

The Habits of Highly Successful Couples

Divorce rates in America suggest that about half of the people who say “I do” are unable to achieve their goal of creating a happy, long term union with their partner. The statistics are even more ominous for people who have already endured one or more divorces. Yet we know, both from stories in our personal lives and from research in the field of long term relationships, that there are many couples who report that they have been together for a lifetime (with or without marriage) and remain quite happy together. These unions belong to highly successful couples, and luckily for us, there are people who have studied the habits of these couples and made the data available to those of us seeking to emulate their success. As it turns out, almost all of these highly successful couples have the same habits. And the best news? The skills these couples have in common are learnable by anyone who wants to manifest a highly successful union in their own life. Following are some of the habits, identified by Brent Atkinson and John and Julie Gottman, of things successful couples do during conflict. Notice that most of these habits pertain to how these individuals maintain respect for their partner throughout conflict.

Avoiding Judgment and Disdain

It’s easy to see the worst in our partners when conflict becomes emotional, and we become reactive. In my clinical practice, I find that the vast majority of contentious material in couple’s therapy has, at its root, a misperception of the meaning of the other person’s behavior. Under these circumstances it’s easy to jump to conclusions about the character of one’s partner. However, highly successful couples are great at suspending judgment, at least long enough to really hear and understand how their partner is experiencing the problem. Often, once a person truly understands the motivation and experience of their partner’s behavior, the behavior that was once offensive becomes at least tolerable, and occasionally even admirable. Of course all couples make judgments about the behavior of their partners, but the longer you can suspend your judgment while gathering information from your partner, the better chance you have of avoiding a misinterpretation of their action. The next time you feel yourself jumping to judgment in a conflict, try these self statements:

“I feel mistreated, but I know my partner is a loving person. Maybe I don’t have the full story.”

“If I did that behavior it would mean I don’t care about my partner, but maybe it has a different meaning for him/her.”

Finding the Understandable Part

All too often, conflict can degenerate into a win-lose dynamic. Under this paradigm, each person seeks to “win” by convincing the other person that their way of experiencing the situation is

more right, valid, or important than the way their partner is experiencing the situation. Highly successful couples have the habit of making sure they find the parts of their partner's story that they can connect with. They do this in an effort to find win-win solutions to conflict. To increase the chances of finding an understandable part of your partner's experience, try putting your own agenda aside for five minutes while you explore his/her experience. Ask lots of questions about what it feels like to be in his/her shoes. This sounds simple, but in couple's therapy I find that almost everyone has a difficult time putting their own agenda, reactions, and world view on hold while they explore their partner's experience around a conflict. The next step is to give that experience legitimacy.

Giving Equal Regard

Highly successful couples not only suspend judgment until they really understand their partner's experience, they not only find part of that experience that they can relate to, but they go so far as to make that experience as important as their own in the process of finding a resolution. These couples realize that to avoid the win-lose trap, they must value their partner's needs, wants and wishes in a fashion that is similar to how they value their own needs, wants and wishes. Consequently these couples tend to accept influence from each other easily. Try this test of your ability to give equal regard to your partner: At the conclusion of the next conflict in your relationship, ask your partner if he/she thinks that you had their best interest in mind. Your partner's feedback may or may not be entirely accurate of your intentions, but it's a perfectly accurate picture of how he/she experienced the conflict.

So far we've discussed three things highly successful couples do for their partners during conflict. Let's explore some of the things these people do to take care of themselves during conflict.

Standing up For Yourself in Caring Ways

When we feel threatened, it's easy to defend ourselves by going on the attack. Attacks usually take the form of "you statements" such as "you've got no room to complain here" or "you're being totally irrational". People in highly successful relationships tend to respond to feeling threatened by standing up for themselves in ways that don't denigrate their partners. These interactions typically take the form of "I statements". "I hear that you're upset, and I want to understand you, but I'm feeling attacked and that's getting in the way. If we don't calm this discussion down I'm going to take a break for awhile." Notice that this statement only addresses the experience of the speaker, yet clearly defines his/her right to not be attacked in the interaction. These statements require good personal boundaries. Good personal boundaries begin with a firm understanding of what we are responsible and accountable for (our feelings, reactions, and overreactions) and what we are not responsible for (other's feelings, reactions and overreactions.) In making "I" statements, be careful of "You Statements" in disguise: "I feel that

you're being selfish." True "I Statements" focus on what the speaker is responsible and accountable for.

Identifying What's at Stake

Identifying what's at stake is similar to being able to get to the heart of the matter quickly. Remember that highly successful couples strive to understand the experience of their partners, especially in conflict? To be able to understand our partners, they have to be able to identify and articulate the meaning of their experience. That means identifying the real reason any given situation is important. "It's not that I don't want you to work this weekend ... I'm afraid that if you set that precedent, someday you'll end up working every weekend like my dad did." If the speaker wasn't able to identify what was at stake, he/she might have argued for a long time about why his/her spouse shouldn't work that weekend without getting to the real issue: "I'm afraid".

One of the myths of marriage, or any long term union, is that a lack of pain or conflict defines a good union. It's more accurate to say that the nature of conflict, which is present in every relationship, defines the union. By learning about the habits of highly successful couples we can increase our ability to define the conflict in our lives in caring ways.

For source information regarding the research mentioned in this article, contact Chris at chris@reynoldstherapy.com.