

# Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet 1999  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
Campbell Hall  
1787 Neil Avenue  
Columbus, Ohio 43210

## Strong Families ... Strong Futures

# Building Successful Marriages

Joan Garrett,  
Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences, Clermont County

There is no denying that this a frightening time for American couples. Most couples face difficult strains on time, money and emotions. But in spite of these difficulties, there are ways that couples can build strong and happy marriages.

Psychologist John Gottman has spent 20 years studying what makes a marriage last. Through intense, detailed observations of hundreds of couples, Gottman has charted the invisible emotional currents between husbands and wives that are experienced as harmony or discontent in relationships.

### Conflict: A Key to Happiness?

Many couples tend to equate a low level of conflict with happiness and believe the claim "we never fight" is a sign of marital health. Gottman contends, however, that "a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship." Growth in relationships comes from learning how to reconcile differences.

Gottman identifies three different marriage types based on problem solving strategies implemented by couples. In a validating marriage, couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise. In a conflict-avoiding marriage couples agree to disagree, rarely confronting their differences head-on. Finally, in a volatile marriage, conflicts erupt often, resulting in passionate disputes. Following one of these three problem solving styles won't guarantee a happy marriage.

These styles work only to the degree that they allow an individual to achieve the right balance between positive and negative interactions with his or her spouse. Gottman's research determined that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula. No matter what style a marriage follows, the couple should have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if their marriage is to be stable.

### Nurturing the Marital Relationship

There are many ways, large and small, that stable couples might show their positivity.

- **Show Interest**—Interest can be signaled by truly listening and being involved in a conversation—timely "uh-huhs," nods, and direct eye contact are key indicators.
- **Be Affectionate**—You can show affection in subtle ways through quiet acts of tenderness: touching or holding hands or a quick shoulder massage.
- **Show You Care**—Small acts of thoughtfulness are a powerful way to boost the positivity in a marriage. Run an errand for your spouse, prepare a favorite meal, or do something special out of the ordinary.
- **Be Appreciative**—Positive energy can be invested into a marriage simply by appreciating it. Let your spouse know that he or she has done something that pleases you. Acknowledgment helps them feel loved and confident enough to share further expressions of love.

- **Show Your Concern and Be Empathic**—Whenever your spouse tells you about something distressing or troubling, express your concern. Be supportive when your spouse is worried. Having empathy requires putting yourself in your spouse's shoes and relating to his or her emotional state.
- **Be Accepting**—Instead of attacking or ignoring your spouse's point of view, try to understand the problem from his or her perspective. See if the other viewpoint may have some validity. Summarizing your spouse's point of view during an argument is another form of acceptance, even if you still disagree.
- **Fight Fair**—In a fruitful argument, each spouse explains why he or she is mad while the other one listens—with respect. Long-term happy couples tend to argue calmly. Loss of control—yelling and sobbing—seldom helps solve problems. Successful couples de-escalate anger by suggesting a compromise or solution.
- **Have Tolerance**—At the beginning of a romance, a person's habits may seem unimportant or even endearing, but over the long term, his nightly snoring or her thing about never raising the window shades can begin to grate. The most successful couples acknowledge that many problems are unsolvable and learn to work around

them. The ability to forgo perfection is vital for relationship satisfaction. A successful couple continually focuses on their relationship's strengths.

## Maintaining the Desired Relationship

Marriage relationships are constantly evolving. Feelings of love may wax and wane during a relationship, but trust and commitment must be constant. Successful couples don't take each other for granted but work constantly at rejuvenating their good feelings for each other. The most satisfied couples put as much thought and energy into their relationship as they put into their children or career. A couple must renew and enrich their relationship again and again.

## Bibliography

Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. Fireside.

Klagsbrun, F. (1985). *Married people: Staying together in the age of divorce*. Bantam.

Lauer, R., & Lauer, J. (1986). *Til death do us part: How couples stay together*. Haworth Press.

Sternberg, R. J. (1990). *The psychology of love*. Yale University Press.

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:  
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>