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# Ways to Enhance Your Relationship

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♥ Do all relationships and marriages need tune-ups? ♥

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## What Makes Successful Relationships?

**D**ivorce rates in the United States remain staggering with approximately 50% of marriages ending in divorce. Divorce can have negative emotional, psychological, and financial impact on all members of the family, and often children are the hardest hit.

So, why do so many relationships that apparently begin with strong feelings of love end in divorce or other unhappy breakups? What does it take to have a loving, lasting relationship? Ed Nottingham, Ph.D., was asked this question some years ago for a newspaper interview. Nottingham, who is both a licensed psychologist and a licensed Marital and Family Therapist, had this to say.

### Corners of the Foundation

"I think of successful, loving, liking relationships as having a strong foundation made up of several elements or corners," Nottingham said.

"The first corner of the foundation is based on **personal responsibility**, knowing thyself." Before relationship issues can be addressed, each partner needs to take his or her own "inventory," rather than pointing fingers at the other and blaming. A willingness to be part of the solution and to

view the relationship as a 60-60 proposition rather than just 50-50. In other words, each partner had better be willing to put more than 50% into the wellness of the relationship in order to create an emotional bank account that is in the black rather than the red.

The second corner of the foundation is **attitude**. One of the biggest problems found in unhappy relationships is "stinking thinking," especially a tendency to rely on "mind reading." People may believe that if his or her spouse "really" loved him or her, then the partner would magically "know" what is wanted. In fact, some believe that if it is necessary to ask, then there is little or no love. "Pure bunk!" quips Nottingham. In a loving relationship there is a willingness to both ask for what is desired and respect the partner's wishes and requests rather than relying on thinking errors such as mind reading. Attitude also involves identifying our own underlying irrational beliefs such as demandingness, lack of self- and other-acceptance, (topics addressed in Nottingham's book *It's Not as Bad as It Seems*) and having a sense of commitment to the relationship as well as the attitude of love, respect, and desire for positive change.

The development of **certain skills** is the third corner. These include communication skills (e.g., making sure that message sent = message heard), problem-solving

skills, and caring behaviors. Caring Behaviors are an important part of the creation and maintenance of a "loving environment." Love is more often expressed through behaviors and actions than through words. The words can say "I love you," but unless the behavior is consistent with the words, the words may have little meaning. Problem-solving skills are also critical since all relationships will experience some conflict and problems, and it's how these problems are addressed and solved that is of utmost importance.

Finally, a fourth corner of the strong relationship foundation is a **general factor** that includes commitment, sensitivity, loyalty, trustworthiness, cooperation, compromise, respect, and dedication to the relationship. A willingness to work hard is critical, since some people believe that if it's love, then people don't have to work at it. "I think a book by Dr. Paul Hauck written some years ago really addresses this misconception," said Nottingham. The book called *Marriage is a Loving Business* (and later revised and renamed *The Three Faces of Love*) hits the nail on the head. Unless partners view their relationship with the same (or more!) attitude of importance as their jobs, problems may emerge. People often tend to put more effort into their jobs (whether inside or outside the home) than into the loving business of marriage.

## How to Strengthen the Foundation

A book by Dr. John Gottman called *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994) is rich with ideas. Dr. Gottman lists three keys to improving a relationship including:

- ♥ Calm down
- ♥ Speak nondefensively
- ♥ Validation.

Nottingham explained, "Calm down refers to several things including taking ownership for personal upset. " Anger begets anger, so it is critical to work on identifying and changing the unhealthy attitudes and beliefs creating the undesirable emotions such as anger and frustration. A willingness to "change first" is important without **demanding** that our spouse change before we'll change. Take some deep breaths; breathe in relaxation and exhale tension, anger, and frustration.

Speak nondefensively includes reintroducing praise and admiration into the relationship rather than criticism and contempt. Listen actively and practice clarifying in order for the message sent to equal the message heard.

Validation involves a concept discussed by Dr. Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and considered one of the 7 habits. This is the notion of "seek first to understand and then to be understood." Put yourself in your partner's shoes. Be empathic. Take responsibility, be willing to say you're sorry (whoever said love means never having to say you're sorry was

very, very wrong!), compliment, be affectionate, be accepting, show interest, show you care, and show your concern are some of the elements of validation.

Relationships are also strengthened and improved when there is a 5:1 ratio of positive moments, feelings, and/or actions according to Dr. Gottman in his book. Nottingham agrees, "This concept goes back to the idea of caring behaviors that are so important to a loving relationship." Creating those positive, caring behaviors and moments is not always easy but certainly critical to any successful relationship.

Nottingham recommends several books that address relationships including *The Three Faces of Love* (1984 by Paul Hauck, Ph.D.), *Love is Never Enough* (1988 by Aaron T. Beck, M.D.), *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (John Gottman, Ph.D.), *The 7 Principles for Making Marriage work* (John Gottman, Ph.D.), and his own book *It's Not as Bad as It Seems: A Thinking Straight Approach to Happiness* (1994).

### About Ed Nottingham:

Ed Nottingham, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in Tennessee and Mississippi and a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist in Tennessee. He is a Diplomate in Behavioral and in Clinical Psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology - ABPP), a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (Division of Independent Practice), a Fellow of the Academy of Clinical Psychology and the American Academy of Behavioral

Psychology, a Fellow and Diplomate of the American Board of Medical Psychotherapists, and is listed in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. He is an Associate Fellow and Approved Supervisor in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. He is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). He has been in independent practice since 1979. He holds faculty appointments at the University of Memphis and University of Tennessee Center for the Health Sciences. He is author of *It's Not as Bad as It Seems: A Thinking Straight Approach to Happiness-Revised & Expanded Edition* (2000) published by iUniverse.com, Lincoln, NE.

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