

Helpful Advice for Strengthening Your Marriage

Gauging the Health of Your Marriage:

Too many couples — especially Christian couples — expect perfection. If you're going through a rough patch, is it possible that you're making a mountain out of a molehill? Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist and the founder of the Gottman Relationship Institute, has identified six criteria to consider when gauging the health of your marriage:

1. **High levels of friendship, respect, affection, and humor** — This is defined as liking each other, being each other's best friend, doing things together; showing interest in and respect for the other's thoughts and feelings, avoiding put-downs, supporting each other's goals and aspirations, feeling affection for each other, having fun and laughter together, being number one in each other's eyes.
2. **A ratio of 5:1 or better of positive to negative interactions** — This means that your relationship averages at least five pleasant, friendly, or loving experiences or periods of time for every hostile word, angry argument, or time spent feeling hurt or resentful. And 5:1 is the minimum!
3. **Successful "bids for attention"** — When a wife says, "Hey, listen to this!" she is trying to get her husband's attention for a conversation. If the husband keeps on scrolling through Facebook, ignoring her, he's turning away her bid for attention. If he says "Huh?" and lifts his eyes off the sports page for a second or two, he's turning toward her — a good sign. And if he actually listens to what she has to say, that's a real connection! In successful marriages, partners turn toward each other an average of 86 percent of the time. In divorcing couples, the average is 33 percent.
4. **Soft starts of disagreements** — In successful marriages, disagreements are started softly, without critical, contemptuous remarks about the other person.
5. **Husband accepts influence from wife** — In successful marriages, husbands accept influence from their wives. If a wife says she's afraid her husband is driving too fast and he responds in irritation, "I know what I'm doing!" this is a shaky marriage. There must be give and take in a relationship. Research shows that women are accustomed to accepting influence from men. So it's crucial that men learn to do the same!
6. **Respect for each other's needs, likes, dislikes, and inner life** — They ask questions to find out; they listen; they care!

Helpful Advice for Strengthening Your Marriage

Advice from long-term married couples:

- **Don't keep secrets from each other** — Be transparent. There are so many biblical truths reflected in being real and honest with each other. When you have that kind of trust in your relationship where you can share kind of the hidden parts of your heart together, it builds intimacy.
- **Don't hold grudges and forgive each other** — The Bible tells us, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger..." (Ephesians 4:26 ESV). Unresolved anger is where bitterness can start, and lead you to start thinking, "I've gotta find the exit door because this is too much. I'm overwhelmed."
- **Don't dwell on conflict** — For some reason, we never seem to focus on happy things; it's always all about the budget, raising children, spiritual frustrations, etc. You certainly need to deal with your disagreements and issues, but always find ways to lift up the joy in your marriage and family. And maybe try harder to understand your spouse's point of view!
- **Love changes because we change** — People change over time; spouses change over time. You will never have the "perfect soulmate" because God will use the differences in your personalities and styles and preferences to make you a better person.
- **Support each other's interests** — Find ways to encourage and motivate each other. Part of loving someone is allowing them to become the best person they can be. Be willing to try new things and focus on having fun together. This advice is especially important for empty-nest couples who need to find new ways to share life together.