

**WHY  
MARRIAGES  
SUCCEED OR  
FAIL . . . AND  
HOW *YOU*  
CAN MAKE  
YOURS LAST**

**JOHN GOTTMAN, Ph.D.**

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JOHN GOTTMAN, Ph.D.  
with Nan Silver

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## *Acknowledgments*

*Dedicated to*

*All the love I know with*

*my wife Julie and my daughter Moriah*

Two are better than one;  
Because they have a good reward for their labor.  
For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow,  
But woe to him that is alone when he falls,  
for he has not another to help him up.  
And if two lie together then they have warmth,  
but how can one be warm alone?  
And if one prevail against him,  
two shall withstand him.

—*from* ECCLESIASTES, 1:9:12

## PREFACE

My personal life has not been a trail of great wisdom in understanding relationships. Indeed, I have probably experienced most of the pitfalls of ailing relationships. I finally got lucky when I met my wife, Julie Schwartz, and now have been able to experience how a marriage can flourish.

This book is not about me, nor is it just another opinion about how to have a good marriage. My expertise is in the scientific observation of couples. Over the course of more than twenty years of research with hundreds of couples, I have found that many of my personal ideas about what holds a couple together—and much of the conventional wisdom among professionals—has been wrong. But the power of doing research is that you can go far beyond your limited intuitions or the hunches of a lone therapist. With impartial observations and statistics you can hear nature tell you what is true. The couples who have participated in my studies, who share their stories in these pages, have revealed the hidden natural laws of relationships.

These couples have shared their pain, but they have also shared their joy, showing me the splendid possibilities of a relationship—the sense in which, as Ecclesiastes has it, “Two are better than one.” It is as though each of us were singing a solo in some grand, mysterious choir, and our voices rose to the heavens the moment we found a partner to blend with in two-part harmony.

## WHAT MAKES MARRIAGE WORK?

Have you and your spouse ever planned a big romantic getaway only to find that once alone together, you fall into the same argument you've had twenty times before? Maybe it's about plans for the future—whether to buy a bigger house, when or if to have a child, how to save for retirement. Or perhaps it's a past wound—the way he acted on the honeymoon, or her fling with a co-worker that ended years ago. Or it could be a never-ending debate over housework, disciplining the children, when to have sex, or how to spend vacations.

I know a woman who traveled with her husband all the way to New Zealand, only to have a nasty spat the night of their arrival. He wanted to go deep-sea diving the next day; she wanted to sun on the beach.

“Your ideas are always so reckless,” she fumed. “Why can't you just act like the middle-aged man you are?”

He retaliated, “You stifle my sense of adventure,” adding a note of quiet contempt: “You bore me to tears.”

Soon she *was* in tears, as their cross-fire continued for about an hour, until they finally called a truce. Stinging from one another's insults, they sat there realizing a worse pain: they could travel to the end of the earth together and still be stuck in a war that started fifteen years ago, fighting the same battles over and over again.

Sound familiar? Or are you and your spouse more likely to avoid such skirmishes at all costs? Perhaps you're more like another couple I'm familiar with, who will float through such a vacation together, giving in to one another's wishes, carefully sidestepping any potential disagreement, burying past disappointments, stifling any complaints, ignoring any suggestion of conflict. If you and your spouse are this way, the odds are neither of you would say what's really on your minds; that way there's no friction and nobody gets hurt. These are peaceful matches—except for this occasional, unpredictable twinge of restlessness. It might surface, say, when he tosses his jacket over his shoulder in a certain way, or when she brushes a wisp of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand. It's these small, familiar gestures that can make you remember: *There used to be more passion here.* You wonder what happened to all the laughter and affection. When did life together become so flat and colorless?

Or, maybe, at least sometimes, your marriage is like that of another couple I know. They go out for a Sunday afternoon in town together. She wants to do some browsing in shops; he starts to get visibly impatient. She begins to sulk, thinking, "He doesn't really want to spend time with me. He's so uncaring." Meanwhile, he broods, "She's spending too much money—she's so selfish. Why can't we just enjoy going for a walk?" And for the rest of the afternoon the two are caught in separate ruminations about each other's faults.

Or, perhaps you and your mate are like still another couple, no longer even spending such time together. Come Sunday, she's caught up in a whirl of chores, helping the kids with school projects, trying to get the laundry done

and the house in order; he's out playing softball, working on the car, or watching football on TV, or puttering somewhere. If your relationship has lots of times like this, the two of you may be living in parallel universes under the same roof.

And yet this is the person you loved so deeply when you got married, the person you sincerely meant to stick with through the joys and hardships of life. But despite your best wishes, there are moments when it seems impossible. It's as though some powerful, subterranean current takes hold of you both and leads you down a path of negative thinking, destructive feelings, painful action and reaction, drifting toward isolation and loneliness.

What is this mysterious current? Today, as we witness the dissolution of so many marriages, it becomes more crucial than ever to find an answer. And finding that answer has been the mission of my research these past two decades. Through intense, detailed observations of hundreds of couples like these, I have charted the invisible emotional currents between husbands and wives, underground streams of feeling that can burst to the surface either as a spring of harmony or a well of discontent.

In pursuit of the truth about what tears a marriage apart or binds it together, I have found that much of the conventional wisdom—even among many marital therapists—is misguided or dead wrong. For example, some marital patterns that even professionals often take as a sign of a problem—such as having intense fights, or avoiding conflict altogether—I have found can signify highly successful adjustments that will keep a couple together. And fighting—when it airs grievances and complaints—can be one of the healthiest things a couple can do for their relationship (indeed, how you fight