

Want a Happy Marriage? Be Nice, Don't Nitpick

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WebMD Feature

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Thermostat settings. Dirty socks. Toothpaste caps. Our little habits make our spouses crazy. But no two people are ever truly compatible, so quit nitpicking each other, relationship experts advise. Save the battles for the big issues -- and you'll have a happy marriage.

Susan Boon, PhD, a social psychologist at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, teaches classes in interpersonal relationships. A few years ago, she picked up the book, *Seven Principles for Making Marriages Work*, by John Gottman, MD, psychologist, relationship researcher for 30 years, and founder of The Gottman Institute in Seattle. Ever since discovering the book, Boon has recommended it to her students.

Secrets of a Happy Marriage

Long-lasting, happy marriages have more than great communication, Boon says. "Dr. Gottman brings up something no one ever talks about -- that irreconcilable differences are normal, that you just have to come to terms with them, not try to resolve the unresolvable. On some level, that should have been obvious, but it hasn't been," she tells WebMD.

Most marriage therapists focus on "active listening," which involves paraphrasing, validating, affirming your spouse's feedback, says Boon. "That's all well and good and may help you get through some conflicts in a less destructive way. But, as Dr. Gottman puts it, 'you're asking people to do Olympic-style gymnastics when they can hardly crawl.' Many people will fail at those techniques. Research indicates that most people are dissatisfied with the outcome of marital therapy, that the problems come back."

In happy marriages, Boon points out, couples don't do any of that!

Instead, you must be nice to your partner, research shows. Make small gestures, but make them often. "The little things matter," says Boon. "What a happy marriage is based on is deep friendship, knowing each other well, having mutual respect, knowing when it makes sense to try to work out an issue, when it is not solvable. Many kinds of issues simply aren't solvable."

Learn how to identify issues that must be resolved, that can be "fruitfully discussed," she notes. "Learn to live with the rest. Just put up with it. All you do is waste your breath and get angry over these things that can't be changed. You're better off not trying to change them. Work around them. Commit to staying together, even though this is something you don't like."

A long-lasting, happy marriage is about knowing your partner, being supportive, and being nice. Research shows that, "for every one negative thing you do, there must be five positive things that balance it out," Boon tells WebMD. "Make sure to balance the negatives with positives. Your marriage has to be heavily in favor of the positives."

While it sounds easy -- and while it can be easy -- this commitment to being nice is no small matter, Boon says. "You have to do nice things often. But it's harder to be nice when the heat is on, when you're really angry, or when something has happened for the 15th time. Nevertheless, the balance must be heavily, heavily stacked in the positive, to have a happy marriage."

Also, couples must stay in touch with their special ways of repairing the relationship, Boon says. "It can be humor; it can be whatever helps diffuse the escalating heat. In happy marriages, couples naturally do this. They deflect the anger, and get back on an even keel."

A Happy Marriage Means Respecting Spouse

It's true, research has shown that couples in satisfying, happy marriages have more positive emotions in their interactions -- including discussions of problems, says Shae Graham Kosch, PhD, director of the behavioral medicine program in community health and family at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

Kosch has been married (to the same man) for 32 years. She has counseled unhappy couples just as long.

"Most marital conflicts don't ever get resolved," she tells WebMD. "There are always issues around in-laws, children. Solving the problems doesn't really matter. What's crucial is keeping things positive. You have to accept the other person's perspective, have an appropriate discussion without getting critical or blaming."

Other tips from Kosch: Men in good relationships don't react emotionally during conflicts. Men in bad relationships are more likely to withdraw from the discussion. They might actually leave the room, look at the ceiling, or tune out the conversation. Wives in negative relationships also get entrenched in their particular viewpoint and ultimately feel greater anger and contempt.

Your attitude toward your spouse plays out over the long haul, she adds. "Couples that have good marriages retain their mutual respect and understanding of each other -- even during discussions of their differences -- will stay together much longer."

The Myers-Briggs personality test has helped many couples tune into their own psyches -- whether they're a thinking or feeling type, decisive or perceiving, or flexible. Those insights into themselves help their relationships. "It's a nonjudgmental measurement. It doesn't say that anyone is too rational or overly emotional. We all have these characteristics; in some people they are more dominant."

Most importantly, for a happy marriage, be committed to seeing your partner's perspective, she tells WebMD. "Have a willingness to understand, make changes in yourself, and find some method to get out of negative communication patterns -- negativity that just escalates. Sometimes that couple just can't move forward. They develop what I call 'manure-colored glasses.'"

One trick that works: Discussing conflicts while talking on the phone, rather than face to face. "That removes all nonverbal cues. She won't see him looking at the ceiling; he won't see her rolling her eyes. It keeps things more positive."

Step by Step to Resolving Issues

"Conflict is common, and a healthy dose of conflict is OK," says Terri Orbuch, PhD, a research scientist with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She's also a family therapist and the "Love Doctor" on a Detroit radio station.

In her research, Orbuch has studied one group of couples for the past 16 years. "How you deal with it, that's what matters in a happy marriage," she tells WebMD. "You have to fight fair. Stay calm. You cannot be at problem-solving best when you're angry. Come back to the situation when you're not, and you can have a whole new perspective."

Also, pick your battles. "You can't have a conflict over everything. We call it 'kitchen sinking' -- bringing up things that happened five, 10 years ago," says Orbuch.

For a happy marriage, here's how to deal with conflict:

- Bring it up in a nonthreatening way. "Be nice. No name calling," she advises.
- Bring up specific issues or behaviors, rather than personality qualities. In a happy marriage, there's no attacking the person. "Bring up the specific time, how you felt about it, then people can change the behavior," Orbuch tells WebMD. "Otherwise, they don't know what to do about it, they're boxed in."
- Use "I" statements. Instead of "you're a very messy person" say "I'm really bothered when you put clothes on the floor." Such statements show how you feel about a specific behavior, and that's important in a happy marriage, she says.
- Try to stay calm. Studies show that the calmer you are, the more you will be taken seriously, she says. "Take a breath, count to 10, breathe. Try to be nonthreatening."
- Take a break. "If you're going back and forth, if you find blood pressure going up, take minutes or seconds," she says. "Don't take hours. If you take too long, it festers in the other person, they've had time analyze it; you're dismissing their feelings opinions, dismissing them."

- Don't bring it up at night. Choose the right time -- not when people are tired, hungry, when the kids are all around, when you've got a deadline at work. Those are not best times."
- Consider your spouse's point of view, if you want a truly happy marriage. "I'm a true believer in this," says Orbuch. "Studies show that every single action has a different meaning depending on if you are male, female, your race, your background. That is important to remember in conflict resolution."

Her research "has shown, time and time again, that conflict is not important, that how you manage conflict, how you handle it over the long haul, really is important to a happy marriage," Orbuch tells WebMD. "I'm a big believer in direct, meaningful communication -- but you have to choose the right time."

Also, compromise is necessary in long-term relationships, she adds. "But each partner has to feel that it's reciprocal. One can't feel that they're making all the compromises." When one spouse makes all the compromises, it's uncomfortable for both -- not just the one giving in.

"You have to remember there are ebbs and flows in relationships," Orbuch says. "There will be times when you're making the compromises. But there will be other times when your partner is making them. As long as in the long-term things are reciprocal, that's what is important."

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