

Gottman's Marriage Tips 101

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Since 1973, Dr. John Gottman has studied what he calls the "masters and disasters" of marriage. Ordinary people from the general public took part in long-term studies, and Dr. Gottman learned what makes marriages fail, what makes them succeed, and what can make marriages a source of great meaning. By examining partners' heart rates, facial expressions, and how they talk about their relationship to each other and to other people, Dr. Gottman is able to predict with more than 90% accuracy which couples will make it, and which will not. What advice does Dr. Gottman have to offer? Below are some of his top suggestions for how to keep your marriage strong.

- Seek help early. The average couple waits six years before seeking help for marital problems (and keep in mind, half of all marriages that end do so in the first seven years). This means the average couple lives with unhappiness for far too long.
- Edit yourself. Couples who avoid saying every angry thought when discussing touchy topics are consistently the happiest.
- Soften your "start up." Arguments first "start up" because a spouse sometimes escalates the conflict from the get-go by making a critical or contemptuous remark in a confrontational tone.
- Accept influence. A marriage succeeds to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife. If a woman says, "Do you have to work Thursday night? My mother is coming that weekend, and I need your help getting ready," and her husband replies, "My plans are set, and I'm not changing them," this a guy is in a shaky marriage. A husband's ability to be persuaded by his wife (rather than vice-versa) is so crucial because, research shows, women are already well practiced at accepting influence from men, and a true partnership only occurs when a husband is able to do so as well.
- Have high standards. Happy couples have high standards for each other even as newlyweds. The most successful couples are those who, even as newlyweds, refused to accept hurtful behavior from one another. The lower the level of tolerance for bad behavior in the beginning of a relationship, the happier the couple is down the road.
- Learn to repair and exit the argument. Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Successful repair attempts include: changing the topic to something completely unrelated; using humor; stroking your partner with a caring remark ("I understand that this is hard for you"); making it clear you're on common ground ("This is our problem"); backing down (in marriage, as in the martial art Aikido, you have to yield to win; and, in general, offering signs of appreciation for your partner and his or her feelings along the way ("I really appreciate and want to thank you for..."). If an argument gets too heated, take a 20-minute break, and agree to approach the topic again when you are both calm.
- Focus on the bright side. In a happy marriage, couples make at least five times as many positive statements to and about each other and their relationship ("We laugh a lot") as opposed to negative ones ("We never have fun"). A good marriage must have a rich climate of positivity. Make deposits to your emotional bank account.