

## The Secret of Marital Success

Written by Richard Marks, PhD

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“We took our time [preparing for marriage], we looked forward to it; didn’t want to run into something and have nothing to count on but love...”

**Aunt May, Spider-Man 3, 2007**

Currently, couples marrying for the first time are more likely to divorce in the first four years of marriage and the current national divorce rate for these couples is around 50 percent. Research shows that co-habitation is a risk factor for divorce as well as many other things. But, what does a couple need in order to be successful at marriage? What predicts marital health? Research shows that what predicts distress and divorce 90% of the time is how couples communicate and solve problems.

Humans must bond. And we bond through intimate and open communication. Thus, the key to bonding is CONFIDING. What is confiding? The dictionary defines this word as the trusting of one’s secrets, private thoughts, matters, or problems to another. When we confide in another it says we know enough about them to trust them with our inner most thoughts and feelings. Intimacy then, consists of two components: emotional openness and physical closeness. When we confide in another we are emotionally open to them and that emotional connection draws us close physically. When couples get angry, hurt, scared, or lack trust in each other, it is a sure bet that they will close up to one another emotionally and this leads to a physical distancing in the relationship as well.

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Communication, the lifeblood of intimacy, is necessary for a healthy, strong, relationship. Where do we learn communication skills? We learned them from our family of origin. How did your family communicate and handle problems? How was anger expressed in your family? Did people explode, withdraw, remain silent, or throw things? We tend to repeat the communication patterns we learned in our family of origin. What patterns does research indicate that lead to destructive communication patterns and thus, to a lack of connection and closeness? Let's take a quick look.

The first pattern is that men tend to be the first to withdraw from conflict in intimate relationships. If they do not leave the room, they will turn their head, move their eyes, and show behaviors that they just don't want to be present and that they want the conflict to disappear. Male withdraw is half the problem. The other half is that women pursue conflict where men withdraw from it. Women want to talk about issues thus they tend to pursue the conflict. This pursuer-withdrawer pattern proves destructive to the relationship and leads to the second pattern: escalation. At some point in the pursuing the man engages the conflict and things begin to heat up. Voices raise, energy increases and the conflict increases in strength. This leads to the third destructive pattern of negative interpretation. Negative interpretation is when one person says something in the discussion and the other person receives the message as negative. The speaker never intended the message as negative but because there is too much negative energy flowing the listener hears things as negative that was never intended as antagonistic. This leads to the fourth destructive pattern: invalidation. Invalidation is when the couple begins to put the other person down by calling them names, through intimidation, or such behaviors. This eventually leads to the erosion of the positive things in the relationship such as love, goodness, intimacy, and respect.

Research also shows that gender roles lead to different couple types in communication. Mary Anne Fitzpatrick in her book, *Between Husbands and Wives: Communication in Marriage* identifies the following couple types and their particular communication pattern:

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**Traditional couple-types.** Men and women who are traditional are highly interdependent and emphasize doing things together versus autonomously. Traditionals hold traditional gender role beliefs (e.g., the woman takes the husband's last name when married) and hold the stability of the relationship in high esteem. Traditionals use positive communication behaviors during conflict (e.g., discuss issues keeping the relationship in mind, not using threats), tend not to argue over petty issues, but do openly engage about salient issues.

**Independent couple-types.** Independents value both connection and personal autonomy. They actively discuss many aspects of their relationship and hold nontraditional beliefs about relationships (i.e., do not espouse the belief that the "man is in charge"). Independents actively engage in conflict over minor and major issues, argue for personal positions, and offer reasons for accepting their positions rather than rely on a one-up/one-down solution by virtue of gender.

**Separate couple-types.** Separates, unlike independents or traditionals, are not interdependent and avoid interaction, particularly conflict. Separates are likely to withdraw or give in during early stages of conflict because active engagement in conflict involves interaction and a degree of interdependence. However, when separates do engage in conflict, the interaction can be quite hostile.

**Mixed couple-types.** Approximately half of couple-types do not neatly fall into a specific category such that both husband and wife are traditionals, independents, or separates. Rather, many couples represent a meshing of two different types. The most common mixed couple-type is the separate husband and the traditional wife. Several implications for this couple-type exist in terms of gender role adherence, engagement in conflict, and effects on the satisfaction of the relationship.

Premarital counseling is strongly encouraged for all couples. Research shows that couples can gain insights into their particular communication patterns and styles and learn healthy communication and problem solving skills: those that predict marital success. If you are interested in premarital education and counseling contact us today. And, congratulations on your engagement and keep the lines of communication and closeness open.