

## THE SUCCESS RATIO

Committed married and family life are the heart of our Church and our culture. John Gottman, a research psychologist, has studied couples whom he categorizes as Masters and Disasters, e.g., couples who have successful committed marriages and couples who have divorced. From this work he offers suggestions for married couples. We will share his recipe for success in this series of articles.

Today's information concerns the success ratio. We want to share two comforting findings from his study of hundreds of couples over many years: first, "everybody messes up on occasion," and second, each couple is unique. They develop their way of living their commitment. With regard to the second finding - in fact to his surprise - Gottman discovered that there is a group of successfully married couples who argue heatedly and fairly frequently as part of their way of being married.

Success is not an absence of conflict, it has to do with the success ratio. One of Gottman's key findings was that in successful marriages there is an ongoing ratio of five positive interactions for every one negative interaction.

These positive interactions are expressions of interest, affection, etc. towards the spouse. It is the little things that matter: small courtesies, affectionate gestures and respectful actions. The common courtesies, for example, saying "please" and "thank you," remembering things important to your spouse, remembering the trash, picking up the dry cleaning, having a date night occasionally are all important as are small gestures of affection (hugs, kisses, holding hands.)

Let's look for a moment at Gottman's three categories of successful couples.

- "Validating" couples are excellent communicators. They seem to be good friends who value the "we-ness" of their marriage over their own individual goals and values. They have obvious respect for each other's views. They want to listen and are gentle in attempts to persuade their spouse to their point of view.
- The second group was the surprise for Gottman; he calls them the "volatile" couples. They have lively, heated disagreements. The "volatiles" are not the "we-ness" type. They like a good debate and jump right into it without much effort to understand the other point of view, but these occasionally volcanic disagreements are just a small part of an otherwise warm and loving marriage. They are masters at making up and though they express much more anger than "validators", they laugh and are demonstrably more affectionate.
- The last successful style that he found were couples he calls "avoidant." These are people who like to be conflict minimizers. Gottman states "moving from the "volatiles" to the "avoiders" is like moving from a hurricane to the placid waters of a summer lake. "Avoiders" like "agreeing to disagree" rather than the "volatiles" love of a good debate.

Perhaps you see your preferred way of living out marriage in one of these styles. It is good news that there is not one way to communicate and succeed. What matters is the success ratio of five positive interactions to one negative. The five to one ratio helps produce a climate of mutual respect and good will so that the inevitable misunderstandings and disagreements can be taken in stride.

This secular research confirms Catholic wisdom which encourages married couples to engage in rituals of positive connection and to view our homes as domestic churches.

Praying before meals and sharing prayer at home can be a very positive part of your week. Also, our Catholic understanding of the meaning of marriage and the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage will lead to many more positives than negatives. In a daily climate of five positive happenings to one negative, the marriage remains healthy. This finding is based on thousands of

hours of videotaped interactions between married couples who volunteered to be part of the study and it squares with Catholic common sense. Take a moment to reflect on your own ratio of positives to negatives.

Hopefully, you are in the five to one ballpark and have just decided to take the positives up a notch!

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