

This information is based on the book “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work” by John Gottman. Overall, I felt that the book is very good. The first half of the book was very good (through principle 4). The second half was a little muddled for me and didn’t feel quite as effective but was still pretty good. The book is pretty balanced for both women and men. From my point of view, this can be a ‘self help’ book and is very exercise oriented. The book also includes a mix of narratives of couples with problems. The narratives were useful to help understanding and were not over-long.

The book is based on the author’s research at a ‘love lab’. The recommendations are based on studies of couples over an extended period of time. Of course, the concept of an analytical approach appealed to my engineering nature – but the author didn’t dive very deeply into this (which is good). The author feels that making a marriage work is ‘surprising simple’. I don’t know that I’d necessarily agree with that, but I do agree that the foundations are pretty straightforward. The trick is really engaging in the principles and actually changing (which is hard for people).

A basis for happy marriage is rooted in having an emotionally intelligent marriage. I feel this is about the individual being emotionally aware (and emotionally intelligent) and making good choices in the relationship and its interactions. The research into the emotionally intelligent marriage is synthesized into seven principles that help make a marriage work and happy:

1. Enhance your love maps (the couple’s knowledge and understanding of each other)
2. Nurture your fondness and admiration (be friends)
3. Turn toward each other instead of away (sending and being open to positive overtures)
4. Let your partner influence you (compromise)
5. Solve your solvable problems (conflict resolution)
6. Overcome gridlock (recognizing and coping with unsolvable problems)
7. Create shared meaning

Therapy and Marriage myths

The author points out how lots of marriage counseling fails. His view is that a lot of counseling focuses on communication, active listening, and conflict resolution. These things are good and useful, but they do not really get at the root causes for the conflicts and issues. And note that fights and issues commonly arise in good marriages and in bad. The author suggests that the seven principles give you resilience and/or allow you to deal with the issues in a smoother, less damaging way.

The author talks not just about communication but also a variety of other marriage myths including:

- Communication and resolving your conflicts (good to do, but not the only tool or answer)
- Personality problems (don’t ruin marriages if you are aware and deal thoughtfully with them)
- Common interests (aren’t necessary, but a lack of them can be a problem with poor interaction)
- Reciprocating (doesn’t help if there is a ‘ledger’ of balance)
- Avoiding conflict (isn’t necessary if you have some effective way of dealing with the conflict)
- Affairs (are the result of relationship issues, not the cause – they are the consequence)

The foundation

The basis of the seven habits is that happy marriages are based on a **deep friendship**. This means a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other’s company. They know each other’s likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams.

The structure of a happy relationship is based on this relationship attunement. This, along with the seven principles, is directly related to trust and commitment. Assuming the worst about your partner leads to a negative sentiment override that prevents building trust and commitment. The key to avoid this is to better attune to each other and make friendship a top priority.

One technique that couples use to make sure fights do not get out of control is a repair attempt. A repair attempt is any action or statement that prevents negativity from escalating. They can be serious, heart felt, silly, or whatever. Part of the deal here is that the receiving partner has to recognize the attempt (and in troubling relationships even if it is wrapped in snark or tone).

The author also mentions that most marital arguments cannot be resolved. They are not usually about the thing that triggered them – they are really about fundamental differences. And these fundamental differences cannot be addressed because people can't really change those fundamental characteristics. What couples can do is to learn to live with the difference and honor and respect each other.

The foundation

Warning signs of troubled/unhealthy relationships include:

- **Harsh start up**
(starting out negatively and/or accusatory)
- **The four horsemen** (and they don't always go in order)
 - **Criticism**
(criticizing the person – as opposed to complaining about a behavior or event; criticizing often includes phrases like 'you always' or 'you never'; complaining includes 1) how you feel, 2) about what, 3) what you want)
 - **Contempt**
(disrespect of the partner, often a form of a sense of superiority; often fueled by long term negative thoughts about the partner; belligerence is often an aggressive form of contempt)
 - **Defensiveness**
(defensiveness is often a way of blaming the partner (the problem is you not me); a common form is the 'innocent victim' stance; defensiveness mostly escalates the conflict)
 - **Stonewalling**
(stonewalling is effectively withdrawal)
- **Flooding**
(emotional overload)
- **Body language**
(the author is really talking about physiological response - increased heart rate, sweating, nausea; your body feels in danger and goes into a fight or flight response – the amygdala doing its thing; you are not rational or capable of humor or problem solving in this state)
- **Failed repair attempts**
(the four horsemen do appear in good relationships but the couple has good repair mechanisms)
- **Bad memories**
(good relationships tend to remember their early days positively; failing relationships often rewrite history and remember their early days negatively; couples in failing relationships forget or distort the reasons they were attracted to each other)

In this section the author talks briefly about some gender differences (although there is some controversy):

- Men tend to do a lot of the stonewalling/withdrawal
- Men tend to respond badly to flooding/emotional overload and the body language (physiological) response
- Women tend to remain composed longer and recover faster

The author also talks about the 'end game' of a failing marriage. He says the four final stages are:

- The couple sees their marital problems as severe
- Talking things over seems useless. (They try to solve problems on their own.)
- The couple lead parallel lives
- Loneliness sets in

He notes that when couples come in they appear calm and don't argue. The scary thing is that in this mode, the time to dissolution of marriage is very long.

Principle 1: Love Maps

Love maps are the couple's knowledge and understanding of each other. This is basically working on being close friends. This includes knowing things about your partner like:

- Best friends
- Current stresses
- Life dreams
- Beliefs and ideas
- Philosophy of life
- Favorite (or disliked) music
- Special times in their life
- Aspirations
- Hobbies
- Birthday, anniversary, other important dates

The section on love maps includes several exercises on finding what your maps are and updating them:

- General love map exploration
- Open-ended questions – to really dive deep to understand your partner
- Who am I?
 - Triumphs and strivings
 - Injuries and healing
 - My emotional world
 - Mission and legacy
 - Who I want to become

Principle 2: Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration

People who like each other tend to be happily married. Well, duh! Liking each other means that you have fondness and admiration for each other. But fondness and admiration can be fragile and require care.

Examples of fondness and admiration:

- What do you admire most about your partner
- You find some way to say 'I love you'
- You find your partner attractive (sexually and physically)
- You feel accepted by your partner
- You are proud of your partner
- You can describe why you married your partner
- Your partner likes your personality

Is your partner worthy of honor and respect? (If you don't think so, things are in a serious state.)

The section on fondness and admiration includes several exercises:

- I appreciate...
- History of your relationship
- Philosophy of your relationship
- Cherishing your partner
- Seven week course in fondness and admiration

Principle 3: Turn Toward Each Other

In interactions, couples can turn towards each other or away. Couples usually make 'bids' for each other's attention, affection, humor, or support. These are basically small and big ways to connect with each other. And turning toward your partner is the basis of trust, emotional connection, passion, and a satisfying sex life. The first step is to be aware of how important these mini-moments are and to respond to them. Some examples that indicate you are primed for turning towards each other from an exercise are:

- We enjoy doing small activities together
- Looking forward to spending free time together
- Interest in your partner's views
- You are close or best friends
- Time goes quickly when you go out together
- We have lots of common interests or enjoy each other's interests

The obstacles to turning toward each other are 1) missing a bid because it's wrapped in some negative emotion and 2) being distracted by the wired world

Other exercises in this section are:

- Emotional bank account
- Stress reducing conversation
- Talking it out
- Positive sentiment override questionnaire

Principle 4: Let Your Partner Influence You

This section, for me, is fundamentally about control and compromise. Having to be in control and not accept influence is not a path to success (or even influence). I personally believe that control leads people to Win/Lose situations and in a relationship that means everybody loses. Both people in a relationship have to be emotionally intelligent and listen and be willing to understand the issues (surface and underlying) and work through compromise.

The section includes several exercises:

- Accepting influence questionnaire
- Yield to win
- The Gottman island survival game

Principle 5&6: Solve Your Solvable Problems; Overcome Gridlock

I combined several of the later chapters into this section about the two types of marital conflict – perpetual/gridlock and solvable. Perpetual/gridlock issues are ones that don't go away and can't be resolved. They tend to be gut-wrenching and intense with some underlying conflict that is the real issue. In solvable problems, they tend to be less intense and really about some current issue or event.

Problems happen all the time in good and bad relationships. It is important to be aware of and avoid perpetual conflict because it usually leads to emotional disengagement – gridlock. Signs of gridlock are:

- The conflict makes you feel rejected
- You keep talking but make no headway
- You are entrenched in your positions and unwilling to change
- When you discuss the subject you end up feeling more frustrated and hurt
- Your conversations about the problem are devoid of humor, amusement, or affection
- You become even more intractable over time leading to you vilifying each other
- Vilification makes you more polarized and extreme and less willing to compromise
- Eventually you disengage from each other emotionally

Solvable problems may sound simple, but can also cause a lot of pain. Note that just because it is solvable doesn't mean it is solved.

For dealing with conflict, the author has advice:

- Negative emotions are important (when your partner is in pain, you stop and listen)
- No one is right (there is no absolute reality in marital conflict)
- Acceptance is crucial (you have to understand, respect, and accept before you can be heard)
- Focus on fondness and admiration (remember you love each other)

The author has a new/different model for conflict resolution that includes:

- Soften your start-up (don't go to the horsemen – criticism, contempt, ...)
- Learn to make and receive repair attempts (de-escalation, humor, ...)
- Soothe yourself and each other (author notes that men take longer to calm down)
- Compromise (both partners have to compromise for a good relationship, one side can't have it all)
- Process any grievances so that they don't linger

The author says that gridlock is usually a sign that there is some dream of one partner's life that the other isn't aware of, hasn't acknowledged, or doesn't respect. The author's definition of dreams is: hopes, aspirations, and wishes – the things that give your life meaning. These may be explicitly understood and visible, but they may also be hidden – even to the person they belong to.

Across these chapters, there are several exercises:

- Telling the difference between solvable and perpetual/gridlock
- Assessing your marital conflicts
- Harsh start-up questionnaire
- Softened start-up
- Repair attempts questionnaire
- Flooding questionnaire
- Self-soothing
- Soothing each other
- Finding common ground
- Processing a previous emotional injury
- Electronic distractions quiz
- In-law problems
- Money
- Quality of sex, romance, passion
- Detecting dreams

Principle 7: Creating Shared Meaning

The author closes the book and his principles with 'shared meaning' and 'what now'. He states that a crucial goal of any marriage is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her convictions and to pursue them. The four pillars of shared meaning that the author found are:

- Rituals of connection (evening dinner together, weekly family dinners, ...)
- Support for each other's roles
- Shared goals
- Shared values and symbols

Across this section, there are several exercises:

- Rituals of connection
- Roles
- Shared goals
- Shared values
- Using the four pillars to create meaning
- The magic six hours
- Marital poop detector
- An exercise in thanksgiving