

## Predictors of Relationship Failure

As a result of studying hundreds of couples over several years, psychologist John Gottman claims he can predict divorce with 91% accuracy. However, there are many myths about relationship red flags.

### Disaster Detectors

**Directions:** Mark any of the behavior patterns below that you think are signs of troubled twosomes.

- 1. The inability to resolve conflicts and a lack of important communication skills.
- 2. Partners avoid conflicts altogether.
- 3. A partner(s) has emotional or personality problems.
- 4. Partners have different values, goals, and interests.
- 5. A partner makes complaints about tasks that were not done—*I wish you had ...*
- 6. A partner blames or criticizes—*You are so ...; What's wrong with you?*
- 7. Discussions start off with criticism, sarcasm, or contempt (*harsh start-ups*).
- 8. A partner expresses contempt with name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, and hostility.
- 9. A partner defends him- or herself with explanations, excuses, and reassurances.
- 10. One partner *stonewalls* the other's attempts to talk by looking away, acting deaf, or leaving.
- 11. During disagreements, one partner becomes physically *flooded*—heart races or sweats.
- 12. Negative thoughts about partners outweigh the positive.
- 13. A partner(s) has mostly negative memories of dating, their wedding, or first year together.

Fortunately, the first five patterns are common in many good relationships. Most marital conflicts do not get resolved. While skillful communication can come in handy, it cannot save a marriage. A couple may avoid conflicts or be prizefighters, as long as they have similar styles for handling disputes. Mates can accommodate each other's eccentricities when they make their quirks mesh and not clash. Values, goals, and interests can be different, but partners need to know and support each other's pursuits.

### Steps to Successful Relationships

If a relationship meets certain basic criteria, it can weather the storms of character flaws, knock-down-drag-out fights, and even withstand an affair. Dr. Gottman identified seven fundamental requirements in successful marriages. They are summarized as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Build your bond.** All relationships begin with an attachment bond—whether that is between parents and children or spouses. The source of attachment is knowledge; self-disclosure is the glue of intimacy. The acronym OPEN suggests ever-deeper levels of self-disclosure: Observations, Perspectives (views), Emotions/ Experiences, and Needs. Make trivial pursuit questions for each partner that increase knowledge of each other's friends, family, missions, philosophies, fears, and secret desires.
- 2. Focus on positives.** All people have quirks and annoying habits. The reason that happy couples tolerate them is that their positive thoughts about their partners and their relationship outweigh the negatives. Their marital cup is half full—not half empty.. Remember what first attracted you to your spouse. Describe her the way a compassionate higher being would. Pick three positive words to describe her. Turn weaknesses into strengths—a messy person may be creative. Remind yourself of her good qualities often, especially when you are feeling fed up.
- 3. Connect in little and big ways.** Asking for a hug, going for a walk, pointing out what the dog just did, and (of course) having sex all count as connecting. The ritual good-bye and hello kiss are all important. *How was your day?* yields more details if asked: *What happened at the meeting? Tell me something good the kids did before the bad news.* Choose good times to talk. Be sure to take your partner's side when he is venting and refrain from giving advice. People have varying needs for connection and independence. If you and your partner have major differences, discuss how to

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by J. M. Gottman and N. Silver, 1988, New York: Crown Publishers.

make little changes to adapt to one another.

4. **Share power with your partner.** Men who do not share power have an 81% chance that their marriage will self-destruct. Women often complain that men do not do their share of chores and childcare. However, some men are people pleasers, and the woman is the decider. Sharing power means considering your partner's feelings and opinions before making major decisions. Accepting a spouse's influence strengthens friendship. Learn to yield to win—consider ways to meet your partner's request. Evaluate yourself: *Are you interested in your spouse's opinions? Do you learn from your spouse? Can you find things to agree with in your partner's position?* Acknowledge any problems accepting influence. Have your partner gently point out times when you are dominating or disrespecting her (or him).
  
5. **Solve solvable problems.** Only 31% of a couple's problems are solvable. This means they are due to a difference of opinion or a temporary situation, and can be resolved through compromise. Steps to solving problems:
  - (a) **Soften harsh start-ups** by complaining and not blaming (*I wish you had ...* vs. *You are so ...*); avoiding the words *never* and *always*; and making specific requests—*Would you ...*
  - (b) **Make ongoing corrections** kindly—*Let's get back on topic, not lecture, lower our voices, take a break, hang in a little longer.*
  - (c) **Self-soothe** if someone gets flooded (see disaster #11) by separating for 20 minutes and using calming distractions—exercise, read, work puzzles.
  - (d) **Reach a compromise** (eventually) by focusing on areas of agreement, brainstorming options, and identifying what you can each give up.
  
6. **Work with perpetual problems through dialogue.** Some conflicts are due to core differences in personalities, temperament, and backgrounds. Your heart's desire is a part of your identity. When differences are viewed as dreams, judgment is removed. A Nancy Neat longs for cleanliness and order; Mr. Messy craves a safe haven from rules. Clashing goals require partners to...
  - (1) understand underlying dreams
  - (2) validate desires or traits; and
  - (3) support aspirations.Then, the issue can be discussed peacefully without being resolved. The problem is identified; nonnegotiable areas are stipulated; areas of flexibility are defined; temporary compromises are reached; and the ongoing conflict is returned to periodically.
  
7. **Build shared meaning.** As two people become a *we*, they accumulate stories of their struggles, victories, and family histories; create rituals for mealtimes, daily partings, birthdays, holidays, and entertainment; define unique pursuits and common passions; and decide who does what. Their partnership develops a distinct identity. This additional glue holds them together in troubled times and keeps them from becoming two ships passing in the night.