

# How to Know if You Have a Healthy Marriage

## Like people, marriages come in many different varieties.

Despite the different approaches that couples collectively have to marriage, the elements of a healthy marriage share some common characteristics. These common characteristics do not imply that a marriage will be free of conflict but rather that couples with these elements have the “glue” that keeps them together. If your marriage does not include all these positive elements, it also doesn’t mean the marriage is doomed to failure. Use these characteristics as a “check-up” to help you and your spouse explore together the areas that are working well and those that may need some extra attention or nurturing.

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### Maintaining a Friendship

A deep friendship is the foundation for a happy marriage.<sup>1</sup> This friendship cultivates the intimacy between husband and wife, an intimacy that can sustain a marriage, even beyond a romantic connection.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining a friendship is a continual process of learning the

other person’s likes, dislikes, fears, hopes and dreams. It involves practicing showing respect for one another, and quite simply, the continual enjoyment of each other’s company. It is this friendship that allows the couple to become an expert at when and how to repair hurt feelings as well as how to apologize and keep inevitable conflict from getting out-of control.<sup>3</sup>

### Practicing Kindness, Respect and Nurturing

Doing things that please and uplift your partner typically occur naturally during the dating phase of a relationship. The need to continue “courting” your spouse beyond the dating phase and throughout the marriage is essential. Couples that take time to nurture their spouse also create an emotional safety net that protects their closeness even during conflict. This way, each person feels secure bringing up issues or problems without fear of ridicule. Even through the potential boredom of your daily routines, you and your partner can still find ways to show each other that you are worthy of admiration and respect.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> John M. Gottman, and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, (New York, NY: Crown Publishers Inc., 1999), 19

<sup>2</sup> Howard Markman, et al, *12 Hours to a Great Marriage*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Gottman, 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Gottman, 63

## Doing Your Part

Although marriage is a partnership, it involves the active participation of two people. Both individuals need to do their part to address personal issues and achieve personal growth.<sup>5</sup> You can not control what your spouse does, or how they react, but you can begin addressing the ways in which you respond or react in certain situations. Stay motivated to take good care of yourself, both inside and out. Stay committed to doing your part, even if your spouse behaves poorly or their actions are seemingly unfair. If physical or emotional abuse is part of your spouse's poor behavior, make an effort to remove yourself from the situation and seek outside help.

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## Managing Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of relationships. It is not the frequency that conflicts occur that matters most but how couples address them. In marriage there are two primary types of conflicts: 1. those that are solvable, and 2. those that couples learn to live with.<sup>6</sup> Couples learn to identify the differences between the two and to develop healthy ways to manage them as they arise. Together, couples can problem-solve the conflicts that are resolvable, while finding ways to manage the irresolvable ones. This can keep them from impacting their relationship in unhealthy ways.

## Staying Committed to the Commitment

When both husband and wife remain committed to staying together, not only are they more likely to stay together, they reaffirm a sense of permanence and stability that will block conflict from destroying their commitment.<sup>7</sup> In other words, their actions can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy—if they believe they will be together long term, they are more likely to stay together.

## Upholding a Shared Purpose

Like businesses and corporations with mission statements, couples in healthy marriages work to uphold their shared sense of meaning—where they are headed, the dreams they want to accomplish and the values that develop and evolve during the relationship. Couples support their shared purpose by enabling each other to achieve individual happiness and goals—these individual goals become a part of the overall concept of what marriage is about.<sup>8</sup>

There is no magic formula to create a healthy marriage, but there are skills and approaches that can help you build those areas in need of attention.

After looking at this list, you may discover that there are areas in your own marriage that could use some improvement. Furthermore, you may notice that there are areas that you are unsure about how to improve. If that is the case, don't worry. Having a healthy marriage doesn't just happen—it takes work and commitment.

<sup>5</sup> Markman, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Gottman, 129-135.

<sup>7</sup> Markman, 8.

There is no magic formula to create a healthy marriage, but there are skills and approaches that can help you build those areas in need of attention. Learning the skills and techniques for a healthy marriage does not necessarily require counseling or therapy, it can be as simple as learning how to better manage conflict by developing and practicing more effective ways of communicating. It can also include learning more effective ways of recognizing and responding to the dynamics of a relationship through marriage education. Because it is not therapy or counseling, it is a less expensive and less intimidating way to work on your relationship.

There are a few key points you should take from this tip sheet. The first is that all marriages function in different ways. There are however certain aspects that are present in every healthy marriage. Amongst the most important of them are maintaining a positive bond based in true friendship and maintaining your commitment. These two aspects will impact how confident and motivated you and your partner are to moving forward together. By communicating well and proceeding with purpose you can increase your chances of building and developing your healthy marriage.

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