

Book Review: The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman, PhD

Failed marriages are predictable. Such is the belief of John Gottman, author of the best-selling book, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. Gottman says “happily married couples aren’t smarter, richer or more psychologically astute from others, but keep their negative feelings from overwhelming the positive ones.”

After years of marital research, Gottman asserts that he is able to predict the outcome of a marriage (with a 91% accuracy rate) by noting the presence or absence of certain behaviors. “I can make the prediction after listening to a couple interact for as little as five minutes.” Couples who present with the following four behaviors will, Gottman believes, have unsuccessful marriages: criticism, contempt, defensiveness or stonewalling.

Criticism is different from complaining, according to Gottman. A *complaint* is bringing a difference of opinion or need to a spouse for discussion whereas a *criticism* involves making that complaint demeaning. “I wish you would take out the trash like we agreed,” vs “you are so lazy, you never do anything around here.”

Contempt in relationships can be seen through sarcasm, cynicism, hostile humor, mockery, eye-rolling or name-calling. Gottman views *contempt* as a way to convey disgust and when feelings of disgust are present, chances of reconciliation decrease. Being *defensive* harms relationships in two ways: The ability to listen and respond to a spouse who is attacking suffers while the attacker gains momentum. Gottman describes the *stonewalling* partner as the partner who does not give any casual feedback that would indicate he/she is listening. “Stonewallers act as if they could care less,” he says. The hurtful and non-productive system of spouses initiating conversations with *criticism* and *contempt* which then lead to *defensiveness* and *stonewalling* is common for many couples.

Rather than focus entirely on predicting the demise of marriages, the author gratefully shifts his focus to happy marriages and seven characteristics that make them successful. The idea of friendship being a foundation for a healthy marriage is reiterated throughout Gottman’s book and there are numerous exercises in the book to assist couples in becoming more connected with one another.

I believe couples searching for ways to change destructive patterns will find Gottman’s book a useful tool. He reminds us to focus on positive feelings which have been the foundation for the relationship and to remember the importance of our own behaviors within the relationship. He encourages us to spend time with partners. This book is a call to act with honor and respect within relationships.

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