

Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D.

Since the early 1980s, marriage researchers have conducted a series of long-term studies in which they have examined the question: What do people who are destined to succeed in their relationships actually do differently from people who are destined to fail? Researchers have identified specific interpersonal habits or abilities that distinguish people who are destined to succeed. By assessing the presence or absence of these interpersonal habits, researchers have been able to predict which people eventually divorce with over 90% accuracy. If you want to succeed in your relationship, you'll need to have interpersonal habits like the ones described below. Some of them have to do with how you react when you feel misunderstood or mistreated by your partner, and others are related to how much you think and act in ways that are likely to promote fondness and admiration between you and your partner.

WHEN YOU FEEL MISUNDERSTOOD OR MISTREATED

1. Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

Research suggests that without meaning to, intimate partners often trigger defensiveness in each other before they even open their mouths! The attitude you have when you're upset will tend to breed cooperativeness or defensiveness in your partner. A *judgmental* attitude is the most damaging to relationships. You know you have a judgmental attitude when you find yourself thinking things like:

- "He shouldn't have done that."
- "That was really inconsiderate!"
- "He's never satisfied," or
- "How could anybody think that way?"

Marriage researchers have discovered that, the vast majority of the time, when partners are upset with each other, neither partner has done anything that is intrinsically wrong. For example, sixty-nine percent of marital upsets perpetual arise from conflicting values, priorities, beliefs or personal tendencies for which there is no generally accepted standard. Marriages start to slide when partners assume there is a "correct" standard to which they are entitled to hold their partners accountable. For example, consider the following questions.

- How much arguing is acceptable in marriage?
- How much money should be spent on what type of things?
- How much of life should be planned out versus "make-it-up-as-we-go?"
- Should we work first, then play, or play along the way?
- To what extent is it OK to socialize with members of the opposite sex?
- To what extent is it appropriate for a married person to wear sexy or revealing clothing in public?
- Who should do what chores around the house, how often?
- How neat and organized should our life be?
- How much time should you put into your career versus family?
- How important is it to talk about our feelings?
- How much discipline should be used with the kids?
- How much time should married people spend together versus time with friends?
- How much time should we spend with our extended families?
- How much should we keep each other informed as to where we've been, and whom we've been with?
- What kind of sexual activities are acceptable (or expected)?
- How much financial risk should we take?

Studies suggest that there are a wide variety of legitimate opinions that partners can take on such questions. There are happily married and unhappily married risk-takers, and both happily and unhappily married conservatives. Some couples who place high value on personal freedom are happily married and some are not. Some happily married couples argue a lot and some couples who argue a lot end up divorced. Happily married partners differ on scores of important values and priorities, but they have one thing in common: They avoid assuming that their partner's values, priorities or opinions are *wrong*, and