

3

Relationships

Signs of Trouble, Signs of Strength

A firefighter relationship works in the long run only when it is an equal partnership. As a firefighter's partner, you have signed up for something that might never be a day at the beach, but which will bring you happiness, love and fulfillment. The key? Never forget that you're on the same team.

—MYNDA OHS, *Fully Involved: A Guide for Being in a Relationship with a Firefighter*

In our culture, as in many cultures around the world, the responsibility for managing relationships falls to the woman. There are many reasons for this—socialization, issues of inequality, and biology. Because most of my readers are women, I want to say up front that I believe men and women share equal responsibility for creating healthy partnerships. In no way do I mean to suggest that improving or changing whatever needs to be changed in a relationship or a family falls exclusively to the female.

Marriage and family life are never easy to sustain, regardless of what you or your mate do for a living. There are times when we are all amazed at how two separate human beings with different backgrounds, values, biological and sexual needs, communication styles, and so forth can form an enduring partnership. Those of us who are partners with someone quite like ourselves know that there are still essential differences between us. And those of us who are attracted to our opposites may come to regret the very thing that drew us to that person in the first place. What we bring into our adult relationships from our families of origin and our cultural conditioning in terms of expectations,

attitudes, self-esteem, needs, and interpersonal skills is as important an influence on family life as is the work we do.

This chapter lays out some basic principles for building and sustaining a successful relationship. Some of you will be reading this chapter because your relationship is in trouble. Some of you because you want to avoid future trouble. And some of you because you want to strengthen an already durable partnership. It is my hope that there is something here for all of you.

Is Your Relationship in Trouble?

This may seem like an odd question. Wouldn't you know if things were going sour with your partner? Not necessarily. Sometimes things build slowly to the point where they are past repair. Other times it's hard to distinguish between a bad patch that will resolve and the start of a downward spiral.

Dr. John Gottman is a marital expert and researcher whose work I've admired for years. I've adapted and condensed some of his five warning signs of relationship trouble and added some of my own thoughts. If you want to pursue this question further, you can take his relationship quiz by visiting his website or reading one of his many informative books (see Resources).

1. **The quality of your friendship is low.** You no longer respect each other or enjoy each other's company. Happy couples know each other's preferences, dreams, hopes, and gripes. They do little things for each other, express interest in each other's everyday life, or support each other's aspirations.

2. **There's more negative than positive in your relationship.** What Gottman means by positive interactions are verbal or nonverbal expressions of fondness, admiration, respect, and regard for the other. Gottman has actually formulated a precise ratio for this balance. For happy couples positive comments and actions outweigh negative ones about 20 to 1 in everyday life. When a couple is in conflict, the ratio drops to 5 to 1. In couples soon to divorce, the balance tips to fewer than 1 to 1, positive to negative.

3. **Your communication is characterized by criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.** Either of you says whatever angry

thing comes into your mind. Efforts to repair the resulting damage fail or never happen. Once an argument starts, neither of you knows how to stop it. Take note of this: Gottman is not saying that anger is the problem. Most couples have multiple irreconcilable differences that will last a lifetime, and all couples get angry and fight. It's *how* you fight and *how* you repair the damage that counts. To keep that 5-to-1 ratio during a conflict, happy couples validate their partner's perspective, listen attentively, ask each other to say more, and express empathy for the other person's position.

Because all couple have differences, learn to tolerate your own anxiety about disagreeing—don't assume it means the end of the relationship. At the same time, avoid blaming the fire service for your unhappiness. It will put your mate on the defensive instead of recruiting your partner as a problem-solving ally. And don't use work as a way not to deal with the friction that exists between you.

4. **You tolerate hurtful behavior in each other.** Hurtful behavior exists along a continuum from lack of respect and consideration to outright abuse (see Chapter 17, on domestic abuse). This can be a problem for fire fighters who don't recognize they are inappropriately using fire station language or humor at home.

5. **The man in the relationship won't accept influence from the woman.** We women are used to accepting influence from men, but for a true partnership to exist, a man must do the same. For a relationship to work, each partner must have equal power and input.

What Predicts Divorce?

In his decades-long research on marriage, Dr. Gottman found four destructive behaviors that were the biggest predictors of divorce and separation: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He called these "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." I've added some of my own thoughts and those of my colleagues to Dr. Gottman's list along with some constructive alternatives. As you read, ask yourself if any of these behaviors sound familiar.

1. **Criticism.** Criticism can be constructive, but it is not when it involves making negative judgments about your partner in extreme, absolute, and global terms. Because fire fighters are held to exceptionally high standards, they may be at risk for unfairly criticizing those

at home for not living up to the same standards of cleanliness and organization they have at work.

What to do instead: Voice your concerns in a way that focuses on your own feelings rather than attacking your partner's personality or character. For example, "I feel neglected when you don't tell me you'll be home late" rather than "You are selfish and never think about my feelings."

2. **Contempt.** Contempt is a destructive form of criticism that involves treating your partner with disrespect, disgust, condescension, or ridicule. It can involve sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, sneering, or name-calling. It is essentially an attack on a person's entire character. Contempt can grow over time if you focus exclusively on the qualities you dislike in your partner.

What to do instead: Consider your mate's positive qualities instead of keeping score on all his or her flaws. It may help to write a list of these qualities and return to it when you need a reminder. It also helps to put yourself in the other person's shoes and ask yourself what things about *you* your partner finds irritating. My husband uses something he calls the 85% rule. He only needs to be happy with 85% of my behavior or habits. When he needs to, he finds a way to live with the 15% he finds irritating because he knows he can't change me and it would annoy me if he tried. The takeaway here is, as someone once said, "Perfection is the enemy of the good." It helps to be humble about human flaws, including our own.

It also helps to separate intentions from consequences. While I didn't set out to hurt someone's feelings with an off-handed remark or a joke, it is my responsibility to deal with the consequences, not defend my innocent intentions. And when I am the offended party, it helps me to consider the other person's intentions.

3. **Defensiveness.** Defensiveness arises when people feel criticized or attacked; it involves making excuses to avoid taking responsibility, deflecting blame back onto the other person, protesting your innocence, or blaming your partner for something else after he or she has raised a complaint against you. The other day a friend was irritated with me because she thought I hadn't listened to something she told me earlier. My reflexive response was to remind her of all the times she hasn't listened to me. Even if I was right—and I like being right—that didn't absolve me from the responsibility of considering how I had hurt her feelings and what I could or should do differently. The

problem with defensiveness is that it communicates that you aren't taking the other person's concerns seriously. If I'd piled on additional complaints about my friend, I would have escalated the conflict, making her feel attacked and defensive. At times like this, I find it helpful to ask myself if I'd rather be right or free.

What to do instead: Take the time to hear each other out. When appropriate, apologize. A simple, genuine apology can go a long way when it includes an authentic acknowledgment of how whatever you did, intentionally or unintentionally, affected the other person. Stay calm. Focus on your breathing. Be specific about your mistake. Don't make excuses for your behavior. In my own example, I acknowledged that I am often preoccupied, that my failure to routinely retain or register what my friend says makes her feel I don't care about her. This isn't true—I care the world about her—but it's how she felt in the moment. If you're not certain what to do to correct the situation, enlist the other person's help. Together, problem-solve the steps you will take to avoid crossing that line again.

4. **Stonewalling.** Stonewalling involves putting up a wall between you and your partner by withdrawing or shutting down—meaning physically and emotionally distancing yourself. Giving your partner the “silent treatment” or abruptly leaving the room or the house without saying where you're going is an example of stonewalling. Stonewalling often happens when the first three “horsemen” mount up or become so overwhelming that one partner feels “flooded.” Stonewalling is far more common among men, according to Gottman, due to physiological differences between men and women.

What to do instead: One of the problems with flooding and the other four destructive behaviors is that they drown out any attempts to repair the damage done in a conflict. Sometimes it's a good idea to take some time to calm down and collect your thoughts before reengaging. Make sure to let your partner know what you're doing and why. Perhaps agree on a time to reengage when you're ready. But make certain your partner understands that you're taking care of yourself, not turning your back on him or her.

A note about divorce in the fire service: Is it true that the divorce rate among fire fighters is through the roof? Not as far as I can tell. Researching divorce rates is always difficult, but the most reliable studies place the divorce rate for male fire fighters at the same level as the

general population. On the other hand, female fire fighters have a significantly higher divorce rate than the general population. Why this is so isn't clear. It's also the case that there are so few women in the fire service that these findings may be questionable.

Infidelity

Is infidelity a predictor of divorce? Not necessarily. There are many reasons and conditions that lead to infidelity. Dr. Gottman suggests that a common reason behind infidelity is the search for lost friendship. Is infidelity common in the fire service? Hard to know. Getting dependable facts about people's sexual behavior is difficult. Firehouse gossip is hardly a reliable source of information.

Trauma raises the risk for infidelity; for example, a psychologically injured fire fighter may look to an extramarital relationship to restimulate adrenaline, fight depression, or counter deep feelings of inadequacy by finding someone who, at least temporarily, finds him or her attractive or admirable. Posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI) does not excuse infidelity, but it is a factor to be considered by the couple and any therapist they consult.

Infidelity is complex. It may be an indication that the unfaithful partner has significant emotional problems, that the marital relationship is in dire need of repair, or that the unfaithful partner is signaling that he or she wants out of the relationship.

Repairing a relationship after infidelity is hard work involving restoring trust and figuring out what went wrong. It is beyond the scope of this book (see Resources). But remember this: infidelity does not have to be the end of a relationship. Many people survive it and go on to build better, more honest, and stronger connections with each other. Others choose to end their relationship, repairing as much damage as possible before moving on, wiser about themselves and better prepared for the next relationship. Whatever the outcome, infidelity is a wake-up call to get help for yourself, perhaps for your relationship, and certainly for your children.

Codependence

I volunteer at the First Responders Support Network Significant Others and Spouses (SOS) retreat. The program was originally created by Drs. Ann Buscho and Mark Kamena to assist family members whose mates

had been through a critical incident. Instead they discovered that what our clients really needed was relationship help with particular emphasis on overcoming codependence. Codependence—I prefer the term *overfunctioning*—is so common among our clients that it has become a central focus of our work. (See Resources for books and organizations.)

What we try to teach at the retreat is balance. An approach that is not either/or but both/and. Caring for others without caring for yourself equals self-sacrifice; caring for yourself without caring for others equals self-centeredness or selfishness. Doing for others what they can do for themselves leaves people feeling as though they are helpless. The goal is to *care* for those we love, not *carry* them. Most of our clients fall into the first either/or category. As a result, they arrive at the retreat exhausted, depleted, isolated, and deeply discouraged, erroneously believing the following about themselves:

- “Only if I get your approval do I feel good about myself.”
- “Only if you like me do I feel good about myself.”
- “The quality of my life depends on the quality of yours.”

Cara’s story: When Cara’s husband, Arnie, was seriously injured in a fire, Cara was the “I got this” girl. In the hospital, when Arnie was intubated and couldn’t talk, Cara learned to read his mind. Or so she believed. When he was released to recover at home, her entire sense of self rested on his mood. When he had a good day, she had a good day. When he had a bad day, she felt like a bad girl. This was not a new pattern. Prior to his injuries Cara was independent at work, but deferential when Arnie was home. After his injuries, she was deferential all the time.

Arnie’s recovery was challenging both physically and emotionally. He was obsessed by fire and triggered by the sound of helicopters flying overhead. Cara was fearful every time she left the house, believing that if she wasn’t around, Arnie would be triggered, this would lead to chaos, everything would go to hell, and he would leave her. She didn’t know what to do to help Arnie psychologically. At the same time she was convinced that if she could figure out how to stop his being triggered, he’d be happy.

Then she broke her leg.

Now it was Arnie who had to help her. At first, she refused his assistance. “I got this,” she said and tried to suck it up. When Arnie was injured, Cara believed the responsibility for his recovery was both “his

and ours.” But when she was the injured party, she believed recovery was hers alone.

The more Arnie tried to help, the more Cara felt like a toddler. The more she felt like a toddler, the more she understood that her “helicoptering and hovering” made Arnie feel like a helpless child. With time and some counseling, Cara realized how out of balance their relationship had become and that Arnie, while still disabled, was capable of helping her now and in the future.

I love Cara’s story because it so clearly illustrates not just the value of counseling but how easy it is to mix up love and overfunctioning. Or as police chaplain Reverend Jan Heglund says, “We are joined at the heart, not the hip.”

Many of our clients are so fearful of rejection that it determines what they say or do. They have put their values aside to connect with their spouses. They suffer because they feel responsible for solving their loved one’s problems and relieving their pain. They’ve forgotten what they want or like and routinely defer to their mates. Their social lives are diminished. They know better what their mate feels than they know their own feelings. Their mate’s opinion counts more than theirs, and their futures are dependent on their spouses.

Codependent behavior typically arises in reaction to social pressures—women should put others first—and/or childhood experiences. Maybe your mother was codependent, or your parents depended on you as a child to take care of them. Overfunctioning is habitual, excessive, and limiting. It is not the same as caring or empathy. If you find yourself identifying with our clients, please check the Resources at the back of the book for help.

Communication Problems: Tell All/Tell Nothing

What to tell the family can be a big dilemma for fire fighters who don’t want to overwhelm their loved ones with experiences that are hard for fire fighters themselves to tolerate—tragic deaths, gruesome details, and so on. Here’s what I tell fire fighters. “It’s not a matter of tell all or tell nothing. Your family doesn’t want or need to know the details. What they want to know is how you are emotionally and psychologically. Being open about what you are feeling makes you accessible, not vulnerable, and creates intimacy. Don’t kid yourself; the job follows you home even when you think it doesn’t.” (They especially don’t like hearing this.) “Your family is reading your mood the minute you come home.

TWO IN/TWO OUT

They're looking for what our SOS clients call *The Face* and other clues that leave them worried and wondering if something bad happened at work or if they're the ones who have upset you."

What stops fire fighters from answering the question "How was your shift?"

- Talking about what happened will cause them to reexperience certain sights and sounds.
- They've talked about the incident so much at work that they just need a break.
- What they need most is to have fun with the family and put some positivity back in their lives.
- What they need before talking is some exercise to burn off all the excess adrenaline.
- What happened at work is so outside normal experience that they are afraid to overwhelm their significant others.
- They know their significant others can't tolerate hearing about bad things happening to children. Talking about it might make the fire fighter feel better, but it feels selfish to do so.
- They know that what fire fighters find funny doesn't seem funny to civilians.
- The last time they shared something tragic that happened at work, the family got so upset they vowed never to do that again.

I wish there were an exact formula for family communication, but there isn't. Every family is unique. What I do know is that it is not the first responder's responsibility or privilege to make unilateral decisions about what, when, where, and how to communicate. It is a negotiation between two equal partners, and it is best done earlier rather than later in a relationship.

If either of you finds yourself telling friends and relatives about a problem you're having with your mate before you tell your mate, you're probably not communicating well. It's comforting and helpful to talk with friends and family, but ultimately it won't solve the problem you're having at home. If you're having trouble communicating, consult a therapist (see Chapter 20).

My suggestion is to talk about talking. Remember: every couple is different, and each partner has different needs for communicating. (The same goes for talking with parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, anyone in your support system.) Here are some questions you can ask

each other, and your children if they're old enough, to evaluate how you are doing.

- “Are you content with how, when, and where we communicate?”
- “How much detail do we want to share with each other?”
- “Do you want to know when I've been in danger?”
- “Do you want to know when I'm upset?”
- “Do you think we solve problems well?”
- “Do our conflicts get settled satisfactorily?”
- “Is one of us afraid of the other?”
- “Do we each feel listened to?”
- “Do we both have sufficient airtime?”
- “Do our children feel that we listen to them and value their participation in family decisions?”

What to Aim For

There are many reasons couples have relationship troubles. You've already read about some, and you'll read about more in the pages ahead. Fire service families may have to be creative to compensate for spill-over from the job, but the basic principles of relationship building are the same for everyone. Or as Tolstoy said in the beginning of his classic novel *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Thinking that what makes for good relationships doesn't apply to fire service families is like saying the rules of gravity don't apply to you either.

The big takeaway here is that, no matter what you do for a living, strong, sustainable marriages are based on friendship and positive regard. Happy marriages are not without conflict—sometimes lots of conflict. It's just that so much of the relationship is positive that the negative is hardly more than a bump in the road.

Couples build positivity and connection through what Gottman calls “bids and turns.” These are small, everyday acts of affection and attention that speak volumes about our care and concern for each other: a pat on the arm, asking how the day went, a private wink, a waiting cup of coffee just the way you like it, an article you clipped from the paper because you know it will interest your spouse, a gesture of thanks when your partner has done something nice for you. Nothing glamorous, fancy, sexy, or expensive.

Sometimes one partner makes a bid that is so subtle it goes unnoticed. Other times the receiving partner is preoccupied with work, worry, kids, or, too commonly, surfing the Net. Turning away from rather than toward each other can be painful. Turning against—as in stop bothering me—is destructive. The point of making bids is to build emotional connection. We are all unique in what makes us feel connected. What we need may not be obvious to the person we love. According to Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, there are five main ways couples connect: receiving gifts, words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, and acts of service. It may be helpful for you and your mate to take a free online profile (5lovelanguages.com) to determine your individual preferences and then spend some time talking about your similarities and differences.

Gottman suggests treating one's relationship or marriage like a bank account. If you're running low on funds with more withdrawals (negative interactions) than deposits (positive interactions), then each successive conflict brings you closer to bankruptcy. But if there's plenty of money on deposit, the occasional withdrawal won't break the bank. Even more important, having a positive cushion makes conflict feel like a small blip on a big screen of love and acceptance, keeps arguments in perspective, and leads to quicker and more frequent attempts at repair.

A note about sex: This concept of building positivity in your relationship is extremely important when it comes to sex. Talking about sex is difficult for most of us. We're shy, worried that we aren't attractive or good enough lovers, concerned that our preferences are unacceptable or weird. Sex can be fun, a way to feel closer, express our love, and please our partners. It can also be a source of conflict. Sexual desire varies between people and changes over time. Fatigue, shift work, emotional problems, childcare, illness, conflict, and many other factors affect our sex lives. Here are a few things to think about regarding sex.

1. **Learn to talk about sex with each other, but be gentle.** Avoid criticism. Ask for what you want in clear terms—it's okay to blush—instead of criticizing your partner for not knowing what you need or for not doing it right. Loving you doesn't mean your partner can read your mind. Better to say "I love it when you kiss my neck" than to say "You never kiss me on the neck." In other words, when discussing your sex life, accentuate the positive and try to make a good thing (even when it isn't entirely good) better.

Relationships

2. **Learn about sex.** Read books. Most of us know pitifully little about our own anatomy, let alone our partner's. Our expectations of ourselves and each other are often based on unrealistic media images. Learn about each other's likes and dislikes and accept individual differences as useful feedback, not criticism.

3. **Try to accommodate each other's desires.** People have an infinite range of fantasies, none of which are intrinsically bad. Be clear about what feels right, safe, and dignified to you and what doesn't. Be playful and open to experimenting. At the same time, honor each other's limits.