

Argument-Free Marriage Advice

by Keith Miller, LICSW

If you want to improve your relationship, you don't have to wait. Take a look at the following suggestions I have that can make major shifts in your relationship.

Before you try to put these ideas to work, make sure to be patient with yourself in the process. Change is possible in any relationship, but it requires dedication and persistence. If you have trouble implementing these principles on your own, consider investing in marriage therapy, or an effective alternative like this [21-day marriage transformation guide](#) I created.

Marriage improvement isn't always linear or clearly observed. Don't expect it all to happen overnight. It is a life-long journey. This being said, you can make a conscious choice to start on this path, and I hope some of these ideas may lead the way.

1) Stop all forms of blaming, shaming, or criticizing your partner.

Criticism is the adult version of crying, our natural, built-in distress signal that we used to get our parents' attention. As adults, our infantile shrieking comes out as words and we believe that inflicting our partners with pain will get them to meet our needs. In reality, when you inflict pain on your partner, you make it more difficult for her to stretch and accommodate your needs.

2) Don't wait for your partner to guess what you need.

This worked for us as infants. Our parents responded to our cries and intuited what we needed. This is the definition of an unconscious relationship. You won't get what you really need from your partner unless you are willing to move into a conscious relationship; one in which you say what you need without inflicting pain on your partner.

3) Do 3-5 caring behaviors for your partner every day with no strings attached.

When you first fell in love you were probably doing dozens of caring behaviors each day for each other. Gradually, as our idealized image of our partner is replaced with reality, we do fewer and fewer caring behaviors. If left in a relationship devoid of caring behaviors, we find other things or people to give us pleasure, making an emotional separation that often flowers into real separation. You can change this. Start remembering what your partner likes, and start doing it. If you can't remember, ask!

4) Close all exits.

You open an exit in your relationship when, instead of telling your partner what you need, you withdraw or put your energy somewhere else. The relationship won't get better until you put your energy back within its bounds. There are an infinite variety of exits, but common ones are affairs, friendships, work, religion, children, alcohol/drugs and hobbies. Discuss with your partner how you can gradually commit to close your exits together.

5) Know thyself.

Your partner may be pushing your buttons, but how did your buttons get there in the first place? No matter how much you may think that other people in your position would be hurt by what your partner does, this thinking only diminishes your power. Take ownership of the way your unique experiences in life have left you hurt and reactive to certain things your partner does. Admitting that you are sensitive in some areas will necessarily induce you to become articulate about what you need rather than expecting someone else to figure it out for you.

6) Remember that your partner is not an extension of you.

We fall in love feeling that we are one with our partner. It feels so good that our brains literally get high. We thus minimize our differences and forget that we are two totally separate people. After the intoxication of romance predictably fades, the conflict we encounter may be traced back to our definition of love as being "when you see/do things my way." Learn from the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran, who said in *The Prophet*, "...let there be spaces in your togetherness. And let the winds of the heavens dance between you."

7) Let the sun go down on your anger.

The old adage that you have to resolve your differences before going to bed does not factor in brain research that suggests otherwise. When you feel yourself getting angry or frustrated with your partner, your body may be in what is known as diffuse physiological arousal or DPA. Every major system in your body gets prepared to fight, run, or freeze in place. As social creatures we are genetically wired to mirror the emotions of those around us, so DPA in one partner quite naturally triggers DPA in the other. Bottom line: You won't improve your relationship while in DPA. Both of you have to learn to notice your own arousal levels and take responsibility to sooth yourself (and allow your partner to do so without pursuing them). Take a break that does not include ruminating about the issue that triggered the state of DPA. Agree together when the break will be over before taking the break.

8) Become a good listener.

It's amazing how people respond more positively to you when you make them feel heard. Generally, people relax and become more willing to do things for you. See if you can notice the people in your life who make you feel heard. Pay attention to what they are doing. You will likely find that real listening is incredibly hard work and requires much discipline and practice. The best (and hardest) tool to practice listening is called mirroring. You may try casual mirroring at first; the goal is for the person talking to not

notice you are doing it. To do casual mirroring, summarize out loud what you are hearing from your partner; ask them if you are getting it correctly (and listen to any clarifications), then invite them to tell you more. Do not interrupt with your own thoughts until they tell you they have nothing more to say. (This skill can work wonders when applied to someone experiencing DPA because it is exceedingly difficult to argue with someone that is trying to make you feel heard).

9) Receive attempts at repair.

According to marriage researcher John Gottman, couples who have long, successful relationships are ones that notice and receive their partner's bid for connection before, during and after arguments. If you hear your partner say "you're right," or if she pays you a compliment, take notice of how you receive it. Do you deflect, or outright reject, these efforts to connect? According to Gottman, couples who are no longer open to their partner's repair attempts may move predictably into what he calls the "distance-isolation cascade," marked by increasing withdrawal from the relationship. If you are harboring unresolved hurt that makes it too difficult to accept your partner's bid for connection, find ways to talk about it. If that is too difficult, you need the help of a therapist.

10) Become the partner that you want to have.

It's easier said than done, but try to turn your critical eye from your partner to you. Instead of complaining that your partner doesn't pay you the attention you want, ask yourself, "If I were my partner, what kind of attention would he want me to pay him?" Then try to do it. It's the Golden Rule with a twist: Do unto others the way they would want it done unto them. Notice it is not necessarily the way you would want it done for you.



Put this advice into your daily habits. My proven online course methodically coaches you for 21-days with daily exercises. It's like going to the gym for your marriage.

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