

## The Keys to Relationship Fulfillment

Have you found yourself feeling less and less fulfilled by your marriage? Have you found yourself nagging or criticizing more lately? Want to know what you can do about it?

In a time of such uncertainty in our country (When will the economy pick up? Will I lose my job? etc.), many people look to their spouses (usually the people closest to us in proximity) to explain how stressed they feel. It is not uncommon for people to report feeling less close to their spouses when they are experiencing other stress in their life, a result of mistakenly identifying their spouse's deficiencies as the sole cause for their discomfort (when in reality, a great deal of this discomfort may be coming from other places in their life). It is often helpful, when faced with uncertainty, to focus on what you DO have control over, and what many people do not often realize is how much control they have over the satisfaction they receive in their marriage.

John Gottman, a leading researcher in couples dynamics, offers 7 principles that can help you feel more fulfilled in your marriage (from his book with Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*):

1. *Enhance your "love maps"*: This principle focuses on increasing how much you know about your partner. While we typically spend a lot of time in the beginning of a relationship getting to each other, the time we spend on this tends to decrease until you can't even name your spouse's coworkers anymore. Continuing to learn about your partner will help you feel closer. So go ahead and ask some questions! What are some goals they have? What about current stresses?
2. *Nurture your fondness and admiration*: What we focus on tends to expand (Ever notice the longer you stare at dirty clothes on the bedroom floor, the angrier you become?). Steer your brain toward positive aspects of your partner more often, like what a creative cook they are or their sense of adventure.
3. *Turn toward your partner instead of away*: Generally people are more fulfilled when they have a good dose of interaction with others. However, your partner may have learned to not turn toward you to look for interaction (possibly because you give advice when they'd rather have you listen instead). Be on the lookout for your partner's "bids" for your attention and answer them. For example, positively acknowledge when they speak by asking a question or making a comment, despite how trivial you think it may be. See how long you can go without giving a dismissive shrug or eye roll.
4. *Let your partner influence you*: Gottman's research showed marriages are less likely to end in divorce when a husband allows himself to be influenced by his wife (other research has shown married men tend to live longer, most likely for this exact reason when it relates to listening to your wife when she says it's time to have a check-up). Bottom line, you're not going to be very happy if all your energy goes into trying to get your partner to see things your way (aka "the right way").

5. *Solve your solvable problems:* The key to doing this is by talking to your spouse as if you were having a disagreement with a guest in your home. When a guest has done something we don't like, we politely assume there must have been a misunderstanding or acknowledge our part in the problem. The soft start-up to these conversations usually ends in much better conflict resolution than the blaming, defensiveness, and criticism that can plague disagreements with our partner. In short, be polite.
6. *Overcome gridlock:* Every marriage has problems that will NEVER be solved. That's okay. What can make these problems easier is by moving from gridlock to dialogue. Have the new goal of conversations around these topics be "How can I understand why this is so important to you?" instead of "How can I make you change your mind?" How can you be respectful of the differences between the two of you?
7. *Create shared meaning:* What makes the two of you a couple? What are the rituals the two of you have? What values do you share? What symbols or objects have special meaning to the two of you? Answering these questions and fostering an accepting culture between the two of you can help you add to these answers and feel more connected and fulfilled in your marriage.

If you have any questions about these principles, or need help implementing them into your marriage, feel free to give Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio a call (572-0000) or email ([nimbraguglio@lepageassociates.com](mailto:nimbraguglio@lepageassociates.com)).