



# Enriching Your Marriage by Creating Shared Meaning

By John Gottman

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## STORY

After being married ten years, Teresa, age 38, discovered that being in love with Brian, age 37, was just not enough to sustain happiness in their union. When Brian married Teresa, he was impressed with her hard-working nature and financial independence. Teresa was attracted to Brian because he had a good job and was conscientious and kind.

However, over the last few years, Teresa found herself comparing her marriage to her friends unfavorably and criticizing Brian for habits she found annoying, such as leaving dishes in the sink and not hanging up his clothes. They rarely spend time together and intimacy and romance have evaporated since their young children, Aiden and Stacy, had arrived. Teresa put it like this:

“It seems like Brian puts all of his energy into his job and has little left over for me, our kids, or our home at the end of the day. We’ve been considering buying a bigger house but I’m putting that on hold for now.”

Just because you fall in love with someone, that doesn’t mean that love will stay alive without nurturing your partnership. If you find yourself asking, “What is missing from my marriage?” your situation may be similar to Brian and Teresa’s.

What might be missing is what Dr. John Gottman refers to as a sense of **shared meaning**. A successful marriage is about more than raising kids, paying bills, and getting chores done. It is also about building a meaningful relationship that has a spiritual dimension and is rich in **rituals of connection**.



## Here are four ways that couples can build a stronger relationship with shared meaning:

- 1. Sharing a common dream or vision for life can help you gain a healthy perspective.** When couples have that shared dream, the inevitable ups and downs of marriage are less bothersome. Creating a larger context of meaning in life can help couples to avoid focusing only on the little stuff that happens and to keep their eyes on the big picture.
- 2. Talking about your shared vision can foster attunement.** Taking time to process your dreams can bring you closer. A crucial goal for couples is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her convictions. According to Dr. Gottman, couples who talk about their hopes and dreams with one another openly are more likely to be happy and less likely to be struggling.
- 3. Creating daily or weekly rituals of connection will enable you build shared meaning.** Carve out time to be together and spend time doing enjoyable activities that bring you both pleasure. Couples need to make a commitment to spending quality time together – which includes saying goodbye in the morning and reunions at the end of the day.
- 4. Implementing your shared goals can help you to be a stronger couple with a purpose.** For instance, your goals might include volunteering in the community, raising your children in a specific way, or adopting a sustainable lifestyle. Regardless of what your shared vision or goals are, they can strengthen your bond.

In fact, **creating shared meaning** is the highest level of Dr. John and Julie Gottman's Sound Relationship House, which is a model on how to have a healthy relationship in which a couple can intentionally create a sense of purpose together. Building a relationship that is full of meaning and involves prioritizing time and resources is essential to a happy marriage. It encompasses a couple's legacy – the stories they tell, their beliefs, and the culture they create to form a shared meaning system.

### ***Maintaining a Deep Connection to Your Partner***

In *Fighting for Your Marriage*, Harold J. Markman, Ph.D., writes that the amount of fun partners have together while nurturing their connection is a key factor in predicting their overall marital happiness. But Markman also explains that “[w]hen we interview couples planning marriage, we learn that most of them have tons of fun early in the relationship. But for too many, **fun fizzles out as time goes by.**”

While a new relationship is often exciting, stimulating, and fun, having a deep and meaningful connection with your partner can infuse your relationship with love and purpose over the long run. Excitement and fun are mostly felt in the present moment, and they can fade away; feelings of pleasure can be temporary. But developing shared meaning over a longer period will sustain a deep connection in your marriage, resulting in overall positive affect and shared happiness.



Couples who take the time to develop shared meaning and goals are more likely to **cultivate intimacy** – a hallmark of matured and lasting love. Intimacy is something not simply arrived at by chance, but it is **deliberately** nurtured. Keep in mind that maintaining a deep connection to your partner does not mean that you place them on a pedestal or that your relationship is without problems. It's not about sidestepping conflict, but you can't force your opinions on your partner, either. In every marriage, you will have your disagreements, and the key is **learning how to manage them**.

However, if you like and respect who your partner is and how they conduct themselves in their world, and if you generally agree on the fundamentals in life, your connection will be deeper and more meaningful. This doesn't mean you'll see eye to eye on everything, but your shared goals will align.

Going back to our example, for Brian and Teresa to overcome their current difficulties and succeed in their marriage, they'd be wise to **build quality time** into their relationship on a **weekly basis**, and to consistently remember and verbalize the positive meaning and dreams that they share. In that case, Brian may be quick to elaborate on Teresa's strengths about having a shared purpose in his marriage, which indicates his **fondness and admiration** for her:

"I respect Teresa because she's a hard-worker and a loving wife and mother. We argue, but we try to be patient with each other and show understanding and empathy. When I get aggravated with Teresa, I try to listen and respect her view. We both avoid issuing **ultimatums, shutting down, or being disrespectful.**"

What is the secret to increasing shared meaning between you and your partner? Spending quality time together on a regular basis and getting to know your partner better by sharing your innermost thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and wishes, which is a life-long process and takes a strong commitment. This, as Dr. Gottman's research proves, will result in a happy and successful marriage.





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