

# 7 Signs of a Functional Relationship

from CatholicMatch Institute

During my year studying Interpersonal Communications, I was introduced to the work of one of the top researchers in marriage and relationship health, Dr. John M. Gottman. Throughout my post college years, I have kept up with his research. He is most famous for developing a formula that accurately predicts divorce after observing a couple interact with one another for only five minutes!

Here I will describe Dr. John Gottman's findings through his research on successful, happy couples, as written in his book, *The Science of Trust*.

## 1. Matches in Conflict Style

Most people fall into one of three conflict styles: validators, avoiders, and volatiles. If the ratio of positivity to negativity in conflicts was 5:1, the relationships were functional. However, mismatches in conflict style will increase risk of divorce. The mismatches usually mean one person wants the other to change, but that person is avoiding change. The researchers did not find any volatiles and avoiders matched. They speculate it's because they don't get past the courtship phase!

## 2. Dialogue With Perpetual Issues

Gottman discovered that only 31% of couples' disagreements were resolvable! This means the majority of conflicts were about perpetual problems, which was attributed to personality differences (even among similar temperaments). While active listening seems like a good idea in theory, it almost never is practiced or works in real life settings, because if there is any negativity at all, the listener finds that hard to ignore and will usually react to it.

One of the biggest indicators for a successful relationship is having a "soft" start-up. This usually puts the pressure on women, since we are the ones who bring up issues in the relationship 80% of the time. The positive responses in these conflicts were from couples in relationships who used the gentler start-up. So remember to keep your sense of humor, and be sensitive to your beloved! Dialogue is necessary to avoid "gridlock" in conflicts, and remember, God created us uniquely, so rejoice in that!

## 3. Present Issues as Situational Joint Problems

Instead of blaming your spouse for your feelings of irritability and disappointment in the relationship, express how you feel, but then identify your needs. Be gentle in this conversation. Focus on what he or she is doing right, and acknowledge that first. Remember, you're not perfect either, so don't expect gratitude for your complaints.

## 4. Successful Repair Attempts

No one is perfect. After years of spending time with someone, you're going to get on their nerves from time to time, and vice versa. This is actually a good thing! It helps us identify our

areas of weakness beyond the shadow of a doubt, and remain humble through seeking correction.

Your goal in a relationship is not to avoid these conflict situations, or punish yourself when they happen, but rather process the damage done and make repair. This point of repair is so crucial. Saying sorry alone is never enough. Work with your spouse in identifying those areas where you strayed, apologize for those specifics, and ask what you can do to make it up to them.

I teach my daughters that for every offense they commit to one another, they must actively seek three to five good things to do in reparation for them. Repairs also help maintain the positive balance in the relationship.

### **5. Remaining Physiologically Calm During Conflict**

Once adrenaline is flooding our bodies, we are rendered incapable of empathetic conversation. Learn techniques and skills to self-soothe. When you sense your temper rising, either take a break, or interject with some humor. Reach out to hold each other's hands. Stop the negativity in its tracks. These skills will not only help you in your marriage, but they will help you as a parent when you teach your children positive methods of self-soothing.

### **6. Accept Influence From Your Spouse**

Resist the pattern of turning down every request your husband and wife makes. Accepting influence means looking at your beloved's point of view, and allowing their way, as long as it's not immoral. This means stretching your comfort zone. So if your significant other asks for you to wake up early on a Saturday morning to pray in front of abortion clinic, for example, try it, instead of making excuses or backing down.

### **7. Building Friendship, Intimacy, and Positivity Affects Systems**

This is where couples who practice Natural Family Planning have an advantage. There is already that regular built-in daily evaluation of how you're going to spend your time together, and how you will show your love for one another. The issue isn't whether you *do* love each other, but rather which *way* are you going to express it today? This just means keeping up the courtship all throughout marriage. Learn to love each other well. Keep a greater ratio of positivity to negativity. Start those habits now, and you'll have a seamless transition into marriage.

My husband, Alex and I can attribute much of our success in marriage to prayer, regularly receiving the sacraments, and following these points in our relationship. After reading these points, maybe you'll find an area that needs improvement in your own relationship. If you recognize these habits in your own relationship, congrats! Keep up the good work; you're on the road to happily ever after.

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