

## What Does Research Tell Us About Healthy Relationships?

Dr. John Gottman is a leading researcher in marriage and couples issues and has been studying relational dynamics for years. His work has been helpful in understanding the complex interactions between individuals in a couple and how those interactions impact the durability of the relationship.

### Two Types of Couples:

#### Healthy/Regulated

- Have increased couple satisfaction
- Less likely to experience flooding, which refers generally to feeling overwhelmed emotionally (described more later)

#### Unhealthy/Unregulated or Hostile

- Have decreased couple satisfaction
- Increased use of the Four Horsemen (described more later)
- More likely to experience flooding
- Less able to calm own emotional reactions or to soothe partner

### Five to One Ratio:

Healthy couples have a 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative behaviors. Unregulated couples have a much lower ratio of positive to negative behaviors.

#### Positive Behaviors

- Expressions of Humor
- Affection
- Interest
- Joy

#### Negative Behaviors

- Expressions of Anger
- Contempt or Disgust
- Whining
- Sadness
- Fear and Tension

### Three Types of Healthy/Regulated Couples:

#### 1. Validating

- These couples handle conflict in an open and cooperative manner; they exhibit increased positive emotions and a respect for each other's opinions
- They believe in emotional expressiveness, but in moderation, at the right times, and only on central issues
- There is an emphasis on "we-ness" and companionship
- They peak in their attempts to influence their partner in the middle third of the interaction, which is the agenda building or negotiation phase.

#### 2. Volatile

- Like the validating couples, this type of couple handles their differences in an open manner, but in a competitive manner
- They exhibit a high frequency of negative emotions and an attempt to persuade their partner's opinion. During conflict, these couples begin their persuasions attempts right away, which remains high throughout the interaction
- They are the most emotionally expressive of the three types. Positive and negative feelings are freely expressed.
- These couples show high levels of affection and humor in the midst of an argument; they use a "we against them" stance.
- Men who prefer volatile relationships are just as likely as women to bring up issues.

- They value openness and honesty and like to see strength in one another and are very supportive of mutual independence.

### **3. Conflict-Avoiding**

- These couples confront their differences covertly, downplay negative emotions, and focus on their similarities.
- They minimize the importance of the problem at hand; they gossip; they focus on the strength of the relationship; they reiterate their shared beliefs; they reaffirm their commitment to one another; and they end conversations with a note of optimism
- These couples will, at times, explore their emotions because their goal is acceptance, but any emotional expression is usually low-key.

### **Mismatched/Unregulated Couples:**

- It is ideal for the relationship when partners have the same kind of conflict resolution pattern. Although to others the relationship will look dysfunctional, it generally works out for them.
- When people have different conflict resolution patterns, several problems can arise. These couples find themselves stuck in problems they cannot resolve which causes both of them emotional pain and leads to negative ways of interacting.
- Both individuals exhibit personal attacks.
- Both have a decrease in positive emotions.
- There is an increased intensity in conflicts.

### **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:**

- All couples exhibit negative behaviors that are damaging to the relationship. However, couples that are unregulated exhibit an increased amount of damaging behaviors.
- The most damaging of these behaviors are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They show the relationship is in crisis and are shown to be predictors of divorce.
- The Four Horsemen are also found in healthy couples, but are much more frequent in unregulated couples and without the repair attempts found in stable relationships.
- The behaviors that make up the Four Horsemen are: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Withdrawal (also referred to as Stonewalling).

#### **One: Criticism**

- Attacking someone's personality or character rather than a specific behavior and is usually accompanied with blame.
- Any statement that implies there is something globally wrong with one's partner, something that is probably a lasting aspect of the partner's character.
- Any statement that begins with "you always" or "you never" is a criticism rather than a complaint.
- Example: "You talked about yourself all through dinner and didn't ask me anything about my day. How can you treat me this way? What kind of a self-centered person are you?"

#### **Two: Defensiveness**

- Any attempt to defend oneself from a perceived attack. A general stance of warding off a perceived attack.
- A common defensive mechanism is where someone rarely admits they are wrong and instead blames the other partner for not somehow preventing the mistake, which makes it their fault.
- Usually this includes denying responsibility for the problem by diverting, deflecting, attacking, or defending, which fuels the conflict.
- Example: "How about when you explode into a tantrum?"

#### **Three: Contempt**

- Any statement or nonverbal behavior that puts oneself on a higher plane than one's partner.
- The facial expression of contempt, such as eye rolling, is particularly corrosive to relationships.

- Contempt is the single best predictor of divorce; it is found heavily in unregulated couples and essentially zero in happy relationships.
- Example: “It’s not, ‘I could care less,’ it’s ‘I couldn’t care less.’ At least get that right!”

#### **Four: Stonewalling/Withdrawal**

- Occurs when the listener withdraws (through physically leaving or emotionally shutting down) from the interaction.
- Non-verbal behavior expresses the withdrawal, such as few glances, looking away or down, stiff neck, saying little, concealing or lack of facial expression.
- 85% of Stonewallers are men; when women stonewall it is very predictive of divorce.
- Men usually stonewall as an attempt to decrease their state of being flooded and to self-soothe.

(Reference: Gottman, John (1999). The Marriage Clinic. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, NY.)

#### **Websites:**

For additional information about relationships, here are some helpful links:

Fighting Fair to Resolve Conflict:

<http://cmhc.utexas.edu/booklets/fighting/fighting.html>

### Self-Help Books:

1. John M. Gottmann and Nan Silver (2004), *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.
2. John M. Gottmann (2002), *The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships*.
3. Matthew McKay (2009), *Messages: The Communication Skills Book*.
4. Harriet Lerner (1990), *The Dance of Intimacy*.
5. Harriet Lerner (2002), *The Dance of Connection: How to Talk to Someone When You're Mad, Hurt, Scared, Frustrated, Insulted, Betrayed, or Desperate*
6. Deborah Tannen (2001), *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*.

### Virtual Pamphlet Collection:

The Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection was originally developed by Dr. Robert Hsiung. Clinicians at the Marquette University Counseling Center have reviewed and selected the information most relevant to their students for this website. An [unabridged version](#) of the Virtual Pamphlet Collection is currently available on Dr. Hsiung's independent website.

A virtual pamphlet put out by another university may refer to services available only to students at that university. Marquette University students should refer to the **List of Services** offered at the Marquette University Counseling Center.

- Bill of Dating Rights – Texas Woman's University
- Common Questions About Relationships, And Some Answers – SUNY at Buffalo
- Conflict Resolution – Massey University
- Coping with a Breakup – University of Texas at Dallas
- Friendship Building – University of Florida
- Making Friends – Massey University
- Handling Common Relationship Problems – University of Florida
- Healthy vs. Unhealthy Relationships – Texas Woman's University
- Long Distance Relationships – Missouri University of Science and Technology
- Thinking about Sharing a Flat? – Massey University

Linda- Can you please link the above bullets so they can be clicked on.