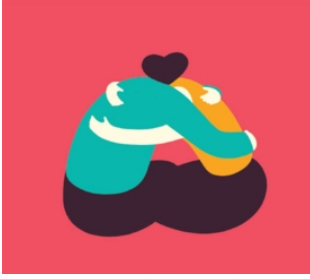


How to Be a Better Spouse

Being nice, paying attention and praising a partner's strengths all pay off in a long-term relationship

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Before you get married, everyone tells you that marriage takes work. I never really believed it until my husband and I landed in therapy after four years, two kids and one seismically stressful cross-country move. Turns out you really can't just flip the switch to autopilot and trust love to take care of itself; you have to devote actual time and effort to understanding and appreciating your spouse. Anyone who is married knows that's not always a simple feat. Here's what relationship research (and a touch of game theory)

tells us about how to become a better spouse.

#1 Be nice as often as you can. A lot of modern relationship therapy is based on the research of John Gottman, a prolific psychologist famous for videotaping thousands of couples and dissecting their interactions into quantifiable data. One of his most concrete findings was that happier couples had a ratio of five positive interactions to every negative interaction. “That just leapt off the pages of the data analysis,” he says. It was true in very different types of relationships, including those in which the people were very independent and even distant or argumentative. These positive interactions don't have to be grand gestures: “A smile, a head nod, even just grunting to show you're listening to your partner—those are all positive,” Gottman says.

#2 Think about what your partner needs, even when fighting. To resolve conflicts, Gottman says we can learn from game theory—the study of conflict and decision making used in political science, sociology and economics. It used to be widely accepted that negotiations were mostly zero-sum situations, meaning one party's gain was the other party's loss. In 1950 mathematician John Nash proved there was another, better outcome: a solution in which the parties may have to compromise, but in the end all of them come out satisfied. (This now famous “Nash equilibrium” won him a Nobel Prize in 1994.) I'm reminded of a recent situation in my own marriage—my husband hated the house we bought a couple of years ago and wanted to move to a different neighborhood; I liked the house just fine and didn't want to go *anywhere*. After much discussion, we realized that what we both really want is to settle in somewhere for the long haul. If the current house is not a place my husband feels he can settle in, then I can't truly settle in either. So we're moving next month, for both our sakes! Find the Nash equilibrium in your conflict, and you'll both get your needs met.

#3 Just notice them. “People are always making attempts to get their partners' attention and interest,” Gottman says. In his research, he has found that couples who stay happy (at least during the first seven years) pick up on these cues for attention and give it 86 percent of the time. Pairs who ended up divorced did so 33 percent of the time. “It's the moment we choose to listen to our partner vent about a bad day instead of returning to our television show,” explains Dana R. Baerger, assistant professor of clinical psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. “In any interaction, we have the opportunity to connect with our partner or to turn away. If we consistently turn away, then over time the foundation of the marriage can slowly erode, even in the absence of overt conflict.”

#4 Ignore the bad, praise the good. Observations of couples at home reveal that people who focus on the negative miss many of the positive things that their partners are doing. Happy spouses, however, ignore the annoyances and focus on the good. “If your wife is irritable one morning, it's not a big deal. It's not going to become a confrontation,” Gottman says. “Then when she does something nice, you notice and comment on that.” Guess what that breeds? More of the good stuff.

It's this lesson that I'm going to try to implement right away. The guy I'm married to leaves dirty shirts balled up on the floor, never loads the dishwasher correctly and can be prickly when he hasn't had enough sleep—but he is an amazing husband. He's honest, shares his feelings, hugs and kisses me, and basically acts like I matter. I want to show him how much *he* matters, too, and that all the other stupid little stuff doesn't.

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