

This One Small Change in Behaviour Could Turn Your Relationship Around

In my work with couples, I often see partners come into therapy with complaints about similar issues. They say “we have communication problems”, “we fight all the time”, “we constantly disagree about money / parenting / the in-laws”, “we don’t have sex anymore”. The list of issues is endless, but the core of the problem is always the same. Couples come to therapy because they have lost their connection with each other, they have lost sight of what it was that drew them together in the first place, and now they are floundering and unhappy.

Interestingly, it is not attending to the big disagreements that mends the couple relationship, it is repairing the emotional connection and helping couples to care for the relationship on a daily basis. In doing so we need to learn that it is the small repetitive behaviours that make or break our bond with each other, the things we do or don’t do each day that either build up trust and a deepened intimacy, or that tear us apart.

Relationship expert John Gottman has spent decades studying couples and what makes a relationship succeed or fail. He has identified the *emotional bids* that partners make when they are trying to engage with each other. In a six-year study, Gottman found that couples who consistently respond positively to each other’s emotional bids, or *turn towards* each other, are more likely to stay together. In his study, those couples who turned towards each other’s emotional bids over 80% of the time went on to stay together long term, while those who ended up divorcing only turned toward each other about a third of the time.

An emotional bid can be as straightforward as a request for a hug or a comment about our day. Gottman has identified four possible ways that we respond to these bids:

1. We can turn towards our partner
2. We can turn towards our partner with enthusiasm and focus
3. We can turn away from our partner
4. We can turn against our partner

To illustrate this, let’s imagine a scenario where one partner has had a hard day at work. The commute was difficult, there was a series of unproductive meetings that didn’t go well and a serious disagreement with a colleague rounded off the day into a perfect storm. Our unhappy spouse comes home exhausted and wants nothing more than to watch some mindless TV and be left alone. Then their partner comes home, seemingly in a bright mood and starts talking about her day while she unpacks some shopping in the kitchen.

In this example, the partner who comes home tired can either make a kind comment to acknowledge their loved one is in a bright mood and had a good day, or go into the kitchen and engage in conversation about her day, or ignore her, or ask her to be quiet as the TV is on. Which would you choose? Interestingly, you don’t always have to be enthusiastic, sometimes it is enough just to acknowledge your partner’s bid for attention and make them feel valued in the process.

An emotional bid is the way that we each constantly check in to make sure our partner still cares, and when it is answered with positive attention it serves to reinforce and strengthen the relationship. So, take note of the ways in which your partner makes emotional bids to you, and be sure you turn towards and not away. It could be the key to saving your marriage.