



## RELATIONSHIPS

# A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Relationship

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### Introduction

Does it ever feel like your partner only criticizes you? Can you remember the last time your partner said something positive to you? When negative interactions outweigh the positive ones, it may be hard to recall the positive qualities in an intimate relationship or in your partner. Successful intimate relationships have a balance between positive and negative feelings and actions between partners. According to relationship researcher John Gottman, the magic ratio is 5 to 1.

What does this mean? This means that for every one negative feeling or interaction between partners, there must be five positive feelings or interactions. Stable and happy couples share more positive feelings and actions than negative ones. Unhappy couples tend to have more negative feelings and actions than positive ones. Partners who criticize each other, provide constant negative feedback, aren't supportive of each other, don't demonstrate affection or appreciation, or behave as though they are uninterested in their partner are in relationships that are out of balance.

How do you increase the positives in your relationship? Here are some things you can do.

### **Show interest**

Show your partner that you are listening. Pay attention to your partner. Are you interested in what your partner is saying? Are you showing your partner that you are really listening? For example, your partner comes home from a long day at work. She or he wants to talk to you about it. You nod absently while watching television. Does this show real interest in your partner and what the person is saying? Turn off the television and make eye contact with the person.

### **Show affection**

There are many ways of showing affection to your partner. Hold hands, sit together while watching TV, tell each other "I love you." These are all small ways to be affectionate. You can also do thoughtful things for each other, such as helping with chores.

**Show your care and concern**

Caring acts can take many forms. You could buy your partner their favorite ice cream while on an errand. You could take time in your busy day to write a short e-mail, leave a phone message, or write a note. If your partner is worried about something, express your concern verbally – “It sounds like you had a really rough day at work today.” You can also show your concern by giving your partner a hug. Let your partner know that it matters to you when he or she is worried or concerned.

**Be appreciative**

Think about what you liked and appreciated about your partner when you first met. Recall the ways in which you did things for each other that were helpful and caring. Encourage positive memories of your partner. Let your partner know what you appreciate. Thank your partner for what they do for you. Compliment your partner. Point out the positives that you genuinely appreciate.

**Listen so you can understand**

Show your partner when you really understand. Verbal and non-verbal expressions can show your partner that you are listening and understand. Tell them how you understand their perspective. Listen carefully and completely to your partner before conveying your understanding. Express your understanding when you really do understand. Show your partner that you are trying to understand him or her by being a good listener and not giving advice too quickly.

**Be accepting**

Sometimes you may disagree with your partner. You may not always like or agree with what the person is saying. However, you can still respect your partner. You accept what they have to say and you let your partner know you think it is important.

**Lighten things up**

Be playful, joke, and enjoy each other’s company. Use jokes and playful teasing as long as it isn’t hostile or sarcastic toward your partner. Joking about your partner’s fashion sense or cooking are examples of hostile joking. Sharing your memories with your partner about when you first met can be a way to enjoy each other’s company. Keep things light sometimes. Find ways to spend time together that are fun for both of you. For example, set up a regular date night or lunch with each other. Share your feelings with your partner when you feel good, excited, or happy. Especially share your joy with your partner when your good feelings are about your partner and your relationship.

**Aim for more positive interactions**

How can you tell if the magic ratio in your relationship is unbalanced? Pay attention to how you and your partner interact. For every negative interaction that takes place between you and your partner, are there several positive interactions? Using Gottman’s suggestions can help you increase the positives in your relationship. More positive feelings and actions can lead to happier, more stable, and connected relationships.

**Activities to help you achieve the magic ratio**

The following exercises/activities will help you start thinking about how to implement the suggestions and strategies from this fact sheet.

- Start by keeping a journal for one week.
- On a daily basis, review the various interactions you have had with your partner and list them in your journal.
- Categorize the interactions as either negative or positive.
- At the end of the week, review your journal to see how the negative and positive interactions balance out.
- Whatever your relationship ratio is, decide to implement at least two positive interactions or behaviors from the list above on a regular basis in your relationship. Put them to use each time you find yourself in a negative interaction or expressing negative feelings in your relationship.
- In a few weeks, try journaling again to see if your relationship is closer to achieving that “magic ratio.”



## Online resources

### [www.gottman.com/](http://www.gottman.com/)

The Gottman Institute: A Research-Based Approach to Relationships. Website provides information on John Gottman's research on couple relationships, media resources, books, workshops, and training for the public and for professionals.

### [www.smartmarriages.com/](http://www.smartmarriages.com/)

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. Website provides information on strengthening marriages and on marriage-related issues such as domestic violence and effective communication.

### [www.aamft.org/](http://www.aamft.org/)

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Website provides links for professionals on issues related to family and couple relationships. Provides information on resources, workshops, current issues, and professional development opportunities.

## References and resources

Gottman, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

Gottman, J., Schwartz Gottman, J., & DeClaire, J. (2006). *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (2015, Second Edition). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*. New York, NY: Harmony Books.

Johnson, S.M. (2020, Third Edition). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.M. (2010, Third Edition). *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tannen, D. (2007). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

Successful relationships with an intimate partner require nurturing and attention. There are no quick fixes or fast-track methods to satisfaction and happiness in a long-term relationship. Most strategies for enhancing your relationship require repetition and practice over time. Six fact sheets from Purdue Extension – Health and Human Sciences address six areas of couple relationship challenges. The information in the fact sheets is based on research by prominent marriage and couple researchers such as John Gottman, Sue Johnson, and Howard Markman.

The titles in this series are:

HHS-742-W, *Handling Conflict with Your Partner and Staying Emotionally Connected*

HHS-743-W, *Making Time to Talk With Your Partner*

HHS-744-W, *A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Relationship*

HHS-745-W, *Increasing the Positives in Your Relationship*

HHS-746-W, *The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing*

HHS-747-W, *Sharing Dreams and Goals: Creating an Emotional Connection*

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