

March 2010 Newsletter  
Renewal in Your Relationships  
By Matt Rome

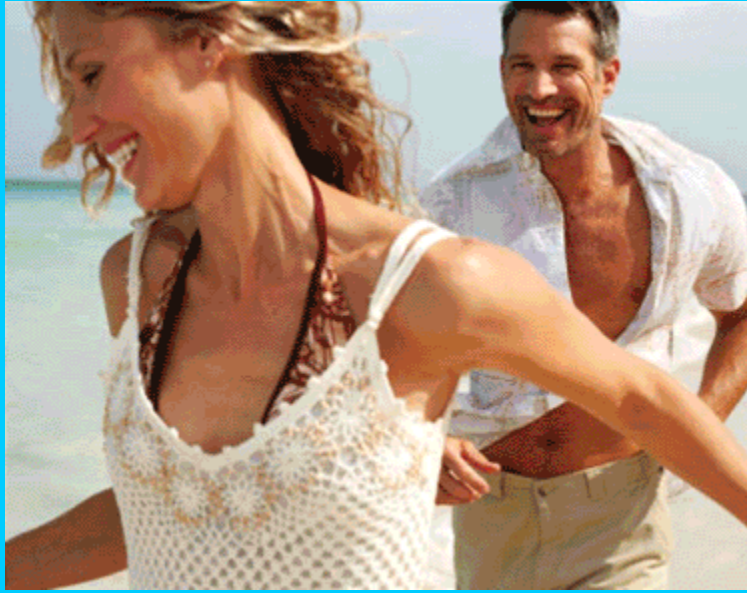
*In like a lion, out like a lamb.* That's how the old saying goes to describe the journey that is the month of March. At the outset, winter is still having quite the difficult time letting us loose from its frigid grasp; however, by the end of the month, signs of spring often times radiate from every conceivable direction – leaving us hopeful and eager for the rush of pleasant weather to come. It is not uncommon for the winter months to leave our relationships cold and in need of some modifications by the time spring is right around the bend. The holidays can often exhaust us with all the work parties, shopping, food intake, and familial get-togethers, and it is not uncommon for this whirlwind of activity to put the relationships that should matter most on the back burner. After the holidays, the desolation of winter can linger on and leave us feeling lethargic, craving sunlight, and going stir crazy thanks to a little phenomenon called *cabin fever*.

These aforementioned characteristics of the winter months frequently put a strain on our relationships with loved ones, and we may even be inclined to take out our winter-induced irritability on our significant others. That is why this month's newsletter will focus on some tried and true self-help tactics that relate to reviving the positive connection and intimacy with those we care about most. And we're off!

Let's hit the ground running shall we...John Gottman, a very renowned PhD psychologist who specializes in marriage and couples counseling, will be the template for our discussion on what constitutes a solid, long-lasting, loving, and overall reciprocal relationship. Now even though these specific criteria were intended for couples and/or marriage partners, I still wholeheartedly believe that they also serve as fantastic guidelines for any other genre of important relationship in one's life. Furthermore, I would certainly consider it a great disservice to delineate these positive principles of a successful relationship without first going over the negative, more destructive patterns that more often than not derail any brand of loving relationship. After all, we need to have something to contrast the positives against don't we?

First of all, Dr. John Gottman usually starts off his books and/or his dissertations about marital success and failure by describing his concept of the *5:1 ratio*. This *5:1 ratio* theory, which has been successfully proven in a great number of observational scientific studies and has been published in scholarly peer-reviewed literature, essentially states that the vast majority of successful couples (the ones who have the most fulfilling and long-lasting relationships) have five positive interactions for every one negative interaction. In other words, it takes FIVE positive interactions with your significant other to make up for just one negative interaction. So what constitutes a negative interaction and what constitutes a positive one? So glad you posed the question readers. According to Gottman's theory, the four most abominable interpersonal and emotional reactions that seriously impair a marriage or relationship between two people are as follows: *stonewalling*, *defensiveness*, *criticism*, and last but certainly not least there is *contempt*. *Stonewalling* basically equates to emotional withdrawal by one or both partners and commonly rears its ugly head in the form of a *cold shoulder*. *Defensiveness* is commonly exhibited when one (or both parties in a relationship) adopt the perception of being constantly under attack – that their partner is constantly judging them for who they are and the behaviors they engage in. This often results in angry outbursts, an absence of intimacy, and emotional abandonment in an attempt to protect oneself. *Criticism* is relatively self-explanatory and has to

do with a harsh brand of verbally judging others for their actions and personality traits; it often stems from one's own insecurity. Lastly, *contempt* is frequently defined as *an open disrespect or willful disobedience towards someone who is viewed as being inferior* – it is along the same lines as resentment or scorn in my book.



So now that we've made sure to get the ugly guys out of the picture first, let us delve into some of the key behaviors in which Gottman has found most successful marriages/ relationships have. In Gottman's popular book entitled *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*, his first principle is called *Enhance Your Love Maps*. What on earth is a love map? Glad you asked friends! Gottman basically defines this term as *a place in your brain where you store information about your partner*. He is basically saying that you should make a constant and genuine effort to learn and re-learn your partner – her likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams, fears; make it known that you are interested and fascinated by the process of understanding your partner's world.

Secondly, Gottman promotes that all couples *nurture their fondness and admiration* for one another. What does this equate to exactly? Well, Gottman sums this next principle up as more or less cultivating a positive view of your partner and learning to respect his or her differences; this includes accepting all of your mate's shortcomings and faults! I like to think of this as *holding one's partner in an unconditional positive regard*.

The third principle in which Gottman abides by has to do with body language. Gottman notes that most successful couples *turn towards one another as opposed to turning away*. As far as I understand it, this simple yet effective action communicates that you are open and receptive to your special someone – both physically and emotionally. Fourth and fifth on Gottman's illustrious list are as follows: *let your partner influence you* and *solve your solvable problems via compromise*. You heard right my friends! Now please do not misunderstand Gottman; he is not advising that you should have a fused identity with your mate. He is however saying that - while you should definitely be your own unique person – you should yield to your partner every so often and put their wants and needs above your own. In essence, the good doctor is advocating selflessness as it relates to interpersonal dealings with your partner.

Alright, here we go; this is the home stretch of this month's letter, so please hang in there as we march towards the finish line. Numero seis is *overcome gridlock*. This principle has a perplexing ring to it, but its intention is truly quite simplistic in nature. This standard basically lends itself to lightening up one's own rigidity in order to better empathize with another. When you find yourself locked in a knockdown-drag-out skirmish with one you love, do yourself a favor and cool off the heat by putting yourself in the other's shoes. Make a genuine attempt to see the world from the other's perspective without your own stubbornness tainting it. Basically, Gottman believes that most successful couples engage in open-minded and empathetic ways of handling conflict. Competitiveness with your significant other in a conflict is utterly useless and will only put a tremendous strain on your relationship.

Lastly, Gottman notes that couples who love their relationship *create shared meaning* with one another. This translates into creating a shared value system with your partner that continually connects both parties through rituals/traditions, shared roles, and symbols. There you have it my friends – some wonderful wisdom from marriage and relationship psychologist/expert John Gottman. I hope you enjoyed the ride. Good luck in all of life's endeavors and God bless.

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