

Who Wrote the Book of Love?

by Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D.

Chapter Four, you break up,
But you give it just one
more chance.
Tell me, tell me baby,
Who wrote the Book of
Love?

— Lyrics from a '60s song
recorded by The Monotones

Driving home recently from an evening of jazz at Heinz Hall, I tuned to a radio station playing hits from the '50s and '60s. Among the DJ's selections was Book of Love.

Does the melody of that standard from years ago bring back memories

of spring days when new love was in the air? Or was it infatuation? Most people marry for romantic love, but nearly 50% of marriages fail.

With post-war nostalgia fading into divorce at the new millennium, the question, "who wrote the book of love?" remains unanswered. But we are beginning to get a few hints about the nature of love and what makes it last, or end in disappointment. Back in the old days, only novelists and poets delved into matters of love. Science had little to say. But in the past 25 years, psychologists have begun to scientifically investigate what makes love and marriage tick.

In fact, my first teacher in graduate school, Dr. John Gottman, has been conducting research at the University of Washington's "Love Lab" on successful and failed marriages. He has discovered the essential ingredients that predict whether a marriage will work. As you fall in love (again?) this spring, or renew your marital passion, you will want to consider some of the insights from Dr. Gottman's Love Lab.

Common sense and poetic writings suggest that the key to marital joy is a romantic passion and a love relatively free from conflict, where people never go to bed angry. Dr. Gottman has discovered, however, that the key to a successful marriage is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of some method to resolve conflict.

According to his findings, any of three types of marriages can succeed: 1) Validating marriages, in which partners calmly work out their problems by understanding each other's points of view; 2) Conflict-avoidant marriages, in which couples agree to disagree and rarely confront problems head-on; and 3) Volatile marriages, which frequently erupt in passionate disputes.



The Answer is Here, Not Blowing in the Wind

What, then, is the key to a successful marriage? A healthy balance of positive to negative feelings and interactions. Specifically, you must maintain an "ideal ratio" of 5:1, or five positive interactions for every negative one. Failed marriages have only a 1:1 ratio.

Beyond healthy marriages, my own research supports that this optimal balance also characterizes healthy minds. People who maintain the 5:1 proportion are free of anxiety, depression and stress.

Whatever your style of conflict resolution, if you accentuate the positive and do or say five positive things for every negative one, you can keep the flame of love burning.

What is the ratio in your relationship? Become aware of the positive-negative balance while keeping in mind that there are barriers which can make the 5:1 ratio difficult to achieve. Dr. Gottman found that failed marriages were plagued by

what he called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Withdrawal.

Criticism is attacking in a destructive way rather than offering constructive suggestions. Contempt lets a person know that you feel he or she is defective, disgusting or bad. Defensiveness then sets in and the person puts up a wall or a counter-attack. Finally, Withdrawal results in the partner being emotionally absent, which eventually leads to a physical departure from the relationship.

Women tend to criticize more than men, and want to get responses from their partners. In contrast, men tend to withdraw into their proverbial caves. Avoiding these conditions is critical for successful marriages. But remember, a marriage in which one partner emphasizes "constructive negatives" can still work if that person says enough "positives."

A Prescription for Marital Health

How can you shift toward the positive? Begin by showing more interest in your partner. Demonstrate more physical affection, like holding hands, or kissing when you return from work. Bring flowers or small gifts. The frequency of positives, not the expense of the items, is what matters most.

Express appreciation about the small things for which you are grateful and give plenty of compliments. Show concern if your partner is upset and learn to express empathy to let him or her know you understand how he or she feels. Be accepting and tolerant rather than critical. Joke around, but not by making your partner the target of the joke. When you feel happy or satisfied about something in your life, do not keep it

a secret; let your partner know.

The importance of being expressive is best seen through the case of Don, a client in his mid-50s who watched his marriage of 25 years nearly fade into oblivion. Although Don and his wife loved each other and were best friends, their relationship was challenged by her typically fatal illness. Miraculously, she recovered, but their marriage nearly died.

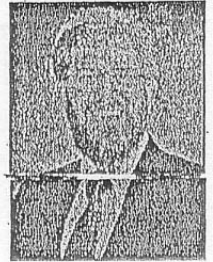
Don was an engineer who valued stability and control above all else, and whose guiding maxim was to "maintain an even keel." The problem was that he lacked spontaneity and kept his feelings, including positive ones, to himself. His wife had been dissatisfied for many years, but with her new-found life, she wanted to be in a fulfilling marriage. Don realized he had to change and gradually tested the waters of spontaneity. He started to give flowers again, but most importantly, he discovered the positive little things that he had always noticed but never thought important to say.

At first, Don was afraid of losing control, but eventually, he became more comfortable with his feelings. Don initiated more physical affection and expressed tenderness. His wife's reaction was as miraculous as her recovery from physical illness. As the ratio of positive to negative communication shifted to the ideal balance, Don's wife drastically reduced her criticism and "Don Juan" ventured further away from his cave. The couple felt a new depth of connection and an affirmation of the love that they both knew was there, but had not experienced for years.

So, perhaps it is time to take out your Palm Pilot™ or pocket calculator and begin keeping a record of your positive and negative interactions. The results of this scientific truth can be life-changing.

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