It's important to know how your partner receives love, some may think that a physical touch is an act of aggression so a hug may not work in all cases. So it's not enough just to repair, but to learn how to repair effectively.

Lastly, you should find common ground and accept one another's faults. To find common ground, you should ask yourself: Where do we agree? What feelings do we have in common? What goals can we share? How should these goals be accomplished? If a solvable problem arises, finding common ground can help you find an agreeable compromise. However, you will not be able to compromise if you are unable to accept your partner's faults. Avoid the "if onlies" and be tolerant of each other's faults. Once you've mastered your problem-solving skills, you'll see many issues within your marriage begin to resolve themselves.

## **Principle Six - Overcome Gridlock**

What if you have conflicts that you can never get over? This is common in many marriages. Those perpetual conflicts can feel like a gridlock in which neither spouse can see their partner's view on a certain situation. You consistently feel caged as you and your partner have the same argument over and over again. The goal is to be open and talk about the problem, not necessarily solve it as it may be an unsolvable problem. But the good news is, you can learn to live with it by communicating with one another.

To overcome such gridlock, you must both recognize that gridlock occurs when one or both of your dreams are not being respected. When you feel respected, it's easier to compromise. For instance, let's take a look at Malcolm and Shelley. Shelley wants to get a degree while Malcolm wants to quit his job and start his own business. Their dreams are different, but as a happy couple, they sit down and discuss their dreams, talk it through, and come to an agreeable compromise. On the other hand, couples who don't appreciate the importance of supporting their partner's dreams will find themselves gridlocked with no end in sight.

Of course, gridlock isn't always on conflicts about following one's dreams. They can also occur when a spouse has expectations that may differ from the other. For instance, John and Amy disagree on how they should spend their Sunday evenings. John prefers Amy to cook dinner and eat at home because that's what his mother used to do for him, while Amy would rather eat out at a restaurant because that's what makes her feel special. They simply have a difference in how they feel loved; therefore, the couple must talk and overcome this issue by compromising and taking turns each Sunday.



## **Principle Seven - Create Shared Meaning**

When you hear the word “culture,” what do you think of? You may think about culture on a global scale where people share common beliefs, values, and religious practices. But culture can also be what you and your spouse create within your marriage. Each couple and family create their own micro-culture with their own customs, rituals, and traditions. This doesn’t mean that you have to agree on everything, but you must be willing to grow and develop as you create your culture.

We can look at the example of Kevin and Helen who entered marriage wanting to have independent careers, interests, and social circles. Because of their independence, Helen recognized her lack of connection with her husband. She simply felt like a roommate as they lived separate lives, so they decided to sit down together and discuss their past. They shared their childhood experiences and their family values with one another. Through this conversation, Kevin and Helen were able to connect on a new level and find some common ground to build their shared meaning.

To help create shared meaning, there are rituals that you must create that allow you and your spouse to connect. A simple phone call at lunch can be a small ritual that you adopt to show your spouse that you are thinking of them. Additionally, the roles we play significantly affect how we view one another and the world around us. You may have an idea of the role you wish to play in marriage, but you and your spouse must communicate those roles effectively to be happy. For instance, Ian and Hilary agreed that the husband should be the protector and provider while the wife should take on the nurturer role. On the other hand, Chloe and Evan viewed their marriage in a more egalitarian way in which they supported each other equally emotionally and financially.

Whatever roles and rituals you adopt, each spouse needs to agree with the roles and rituals chosen. Through compromise and communication, you

can enjoy a happy long-lasting marriage just like many of the couples seen throughout this book.

## Final Summary

A successful long-lasting marriage is possible. Even if you find yourself in the throes of a doomed marriage, there are steps you can take to recover and revive your relationship to what it once was. By applying the seven principles, you can learn how to communicate effectively, make agreeable compromises, and overcome solvable and perpetual conflicts. The key to a happy marriage is how you approach conflict, and when you adopt the four horsemen in your arguments, your marriage is certainly in trouble.

However, it doesn't have to be in trouble forever. By nurturing the fondness and admiration you have for your partner, you can be on your way to saving your marriage. Additionally, you should let your partner influence you and communicate the roles you wish to have within your marriage. Once you adopt and practice the seven principles, you can enjoy a happy marriage that is prepared to last a lifetime.



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