

The Top 3 Skills Couples Need to be Happy

It has been said that there are endless ways to have a bad relationship, but all good relationships are remarkably alike. As a therapist that focuses on couples, I have found that to be true. In fact, I have found that if people can master three simple skills, almost any relationship will work out and be happy. Unfortunately, most couples don't have a clue what those three skills are, so they bounce from one partner to the next, thinking there is either something wrong with them or the mates they pick. But what if the only thing "wrong" is their lack of knowledge as to what really makes a relationship happy and strong? Without the right skills, they could be fully committed, work hard on their relationship, and even pick a good mate—but still have it end in disaster. In this age of great stress and distraction, it's more important than ever that couples know the three key skills needed for creating a lasting, satisfying bond.

Gratitude

Gratitude is the first skill needed in a relationship, and luckily it can be developed. Gratitude for your partner is like a powerful elixir. Just a little can go a long way toward cementing your bond. When you live with someone day after day, however, it's easy to take that person for granted. That's why I was intrigued when a friend told me he'd met a guru in India who gave him a mantra for feeling gratitude toward his wife. Unfortunately, he wouldn't tell me what the mantra was. I badly wanted to know what this technique was, so I booked a flight to India and traveled by rickshaw for three hours to the guru's ashram. After waiting in line for four hours, I finally got a chance to ask this holy man about his magical mantra for feeling more gratitude toward my wife.

The guru looked me over and in a deep Indian accent said: "Yes, my mantra is the most powerful mantra on Earth." He told me to come close, so I leaned in next to him. I was very excited. He put his mouth close to my ear and whispered: "Whenever possible, repeat the following words in your head. . ." After a brief pause, the guru finally said: The mantra I give you are the words, "*Thank you.*"

I was stunned. I stared at him for a moment and then practically shouted: "Thank you! I traveled 18,000 miles to hear the words 'thank you'? *That's it?*"

The guru said: "No, 'That's it?' is the mantra you *have* been using and *that* mantra makes you feel as if your wife is never quite enough. My mantra is 'Thank you.' It's not 'That's it?' *That* mantra will take you *nowhere*. However, 'Thank you' will open your heart. So when you see your wonderful partner in the morning, say to yourself, 'Thank you.' When she gets you a cup of coffee, say 'Thank you' in your heart. Soon you will feel overwhelming gratitude."

Well, I was pretty angry and disappointed, but, having traveled all that distance, I figured I would try out the "mantra". When I got back to my hotel, I Skyped with my wife. As I saw her beautiful face on the screen, internally I said to myself: "Thank you." I realized how lucky we were to be able to talk to each other—for free—across the planet. Another "thank you." When my wife said that she and our dogs were doing well, I said another "thank you" from my heart. To my astonishment, I soon had tears of gratitude dripping from my eyes. This guru's simple mantra actually worked!

Try it for yourself. When you see your partner throughout the day, say a silent “thank you” from your heart and see what magic results from your feelings of gratitude. Even when we don’t say it out loud, our partners can pick up on whether we feel gratitude toward them or not. As you cultivate an attitude of gratitude in your relationship, you’ll find that more love and less conflict will follow.

Vulnerability

Brené Brown is a well-known self-help author and social psychology researcher. In books like *Daring Greatly*, she speaks eloquently about the power of vulnerability. The problem is that, in our culture, we’re taught that vulnerability is weakness. As a man, it has not always been easy for me to share my vulnerable feelings and thoughts. I was taught to be strong. But over time, I noticed that my wife loved me more when I was able to convey my vulnerability. Think back to what *you* appreciate in your partner. Do you appreciate it most when he or she is full of self-righteousness and bluster? Or do you prefer it when your mate is truthful, authentic, and vulnerable? Most people prefer vulnerability over bluster.

To increase vulnerability in your relationship, try a simple exercise: Answer these two questions: *What am I really feeling? What am I really wanting now?* When you tell your mate the answers to these two powerful questions, you increase the intimacy in your relationship. Intriguingly, the instructions for creating *intimacy* are practically hidden within the spelling of the word: in to me see. When you allow your partner to see into what’s really going on for you, vulnerability occurs and intimacy grows.

Empathy

In my many years of counseling couples, I’ve found that what most people want above all else in a relationship are moments of understanding and empathy. When we feel our partners truly “get us,” it feels fantastic. When our partner feels *we* truly understand their pain or know their joy, they feel loved by us. How sweet that can be. Regrettably, such moments are rare in most relationships. While we all want to feel understood, the way we tend to communicate nowadays makes this harder and harder. Texting and email are not conducive to empathic communication. Therefore, it’s important to have a daily practice where couples can share empathic communication.

Being a guy, empathy is not my strong suit. Therefore, I came up with a simple method I can use with my wife to help lead me down the road of empathic listening. The technique consists of completing two simple sentences. The sentences are: *It sounds like... That must make you feel...* So when my wife comes home after a hard day and starts complaining about how her boss is giving her too much work and is not grateful for all she does, I say something like, “*It sounds like* your boss is being unreasonable and hard on you. *That must make you feel* unappreciated and angry.” Like an instant salve, my words of empathic listening immediately soothe my wife and make her feel much better.

The three skills of gratitude, vulnerability, and empathy are like magical “spells” in a relationship. When they are present, they keep the “wheels” of love lubricated and

spinning. When they are absent, love and kindness can grind to a halt. Of course, there are many other ingredients that can make a relationship better and stronger, and in my book, “More Love, Less Conflict” I discuss several others. Yet, just a little bit of these three key ingredients can have a surprising impact on even a problematic relationship. If you use the methods presented here for keeping gratitude, vulnerability and empathy alive, I’m confident you’ll soon find even more love and less conflict in your relationship.