



RELATIONSHIPS

Increasing the Positives in Your Relationship

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Introduction

Have you ever noticed how your thoughts have a way of affecting your feelings and your actions? In a way, the way you are acting can be “all in your head” (and heart). We all want our relationships to be mostly positive, but sometimes things don’t go that way. For example, maybe your partner does something in the morning that makes you angry. You don’t feel like you can tell him or her. Instead, you spend the day thinking about how annoying your partner is. By the time you see your partner again, you are in no mood to talk and you spend the evening avoiding him or her. Your partner has no idea what is wrong and why you aren’t talking. Your partner can’t see what is in your head, but he or she can see your actions.

Negative behavior like this happens in every relationship. When it happens frequently over time, couples end up feeling as if the whole relationship is negative. If there are more positive behaviors than negative, though, an occasional negative experience doesn’t matter as much. Some researchers

have said a healthy and stable relationship requires five positive experiences to balance out every negative experience. Relationship researcher John Gottman refers to this balance as the “magic ratio.”

You can increase the number of positive experiences in your relationship. One way to do that is to increase fond and affectionate thoughts about your partner and your relationship. Remember why you love each other. Remember what brought you together. Think about times you have been kind to each other. This will help you stay connected with your partner rather than distance you from him or her. The increased positive thoughts can improve your feelings about your relationship and help you behave more positively towards your partner.

Negative thoughts can have an impact on a person's feelings and behaviors. Here are some examples:

Negative thoughts	Negative feelings and behaviors
We rarely share any physical affection.	I don't feel like being close to my partner. I feel resentful.
I'm not interested in my partner.	I don't care about what my partner thinks or feels. I tune out my partner.
I don't find my partner physically attractive.	I'm not physically attracted to my partner.
I don't feel supported in this marriage.	My partner doesn't listen to me. I feel like he/she doesn't care about me.
We can't seem to agree on anything.	We are always arguing about little things.
Everyone else's marriage seems happier than ours.	There is no point in working on our relationship; we just can't get along.

This shows how we can change negative thoughts into positive thoughts, using the examples from above:

Negative thoughts	Positive thoughts
We rarely share any physical affection.	I like my partner when he/she holds my hand or gives me a hug.
I'm not interested in my partner.	I enjoy spending time with my partner.
I don't find my partner physically attractive.	I think my partner is attractive.
I don't feel supported in this marriage.	I feel supported by my partner when he/she listens to me.
We can't seem to agree on anything.	We share many of the same values and beliefs.
Everyone else's marriage seems happier than ours.	We have had many happy times together.

Having positive thoughts affects your feelings and behaviors and can improve your relationship, as shown in the following examples:

Positive thoughts	Positive feelings and behaviors
I like my partner when he/she holds my hand or gives me a hug.	I feel love for my partner when he/she holds my hand or gives me a hug.
I enjoy spending time with my partner.	I want to plan a regular date night with my partner.
I think my partner is attractive.	I can list the qualities in my partner that I find attractive.
I feel supported by my partner when he/she listens to me.	I want to share my thoughts and feelings with my partner.
We share many of the same values and beliefs.	We agree on things that are important to both of us.
We have had many happy times together.	I want to build on the positives we have in our relationship so that we have a stable future together.

Positive thinking does not mean you ignore your problems. Couples will always experience some conflict and negativity in their relationship. But how you deal with conflict can be influenced by your negative or positive thoughts about your partner and your relationship. If you continually think of your relationship in a negative light, it is more difficult in the middle of a conflict to find productive and positive ways to deal with the conflict. But if you can bring up positive thoughts about your partner and relationship even when in the middle of a conflict, you may be more likely to find positive ways to deal with the conflict. By training your mind to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts, you can increase the positive behaviors and feelings in your relationship.

Activities to help you increase the positive

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

- In a journal, list three things that you like about your partner.
- List three activities that you enjoy doing with your partner.
- List three reasons why you are with your partner.
- List three things your partner does that make you feel cared for and supported.
- List three things that you could do to help your partner feel cared for and supported.
- Think of other areas in your relationship that you have positive experiences and thoughts about.
- Make it a habit to share at least one positive thought about your partner or relationship with him or her each day.

Online resources

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/

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/

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