Why Do Intimate Relationships Succeed or Fail?

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In the early 1980's, relationship researchers set out to find exactly what people who are highly satisfied with their relationships do differently than people who are dissatisfied. In the first year of these studies, researchers carefully observed and measured everything that they believed could possibly be related to how relationships fare over time (e.g., attitudes, values, communication styles, amount of anger, amount of tenderness, etc). They put partners in apartments equipped with video cameras and recorded everything each of them said and did. They also asked partners to have conversations about specific topics while the researchers observed their interactions, monitored heart rates, took blood samples at various points in conversations and measured physical movements. Partners were also asked to give moment-to-moment commentaries while watching recordings of previous conversations they'd had with their partners. When the researchers were satisfied that they had measured everything that might be related to the how relationships fare over time, they simply turned partners loose and then tracked them down up to 15 years later to see how they were doing. Which couples were still together? Which ones were satisfied or unsatisfied with their relationships? Most importantly, of the variables measured earlier, which distinguished those who were satisfied from those who were dissatisfied or no longer together? And which of these variables were *most* highly associated with good or bad relationship outcomes?

The answers that came back were clear. Not only did researchers succeed in pinpointing specific interpersonal habits that distinguished people who were headed for satisfying relationships versus those who were headed for trouble, once they knew what to look for they found that they could predict the future disposition of relationships with over 90% accuracy. In the scientific world, 90% predictive accuracy is virtually unheard of. Rates of lung cancer in chronic smokers can't even be predicted with this degree of accuracy. Researchers had found a core set of habits that clearly and reliably distinguished the course of relationships. People who had these crucial habits almost always ended up satisfied with their relationships, and people who didn't have these habits were almost always headed for relationship dissatisfaction or dissolution.

Findings from these landmark relationship studies have challenged many long-held assumptions about how to improve relationships. Before these studies, therapists had to proceed on the basis of what they thought couples needed, or what generally accepted theories told them to do. Now, for the first time, we have scientific evidence about what people who cultivate satisfying relationships do differently than those who become dissatisfied with their relationships. These studies have identified the *prerequisites* for succeeding in intimate relationships. There's a distinct set of habits that are shared by almost all people who know how to get their partners to be open-minded and receptive, and thanks to decades of painstaking relationship research, we now know exactly what these habits are. If you want to succeed in love, you simply must have specific interpersonal abilities. If you have them, chances are very good that

over the long haul your partner will be responsive to your wants and needs. If you don't have them, the evidence suggests that your relationship future is likely quite dim.

So what are the habits that are so highly predictive of relationship satisfaction? A detailed description of each of them can be found elsewhere (see the articles*, Habits of People Who Know How to Get Their Partners to Treat Them Well --Parts I & II,* and *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something You Don't Like or Agree With)*. Here, I'll begin by summarizing some of the main lessons we've learned through years of helping people develop the habits through our counseling and educational programs at the Couples Clinic and Research Institute. Wherever possible, I'll use language that suggests how the lessons may apply to you.

1. ***Some of the most important habits are not "couple" habits, but rather are "individual" habits.***

Researchers found that some of the things that are most crucial to relationship success are not accomplished through joint teamwork but rather through individual effort. Not only must you be able to do certain things without the assistance of your partner, some of the most critical habits must be implemented at moments *when it seems that your partner is making it most difficult for you to do so*. The ability to respond effectively when feeling upset, provoked, annoyed, ignored or mistreated is one of the most important abilities identified by researchers. It is precisely when their partners are acting in ways that seem out-of-line or off-kilter that people who are destined for satisfying relationships distinguish themselves from those who are destined for disappointing relationships. People who are effective at these moments require that they be treated with respect, but they also have ways of making it easy for their partners to do so. They know how to stand up for themselves, but they do it without a lot of fuss. They don't make a big deal of how awful their partners are for being selfish, inconsiderate or controlling – they just require that their partners give their priorities and opinions equal regard.

2. ***The ability to react effectively when your partner says or does things that you don't like or agree with is not optional. It's a requirement for anyone who hopes to have a partner who is responsive to his or her wants, needs or viewpoints.***

When your partner acts in ways that seem selfish, annoying, irresponsible, inattentive, irrational, short-sighted, biased, lazy, inconsiderate, self-absorbed, unrealistic, unfeeling, uncaring, needy, controlling, negative, or over-reactive, you may feel that the solution to the problem lies in his hands, not yours. You may reason that since he is the one who is behaving badly, he is the one who must make efforts to change. But study after study suggests that changes are initiated by the skillful reactions of those who are dissatisfied with their partners' behaviors, not by the partners who do the objectionable things. The way people react when their partners say or do things they find objectionable is a powerful predictor of the rate of future occurrences of their partners' objectionable behaviors. Some reactions reliably trigger closed-mindedness, inflexibility, defensiveness, and/or dismissiveness; other reactions reliably elicit open-mindedness and flexibility. If you're serious about wanting your partner to change,

you simply cannot overlook the role that your reactions play in the larger pattern that fuels or dampens his objectionable behaviors.

Many people object in principle to the idea that they should assume responsibility for being thoughtful in their reactions to things that their partners shouldn't be doing in the first place. If your partner is behaving badly, why should you have to devote time and effort to trying to figure out how to talk to him about it? Shouldn't it be as simple as pointing out his offensive behavior and telling him to stop? Shouldn't he be willing to take responsibility for his objectionable actions regardless of how you express your dissatisfaction to him?

Two important relationship facts are relevant when considering such questions:

A. Most of us are significantly biased and self-serving in our judgments about what objectionable relationship conduct is. We're prone to believe our partners' are wrong when they really aren't.

Studies suggest that most people are accurate in their assessment of dysfunctional relationship behavior only up to a point, and then the accuracy of their assessments goes downhill. More precisely, most people are accurate in their assessment of the harmful effects of things such as *lying, sexual unfaithfulness, failing to keep agreements, badmouthing or undermining one's partner, violations of privacy, and making unilateral decisions.* But beyond these offenses, assessment of inappropriate conduct becomes increasingly biased and self-serving. Studies indicate that in general, when people believe that their partners' conduct is selfish, irrational, irresponsible, inattentive, inconsiderate, short-sighted, lazy, uncaring, or negative, *most of the time* their partners actually aren't doing things that are inherently harmful to or unhealthy for relationships. Because our standards or priorities at the moment seem so obvious and logical to us, it's easy for us to assume that our partners' actions are out of line if they don't meet our standards. But studies suggest that *most of the time when partners disagree, neither partner's priorities or expectations are wrong.* For example, a wife accepts an invitation to go out with her friends on Friday night without asking her husband if that would be OK with him. The husband considers this to be really inconsiderate, and feels justified in criticizing her for it. But the fact is, this wife wouldn't be upset at the husband if he made similar arrangements with his friends without consulting her. In fact, the wife has a whole different ideal for how a relationship should be. In her view, partners should each be free to make other arrangements unless plans between the two of them have been specifically made. She wouldn't dream of being so selfish as to try to restrict his freedom by asking him to consult her every time he wanted to plan something with his friends. Obviously, he doesn't see it that way, and he let her have a piece of his mind! Well, if she wasn't behaving selfishly before he harshly criticized her, now she is! She slams the door in his face. Feeling perfectly entitled to his contempt, the next time he sees her he sneers at her for her childish tantrum. Needless to say, her response to his contempt provokes him to even more scornful expressions.

And so the story goes. It began with the husband's *perception* that his wife was being inconsiderate. If he had been able to avoid judging her and instead approach her

in an attempt to work out an understanding that took both of their points of view into account, she may have been willing to try to work out a more mutually-satisfying plan. Relationship researchers tell us that this sort of situation is like most situations in which partners become upset with each other in that there isn't anything inherently harmful to relationships about either partner's expectations. There are happily coupled partners who always check with each other before making plans with others, and there are happily coupled partners who never check with each other. Either set of expectations can work just fine. People who know how to elicit responsiveness in their partners are thoughtful about their reactions rather than just blindly "going with" knee-jerk instincts that tell them that their partners' priorities or actions are wrong.

So let's go back to the original question. "Why do you need to focus on your reactions if your partner is the one whose conduct or priorities are wrong?" The answer is, unless you're different than most people, most of the times when you get upset with your partner, his conduct or priorities probably aren't wrong – they're just at cross purposes with your priorities or expectations. Concluding that he's wrong when he's not is a mistake that you do not want to make , at least not if you take the landmark studies on relationships seriously. The *mistaken attribution of blame* is no small matter when it comes to how relationships fare over time. A steady habit of believing your partner is wrong when he or she isn't can destroy a relationship. People who are skillful in relationships think twice before assigning blame. They understand that they have a right to ask their partners for changes even if their partners' current viewpoints or actions aren't wrong. In fact, the partners of skillful people tend to be more responsive to requests precisely because they don't feel accused or criticized.

Avoiding blame isn't the only thing that skillful people do in relationships. When their partners aren't responsive to their needs, they also have powerful ways of standing up for themselves. However, the avoidance of blame serves as a foundation for the effectiveness of the skills they use.

Of course, it's important to recognize that while most of the time when partners get upset at each other neither partner's viewpoints or priorities are wrong, sometimes people have attitudes or do things that are truly harmful to or unhealthy for relationships. People are sometimes closed-minded, inflexible, overly-critical, defensive and/or dismissive. People sometimes lie to their partners; they are sexually unfaithful; they fail to keep agreements; they badmouth or undermine their partners; they violate their partners' privacy; or they make unilateral decisions in spite of the protests of their partners. These things are wrong by almost any standard. Why should you be thoughtful about your reactions if your partner is undeniably wrong?

B. Your partner's objectionable conduct likely arises at least partly in reaction to your unhealthy relationship habits, just as your unhealthy relationship habits likely arise at least partly in reaction to his objectionable conduct.

Studies suggest partners engage in dysfunctional or unhealthy relationship conduct at similar rates, but most people don't realize it. This is probably because the average

person has limited knowledge of the full range of behaviors that are unhealthy for relationships. When asked about the behaviors that are unhealthy relationships, most people identify things such as lying, sexual unfaithfulness, failing to keep agreements, badmouthing or undermining one's partner, violations of privacy, and making unilateral decisions. For these obvious unhealthy behaviors, transgression rates between partners are often uneven, with one partner engaging at a higher rate of offensive conduct than the other. However, relationship researchers have identified another group of unhealthy relationship behaviors which are more subtle and often overlooked, but just as damaging to relationships if they occur regularly. We've already discussed one such unhealthy relationship behavior -- believing that your partner's viewpoint or conduct is wrong when it's really not. Researchers have located seven other subtle and often overlooked unhealthy relationship behaviors that are clearly predictive of poor relationship outcomes (defensiveness; dismissiveness; putting your partner down; unwillingness to compromise; acting "high and mighty;" shutting down, walking away prematurely, or unwillingness to talk about an issue; failing to stand up for yourself and instead acting like your partner is selfish or controlling). Partners usually commit these subtle, higher-frequency unhealthy relationship behaviors at similar rates.

The subtle offenses tend to be mutually reinforcing. If you're like most people, you will tend to react to your partner's unhealthy relationship behavior with unhealthy relationship behavior of your own, which will provoke more unhealthy behavior from him, and so on. Your unhealthy reactions to your partner's unhealthy behavior may not seem to you to be unhealthy – at least not when compared to his. This is because you probably don't engage in the same *type* of unhealthy relationship conduct that he does. There are several different types of subtle unhealthy relationship behaviors. Some of them are most often seen in people who tend to be the first to express dissatisfaction with or disapproval of their partners' viewpoints or actions, while other types of unhealthy relationship behaviors are more often seen in people whose partners are usually the first to express dissatisfaction or disapproval. Each of these types are detailed in the article *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something You Don't Like or Agree With.* Here, I simply want to draw attention to the fact that if you respond to your partner's unhealthy or offensive behavior with unhealthy or offensive behavior of your own, and he responds to your unhealthy or offensive behavior in an unhealthy or offensive way, the two of you will be caught in a vicious cycle with no exit. *Vicious cycles such as this usually serve as the base relationship condition from which partners then go on to commit more obvious relationship offenses such as lying, cheating or becoming verbally or physically aggressive*. Researchers tell us that the only way out of the vicious cycle of damaging interaction is for at least one partner to unilaterally break the cycle by developing the ability to respond effectively when his or her partner's viewpoint or behavior seems wrong. Indeed, researchers found that the ability to respond effectively when dissatisfied with or disapproving of one's partner's conduct is consistently predictive of lower future rates of partner offensive conduct.

3. ***If your partner has been significantly unhappy with your level of responsiveness to him for longer than a few months, it's very likely that he has dysfunctional ways of approaching you and/or reacting to you when you don't respond to his satisfaction.***

You may have already tried explaining to your partner that it's difficult for you to be responsive to his concerns if he approaches you in an accusatory way, or if he dismisses your viewpoint when you try to discuss the issue. You may have tried to explain that you wouldn't shut down if he didn't criticize you, or that you wouldn't criticize him if it weren't the only way to get his attention. If your partner is like most people, he wants you to change while continuing to engage in unhealthy or offensive behavior himself.

In his quest to get you to change, it's likely that your partner has been making the same crucial mistakes that most people make when they become dissatisfied with or disapproving of their partners' viewpoints or actions. Your therapist will be helping him develop more effective ways to get what he wants and needs from you.

4. ***If you have been significantly unhappy with your partner's level of responsiveness to you for longer than a few months, it's very likely that you have dysfunctional ways of approaching him and/or reacting to him when he doesn't respond to your satisfaction.***

Of course, that which applies to your partner also applies to you. If you're dissatisfied with your partner's level of responsiveness to you, it's highly likely that you lack the ability to approach him or react to his unresponsiveness effectively– or he would be more responsive by now. People who manage to avoid unhealthy relationship behaviors and develop the full set of needed habits *almost always* get more responsiveness from their partners over time than people who lack the full set of habits. If you're dissatisfied with your partner's level of responsiveness to you, chances are high that you'd be having the same problem even if you'd chosen a different person to have a relationship with. Sooner or later, another partner would do things that you wouldn't like or agree with – just like your partner does. It might not be the same things as your partner has done, but it would be *something*. The ability to react effectively at such moments would be required in that relationship, too. The odds are high that you haven't found the required combination of "tough and tender" that's needed for relationships to go well. You're probably too heavy on either the "tough" side (you tend to be too critical or inflexible), or you're too soft (you are too willing to overlook unhealthy behavior and continue business as usual even when the offensive behavior continues). If you want your partner to be responsive to your wants, needs and viewpoints, evidence suggests that there are certain criteria of conduct that you must be able to meet. The bar for relationship success is much higher than most of would like it to be. If you are trying to get your partner to change and/or be more accepting of you, and yet you are going about trying to accomplish this in ways that are highly predictive of unresponsiveness from one's partner, the first thing you'll need to do is to focus on meeting the prerequisites for relationship success yourself.

5. ***The single most powerful thing that you can do to get your partner to be more responsive to your needs and priorities is to develop the ability to react effectively when he's not being responsive***.

People who become more successful in "getting through" to their partners tend to adopt the following logic:

> *If I want my partner to be more responsive me, then I need to develop the ability to think and act like people who regularly elicit responsiveness from their partners, and I certainly don't want to think and act like people who are seldom able to get their partners to be responsive.*

At our clinic, we encourage each partner to develop a "first things first" attitude.

> "First, eliminate any habits you have that are predictive of low levels of partner responsiveness and make sure you're interacting with your partner in ways that are correlated with high levels of partner responsiveness. If you still find that your partner is unresponsive to things that are important to you, then we'll deal with the question of what to do with your partner. But right now there's no way to know how much of your partner's unresponsiveness is due to his or her basic personality, or how much is a reaction to your dysfunctional habits of interacting with him or her."

People who experience the most dramatic increases in their partners' responsiveness are those who come to therapy sessions saying things like,

> "My partner did the same upsetting thing once again this week … but I don't really want to talk about that. I'd rather focus on *how I reacted* to what he did, because I know that if I can develop the ability to react effectively, the odds are pretty good that he'll soon be more responsive to me."

When people begin getting more upset about the fact that they reacted ineffectively than they are about the offensive things their partners did, they are on the verge of good things happening in their relationships.

Got Reservations?

Your therapist's approach to helping couples improve their relationships is based on the assumption that when even one partner develops the full set of habits that are highly predictive of relationship success, the other will follow. In the coming weeks, your therapist will help you identify habits that may interfere with your ability to get your partner to be fully responsive to your needs, opinions and priorities. Relationship studies suggest that you can best change your partner through changing yourself. However, you might be feeling less than enthusiastic about

the idea of developing more effective ways of interacting with your partner. You might feel that changing your habits won't make a difference, or that you really shouldn't have to work on improving your reactions to him because they are inevitable given the level of provocation you're receiving from him. If you find that you're less than excited about the task of improving your relationship habits, please take a few moments and jot down your reservations. Write about anything that makes you uncomfortable or hesitant about what you've read so far. You'll need sensible and satisfying answers to your questions if you're going to be able to devote full energy into task of improving your habits.

Once you receive credible, satisfying answers to all reservations you may have, you'll be ready to move on and begin studying the habits that are highly predictive of relationship success. The full set involves ten specific relationship habits. Six of the ten habits are used to negotiate differences; the other four have to do with how you think about and act toward your partner when you're not upset with each other. Research studies show that successful resolution of conflict is not enough to cultivate satisfying and stable relationships. Only 40% of those who divorce report severe fighting as the cause. The other 60% cite a gradual drifting apart or the absence of fondness and admiration as the cause. In the second half of your therapy, your therapist will help you focus on developing or enhancing four that strengthen your friendship and create a sense of emotional closeness in your relationship. Studies suggest that finding and maintaining emotional closeness is the key to lasting relationship satisfaction. However, if you are feeling regularly disrespected, criticized or dismissed, you'll not likely feel able to implement the four abilities that create emotional closeness. You probably don't even want to. That's why therapists often begin therapy by helping partners change interact more respectfully. Intimacy-building comes later, when there is a foundation of respect. The habits for establishing a foundation of respect are summarized in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get Their Partners to Treat Them Well: Part I – Dealing with Differences.*