

Five Keys to Improving Your Marriage Dramatically, *Immediately*

Having worked clinically with couples for many years, I offer below what I believe to be five fundamental keys to dramatically improving your marriage, *immediately*. Each of these keys, individually, when successfully applied, can make a significant, fast difference in your marriage. By implementing several or all of them, the compounding return is spectacular. I have seen dying marriages revived, and complacent marriages revitalized, when partners, beginning with *you*, earnestly commit to investing in these curative marital principles.

Key 1: Stop criticizing your spouse

This alone will make an enormous difference in the quality of your marriage. The *less* you criticize your spouse, the *more* the goodwill piles up between you. The *more* the goodwill piles up, the more dramatic the benefit to your relationship. Because criticism is habit-forming, you'll need to break the habit. To do this, you'll need to replace your critical language with a new language (see Key 4). While it's tempting to suggest that certain forms of criticism—like “constructive”—should sometimes be permissible, the problem is, *who* determines its proper indication, and constructive from *whose* point of view? For now, the key points to remember are that the quality of your marriage corresponds directly to the levels of goodwill between you and your spouse, and that criticism almost always *erodes* goodwill. So you now have in hand a powerful strategy to begin implementing *today*—stop criticizing your spouse.

Key 2: Eliminate all forms of expressed contempt towards your spouse

Contempt is a tone or attitude likely to evoke in others feelings of shame, belittlement, hurt, the sense of being dismissed. Criticism is bad enough, but when expressed with contempt, it's even more toxic. “You did a lousy job” is criticism; “Great job, as usual, honey,” said sarcastically, is criticism expressed *contemptuously*. Like criticism, contempt destroys the goodwill in a relationship. Contemptuous language carries poisonous, judgemental undertones that aim to devalue and/or humiliate. When you are contemptuous towards another, s(he) will feel unsafe with, mistrustful of, and guarded around you. These are harmful experiences for partners to have of each other. As with criticism, you must eliminate, beginning *today*, all contemptuous language with your spouse. The payoff will be as enormous as your commitment is essential.

Key 3: Stop dwelling on, and personalizing, your spouse's imperfections

Your spouse has many flaws, many imperfections. Some of these you knew about early on; some may have slipped under your radar; and others may have grown worse (or certainly less charming) than they once might have been. Your spouse is a deeply flawed human being (almost as deeply flawed as you). S(he) can be difficult, unreasonable, insensitive, and self-centered. Your task, beginning *now*, is to pay *less attention* to his deficiencies, and *more attention* to her assets. Your spouse doesn't want to be *made-over* anymore than you do. S(he) isn't the best spouse in the world, by a long shot; and s(he's) probably not the worst, by a long-shot. I'm not suggesting that you accept a situation where true abuse is occurring; but short of that, when you *stop fighting and attempting to resolve* your spouse's limitations, paradoxically you become more receptive to his/her positive, admirable qualities. When you accomplish this—specifically, taking the time *regularly to reflect* on your spouse's strengths—you will find your chronic frustrations abating and a newfound satisfaction emerging.

Key 4: Use *I-language* to express your disappointments

Spouses frequently leave us feeling disappointed. It is normal, indeed inescapable, that we will feel regularly disappointed by those we risk getting close to and/or *live* with. When you feel disappointed, keep this important difference in mind: "I am so *disappointed*," versus, "S(he) is so *disappointing*." After all, people really aren't *disappointing*; yet we really are regularly feeling *disappointed*. When you understand the difference, you are ready to begin practicing *I-language*, the use of which will singlehandedly upgrade your marriage six notches. *I-language* is a hard, but important, habit to form. It enables you to express your disappointment and emotionally loaded feelings—like anger, resentment, sadness, shock, dismay—in a way that dignifies *you* while respecting your spouse. The flipside of *I-language* is *You-language*. *You-language* comes much more naturally to us, but unfortunately is accusatory and tends to elicit defensive responses.

Here's the difference:

"There you go again, Jim...*you* are so abusive," versus, "*I* feel attacked by your tone of voice, Jim."

When you use *I-language*, you are *owning* your feelings, wishes, and needs. More examples:

"I feel hurt by that remark."

"I need you to listen to me patiently for a few minutes."

"I'd really appreciate your reconsidering your position."

Versus respectively:

"*You* are so insensitive."

"*You* really *are* a terrible listener."

"*You* are so inflexible."

I-language requires practice and commitment to master. But its emotional accurateness and deescalating properties make for a handsome payoff. As you use *I-*

language increasingly with your spouse, don't be surprised to see her/his "best sides" making permanent and not "guest" appearances.

Key 5: Take interest in your spouse's interests

Your willingness to show more interest in, and enthusiasm for, your spouse's interests—because they *interest your spouse* (not you)—is a magical way to improve your marriage, *fast*. Your spouse will find your interest surprising, if not suspicious, at first; but as you *sustain your interest*, s(he) will soon grow to trust it, greatly appreciate it, and feel much closer to you. This will almost certainly result in your spouse's finding a way to reciprocate your supportive attentions. Spouse's declining *active support* of each others' interests has an insidiously depressing effect on their marriage. Resentment tends to build covertly and may be acted-out passive-aggressively. You can solve this vicious cycle by, starting *today*, showing an interest in your spouse's interests. Your marriage, if not your spouse, will thank you for it.

I strongly encourage you to reflect on these curative marital strategies and experiment with their power. Conveniently, none of them takes "two to tango," meaning you can initiate them immediately and *unilaterally*. All of them, separately and in combination, give you the power to turn your relationship with your spouse into something much different, and dramatically more gratifying.

But don't take my word for it—go ahead and see for yourself.