

Summer 2007 Article

Relationships

Part I: Emotional Intelligence

By Jennifer C. Kaplan, Ph.D., MACP

I'm not trying to scare you, but the following statistics on divorce just might do that. According to psychologist and relationship researcher John Gottman (1999), "The chance of a first marriage ending in divorce over a forty-year period is 67 percent. Half of all divorces will occur in the first seven years." (p. 4) My aim with this series is to inspire you and your partner or future partner to be and to stay on the path of healthy, sustainable marriage instead of the other path, the one ending in divorce.

I will be presenting you with just a few of the discoveries made by John Gottman (1999), as described in his book [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#). I will not be presenting you with the seven principles themselves. For that you'll have to read the book, which, as far as I'm concerned, is *required reading* for anybody in or wanting to be in a long-term committed relationship.

Gottman has received many accolades for his empirical research on couples. Through years of observing couples' interactions along with monitoring their physiological responses while observing couples who agreed to spend time in his "love lab": "heart rate, blood flow, sweat output, blood pressure, and immune function" (Gottman, 1999, p. 7), Gottman (1999) has developed a model for a good marriage that we all, especially those of us from divorced families, would benefit from having in mind. His research also resulting his having cultivated the amazing ability of predicting divorce within FIVE MINUTES.

One of Gottman's (1999) most interesting, yet not surprising, findings was that a bad marriage is toxic. Internally, a bad marriage puts tremendous stress on your body, negatively affecting your immune system, nervous system, and cardiovascular system, over time having the potential to create all kinds of symptoms and affect other systems in your body. Externally, a bad marriage is damaging to your children, who are exposed to sustained high levels of negativity and hostility at home and who are also forming their mental model of what marriage is based on a bad marriage. Gottman writes, "A peaceful divorce is better than a warlike marriage." (p. 6) If your marriage is causing you stress and/or is a source of more negativity than positivity in your life, work on your marriage or get a divorce, but in either case, work towards an amicable, peaceful relationship if not for the sake of your or your partner's health then for the sake of your children's.

Gottman's (1999) findings debunk many of the common myths about what makes marriage work, the most widespread myth being that good communication is the key to a good marriage. While communication is important, it isn't everything.

According to Gottman, the real backbone for a good marriage is "emotional intelligence" (Gottman, 1999, p. 3). *Emotional intelligence*, a term popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995) in his seminal work entitled [Emotional Intelligence](#), which I recommend reading if you haven't yet, is considered a combination of the following capacities (from [Funderstanding.com](#)):

1. Self-awareness--knowing your emotions, recognizing feelings as they occur, and

- discriminating between them
2. Mood management--handling feelings so they're relevant to the current situation and you react appropriately
 3. Self-motivation--"gathering up" your feelings and directing yourself towards a goal, despite self-doubt, inertia, and impulsiveness
 4. Empathy--recognizing feelings in others and tuning into their verbal and nonverbal cues
 5. Managing relationships--handling interpersonal interaction, conflict resolution, and negotiations

So you can continually guide and redirect yourself down the path toward a healthy, sustainable marriage or long-term relationship, try increasing your emotional intelligence. Below, I elaborate on the five aspects of emotional intelligence and offer you some tips:

1. Self-awareness

You are the expert on you, and your partner is the expert on him or herself. It is your job to know yourself well enough so that you can share what you know about you with your partner. Likewise, it's your partner's job to know him or herself well enough to educate you on who he/she is. This is not just how relationships function better but also how intimacy deepens.

Tips for increasing emotional self-awareness: Cultivate a contemplative practice like meditation; see a psychotherapist on a weekly basis; read self-help books on various aspects of emotional health and healing; journal and monthly or bimonthly reread all your journal entries from the month before; familiarize yourself with the language of emotion set your alarm on your watch or computer to go off every hour for 1 day and each time it goes off, ask yourself "What am I feeling right now in this moment?".

2. Mood management

I generally use the word "reactivity" to denote shifts in mood or feelings that occur suddenly, without warning, and feel intense. When you are reactive, your moods and feelings are more volatile and therefore your internal world is less stable. High reactivity to certain specific events could be a sign of some deep wounding or trauma from the past.

Tips for managing your mood better: Learn to recognize your moods first, before you try to manage them, by cultivating emotional self-awareness-see tips for increasing self-awareness above. Then develop some self-soothing strategies for each mood that you need some help managing. Self-soothing strategies are those behaviors we do to soothe ourselves; everybody needs soothing sometimes. Self-soothing are not intended to rid discomfort or pain from our lives; they are intended to support and nurture you while you go through whatever you're going through until you no longer feel the need for self-soothing. Some general self-soothing strategies are conscious breathing, exercise, journaling, washing dishes, taking a bath, getting a massage, going out into nature, taking a yoga class, dancing, and having sex. Develop the strategies that work best for you in various moods. Be careful not to employ a self-soothing strategy that might benefit you in the short-run only to create more harm than good in the longer run. For example, when you wake up on the wrong side of the bed on some mornings, I wouldn't recommend doubling your caffeine intake. If you think there is some deep wounding or trauma from the past that results in reactivity to present situations, a therapist would be helpful.

3. Self-motivation

Being self-motivated requires direction and energy. Goal-setting, even the goal to be more process-oriented as opposed to goal-oriented, establishes a direction. Energy follows attention, so if your attention is directed towards something, your energy will follow. If you've heard all the buzz on Oprah about "The Secret", I've just revealed the secret to you. The secret is that energy follows attention, and this principle in the movie is referred to as the "Law of Attraction". It's not really such a secret, but it's a great title for marketing a movie. The point: There is tremendous value in being able to direct your attention to where you want it to go so that your energy is what you want it to be so that you end up where you want to be.

Tips for cultivation of greater self-motivation: Reflect for just a moment on those times in your life when you have been most motivated. Answer the question, "What motivated you?" Write down your answers and notice how many of them are extrinsic motivations (motivations generated from outside of yourself, i.e., because Mom says so) vs. intrinsic motivations (motivations generated from within in, i.e., because I wanted x). Cultivating greater self-motivation often requires moving through fears. Perhaps reflect on what these fears are and how long you've had them. Some self-investigation by answering these kinds of questions will help you to identify what is getting in your way of being more self-motivated.

4. Empathy

Empathy is stepping into somebody else's shoes. It's understanding someone else's reality from their perspective, through their eyes. Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is what happens when you stay in your own shoes. Empathy is important in a relationship because it allows each person to feel heard, truly understood, and known by the other and to trust and feel safe enough in order to move toward deeper levels of intimacy. Of the five elements of emotional intelligence, empathy is the one most responsible for the creation of community because it fosters a deepening of heart-to-heart connection.

Tips for increasing empathy: Go to the movies and notice how you connect with the characters in the film. To what degree do you feel what the characters are feeling? How easy or difficult is it for you to open yourself to feeling what the characters are feeling? Have your best friend or significant other tell you an anecdote from his/her life, and as you listen, imagine what your friend or significant other might have been feeling at that time. Then ask your friend or significant other to tell you what he/she felt at that time and what they are feeling while talking about it in the present and notice how what is communicated affects you. Try that (those) feeling(s) on, and notice how easy or difficult it is to step into the shoes of your friend or significant other. How is empathizing with your friend or significant other similar to and different from empathizing with a character in a movie?

5. Managing Relationships

Some relationships are easy to manage, and some are more challenging. You and the person you are relating to are two unique individuals with individual needs, wants, desires, likes, dislikes, interests, histories, DNA, religious backgrounds, beliefs, habits, attitudes, etc. Differences can be very difficult to navigate, so difficult, in fact, that people result to war. Many of us weren't raised with good role models for navigating differences and resolving conflict, so we have some work to do; it's now our responsibility to teach ourselves how to better manage our relationships. Think about the ripple effects of our taking such action: If we become better at managing our relationships, then everyone we come into contact with benefits and shifts, even in some small way, in response to our growth, and then each person that comes into contact with each one of those individuals shifts in some small way in response, and so on. We promote better relationships when we

start doing relationships better ourselves.

Tips for managing relationships: If you are conflict avoidant or aversive, work on the other 4 emotional intelligence skills in addition to your communication skills, including the language of expressing emotions; these skills will hopefully propel you into engaging more directly with conflict in way that feels good to both you and your partner. A professional therapist can be helpful in this process. If you are conflict-creating or overly confrontational, also work on the other 4 emotional intelligence, redirecting your self-motivation from getting your individual wants and needs met to having a healthy and stable relationship; these skills will teach you how to reduce reactivity so you can communicate in ways that facilitate heart-to-heart discussion as opposed to arguments or fights so that you get your needs met. Again, a therapist is often helpful for helping to navigate this process.

References

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Gottman, John and Silver, Nan. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

<http://www.funderstanding.com/eq.cfm>