



# What Lasting Couples Do

## *Seven ideas from the research of Dr. John Gottman, in plain language*

This sheet is based on the research of Dr. John Gottman, who spent decades studying what helps some marriages last and grow warmer over time. He and Nan Silver describe what he found in their book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. What you'll read here is a plain-language introduction to those seven ideas, in my own words. If they speak to you, I warmly recommend the book itself. It goes much deeper than one sheet ever could.

### **Before we start: a note about safety**

These tools are for the ordinary bumps and arguments that happen between two people who are safe with each other. If there is fear in your relationship, if one of you controls the other, or if there is any kind of abuse, this sheet is not the right tool. Your safety comes first, before any communication skill. You can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233, or text START to 88788, any time. You deserve to be safe.

### **Keep learning each other's inner world**

Dr. Gottman found that close couples really know each other. They know what their partner is worried about, what they're excited about, and what they quietly dream of. He calls this having a love map, a kind of mental map of who your partner is. The catch is that people keep changing. The person you fell for years ago has new stresses and new hopes today. Staying close means staying curious, like there's always more to learn. Because there is.

1. Try this at home: sometime this week, ask your partner one question you don't already know the answer to. Something simple works, like "What's been on your mind lately?" Then just listen.

### **Keep noticing what you admire**

It's easy to keep a running list of the things that bug you about your partner. Happy couples keep a different list. They notice what they like and respect about each other, and they say it out loud. Fondness is a bit like a garden. It stays alive when you tend it, even in small ways. Kind words spoken often do more than grand gestures once a year.

1. Try this at home: once a day this week, tell your partner one small thing you appreciate. "You made me laugh this morning" counts. So does "thanks for handling dinner."

## **Turn toward the small moments**

Connection is built less by big date nights and more by tiny everyday moments. Your partner says "look at this," or sighs from the other room, or reaches for your hand. Each of those is a small reach for your attention. Dr. Gottman found that couples who answer those little reaches, even briefly, stay much closer than couples who let them slide by. You don't have to drop everything every time. Just noticing, and responding, adds up.

1. Try this at home: pick one ordinary day. Each time your partner reaches for your attention in a small way, give them ten real seconds before going back to what you were doing.

## **Let your partner change your mind**

In lasting relationships, both people get a real say. When your partner's opinion can actually move you, you're not losing an argument. You're being a team. Dr. Gottman found that couples do best when both partners share power, in choices big and small. Asking "what do you think?" and truly weighing the answer tells your partner their voice counts with you.

1. Try this at home: next time you two disagree about something small, like where to eat, ask your partner what matters to them about it. Let their answer actually move you, and notice how that feels.

## **Start soft with the solvable problems**

Some problems between partners have real solutions, and Dr. Gottman found that how a conversation starts usually decides how it ends. A harsh opening puts the other person on defense before you've made your point. A soft opening, where you talk about what you feel and what you need instead of what they did wrong, keeps the door open. It also helps to take a break when either of you is too worked up to think, and to accept the little repairs your partner offers along the way, like a joke or a quick "let me try that again."

1. Try this at home: next time something small bothers you, try starting with yourself instead of them. "I felt hurt when the plans changed" lands very differently than "you always change the plans."

## Get curious about the stuck arguments

Every couple has a few arguments that come back again and again. Dr. Gottman found that most of these never fully go away, and that's normal. Underneath a stuck argument there is usually something each of you deeply wants. A hope, a value, a picture of the life you're trying to build. The goal isn't to win, or even to solve it. The goal is to understand what the argument means to each of you. Understanding can soften things that solutions can't reach.

1. Try this at home: pick one argument that keeps coming back. Set the argument itself aside and take turns asking, "What does this mean to you?" Listen without fixing anything. You might be surprised by what's underneath.

## Build a little world of your own

Lasting couples create a small culture that belongs to just the two of them. Shared rituals, inside jokes, ways of marking the week, dreams they're working toward together. Dr. Gottman calls this shared meaning. It's the difference between two people managing a household and two people building a life. None of it has to be fancy. Coffee together on Sunday morning can carry as much meaning as anything.

1. Try this at home: talk together about one small ritual you'd like to share, like a walk after dinner or coffee before the kids wake up. Try it once this week and see if it wants to stay.

***You don't have to work on all seven at once. Pick the one that tugged at you and start there — small, imperfect, and real. These ideas are simple, but simple isn't the same as easy, and it's okay to move slowly. If you'd like the full picture, Gottman and Silver's book is well worth your time. And if you'd like company while you practice, that's what couples counseling is for.***

This sheet is a companion, not a replacement for working with a counselor. If you're in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time, day or night.