



John Gottman's Balance Theory of Marriage: How to Accentuate the Positive in Your Relationship

Summary Handout

By Nathan Cobb, Ph.D. in MFT, R. Psych, RMFT



John Gottman's Balance Theory of Marriage

According to research carried out by Dr. John Gottman with hundreds of couples over the past few decades, a marriage is likely to be stable if, when differences of opinion are expressed, there are five times as many positive feelings and interactions between spouses as there are negative feelings and interactions (the ratio is even higher when couples are not in conflict). Gottman referred to this as “the magic ratio” because it was the optimum ratio for a marriage to thrive.

In other words, to succeed your marriage needs much more positivity than negativity during your disagreements—at least five times as much. That may sound obvious, but it is important to realize that this is a ratio that describes couples communication *during conflict*.

One way of looking at this ratio is that one “negative exchange” is as impactful as the power of five “positive exchanges”. In other words, five times as much positivity is needed to counteract the effects of one negative.

Another way of looking at this ratio is that some negativity is an expected part of healthy marriages—negativity is defined broadly to include such as things as complaining about a behavior, or protesting mistreatment, or expressing dissatisfaction with some aspect of the relationship. Without such communication, one spouse may never know that their actions are having a negative impact on the other spouse's feelings or may never understand how they can be more effective in the marriage.

However, some negativity is particularly destructive in a relationship (see the handout outlining Gottman's “Four Horseman of the Apocalypse”). Such negativity includes: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. I have also found that disrespectful judgments (a form of criticism), ignoring, silent treatment, and selfish demands are also destructive to a relationship.

Couples whose relationships are at risk typically get into cycles of increasing negativity and do too little on the positive side to compensate for the growing negativity between them. Anger is mostly negative or destructive if it is expressed along with criticism or contempt, or if it is defensive.

WAYS TO ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

- ♡ Show interest – be curious, engaged and responsive.
- ♡ Be affectionate – touch, tenderness, communicate what you like about your spouse.
- ♡ Show you care – *caring, compassionate, responsive communication is one of the most highly predictive features of a strong and stable marriage.*
- ♡ Be appreciative – express gratitude for your spouse and for what they do.
- ♡ Show your concern – through your tone of voice, your actions, your service, your listening.
- ♡ Be empathetic – validate your spouse's feelings, seek to understand first, see their side.
- ♡ Be accepting – eliminate condemnation, give the benefit of the doubt, love unconditionally.
- ♡ Use humor appropriately – humor can be a great repair mechanism if used wisely.

Keeping this ratio high is an active, conscious choice: Even if you don't do anything wrong in your marriage, if you do nothing consciously to make things better, it will still get worse over time (The sentiment in this quote was first expressed by Dr. John Gottman).

