



10 Steps to a Happier Relationship

If your relationship could be happier, the following 5 tips from John Gottman, PhD, relationship expert, can help.

- **Stop being critical** It takes at least 5 positive comments to overcome a single negative one. Happy couples avoid saying every critical thing they think, and find ways to gently talk about problem areas (see the next section).
- **Soften your “start up.”** According to Gottman, arguments tend to happen because we make them likely to happen: Being critical, being confrontational, being mean. The solution? Bring up problems gently.
- **Have high standards** “Happy couples have high standards for each other even as new-lweds” according to Gottman. This includes not allowing hurtful behavior.
- **Learn to repair and exit the argument** Happy couples stop arguments before they spiral out of control. Just like any situation in which a person becomes angry, taking a time out is enormously helpful. And after the argument, they make up, whether it is through a caring remark, physical affection, giving in and compromising, or showing appreciation for one another.
- **Focus on the bright side** Remember how it takes at least 5 positive comments to overcome a negative one? Happy couples know this intuitively. When they talk about their problems and try to solve conflict, they make at least 5 times as many positive remarks as negative ones. “Make deposits to your emotional bank account” is key, according to Gottman.

Sue Johnson, PhD, another recognized relationship expert, has a slightly different approach from Gottman. Both approaches have been shown to be useful, so you might benefit from trying ideas from both. Johnson focuses on how to break the negative cycle that begins when our feelings are hurt over time in relationships. Five of Johnson’s suggestions include:

- **Recognize Demon Dialogues.** Johnson asks couples to try to figure out what the other person is *trying* to say during arguments, what fears or other deep concerns they might have underneath their words.
- **Hold Me Tight.** Johnson’s research indicates it is key that couples work on being more accessible, emotionally responsive, and deeply engaged with each other. Work on sharing your deeper, softer emotions--your fear, your caring. Remember that you are partners, forging through life together.
- **Forgive Injuries.** Forgiveness isn’t the same as forgetting. But it can help strengthen relationships.
- **Physical Bonding.** Emotional connection creates positive physical affection, and physical affection creates deeper emotional connection.
- **Keep Your Love Alive.** It is true that relationships are hard work. Johnson has found that consistent effort (making your relationship a top priority) is key to keeping it happy.