



by Tamsen Thorpe, PhD



to love & be loved

# NURTURING DESIRE

In my practice as a relationship therapist, I frequently hear cries for greater connection, understanding and harmony from the couples with whom I work. Financial, career, parenting and intimacy issues challenge modern couples. In this column I will share the secrets to conquering these challenges so you can enjoy a close relationship with your partner.



## FIGHTING FAIR

This article will provide you with some basic facts about conflict and attempt to motivate you to make some improvements in your couple relationship. Most of the research facts are based on Dr. John Gottman's 30 years of in-depth research with married couples.

Let's test your knowledge along the way:

### **What are the most common things that couples argue about?**

The "Big 3" are sex (quality and frequency), finances and responsibilities. Parenting/family issues and religion are hot topics that are not far behind the others.

### **Do successful couples argue about these same things?**

Yes they do, but they are successful because they also use repair attempts to diffuse the conversation; it seems more like a discussion than an argument.

### **Do successful couples completely solve their issues?**

For all couples about 70% of marital conflicts are enduring! The good news is that 30% can be resolved. The other 50 to 60% of conflict can be modified. For example, if a couple argues about the messiness of the house, and finances permit, this task can be outsourced with some degree of success. The remaining 10 to 20% of differences need to be accepted without controlling your view of your partner or your relationship.

### **Do successful couples argue less?**

All couples argue about the same amount. Successful couples are able to stay "connected" when they disagree. They often show humor, affection, interest and respect while disputing. Successful conflicts tend to feel fruitful even though nothing meaningful was resolved. Being able to have a successful conflict largely depends upon at least one partner remaining calm and acting as a soothing force for the other partner. **A strong friendship is the best predictor of couples being able to work through conflict.** The good news is that anyone can learn the skills needed to successfully work through conflicts.

Research has revealed that relationships, even damaged relationships, can be improved by building the basic friendship. This may sound counter intuitive, what with the emphasis on problem solving so prevalent in our society, but friendship acts as a grease to ease the passage of conflict.

### **How can you improve your friendship?**

Make time to talk to each other. Have rituals in place. They do not have to be complex, expensive or time consuming, just repeated and predictable.

- Linger with a hug/kiss for a few seconds when you greet your partner and say goodbye
- E-mail, text, phone during the day
- Have a 20 minute conversation nightly
- Have date nights to look forward to
- Repair after an argument
- Eat family meals with the TV turned off

### **Communication Patterns:**

When your partner speaks to you imagine that they have served a ball to you and try to hit it back to them, without letting it sail past you or smashing it back. We know that when relationships are dominated by a pattern of "turning toward" your partner versus away or against them, that they are more likely to be optimal.

Does the content of a conversation seem to matter? No. Couples who scored high on surveys of marital satisfaction spent most of their time talking about mundane topics.

### **Gender Communication Differences**

Contrary to recent popular belief, men and women are more similar than different. There are however, a few differences that impact the stability of a relationship:

When men give more thought to their partners, the couple tends to be happier. Also, men tend to emotionally "flood," more than women.





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& defensiveness,  
& stonewalling.”

Flooding occurs when the fight or flight mechanism kicks in due to different arousal systems. During flooding, the frontal cortex, or the part of the brain responsible for logical thinking, shuts down and the more primitive parts of the brain, responsible for quick reactive actions, becomes activated. This explains why it is so hard for some men to express themselves when they are upset, as the part of the brain responsible for reasonable self-expression is not active. You can get around this by negotiating a “time out rule” prior to any conflict; this would mean that either partner can call a time out to give everyone a chance to deactivate the fight or flight mechanisms (about 20 minutes for most men). It is imperative that the partners return to the conflict after they have calmed down so that the issue can be addressed.

#### Tips mostly for men

Monitor your temperature, heart rate, and/or your breath rate. Elevated rates indicate that you may be emotionally flooding. Accept your partner's influence; relationships are happiest when partners accept influence from each other. When an issue arises, consider it to be an issue that you are working on together to resolve, rather than making it your partner's problem. Express your agreement with at least part of what your partner is asking for, give in, and look for common ground.

#### Tips mostly for women

Be aware that how a discussion starts is crucial. Women tend to start conflicts by making angry remarks; this leaves the woman feeling better because she has let off some steam but the man typically reacts by escalating to emotional overload. Women need to learn a softened startup approach that gradually and safely raises the issue without prompting emotional flooding in their partner. Using a softened startup helps a man stay in the “ring.” It can help to use phrases like “It's good we can talk about this even if it is hard.” Acknowledging how difficult it is, even how dangerous it is, can reduce the tendency to slide toward emotional overload and outbursts.

**What are the four most common corrosive factors in unstable relationships?** Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

**Criticism** suggests a malfunction in your partner's personality. **Contempt** is a higher art form of criticism and portrays a belief that you are better than your partner and that they have a major flaw. Contempt even has a non-verbal look,

including an eye roll. Remember, it is healthy to complain to your partner but stick to what about their behavior bothers you, don't attack their character. Also know that complaining must be overbalanced by appreciation of your partner.

**Defensiveness** is to deny responsibility or explain why you did something without acknowledging your partner's position. It is important that you own up to your part in the problem.

**Stonewalling** is when someone closes down both verbally and nonverbally. It may take the form of ignoring their partner or giving an irrelevant reply. Most of the time it is the male in a heterosexual relationship that withdraws. It is imperative to stay present.

**Do successful couples commit these four sins?** Yes, they make these mistakes, but they pull themselves out. Successful couples repair the interaction before it gets out of control. Repair attempts are utilized and responded to. So although these four factors can predict divorce, if repairs balance them, couples will most likely stay together.

Specific ways to gain a relationship edge are to practice some of these tips, read, attend couples counseling, seek out positive role models, consult with a religious figure, or attend an intensive workshop.

Unfortunately most couples wait too long and try to work on their relationship only after the onset of severe problems. Whether you are trying to build a new relationship, rebuild one in need of repair, or trying to keep a good one healthy, you will be more successful if you adopt a preventive frame of mind characterized by working on your intimate relationships well in advance of any problems.

*The purpose of this column is to provide you with strategies to “nurture the desire” in your intimate relationship. My hope is that the information in this column will deepen the love in your relationship. If you have any questions about this topic or would like to schedule a consultation, contact Tamsen Thorpe, Phd, (licensed psychologist) at 973-425-8868 or [www.directions-cls.com](http://www.directions-cls.com).*

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