

Relationship Tips 101

By Dr. Tanja Haley

In this article I'd like to share what the research shows as being very helpful for keeping relationships strong and connected. Since 1973 Dr. John Gottman has been studying what he calls the "masters and disasters" of relationships. From these studies he has been able to predict with 90% accuracy which relationships will last, and which will fail. Dr. Gottman suggests the following tips to keep your relationship strong:

- **Seek help early.** The average couple waits six years before seeking help for relationship problems (and keep in mind, half of all relationships that end do so in the first seven years).
- **Edit yourself.** Couples who avoid saying every angry thought when discussing touchy topics are consistently the happiest.
- **Soften your "start up."** Arguments first "start up" because a partner sometimes escalates the conflict from the get-go by making a critical or contemptuous remark in a confrontational tone.
- **Accept influence.** A marriage succeeds to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife. If a woman says, "Do you have to work Thursday night? My mother is coming that weekend, and I need your help getting ready," and her husband replies, "My plans are set, and I'm not changing them," this is a guy in a shaky marriage. A husband's ability to be persuaded by his wife (rather than vice-versa) is so crucial because, research shows, women are already well practiced at accepting influence from men, and a true partnership only occurs when a husband is able to do so as well.
- **Have high standards.** Happy couples have high standards for each other. The most successful couples are those who refused to accept hurtful behavior from one another. The lower the level of tolerance for bad behavior in the beginning of a relationship, the happier the couple is down the road.
- **Learn to repair and exit the argument.** Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Successful repair attempts include: changing the topic to something completely unrelated; using humor; stroking your partner with a caring remark ("I understand that this is hard for you"); making it clear you're on common ground ("This is our problem"); backing down (in marriage you have to yield to win); and, in general, offering signs of appreciation for your partner and his or her feelings along the way ("I really appreciate and want to thank you for..."). If an argument gets too heated, take a 20-minute break, and agree to approach the topic again when you are both calm.
- **Focus on the bright side.** In a happy relationship, couples make at least five times as many positive statements to and about each other and their relationship ("We laugh a lot") as opposed to negative ones ("We never have fun"). A good relationship must have a rich climate of positivity. Make deposits to your "emotional bank account".

If you are in a relationship where there is a climate of negativity and/or you are not feeling as close to your partner as you'd like, don't avoid the signs. Seek help early if you need to, and start to build up the positivity that may currently be missing. The key seems to be having a healthy "emotional bank account", and aforementioned seven tips can give you a head start.

If you would like to learn more about Dr. Gottman's research, please visit his website at:

www.gottman.com