

Celebrated Therapist John M. Gottman on Marriage and Divorce

John M. Gottman is one of America's best known counselors and researchers on marriage and divorce. The book that best sums up his contributions is *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, co-edited by New York Times author Nan Silver. The revised edition of 2015 is a book with which every divorce professional should be familiar.

The seven principles. The seven principles are: (1) enhance your love maps (things you know and appreciate about each other); (2) nurture your fondness and admiration for each other; (3) turn toward each other instead of away; (4) let your partner influence you; (5) solve your solvable problems; (6) overcome gridlock; and (7) create shared meaning.

Although these are framed quite differently from the seven elements of successful marriage that I postulated previously in this book, they are not inconsistent. Those prior elements are structural and address the personal and relationship characteristics of the parties and their marriage. Gottman's principles are formulated as a summary of the sound advice he offers to each spouse.

Gottman's homework projects. One of the many strengths of Gottman's book is the series of questionnaires that he provides for the reader to check out how his or her marriage corresponds with each of the seven principles. These are brilliantly constructed, and they could easily be assigned as homework by a marriage counselor. In his seventh principle, *create shared meaning*, which has to do with both compatibility and intimacy, he suggests rituals of connection, support for each other's roles, shared goals, and shared values and symbols.

Perpetual and solvable conflict. Gottman believes, as I do, that understanding marriage is necessary to fully understand divorce, and vice-versa. The key element is marital conflict and how it is to be handled. He identifies two basic categories of marital conflict, namely *perpetual* and *solvable*. Perpetual conflict is the arguments the parties may have to live with, even though they don't accept them. A key to the available options may be something like the famous Alcoholics Anonymous prayer: "Give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Gottman sets forth 10 hypothetical conflict situations and for each asks whether it is perpetual or solvable, and afterwards provides his analysis.

Effective and ineffective communicating. This book is centered around the kinds of communication that lead to effective resolution of conflicts in marriages. Therapists often use the term *communication problems* to describe marital conflicts, whereas a lawyer might instead think of those exchanges as *ineffective negotiating*. Each of these terms is a relevant perspective. The advantage of using both is that they each add a dimension to the real objective, which is finding ways to resolve the conflict. That in turn suggests an additional approach, namely treating the matter as an exercise in problem-solving rather than as just an exchange of emotionally-based positions.

Arguments about how to argue. Arguments can be over the substance of the particular dispute, but they also can be about the how the argument is to be conducted. Gottman calls the second category "meta-communication." Another term for the same

thing (that is, communications over how the parties communicate) is that they are process arguments. Let me illustrate this with one of Gottman's examples:

Whenever Brian and Allyssa have a disagreement, he quickly raises his voice. Allyssa feels intense stress when he yells and tells him to stop. Brian says he doesn't see anything wrong with yelling when he's upset. Allyssa starts to cry and tells him she can't take it. So they find themselves fighting over his yelling rather than whatever issue they disagreed about.

Gottman treats this as a perpetual conflict, since it has to do with the basic styles of each spouse in communicating rather than with the substantive matter to be resolved. Because of this, Brian and Allyssa may never even get to the presenting issue, which may very well have been solvable. A classic mediator tactic in a situation such as this would be to point out to Brian that his approach is counter-productive since he should know that it prevents Allyssa from even considering his point-of-view on the merits, and that he is therefore doing an ineffective job of negotiating. So, of course, is Allyssa.

In theory, process arguments should be easier to resolve, but because they often have an emotional component on both sides, they may actually be just as difficult as the substantive arguments, and at times even more so. One exception is well-known to many divorce mediators, namely when the mediator is able to point out to the couple that they are heatedly arguing over something they actually agree upon.

Arguments that resolve nothing. When the parties experience an argument only as a disagreement, which neither of them expects to lead to any particular decision or changes, it is simply dysfunctional communication, not a *negotiation*. It is also not a *sharing*, at least as therapists use that term. Such exchanges may give the parties an opportunity to "blow off steam," but seldom leave them with anything positive. They usually just result in more bad feelings that then become another part of their unhappy memories. In my native Montana we didn't need a technical term to describe these altercations. "Tossing crap at each other" says it all. If the spouses were only able to reframe their argument as a problem to be solved, they might then (and probably only with professional help) consider the possible options for resolving it.

Seven common causes of marital conflict. Gottman identifies the seven most common causes of marital conflict. They are work stress, in-laws, money, sex, housework, internet-fueled distractions, and a new baby. These can often be solvable conflicts unless they involve more intractable and basic personality attributes. Gottman suggests that many of the conflicts over these issues may be amenable to compromise.

The steps toward divorce. Prior to setting forth his seven principles for making marriage work, Gottman lays out what he sees as the steps toward divorce when a couple can't figure out how their marriage might be saved: These are:

- A harsh start-up;
- The "Four Horsemen" – criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling;
- Emotional "flooding" (overload);
- Negative body language;
- Failed repair efforts;
- Bad memories (often dredged up retroactively); and
- The end draws near.

When *the end draws near*, the spouses are aware that their problems are severe, that talking them is useless, that they live parallel lives, and they are both lonely. Even then, being the skilled therapist that he is, Gottman adds a brief subsection, “But It Isn’t Over till It’s Over.” Is there one last intervention that might save the marriage?