Turn Towards Each Other: Emotional Connection as a Catalyst for Marital Satisfaction, Especially During Times of Conflict

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TURN TOWARDS EACH OTHER: EMOTIONAL CONNECTION AS A CATALYST FOR MARITAL SATISFACTION, ESPECIALLY DURING TIMES OF CONFLICT

by

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

Psychology Department

Brigham Young University

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Abstract

TURN TOWARDS EACH OTHER: EMOTIONAL CONNECTION AS A CATALYST FOR MARITAL SATISFACTION, ESPECIALLY DURING TIMES OF CONFLICT

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This thesis explores research-based factors that contribute to a healthy relationship and the benefits of creating and enhancing emotional connection in marriage. One outcome of improved emotional connection between spouses is that when conflict occurs – and it will – the couple will be better equipped to behave in mature, respectful, and effective ways. A healthy marriage looks different for individual couples yet all have defining characteristics that turn spouses towards one another and build their marital friendship. Examples include the following: avoiding the four horsemen of the apocalypse (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling), maintaining the 5:1 magic ratio, making intentional and undistracted time for each other, listening to understand and not to fix, forgiving, and recognizing that most things are not personal. As spouses practice strategies to create and enhance emotional connection they will be more likely to have greater marital satisfaction.
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Towards Each Other: Emotional Connection as a Catalyst for Marital Satisfaction, Especially During Times of Conflict

Romantic tales frequently end with the famous words, “And they all lived happily ever after.” More often than not, marriage is not that simple or easy. It requires consistent effort and upkeep no matter the individual or how natural being married might be for them. Adjusting to “doing life” with another person is full of highs and lows and is a complex, worthwhile endeavor.

However, current attitudes about marriage vary concerning the importance of being in a committed, legal marriage despite significant physical health, mental health, family life, and even financial benefits (Fowers et al., 2021; Gurrentz, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Markman et al., 2010). One national poll collecting data on attitudes about family life found that 48% of adults in 2021 agreed that being legally married is less important than having a “personal sense of commitment to your partner” while 31% disagreed, which is a decline in comparison to a similar survey from 2015 (Collins, 2021). Collins et al. (2021) also found that 17% of young adults ages 18 to 29 consider marriage to be more of a burden than a benefit to families, which is higher than what the majority of adults today believe as well as what people in all age demographics from previous generations believed. That data is just one of many surveys that have found a decline in the popularity of marriage in today’s world (Ciancio, 2019; Gurrentz, 2018; Horowitz et al., 2019).

Another change affecting marriage is that of divorce and cohabitation rates, which were both significantly lower in previous generations. Divorce has increased over the past few decades and society at large dismisses marriage in favor of a culture of low commitment, low risk, and low effort which can be seen through cohabitation or casual sex (Busby et al., 2013; Collins,
Cohabitation rates have risen, especially for young adults, and marriage rates have decreased (Ciancio, 2019; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Stanley et al., 2010). According to a study done in the United States by Horowitz et al. (2019), the number of adults living with an unmarried partner increased from 3% to 7% since 1995, and 53% of adults were currently married in contrast to 58% in 1995. They also found that 59% of people ages 18 to 44 had cohabitated at some point in their lives whereas 50% of people ages 18 to 44 had actually been married (Horowitz et al., 2019). As Blaine Fowers (2000) commented, “the current trend is for fewer people to marry, for half of all marriages to last fewer than seven years, and for the majority of recent marriages to end in divorce” (p. 217).

It does not have to be this way, especially because marriage has significant potential for greater health, satisfaction, and happiness. Generally speaking, people crave connection (Crow & Karinch, 2013). Marriage fulfills that universal need to belong, which includes feeling seen, wanted, and loved. While some might dismiss the importance of marriage and not put forth the commitment required for a healthy relationship in favor of cohabiting or other alternatives, those who marry can experience a rewarding partnership as well as significant health benefits (Crocker et al., 2017; Gurrentz, 2018; Waite, 1995). For example, one study by Gottman and Silver (2000) found that people who stay married live four to eight years longer than their unmarried or divorced counterparts. In a different study by Horowitz et al. (2019), collected data suggested that married adults have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and trust than those living with an unmarried partner. Despite a current popular opinion that marriage is the end of freedom and a less-than-ideal option, it remains the most satisfying and meaningful opportunity of all time for those who are willing to be “all in.”
People crave love and connection, and that is what marriage ideally is. Marriage is both love and freedom, fulfills individuals’ basic needs to belong and become, and offers a meaningful friendship and partnership (C. Leavitt, personal communication, January 19, 2023). Marital satisfaction is often measured by a couple's ability to handle and resolve conflict, and their ability to turn towards each other and stay connected. A key characteristic of a thriving marriage is emotional fluency, which is a husband and wife’s ability to be in tune with, understanding of, and connected when there is and is not conflict (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Pearl & Kassan, 2012).

This emotional connection enhances couples’ marital satisfaction and is especially useful during times of conflict. The purpose of this paper is to review research done by experts in the field of marriage and couples therapy, primarily John Gottman and Sue Johnson, to suggest strategies that enhance a husband and wife's ability to connect and turn towards each other, and how they can emotionally connect during conflict, thus creating a successful marriage. To have greater marital satisfaction individuals and couples must understand how conflict works in marriage, the role of attachment and emotional connection in marriage, and strategies for a successful marriage.

Understanding Conflict in Marriage

So how do couples create a successful marriage, especially during times of conflict? To answer this question, this thesis paper will examine the work done by experts in the field of marriage therapy. A great foundation was laid by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth with their research on attachment theory. Bowlby (1982) suggested that all human beings need emotional connection, and his research found that infants form an emotional bond with their caregiver, which then impacts future attachments such as friendships throughout the lifespan, dating, and
interactions with their future spouse and family. Ainsworth and Bell (1970) explored and built upon Bowlby’s findings with their “strange situation” research and ultimately suggested three main attachment styles: secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure. These styles impact how someone interacts with others, especially in an intimate relationship, with those who have a secure attachment style typically having an easier time creating a healthy, emotionally safe, and respectful relationship (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Johnson, 2008). Regardless of what style an individual might have, by being aware of attachment theory and knowing their personal attachment style and insecurities a spouse has a higher likelihood of having a great marriage.

Sue Johnson is a clinical psychologist who founded emotionally focused therapy (EFT) and is well known for her work in couples therapy and the application of attachment and emotion. Johnson (2019) asserted that positive connections with others impact physical and mental health and based much of her work with EFT on Bowlby’s attachment theory. She centered EFT in couples’ therapy on spouses’ emotions and attachment needs, to help them build and improve their marriage. One paradigm shift Johnson (2008) proposed deals with conflict: Rather than fearing strong emotions and their disruptive potential, “we can now harness the extravagant transformational power of emotion… [to] create an emotionally intelligent couple.”

That is a brilliant way to view conflict. While other couple therapies focus on changing negative thoughts or behaviors about relationships, EFT is all about negative emotions being the catalyst for negative thoughts and behaviors. Johnson created a therapy that centers on people’s emotions, ways of thinking and acting, and habitual ways of engaging with others that can provide spouses tools for how to emotionally connect during conflict. Therapists trained in EFT aim to help couples both express their feelings and have empathy for each other’s insecure attachment emotions, which works wonders for a relationship (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2002;
Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2012). According to Regier (2016), EFT moved 70-75% of couples from distress to recovery and helped 90% of clients make significant improvements in their marriages. EFT and Johnson’s strategies for enhancing marriage work extremely well.

Another leading researcher who has helpful insights on what makes a successful marriage work is John Gottman. Gottman focuses on divorce predictors and marital stability through relationship analysis he has worked on for the past 30 years. Much of his data comes from his “Love Lab” in Seattle, Washington studying hundreds of couples. Thanks to studies done there, Gottman can predict divorce with a startling 91% accuracy just by observing how people interact with and treat each other (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). One observation is the 5:1 magic ratio of more positive interactions than negative ones needing to occur for couples to maintain and improve their marriage (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Overall, Gottman’s work is ripe with valuable information on what distinguishes “disaster couples” from “master couples” and how spouses can build a sound relationship house.

See Conflict as an Opportunity for Intimacy

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of life, especially in marriages and close relationships in general due to shared intimacy and interdependence (Kaur, 2010). There can be different sources of conflict over the marital lifespan, such as disagreements over finances, kids, sex, housework, in-laws, communication, etc. Gottman suggests that differences are the root of conflict while Johnson proposes that it is due to couples trying to meet their intimacy and attachment needs (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). Both are valuable to examine, and both have ample research showing the effectiveness of Gottman’s therapy techniques and Johnson’s emotionally focused therapy for couples (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2002; Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2012; Gottman & Silver, 2000; Regier, 2016).
Keep in mind that 69% of conflicts are “perpetual problems” or differences that reoccur over the marital life cycle and will not change, so knowing how to reconnect on an emotional level and move forward as a team comes in handy (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Instead of letting conflict evolve into contention and criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling – which are predictors of divorce Gottman and Silver (2000) nicknamed the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” due to their presence alone increasing the risk of divorce in marriage – couples can choose to see conflict as an opportunity to connect, work together, and improve their relationship (Johnson, 2008). A husband and wife who can recognize and be okay with differences as well as see conflict as an opportunity for intimacy will likely experience more marital and relational satisfaction.

Another way to reframe conflict is to see it as a crucial conversation, a term devised by Patterson et al. (2002) to describe any situation someone finds themselves in that involves strong emotions and high stakes. Each couple can deal with conflict differently and still grow together, but overall when spouses learn how to be emotionally intelligent and attached to one another in healthy ways they are better equipped to turn toward their partner to work through conflict (Fowers, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 2000). This involves habits such as self-soothing, asking open-ended questions, using exploratory statements, not taking things personally, and listening to understand (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Makinen & Johnson, 2006; Patterson et al., 2002). By choosing to do personal work in order to have crucial conversations, couples are typically better equipped to listen and then understand what is important to each other.

One example from Sue Johnson’s therapy work that highlights the impact emotional intelligence and emotional fluency have on successfully working through conflict involves a young immigrant couple named Charlie and Kyoko (Johnson, 2008). Their marriage was going
through a rough time after Kyoko was refused entry to a university graduate program, “became hysterical”, and Charlie tried to help by offering advice which mostly consisted of invalidating comments about how unsuited she was to any of her career choices. Kyoko felt hurt, Charlie felt confused, and both were unsure of what to do.

This couple met with Johnson for help reclaiming that loving feeling and closeness that had been hidden by conflict and a growing emotional disconnect. By encouraging both partners to reflect on their patterns of conflict, share deeper emotions, and recognize cognitive distortions and spiraling “what if” thoughts, Johnson (2008) created an environment for Charlie and Kyoko to understand themselves, their spouse, and their fears as well as to fully engage with and focus on each other. They have connected with their own emotional realities and opened up to each other and thus created a healing moment in their marriage. Johnson (2008) described this process between the two as the “ability to attend” with attend coming from the Latin word ad tendere, which means to reach toward. This example highlights a key principle: When there is conflict there is an opportunity to reach toward and connect with a loved one.

**Fight-or-Flight, Flooding, and Raw Spots**

Working through conflict becomes easier when couples see it as an opportunity for increased connection and healthy attachment in their marriage. This mindset helps calm people’s fight-or-flight response which tends to be stirred up by conflict, which Gottman and Silver (2000) refer to as *flooding*. Flooding is “a sensation of feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed during conflict, making it virtually impossible to have a productive, problem-solving discussion” (Lisitsa, 2022). Basically, individuals’ sympathetic nervous system goes into overdrive as a response to whenever something happens that sets off their internal threat-
detection system, thus preparing them for battle or flight. Examples of flooding provided by Rusnak (2021) include the following:

1. The husband, wife, or both does not feel heard by their partner
2. One partner says something that they do not really mean
3. A raised voice
4. Interrupting or talking over someone
5. Feeling out of breath
6. Heart rate speeds up and it feels like a panic attack
7. A partner, or both, start to stonewall, withdraw, or shut down during conflict
8. Any defensive feelings
9. The presence of contempt, such as a wife using contempt toward her husband

Research shows a decrease of activity in the pre-frontal cortex during flooding, which is the center of higher cognition such as reasoning, logic, emotional regulation, and self-control (Coussens, 2019; Lisitsa, 2022; Siegel, 2007; Wright, 2018). Siegel (2007) described the ability to think and pause before acting as “what makes us human.” It also allows for perspective-taking, which is the useful ability to observe what others are doing and reflect on what is happening inside of them.

Fight-or-flight was helpful in ancient history, as human ancestors needed survival instincts that told them to flee or attack when faced with danger, but now it can cause problems in relationships. According to Coussens (2019), the fight-or-flight response can result in spouses viewing each other as their enemy instead of their partner, which is extremely detrimental to repairing hurts, conflict resolution, and increased intimacy. Take a situation with a friend, roommate, sibling, parent, co-worker, significant other, spouse, child, etc., in which an argument
occurs. In a matter of seconds, a conversation can go from calm and well-intended to charged with exasperation, frustration, distrust, and even anger. Why is this so?

One contributing factor is that of triggers, insecurities, or raw spots. If there are careless words or actions both individuals can be hurt and left with a raw spot, which is what Johnson (2008) defines as a “hypersensitivity formed by moments in a person’s past or current relationships when an attachment need has been repeatedly neglected, ignored, or dismissed, resulting in a person feeling what I call the ‘2 Ds’ – emotionally deprived or deserted” (pp. 99-100). Raw spots, or sensitivities, most frequently arise from wounded relationships or moments with significant people in the past. Another way to think of it is how impactful, for better or for worse, someone can be on an individual’s attachment style and how they view the world and other people. A common example of this would be parents, because they are the ones who typically give children, youth, and young adults a basic template for what loving relationships should look like.

Raw spots are not only a thing of the past, they can also be created in a current relationship no matter how happy or ideal it might be, thus the importance of being attentive, responsive, and willing to engage with one’s partner (Busby et al., 2013; Johnson, 2008; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Life is hard and everyone has differing expectations for how they want to be loved and reached out to. When there is a higher need for support from a spouse – such as during a big transition or crisis – and it does not come, a raw spot can develop (Johnson, 2008). This disconnect can lead to criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling – Gottman’s four horsemen of the apocalypse a.k.a. predictors of divorce – which makes conflict resolution and reconnecting harder. Therefore, it is essential for individuals to ask themselves what their raw spots might be, and what they are going to do about them.
Conflict Styles

Another research finding to consider is that of conflict styles. According to Peterson et al. (2002), what tactics people typically revert to – such as silence or violence with subcategories of masking, avoiding, and withdrawing for the former and controlling, labeling, and attacking for the latter – largely influence by how individuals generally respond to a crucial conversation. One proposed scale for conflict management styles is the Deming Test spectrum which has six main styles people could fall into (Fackrell & Beck, 2021):

1. Demander
2. Convincer
3. Negotiator
4. Team Worker
5. Supporter
6. Avoider

This conflict spectrum is useful to be aware of as it offers introspection on the different ways people can respond to conflict (Fackrell & Beck, 2021; Patterson et al., 2002). The six styles are placed very intentionally. A basic summary of the Deming Test spectrum of styles is that it is scaled on a line of control with demanders behaving as the most controlling and avoiders acting the least controlling (Fackrell & Beck, 2021). On the left there is more prioritization of the self and personal wants and needs, with the middle focusing both on “we” as the team and the relationship, and the right side placing greater importance on others. Individuals can switch which style they use according to different situations they are in and different people they are interacting and working with, but typically have one style that is more dominant than the other five.
Spouses can float between these six conflict management styles but generally fall into one specific style (Fackrell & Beck, 2021). Other research regarding conflict styles is that of Gottman’s work with couples in his Love Lab. From data collected there, Gottman (1994; 2015; 2021) suggested the following five problem-solving styles into which marriages can settle:

1. **Validating**: couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise

2. **Volatile**: conflict erupts often, resulting in passionate disputes but they are not disrespectful and insulting
3. **Conflict-Avoiding**: couples agree to disagree, rarely confronting their differences head-on and balance independence and interdependence quite well.

4. **Hostile**: couples’ discussions are characterized by too much criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal leading to dangerous disconnection to their relationship.

5. **Hostile-Detached**: conflict can be highly hostile yet also full of emotional detachment and resignation which limits conflict resolution, improved marital connection, and healing.

Many psychologists prior to Gottman largely considered conflict-avoiding and volatile marriages to be destructive, but his research suggested that all three styles are “equally stable and bode equally well for the marriage's future” (Gottman, 1994). While healthy marriages tend to settle into the validating, volatile, or conflict-avoiding problem-solving styles, unhealthy ones frequently fall into the hostile and hostile-detached pattern of behavior (Gottman, 2021).

Different styles work depending on each spouse’s personality but overall, marriages that settle into hostile or hostile-detached styles of conflict have a higher chance of divorce. This is attributed to the hostile style’s tendency to have caustic and harmful arguments that usually involve insults, putdowns, and sarcasm which are all damaging to any relationship (Gottman, 2021). Generally speaking, the husband and wife fail to maintain the 5:1 magic ratio of positivity to negativity in their conflicts due to significantly more negative than positive interactions in their relationship.

Hostile couples’ discussions are characterized by too much criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal. Their communication is unhealthy, they do not listen to what each other is saying, and conflicts can critically damage their relationship. According to Gottman (2015), “some hostile couples try to actively address their disagreements, but this is usually
ineffective. Others remain more detached, uninvolved, and critical of each other, with brief spurts of attack and defensiveness. These couples are meaner to each other than the other three types of couples.” Essentially, they are escalating conflict and eliminating safety by resorting to hurtful tactics.

Safety is incredibly valuable to have in marriage. According to Patterson et al. (2002), safety is vital for creating an environment in which people feel heard, respected, and able to freely add to the dialogue instead of becoming defensive, fearful, or feeling humiliated. Thus it is important for spouses to learn how they tend to think about and respond to conflict as well as what their behavior could communicate to their spouse. If a husband has a hard time with a demanding style, now there is enough awareness for a wife to be able to soften and transition to a more suitable style that works more effectively for the overall marital relationship.

There are verbal and non-verbal signs that can cue both individuals and spouses into if safety is present, lacking, or completely absent. One tip for knowing when it is more beneficial to try a different approach is paying attention to the content, like the topic of a discussion, and the conditions, like what people do in response (such as how someone is feeling and acting or what tone they are talking in) to a crucial conversation (Patterson et al., 2002). Another helpful habit is to look for physical, emotional, and relational signs that may cue spouses into if they or/and their partner is feeling unsafe or flooded (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). Examples include a dry mouth or eyes, racing heart, frowning, defensive body stances such as crossed arms over the chest and turning away, and clinched fists (Fackrell & Beck, 2021; Patterson et al., 2002). Whether it is through emotions or physical reactions, the body keeps the score and can cue partners into how each other is feeling and if safety is present or needs to be brought back.
What the Experts Say

Gottman and Johnson agree about the importance of protecting safety in a relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). According to Johnson (2008), “once emotional safety is established, one partner can bring up a problem in softer, less aggressive ways, and the other partner can stay emotionally engaged in the discussion, even if he or she does not agree with the view that is being presented” (p. 214). She terms this as the Safety-First strategy in EFT. Prioritizing emotional safety involves trust, which according to Gottman et al. (2016) is the number one thing women look for in a man. While safety and well-being matter to both genders, it is especially important to women, and a husband’s trustworthiness shows her that she can be safe and taken care of by him (Gottman et al., 2016). The bottom line is that when someone shows a loved one they can trust them, that person is signaling that they care about them, are willing to protect them, and are invested in them and their relationship.

Maintaining emotional safety and trust in conflict helps spouses understand each other better and avoid the likelihood of divorce. One study on marital interaction and satisfaction by Gottman and Kroff (1989) found three interaction patterns that emerged when safety was absent from couples’ conversations and interactions: defensiveness (which includes whining), stubbornness, and withdrawal from interaction. Those directly resulted in longitudinal marital deterioration. Gottman and Silver (2000) suggested a few tried-and-true strategies for creating safety in a marriage that included making statements that start with “I” instead of “you,” describing what is happening instead of blaming or accusing the other person, being clear about positive needs, politeness, being appreciative, bringing up issues sooner rather than later instead of holding on to them, accepting a partner’s influence, and having a “softened start-up.”
Taking time outs can also be helpful for both spouses to calm their fight-or-flight response, self-soothe, and decide what their goal is for moving forward (Coussens, 2019; Lisitsa, 2022). Another way to create safety is through forgiveness. Markman et al. (2010) commented that forgiving one another for past problems and “nurtur[ing] the trust, safety, and acceptance that friendship thrives on” helps couples turn toward each other (p. 226). Besides getting couples to turn toward each other, these strategies have an important quality: the absence of any of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Even if one of the four horsemen – criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling – appears in a conversation or experience, couples can utilize repair attempts to successfully de-escalate those predictors of divorce. According to Gottman and Silver (2000), “repair attempts are a secret weapon of emotionally intelligent couples” and the strength of a couple’s friendship is what determines the success of repairs (p. 27). A study done by Gottman, Driver, and Tabares (2015) on how couples move from attack-defend to collaboration found that the most effective repairs occurred in the first three minutes of conflict, during the heat of things, and the last three minutes but the later was rarer. Effective repair attempts aimed at establishing emotional connection instead of problem-solving, logic, or rationality and included shared humor, affection, self-disclosure, expressing understanding and empathy, taking responsibility for their part of the issue being discussed, and sending “we’re okay” codes (Gottman et al., 2015). Couples who used these tactics were staying connected to their spouse and showed them that they were on the same team.

Spouses must choose to nurture and protect that friendship rather than getting stuck in raw spots, being emotionally closed off and unavailable, and withdrawing from each other. Research shows that as spouses show up for each other, maintain safety, and use repair attempts
they improve their ability to create an atmosphere of deep acceptance and total safety, which leads to marital satisfaction (Makinen & Johnson, 2006; Markman et al., 2010). Conflict will likely become far less destructive as couples turn toward each other through repair attempts.

**The Demon Dialogues**

One last research finding that can help couples understand how conflict works in marriage is looking for damaging patterns known as the “demon dialogues.” Research done by Johnson (2019; 2008) showed that when partners felt disconnected there was a tendency for their interactions to become more negative and fall into one of three demon dialogues:

1. *Find the Bad Guy*
2. *Protest Polka*
3. *Freeze and Flee*

The first demon dialogue, Find the Bad Guy, is an attack-attack conversation that has no end to it and is full of accusations and pointing blame. Both spouses will “dance at arm’s length” and keep their guard up which deters any hope of re-engagement and creating a safe haven (Johnson, 2008, p. 67). The second demon dialogue, the Protest Polka, follows soon after and is characterized by reoccurring demand-withdraw and criticize-defend interactions. Typically, one partner will pursue by making demands, criticizing their spouse, or making a point about something, while the other tries to defend him or herself. That quickly becomes exhausting for the second partner, and thus, they begin to shut down and withdraw, which in turn has a devastating effect on their spouse because they feel unheard and unseen. In response to feeling rejected, the first partner will protest even more and escalate the conflict, which often causes the other partner to further withdraw.
Both partners are protesting for the same thing: the loss of emotional connection. They both worry about the possibility of abandonment and loss of their relationship. Johnson (2008) saw the Protest Polka as a “reaction to or, more accurately, a protest against the loss of the sense of secure attachment that we all need in a relationship” (p. 67). The third and final demon dialogue is Freeze and Flee, which usually follows the Protest Polka. A couple will start feeling hopeless, put their emotions and needs in a deep freeze, and then withdraw to escape hurt and despair. This is the most dangerous dance of all because, by removing themselves, spouses are essentially giving up on their relationship, their marriage, and each other. No one is reaching out, no one is taking risks. If left untreated, a couple’s marital satisfaction typically plummets and the likelihood of divorce increases (Johnson, 2008).

Couples caught in these three demon dialogues have the same underlying problem: They feel that the answer to the question “Are you there for me?” is going to be met with rejection and the loss of their relationship (Yazmin, 2020). Much of Johnson’s work has been with couples in this scenario, and over several decades, she created seven conversations that are aimed at encouraging a “special kind of emotional responsiveness that is the key to lasting love for couples” (Johnson, 2008, p. 49). The three core components of this emotional responsiveness are the following:

1. **Accessibility:** Can I reach you?
2. **Responsiveness:** Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally?
3. **Engagement:** Do I know you value me and stay close?

To remember these key aspects of emotional responsiveness, Johnson (2008) came up with the nifty acronym A.R.E. and the phrase “Are you there, are you with me?” Emotional responsiveness involves paying attention to one another, turning to each other to share
vulnerabilities and goals, supporting and being able to rely on each other on an emotional level, and being involved and engaged as a couple. Both responsiveness and engagement in a variety of situations have an especially calming effect on the human nervous system (Coan et al., 2006; Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). For example, one study by Debrot et al. (2013) examined how touch influenced couples’ daily lives and stress. They found that positive physical contact with a close partner had direct short-time effects on the affective, or emotional, state not only of the touch target but also for the touching partner, and that responsive touch improved mental and physical well-being in the long-term.

**Conflict Conclusion**

The key takeaway about conflict in marriage is that it is okay. The goal in marriage is to manage conflict effectively, connect as spouses, and strengthen the relationship unity within. Couples create unity and work together as a team as they view conflict as an opportunity for intimacy, to identify potential raw spots, to take time to understand their conflict style, and to recognize when they are in demon dialogues (Fowers, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). They must learn to look and check the condition of their conversations and emotions, notice when safety is at risk, and make it safe to talk (Patterson et al., 2002). Helpful ways to do this are by avoiding escalation and doing the emotional regulation necessary so that spouses avoid becoming a ticking time bomb about to explode all over their spouse, who is the person they promised to cherish and love well (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Markman et al., 2010).

Differences are what help spouses learn from each other, grow as an individual, and connect in meaningful, complementary ways. Life would be boring if spouses were an exact copy of each other. Thanks to those differences, couples have a chance to look at both themselves and their spouse and then reflect on why they behave in certain ways and think the
way they do. For example, conflict typically has high stakes and strong emotions involved and can evoke different responses in spouses depending on their life experiences and personalities. Asking questions to learn about a partner’s perception of what is happening and why they are pursuing one course of action or firmly keeping a stance on something can be extremely helpful to the conversation and interpersonal dynamic (Fackrell & Beck, 2021). By exploring each other’s perceptions and stances, couples can better reconnect, create emotional fluency, and resolve conflict (Gottman & Silver, 2000). It also helps husbands and wives recognize the good the other offers and that they can work together when experiencing any type of disconnection.

Overall, successful couples use conflict as a catalyst to grow closer together. If people see conflict as the opportunity it is, they will feel more confident and comfortable with addressing it in their relationships. As they pinpoint and bring up conflict, people must remember to practice healthy conflict resolution and repair skills for assistance. Repairing is valuable for the marital relationship and some suggestions by Gottman and Silver (2000) include accepting influence, which is a spouse acknowledging that their partner has a valid point of view and then being willing to be influenced and changed by it, having a dialogue about problems, and practicing self-soothing so that emotions can offer introspection instead of overwhelming them. By choosing to be vulnerable with their spouse, people increase fondness and admiration for each other which frequently leads to increased affection, a better friendship, and more unity as a couple as “we” is prioritized over “me” (Johnson, 2008; Gottman & Silver, 2000).

**The Role of Attachment and Emotional Connection in Marriage**

Attachment significantly impacts marriage (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney et al., 1994; Johnson, 2008). Spouses’ attachment styles and needs can vary but ultimately simplify down to their desire to connect with another person, which is what Pearl and Kassan (2012) described as
“the most basic of psychological and physiological drives.” Having healthy, secure attachments and relationships is a universal human need and a pillar of human flourishing (Busby et al., 2013). Attachment theory and research show that emotional accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement characterize secure bonding interactions between people who are important (Johnson, 2008).

While different couples have varying attachment and conflict styles that can interact in complementary ways, the best type of attachment is a secure one (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Johnson, 2008). Those with secure attachment are more likely to trust others, have better interpersonal and emotional regulation skills, and be resilient, confident, and happy while those with ambivalent-insecure and avoidant-insecure styles tend to be more distant, detached, anxious, and aggressive (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1982). The good news about attachment styles is that an individual’s style can change for the better; it just takes education and effort on their part.

Healthy adult attachment, which is secure attachment, is directly connected to marital satisfaction. Two different studies examining attachment found that secure attachment leads to better differentiation of self, increased marital satisfaction, and improved sexual communication and satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Timm, 1999). Research done by Feeney, Noller, and Callan (1994) confirmed this and found that attachment style has a direct influence on relationship satisfaction in general. A study by Ben-Naim et al. (2013) explored the moderating role of attachment orientation on emotion regulation during relationship conflict interactions among 126 couples. The researchers recorded the volunteers’ autonomic physiology, emotional experience, and emotional behavior during a relationship conflict interaction occurring in either one of two interventions or a control condition. Results showed that partners and couples who
were responsive and warm experienced decreased cardiovascular arousal and negative affect, as well as increased emotional regulation (Ben-Naim et al., 2013).

Overall, attachment is an underlying component that greatly contributes to the quality of a marriage. It can explain why people will react to certain things in certain ways such as how hurtful it can be when a wife ignores her husband’s sign that he wants to be focused on. People are relational beings, or “bonding mammals” as Johnson often says, and one of the most important relationships is one’s own marriage. If attachment cues or bids for connection and attention as Gottman and Silver (2000) call them, are not met, then a couple could suddenly start doubting that their partner cares (Johnson, 2008). Thus, it is important to create a better emotional connection between spouses to reassure each other that they will show up for their partner. This benefits them as individuals and a couple with increased trust, gratitude, safety, feeling connected and like they belong, self-esteem, mutual understanding, and improved communication skills (Johnson et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2020; Ornish, 1998). Maintaining a close, intimate relationship that demonstrates both partners’ commitment to their marriage and each other communicates that they want to be attached and connected.

**Emotional Intelligence and Fluency**

Before looking more at Gottman and Johnson’s research-based practices that help build emotional connection in marriage, it is important to call attention to something. In order to truly create a great relationship, individuals must recognize the importance of becoming better as a person and practicing self-reflection and self-authorship for that to happen (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Patterson et al., 2002). If someone is not willing to be humble or change in necessary ways, then the entirety of this thesis will not be as impactful or meaningful as it could be. In order to create a great relationship people must first build their emotional intelligence and be
willing to reflect on how they need to change and grow, then move on to their dating life or marriage (Busby et al., 2013).

Earlier, when discussing conflict, the importance of emotional fluency in staying connected as spouses was brought up. A similar concept is emotional intelligence, which means being able to recognize, understand, and communicate feelings. Both emotional intelligence and fluency are powerful and significant in marriage, especially during times of conflict (Johnson, 2008). According to Makinen and Johnson (2006), marital satisfaction received a significant boost when husbands and wives practiced more affiliative responses, such as disclosing and expressing needs as well as affirming and understanding, instead of giving hostile and distant responses, such as belittling and blaming as well as defending and withdrawing. They also found that greater awareness of primary feelings, moving from a negative pattern of attack-and-defend to a more affiliative stance, taking responsibility for personal behavior, and forgiveness restored trust and built emotional bonds between spouses (Makinan & Johnson, 2006). This is largely due to the beneficial nature of people connecting on an emotional level and understanding emotions better (Johnson, 2008).

Emotional connection and fluency matter in marriage for a few reasons. Number one, emotions are often a way of getting closer to and connecting with people. Secondly, happy marriages are based on a deep friendship and that friendship needs to be intentionally built in healthy ways (Fowers, 2000; Gottman et al., 2015; Gottman & Silver, 2000). Emotional fluency helps with that. Thirdly, emotional intelligence helps couples navigate difficulties and conflict more effectively. Finally, it builds trust and attunement – a term coined by Gottman to describe mutual understanding on a core emotional level – in marriage. Being connected on a deeper emotional level is great for marital satisfaction.
What Does John Gottman Say about Emotional Connection?

How spouses interact together can make or break the relationship over time. According to Gottman and Silver (2000), there are seven principles that help keep marriages happy and stable over time through emotional connection. They are as follows: enhance love maps, which means storing relevant information about a partner’s life and being intimately aware of what is going on in their world; nurture fondness and admiration for each other, which are crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance; turn toward each other instead of away; let your partner influence you and accept their support and feedback; solve your solvable problems, meaning the issues that do not fall into the 69% of perpetual problems a.k.a. perpetual differences; overcome gridlock by understanding each other’s dreams and core values; and create shared meaning through rituals of connection, giving support for each other’s roles, shared goals, and shared values and symbols.

These seven principles have empowered couples in their marriages and helped them connect in meaningful ways (Gottman et al., 2016; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Silver, 2000). The underlying reason why is that each principle helps spouses have a deep friendship, mutual respect for and enjoyment of one another’s company, regular check-ins, and a sound relationship house – all of which create closeness and intimacy between a husband and wife (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Couples who frequently engage in interactions that get them to turn toward each other are also more likely to remain happy in their relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Examples include making time to chat while eating together, listening to how their partner’s day went, and watching the news together instead of sitting silently alone.

Another practice that separates the relationship “masters” from the “disasters” is that of being able to recognize and then respond to bids. Bids for emotional connection are a fantastic
yet simple way to consistently improve a marriage (Gottman & Silver, 2000). A real-life example of this would be if a wife comments that there is a pretty boat, to which her husband would acknowledge and verbally respond in an enthusiastic way to match her excitement. Other ways to respond to bids include touching, smiling, paying compliments, and laughing. Responding to bids increases connection and the likelihood of a successful, happy relationship.

Research by Gottman and Silver (2000) found that responding to bids and putting deposits in the emotional bank account resulted in greater couple success and higher marital relationship satisfaction. Will a spouse choose to turn toward their partner, or away from them? The decision matters, because how a couple responds to bids will determine if they are a relationship master or a relationship disaster. Masters turn towards each other 86% of the time, while disasters do so only 33% of the time (The Gottman Institute & Ury, 2021). The act of turning towards a partner is a deposit in the emotional bank account, which consistently results in mutual trust, emotional connection, passion, and a satisfying sex life (The Gottman Institute & Ury, 2021).

A third and final way spouses can create a successful and richly satisfying marriage from Gottman’s work is through attunement. This can be done following the ATTUNE model which stands for attend, turn toward, understand, non-defensively listen, and empathize. Emotions are a way of getting closer and creating connection, understanding, and attunement which has positive implications for marriage (Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Johnson, 2008). For example, Gottman’s Love Lab found that the two major complaints women tend to have about their husband are that “he is never there for me,” and “there is not enough intimacy and connection,” while the chief complaint men have about their wife is that “she complains too much” and “she does not want to have enough sex” (Gottman et al., 2016). Being emotionally present and available helps with all of this. When men attune to their women, there is less
fighting, more frequent and better sex, and both partners no longer feel so alone (Gottman et al., 2016). It also leads to genuine emotional connection and more trust, which may have the effect of giving women what they want and concurrently giving men what they want, too.

**What Does Sue Johnson Say?**

While Gottman focuses more on creating meaning and accepting differences through a variety of steps in order to make a marriage work, Johnson points to emotional attachment and needs as the overarching answer. According to Johnson (2008), marital satisfaction depends on how couples answer the following questions: Is my partner available? Is my partner responsive? Is my partner willing to engage and interact with me? Thus, her work with EFT has examined ways couples can become better attached and have their needs met.

Johnson (2008) described EFT as a couple’s therapy focused on “creating and strengthening this emotional bond between partners by identifying and transforming the key moments that foster an adult loving relationship: being open, attuned, and responsive to each other” (p. 5). This comes down to attachment. Distressed relationships are viewed as insecure bonds in which “essentially healthy attachment needs are unable to be met due to rigid interaction patterns that block emotional engagement” (Timm, 1999, p. 89). The goal of EFT is to reprocess and restructure partners’ inner experiences – even getting individuals to get to the root of their fears and insecurities – to create understanding and healthy attachment between spouses (Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2008; Timm, 1999). Being able to successfully create a secure bond so that when hard, stressful, and scary things happen spouses know that they can turn to each other for comfort and support.

Similar to Gottman, Johnson (2008) has seven transforming conversations that move a couple away from disconnection to being accessible, responsive, and engaged. The first
conversation is *recognizing the demon dialogues*, which were discussed earlier in this paper. The second conversation is *finding the raw spots*. Then there is *revisiting a rocky moment*, which requires recognizing a negative pattern and choosing to do something about it in order to re-establish a warmer connection. Next is the fourth conversation: *hold me tight – engaging and connecting*. The fifth conversation is *forgiving injuries* which is helpful in creating safety as well as healing which is extremely beneficial to a successful relationship (Fowers, 2000). The sixth conversation is *bonding through sex and touch*, with the last conversation being called *keeping your love alive*. After all, if spouses stop putting forth the effort to love each other well their relationship will suffer (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). All of these conversations aim to build commitment, trust, and emotional connection in the relationship.

**Attachment and Emotional Connection Conclusion**

Attachment styles and emotional connection play integral roles in marriage. When conflict occurs, a couple typically experiences disconnection, which, if unchecked, can create negative patterns of behavior, such as Find the Bad Guy, the Protest Polka, Freeze or Flee, hostility, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008; Patterson et al., 2002; Wright, 2020; Yazmin, 2020;). Two great solutions offered by Gottman and Silver (2000) and Johnson (2008) are to practice principles that make a marriage work and to focus on the “emotional music” in a couple’s relationship. Other ways to create a better relationship include slowing down and being intentional with the time spouses make for each other, practicing good listening skills, and building trust. Gottman and Silver (2000) found that by setting aside “friend time” to do something enjoyable and fun couples could take breaks from stressors, share their dreams and goals together more easily, and create meaningful rituals that helped them connect. Attunement, emotional fluency, recognizing and responding to bids,
forgiveness, finding the raw spots, and being an intentional spouse also significantly help in creating a satisfying and happy marriage (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008).

**10 Strategies for a Successful Marriage**

Ultimately, what spouses choose to do in their marriage is up to them. The exciting truth is that all a successful marriage really needs are two willing partners to talk about what is important to them, be committed to their spouse and marriage, and attune to each other (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Here is a general list of strategies for a successful marriage compiled from the research that was examined in this thesis:

1. Friendship is the best foundation for a quality relationship; build a marital friendship.
2. Make intentional time for a loved one. During this time, distractions should be put away so true connection can be fostered.
3. Recognize that most things a spouse does are not personal. Use empathy and compassion to give a partner the benefit of the doubt.
4. Work on emotional intelligence, fluency, and regulation (i.e., self-soothing).
5. Check for safety and create a safe haven.
6. Listen to understand, not to fix. Often, spouses just need to know that they are seen, heard, and wanted.
7. Use repair attempts to reconnect as well as de-escalate conflict.
8. Exercise forgiveness. While this can be hard at times, it is essential in maintaining a safe space with a partner.
9. Reflection helps individuals learn more about themselves, understand their spouse better, and how they want to respond. It can be useful for someone to think about why they are
responding in a certain way, their goals, how both they and their partner want to be treated, where their partner is coming from, etc. People benefit from asking themselves the following: “Why do I do the things I do? Why is my spouse behaving in this way? Why does this matter to me, to my spouse? What are our differences, and how can I learn from and appreciate those?”

10. Create a culture of appreciation, trust, and commitment.

**Conclusion**

At the end of the day there is an important truth to be remembered: Marriage is not a picture-perfect fairytale devoid of negativity and hard things. There will be disagreements, strong emotions, and high stakes. That is okay, and in fact, conflict is an opportunity for couples to understand each other better and experience greater intimacy and marital satisfaction.

When conflict occurs – and it will – remember that it is an opportunity for greater intimacy and to get to know both oneself and one’s spouse better. Feelings are valid and reveal what is important. While it is okay to be angry because of conflict, it is not okay to be mean or allow it to escalate to contention. Showing respect for one’s partner as they talk can mediate tension and create safety during a disagreement which tends to result in a better relationship (Johnson, 2008; Patterson et al., 2002). It is important to recognize the core issues behind complaints and understand that conflict is not about taking out the trash and letting one’s spouse “have it.” It is about understanding where each partner is coming from and making a connection together, to turn toward each other (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Instead of slipping into criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling and thereby hurting the relationship and potentially creating new raw spots, seek to understand the attachment needs and worries that the partner is really trying to express beneath the strong emotions.
Use a softened startup when bringing up issues, check for flooding, self-soothe, and address any negative patterns spouses might fall into, because by acknowledging it, something can be done about it (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008; Makinen & Johnson, 2006). Accept the partner’s influence and make sure to look for safety and make necessary repairs to de-escalate conflict, as needed (Patterson et al., 2002). Stop focusing on the uncontrollable in marriage because 69% of issues will arise from perpetual differences, so learn to let go, emotionally regulate, and move on (Gottman & Silver, 2000). Instead of looking at differences and seeing a problem, it is important to remember that men and women are complementary and interdependent. As Gottman et al. (2016) commented, “the goal in a relationship is not to turn the other person into you. The goal is to understand the unique, amazing, annoying, complex, frustrating, fascinating person you are in a relationship with.”

Spouses must stay committed to each other and their marriage, and keep what works in their marriage and change what does not. Generally speaking, it is a good idea to recognize and acknowledge the efforts a spouse makes in the relationship because it creates a culture of appreciation, which several studies show benefits overall marital satisfaction (Busby et al., 2013; Fowers et al., 2021; Fowers, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 2000). Be kind, empathetic, quick to forgive, brave, honest, genuine, and willing to be vulnerable, because those qualities contribute to more successful marriages (Fowers et al., 2021; Gottman, 2015). As couples put forth effort, they will become more intimate and closer.

In summary, emotional connection makes a significant difference in marriage. Conflict is a normal part of life, and when couples learn how to be emotionally intelligent as well as attached to one another in healthy ways, they are better equipped to turn toward their partner and work through conflict (Gottman & Silver, 2000; Johnson, 2008). This thesis examined work
done by experts in the field of marriage and couples therapy, such as John Gottman and Sue Johnson, to suggest strategies that enhance a husband and wife's ability to connect and turn towards each other. The hope is that the skills suggested in this paper will be a general guide for couples on how they can emotionally connect during conflict so that they can grow together in understanding, respect, and love as well as experience marital satisfaction instead of dissolving into a relationship full of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.
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