Do you want to dance? If we think of patterns in a marriage as a dance, it might help us change a few dance steps—which, in turn, will improve the marriage.

What happens when we dance? Dance partners must follow patterns and attend to each other. The dancers give and receive feedback; they engage in verbal and nonverbal behavior. Physiological linkages between dancers probably contribute to rhythm and synchrony; that is, moving together as the dance progresses. You need to monitor yourself and your dance partner in order to have good rhythm and good synchrony.

Some of the patterns in marriage involve time cycles, or rhythms, and synchrony as husband and wife live together in a complementary way. On weekends, for example, a couple's behavior is often different than it is during the week. Conflict patterns often recur—a couple may have a major argument just before payday every month. Kindness patterns recur, too. If a wife is sick, the husband may go to the store for clear liquids or put socks on her cold feet. If a husband is tired, a wife may do all the chores that day or give him a back rub.

Like dancers, husbands and wives monitor distance between each other. We become comfortable with the amount of emotional and physical distance we learned as children. In our adult relationships, we continue to regulate distance according to our comfort.

Married couples, like dancers, have reciprocity. Reciprocity means you exchange similar behaviors. In a dance, reciprocity can be a problem if both partners put their feet forward at the same time. They step on each other's toes. Sometimes a couple will trade anger for anger or criticism for criticism. Reciprocity is not necessarily a good pattern when it exchanges bad for bad, but when it exchanges good for good, like eye-gazing or comforting, it is a good part of a family pattern.

Interactional synchrony is usually a better pattern than reciprocity in marriage. "Interactional synchrony" occurs when husband and wife learn each other's rhythms and modify their behavior to fit those rhythms. A husband who knows his wife needs more sleep may prepare breakfast and get himself on his way in the morning. A wife who knows her husband is trying to get more exercise may invite him to go for a walk or a bike ride each evening. Long-time dance partners know that they might lose their rhythm if the man twirls the woman more than three times, or that the man likes to pause where a step would ordinarily be to emphasize the partners' closeness or eye-gaze a little.

Eye-gazing between couples is an important pattern. "Eye-gazing" is the mutual eye contact that enhances the bond between two people. Emotions, physiology, and basic passions strengthen our connections through shared eye-gazing. Think of the first time that you met somebody that you liked and stared into his or her eyes. Think of the time you purposefully avoided your dance partner's eyes during a slow dance, or when you stared at your dance partner's eyes during "your song."
Families operate on implicit "family process rules."

Attractive person of the opposite sex. Within ten feet there is sort of a body search that starts from the bottom and goes up and down until your eyes meet and you immediately glance away. What would happen if your eyes met and you eye-gazed for a while?

What are some other patterns in the marriage dance? I've been interested for years "family process rules." These rules are understood but not usually talked about. They are not things like who does which chores or that one marriage partner calls the other to say he or she will be late. Process rules develop over time because of redundancy and social interaction. The particular type of interaction becomes a pattern. For example, a process rule can come from a couple's dating pattern. When he comes to pick her up, he's 15 minutes late on the first date. She doesn't say much. Second date, he's 15 minutes late, she doesn't say much. He continues the pattern several times. Finally about the seventh time she's fairly upset, and so she confronts him when he arrives and says you've been late now seven times; what's going on? He becomes angry. Why? He has indeed been late seven times, but the redundancy in the interaction had become an unspoken rule. It appeared that it was okay with her if he was late. Suddenly she was changing the rules.

If we return to the dance, a regular partner might know that the other partner refuses to "dance" the clutch-and-sway two-step that ends up in a close hug. Perhaps the partners have always gone for punch and cookies during those songs. If one partner leads the other to the dance floor and she puts both arms around his neck or he takes her right arm and puts it around his neck, the rules have apparently changed. The partners need to talk about it.

Families operate on such implicit rules. A few years ago, now-retired marriage and family therapist Margaret Hoopes and I were interested in negative family rules. We brainstormed some of the rules we thought would be true for alcoholic family systems. We developed fifteen. Here are some examples of destructive rules:
- Don't feel or talk about feelings.
- Rather than be who you are, act good, right, strong, or perfect.
- Don't have fun, be silly, or enjoy life.
- Don't trust yourself, your feelings, or your conclusions.

Marriage and family therapist Jeffry Larson has also done several studies about implicit family rules. He found that adults from alcoholic families reported using the negative rules more than adults from non-alcoholic families.

Young adults from families with negative rules reported more problems with cohesion, emotional expressiveness, and overall family functioning. We also developed a scale that includes positive rules, such as:
- Encourage others to share their feelings.
- Play and have fun together.
- Be gentle.
- Don't blame others unfairly.

Why are unspoken family rules important? If a family can change the rules, or steps of the dance, they can sometimes change the whole dance festival—the family, perhaps for generations.

Are the patterns in marriage fairly stable over time? According to clinical psychologist John Gottman, you can predict divorce from the first three minutes of social interaction by tapping and cod-
filling marital dance steps. You can teach people that when they're aware that they're emotionally aroused (e.g., angry, upset, frightened), they can say things like "relax, she still loves me. It's not always like this. We really do love each other." Some of those techniques help. If you teach couples to deep-breathe, to use relaxation techniques, they can soothe their own emotions in about 20 minutes. If a couple returns to an interaction too soon, they're often not able to continue because they haven't self-regulated, or soothed the emotions that are causing problems. The opposite of self-soothing is emotional or physiological escalation, which makes things worse.

Couples who have that problem may work themselves up to a dangerous point, as though they were competing to dance faster, to the point of trying to outlast the other, watch the other be injured or exhausted first, or "win." If only one partner to the marriage dance "wins," then no one really wins.

What are some other good dance steps? A soft start. Wives, don't go to your husbands and say, "You never take out the garbage; I've about had it with you." That's not a soft start. Soft starts are important. Don't begin the dance by throwing your partner in the air and trying to catch her or jumping off a table and expecting him to catch you. Take time to synchronize yourselves to the music and to each other. Discern where you and your spouse are, emotionally and physiologically, before you begin to dance.

Nurturing is important. Gottman recently advised couples to nurture fondness for their partners. Think of the good times together; think of the reasons you married each other. Don't let fondness for your partner or children become rare. Avoid demanding, dwelling on bad times, criticizing, or showing resentment. Observational research shows that when women make demands on men, the men usually withdraw. That's because women tend to make more demands about marital relationship issues. Another piece of research shows that if men get mad and make demands, women also withdraw. Men just don't make demands on relationships as much.

Demand followed by withdrawal is not a good dance step. It's like one dance partner pulling the other too close and the other partner pushing away. The couple are sending mixed, opposing signals. There are more graceful and less exhausting ways to dance.

A third, good step in marriage dancing is flexibility rather than rigidity. Let me give you an example. Typical interaction between husband and wife is she says, "I love you," and what does he say back? "I love you, too." I've started changing that. My wife will tell you that I have all kinds of things that I say back. My favorite of late is she says, "I love you" and I say, "I love you more." She says
sometimes, "Oh, no you don't." Or sometimes I say, "I'm really glad that you love me." Or "Thank you." But I vary my behavior simply because I believe flexibility is important. In my research with Gwenaelle Couillard we studied rigid thought that affected marriage. We found that couples who are rigid and dogmatic in thought only saw the world in one way. They did not have as good a marital quality. The dance wasn't as good as it was for couples who were more flexible. I started changing my behavior as a result of my research. I realized there were multiple views of any situation, that my view wasn't necessarily the correct one, and that I could entertain multiple views. As a marriage therapist I have seen multiple views of what the damage was all about. The pattern looked similar, but each person had a different explanation. When husbands and wives had rigid explanations, they were usually in a highly distressed marriage.

There are many good dance steps: be more affectionate, eye-gaze more, and synchronize breathing. Synchronous breathing is an interesting phenomenon; it simply means there's mutual feedback in breathing rhythm. I watch my wife's breathing rate, and I try to synchronize my breathing with hers. When she inhales, I inhale; when she exhales, I exhale. For those of you who are married, go home and try it. If you're single, don't do it. It's a very intimate experience. You have to regulate yourself; you have to watch your partner. There's mutual feedback; it's sequential; it's simultaneous; it's nonverbal behavior; you're usually not talking when you do it; it provides physiological linkage between husband and wife. I recommend more synchronous breathing for married couples.

Let your spouse influence you. Everyone who's been dancing knows that it's fun to try new steps and essential to signal one's partner that he or she is about to collide with another couple. Gottman is finding in his research that, particularly when husbands allow their wives to influence them, it's a great marriage dance step. Particularly if there's a repair attempt—if he comes and says, "I'm really sorry for that" and she says, "I'm not ready to accept your apology; I have to be angry for two more weeks before you're getting out of this"—particularly when he or she is making an attempt to repair the relationship, allow your spouse to have influence over you. It'll make your dance much better.

Learn conflict resolution processes. Most of us solve conflict in the same ways that our families did. Gottman's research indicates, because the marriage dance is so stable, that if you don't learn different kinds of conflict resolution, you're going to try to resolve everything in the same way. One bad predictor for marriage is if you have private conflict that never gets resolved. Learn and use conflict resolution processes. It's a myth that happily married couples don't fight. They often have intense conflicts, but they get the issue resolved. It doesn't go on and on. You wouldn't want to keep dancing if your partner reminded you every time you missed a step. Practice, take lessons, discuss why it's important, but don't continue to exchange the same old criticisms. Resolve the problems so you can get back to the joy of dancing together.

Learn nondefensiveness skills. When you're defensive, you come up with an excuse for your behavior. Or you counterattack. The message to your partner is always, "I'm not to blame for this, you are; don't try to put it on me." I learned long ago that it was a great strategy just to defer to my wife when she was saying something about me. Say, "You're right, I really am a klutz; I probably get it from my great-great-grandfather." If you can't soothe your rising emotions, you can't be nondefensive. If you can become aware of your physiology and emotions, you can calm yourself. Maybe you have to go away, breathe deeply, do relaxation exercises, tell yourself "She really doesn't hate me, she's trying to give
Particularly when he or she is making an attempt to repair
the relationship, allow your spouse to have influence over you.

... me feedback, she's trying to
work on this." Then you can
return and work it through.
It could be a new marital
dance step and you could
become a better dancer.

Last, learn the lost art of
listening. Responsive listen­
ing is important. Rather than
stonewalling, where some­
boby just stops listening,
turns his or her head, and
looks the other way, listen.
Stonewalling causes problems
on top of problems. Respons­
ive listening, where you
listen (rather than planning
your defense) and respond
with expressions of your
feelings, is a better step in
the marriage dance.

The marriage dance can be
fast or slow, routine or exci­
ting, a dance of mourning or a
dance of happiness—or all
those things at different times.
Every couple goes through cycles.
The couples that learn to soothe
themselves and each other, to be
nondefensive, and to be flexible will
find great rewards. Most important,
the husband and wife must learn to
bring healthy patterns to their
marriage and family life, leaving
unhealthy patterns behind. The
marriage dance is not a matter
of luck or fate; we can learn through
counseling and education to take
the steps we must to engage our
spouses in a dance of joy. $\frac{1}{2}$

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