

A LINE ON LIFE

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Love, Commitment and Communication ¹

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What makes for success in a marriage? Current estimates for the United States are that about 1.2 million couples divorce each year, which affects about 2 million children. This is in spite of the fact that divorces have dropped since the mid-1970s. What qualities do couples need for a happy marriage that lasts?

Some say **love** is enough, while others add **commitment** to the requirements. For over a decade, psychologists Howard Markman and Clifford Notarius studied 135 couples who were planning to get married.² Of these couples, 103 eventually married. Of the married couples, 18 divorced and 3 were separated. These married couples have fared better than the national average. This difference is attributed to one-third of them participating in a divorce prevention and relationship-enhancing program devised by the two psychologists.

*"What are needed...
are skills in effective communication
and how to handle conflict."*

The program emphasizes **conflict management** and **communication** skills. For five weeks, the participating couples had 2.5 hour sessions given once a week. Comprehensive homework assignments required that couples practice communication and problem-solving skills. The partners also discussed the expectations they had for each other. (Without this training, few couples discuss their expectations.)

In their study, they found that certain behaviors predicted the collapse of a marriage. First, one partner – usually the man – withdraws from the conflict. Second, conflicts escalate and partners can't stop fights *"before they get ugly."* Third, they undermine their marriage by insulting each other.

Another psychologist, John Gottman, studied 2,000 couples over the last two decades.³ He found a similar formula for a successful marriage – *"A couple must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments in their marriage."*

"...one 'zinger' counteracts 20 positive acts of kindness."

Gottman links satisfaction to physiological responses to marital upsets. In his laboratory, Gottman measured various physiological changes – heart rates, sweating, and adrenaline levels – as couples discussed problem issues. During emotional stress, adrenaline is released, which leads to increased heart rate and respiration. In turn, this "floods" the partners with anxiety – a "flight or fight" response – leading them to escalate the conflict. Although this response might be linked to something that one person has said, small nonverbal cues can trigger this reaction. One partner may merely show a slight change in facial expression or tone of voice. This could be as small as "a raised eyebrow or a curl of the lip."

Whatever this nonverbal cue may be, the partner becomes conditioned to it. Every time the cue is given, the partner reacts in panic – as if s/he is being attacked. When this reaction becomes habitual, the partner is unable to think positively about the spouse. Good memories of the relationship may be lost. Some partners may not even be able to remember details of earlier, positive times at the beginning of the relationship.

Gottman believes that "compatibility is not the issue." However, couples need to discover the response patterns that provoke marital stress. Then they need to break the escalating cycles of conflict and appreciate each other – even with their differences – within their marriages.

Research seems to contradict some popular assumptions about marriage. First, they indicate that partners do not need to be completely compatible to have successful marriages. Second, marriages that repeatedly flare up with disputes can survive as successfully as peaceful marriages. Third extramarital affairs are not necessarily caused by problems within a marriage, and they will not necessarily end a marriage.

In a study of over 200 couples, psychologists Shirley Glass and Thomas Wright found that two-thirds of marriages survived **infidelity**. If the wife is unfaithful, the marriage is more likely to end in divorce. Since women are more likely to become emotionally involved, they are more likely to have a detachment from the spouse, which is hard to overcome. In addition, men find it more difficult to deal with a spouse's affair. In Glass' words –

"But you never know. Sometimes when people are able to talk about their anger and their hurt, and the other partner really listens, that detachment and contempt can shift."

In other words, if *both* partners make repeated efforts to **communicate** – if they really talk with and listen to each other – even the most difficult obstacles can be overcome. Love and commitment are necessary for a successful marriage, but they are not enough. Open communication between partners is a factor that makes a difference.

1 Adapted from Randall Edwards' article, "New tools help gauge marital success," *APA Monitor*, February, 1995, page 6.

2 Details of their research are in their book, *We Can Work It Out*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994.

3 Details of his research are in his book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, Simon and Schuster, 1995.

