

SECRETS OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE

Have you ever wondered if there are secrets to a happy marriage? John Gotman, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Washington has learned to predict, with more than 90 percent accuracy, which couples succeed and which ones will divorce. Based on his research, here are some tips for building a happier marriage:

Know the danger signs. Bad habits can escalate conflicts and damage relationships. These things should be avoided at all costs: harsh criticism, contempt, sarcasm, eye rolling, and walking away.

Argue gracefully. You're bound to disagree occasionally. Open and honest communication is key to a healthy marriage. However, keep these tips in mind during an argument: discuss matters gently and without blame, make it clear you're on common ground (this is our problem), use "I feel" statements rather than "you do" statements to decrease defensiveness, exit arguments as gracefully and cordially as possible. Or, use a little humor or an expression of affection to make it clear you still love one another. If things become heated, agree to a 20 minute break before resuming the discussion.

Be flexible. Consider your partner's feelings when conflicts or obstacles arise. Sometimes, you may need to change your plans or compromise.

Expect the best from each other. The happiest couples have high standards for each other. Ask yourself, "are you getting treated with love, affection and respect"?, "do you feel there is a basis of nurturing and support"?, "do you really like spending time together"?, "do you like yourself when you are with this person"?

Stay positive. You love each other, right? Don't be shy about saying so. In healthy marriages, positive statements outnumber negative ones by about 5 to 1. Find ways to show your affection. Give hugs and kisses. Be kind and thoughtful.

Study your partner. Learn what pleases, annoys, angers or saddens your partner. How does your behavior affect your partner? The more in tune you are with one another, the stronger your marriage.

Get help early. If you're having trouble with your marriage, don't let it slide. Most couples wait 6 years before seeking counseling. Since many marriages fail in the first seven years, that help may come too late.

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