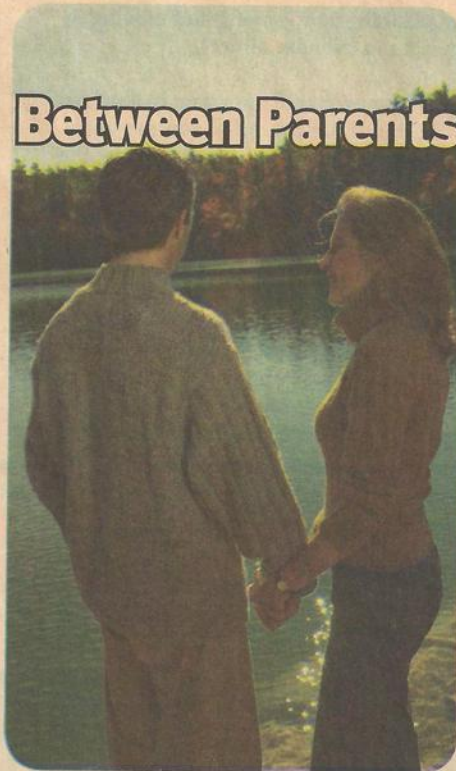


How to Have a Healthy Loving Relationship

by Dr. Jenn Berman

Between Parents



Your relationship with your spouse or partner is the emotional foundation for your entire family. Your children are counting on you not only to demonstrate what a healthy relationship looks like, but also to provide them with the safety and security they need to create their own healthy attachments as they get older.

Four Behaviors to Steer Clear Of

Dr. John Gottman, a therapist who studies couples in their natural habitat (i.e. he performed long term observations and studies in his "love lab"), found that the most important predictor of the success or failure of a marriage was not whether or not a couple fought, but the ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions. According to Gottman, for a marriage to work there must be five positive interactions for every one negative.

In addition to maintaining the five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interactions to maintain a happy marriage, Gottman, who founded the Gottman Institute, identified four common predictors of divorce among married couples. Those predictors are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He explains that couples who discuss their grievances in a relationship seem to be able to work through conflict, while those that criticize or attack the other person's character do not. According to his research, showing contempt for your partner can cause tremendous damage to a relationship. As Gottman defines contempt in this case, it is an interaction that contains sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, or hostile humor. In one study, in fact, Gottman found that wives who make sour facial expressions during conversations, which he views as an example of contempt, are likely to be separated from their husbands within four years. When a relationship has devolved to the point where a couple is regularly demonstrating their contempt for each other, they are no longer trying to get along but are communicating their disgust towards one another.

Gottman identifies defensiveness as a predictor of divorce, because it quickly and quietly erodes a marriage. When partners are defensive, they blame each other without taking responsibility for their own actions. This stalemate makes it impossible to work

through conflicts at all. Stonewalling, similar to defensiveness, is equally damaging, although it can take more time for the full effects to become apparent. When even one member of a couple is guilty of stonewalling, it makes any sort of dialogue impossible, resulting in an inability to communicate and work through problems.

All's Fair in Love and War?

There are many things you can do to improve your relationship. While few couples avoid fighting completely, all couples can learn to fight fairly. Good communication and the ability to fight fair are crucial cornerstones to a healthy marriage. Some tips:

Use "I" Statements. Instead of blaming your partner, use what therapists call "I statements." They look like this: "When you _____ (fill in the blank with a behavior). It makes me feel _____ (fill in the blank with a feeling or two). For example "When you raise your voice to me it makes me feel scared and hurt."

Try reflective listening. Reflective listening is repeating back to your partner what he or she just said using your own words. For example, "Let me see if I understand you correctly. When I yell at you, you find it threatening and it makes you feel hurt and scared?" Often when couples fight, they are so busy constructing their next argument while their partner is talking that they don't really listen to what the other person is saying. Feeling heard in a relationship is vital to good communication.

Change the way you begin a discussion.

Gottman found that 96% of the time, the way a discussion begins predicts the way it will end. If you can start from a loving stance rather than accusatory or attacking one, the odds are better that you will resolve the conflict in a positive way.

Take a time out. Time outs are not just for kids. Sometimes adults can benefit from a cool down period during an argument. It is important that you establish this before taking the break, so your partner doesn't think you are simply walking away. It is helpful to say something like; "I think I need a time out right now. I am too upset to think straight and need some time to calm down. Let's check back in an hour." Learning to take a loving time out is a valuable skill.

Do a daily check in. Take the time during your day to check in and see how one another are doing. Try to touch base about your thoughts and feelings as well as how your partner's day is going. Make sure you ask if it is a good time when you call.

Make a date night. Make sure to pick something you both enjoy. Keep the pressure low, but make sure it is adults only.

Put the romance back into the relationship. Sharing specific information about what pleases you and agreeing to do things to please each other on a regular basis is a very good idea. If you are not sure what your partner would like, ask him or her to complete the following sentences: "I feel loved and cared about when you" _____, "I used to feel loved and cared about when you" _____ and "I would love it if you would _____."

Let your partner influence you. Let your partner influence your decisions. Gottman found that, even in the first few months of marriage, men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages and are less likely to want a divorce than men who resist their wives' influence. Statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81 percent chance that his marriage will self-destruct.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in Los Angeles. She has made appearances on approximately one hundred television shows. Her column called "Dr. Jenn" won the 2005 Parenting Publication of America silver medal in the area of Child Development and Parenting. You can hear her giving advice Monday nights 10 to midnight on Star 98.7 (98.7 FM). For more information check out Dr. Jenn's website at www.DoctorJenn.com.