

NURTURE FONDNESS AND ADMIRATION

In previous articles on successful marriages we learned that, in general, happily married couples do two things. First, you maintain a five-to-one ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions. In other words, you expend five times more thought and energy showing appreciation for your spouse than doing or saying negative things. Secondly, we learned that successful couples maintain an updated “Love Map” of their spouse’s life. The married couples, on a regular basis, make it a point to check in with each other to talk about the joys, frustrations, hopes and dreams that are important to each other. They then know each other’s current psychological landscape and can, in many small ways, frequently include those elements in their life together.

Today’s article will discuss the importance of nurturing fondness and admiration. All married couples from time to time experience disagreements, annoyances and periods when they just don’t see things the same way. This is normal because marriage takes two independent people and joins them together to become one. They become two people acting together for a unified purpose. For some of us, this “oneness” takes a lot of time, patience and energy. Successful couples, whether they are classified as validators, avoiders, or volatiles, have much more positive interaction than negative (the five-to-one). According to research by John Gottman, and based on my experience as a counselor, couples who are able to weather the storms of life have developed the habit of showing genuine love and respect for each other. They have managed to maintain a friendship. The couples who have marriages that are classified as “happy” are those in which fondness and admiration abound. Gottman’s third principle for a successful marriage is to nurture fondness and admiration. So what does that mean? And how can you achieve that?

Webster’s Dictionary defines fondness as tender affection. It defines admiration as wonder, an object of esteem, a feeling of delighted or astonished approval, the act or process of regarding with admiration. So, in other words, to nurture fondness and admiration for our mate means to be tender and affectionate toward them, to admire them and hold them in high esteem, to approve of them, to spend time with them, to treat them with fondness, to delight in their company. Wow! How many of us nurture these feelings toward our spouses, especially when the marital relationship is in a difficult period? In difficult times we tend to bring up and focus on our hurts and grievances. We amplify the negative. When working with couples, one of my most effective homework assignments is to have couples observe and keep track of the positive things their spouses do between counseling sessions. They often ask, “Don’t you want to know all the things he/she does that hurt me or make me angry?” I tell them that we need to learn what they are already doing which is helpful; what works in a positive way, so that they can amplify the positive things—doing more of what works and less of what does not work. I ask them to write down all of the positive things their spouse does and to not mention the items to each other until our session together. I have them write it down to reinforce it. We often don’t see the positives during difficult times because we are so consumed by the negative. At our session, they each share their list and thus provide each other with images of what works and information for a renewed Love Map.

In Gottman’s research, he has identified what he calls The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These Four Horsemen are warning signs that a marriage is headed for disaster. They are: **CRITICISM**: Attacking someone’s personality or character (rather than the behavior) usually with blame; **CONTEMPT**: Criticism with the intent to insult and psychologically abuse your partner; **DEFENSIVENESS**: Responding as if victimized, not listening, protecting self as if warding off a perceived attack; and **STONEWALLING**: Withdrawing and disengaging from meaningful interaction, a refusal to communicate. These Four Horsemen do not work and they need to be curbed.

Married couples will always have differences. However, the research is fascinating. Sixty-

nine percent of differences between spouses never get resolved and that is the norm. Having “perpetual differences” in an overall climate of respect and friendship is what matters. It is important that couples lessen criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. It is equally important that couples continually seek to nurture fondness and admiration for each other. We can examine our conscience daily and ask ourselves what we have done to build up and encourage our spouse. Partners must put effort into staying connected. Think of turning towards each other instead of away and be very alert to your spouse’s subtle and not so subtle bid for attention, affection, and humor. Doing these things results in a climate in which you both build up positive balances in your emotional bank accounts. Acts of thoughtfulness, courtesy, and affection give you a positive balance in your spouse’s emotional bank account. These positive balances are there to draw against when the inevitable negatives occur. How are the balances in you spouse’s bank account? With the unified purpose of being a committed Christian Marriage, a couple will have God’s grace to assist them in their journey.

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