



## **WHAT DO COUPLES WHO SUCCEED DO DIFFERENTLY THAN COUPLES WHO FAIL?**

(Adapted from Couples Clinic and Couples Research Institute from  
[http://www.thecouplesclinic.com/our\\_approach.htm](http://www.thecouplesclinic.com/our_approach.htm))

In the past two decades, researchers have conducted a series of long-term studies in which they have examined the question: "What do couples who succeed actually do differently than couples whose relationships fail?" Researchers have identified specific ways in which these couples do differ, and by assessing these areas in specific relationships, researchers have been able to predict which couples eventually divorce with 94% accuracy. What do couples who succeed do differently than couples who fail? Some of the important differences have to do with how partners react when they are upset with each other, and some have to do with how much fondness and admiration they experience during non-conflict times.

### **Handling Upsets**

- 1. Avoiding Judgmental Thinking.** Research suggests that without meaning to, intimate partners often trigger defensiveness in each other before they even open their mouths! The attitude you have when you're upset will tend to breed cooperativeness or defensiveness in your partner. A *judgmental* attitude is the most damaging to relationships. You know you have a judgmental attitude when you find yourself thinking things like:

- "I can't believe how selfish or insensitive he is"
- "She's never satisfied"
- "How could anybody think that way?"

If you want to succeed in your relationship, you'll realize that just because you are upset with your partner doesn't mean that your partner's thinking or actions are *wrong*. Your partner's way of thinking or behaving may be different from *your* expectations of how people should treat each other, but that doesn't make it *wrong*. You may believe that convincing your partner that he or she is wrong is the only way to get the change you are looking for, but studies suggest that most of the time quite the opposite is the case. If you want your partner to listen to you, you'll find a way to stand up for yourself without resorting to judgmental thinking.

- 2. Finding the Understandable Part.** When disagreements arise, most of us tend to think of our own position as reasonable and our partner's position as unreasonable. However, at some point in the argument, those who succeed in their relationships manage to find something understandable about what their partner is saying or wanting, even if they can't agree overall. Partners who succeed are also more willing to make small accommodations, rather than issuing flat-out rejections.



- 3. Accepting Influence.** People destined to succeed in intimate relationships easily accept their partner's influence, while people destined to fail are much less likely to accept influence. In relationships that fail, often partners are only willing to accept influence if they judge their partner's reasoning to be compelling. The problem is that, for most of us, our partner's reasoning seldom seems as worthy as our own! Reasoning that fits your values and priorities will always seem more compelling than reasoning based on other values or priorities. People who succeed in relationships recognize that opinions and preferences are rooted in personal values, and their partners' values and priorities are just as important and legitimate as their own. Successful partners are willing to try to work toward mutually-satisfying solutions rather than insisting that their own thinking or opinions should prevail.
- 4. Offering Assurance.** Often, when you try to understand the reasons behind your partner's upsetting behavior, you'll find that your partner's behavior is a result of an underlying worry or fear. However, you may also feel that you are being blamed! This makes it difficult to respond non-defensively, but people who are successful in their relationships find a way. Instead of debating whether or not your partner has the right to be worried or upset, you'll get more cooperation if you can take your partner's feelings at face value and allow yourself to feel concern. A willingness to discuss what would make your partner feel better doesn't mean that you must cave in and do exactly what your partner wants. Often, just being understanding and willing to consider what you could do is enough to help your partner feel better.
- 5. Explaining what is at stake for you.** People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner be more cooperative and understanding. Consider the following common "hidden" reasons why you may be upset or unable to consider your partner's opinion or request:

  - You're worried that your partner is sending a "bigger message" that applies to more than just the present situation.
  - You're worried that if you do what your partner wants, you'll lose a dream of how you want things to be or a need that is important to you.
  - You're worried about where this is going. The present situation bothers you because it may be a step toward something much worse.
  - It's not what your partner wants that bothers you so much. It's that you feel criticized or dismissed, as if your partner is saying you're wrong just because your wants, needs, or opinions are different.
  - Beneath it all, you're worried that what's happening now is similar to something bad that happened to you earlier in your life.
  - You're worried that if you do what your partner wants, it will conflict with a belief or value that's really important to you.



When you identify “underlying” reasons like these and explain them to your partner, you create an opportunity to address your worries or fears. Unless you identify these, your partner will have a difficult time helping you feel better.

- 6. Standing up for yourself without putting your partner down.** Sometimes, in spite of your best efforts to do the above, your partner may continue criticizing you, not showing any understanding of your feelings. A growing body of evidence suggests that you can dramatically influence the likelihood that your partner will treat you better in the future, regardless of whether your partner is deliberately trying to treat you better or not. You must stand up for your own feelings, but in a way that doesn’t put your partner down. Often, this involves withdrawing your cooperation or participation as long as your partner continues acting in the ways that are upsetting to you. As a last resort, successful partners stand up for themselves firmly, *but reluctantly*, often with a note of sadness or resignation rather than defiance – an admission that you simply don’t know what else to do.

### **Building the Emotional Bond**

- 7. Knowledge of each other’s worlds.** Studies suggest that a significant difference between couples destined to succeed versus those destined for failure is how much they know about each other’s worlds. Does your partner know your upcoming worries, your greatest sources of stress at the moment, the “high” and “low” points of your day, what you usually think about on the way home from work? Taking time to know the small details of each other’s worlds is actually predictive of marital success.
- 8. Keeping sight of the positive.** Research studies suggest that when intimate partners are upset with one another, they underestimate the positive things that happen in their relationship by 50%. Or, if they do notice, they don’t acknowledge them. Research studies confirm that in relationships destined for success, partners notice, think about, and acknowledge the small, positive things that happen. They also remember and discuss positive memories more often.
- 9. Making and responding to "bids" for connection.** Research studies suggest that partners who initiate small acts of caring or connection, delivered without strings attached, are much more likely to end up in happy relationships than partners who neglect such small acts. These partners also make more attempts to connect and they pick up on (and respond to) small attempts at connection that their partner’s make. Partners who succeed allow themselves to be nurtured by their partners and provide emotional nurturing as well.
- 10. “We-ness”** Intimate partners who succeed actively plan their lives together, rather than being at the mercy of the “rat race”, or taking the path of least resistance. They talk (and sometimes argue) with each other until they can agree on important priorities. They plan the broad strokes of their lives, making efforts to support each other’s dreams, and they also plan the small details, discussing questions such as, “How do we want our dinner times to be?”



## **The Problem of Motivation**

Knowledge of the attitudes and behaviors that will help a relationship succeed, while essential, is not enough. Many times the problem is not so much knowledge, it's *motivation*. Even when intimate partners know what they can do to improve their relationship, they find themselves unable to do it. Fortunately, we now know more about how to approach motivational problems.

The behaviors and attitudes necessary to succeed in relationships are easy to understand and learn, but can be very difficult to do, because, when misunderstandings occur, each partner may find him or herself in a state of mind that isn't compatible with the needed behavior or attitude. In order to change his/her attitude or behavior, each partner must learn how to get into the right frame of mind for the task.

For example, researchers have noticed that, when a relationship is distressed, each partner generally reacts to the other during arguments in highly predictable and patterned ways. Thanks to some very helpful brain research in the past 15 years, we now know that this is because each of our brains gets conditioned to produce highly specific *response programs*. These programs involve conditioned brain circuits that are pre-programmed so that, once triggered, they unfold as if they had a mind of their own, producing a predictable pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Brain researchers call these brain states "executive operating systems," but ordinary people call them "states of mind" or "moods." The important thing is to recognize that these internal response programs can dramatically dictate how you interact with your partner.

Most of the time, it's an advantage to have these automatic response circuits in our brains, because when they are activated we automatically experience motivation to learn, love, be close to others, be playful, defend, and protect ourselves. But when relationships are distressed, these automatic response circuits are often to blame. Often, the wrong circuits get activated at critical moments. Research on internal response circuits suggests that problems come in three varieties:

1. When you get caught in the "pull" of an internal response circuit, and are unable to do what is needed (e.g., when the 'anger program' kicks in, and you just can't listen to your partner when it would ultimately be to your benefit to do so)
2. When you avoid doing or saying needed things because to do so would likely trigger an uncomfortable internal response circuit in you (e.g., When you are unable to admit when you're wrong, because doing so triggers an anxious or vulnerable state in you)
3. When a needed response state simply doesn't show up (e.g., When you need to respond to your partner with tenderness or caring, but you find yourself feeling nothing)

To improve your relationship, you need to become very familiar with the specific response state patterns that happen to you during key intimate situations. Your best shot at acting differently comes when you can recognize when a response state problem is automatically activated and when you develop the ability to shift internal states when needed. If this sounds complicated to you, don't worry. Your therapist will help you identify and learn to influence your internal states when needed.