

REPAIR ATTEMPTS

If you have been following this series on successful marriage, you know the value of nurturing mutual fondness and admiration and the value of letting your partner influence you. You also know that in real life we all occasionally do something thoughtless, hurtful and just plain dumb which brings us to a discussion of the value of “repair attempts”. This article focuses on “repair attempts” which are active steps to re-establish love and respect when a disagreement is escalating.

When negative interaction occurs and you sense that you or both of you are escalating and losing control it is important to de-escalate and repair the interaction. This is particularly important for the men. Dr. Gottman found that in stable, successful marriages the husband tended to make repair attempts when things were getting too heated. These men did not lose control when they responded to their wives expressions of anger, disappointment, hurt. They were able to calm themselves down. They were able to stop their negative, defensive reaction and calm down. Their pulse rate actually went back toward normal and they expressed a quiet concern for their wives. They did not become cold and stonewall or lose their temper. This self calming by the husbands and the desire to positively respond to their wives had a calming effect on both spouses. These acts of de-escalation and repair are a positive part of a successful marriage. Obviously if the wife is the one who is prone to lose her temper and escalate then her use of repair attempts, self-calming and sharing a positive concern for her husband would be needed. Also, obviously when one spouse begins to self-calm the other spouse should take the cue, accept the message and respond accordingly. If you and your spouse are like many of us who do not do this naturally, you can start now to practice together de-escalation and repair attempts. It will in time become a natural expression of your respect for one another and do not forget the importance of a sense of humor. Agree now on how you will help each other de-escalate when you have your next discussion of a sensitive topic.

In dealing with difficulties, the following process is used almost intuitively by successful married couples. Step 1: Softened Startup (see Successful Marriage IV), this will help begin the discussion in a way which will increase the chance of reaching a compromise. Step 2: Make repair attempts and de-escalate when the discussion is getting too heated. Step 3: Accept Influence which means that you express understanding and agreement with at least part of what your spouse is asking for. Step 4: Compromise, which involves coming to a common way of thinking about the issue based on both of your ideas. Both of you need to use the principle of yielding to win. It works! Dr. Gottman discovered that in stable and happy marriages wives often contributed to the self-calming and repairing by using positive affect or emotion particularly humor and affection which recognized and encouraged the physiological self-calming initiated by the husband. These practices predicted good things for the marriage and it is good Christian common sense.

In Dr. Gottman’s book “Why Marriages Succeed or Fail” there are many suggestions concerning how you can put these principles of successful marriage to work and build on your natural style and strengths as a couple. Being people of Faith can enhance this process for a Catholic couple in a sacramental marriage. We are aware of our sins, the need for self examination, confession, repentance, penance and starting again. All of these practices can give a solid, graceful foundation to the process we outlined in the four steps above. Spouses, who both seek to grow in love and mutual respect, will find marriage to be a school of holiness, with ups and downs, which brings you closer to each other and to God.

CHRISTINA M. ROSARIO, MSW, LSW