

# The Challenge of Marriage

By Peter McFadden

*Dear Reader: in these coming pages, I will be open with you about the challenges my wife & I have faced in our married life. I will also be sharing with you some sobering research findings on marriage, but be assured, the bulk of these pages will be devoted to how my wife & I have used the research on marriage to chart a positive course in our married life.*

When my wife & I got married, over seventeen years ago now, we were convinced we would have a happy life together. Our courtship was exciting and we had a truly fantastic wedding day. I remember thinking the evening of our wedding, what a great way to start our married life together.

Little did we know that our wedding day would be a high point in our marriage, and we would begin the process of taking each other for granted as soon as the very next day.

It's only in looking back that I can understand what happened early in our marriage. At the time, the change in our relationship was so gradual we didn't even notice it.

A switch was flipped in both of our heads on our wedding day. We didn't think getting married would change how we felt about each other, but it did.

Without realizing it, I viewed our wedding day as the finish line of the courtship race, and I had won the race. Having won the race, I no longer felt the need to court my wife. I began to get comfortable in our relationship. Gradually and slowly I did less and less to nurture the romance in our marriage.

My wife also looked at our relationship differently after the wedding. Before we got married, we would talk excitedly about our future life together. With our wedding day, in my wife's mind, the future had arrived and the time for talk was over. She was eager to get on with the serious work of starting a family.

Before our wedding day, our focus was each other, having fun, and building our love. After our wedding day, our focus began to shift.

We did not realize this at the time, though there certainly were moments when we could sense that something had changed. We were about six months into our marriage before I realized we were actually less happy married than we had been dating and engaged.

This is not what I wanted to discover about our marriage.

I tried to figure out what we were doing wrong, but could not identify any significant mistakes we were

making. We weren't yet at a terrible place in our marriage, though, so I did not panic.

Three more months passed, however, and the slow decline we were in had continued. I still couldn't figure out what we were doing wrong. I looked into the future of our marriage, and I did not like what I saw. Marriage is for life. Where would we be if this slow decline continued for another forty years?

Looking into the future of my marriage spurred me into action. I thought to call three friends of mine, all of whom had been married for more than ten years. It seemed to me they all had good marriages, and would be good people to get advice from.

## Advice from Friends

I was shocked by what I heard from them. My first friend urged me to get over it. No one is happily married, he said. My second friend explained to me this is what happens in marriage: the initial passion fades and you end up bickering the rest of your lives, just get used to it. My third friend told me the key to surviving marriage was to have low expectations.

I remember telling my third friend I didn't think I hoped for too much. I told him I didn't expect a parade every time I came home. I asked him if it was too much to expect your wife to smile at you when you arrived at home.

He said, "Yes, it is too much to expect a smile when you come home. It is better to be pleasantly surprised than disappointed."

These three phone calls put me into a state of shock. I wondered, what I had done to myself by getting married?

Remarkably, this very night, the phone rings and it was the couple who had taught us Pre-Cana. They had had their fourth child, and couldn't teach anymore. They asked me if I could take over teaching the program.

My initial reaction was, are you crazy? But then I remembered years before I had an office next door to a marriage counselor. He had often told me about how excellent the psychological research on marriage was and that I should read it.

Years later, now married and in urgent need of learning how to be married, I finally decided to read that psychological research. I agreed to teach Pre-Cana, as I felt the challenge of teaching others would force me to do my own homework.

I immediately called that counselor friend of mine, and told him I wanted to learn about marriage from the best people in the field. He had read hundreds of books on marriage. I asked him to recommend the three best.

It took only a few days to read the books he recommended. I also found some talks on the internet by the same authors which I could download and listen to on my iPod while I worked out.

To my surprise, the suggestions I learned for how to strengthen our marriage and communicate more effectively were practical and simple enough that I was able to apply them quickly to our own marriage.

My wife & I felt the trend of our marriage shift in a positive direction in those few days, and we regained our confidence that we would have a happy marriage for the rest of our life.

It's now more than sixteen years later, and our confidence has only grown as our years together have reaffirmed our belief in each other. In my work teaching Pre-Cana, I've now met with more than five thousand couples, and I can see the same lessons we needed to learn have helped so many other couples.

### **The Challenge of Marriage**

Dr. John Gottman, a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, is the world's leading expert on marriage. His books, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, were the first books my marriage counselor friend had me read.

Dr. Gottman has a famous "love lab," popularly described in the book *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell, where he has been observing married couples interact for more than 40 years now. He has followed many couples for more than 30 years of their marriages.

What Dr. Gottman has learned about marriage is extraordinarily helpful to know. Here are three significant findings about marriage from his research:

1) In 80% of marriages, the success or failure of the marriage will not depend on a major event, but rather on the cumulative effect of small events. There are two types of small events: good small events and bad small events. The challenge of marriage is that the good small events tend to come naturally in the beginning (saying thank you and planning a nice time together, for example), but these good small events tend to trail off in marriage. Meanwhile, the small bad events (petty bickering and forgetting to say thank you, for example) tend to increase over time.

2) Only 1 in 6 married couples is truly happy. While this statistic is surely daunting, for me, at the time I learned it, it was a source of hope. My three friends had told me no one was happily married. What

this 1-in-6 statistic tells me is a truly happy marriage is probably not going to fall in my lap. It's an achievement worth working towards. As an important footnote to this statistic, Dr. Gottman and others have found the percentage of truly happy couples can be dramatically increased through marriage education. And, it is not hard to teach couples how to be married. The advice on how to have a happy marriage is actually pretty simple.

3) In 85% of marriages, the success or failure of the marriage depends more on the behavior of the husband. This finding surprised me, as I was raised to defer to women in relationships, as women tend to be better at relationships. I was excited to discover from the research that, as a man, "I'm relevant." I have come to embrace my responsibility as husband to make our marriage work, and I take pride in our happy family.

The reason why men's behavior in marriage is so significant is that it's the quality of sustained emotional connection between husband and wife that most determines the long-term success of marriage. Women, on average, are built for a higher level of emotional connection than men. Men tend to be satisfied with a lower level of connection.

Life is filled with challenges, big and small. The quality of emotional connection a couple maintains determines how strong a team they are in taking on these challenges.

### **Emotional Connection Makes for Strong Marriages**

In an emotionally connected marriage, even big problems make the marriage stronger, as the challenge reminds the couple they can rely on each other.

My wife & I suffered from infertility for four very long years, but thanks to the strong emotional connection we learned to establish, our marriage grew stronger over these four years. Each time my wife needed emotional support, she could see I was there to generously offer it.

The research has found that emotionally connected marriages get stronger once the couple becomes parents, as they can share the joys and challenges of raising children together (and, happily, my wife & I are now the parents of two beautiful adopted daughters).

In marriages where the emotional connection is weak, even a small problem can destroy the marriage. Shortly before our own wedding, we met an older woman who urged my wife not to marry me. She had explained she had divorced her husband over the laundry.

When I challenged her on this, she explained that one day she was doing his laundry, and realized she did not want to do his laundry anymore. In her mind, it was the laundry that made her divorce her husband.

At the time, I couldn't believe her, but now I understand. It wasn't the laundry that made her divorce her husband, it was the lack of emotional connection. But emotional connection is an abstraction, her frustration with doing laundry was very tangible.

As she was doing his laundry, she was asking herself: Why I am doing this man's laundry? He hasn't asked me how my day was in five years. He hasn't said I love you in ten. It was the underlying lack of emotional connection, not the laundry, that was the real issue.

It is extremely important to nurture emotional connection within marriage, and this is largely the responsibility of the husband, as husbands are more likely to neglect emotional connection.

According to my marriage counselor friend, the average husband, in the absence of bickering, is satisfied with just one positive connection per week with his wife. Meanwhile, for the average wife, she needs positive connections not only every day, but ideally throughout the day.

In my opinion, for the typical couple, marriage can only truly work if the husband strives to meet his wife's need for emotional connection on a daily basis. This is what I try to do in my own marriage. How to nurture emotional connection is the focus of my most important advice for marriage (*coming up in next essay*).

### **What Divorce Teaches Us**

The statistics on divorce, incidentally, confirm that a successful marriage largely depends on the husband's willingness to connect emotionally with his wife. Two-thirds of divorces in the United States are initiated by women. Among college-educated women, who have a greater ability to support themselves outside marriage, close to 90% of divorces are initiated by women. It is very hard for women to live without emotional connection in marriage.

It is important to say, there are exceptions to every rule. In some relationships, the man has a higher need for emotional connection than the woman. For these couples, my advice is the same, just in reverse: the wife should strive to meet her husband's higher need for connection each and every day.

And, for typical couples like myself & my wife, while the obligation is on me as the husband to meet my wife's greater need for connection, it doesn't mean my wife doesn't share in the responsibility for making our marriage thrive.

Early in our marriage, my wife & I attended a talk by my marriage counselor friend, and he surprised us by saying what husbands most need in marriage is to

feel admired by their wives. Men thrive when they receive concrete admiration. Alas, just as connecting emotionally does not come naturally for most men, it turns out concretely admiring men does not come naturally for most women.

Since that talk, my wife has made it a point nearly every day of our married life to admire me for things I do, both at work and at home. Statements like "thanks for working hard today," "I admire your passion for your work," and even something as simple as "thanks for taking the trash out" lift me up and increase my enthusiasm for life.

When my wife feels emotionally connected and when I feel admired by her, we both go about our days with an extra bounce in our step.

### **Positive-Sentiment Override**

Dr. Gottman has found that couples are either in what he calls "positive-sentiment override," or "negative-sentiment override."

What he means by this is, in emotionally connected marriages, spouses tend to interpret the behavior of their spouses in the most positive light. Conversely, when emotional connection is weak, couples tend to negatively interpret each other's actions.

For example, early in our marriage, when our emotional connection was weak, if I ever worked late, my wife took this to mean I loved my work more than I loved her. If she found my dirty socks on the floor, she took this as a sign I did not respect her.

Today, in our emotionally connected marriage, if I ever work late, my wife thinks of me as her hard-working husband. And, when she occasionally finds my dirty clothes on the floor, she thinks of how tired I must be after a long day of work.

Emotional connection helps couples see the best in each other.

The events of life tend to make emotionally connected marriages stronger and more sympathetic to each other. Conversely, the events of life tend to undermine marriages where emotional connection is weak.

Nurturing emotional connection is job #1 in marriage, and it is the topic of my most important advice on marriage coming up in the next essay.

Neither my wife nor I are perfect. We have many flaws. In many ways, life has not been easy for us. We are mediocre at many things. But, we've learned to be excellent at emotional connection, and this has made for a very happy marriage for us.

# My Best Advice for a Happy Marriage

By Peter McFadden

I like to explain my top advice for marriage the same way I came to learn it. While Dr. John Gottman's books, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, were great for providing the background research, it was a story told by Bill Doherty, a professor of Marriage & Family Therapy at the University of Minnesota, that helped me really understand marriage.

Bill Doherty is widely regarded as one of the wisest marriage counselors in the country and, nine months into my own marriage, I listened to a talk he gave that had an immediate and lasting impact on our marriage.

In his talk, Doherty spoke about a couple who came to him for counseling. When he asked what was wrong, it was the wife who raised her hand to say she was the one who was unhappy in their marriage.

What was her complaint?

When her husband came home from work, the dog would excitedly run out to greet him, and he would greet the dog with great affection. Then the children would run out, not as excited as the dog, but they were still happy to see him. He would greet the kids with warmth and tenderness.

In the wife's words, he was good with the kids, but better with the dog.

Then the husband would make his way to the bedroom, where he would change. Twenty minutes later he would track down his wife to ask when dinner would be ready.

The wife felt the dog held first place in his heart, the children were in second place, and she was not even in third place. She was tied with the furniture in regards to how much positive reaction she had received from him.

Her husband's obvious affection for the dog, and his tenderness with the children, made it all worse. She could see he was capable of the affection and tenderness she craved.

Bill Doherty asked the husband his point-of-view. The husband felt everything was fine. He was doing his job as husband as he knew it. He was working hard as a provider, he was a warm and responsive father, and he was not a critical husband.

Of course he loved his wife, and he felt she should know that.

One of the fundamental differences between men and women is that, for the typical man, no news is good

news. Men communicate they are happy by being quiet. If our wives are quiet, we assume they are happy, too.

Like many men, I like to think of myself as "rational." When I told my wife "I love you," I meant it. No need to say it again until I change my mind.

For the typical woman, on the other hand, no news is bad news. If I forget to call my wife to let her know how my day is going, she thinks something horrible has happened to me. If I stop saying "I love you," she thinks I have stopped loving her.

On average, women need positive communication more than men. On average, men are allergic to negative communication. We are satisfied with quiet.

The couple Bill Doherty saw is in many ways a typical couple that has settled into their marriage. For the man, the relative quiet of the relationship is tolerable. For the woman, it is not.

## The Couple Made Just One Mistake

Bill Doherty told the couple there was nothing wrong with their relationship, except for one thing.

Bill Doherty's important point about marriage is that the natural trend of marriage is for romance, affection, appreciation, and communication to decline over time, not because couples start to dislike each other, but because they get too comfortable together.

By natural trend, Bill Doherty does not mean that marriage must go downhill over time, just that it's not enough to be two good people for marriage to work. If you think marriage is all about choosing the right person, and then it should just work, your marriage will probably slowly decline over time as you take each other for granted.

To Bill Doherty, it is important to choose the right person, but it is also important to have a strategy to stay happy over your many years together. Doherty's big phrase is "the intentional couple," by which he means you need to be aware of what you're doing as a couple, and you need to have a plan to nurture the positive in your relationship.

He told the couple who came to him for counseling they were still capable of a happy marriage, but the key to a long-lasting happy marriage is... what comes naturally in the beginning, at some point you need to make it a habit.

Good marriage habits are the key to a long-lasting happy marriage.

Couples with marriages rich in habits, rituals, and traditions will be better suited to avoid the trap of taking each other for granted, and will keep the positive side of the relationship nurtured over time.

Bill Doherty gave the couple a homework assignment. Before their next appointment with him, they were to develop a daily ritual, something they would do every day for the rest of their married life together.

According to Bill Doherty, the most important moment in your marriage is the moment of reunion — it's how you greet each other.

### **Setting the Tone for Your Married Life**

How you greet each other sets the tone for your married life.

If you greet each other well, good feelings and good things tend to follow afterward. If you greet each other poorly, hurt feelings and missed opportunities tend to follow.

If you consistently greet each other well, you will look forward to seeing each other. If you are inconsistent about how you greet each other, you can lose that sense of excitement. If you criticize each other at the moment of reunion, you can become fearful of seeing each other.

Bill Doherty urges couples to be perfect about how they greet each other, and to develop a ritual for greeting each other to make sure every moment of reunion goes well.

Bill Doherty told the couple not only to develop a daily ritual, but ideally the ritual should be for the moment of reunion.

The couple went home, spoke to each other, and agreed it was their great shame that the dog was the most affectionate member of their family. They decided to develop the daily ritual, "Top the Dog."

The next day, when the husband came home, the wife ran out the door barking at him even more affectionately than the dog, and the husband in turn barked affectionately at the wife. They were even more excited than the dog to see each other.

Unbelievably, just like that, the couple was happy in their marriage again. They were two good people, but by taking each other for granted, they had allowed the loving feeling to dissipate in their marriage.

Now, thanks to a simple daily ritual, they had regained that loving feeling.

When I heard this story, I nearly fell out of my chair. "That's us," I thought. We did not yet have a child, nor did we have a dog, but already in the first year of our marriage, we were getting too comfortable as a couple.

I resolved to start barking at my wife. I figured if it could work for this couple, it could work for us. The only problem was I've never had a dog, and did not have a good ear for barking.

I decided to practice barking before my wife came home to see if I had an affectionate bark in me. After fifteen minutes, I deemed my barking too hostile, and feared my wife might run away if I ever barked at her like that.

I realized I needed to come up with my own daily ritual, and immediately remembered something my parents did that had made a strong impression on me when I was a little boy. My parents did it very rarely, but very occasionally after dinner my father would ask my mother to dance, and they would dance in the living room of our home.

Seeing my parents dance in our home was a beautiful memory for me. Realizing I couldn't affectionately bark at my wife every day, I decided to dance with her instead.

### **Dancing through Life Together**

And so, for the past 16+ years of our marriage, I've been dancing with my wife when I greet her. It is the first thing I do when I get home. I walk in the door, find her, and tell her, "I have to dance with you." On the days when I'm home first, I run to my wife when she enters the house, and tell her the same.

I calculate I have danced with my wife more than five thousand times over these past 16+ years as a result of this little habit of dancing with her at the moment of reunion.

All this dancing has completely transformed our marriage. Every day of our marriage, good or bad, has romance and affection in it. My wife & I are always excited to see each other. No matter how our days go, seeing each other is the highlight of our days.

But the dancing is not just romantic and affectionate, as important as romance and affection is. Dr. Gottman, in his research, found the key to being a well-connected couple is to have frequent and consistent *non-distracted* communication.

Non-distracted communication is important because over 90% of communication is non-verbal. Dr. Gottman has found even if there is a small distraction, important non-verbal clues will be missed in communication.

Dr. Gottman has said that anyone can recognize high-intensity emotion — if someone is very upset, for example. But, if you want to be good in marriage, you need to be good at recognizing low-intensity emotion. Can you tell when your spouse is a little upset, a little worried, or a little tired?

Dr. Gottman has found two minutes of non-distracted communication can be more important than spending a whole day together, if you are never fully focused on each other during that day.

My wife & I now have three daily rituals. Each involve about two minutes of non-distracted communication.

### **Non-Distracted Communication**

Dr. Gottman found if you can connect for two minutes in the morning, you will feel closer the whole day. When I learned this, even though I am not a morning person, I resolved to wake up a little earlier each day and have a cup of coffee with my wife.

Drinking coffee together is not our morning ritual, as even the coffee can be a distraction (and I am usually still waking up). It's when we are finished that I slap my knee and invite my wife to sit on my lap. We then ask each other what the other's day will be like. I also ask my wife if I can do anything for her that day.

Right from the beginning of the day, we have a ritual to nurture the romance, affection, and connection in our marriage. I find my wife more vividly lives in my heart during the day thanks to this morning ritual.

By asking my wife in the morning what I can do for her that day, we also nurture the sense we are teammates.

In my marriage, my wife is more attentive to the details of our lives than I am (do we need toilet paper, for example). She was feeling the burden of being responsible and often having to ask me for help. To be honest, I wasn't always consistent about following through on what she asked me to do.

My wife felt she had to nag me to get things done, and this was creating a near daily irritation in our lives. The breakthrough came when I realized I didn't have to wait for my wife to ask for help. I could volunteer first.

This is an important point because researchers have discovered when women are dating they want partners in romance, but when they marry they want partners in romance, plus partners they can rely on to help manage the responsibilities of life.

This is why, as part of our morning ritual, I ask my wife how I can be of help, and then I strive to keep my promise during the day. (Important point: I've begged my wife not to ask me to do too much on any given day. Great advice: couples should maintain a shared to-do app. I no longer forget what my wife asks for!)

Our morning ritual starts our day off on a good note, and our reunion ritual, dancing together, restarts our day together on a very positive note.

It's during our dance together that we really connect as a couple day in and day out. While we are dancing, I ask my wife how her day went, and thanks to there being no distractions (we don't even have music playing), I am able to not only hear her words very clearly, but I can also sense her mood.

We experience "purity of communication" when we dance because there are no distractions present, and it is thanks to this purity of communication I have become an emotionally responsive husband.

Thanks to the frequency and consistency of dancing with my wife, I have developed finely tuned emotional antennae. I am able to sense in my wife the subtle shifts in her mood, the low-intensity emotion that Dr. Gottman speaks about, because the frequency of our connections allow me to notice the subtle changes in her facial expression and the tone of her voice.

According to the marriage research, couples are always drifting apart, until they reconnect. If the connections are too infrequent, the couple will drift farther apart before the next connection, and the sense each holds of the other will become less vivid.

### **Frequent, Consistent Connection**

Thus, the key to a well-connected marriage is frequent and consistent connection. Well established daily rituals are the surest means of accomplishing this consistency of connection.

For couples with opposite work schedules or who travel apart frequently, daily rituals are still possible. I often work late and get home after my wife has fallen asleep. On these days, we rely on a fall-back ritual of a short FaceTime call (we dance via FaceTime!). If the phone call goes unanswered, we send "video kisses" to each other (using the text message app on our phones).

The daily rituals my wife & I have are each only about two minutes long. Even when we are busy, we can find time to include them in our day. These rituals help us notice how each other is doing, and alert us to those days when we need to do more for each other.

My wife & I are both busy, and many days our simple rituals are enough to maintain our sense of connection. When life gets difficult, however, and my wife needs to talk, our daily rituals allow me to notice this, and I know I need to make more time for my wife.

In our seventeen years of marriage, we struggled for four years with infertility, which was extraordinarily painful. Our daily rituals helped us stay positive about each other during this very difficult time in our marriage, as I was able to consistently notice the days my wife needed a sympathetic ear or a shoulder to cry on.

Our daily rituals gave my wife confidence she could rely on me for emotional support, during a time in her life when she sorely needed support. I am convinced if we did not have our rituals, I would have missed many emotional signals from my wife, and she would have suffered alone in our marriage, even though I might have been physically present.

Our third and last daily ritual, before we go to bed, is an appreciation ritual. Saying “thank you” is one of the most powerful things we can do in a relationship, and it takes less than one second to say thank you.

Sadly, couples tend very quickly to take the good in each other for granted, and can even stop noticing the good the other is doing, while focusing more and more on the petty failings of the other. My wife & I were falling victim to this trend ourselves.

### **The Power of a Simple “Thank You”**

Inspired by the research of Dr. Gottman, we began to incorporate an appreciation ritual into our daily lives. We’ve learned to say thank you throughout the day, but we end each day before going to bed by sitting together, with our phones off, and thanking each other once again for all the big and small things we did for each other that day.

When we first started this ritual, both my wife & I were stunned to realize how much each of us was doing for the other during the day. I had become so focused on my petty complaints about my wife I had forgotten what a good wife she was.

Interestingly, when I heard her thank me for what I had done, I realized I had forgotten what a good husband I was. I was not only taking her for granted, and focusing on her mistakes, I was also taking myself for granted, and focusing on my own petty mistakes.

Our thank you ritual at the end of each day has helped us become much more tolerant of each other’s failings — and we all have failings — and we have a vivid sense of appreciation for the other’s contributions.

Our three daily rituals — one in the morning to start the day, one at the moment of reunion to restart the day, and one at night before we go to bed — come at three very strategic moments during the day. They embrace each of our days with romance, affection, appreciation, and communication. And they are fun and easy to do!

I need to stress an essential point. If I were allowed to give only one sentence of marriage advice, the sentence would be this: “Greet each other with joy every single time you meet for the rest of your life, whether you feel like it or not, whether you like each other or not.”

Looking back at our own marriage, I was guilty of loving my wife on the good days, but withholding love on the bad days. My expression of love toward her was contingent on how my day went.

If my day went well, it was not too difficult for me to be positive toward my wife when I came home. But if I was tired, I would “greet” her with a sigh of exhaustion. If I was in a bad mood, I would tell her to stay away from me. If I was upset at her, I could be cold and quiet.

In short, my love for my wife was conditional, contingent on how our days went. My wife felt conditionally loved. A conditional love is a love that is only as good as the circumstances of your life. The good times are good times, but the bad times are made worse by the withdrawal of love, however unintentional.

I now consider the moment I greet my wife as a sacred moment in our lives together. If I’m not in the best mood as I approach the door of our home, I stop and give myself a little pep talk. I’ve learned I don’t need to be cheerful every moment or our lives together, but if I’m cheerful when I see my wife, she’s reassured of my love, and we will be happy together, even on our bad days.

### **A Beautiful Way to Live**

By striving to be perfect in how we greet each other, I’ve learned to love my wife unconditionally. How you greet each other sets the tone for your marriage.

When I am not in the best of moods as I walk home, the moment of reunion poses a choice for me. What’s more important to me: my mood or my wife?

Each time I choose my wife, it’s an affirmation of her and our marriage. As I’ve been consistently making this same positive choice for my wife, day in and day out for 16+ years now, this affirmation of her has become the foundation of our whole marriage.

It is a beautiful way to live.

Daily rituals should be supplemented with weekly and annual traditions.

Daily rituals keep the sense of connection strong in marriage, and assure that romance, affection, and appreciation are a part of every day of your married life together.

Weekly rituals assure, amidst our busy lives, that we consistently spend non-rushed time together.

We have several weekly rituals in our marriage. Sunday brunch is a fixed weekly ritual. We also plan a special Friday night dinner together. If we anticipate a conflict on an upcoming Friday night, we try to plan our special dinner for an earlier night that week.

After we had children, these weekly traditions morphed into family traditions, leaving us short on couple time together. Given how typically tired we now are after a long day of work and parenting, we've begun the practice of scheduling two "date mornings" or "date lunches" per week where we can connect as a couple. We love our date mornings & lunches.

Our weekly traditions guarantee we will have some time each week to catch up with each other at a deeper level, and to discuss those issues that require an extended conversation.

### **Annual Traditions**

Lastly, annual traditions also serve an important function. Well chosen annual traditions help couples maintain connection with their extended families, and assure they continue to do the activities that bring them happiness in their lives.

In our marriage, we anticipated a lifetime of conflict over how much time we spent with each other families. My own extended family is very demanding of our time, and this posed a challenge to our marriage. I love my family, but my wife loves her family, too, and we have a new family of our own that also needs to be nurtured.

I realized the fundamental choice we faced with our families was: would be reactive or proactive in our relationships with them? If we were consistently on the receiving end of invitations, we would often be put in the awkward position of having to say no.

One of the best things my wife & I did for our marriage was to sit down with a calendar, and review the calendar month by month, asking each other these questions: Are there any events in January important to your family? Do we want to create any new traditions with our respective families in January? Do we want to establish any new traditions for ourselves in January?

By taking a strategic look at the whole year, we were able to develop a plan that assures we consistently visit with each other's families, but also consistently have beautiful traditions of our own.

We love Christmas, and dreamed of a beautiful Christmas of our own with our own children in our home, but we knew our families would put up a fight if we did not attend their Christmases.

By anticipating this conflict, rather than reacting to it, we were able to create new Christmas traditions with our respective families.

In the March before our April wedding, long before anyone in our families was thinking about Christmas, we developed a plan to celebrate Christmas with our families... not on Christmas Day.

We take my family out to dinner the Sunday night before Christmas each year (some years, we bring everyone together the weekend after Christmas).

My wife's family lives farther away. We decided to initiate a new tradition of visiting my wife's family every Martin Luther King weekend in January, when we could celebrate Christmas and her Mom's birthday with her family.

We invented a late-August family reunion weekend with my family, as we realized this was a convenient time to bring everyone together for a truly relaxed and enjoyable time together. At the same time, we have reserved Thanksgiving for ourselves as an opportunity to spend some quality time together after a long year of hard work and too little family time together.

We also have an annual beach week, something my wife loves, and an annual football trip, something I love. Some of our annual traditions — visiting a new city each Memorial Day, for example — assure we maintain a sense of exploration in our lives. Thanks to this tradition, we can look forward to many new experiences with each other.

### **The Importance of Fun**

The *New York Times* reported on a study that found if a couple perceives their marriage is fun, the couple is committed to the marriage. If the couple doesn't perceive the marriage to be fun, the couple's sense of commitment to the marriage weakens.

By developing a wide range of annual traditions in our marriage, my wife & I are convinced our marriage is not only fun today, but will continue to be fun in the future.

Having a shared calendar where our plans are written down has helped us hold ourselves accountable as we have gotten busier and busier in our lives.

Most couples allow their marriages to decay slowly over time, often without realizing it, simply because they get too busy and take each other for granted.

Couples with daily, weekly, and annual rituals & traditions, instead of allowing their relationship to decline over time, consistently nurture the fun, positive side of their relationship, and build a sturdy foundation for a long and happy married life together.

*Important note: Life happens. We're not always successful in maintaining our habits and rituals. Babies get sick. Friends have crises. Extreme exhaustion can set in. The best marriages don't always stay on course, they get back on course when they drift off course. Having structure helps us more quickly recognize when we are getting overwhelmed and identify what we need to do to get back on track.*

# Conflict Resolution in Marriage

*By Peter McFadden*

My wife & I were terrible at conflict resolution when we were first married. Thankfully, we didn't have many conflicts, but the few we had we were unable to resolve. My wife would see I was upset, ask me what was wrong, and I would claim not be upset. I would give my wife the silent treatment, usually for three days, until I forgot why I was upset in the first place.

I got married at age 40, and had never seen a conflict resolved through rational conversation in my entire life. My family's motto when I was growing up was, "get over it." When I got married, I didn't know it was possible to calmly talk through a problem. I had never seen it done.

Amazingly, in marriage, we went from terrible to excellent at problem solving in one day, after reading the research by Dr. Gottman on conflict resolution. For this essay on conflict resolution in marriage, I draw upon two different studies conducted by Dr. Gottman.

In the first study, Dr. Gottman found that 94% of couples need to learn to call time outs. What many people believe, that two adults should always be able to talk out problems, turns out not to be true.

## **Is Silence Golden?**

Dr. Gottman has found if one or both partners have elevated heart rates, it's better to call a time out than to continue a conversation. Other researchers have discovered when a person's blood pressure rises, blood is transferred from the thinking portion of the brain to the physical arousal system of the body.

Simply put, our ability to reason is diminished when we are angry, and if we try to talk when we are angry we are likely to do damage to the relationship.

Researchers have found men's blood pressure on average is much more volatile than women's. Our heart rate/blood pressure tends to spike much more quickly than women's. Men are thus much more likely to need a time out than women.

Men are also more likely to be guilty of giving the "silent treatment," though this turns out to be not such a bad thing.

To repeat, when a person gets angry, blood is shifted away from the thinking portion of the brain, leaving the person with three options: physically lashing out (not good), verbally lashing out (also not good), or keeping quiet (the best available option). Speaking reasonably when angry is not possible for most people.

The number one cause of the silent treatment is not a desire to inflict emotional damage on the other person, but rather a desire to protect the other from the crazy thoughts inside one's head (and, of course, to protect oneself from the blowback expressing those crazy thoughts would surely provoke).

It turns out, when you're angry, silence is indeed golden.

Still, the "silent treatment" is not ideal. The recipient of this treatment can feel emotionally assaulted by it. Often, there is a legitimate fear the issue will never be discussed.

My wife so hated the silent treatment I would give her, she would ramp up her efforts to get me to talk. Unfortunately, her increased pressure only further exacerbated the problem, as it prevented me from calming down.

My wife did have good reason to put pressure on me, though, as I had never voluntarily communicated when a dispute arose between us.

Often, seeing that pressuring me didn't work, my wife would finally give up and accept my promise to "talk later." I always agreed to talk later.

The problem is we did not agree on the definition of later. For my wife, later means fifteen minutes from now. When faced with dealing with a conflict, for me, later means never. We never did get around to talking when we agreed to talk later.

## **Talk Later... or a Time Out?**

What helped us get excellent at communication is the simple idea of calling a time out. Agreeing to a time out is different than agreeing to talk later.

The main difference is both sides understand just exactly how long the time out will last. In our marriage, time outs last three hours.

If an issue flares up at 12:36 pm on a Saturday, we agree to talk about it at 3:36 pm. If that isn't possible, we agree on a specific time soon thereafter.

Having an agreed time to talk calms us both down. I feel safe being with my wife because I know she isn't going to force me to talk about the issue until the agreed time. My wife can relax because she can see the light at the end of the tunnel. She doesn't feel the need to keep pressuring me, and she isn't worrying we'll never talk.

It's important to have a clearly understood and humorous signal to call the time out. For us, it is my wife pointing at her watch and giving me a funny look. An Italian couple chose the word spaghetti as their time out signal.

Humorous signals allow a couple to laugh instead of further escalating the tension. My wife & I immediately feel the tension between us dissipate when we call a time out.

We can laugh at the humorous signal because we know we are not avoiding the hot topic. We know the first thing we are going to do after calling out the signal is set a time to talk.

After setting a time to talk, despite our anger, my wife & I dance with each other (this is one concrete way we live our marriage vow to love in good times and in bad). I might not be able to talk reasonably, but I can express affection to my wife, and I do.

Marriage is a two-way street. When a conflict arises, I need time to calm down and think, and my wife needs reassurance she is still loved even though I am angry.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, it's not the silence or anger that is most damaging to women in conflict, but the withdrawal of affection. The study found even a gentle touch on the woman's arm during conflict was so reassuring to her that the conflict became less stressful for her.

So, during a time out, my wife gives me time, and I give her affection, and we both are able to get through a heated moment without doing damage to our relationship.

### **A Time Out from the Issue... not the Relationship**

It's important to note the time out is from the issue, not the relationship. We don't leave the house, or go into a different room. We can even talk with each other about other issues. Amazingly, we've even been able to enjoy each other's company during conflict, because we feel safe together.

A time out is about much more than avoiding doing damage to the relationship. We have found we have had some of the best conversations of our marriage after the time outs we've called.

Here's why: for an excellent conversation, both partners need to be calm, thoughtful about the issues involved, and in a productive frame-of-mind. The time out gives us a chance to be calm, thoughtful, and productive — both of us at the same time.

It turns out, even if you're not angry, if it's a sensitive or complex issue, it can be a good idea to schedule the conversation, not spring it on each other, as it gives each a chance to prepare.

We have three-hour time outs in our marriage because it takes me one hour to complete each of the three tasks of a time out.

It takes me one hour to calm down.

After this first hour, my ability to reason is fully restored, and I am able to get to the deeper issues involved. Most couples end up arguing at the surface level, and this is doomed to failure. After the second hour of my time out, I have my "ah hah" moment, where I finally understand the real issues involved.

I am still not ready to talk, though, even though I finally understand the issues involved. The third hour of my time out gives me a chance to come up with a creative, win-win solution. Also, very importantly, this last hour of the time out helps me find the right words to express myself.

In a second study conducted by Dr. Gottman, he found how a conversation concludes can be predicted by how it begins. If a conversation begins on a negative or critical note, the chance the conversation will end well is just 4%. It turns out, most of us are defensive, and it seems that no one likes to be attacked.

### **Positive Communication Works**

In short, the research has found negative, critical conversation does not work. Positive communication works extremely well in marriage.

The problem is, when issues arise in marriage, couples almost always think negatively about them. The marriage counselor Terry Real suggests that couples should never go with their "first draft" when they are angry, as this first draft of the conversation is almost always critical, even harsh. Call a time out and give yourself a chance to come up with a positive "second draft," which is almost always more effective.

To give a specific example from our marriage, my wife used to ask me with an accusing tone, "when are you going to learn to pick up after yourself." Even though I knew I was guilty of being messy, and that my wife was justified in her anger, I was always angry myself when she talked to me like this. In my eyes, she had not appreciated what I had done that day, and she made me feel like I was a lazy bum.

Now, when my wife feels the need to get my help with the mess, this is what she tells me: "Peter, my hard working husband, I would like to gently remind you I like a clean apartment." When my wife speaks to me like this, I laugh instead of getting angry, and I want to clean up the apartment for her.

Positive communication works in marriage; negative communication backfires. Couples should never criticize each other. Express yourself. Just be sure to find a constructive way to make the same point.

It is one of the most important things we have learned from Dr. Gottman: there always is a positive, constructive way to make a critical point.

Think before your speak turns out to be very good advice for marriage.

I strongly recommend reading the books, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, by Dr. Gottman, as they have actual transcripts of couples talking with each other.

Dr. Gottman rewrites many of the conversations so you can see how expressing the same exact point, but in a much more positive way, leads to a completely different and more productive conversation.

Just to summarize, after a lifetime of being a poor communicator, I became excellent when my wife gave me two things: time and a deadline.

I needed time to calm down and think, but without a deadline, I was not motivated to prepare for the conversation. Let's talk "later" didn't work for us.

When we began the practice of scheduling our sensitive conversations, we became amazingly proficient at talking through the few difficult issues in our marriage.