

# The Gottman Method for Couples Counseling

## What is the Gottman method?

Clinical psychologists, John and Julie Gottman, are the gurus of couples counseling today, their methods being one of the most widely used by therapists throughout the world. The Gottman Method is a form of couples-based therapy that draws on the pioneering studies of relationships by psychologist John M. Gottman and clinical practice conducted by John Gottman and his wife, psychologist Julie Gottman. Their method is based on observations of thousands of couples, demonstrating that there is a real science to having a happy and healthy relationship. They have a ton of tried and true interventions and techniques that I have used many times with couples and that lend a structural frame to the sessions which is important when tension sometimes run high.

The goals of Gottman Method Couples Therapy are to disarm conflicting verbal communication, increase intimacy, respect, and affection, remove barriers that create a feeling of stagnancy in conflicting situations, and create a heightened sense of empathy and understanding.

The Gottmans developed 9 components of healthy relationships, known as the Sound Relationship House theory, that include:

1. Building love maps
2. Sharing fondness and admiration
3. Turning toward (as opposed to turning away from each other)
4. The positive perspective (seeing your partner in a positive light vs. looking for and finding fault)
5. Managing conflict
6. Making dreams come true
7. Create shared meaning
8. Building trust
9. Shaping commitment

## What you can expect from Gottman's Couples Counseling

### **How to communicate effectively:**

The number one reason couples request counseling is communication. As we know, in order for a relationship to operate well, we need to be able to talk to each other in a healthy and effective way. We often learn communication patterns that aren't always the best or most effective way to make ourselves heard or understood.

You will learn great communication from The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse which refers to the 4 big communication mistakes that most of us make at some point or another. Most importantly, you will learn HOW TO AVOID THEM. The Gottmans found that while all couples argue, it's not so much the conflicts themselves that indicate a bad relationship, but instead the manner of which the arguments are communicated. The 4 big communication offenders are **defensiveness, criticism, contempt, and stonewalling**. Most relationships will have some of these, but healthy relationships don't use them nearly as often and do more to repair them when they are used. When we criticize, use contempt, become defensive, or stonewall, we are not creating a healthy place from which to discuss issues and consequently will not be heard or listened to. In our session, I will help you to see how the Four Horsemen have affected your relationship, and assist you in implementing the antidotes and teach you to help each other implement them. When you have mastered the antidotes of the 4 Horsemen, you will have started the process of changing the communication patterns with your partner, as well as with others. Effective communication is fundamental to success in many aspects of life, and you can use these skills anywhere you want to: with your children, with colleagues, in meetings, or any place where you want to make sure your voice is heard.

### **How to manage conflict:**

Many couples make the mistake of assuming that conflict is bad when it really isn't; it's a natural, unavoidable part of a relationship. In fact, conflicts, when communicated in healthy ways, can result in increased growth and greater closeness with your partner. However, it is often not possible, or even important, to solve every problem that comes along. John Gottman found in his research that actual solutions of problems are less important than the manner in which they were communicated and that in happy marriages, only 69% of conflicts are ever resolved.

You will learn to identify when a problem within the marriage is a *perpetual problem* and when it is a *solvable problem*. Perpetual problems are issues that will never go away because they come from differences of personality, innate values, or lifestyle needs. These are the types of problems that result in "argument loops" that go nowhere but cause a lot a havoc in relationships. Couples unable to manage perpetual problems often end up calling it quits, only to get into another relationship and trade one set of

perpetual problems for a different set of perpetual problems. All couples have perpetual problems. When you learn to identify them and discuss them properly, the amount of unnecessary conflicts will considerably lessen.

Solvable problems, on the other hand, are often situational issues such as child care, intimacy, chores, etc., and a solution to those can be agreed upon and maintained. The key to managing them without unnecessary arguing is to avoid using the 4 Horsemen offenders mentioned above.

I will help you learn 6 skills to manage conflict:

1. Use softened, Gentle Start-up
2. Repair and De-escalation
3. Physiological Self soothing
4. Accept What You Cannot Change (understanding your partner's way of thinking)
5. Accept Your Partner's Influence
6. Compromise

### **How to repair your relationship after an affair**

Repairing a relationship after an affair can be one of the hardest things to do and often requires significant commitment and work. I like to tell couples that we are no longer working on marriage number 1, but on marriage number 2; the old marriage is no longer the way it was. That can be a daunting task, but after the work is done, I have seen marriages become closer and more intimate than they ever were before the affair.

There are 3 phases in the work after an affair:

1. Atonement
2. Attunement
3. Attachment

The Atonement works on processing emotions from the betrayed partner as well as the betrayer. This can be a lengthy process but is important work to do, and the "bones" of recovering from infidelity.

The Attunement phase is when a narrative is created about how or why the affair came about and this is when the couple learns to reconnect emotionally. The couple also focuses on replacing negative, contemptuous talk with appreciation for each other.

Attachment is re-learning intimacy, trust, and re-attachment to each other. I will help you develop skills about perpetual issues that have become gridlocked and implement skills

to have new, intimate conversations. You will also learn more about shared meaning in the relationship, which is an important building block to strengthen the friendship in a couple.

### **Couples with Addiction**

As if a relationship alone isn't hard enough, alcohol or drug addiction adds extra dimensions that can become difficult for couples to navigate through on their own.

I assist couples with

- Gaining understanding for addiction as a disease, as opposed to a character flaw
- Addressing denial and enabling issues
- Developing a plan to move from addiction toward recovery
- Improving conflict management skills.
- Learning healthy boundaries
- Learning to strengthen individual recovery for both partners

Often, when a partner is interested, I offer to see the addicted person individually for more comprehensive addiction counseling, or alternatively, assist the person with appropriate referrals.

### **Couples with mental health issues or trauma**

It can be challenging to live with a partner who has a mood disorder or mental health issue such as depression or anxiety, or who has had trauma in his/her past. Either of these can be highly disruptive in a relationship, partly because one partner may have little understanding of mental illness and because the afflicted person's behavior can be unpredictable and confusing.

I help couples

- Understand how trauma or mental health issues affect your relationship
- Manage and decrease symptoms
- Better understand mental illness/trauma
- Conflict management
- Repair after conflict
- Create shared meaning
- Strengthen their friendship

