

## What You Do

In addition to thinking in ways that support and build the relationship, people in healthy marriages make a habit of *doing* certain things that keep their friendship, their commitment, and their connection strong. Some of these behaviors come more naturally for some people than for others; however, *everyone* can build skills in these areas with some effort.

### ❖ Maintaining & Growing Your Friendship

It should come as little surprise that couples with a strong friendship quite naturally handle their conflicts better. Couples are often very good in the beginning of their marriage at doing the kinds of things that enhance their friendship and positive feelings for each other. The following are suggestions that are fairly simple but very powerful in maintaining and growing your friendship throughout your life together.

## Tip #7 ♦ Frequently ask your spouse about his or her thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

You may know a lot of things about your spouse already, but always striving to more deeply know your spouse can positively affect your marriage. The more a spouse is aware of the details of the other person's world (his or her stressors, hopes, likes, and dislikes), the better the marriage. Knowing your spouse well leads to a strong friendship—the true key to a long-lasting, healthy marriage.



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Test how well you know your spouse by answering the following true or false questions.

	True	False
I can name my spouse's best friends.		
I know my spouse's favorite type of music.		
I know my spouse's favorite movie.		
I know my spouse's most stressful childhood event.		
I know my spouse's most embarrassing moment.		
I know what my spouse would do if he or she won the lottery.		
I know what my spouse's ideal job would be.		
I know my spouse's ideal place to live.		
I know the things that currently cause my spouse stress.		
I know the names of the people that have irritated my spouse recently.		
I know some of my spouse's life dreams.		
I am very familiar with my spouse's religious beliefs.		
I know my spouse's favorite and least favorite relatives.		
I feel like my spouse knows me pretty well.		
I trust my spouse.		
My spouse trusts me.		

\* Adapted from Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 1999

If you were able to answer true to more than half of the questions, you know your spouse fairly well. If not, take some time to find the answers to these and other important questions about your spouse. It will improve your friendship and your commitment to your spouse. Share the answers on your list with your spouse, and don't feel badly if you didn't know a lot of things. Use this as an opportunity to share with each other. Enjoy the conversation, and make it a regular part of your time together.

## Tip #8 • Show your spouse in small ways daily how much you care.

Interestingly, it's not the big, grandiose displays of love and affection that keep a marriage strong. It's the daily, small, positive behaviors and habits that work best. Researchers have even discovered a formula among healthy couples: there are five positive behaviors for every one negative behavior in the relationship. Often, when couples struggle in a relationship, it's not necessarily that there are lots more negative behaviors—it's that they have lost the many daily kind and thoughtful behaviors and routines that existed in the early part of their relationship.



As daily physical exercise builds strong bodies, there are some daily relationship exercises that build strong marriages. *Try these. Post these exercises on the refrigerator, and try them. Couples report amazing results!*

### Exercise 1

Before saying goodbye to your spouse in the morning, learn about one important thing that's happening in his or her life that day. This will break the habit of inattention that eventually turns couples into strangers.

*2 minutes per day*

### Exercise 2

Decompress after work by discussing the most stressful parts of your day. This will prevent job frustration from spilling over into your home life. Also share your joys and successes. When it's your spouse's turn to talk, resist the urge to give advice. Instead, be supportive and say you understand. Be a cheerleader for the joys and the challenges.

*20 minutes per day*

### Exercise 3

Once a day, spontaneously tell your spouse you appreciate something he or she has done or that you admire a certain quality in him or her.

*5 minutes per day*

### Exercise 4

Show affection outside the bedroom by occasionally kissing or touching.

*5 minutes per day*

### Exercise 5

Plan a date once a week, just like when you were single. Go someplace—just the two of you—and get reacquainted with each other.

*Once a week for at least 2 hours*



❖ **Learning to Communicate**

Communication is the key to a good relationship. How many times have you heard that? Well, it's true. Finding ways to be *heard*—and to *listen*—to your spouse are very important skills for healthy marriages. Some people are really good at this; others need to work at it.

The way your family members—those you grew up with—communicate with each other has a great influence on how you interact with your spouse. It can help you both to examine the patterns of communication you've learned.

*Check the answers below that best describe your original family's communication patterns. Were you aware of your and your spouse's family patterns before completing this questionnaire? Did you mistakenly think that you were both familiar with the same communication style? What often happens when two people have different styles of communication?*

**Tip #9 • Talk about your differences in communication patterns, and decide together what areas you will work on so that you can communicate more effectively.**



1. How would you describe the communication?

- Open
- Closed

2. Within your family, how do the members feel toward each other?

- Separated
- Connected

3. The conversations in your family tend to center around which topics?

- People
- Facts
- Feelings
- Ideas

4. To whom would you rather talk?

- A parent
- A sibling
- A relative
- A friend
- No one

5. How often would your family members get together to talk about concerns?

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Only when there is a problem
- Never

6. When did your family spend time together in conversation?

- After school
- At mealtime
- Late evenings
- On weekends
- Never

7. How would you describe your family's ability to handle change?

- Go with the flow
- Very stressful
- Get angry
- Resistant

8. Who made the major decisions in the family?

- Father
- Mother
- Children
- Grandparents
- Varied

9. Are family members free to disagree with one another?

- Yes
- No

10. How would you describe the overall tone of the conversation style in your family?

- Quiet
- Loud
- Argumentative
- Critical

11. Are there topics at home that are off limits for discussion?

- Yes
- No

12. Do family members value each other's opinions?

- Yes
- No

\*Adapted from *Connections: Relationships and Marriage*, C. Kamper, The Dibble Fund.



It's important to remember that communication is like a game of tennis. There's a sender, and there's a receiver—and both of these things have to happen or the ball (the message) will be dropped (not communicated).

Get in the habit of sending and receiving in your everyday life together. For the sender, use "I" messages to tell your message from your viewpoint, for example:



.....

*I am excited about \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I am frustrated about \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I am happy that \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I am nervous or uneasy about \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I am hopeful about \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_.*

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As one spouse communicates his or her thoughts and feelings, the other spouse should make an effort to receive and understand the message that's being conveyed. One of the easiest ways to facilitate understanding is by asking your spouse questions about what he or she has said.

Receiving the information in communication is usually the more difficult part for couples. Practice by saying back to your spouse what you heard her or him say; for example,

*"So what you're saying is..."*

Let your spouse clarify if necessary. Take turns being the sender and the receiver. This back-and-forth kind of communication might feel awkward for some people, but if you can make it part of your habit of talking with each other in your daily life, it will enter into your communication patterns when you're in conflict.

**Tip #10 ♦ In talking with each other, be sure that you take turns and make an effort to really hear what your spouse is saying and feeling.**

❖ **Managing Conflict**

A major difference between satisfying and unsatisfying relationships is not whether the couple has conflict; it is how the conflict is *managed*. No two people agree on absolutely everything, and avoiding issues or trying to pretend there's nothing wrong can create major problems. All human beings in relationships have conflict now and then. Conflict doesn't mean that there's something wrong with your relationship.

It's important to remember that *how you communicate—how you respond to each other when you're in conflict—can either strengthen your relationship or tear it down*. It's possible for a couple to learn healthy ways to disagree and not damage their relationship in the process. It may even be possible to resolve some problems together. *Rate yourself on the following statements.*



I use language that wouldn't put a person on the defensive, such as telling my feelings rather than blaming or accusing.

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!

I am not immediately defensive when my spouse brings up an issue or problem.

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!

I speak kindly to my spouse (no sarcasm or name-calling).

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!

I will apologize.

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!

I take time to listen to what my spouse is saying. (I'm not just thinking about what I'm going to say next while he or she is talking.)

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!

I stay engaged with my spouse and don't just shut down and not try to talk things out.

- I'm really good at this!
- I'm okay at this.
- I really need to work on this!



How did you do? Why is it important to keep your words focused on yourself rather than on your spouse? Why is it important to not immediately respond defensively?

Human beings are defensive by nature. Ask your spouse to hold up one hand; push your hand flat against his or her hand, and watch the reaction. What seems to be the natural reaction? *To push back!*

It should be easy to understand that attack/defend is not a good method of communicating with each other. If you're attacking, your message is not getting through—the other person is too busy pushing back.

What are some ways to avoid or move out of this trap? First, *use a softer start* when you have an issue or problem you want to discuss. Anger is usually met with anger, so if you start with emotions that are not so strong, your spouse is less likely to respond with strong, angry emotions.

When you're in an emotionally charged argument, either one of you can pull back and reduce the conflict level. Push on your spouse's hand again, and when he or she pushes back, relax your hand in response. What does the other person do? *He or she usually doesn't push as hard.*

There are lots of different ways to pull back. You can intentionally talk more softly and slowly. You can reach out to your spouse emotionally by

saying, “You must be feeling...” or by sharing your emotions and asking for help.

It’s vitally important to use *soothing behaviors* and to find ways to keep the angry emotions manageable when you’re in conflict. If someone becomes too upset, all the wonderful knowledge and skills you have to keep your connection with your spouse strong can fly right out of your head!

### ❖ **More Tips for Effective Communication During Conflict**

With your spouse, put a star by the suggestions below that you think are especially important for the two of you. Write these rules and others you come up with together on a piece of paper, and post it somewhere you will see it often.

**Tip #11 • Describe your feelings, using “I” instead of starting with “you....”** Starting with “you” usually puts the person on the defensive and may start to get him or her emotionally upset.

**Tip #12 • Focus on the specific and current behavior, and don’t label the person in a bad way.**

“I” statements can be combined with a specific focus on the behavior. Labeling a person can make that person defensive and upset very quickly. See how these are different:

- “*You’re such a slob,*” versus “*I’d like it if you’d remember to put the wet towels in the hamper.*”
- “*You’re thoughtless,*” versus “*I feel really sad that you forgot our anniversary.*”
- “*You never help with the children,*” versus “*I’d feel much less stressed if you helped with the children’s bedtime routine.*”

## **Tip #13 • Don’t be so focused on winning. Be able to apologize.**

Usually, an apology is almost immediately soothing to your spouse’s upset feelings. It’s a very powerful response.

**Tip #14 • Use kind words and a kind tone of voice.** Isn’t it amazing how kind and polite we are to friends, acquaintances, and even strangers? Do you speak to your spouse with kindness? Consciously work on adding polite, genuinely kind words and phrases to your dialogue with your spouse, such as “please,” “thank you,” and “I so appreciate when you....”

## **Tip #15 • Express some kind of appreciation before offering a complaint.**

There’s a management style that recommends several positive strokes for every one complaint or critique given, making it more likely that the complaint will be received (listened to). Have you ever worked with someone like that? What does that feel like? Even in the midst of conflict and strong emotions, you can find something about your spouse that you appreciate, and you need to verbalize this. It can go a long way in soothing upset feelings.

**Tip #16 • Don’t keep things inside until you feel filled up and then dump everything out at once.**

If you carry around your complaints and hard feelings and then dump them all at once on your spouse, it’s more likely that it will be too much for him or her to handle and he or she will be automatically defensive and not hear what you have to say. Say what you’re thinking and feeling as soon as it’s appropriate. Don’t wait for things to build up.

**Tip #17 • Avoid ultimatums.** Statements that begin with “You better do this or else...” are not helpful in resolving conflict. They limit options and really back your spouse into a corner, forcing him or her to make a choice neither of you may be happy with.

**Tip #18 • Listen to what the other person has to say.** Each person involved has his or her own point of view and should have the chance to express it. Don't interrupt each other. Take turns, and *listen*.

## Tip #19 • Always check your perceptions.

Don't assume you know what's going on or how your spouse feels or thinks. Check and recheck for understanding.

**Tip #20 • State wishes and wants clearly and directly.** Don't beat around the bush or make your spouse guess what the problem is. A technique that can work is W-I-N: **W**hen you...**I** feel... **I** Need...

**Tip #21 • Don't use sex to smooth over an argument.** Sex can be a great part of making up after you've worked through a conflict with your spouse, but it's a poor substitute for really understanding each other on a difficult issue. Also, don't withhold sex as a threat or use it in a manipulative way.

**Tip #22 • Don't fight dirty.** Don't be physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive or manipulative. Don't intentionally say or do things that you know are upsetting to your spouse. Of all the people in the world, you probably know how to hurt your spouse most effectively. Respect your spouse enough to refrain from dirty fighting.

**Tip #23 • Don't give the silent treatment.** The silent treatment is a form of quiet aggression. It will not help you resolve anything and only prolongs the agony of the conflict for both of you.

## Tip #24 • Call time-outs and fouls.

Sometimes it's necessary to take a short break to cool down if things get heated. Be sure to come back to the issue, though. Also, set up a way to call a foul if your spouse begins fighting dirty or breaking your rules for fair fighting.

**Tip #25 • Don't take it out on your spouse.** If you're mad at your sister, don't yell at your spouse. You can share your sad or angry feelings with your spouse, but be careful not to make your spouse feel like he or she is the target.

## Tip #26 • Use humor.

Humor can be a good way to deal with conflict as long as it's not sarcastic. Loving humor can break the tension of an argument in a split second!

**Tip #27 • When the fight is over, drop it.** Forgive and forget. Don't keep bringing up the fight or hold on to your anger once an argument is over, even if it wasn't resolved the way you wanted.

## Tip #28 • Try writing down your feelings.

Sometimes direct confrontation is not the best way to talk to your spouse about an issue. Written words don't carry quite as much emotion as spoken words sometimes do. Your spouse may be more willing to listen to what you've written.

**Tip #29 • Use these important phrases:** "Now I understand," "Maybe you're right," and "I'm sorry." And go ahead and add a fourth to that list: "I love you!"

## ❖ The Big Red Flags

Throughout your marriage, pay particular attention to the following four behaviors, which are considered to be especially destructive and predictive of marital failure.

### Criticism

There's a big difference between complaining and criticizing. A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, such as "I'm angry you didn't put your clothes in the hamper." But a criticism goes the next step and assigns a character trait, such as "You're so lazy!"

### Defensiveness

In response to a complaint, it might seem natural to defend yourself. But rather than defuse the attack, this response usually escalates it. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your spouse. You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't me, it's you."

### Contempt

Too much negativity leads to conversations full of sarcasm, cynicism, and mockery. *Contempt is poisonous* to a relationship. It conveys disgust, and it eats away at any good in the relationship.

### Stonewalling

When there's no hope of progress, one partner (the man in 85 percent of cases) simply tunes out. He doesn't care; he doesn't even appear to hear. Stonewalling usually arrives last. *It represents a deadly disconnection.*

\* Adapted from Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 1999.

Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling can sneak into even the best of relationships. Undoubtedly, an occasional snipe at one's spouse will occur at some point in the marriage, but be on alert—if a conscious effort is not made to stop these behaviors, they create a cycle of negativity that becomes increasingly destructive and difficult to stop.

## Tip #30 + Be on alert for the big red flags: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.



Many of these tips are from "Saying I Do: Consider the Possibilities" by J. Marshall and used with permission.