

Marriage Tips and Traps

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Thank you very much; I appreciate that introduction. I have to tell you, I'm incredibly excited to be here today to talk to you about some things that I'm passionate about. I hope that my passion doesn't overrun the information I want to share and that what my perspective of what we do here and that what your perspective of what we do here might coincide. Perceptions are an interesting thing. To illustrate what I mean, a simple non-threatening discussion about why the chicken crossed the road could elicit a number of differing perceptions. For example, the kindergarten teacher might say, "To get to the other side." Plato might say, "For the greater good." Again, our question is, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Aristotle would say, "It's the nature of chickens to cross roads." Darwin would say, "Chickens over a long periods of time have been naturally selected and are, therefore, genetically disposed to cross roads."

Karl Marx would say, "It was a historical inevitability." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The chicken did not cross the road, it transcended it." Right!? Ernest Hemmingway, if you have read any of his writings, "The chicken crossed the road, to die, in the rain." The Bible, "God came down out of the heavens and said unto the chicken, 'Thou shalt cross the road.' And the chicken obeyed and crossed the road and there was much rejoicing in all the land." Dr. Seuss, "Did the chicken cross the road, or did he cross it with a toad? Yes, the chicken crossed the road, and why he crossed, we've not been told." Captain James T. Kirk, "To boldly go where no chicken has gone before!" Freud, "The fact that you were at all concerned about the chicken crossing the road, reveals your latent sexual insecurities." Einstein, "Did the chicken really cross the road or did the road move beneath the chicken?" Richard Nixon, "The chicken did not cross the road, I repeat. I knew nothing about the chicken crossing the road." Pat Buchanan, "To steal a job from a decent, hardworking American." Bill Clinton, and I'll be sensitive with this one, "I did not cross the road

with that chicken. What do you mean by ‘chicken’? Can you define chicken, please?” Martin Luther King Jr., “I envision a world where all chickens will be free to cross roads. Free at last! Free at last!” Are you getting a glimpse of how different our individual perceptions can be?

Saddam Hussein, “This was an unprovoked act of rebellion and we were quite justified in dropping nerve gas on it.” Bill Gates, “I have just released the new Chicken Office 2002. It will not only cross roads, but it will lay eggs, manage your accounts, and even balance your checkbook.” Now for Grandpa’s perception, and this is one of my favorites, “In my day we didn’t ask why the chicken crossed the road. Someone told us that the chicken crossed the road and that was good enough for us!” Finally, Colonel Sanders, the symbol of Kentucky Fried Chicken, a national franchise—here’s his perspective. “I missed one.”

Now as we talk today about marriage tips and traps, I am very aware that a lot of us have very different perspectives on what should make a great marriage, what kinds of pitfalls there are, and that there are some styles of marriages we ought to steer clear from. During our discussion, I will use my background and training and some of the information from one of the nation’s leading researchers about why marriages succeed or fail. He’s my favorite. His name is John Gottman. We’ll be citing him quite a bit as we talk a few minutes today about perceptions concerning marriage, how to improve our marriages, and how we can avoid some of the pitfalls that are so easy to fall into.

Joseph Smith said this, “We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up or we shall not come out true Mormons.” He also said, “Truth is Mormonism,” and on another occasion, he stated, “Truth tastes good.”

In the electromagnetic world, we can witness both positive and negative energy. I want to tell you the undergirding principle of our discussion today comes from Randy Chatlin (he’s a marriage and family therapist at Weber State University). He has said that if we wake up at 7:00 in the morning and go to bed at 10:00 p.m., we will have 60 fifteen-minute positive or negative energy moments each day in which we choose to be positive or we can choose to be negative. Now, as we’ll see a little bit later, the cycle of negative reciprocity or negative interactions in marriage is the major trap, or in other words, the major predator to marriages. I think sometimes we forget in our relationships that we’re in control of our own positive or negative choices. We can choose positive energy in those 60 fifteen-minute periods during the hours and days that make up the rest of our lives or we can choose negative energy. Again, we’re in charge of choosing positive or negative energy in our relationships.

Let’s talk for a few moments about some current trends and facts concerning marriages and families. First and foremost, there’s an intergenerational transmission of marital relationships. This means that the kind of marriage that we have we will socialize and teach our children to have. We tend to transmit our social skills, our emotional skills, our spiritual beliefs and values, and all other related skills, or a lack thereof, to our children. So one of the best things, I think, we can do for our children is to work on our marriages so that we become more skilled. In turn, our children will become more skilled in their current and future relationships. We seem to know intuitively that we’re supposed to be happy in marriage, but some of us are much more skilled than others in bringing about marital happiness and satisfaction.

About 50 percent of marriages today will end up in divorce. That's interesting; that's kind of a scary fact. In fact, the decline in marriage rates has been replaced with an increase in people cohabiting. People are less trustful today of marriage and the fact that their marriages will work, especially with a statistic like this. Some statistics point to as high as 67 percent of marriages today will end in divorce. That's incredibly scary. Ten percent of the population are presently divorced; 35 percent of all marriages involve one or more previously married partners, which says that people want to be married, they want to have this experience, this union together, but in my mind, they lack skills.

Forty to fifty percent of all married couples under age 34 cohabited prior to marriage. We've talked about that. Those who have cohabited prior to marriage are twice as likely to divorce than those who have not. Premarital sexual experiences are correlated with the following: lower marital satisfaction, divorce, and extramarital sexual experience.

Now this next fact is an interesting fact to me. The Utah divorce rate, and this comes from Elder Glen Jensen, is .1 percent higher than the national average. I think we tend to think in Utah that we're shielded from some of the effects of separation and divorce. This fact reveals that we have work to do in our own marriages in teaching our children how to be married, how to negotiate conflict, and how to negotiate happy, healthy marriages.

Children in single parent families are six times as likely to be poor and to remain poor; two to three times more likely to have behavioral problems, to drop out of school, to get pregnant, to use drugs, and to get in trouble with the law. This fact suggests that marriages that are ending in divorce are not only having an impact on the couples themselves, but also an incredible impact on their children.

Next, children in single-parent families are less able to achieve intimacy in their relationships, to achieve a stable marriage, and to hold down a steady job. Currently, about 16 percent of grandparents participate in active, everyday caring of their grandchildren. Now, the other thing that I think is interesting is that couples will spend about as much time caring for the elderly as they did parenting.

Let's talk for a minute about marital quality. The higher the marital quality in the parents' marriages, the higher the marital quality in the adult children's marriages. Again, there's that intergenerational transmission of marriage. If you happen to have a high quality of marriage, your children will likely be socialized with your skills, skills that they'll be able to use in their own marriages.

Marital satisfaction is higher for both husband and wife when they're more androgynous or feminine in their gender roles, meaning that they're more nurturing, they're more caring, they're more affectionate, they devote themselves to others, they're more sympathetic, gentle, and kind. All of these are especially important skills. In other words, gone are the days when the mother takes care of the children. There is an incredible need for the father to be involved.

Next, the presence of children negatively correlates with marital satisfaction. That's one we can all buy into a little bit. This doesn't mean that we don't enjoy our children. It just means that in raising our children there are some interesting stresses we experience.

John Gottman, as I mentioned earlier, one of the leading researchers in marriage and family relationships, said this. "Amazingly, we have found that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula. No matter what style your marriage follows, you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable. The magic ratio is five to one." Now remember what Randy Chatlin said, "We have 60 fifteen-minute moments each day in our day to choose positive or negative energy. What happens so often is that people begin to choose negative energy in their relationships and they don't even realize they're choosing it." Gottman calls this the cycle of negative reciprocity. It's my belief that this formula of five-to-one positive to negative interactions really correlates with all of our relationships with friends, siblings, parent-child relationships, etc.

The big question for many couples, then, eventually becomes, "Why stay in a relationship when it is more negative than it is positive?" John Gottman has said that the heart of any healthy relationship is *love* and *respect*. We each have a need to have a close, real love relationship. We have at least eight needs. One of these is the need to belong. Another is to have a close, real love relationship. Another is safety and security. All of these needs correlate with why a man and a woman come together in a relationship, a marital bond.

Historians talk about the fact that our society has moved from an agrarian society where the man and woman needed to be together to perform their different roles and family members needed to do their chores and things on the farm so that the family could survive, to a society of technology and consumerism. That's no longer the case, and marriage has taken a higher level. That is, people want intimacy. That's what we want in marriage, isn't it? We want a spiritual, an emotional, a social, and an intellectual connection with somebody else.

I was watching a program the other day about people who were discussing who they would marry or who they would date. They talked about dating all kinds of people but when they talked about who you would consider to marry, every one of them, right down the line, said that they would only marry someone that matches up with them emotionally, socially, intellectually, and they talked about spiritual intimacy, as well.

Forging intimacy bonds is a very interesting process. We can achieve them through a lot of general principles. Brent Barlow has recorded a few of them as follows: Physical touching, of affection in a nonsexual nature; shared feelings; closeness without inhibitions; absence of psychological defenses. We'll talk about defensiveness in just a minute. Open communication and honesty; intellectual agreement on major issues; spiritual harmony; values and belief systems; sensitive appreciation of the mate's physical and emotional responses; similar values; imparted secrets; genuine understanding; mutual confidence in each other; a sense of warmth, safety and relaxation when together; sexual pleasures, lovingly shared; signs of love freely given and received; mutual responsibility in caring; and I think this last one is the heart of every enduring relationship: abiding trust. Whenever a relationship breaks down in marriage, it's always over trust issues. Trusts have been broken, and they continue to be broken, and if they

can't be healed, and the trust can't be repaired, then eventually the relationship is doomed. It's incredibly important that we learn how to keep trusts.

John Gottman speaks of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Now, you know that *apocalypse* means to make known, to reveal, or to uncover. He says, "This is my name for four disastrous ways of interacting that sabotage your attempts to communicate with your partner. In order of least to most dangerous, they are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling." Now notice what he says, "As each horseman arrives, he paves the way for the next." Each of these Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse involve the choice of negative energy—choosing negative energy in these 60 fifteen-minute moments we have each day. The problem is that we can slip into this cycle of negative reciprocity without realizing it.

We choose negative energy. We push our spouse's button, right, and then they choose negative energy and they push our button, and then we proceed right through the cycle. And what happens is that so many couples can't figure out how to get out of it. Now what we're going to talk about is how we can drive a wedge into that cycle, so that you and I can be aware of how to get out of this cycle. In fact, John Gottman calls it minimal marital therapy. He says that if we can learn just a few skills (and he doesn't say it exactly like this, but I'll say it like this), or in other words, if we can teach people correct principles, they can eventually learn to govern themselves. They can put their marriage on a trajectory that's more positive than negative. Remember, what did he say must happen if we are to have healthy, happy marriages? Five-to-one positive/negative experiences.

So let's talk about the Four Horsemen for a minute. The first one is criticism. *Criticism* is attacking someone's personality or character. We'll talk about that a little more in a minute. *Contempt* is intentional insulting or name calling; *defensiveness*, feeling victimized by others in response to contempt and also criticism. *Stonewalling* is just simply withdrawing from interactions, just refusing to communicate.

Now let's talk about them in depth. The first one, *criticism*. Have you heard this saying? "Before you criticize someone you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize someone, you're a mile away and you have their shoes." John Gottman says criticism is this: **"Attacking someone's personality or character rather than a specific behavior, usually with blame."** Let me give you an example. "You don't care about me. You always think of yourself first!" Do you see how we're attacking personality characteristics when we say things like this? Criticism is an absolute *no-no* in marriage. Complaining, on the other hand, and again these are skills, is an absolute must for a marriage to be happy and healthy. Notice what Gottman says, **"A complaint is a specific statement of anger, displeasure, distress."**

For example, as we talk with our children we might say, "When your share of the chores don't get done, then it falls back on the rest of us to do them, and that isn't fair to any of us," or, "When you arrive after curfew, you show a disrespect for family rules, for the fact that we will worry about you and for the right we have to get a decent night's sleep." Now, do you see by complaining in this way that we haven't attacked the child's character, we have simply brought up a specific complaint. Have we not? That is absolutely healthy and fair. Gottman says, **"Criticizing someone is just a short hop beyond complaining, which is actually one of the**

healthiest activities that can occur in a marriage. Expressing anger and disagreement, airing a complaint, though rarely pleasant, makes a marriage stronger in the long run than suppressing the complaint.” I believe that!

“Contempt.” Gottman says, **“What separates contempt from criticism is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. With your words and body language, you’re lobbing insults right into the heart of your marriage partner’s sense of self.”**

Guess what we’re choosing when we choose contempt? Negative energy! These are skills, and once we begin to see these negative behaviors we can begin to delete these from our marital interactions. They’re traps—criticism, contempt. They’re traps that will bring about this cycle of negative reciprocity and they will not bring about the favored rewards. Remember in the Book of Mormon. Alma talks with his sons about the law of restoration. If we choose negative energy, what will be the consequence? Negative consequences! If we choose positive energy, what will be the consequences, generally?

Now, let’s talk for a minute about defensiveness if we could. John Gottman says, **“The essence of defensiveness is self-protection, a natural response to warding off a perceived attack. The fact that defensiveness is an understandable reaction to feeling besieged is one reason why it’s so destructive. The victim doesn’t see anything wrong with being defensive. *IF YOU ARE BEING DEFENSIVE, EVEN IF YOU FEEL COMPLETELY RIGHTEOUS IN YOUR STANCE, YOU ARE ONLY ADDING TO YOUR TROUBLES!*”** What energy are we choosing when we choose to be defensive? Negative energy. However, it is sometimes difficult to see that we are choosing negative energy when we become defensive, right?

May I share with you one quick example from the Book of Mormon? If you have your scriptures, [it’s about] Lehi and Sariah (it’s in chapter 5 of 1 Nephi). I think it’s an interesting, interesting relationship example. Chapter 5 verse 1: *And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us.* Now verse 2: *For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness.* She had also done what? Complained. Do you think her complaining moved into criticism? *She also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness.*

Now note Lehi’s reaction. Most of us would get defensive. Right? We would choose negative energy. Let’s see what Lehi did. *And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father. (verse 4) And it had come to pass that my father spake unto her, saying: I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren. But behold, I have obtained a land of promise, in which things I do rejoice; yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness.”*

Does this sound like Lehi was defensive? I don’t think so. I think it’s a huge skill (i.e., not to become defensive) that we have to learn in our relationships for them to be successful. Now how

do we become defensive? Denying responsibility. “It wasn’t my fault, it was your fault.” Can we see that. Or by making excuses, “I couldn’t help it, but I know I promised to get it done; I said I’d be home when I said, but.” There’s always that “but.” Can you see that these things can become trust issues?

What I’m telling you are things that I know personally can help every marriage. They have helped mine. If we can just drive a wedge into the cycle of negative reciprocity, we can govern ourselves, and we can get our marriages on a trajectory of happiness and positive energy; and during this process, our children will also learn these skills.

Next we have whining, “It’s not fair!” Always playing the victim, you see. Body language. Clenched fists. Arms folded. Body turned away. Again, all are defensive, and they simply do not help us resolve any issues. Notice this. I think it’s important to take responsibility for our actions while we still can. You see she has a birthday, September 23. He says, “Woe! Hey, Gina, I really messed up! I swear to you I will never ever forget your birthday again.” What’s she going to do? She’s going to brand that September 23 on him, so that he gets it. Terrance Olson from BYU (this has impressed me) talked about the language of the heart and reacting softheartedly with our spouses compared with hard-heartedly. Now, notice what happens when person one or spouse one and spouse two react hard-heartedly. What’s almost always the result? Contention, the heart of which is negative energy! You see, **conflict** is not of the devil, as 3 Nephi 11:29 says—**contention** is. Conflict is inevitable, right, but what moves conflict to contention is our inability to resolve conflict. If we criticize, we complain, we become defensive, then of course the relationship becomes contentious, rather than negotiating and working past our differences so that our marriage can become more healthy. Notice what happens when one spouse reacts hard-heartedly and the other softheartedly. The softhearted spouse experiences sorrow. Have you ever experienced that? The hard-hearted spouse experiences what? Bitterness and acrimony?.

Now the last one, and this is the most critical one. *Stonewalling*. Gottman says this: **“Stonewalling often happens when a couple is talking. The stonewaller just removes himself by turning in to a stone wall. About 85 percent of them are men. The message to the spouse is the same: ‘I am withdrawing, disengaging from any meaningful interaction with you.’ If either spouse refuses to communicate whenever conflict arises, it can be hard to heal a marriage.”**

Once either spouse develops into a habitual stonewaller, the marriage becomes very fragile. Why is it that 85 percent of men are the stonewallers, the people who just choose to disengage? Because there’s a physiological difference with us men and we become absorbed in this negative energy, this negative emotion, or “flooded” (as Gottman says) sooner than women. Because of that, we tend to be the ones that become so flooded that either we say something that we don’t mean or we need to get out of the situation so we don’t say something we don’t mean.

Now let’s look a minute at some positive tools that Gottman and others bring up that can help us, some marriage tips. **First is to show interest.** How did the program go? How was their day? What are they doing at work? What happened at home? That’s a huge skill that pushes positive energy.

Show your concern! “What can I do to help?” I believe if we encourage our spouses in their goals and their dreams, they will encourage us in ours. We become their cheerleader, and they will become ours. Again, it’s the law of restoration. **Be empathetic.** There’s a huge body of research on empathy, and part of my doctoral dissertation has to do with emotional intelligence. The highest level in emotional intelligence is empathy. You can feel what they’re feeling and relate to them accordingly. **Be accepting.**

Stephen R. Covey said this. I know unconditional love isn’t mentioned in the scriptures, but he called them primary laws of love, laws which reflect the reality that love in its purest form is unconditional. Three such laws: 1. Acceptance rather than rejection. Notice the difference in positive and negative energy when we accept our spouses and the things that they’re saying. We choose positive energy. When we reject them, what do we choose? 2. Understanding rather than judgment. 3. Participation rather than manipulation—all of which, you can see, have positive implications.

Now let’s see what Charles Beckert has to say about improving marriages. **“Ten ways to daily improve marriage.” First of all, to say “I love You!” Kiss or hug. Give a compliment. Meditate for three minutes on why it’s wonderful to be married to your spouse. Touch goodbye. Touch hello. Share a personal feeling; perform an act of service; keep a promise.** There’s that word *trust* again.

Now notice some of the traps. We have just a few minutes left, but notice some of the traps. Gordon B. Hinckley talks about this one. “It’s selfishness which is the cause of most of our misery.” I believe that! Why? Because selfishness is negative energy. “Selfishness is the canker that drives out peace and love. Selfishness is the root on which grow argument, anger, disrespect, infidelity,” and there’s this word, “divorce.” Now I don’t say that there aren’t some very good reasons to divorce. I’m not saying that there aren’t, but I’m saying that for many marriages the major trap is selfishness.

“Selfishness,” President Benson said, **“is one of the more common faces of pride. How everything affects me is the center of all that matters. Self-conceited, self-pity, worldly, self-fulfillment, self-gratification, self-seeking.”** Notice what H. Burke Peterson said, and I think this is very, very insightful. **“No selfish person ever thought himself to be selfish.”** You can’t see it. Right? This one by Neal A. Maxwell is a favorite of mine. **“People too caught up in themselves will inevitably let other people down.”** I believe that! When we become self-absorbed and selfish, it’s so easy to break trust (isn’t it?), which trust is at the heart of our relationships.

Gottman says that our marriages will fall into five different styles—three stable styles and two unstable styles of marriage. The first is a *validating marriage*. Couples compromise often and then calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise. Now you need to know that for many of us that would seem like the style of marriage that we ought to have, but that’s simply not true.

The next one is also a very stable style of marriage, *conflict-avoiding marriage*. Couples agree to disagree by rarely confronting their differences head on. Now this style of marriage doesn’t

experience as much intimacy as the others, but it is still a stable style of marriage. Then this one, the *volatile marriage*: Conflicts erupt, often resulting in passionate disputes, but what distinguishes this style of marriage from the two unstable styles is that there's a lot of positive effect. There's a lot of positive energy. Remember, the key to successful relationships is experiencing five to one positive to negative energy moments together.

Now two unstable styles of marriage: *Hostile-engaged*. Now, listen carefully. These couples argue often and hotly. Insults, name calling, criticism, contempt, put-downs, and sarcasm are all a part of their repertoire. *Hostile-detached*: "Husband and wife may yell and abuse each other but neither really listens to what the other is saying, nor do they look at each other very much. Such couples are quite detached and emotionally uninvolved, but they get into brief episodes of attack and defensiveness."

Gottman says, "**Why is some negativity necessary? Why don't stable marriages have a positive to negative ratio that's more like 100 to 1? Wouldn't marriages work best if there were no disagreements?**" What do you think? He says, "**Our research suggests that in the short run this may be true but if a marriage is to have real staying power to negotiate their differences, couples need to air their differences whether they resolve them in a volatile, validating, or a minimizing style. Too much negativity, the marriage becomes doomed but too little can be destructive as well. A certain amount of conflict is necessary to help weed out actions and ways of dealing with each other that can harm the marriage in the long run.**"

Lehi said, "**For it must needs be that there is opposition in all things.**" I believe that this is a true principle. "**If it were not so, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness, nor misery, neither good nor bad.**" Gottman adds the skills of calming down, speaking nondefensively, validating others, and overlearning as skills that are critical to successful marriages.

I bear you my witness that if we can take these skills (these six or seven or eight skills) and move them into our repertoire and our marriages, we can put a wedge in the cycle of negative reciprocity. I believe in minimal therapy. I believe that we have the capacity to be taught correct principles and to govern ourselves. May the Lord bless us to use these principles in our marriages—to stay away from criticism, from contempt, from defensiveness, from stonewalling, and to see that we have the power within us to put our marriages on a positive trajectory. May the Lord bless us in our marriages to choose liberty and eternal life is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.