

MARITAL SCIENCE: A LETTER TO FRIENDS

Dear John and Jane,

This replies to your request for information, research based and empirically validated, that will enable you to rekindle the love, delight, passion and excitement that you had in the early years of your committed relationship.

Fortunately, after seventy years of marital science research, we now have the beginnings of techniques and strategies that actually work. This is largely due to the pioneering research of John and Julie Gottman. They observe couples in “love laboratories,” i.e. actual living quarters to identify what works and what does not work in keeping the fire alive.

FIRST STEPS

Let’s begin with a basic reality. If we are not happy with ourselves, we will not be happy with our spouse or significant other. For couple’s therapy to succeed, individual complicating variables or co-morbidities such as mental illness, addictions, domestic violence, extramarital affairs, trauma, etc. must be resolved.

Another basic issue is to understand and accept that marital conflict is healthy and inevitable when both spouses are relatively healthy. The critical dimension is sticking with the conflictual issue until it is resolved in a win-win manner, where both parties feel heard, loved and respected.

Research reveals that when the ratio of positive to negative emotions expressed during a conflict, as detected by trained observers, is 5 to 1 or higher, a healthy relationship is present. If the ratio is 1 to 1 or less, divorce or intense chronic discord results. As most of us know from bitter experience we readily slide into a negative ratio and it is extremely difficult to change the pattern. When the emotionally negative interactions become pervasive, the Gottmans term it “The Quicksand Effect.”

REPAIR EFFORTS

Effective repair efforts should be timely. The longer the disconnect, the more severe the estrangement. Repair efforts will most likely be very emotional as we share our frailty and vulnerability. The Gottmans suggest beginning the repair conversation with a gentle voice and the giant step of claiming responsibility for some part of the conflict.

Hopefully, John and Jane, you will then be able to move out of the “Attack-Defend” mode and assume a collaborative stance. Research shows that an attitude of mutual interest rather than self-interest must prevail for positive affect to return. In the same vein, rather than a “quid pro quo” or give to get attitude (Sometimes

called Pan Scale Love), people in fulfilling relationships experience mutual giving without measuring what they each contribute.

Another critical skill is to understand that behind or underneath every negative emotion there is a positive need or emotion. I call it “the real issue.” For example, I show you my anger and resentment but I hide my deeper feelings of being unloved, disrespected, unheard, unimportant or abandoned. What do we need to do to get connected and stay connected?

GOTTMAN’S MAGIC TRIO

John and Jane, I could tell you that marriage is like a house built on sand that has to be rebuilt every day. That idea might motivate some people but it might be empty words for others. A more measurable and researchable approach is to develop the ability to stay physiologically calm in the midst of conflict and to help your partner to stay calm. This is step one of the Magic Trio. When our heart rate is above 100 beats a minute and our oxygen level is below 95%, our ability to emphasize, listen, embrace humor or think well disappears. We are flooded with Adrenaline and Cortisol. Rational responses cease. Being a safe haven for one another ends.

Staying physiologically calm while in conflict requires the ability to self-soothe. Avenues to self-soothe are countless and include meditation, prayer, exercise, therapeutic resolution of the origins of the intense emotional reactivity, visualizing, et cetera.

The second part of the Magic Trio is building trust by tuning into one another. This means sharing and caring about our own feelings and our partner’s feelings. In marriage, feelings are more important than facts or opinions. How I feel equals who I am. I feel lonely or afraid equals I am lonely or afraid. If you do not tune into or care about how I feel you will not be tuning into or caring about me. Then I will not trust you.

The third ingredient is being committed to the relationship. How do we build and strengthen commitment? We do it by being responsive to our spouse in each and every interaction each day. This is the Gottman’s “Bid System.” Each time we say something to our spouse it is a “bid” for a response. Three possible responses are (1) Turning Toward resulting in a deepening commitment; (2) Turning Away causing unfulfillment or (3) Turning Against creating hurt, pain, frustration, anger or disgust. Research revealed that couples that eventually divorced turned toward their spouses at a rate of 33%; still married couples did so 86% of the time.

Another research finding that strengthens commitment is comparing your spouse in a positive manner to others. If negative comparisons prevail, divorce ensues.

FINAL THOUGHTS

John and Jane, I hope these brief thoughts are meaningful for you. I like the Gottman approach because it is clear, straightforward and very much in each

moment of each day. Our ageless wisdom said, "Never go to sleep at night angry with your spouse." Our modern marital science says "Unhappy couples get stuck in negative emotions due to failure of repair attempts." Remember marital conflict is healthy and inevitable. Be sure to get it resolved in a mutually satisfying manner before bedtime.

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at jimsue63@gmail.com.