

# How to Make Trust and Intimacy the Foundation of Your Marriage

**M**arriage is a wonderful, intense, and sometimes challenging experience. But to really make the most of it, we can't just fall in love, get married, buy curtains, and expect to live happily ever after.

Instead, we must continue to tune in to our relationship and each other. If we do, we keep building powerful bonds of trust and intimacy that hold us together -- even when times are hard. But if we don't, we may run out of steam, lose interest, or get off track.

Fortunately, experts have some helpful tips for couples who want to keep their relationships strong. Try keeping these concepts in mind as you enter into marriage. They should help you build and strengthen your bonds.

## **Figure out, and talk about, your unspoken rules of communication.**

What are the "rules" of communication in your relationship? You may think to yourself, "Oh, we try to be kind and loving." Nope...not that one.

What we're *really* talking about are the many unspoken rules that we tend to build up and follow over time....even if we don't talk about them or consciously acknowledge that they exist. For instance, such "rules" could include:

- *It's okay to raise our voices, but not to slam doors or scream at each other.*
- *We can joke around about your mom, but not my mom.*
- *I am the one who apologizes first.*

It may seem surprising or a little uncomfortable to actually spell these rules out. But it's really important to look honestly at them. Then you can decide whether they're working for you. Maybe you'd actually like to have some new

rules in place.

## **Communicate respectfully and effectively**

Marriage expert John Gottman highlights 4 landmark skills that contribute to healthy relationships over time. They are as follows:

### **Learn to calm yourself down...often and early**

When we reach the point in a marital dispute where we are seeing red and are emotionally overwhelmed, we're not going to accomplish anything useful. Gottman and other experts emphasize the importance of taking "time outs" when this happens. Don't come back until you are calm—but *do* come back and resolve the situation.

### **Learn to be an effective "complainer"**

You may be thinking, "What? Do we really want to complain more?" Well...yes, because complaining, done right, is actually just expressing needs and preferences. If we don't tell our partners how we feel and what we want, bottled-up resentment will eventually drive us apart.

Does this mean we should come rushing in yelling things like, "Why are you so lazy and inconsiderate?" Definitely not. Instead, use "I-messages" ("I feel frustrated when you leave your work things on the floor").

### **Learn to be less defensive and more positive**

Sometimes, we behave the least admirably with the people we love most. This is one "highly effective" way to damage a relationship! Instead, remember how much you cherish your marriage and assume positive intent on the part of your spouse. Offer praise and compliments rather than blame and sarcasm.

### **Be a validating, effective listener**

Trust and respect are earned or eroded every day when we do or do not give each other our full, respectful attention. Use body language and responses that show you're listening. Reflective listening ("That sounds frustrating") is another great tool. As we really learn to listen well and know our partner deeply, we may even be able to "hear" what they are NOT saying.

Practicing these rules and skills of communication regularly should help you and your spouse continue to deepen the trust and intimacy that are so important to a fulfilling marriage or couple relationship. When we:

- Have clear expectations and a clear understanding of our relationship
- Express our needs and wants
- Speak calmly and respectfully
- Approach each other with love and positive intent, and
- Listen and tune in to each other

...we can expect positive results.

### References:

Harris, V. W. (2010). *Marriage Tips and Traps: 10 Secrets for Nurturing Your Marital Friendship*. Plymouth, MI: Hayden McNeil.