

# Why Do Intimate Relationships Succeed or Fail?\*

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Over three decades ago, marriage researchers set out to find exactly what people who succeed in their relationships do differently than people who fail in their relationships. In the first year of these studies, researchers carefully observed and measured everything that could possibly be related to whether might eventually succeed or fail (e.g., attitudes, communication styles, amount of anger, amount of tenderness, etc). They put couples in apartments equipped with video cameras in every room in the apartment (except the bathroom!) and recorded everything each of them did. They also asked them to have conversations about specific topics while the researchers monitored their heart rates and measured their physical movements. When the researchers were satisfied that they had measured everything that might be related to the couples' eventual success, they simply turned them loose and then tracked them down up to 15 years later to see how they were doing. Which couples were divorced? Which ones were unhappily married? And which ones had thriving marriages? Not only did they succeed in pinpointing the interpersonal habits that distinguish people who succeed from people who fail, but they found that some interpersonal habits are so crucial that the absence of them virtually guarantees marital failure. By measuring the relative presence or absence of specific interpersonal habits, researchers found that they could predict the likelihood that the marriage would eventually succeed or fail with over 90% accuracy! People who have these crucial habits almost always end up in happy marriages, whereas people who don't almost always end up divorced or unhappily married.

These studies are revolutionizing our understanding of intimate relationships. Before them, couples therapists had to proceed on the basis of what they thought couples needed, or what generally accepted theories in the field told them to do. Now, for the first time, we have scientific evidence about what couples who succeed and fail actually do differently. This information has been filtering into public awareness through books such as John Gottman's *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, and *The Relationship Cure*. These studies present compelling evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in an intimate relationship. If you want to succeed in love, you simply must have specific interpersonal abilities, and we now know exactly what these abilities are. If you have these abilities, the chances are very, very good that you will be treated with respect and admiration from your intimate partner. If you don't have them, the evidence suggests that your relationship future is quite dim.

Some of the most important of these successful interpersonal habits involve things that you must be able to do *without the help of your partner*. In fact, you must do these things precisely when your partner is making it most difficult for you to do them! Researchers have discovered that the way people respond when they feel misunderstood or mistreated by their partners dramatically influences the odds that their

partners will treat them better or worse in the future. All people in lasting intimate relationships feel misunderstood or mistreated at one time or another. At these times, some people respond in ways that make it less likely that their partners will mistreat or misunderstand them in the future, and some people respond in ways that dramatically increase the odds that they will be even more misunderstood or mistreated. The way you respond to the worst in your partner plays a central role in determining whether or not you'll experience something better from him in the future. These studies suggest that most of us vastly underestimate the potential positive influence we can have on our partners. Evidence suggests that you can dramatically influence the way that your partner treats you, regardless of whether your partner is deliberately trying to be nicer to you or not. This is because your partner's level of motivation has so much to do with how you interact with him. We are almost guaranteed love relationships in which we feel respected and valued if we have certain interpersonal abilities. If you find yourself in a relationship in which you feel consistently misunderstood or mistreated, you don't have to wait around, hoping that your partner will start treating you better. You can largely take the matter into your own hands. You can't control Charles, but you can dramatically influence the odds that he will treat you better in the future. How? *By making sure that you are responding well to any unfair or disrespectful treatment you may be receiving right now.*

Some of these habits that predict relationship success are obvious. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that people who tend to start out discussions with harsh criticisms won't likely succeed any more than those who are unwilling to accept influence from their partners when making decisions. But some of the important predictors are not so obvious, nor easily observed, because they have more to do with what a person is *thinking* than what she or he says or does. Two different husbands may each apologize and adjust their plans to accommodate when their wives criticize them harshly for forgetting that they had previously agreed to go out with friends to dinner. Husband #1 will end up divorced, and husband #2 happily married. Why? While husband #1 apologizes and adjusts his plans, inside he's thinking thoughts like, "She shouldn't get so upset over such a little thing," "If it's not one thing, it's another!" "She's never satisfied!" "I would never act like that if she forgot something!" "She's just like her mother!" In contrast, husband #2 is thinking things like, "Why is she so upset?" "There must be more going on here than meets the eye." "My forgetting about this must mean something to her that I don't really understand" "I've got to find out the emotional logic behind her reactions." Although the outward actions of the two husbands look the same (apologizing and accepting influence), clearly these husbands have vastly different attitudes, and attitudes are as potent as behaviors when predicting relationship success or failure.

It is exceedingly rare to find a situation in which one partner is meeting the prerequisites when the other partner isn't. Granted, the shortcomings of one partner are often more public or provocative than the shortcomings of the other (i.e., one partner flies into rages and throws things while the other tries to placate and calm the raging partner down), but when each of the prerequisites are weighted equally, partners in distressed relationships are generally a match for each other. Partners entering therapy rarely see things this way. Inwardly, if not outwardly, each partner generally thinks that his or her partner's shortcomings are more serious than his or her own.

Usually, this is because there are certain “dysfunctional” things that their partners do that they know they don’t do themselves. What they don’t realize is that there are many different interpersonal habits that are predictive of relationship success or failure. They are focused on the particular dysfunctional habits of their partner, not realizing that some of their own habits are just as powerfully corrosive to the relationship. The good news is that any partner who is able to see and modify his or her own dysfunctional habits will most often find that their partner follows. This is due to the powerful combination of abilities that people destined for relationship success have. They require that they be treated with respect, but they also make it easy for their partners to treat them with respect at the same time.

The bottom line is this: If you want Charles to treat you better, you need to think and act like people who usually get treated well. Researchers have studied people who naturally elicit respect and cooperation from their partners, and have identified exactly how they do it. There are specific skills and attitudes involved in knowing how to bring out the best in others, and there is evidence that people who know how to do this are more successful not only in their intimate relationships, but in most areas of their lives. Of course, we all have the ability to do this sometimes, but the people who succeed in getting the respect and admiration from their partners can do it even when they feel really misunderstood or mistreated. These are the moments that separate the men from the boys, and the women from the girls, psychologically speaking. If you can’t stay on track in these times, you’re probably not going to be one of those who ends up with a partner who understands, respects and cares about you. Your therapist will be able to see exactly where you are getting off track in your relationship with your partner, and help you get back on track. When you do, you’ll find that Charles will begin treating you differently. Don’t get the wrong idea... Charles probably isn’t any more on track than you are. He isn’t doing himself any favors, either. The way he is treating you only makes it more difficult for you to respond to him the way he wants you to, right? Hopefully, he will be willing to work with your therapist on these things too – your therapist will certainly try to convince him that it would be in his own best interest to do so, but please realize that you, yourself, can dramatically influence the odds that he will become motivated to work on changing the way he treats you.

Each week we encounter people who tell us stories about how poorly they have been treated by their partners. After spewing the details of their mate’s most recent episode of incredibly selfish or disrespectful behavior, they usually look at us as if to say, “Now how on earth am I supposed to respond to that?” Half of these people are already convinced that there is no good answer to this question. In fact, they resent even having to ask the question, believing that they shouldn’t have to deal with this crap in the first place. But the evidence suggests that if they continue dismissing the question, they will kiss their relationships goodbye. Why? Because marital success has more to do with responding well when your partner seems selfish or inconsiderate than it has to do with avoiding actually being selfish or inconsiderate in the first place. It’s not that selfish or disrespectful behavior doesn’t matter. It does. Repetitive, selfish behavior is destructive in relationships. The problem is that you are not a very reliable judge about what truly selfish behavior is. None of us are, the reason being that there are hundreds of yardsticks for measuring selfishness, and we tend to use our own, not our partner’s. Let’s take a hypothetical example: A wife accepts an invitation to go out

with her friends on Friday night without asking her husband if that would be OK with him. The husband considers that to be really inconsiderate, and feels justified in criticizing her harshly for it. But the fact is, this wife wouldn't be upset at the husband if he made similar arrangements with his friends without consulting her. In fact, the wife has a whole different ideal for how a relationship should be. In her view, partners should each be free to make other arrangements unless plans between the two of them have been specifically made. She wouldn't dream of being so selfish as to try to restrict his freedom by asking him to consult her every time he wanted to plan something with his friends. Obviously, he didn't see it that way, and he let her have a piece of his mind! Well, if she wasn't behaving selfishly before he harshly criticized her, now she is! She slams the door in his face. Feeling perfectly entitled to his contempt, the next time he sees her he is sneering at her for her childish tantrum. Needless to say, her response to his contempt isn't exactly what he was hoping for.

And so the story goes. It began with the husband's *perception* that his wife was being inconsiderate. If he had been able to respond differently, she may have been willing to try to work out a more mutually-satisfying plan. But he felt perfectly justified in his reaction. After all, hadn't she done the selfish thing first? She doesn't see it that way. She believes that he is the one who was selfish, trying to control her by limiting her freedom to schedule time with her friends. She wouldn't dream of selfishly restricting him like that! Of course, his priority on collaboration isn't any more selfish than her priority on mutual freedom. As the discussion unfolded, she didn't respond any better to the perception that he was being selfish than he did to the perception that she was being inconsiderate, and so the whole thing blew up. But it all would have been avoided if either of them were able to stand up for themselves without putting the other person down. If you expect to get more respect from Charles, you simply must be able to do this.

The article, *Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners* details specific abilities that highly predictive of relationship success. If you develop and maintain these habits, you're nearly guaranteed a relationship in which you feel valued, respected and loved. Six of these ten interpersonal habits are used to negotiate upsets, the other four have to do with how you think about and act toward your partner when you're not upset with each other. Research studies show that successful resolution of conflict is not enough to predict happy and stable marriages. Only 40% of those who divorce report severe fighting as the cause. The other 60% cite a gradual drifting apart, or the absence of fondness and admiration as the cause. In the second half of your therapy, you'll focus on developing or enhancing four habits that strengthen your friendship, and create a sense of emotional closeness in your relationship. Studies suggest that finding and maintaining emotional closeness is the key to lasting happiness. However, if you are feeling disrespected, criticized or dismissed, you'll not likely feel able to implement the four abilities that create emotional closeness. You probably don't even want to. That's why therapists often begin therapy by helping partners change their habits of reacting when they feel mistreated or misunderstood. Intimacy-building comes later, when there is a foundation of respect.

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