



Un-Healthy Marital Interactions: What Not To Do and What Can Be Done! ¹

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For couples today, there is an abundance of information on how to sustain healthy, happy marital relationships. From how-to books to advice given on television and radio, couples are bombarded with strategies, tips, and techniques focused on “what to do” in their relationships. Most of this information assumes that if couples follow a few short rules, then they can have happy relationships. What most fail to realize is that these new, positive practices won't work without recognizing and addressing what has been done and what is not working. Most information available to couples falls short on giving examples of “what not to do” in a relationship. Communication is the key, but it is difficult to apply effective strategies to harmful interactions. Four negative patterns of interaction have been demonstrated as major destroyers of marital relationships:

- Criticism
- Contempt
- Defensiveness
- Stonewalling

Criticism

Criticism is using hurtful or judgmental comments aimed at your partner's character or personality. With criticism, the blame is placed on the person and not the problematic behavior. Criticism tends to be a repetitive cycle—a single critical moment can end up in a continued exchange. Most critical statements can be recognized by the phrases, “you always” or “you never.” The following are some examples of criticism:

- “You never finish any project that you start. You're so lazy.”
- “When we go out to eat, you always embarrass me with your table manners.”

Contempt

Contempt is a more complex negative interaction. It is an effort to psychologically abuse your partner through disrespectful statements and actions. Contempt has both verbal and non-verbal deliveries. Verbal examples of contempt include sarcasm, hostile humor, and mockery. For example,

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nonverbal displays of contempt include rolling of the eyes and sucking of the teeth during conflict. Contempt sends your partner a message of scorn—that they are inferior and worthless.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is often a natural response to receiving criticism and contempt. When faced with criticism and contempt, most people find a need to defend themselves. However, couples can be defensive even when criticism is constructive. Defensiveness may be a response to previous, current, and/or future attacks. If one or both persons are acting defensively, it is most likely the case they are not listening. Defensiveness may take many forms including:

- Making excuses for behavior
- Repeating a statement for effect
- Denying responsibility for actions
- Answering a complaint with another complaint

Stonewalling

The final negative pattern of interaction is stonewalling. As the name implies, this occurs when partners “put a wall” around themselves, either physically or psychologically. Stonewalling is often used to decrease conflict, and when delivered in moderation, can be healthy. On the other hand, continual failure to respond and/or engage in conversation escalates rather than reduces conflict. Examples of stonewalling include:

- Leaving the room
- Putting a physical barrier between you and your partner (newspaper, book, child)
- Focusing intently on something other than your partner during a discussion
- Failure to actively listen
- Responding with a blank stare

What can be done!

All of the above become patterns of interaction in which couples may find themselves trapped. One negative interaction leads to another, often in a repetitive cycle. Researchers have determined that couples caught in this vicious cycle may be headed for divorce (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). If you or a couple you know are experiencing any of these problems in a relationship, don't be discouraged. Although these may seem like a death sentence, there are ways that couples can break these patterns and start having more positive interactions. What is most important is to mimic the behaviors of pre-marital couples and newlyweds. The following suggestions promote a healthy marriage, regardless of whether you're newlyweds or nearing your golden anniversary.

1. Eliminate criticism. Use complaints. It is okay to complain about troublesome behaviors. Discussing your feelings about the behavior is okay as long as there are no personal attacks. Use the word I instead of you and describe how the behavior makes you feel. Talk about the behavior and not the person.

Ex. “When we go out to eat, you always embarrass me,” becomes “I feel hurt and ashamed when you make fun of me in public.”

2. Build on your friendship base. Validate your partner and his/her feelings, thoughts, needs, and desires, etc.

Ex. “I recognize that you need to talk more about our relationship. What is on your mind?”

3. Take accountability and responsibility for your own actions. Do not make excuses. Apologize and correct the behavior (if possible).

Ex. “I'm sorry that I yelled at you earlier. I've been under a lot of pressure at work, but it is unfair to take it out on you.”

4. Use reflective listening. Repeat what your partner has stated and then respond. Show them that you are listening and hearing them.

Ex. **Partner 1:** "I would appreciate it if you would talk to me before you discipline the kids. That way we can be a united front."

Partner 2: "What I'm hearing is that you would like for us to talk about disciplining the kids before I make any decisions. I think that is a good idea."

divorce over a 14-year period. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 737-745.

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5. Continue dating. Make a point to rekindle the dating aspect of your relationship.

Ex. Go for walks, hold hands, act silly, etc. Find ways to show appreciation to your partner throughout the day (i.e., e-mails, notes, phone calls, etc.)

6. Seek help if needed. If you can identify these negative interactions in your relationship or you think you may need help, see a licensed marriage and family therapist or other professional. Do not try and fix everything on your own.

Ex. Talk to a trusted family member, friend, or your local extension agent in order to find resources in your area.

Summary

Before a couple can learn and/or practice new routines in their relationship, they must rid themselves of the old ways that aren't working. It is important to first identify negative patterns and destructive behaviors and target them for change. At that point, the couple can begin rebuilding their relationship.

References

Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail: What you can learn from the breakthrough research to make your marriage last*. New York, NY: Fireside Publishing.

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