

RELATIONSHIP MATTERS: Marriage Tips by Dr. John Gottman:
by SUSIE ITZSTEIN March 2004

"Keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life."
(Kahlil Gibran)

Greetings to Everyone from Seattle, U.S.A. where I spend about half of my time as this is the Home place of my partner and getting to be my second Home.
What a beautifully glorious time to return to the North West! Everywhere such an abundance of early Spring leaves and buds which are particularly noticeable in their bursting open on the deciduous trees and plants.....some already blossoming offering their magnificent blooms in all shades of pink.....each bud heralding the delights that each new Spring day will bring.....and tender little new shoots starting to break through the dark Earth..... what a wonderfully alive Spring energy all round.....matching the delight at Home in the Hills of early Autumn where the long stalks of the Easter lilies have broken through the summer hardened ground announcing the start of the next growth cycle....Life flourishes. The rhythms of our world move so naturally, so gracefully. Kahlil Gibran's words are appropriate: *"keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life."*

The seasons come and go in all their own unique glory and Mother Earth continues to gift us with enormous offerings and celebrations. I am in awe at the knowing of the plants when to send forth new shoots, new growth... to just **BE** in all their natural **GLORY and BEAUTY and TIMING....**for me it is a feeling of rightness, of a sense of peace, a lack of struggle. I had a beautiful walk this morning with a clear blue sky, soft billowing clouds here and there, warming sunshine against the crispness of the air.....I just Love Blossoms and the Northern hemisphere Spring so muchMy heart and cells are so full and ALIVE just drinking in such Beauty.....such Indulgence..... so I'm sending you a reminder note to indulge yourself on this exceptional beginning to March and Spring.....and Autumnit's so easy to get caught up in our busyness and forget.....and take it for granted.....and miss it.....

Seattle offers so many abundant resources in the area of relationships that regularly impact me. Today I would like to share with you about Professor **John Gottman** who is the Executive Director of the Relationship Research Institute here in Seattle, Washington. This Institute was created to foster research on marriage, couples, parenting and families.

Dr Gottman has gained international repute as a researcher who **KNOWS** what makes marriage last and what makes it fall apart. Yes **KNOWS!!** He is the author of many best-selling popular books on Marriage and Parenting (see www.gottman.com). His most recent works include: *The Relationship Cure; The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work; Why Marriages Succeed Or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last and The Heart of Parenting - Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child.*

Dr. John Gottman has studied what he calls the "masters and disasters" of marriage in his work at what the media has termed "The Love Lab" at the University of Washington where ordinary people from the general public took part in long-term studies. Applying strict scientific rigour his

team videotapes married couples as they go about a lazy day "at home" in the "love lab" and monitor physiological signs like heart rate and blood pressure as the couple discusses areas of conflict. By totting up the "positive" and "negative" interactions, checking "repair attempts" during fights, watching for incidents of contemptuous behavior, etc, Gottman is able to predict which couples will make it, and which will not with **a more than 90% accuracy**. In fact it is possible for them to predict which newlywed couples will divorce from the way partners interact **in just the first three minutes of a discussion**. Pretty stunning, hey! They examine among other things partners' heart rates, facial expressions, and how they talk about their relationship to each other and to other people.

So, what advice does Dr. Gottman have to offer? These are some of his top suggestions for how to keep your marriage strong.

Gottman's Marriage Tips: (The following is based on Gottman's [Marriage & Couples Self-Help & Tips](http://www.gottman.com/marriage/self_help/) - [http://www.gottman.com/marriage/self_help/.](http://www.gottman.com/marriage/self_help/))

- 1. Seek help early.** The average couple waits SIX YEARS before seeking help for marital problems once a problem is recognized (and keep in mind, half of all marriages that end do so in the first seven years). And only 1% of couples seek help.
- 2. Edit yourself.** Couples who avoid saying every angry thought when discussing touchy topics are consistently the happiest. Gottman says **there are two major times when marriages fail and couples divorce**: in the first seven years because of the presence of what he calls the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, (meaning disengaging and withdrawing)), and between 16 and 20 years because of the general absence of positive loving emotions. ("The Four Horsemen" need a full article to focus on them alone, as these are the strongest destroyers of marriages)
- 3. Soften your "start up."** Raise issues "softly". *Discussions invariably end on the same note they begin* That's why 96% of the time I can predict the fate of a conflict discussion in the first three minutes!" says Gottman, If you start an argument harshly by attacking your partner verbally it will usually escalate and make the conflict bigger. Eliminate criticism and contemptuous accusations. Replace them with complaints followed by a request for change. This is especially important for women who tend to be the ones who bring up the problems.
- 4. Accept influence.** A marriage succeeds to the extent that the husband can accept influence from his wife. Husbands who have the ability and willingness to listen to their wives, who attempt to see the validity of their arguments and make concessions have marriages that tend to succeed. He concludes that the husbands who have the ability to hear and appreciate their wives point of view are doing what predicts success. This 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. This is especially hard for men who may feel like they must stay in charge and make all the decisions.
- 5. Have high standards.** Happy couples have high standards for each other even as newlyweds. The most successful couples are those who, even as newlyweds, 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

6. 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 humour; 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, as in the martial art Aikido, 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.

7. Focus on the bright side - building an Emotional Bank Account. Marriages that are successful have a 5 to 1 ratio of positive statements to not so positive. For every negative comment/action they give at least **five** positives in return. A good marriage must have a rich climate of positivity. They daily make deposits to their partner's emotional bank account and fill it up so that it is "in credit" so that when there is a conflict one has in the back of their mind that their partner does love them even if it doesn't seem like it at the moment. Simply, fondness and admiration are the antidotes for contempt and judgment.

For Gottman, the foundation of a happy marriage is **FRIENDSHIP** with your spouse. Of the reasons given by couples for divorcing, absence of positive loving emotion and connection is the most common given by close to 80%, while only 40% give severe and intense fighting as the reason. The most important finding in his research is that **POSITIVE** loving and connection is the main variable that predicts both marital stability and happiness. Successful couples intentionally build their friendship with each other. They express fondness and admiration for each other. They express appreciation and gratitude to their partner building on areas of strength in the relationship. They decrease times of "turning away", and consciously "turn toward" the partner, especially when their partner makes "bids for connection".

As well Gottman categorically agrees with Dean Ornish (see) and says a good marriage benefits your health and longevity by boosting your immune system (and has research data to support it). He says: "I often think that if fitness buffs spent just 10% of their weekly workout time - say 20 minutes a day - working on their marriage instead of their bodies, they would get **three times the health benefits they derive from their workout!!**"

I was talking last month about the importance of doing something different. I invite and encourage you to have a go at doing something different from these tips that Gottman's research has categorically proven have the potential to transform your relationship. What new growth or new shoots does your relationship need? Or it might be some pruning that is needed of negative and hurtful behaviours. Small clue: if you don't know what needs changing ask your partner in a curious and loving way.

Above all, always notice, give attention to and be appreciative and **"keep you heart in wonder of the daily miracle"** of your partner and family. Take gentle care, Susie

(Please note Susie and Shelton are available to give free talks to local groups, organizations, associations, clubs, schools, churches,.....in fact any group or gathering of people that wants to find out more.)