

## **The State of Marriages: Are there Insights to Be Learned from Greeting Cards?**

### **Part II**

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In last month's article I described my experience attempting to buy a birthday card for my wife Marilyn. I noted that over the years I have read many birthday, anniversary, and Valentine's Day cards intended to be given from husbands to wives. Most began with an expression of regret for not stating often enough "I love you" or for not displaying affection or for not spending enough time together. I quickly determined that the apologetic cards far outnumbered those that did not voice regrets. I also judged that they did not reflect my behavior towards Marilyn. Fortunately, Marilyn agreed with this assessment and she liked the card I gave her this year. I tend to gravitate towards those cards that contain few words and focus on feelings of love rather than apologies. I find the fewer words on the card, the more words I write, which makes the message more personal and meaningful.

My experience buying the latest card for Marilyn prompted me to reflect on our marriage as well as other marriages, including couples I have seen in marital therapy. In "googling" the words "happy marriage," many citations appeared. I decided to review those pertaining to Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist who has conducted extensive research in the areas of marital harmony, marital stability, and divorce. Among his books, he is the author of *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. As noted in last month's article, Gottman developed a model that he claims predicts which newlywed couples will remain married and which will divorce within four to six years. He asserts that his model has 90% accuracy and is predicated on the ways in which couples argue. In the October article I described the signs Gottman identified as predicting divorce and added some of my own commentary. In this month's article I will turn to those practices that Gottman contends contribute to happier marriages or partnerships.

### **Principles of Happy Marriages**

Gottman offers guidelines for successful marriages, claiming, "My Seven Principles make the secrets of marital success available to *all* couples." Prior to outlining these seven principles I should offer the cautionary note that some professionals have

taken issue with Gottman's assertion that his *revolutionary* approach makes marital success available to *all* couples. I too am skeptical when I hear the claim that a technique is *revolutionary*. Also, making "secrets available" for *all* couples can be inferred to mean that these secrets will work for 100% of the population. Having information available is not the same as the information being used successfully. Some partners in a marriage may not be motivated to make changes, especially if one or both members of the relationship are beset with strong emotional issues.

However, given these caveats, I believe that similar to the factors that predict divorce described in last month's article, the seven principles of successful marriages can provide guidelines for couples not only to assess the state of their marriages but also to consider changes that will enrich their relationships. The seven principles together with my observations of each follow (please note that while I primarily use the word *spouse* in this article since Gottman's work centers on marriage and divorce, the principles are relevant to any relationship between two adults that involve intimacy; thus, in many instances the word *partner* may be substituted for *spouse*):

*Enhance your love maps.* Gottman defines a love map as your knowledge about your spouse, including your spouse's dreams, hopes, likes, dislikes, and interests. When conducting marital therapy or in my workshops about family relationships, I frequently pose questions pertaining to this principle, such as:

"What is a major dream that your spouse has?"

"What are two or three activities your spouse enjoys?"

"What are two or three activities that are not of interest to your spouse?"

"If there are differences between your likes and interests and those of your spouse, how do you handle these differences? What accommodations do you make for each other?"

Knowledge of our spouse's interests does not suggest that we have to share all of the same interests for a relationship to survive. Hopefully, there are many activities that couples engage in together, but this should not imply they need to be clones of each other. I smile as I write this as I think about one of Marilyn's passions, namely, reading mystery books, which is not of great interest to me. Fortunately, she has friends who possess the same excitement about these books as she does. I should note that in the past

two years I have become more interested in mystery novels and have benefited from Marilyn's book recommendations (I am proud to report that in February Marilyn began a wonderful blog reviewing mystery books; this blog may be found at [www.marilynsreads.com](http://www.marilynsreads.com)). One of my major interests is sports, which is not on the top of Marilyn's list, but I have some close friends and my two sons Rich and Doug with whom to discuss this topic.

Obviously, to have the kind of loving marriage that Marilyn and I have experienced for more than four decades indicates that we do have many common interests and, even more importantly, we hold similar values, including a strong commitment to each other and our family.

I believe that relationships are enriched when we encourage our partner to engage in activities that they enjoy even if we do not join in. Of course, this is a relative statement. If the time spent on individual interests eclipses the time spent in our relationship, then alienation instead of enrichment will be present.

*Nurture your fondness and admiration.* This implies focusing on your partner's positive qualities and the positive feelings you possess for each other. It may seem obvious that relationships will be strengthened when we do not take our spouse for granted and when we openly and comfortably express our feelings of appreciation and love. Yet, too often these positive messages are not voiced or they tend to diminish with each passing year of marriage. If this were not the case then why are so many greeting cards filled with words of apology?

In my clinical work with couples I have witnessed how seemingly simple acts of appreciation, whether saying "thank you" for a favor rendered or bringing home flowers or even sending a brief note (e-mail) can have a very uplifting impact.

*Turn toward each other instead of away.* This involves sharing your thoughts and feelings and maintaining a connection with each other. One of the most common complaints I hear in marital therapy, more often communicated by wives about their husbands, is a lack of communication. I recall one woman who said, "I have to guess what my husband's feeling. Even when we're in the same room together, I feel we're apart. And when I do try to let him know how I'm feeling, he tells me that I'm too emotional. Is it any wonder that at this point I'm hesitant to discuss anything?"

This wife's lament highlights that sharing one's thoughts and feelings must be done with respect. Accusing one's spouse of being "too emotional" is certain to end any meaningful discussion; it represents several of the signs that Gottman outlines as predictive of divorce.

*Let your partner influence you.* While it is essential that spouses maintain their own identity, Gottman asserts it is equally important that they learn to compromise. Different viewpoints and behaviors will exist in any relationship, but if one partner is unwilling to budge over any issue, the relationship will be marked by anger and resentment.

Unfortunately, some couples have a great deal of difficulty engaging in compromise. Given their own histories, some perceive compromise as giving in or losing face. Others remain entrenched because they believe their spouse is never willing to see their point of view or to alter their own behaviors. A common refrain is, "Why should I compromise when he/she never does?" In more solid marriages, each partner is willing to ask important questions, including, "Will a shift in my position without my abandoning my values lead to a stronger, more respectful marriage? If so, am I willing to take the first step?"

Another often heard complaint is "second guessing." I saw Larry and Jennifer in marital therapy. When Larry asserted that he and Jennifer shared equally in decisions she looked at him with a disbelieving expression. She replied, "Larry thinks we make decisions together, but he is always second guessing me. This just happened again when Larry asked me to plan our vacation. After I had made hotel reservations Larry began to wonder if I could have gotten better rates at another hotel. I think he was ready to question the cost of the airfare until I reminded him that I had used our frequent flyer miles."

In hearing Jennifer's perspective I could not help thinking about the "deal" Marilyn and I have struck. Marilyn truly enjoys planning our vacations including hotels at which to stay and restaurants at which to dine. Such planning is not one of my favorite pastimes. Thus, I leave it to Marilyn to arrange these details with some input from me. However, the rule is that if she plans the vacation, I am not to second-guess any of her

choices. I think I have done rather well in adhering to these conditions—and Marilyn will remind me in a pleasant way if I do not.

*Solve your solvable problems.* Of course, this principle implies that you are aware of which problems may be solvable, which is not always the case. Also, some spouses believe that the solution to the problem resides in their partner making changes. Gottman believes this principle is achievable by avoiding the steps that contribute to marital discord (please see last month's article). He advocates that you “soften” your start-up communication, learn to offer and receive repair attempts, compromise, and be tolerant of each other's flaws. Problems will not be solved if one spouse believes the other spouse is always in the wrong.

In my work with couples, I frequently ask them to make a list of several hotspots or issues in their relationship. I then request they select one problem on which to focus their time and energy, especially one that they believe can be resolved. Some couples who have had difficulty for years solving any problems have replied in a resigned manner that they question whether they can come to agreement about any issue. However, I emphasize that we can learn from but not feel defeated by past obstacles and that it is best to select a problem that has the potential of being solved more rapidly and easily than other issues confronting the couple.

Back to Jennifer and Larry and second-guessing. I asked them what area they would like to address first for improvement. Interestingly, it was not what I anticipated since it was not directly related to second-guessing. Rather Jennifer said that over the years Larry has offered fewer and fewer words of appreciation to her, whether about making vacation plans or cooking a meal he obviously enjoyed or changing her schedule to take their kids to sports practice when one of his business meetings ran beyond the scheduled time.

Upon hearing Jennifer's feelings, Larry at first became defensive, claiming he thought he did convey his appreciation. However, Jennifer, rather than meeting Larry's reply with her own defensiveness, validated what he said (validation does not mean you agree but rather that you are attempting to understand the other person's view). She responded, “I know you feel you provide a lot of positive feedback. I feel there are times

you do, but at other times you don't. It would mean so much to me to hear that you appreciate what I do and to hear that you care about me."

Some husbands, especially in a deteriorating relationship, might have dismissed Jennifer's comments with a remark such as: "You're too needy and demand too much from me." The fact that Larry replied, "I do appreciate all that you do and I will make more of an effort to express what you mean to me" suggested that the foundation of their marriage was on a more stable ground than may have been obvious at first.

Larry's words were very reassuring to Jennifer. She said, "And I will do the same with you. I don't like this feeling that we are growing apart."

Consequently, Jennifer and Larry identified providing expressions of appreciation and love as the first problem to be solved. They worked very diligently and successfully to address this problem. They would not be seeking greeting cards filled with words of apology.

*Overcome gridlock.* This principle requires understanding your partner's feelings and communication. It involves what my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have emphasized in our writings, namely, the ability to be empathic, to see the world through the eyes of your partner and to validate your partner's point of view. Jennifer demonstrated this behavior when instead of questioning Larry's genuineness or his perception of reality she said to him that she could understand that he felt he was providing positive feedback. Once she validated his belief, he was less defensive in hearing her differing viewpoint.

Empathy is a critical skill in any relationship. It is for this reason that I often ask spouses to see the world through the eyes of their partner. I request that they consider the following questions:

"How would you like your spouse to describe you?"

"What have you said or done so your spouse is likely to describe you in the way you would like?"

"How would your spouse actually describe you?"

Think about how you would answer these questions and what steps you would initiate if how you hoped your partner described you was very different from the words they actually used to describe you.

*Create shared meaning.* The seventh principle requires identifying shared values that connect you and your spouse through rituals and traditions. I often ask couples about traditions that are features of their marital and family life. I believe that traditions add meaning and commitment to the relationship. As one example, Sam Goldstein and I have advocated that couples and families engage in “charitable activities,” that is, activities that enhance the well-being of others. This can be accomplished through endeavors at one’s place of worship or through such charities as a “Walk for Hunger,” “Walk for AIDS,” or “Walk for Breast Cancer Research.”

An important ritual is to ensure that meals are eaten together at least several times a week. In addition, a couple, especially with children, should strive to set aside a regular time to be together to discuss common interests, including their relationship. When our sons were growing, Marilyn and I found it important to go out almost every Saturday night in order that we might focus on strengthening our relationship, not only in our role as parents but in all aspects of being a husband and wife.

### **One Additional Principle**

I’m certain many of us can suggest other principles to enhance a marital relationship. I would like to add an eighth one that may be embedded in the preceding seven, but that I think deserves to be highlighted separately, namely *playfulness*. Playfulness encompasses the capacity to joke and laugh with each other, to tease in a loving way, and to be child-like (not childish) at times. Obviously, when spouses are angry with each other, it is difficult to be playful; at those times joking will be interpreted as sarcasm. But playfulness and humor, when used appropriately, can help to defuse stressful situations and strengthen the bond between the couple.

### **Concluding Remark**

Gottman’s principles of marital happiness can provide guidelines for strengthening relationships. Some couples will be able to apply Gottman’s suggestions more successfully than other couples, especially when a foundation of respect and love already exist. The task of following Gottman’s recommendations will be more daunting when anger, resentment, and emotional issues faced by one or both partners serve as roadblocks to achieving a satisfying marriage. In that case the couple may require professional help if they are to preserve their relationship.