



ONTARIO ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

(A Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy)

"Helping with life's most precious relationships"

10 WAYS TO GET THE RELATIONSHIP YOU ALWAYS WANTED

Relationships can feel extremely enigmatic at times. We are born into relationships; we have a longing for closeness, security and safety that can be found in a meaningful, respectful, and loving relationship. Many of us spend our whole lives searching for someone that we can feel truly connected to.

Statistics show that we have done a poor job of nurturing healthy relationships with our partners. According to John Gottman, the chance of a first marriage ending in divorce in the United States over a forty-year period is 67 %. Half of all divorces will occur in the first seven years, and some studies suggest that divorce rates are 10 % higher for second marriages. Divorce rates are slightly lower in Canada. Why are the numbers so high? We have learned ways of coping that often do not give us the opportunity for having our needs met in a relationship.

We are wounded people, and we carry those wounds into relationships. Our wounds can feel raw and vulnerable to attack. In order to protect ourselves from being hurt, we have all developed ways of coping. The problem emerges when our old ways of coping (which were probably necessary at the time and had a positive intention) become our current way of coping in a relationship. Most people cope with hurt, pain, sadness, and fear by either attacking (often in anger) or by shutting down or withdrawing from our partners both emotionally and physically; people often say that they are putting their "walls" up.

Couples get themselves stuck in negative patterns of relating to one another. One person's negative behaviour invites a negative response. For example, one partner does not feel like they are a priority to the other so they pursue the other in hopes of closeness (this is often interpreted as nagging), but the pursued feels smothered, so he/she may withdraw more, or lash out in anger which triggers more feelings of loneliness or separateness in the other, which then causes them to pursue more. These kinds of negative patterns are very common in relationships. The problem is that over time, these patterns become entrenched in the relationship, resulting in two people withdrawing or cutting each other off. This is a very dangerous time in a relationship; the relationship is vulnerable to an affair or ending in bitterness and regret.

So, how do some couples survive? Gottman believes successful couples have a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other from overwhelming their positive ones. Here are 10 things you can start doing now to get the relationship you always wanted.

1. Avoid what John Gottman calls *The Four Horsemen*:
Criticism
Contempt (i.e. sarcasm, eye rolling)
Defensiveness
Stonewalling (e.g. emotional cut off)
2. Avoid **blame**. Take **responsibility** for your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
3. Focus on the **positives**. We can easily become overwhelmed with the negative in a relationship which then causes us to respond negatively. Even in the midst of a difficult situation, there are still positives. **Change only happens when you focus on the positives.**
4. **Affirm** your partner daily. Tell your partner the things you appreciate about who they are and what they do.
5. Learn to speak each other's **Love Languages**. Chapman says there are 5 main love languages: Physical touch; Quality time; Words of affirmation; Acts of service; and Gifts. It is important that you speak your partner's love language, in other words, the way your partner receives love is the way you need to express love to him or her.
6. **Choose** your partner each day. Every day when you wake up, you need to choose to love that person today. Take steps daily to increase closeness and intimacy. Choose to turn towards your partner rather than away (withdrawing).
7. **Soften** your position. It is vital to learn how to **soothe** yourself in a relationship. When you are involved in a heated discussion and believe you are right and are entrenched in your position, you create a barrier between you and your partner. Learn to calm yourself, and try and place yourself in the other's shoes.
8. Make your relationship a **safe place**. We have a responsibility to open up to our partners, but we also have a responsibility to make it safe for the other to open up. Choose to **invite** the other person to open up by maintaining a soft and welcoming position.
9. Develop your **friendship** and make **time** for one another. People change on a daily basis, so continue to get to know your partner. Show that your partner is important to you; spend intentional time with one another.
10. Learn to **care for your self**. By caring for your self you will express your needs to your partner, you will set healthy **boundaries**, you will be able to soothe yourself, your level of tolerance will remain stable, you will have healthy ways to manage your physical and emotional stress, and you will have a better relationship

Kahlil Gibran, in *The Prophet* gives a beautiful picture of a healthy marriage. He says: “You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore. You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God. But let there be spaces in your togetherness, And let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone, Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with same music. Give your hearts, but not into each other’s keeping. For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together, yet not too near together: For the pillars of the temple stand apart, And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow.

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