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# Research Notes and Book Excerpts on Relationships<sup>1</sup>

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## John Gottman: [Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage](#)

1. DO: share responsibility  
DON'T: blame other person
  2. DO: describe problem in terms of your perception  
DON'T: describe as a matter of absolute truth
  3. DO: focus on specific problem, one at a time  
DON'T: stockpile complaints or make broad sweeping statements.
  4. DO: focus on present  
DON'T: dig up past grievances
  5. DO: focus on partners actions and how they make you feel  
DON'T: focus on partner's personality or character
  6. DO: pick a time to complain when partner can listen and respond  
DON'T complain when partner is distracted by pressing matters
  7. DO: tell partner needs and desires  
DON'T: don't complain and expect partner
  8. DO: rephrase complaint so complainer knows you understand  
DON'T: ignore complaint altogether
  9. DO: ask questions for better understanding  
DON'T: belittle or criticize partner
  10. DO: acknowledge feelings behind partner's complaint  
DON'T: defend yourself and/or use sarcasm or criticism
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<sup>1</sup> These notes were compiled by Jo Dean — November 2015.

## **John Gottman: [Myths and Truths of Marital Dysfunction](#)**

Myth 1 – Affairs cause divorce – only 20-25% are caused by affairs, but the cause of 80% of all divorces is deterioration of intimacy.

Myth 2 – Gender differences cause divorce.

Myth 3 – Communication problems cause marital conflict – Actually distressed people communicate quite clearly what they feel and mean. Conflict in itself is not good or bad.

Myth 4 – Not having a “quid pro quo” – Referring to a contract in which “I do good things for you so you will do good things for me” and can be absent in healthy and challenged relationships.

### **What is true?**

Truth 1 – The ratio of positive interactions to negative in happy couples is 20 to 1, in conflicted couples is 5 to 1, and in soon to be divorced couples 8 to 1.

Truth 2 Marriages tend to end at one of two times : 5 – 7 years due to high conflict, or 10 – 12 years due to loss of intimacy and connection.

Truth 3 – When it comes to arguments, the type of person one partners with (attacker, soother, avoider) is not so important as the mismatch between the couple. (Soothers overwhelm avoiders and you get the distancer-pursuer dynamic.

Soothers and attackers have little ability to influence each other, little positive sentiment, and a great deal of emotional tension. Avoiders and attackers are the worsts pairing, with severe distancer-pursuer dynamic.)

As with all descriptions of character traits, these types refer to behaviors which can be monitored, regulated, and to some extent changed. In this respect, relationship dynamics are alive and can be transformed.

Truth 4 – Most problematic issues (69%) don't get solved, they get managed. Indeed most issues which couples get “gridlocked” around have more to do with character differences and show up as perpetual or permanent problems.

For example: Steve really values organization and neatness. Sarah couldn't care less about organization – what's much more important is sharing time with friends. The skills which work most effectively have much more to do with managing and not solving the problem.

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## David Burns: [Feeling Good Together](#)

“One of the most interesting things about cognitive theory is the idea that anger and interpersonal conflict ultimately result from a mental con. In other words you're telling yourself things that aren't entirely true. You don't notice this because the distorted thoughts act as self fulfilling prophecies. If you tell yourself something, you'll start behaving toward someone based on that. Then you'll tell yourself that you're right.”

So, if we can learn to think about people in a more positive and realistic way, it will be far easier to resolve conflict and develop better relationships.

### **The basic principles of cognitive interpersonal therapy:**

1. We all provoke and maintain the exact relationship problems that we complain about. However we don't seem to realize this, so we feel like victims and tell ourselves that the problem is all the other person's fault.
2. We deny our own role in the conflict because self examination is so shocking and painful and because we're secretly rewarded by the problem we complain about. We want to do our dirty work in the dark so we can maintain a facade of innocence.
3. We all have more power than we think to transform troubled relationships if we're willing to stop blaming the other person and focus instead on changing ourselves. The healing can happen far more quickly than you might think. In fact, you can often reverse years of bitterness and mistrust almost instantly, but you have to be able to work hard and experience some pain along the way.

Note that the 12 motives below are incorporated into a chart in his book describing each one and he introduces exercises in which you focus on an interaction and analyze which motives were in play.

12 motives that compete with love:

1. power and control
2. revenge
3. justice and fairness
4. narcissism
5. pride and shame
6. scapegoating
7. truth
8. blame (the most toxic)
9. self pity
10. anger and bitterness
11. competition
12. hidden agendas

## **Beliefs that trigger conflict:**

— **Submissiveness** and **demandingness** have to do with how you see your role and your partner's role in the relationship.

— **Dependency** and **detachment** have to do with how you measure your self esteem.

*(Many people base their self esteem on love and approval, whereas other people are more perfectionistic and focused on achievement. The most important deficit that leads to relationship problems is a lack of self-esteem. If you don't love and respect yourself, you'll have a hard time loving anyone else because you'll be trying to get from someone else something only you can give.)*

### **Submissiveness**

1. Pleasing others – I should always try to please you, *even if I make myself miserable in the process.*
2. Conflict phobia/anger phobia – people who love each other shouldn't fight. Anger is dangerous.
3. Perceived narcissism – can't tolerate any criticism or disagreement without falling apart.
4. Self blame – the problems in our relationship are *all my fault.*

### **Demandingness**

1. Entitlement – you should always treat me the way I expect. *It's your job to make me happy.*
2. Justice/fairness – if you don't meet my expectations, I have every right to get mad and punish you
3. Truth – I'm right and you're wrong and you better admit it.
4. Other blame – The problems in our relationship are all your fault.

### **Dependency**

1. Love addiction – I can't feel happy or fulfilled without your love
2. Fear of rejection – If you rejected me, it would mean I was worthless. I can't be happy if I'm alone
3. Approval addiction – I need your approval to feel happy and worthwhile
4. Mind reading – If you really love me, you'll know what I need and how I feel without me always having to explain myself

### **Detachment**

1. Achievement addiction – My self esteem depends on my achievements, intelligence, or income

2. Perfectionism – I must never fail or make a mistake. If I fail, it means I'm worthless.
  3. Perceived perfectionism – You won't love or accept me as a flawed and vulnerable human being.
  4. Disclosure phobia – I can't tell you how I really feel inside. I have to keep my true self hidden.
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### **Conclusion from his years of research:**

Of the above, “other blame” was the most damaging belief by far. People who blamed their partners for the problems in the relationship were angry, frustrated, unhappy and intensely dissatisfied with their relationships. However, if you're willing to examine your own role in the problem, and feel that it's your job to make the partner happy, the outlook is very positive. Note that self blame is not the antidote to blaming your partner. Self blame triggers guilt, anxiety, depression and giving up. It won't lead to love or meaningful solutions to the problems in your relationship. Personal responsibility, without any blame at all is the mindset that leads to intimacy.

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### **Effective Communication: Listening skills**

– The disarming technique – You find some truth in what the other person is saying, *even if it seems unreasonable or unfair*.

– Empathy – Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Two types: A. thought empathy – paraphrase the other person's words, and B. feeling empathy – you acknowledge how the other person is probably feeling based on what they said.

– Inquiry – Ask gentle, probing questions to learn more how the other person is thinking and feeling. *Friendly and non-confrontational*.

– “I feel” statements – Instead of “you” statements.

– Stroking – You find something genuinely positive to say to the other person, *even in the heat of battle*. *You convey respect even if you're very angry*.

These three skills, disarming, empathy and inquiry can help you become a good listener, but good communication requires more than listening skills. Others thoughts and feelings are important, *but so are yours* if you want others to listen to and respect your point of view. You combine effective listening (empathy) with effective self expression (assertiveness) in the spirit

of acceptance and caring (respect). If any of these three components are missing, efforts probably won't be effective.

Inquiry errors – if you jump in and offer to help solve problem, it can prevent the other person from expressing their feelings. It's also patronizing because it puts the person in a one-down position, as if you're the expert. Often the real problem is you weren't listening. The person needs to express the feelings, not have them cut off.

"I feel" statements help you to get people to listen. Use "I feel" instead of "you" statement – You're simply informing people about how you think and feel and maintaining ownership of those feelings.

Stroking – express positive regard for the other person no matter how upset you feel. You can't put people down and expect them to love you in return. We all want love and respect, but sometime don't want to give it especially if at odds with someone and feeling hurt and anxiety. The power of admiration, respect and kindness. If you have to criticize someone, but you convey liking or respect at the same time, they won't be tempted to get defensive and dismiss you. Stroking is empowering because people are more receptive and likely to listen.

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Laurie Abraham: [Husbands and Wives Club](#)<sup>2</sup>

Projective Identification – one of the most durable concepts in marital therapy. Coined by Melanie Klein to describe how infants project destructive parts of themselves onto parental figures as a defense against reckoning with their own violent impulses. In adults, the idea is that a person, unable to bear his own anger and aggression, stokes it in another. This allows the perpetrator to live out this threatening aspect voyeuristically, while simultaneously distancing themselves from it and disdaining it.

*Projective identification both over explains and under explains, but limits aside, an awareness of the process might usefully get a couple puzzling over the constraints they've imposed on each other, as well as themselves.*

“The most distressing parts of our partner provide a starting point for considering your own needs and fantasies.” – Peter Kramer.

Today research into the biology of the brain tells a related story about how spouses call each other into being. Every thought or feeling is accompanied by a firing of specific neurons which lay down neural pathways. Those deeply ingrained are “attractors”, and they collect and shape all future incoming sensory data. This disposes you to see more of what we've already seen, think what we always think hear, etc. Attractors explain why a husband tends to read his wife like his mother – no matter the supposed “reality”. But how does he trigger wife to react, act like mom? Limbic resonance – mammals have evolved this so they can sense other mammals emotional states and adjust accordingly causing adjustments in the other as part of an endless feedback loop. Limbic states leap between minds<sup>3</sup>. We all embody an emotional force field that acts on people we love, evoking the relationship attributes we know best. The unhappily married tend not to ascribe positive behavior to their partners innate goodness but to fleetingly specific circumstances, factors that are “external” to them. The opposite holds for negative behaviors – these are seen as global, stable, and internal.

In addition, spouses are likely to reciprocate each other's negative moods or behaviors, than they are to reciprocate positive ones. They gloss over, take for granted small positive exchanges. Positive spirals are as hard to start as negative cycles are to break, which means that in a tainted setting, there exists a certain impossibility of doing good.

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<sup>2</sup> Many of these same ideas are also found in David Burns' book [Feeling Good Together](#).

<sup>3</sup> For what's it worth, [limbic resonance](#) is the theory that the capacity for sharing deep emotional states arises from the [limbic system](#) of the [brain](#). These states include the [dopamine](#) circuit promoted feelings of [empathic](#) harmony, and the [norepinephrine](#) circuit originated emotional states of fear, anxiety and anger.

“Much of the unchanging character of disturbed, anxiety ridden intimacy comes from the reduced perceptions each person has of the other. At the beginning these projections tend to result in overly idealized images of each other: later intimate partners are likely to take a paranoid reading of the others motives and dwell on the worst episodes in their history together, which exacerbates their freezing each other into negative snapshots.” – Michael Miller

“Who is to tell whom what to do under what circumstances“ lies beneath all serious marital conflict. Not all power has to be shared 50/50 but a couple can't fundamentally disagree on its distribution.”

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**Richard O'Connor: [Projection and Projective Identification](#)**

Two additional defense mechanisms misused by depressives that contribute to problems in communication are projection and projective identification.

*Projection means that I take my feelings, disconnect them from my conscious awareness, and attribute them to you.*

People who are very thin-skinned overuse projection. They take their own bad feelings about themselves and project them onto others, seeing themselves as victims of discrimination and collecting grievances everywhere. Projective identification seems magical but really does happen. It occurs when, as a result of your projection, I really do act that way. I catch the feeling you attribute to me.

People with depression are likely to take their own bad feelings about themselves and project the feelings onto the people who care about them. The depressed husband who has lost his job doesn't believe his wife really means her words of comfort and reassurance: he doubts his own worth, but defends against this doubt by attributing it to her. After enough rejection, she stops trying to make him feel better, and he is reinforced in his belief that she doesn't care about him. A couple of weeks more of this and she really begins to have the kinds of doubts about him that he was attributing to her all along --projective identification at work.

Besides the opportunity for intimacy, marriage can also supply us with someone to blame for our own unhappiness. Though each spouse brings his or her own characteristic defenses to the relationship, marriage seems to offer a special opportunity for projection to operate. Defenses are unconscious habits by which we protect ourselves against uncomfortable or unacceptable self-awareness. In projection, we take unacceptable parts of ourselves and attribute them to others. *"you're awfully grouchy this morning"* Projection can get institutionalized in the marriage so that the couple play roles that they've assigned to each other that are more or less mutually acceptable: the weak one, or the strong one, the one who can't make decisions, the detail person. It can also be the fuel for divorce: *"It's not my fault, it's your fault, that I'm unhappy, unsuccessful, ..."*, (fill in the blank with your favorite complaint or measure of unhappiness).

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## How to Fight Fair

1. No "kitchen sink" arguments, in which one grievance leads to another and you find yourself dredging up the dreck from years of unresolved arguments. Stick to the subject at hand. If you find yourself thinking about old grievances, bring them up when you have set aside some time to work on your relationship.
2. Use "I" statements. "I think", or "I feel" rather than "you should", or "you shouldn't". Don't try to control your partner's behavior, rather make your reactions part of the shared agenda the two of you must address.
3. Never say "never" (or "always") as in "You never think about me", or "you always put yourself first". Generalizations are inherently unfair and can't be answered; they only put your partner on the defensive. If something is bothering you be specific and concrete.
4. Listen, no matter how painful it is. Try repeating what your partner said, just to make sure you heard it right. Try never to lose sight of the fact that this is someone who might tell you an important truth about yourself.
5. Be assertive, not aggressive. Be very specific about what you want, what's bothering you, how you'd like things to change. Be prepared to say what you'll do if things don't change (but don't go out on a limb in the heat of the moment). Do not threaten, nag, or intimidate. Do not call names or make judgmental statements. Cruelty is never acceptable and almost unforgivable.
6. Never get physical. If you don't think you can control yourself, get out. Go for a walk.
7. Don't fight when drunk. Better yet, don't get drunk. But even one glass of wine can impair your judgement enough that you might say something you'll regret.
8. Before you open your mouth, be sure that what's bothering you is really something your spouse is responsible for. Most fights have to do with feeling diminished in self-esteem, wounded somehow and sorry for oneself. Sometimes we don't even realize this until we find ourselves angry at our partner over some little thing. But think about whether this little thing is responsible for the way you're feeling.
9. Always have a way out, a way to stop if you're getting too upset, or frustrated that you're going around in circles.

*Depressed people have trouble with these rules. They tend not to be assertive, and they tend to store up grievances until they burst forth in an explosion of accusations and generalizations. It's important for the depressive to understand that what feels natural (like stuffing feelings), is, in fact a bad emotional habit that has to be unlearned. We have to face the fact that there are skills to life and relationships that make things go a lot better. These are skills that aren't taught*

*in school and probably weren't taught at home. Our ignorance of these skills is nothing to be ashamed of, but if we know they are there and refuse to learn, we have only ourselves to blame for what happens to us.*

When I assume that you understand me, it's also a process of projection. These irrational sensations of knowing with perfect clarity exactly what the other person is thinking are sure indications of projection. They're fueled by emotion, not logic.

"When you ASSUME, you make an ASS out of U and ME"

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## **Relationships and Stress**

Spouses are always involved in a stressful situation. If I'm overwhelmed with problems at work, my wife's reactions are very important to me. When my wife is ill, how I am with her—attentive and caring or withdrawn and aloof because I'm scared—is a major factor in her ability to recover. The spouse needs to get deliberately involved. Not involved in offering advice and solutions, unless there is a clear signal that that's what's wanted, but involved in:

1. Listening, drawing out, and accepting feelings
2. Exploring alternatives, brainstorming, playing out different scenarios
3. Offering hope and encouragement conveying the sense that you are not alone.

These kinds of actions have the effect of reducing anxiety, reducing stress, lessening confusion, and providing a feeling that an acceptable solution is attainable. This is exactly what a good psychotherapy relationship can do, and this is why I emphasize that marriage is a mental health factory.

*"A crisis in our marriage came when my wife developed a thyroid tumor. I was preoccupied with finishing my dissertation at this time. The doctors had told her that these things are almost always benign--and I accepted it at face value. I dismissed my wife's anxiety as groundless and got angry that she needed more reassurance. I treated her as a needy pest when she actually did have something to be fearful about. My analyst at the time pointed out that my behavior was so bad that the pressure of work wasn't a sufficient explanation. I was denying, dismissive, intellectualizing. Instead of telling her that I cared what happened to her, I told her not to worry and got angry when she worried anyway. "*

*“When the spouse doesn't take the bull by the horns and become actively involved, it can poison the relationship. We can't exist without other people. As depressives, we may be prone to want too much from others, and we may protect ourselves from experiencing and expressing those needs by playing roles that aren't really us. But real relationships--built on trust, honesty, and caring--can give us the opportunity to heal, to build a new self. Children grow out of their childish needs for omnipotent, ever-attentive parents by a process of optimal frustration. The parents disappoint the child by making mistakes, by not always paying attention, but ideally they do it in synch with the child's ability to tolerate disappointment and frustration. The child learns to soothe himself, learns that he can feel safe and loved for a while even without the parents attention.”*

*“The child is building a self. Honest, caring relationships give adults the opportunity to do the same thing. The depressed person can repair a damaged sense of self-esteem through developing intimacy with another person. The other person doesn't enhance self-esteem through artificial compliments or through reflected glory; rather the process of letting the other see oneself, warts and all, and finding that one is still loved and accepted, does the work of repair.”*