



# PROTECTING YOUR MARRIAGE

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## THREE TYPES OF STABLE AND SATISFYING RELATIONSHIPS

Researcher John Gottman identified three main conflict-management styles within intimate relationships. These styles, while very different, are considered stable, satisfying, and couples who use them are less likely to divorce.

### **The Volatile Type**

Couples with this pattern fight often and their arguments are intense. If the couple can resolve their differences without overwhelming the positive aspects of their relationship, these relationships can be considered fulfilling.

### **The Avoidant Type**

This style minimizes, and even makes light of, each other's differences. The need to resolve conflict is low, but there is a deep-seated need for harmony. They are able to affirm what they love and value within their marriage, focus on the positive, and accept the rest. They can end a discussion without resolution and still feel good about one another.

### **The Validating Type**

Validating couples are able to identify areas of conflict and express their opinions openly and with honesty, without their interaction becoming negative and harmful. They are able to retain their emotional closeness and loving sentiment while

resolving differences and disagreements. (Gottman, 1995)

Consider a simple plant. It is living, growing, and needs water, sunlight, air, fertilizer, and good soil to help it grow and thrive. Withholding the needed elements or introducing toxic ones would cause the plant to wither and die. Marriage relationships are like the plant. Certain actions and interactions can help it thrive, while others can harm or even destroy it.

## RELATIONAL CARE

Just as a plant can temporarily endure harmful or mildly toxic elements, a relationship can tolerate some negative interaction and still grow. But if toxic components continue at high levels, neither plant nor relationship will survive. Researchers agree that for a relationship to endure, each painful and negative interaction needs to be countered with five positive and meaningful interactions. They also agree certain negative styles and severely toxic elements can overpower this 5:1 rule.

## TOXIC PATTERNS IN MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIPS

Researchers Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg have identified four critical elements that, if present in a relationship and not corrected, cause significant damage and may eventually lead to divorce.

### Escalation of Argument

Escalation is a communication style where each person makes statements that overshadow or exceed the previous comment. Often the subsequent remarks are no longer on topic but are primarily designed to win the argument or hurt and attack the other person. This exchange of increasingly more toxic verbal attacks is extremely hurtful and if not corrected, can do lasting damage.



### Invalidation

This toxic pattern destroys positive feelings and undermines trust. Criticism and verbal put-downs are used to belittle and shame the other. These comments reflect an overall contempt that implies, "I am so disappointed in you." These cutting remarks can be direct and brutally caustic, or subtle, such as withholding praise when it is due or switching topics to deflect positive comments away from the deserving person. Finding fault, complaining about mistakes, and ignoring positive characteristics or behaviors is another destructive and painful variation of invalidation. Markman's research has shown this pattern is one of the strongest predictors of divorce.

### Withdrawal and Avoidance

Withdrawal, such as leaving the room, getting quiet, or emotionally shutting down during stressful and important discussions, is a common, yet destructive pattern in relationships. Avoidance is blocking or keeping important discussions from occurring. These styles of interaction, if prolonged, are also predictive of divorce. Often, in an effort to connect, one person begins an almost relentless pursuit of the other. The second person responds by withdrawing

or avoiding in order to protect self and reduce intense conflict.

### **Negative Interpretation**

This destructive pattern is based on gathering information from the words and actions of the partner, then consistently putting a negative meaning or spin on the interpretation. This inaccurate version is based on the deeply held belief that the partner's words have a destructive bias and a hostile intent. Such pessimistic and harmful explanations can be difficult to penetrate. The negative interpretation is founded on feelings, sensations and perceptions which are viewed as more trustworthy than any contrary evidence offered by the partner. Failure to view things openly, positively, or in the best light often will, in due course, devastate the cooperative integrity of the relationship. (Markman, 1997)

## **SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE YOUR MARRIAGE**

### **Forgiveness**

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)

### **Self-Control**

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1  
A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. (Proverbs 29:11)

### **Communication**

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)

### **Caring**

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

[Love] is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13:5)

## **PRINCIPLES OF INFLUENCE**

You can't really change other people very easily or effectively, but you can influence or even change your relationships. Rather than demanding that others change and commanding how they do it, try moving or repositioning yourself.

## **FACTS ABOUT MARRIAGE**

- Younger people in the U.S. who are marrying for the first time face roughly a 40-50% chance of divorcing in their lifetime. (U.S. Bureau of the Census)
- Poor conflict management in marriage predicts both marital distress and negative effects on children. (Gottman)
- Studies show issues present before marriage can predict, with 80-94% accuracy, which couples stay together. (Clements, Stanley, & Markman)
- Over 75% of people who marry partners from an affair eventually divorce. (Hein)
- Trust—more than friendship, laughter, forgiveness, compatibility, or sex—is identified as the element crucial for a happy marriage. (Harrar & DeMaria)
- A person's happiness level before marriage was the best predictor of happiness after marriage. In other words, marriage won't automatically make one happy. (Gottman)

Some possible ways to shift your position include:

1. Affirm others
2. Increase your respect for them
3. Listen to their underlying hurt
4. Validate others' worth and value
5. De-escalate your intensity when addressing key issues

## PRINCIPLES OF REPAIR

Bitterness and resentment follow the toxic interactions discussed earlier. If someone invalidates your position or feelings, or avoids important topics, it can result in painful and damaged emotions. Detoxifying your bitterness

is essential to move forward. Make a decision to cancel the emotional debt owed to you. Resolve to move forward as positively as you can. People want to be around those who make them feel good. Consider ways to be the kind of person your partner wants to be around. It's often easier to alter yourself to change the relationship than to change the other person. Eliminate some of the characteristics and qualities in your life that drive people away. Affirm, encourage, and validate your partner's positive characteristics and apply this simple principle: If you tell someone what they are doing right, they will do more of it!

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