



Five Things We're Doing That Hurt Our Marriages

(And What We Can Do Instead)

1+1=3 in Marriage

The math of marriage defies elementary school arithmetic.
In relationships, one plus one equals three.

- There's you.
- There's your partner.
- And then there's your relationship.

As I say to my clients, when you walk through my door,
all three of you are my clients.

Your relationship is voiceless. It's up to you and your partner to work together (and at times with a skilled therapist) to nurture your relationship.

Relational joy — deep connection with your spouse — is possible when you nurture your relationship. All of us do things, often unconsciously, that hurt our marriages and make relational joy seem beyond our reach.

Pay close attention and you'll be able to recognize when your default reaction is harming you, your spouse and your marriage. When you stop reacting harmfully, you can adopt positive patterns that honor you and your spouse. Integrate these positive patterns into your marriage and you'll see big improvements in your relationship.

Negative Pattern 1: **BEING RIGHT**

I start with this negative pattern because it is pervasive in our culture. Proving ours is the right perspective is as common as carbon monoxide.

Unfortunately, needing to be right will pollute your relationship. When our emotional home gets polluted, the result is a thick smog of anger and resentment blanketing the horizon.

All of us want to be right. We want to win the game, dominate the debate, and have the last say. Often arguing our case, making the deal, or landing the contract helps us in our professional lives.

Even though our debate skills bring praise at work, we want to keep them out of our relationships, especially our marriages.

Just think back to the one-upmanship arguments you've seen play out badly outside of work. Like the time your sister adamantly declared on Facebook cats should always be allowed to roam free. (Or all college loans be forgiven, the Electoral College be abolished, or minimum wage be raised.) Then a cousin, your niece, and a family friend post counter-arguments. Soon, an uncle is trolling everyone else on the thread, and emotions spiral out of control on all sides.

When you bring the negative pattern of being right to your marriage, you see the same escalation as you see online. When you troll your significant other or spend your energy trying to prove your point, you lose. Your spouse loses. And the relationship loses.

CHOOSE RELATIONAL JOY.

Choose empathy instead of needing to be right.

For your relationship to thrive, you and your partner must work together to come up with solutions you both can live with. This is what I call a triple-win solution. Your needs are met. Your spouse's needs are met. The relationship is nurtured.

So instead of focusing on being right, seek to understand why your spouse is doing or saying something. Be curious. Be loving. Be empathetic. Your partner deserves it, and it's in your self-interest.

Negative Pattern 2:

CONTROLLING YOUR PARTNER

Most of us hate when others try to control us. And most of us struggle with the impulse to control others. It's still a boundary violation all the same.

It's not only ineffective, it's a boundary violation when you try to control what your partner does, doesn't do, says, eats or wears.

The consequences of these boundary violations can vary. Your partner may lash out in anger. Or your spouse may appear to accept your demand, only to go sneaking behind your back and lying to cover it up. Either way, it's bad for your relationship.

CHOOSE RELATIONAL JOY.

Choose to make a request instead of trying to control.

There's a reason you want your partner to do certain things. You aren't simply trying to force your will on him or her. So instead of trying to control, make a request and share your reasons.

For example, you could say, "Honey, I'd like to make a request. Is now a good time to chat? When you go out with your friends, would you be willing to get home by 10 p.m.? I worry when it gets later than that, and you're not home yet."

Asking like this helps your partner hear your request and understand why you're making it. Then your spouse can decide if it works from his or her perspective. If it doesn't, your mate can counter-offer and negotiate other solutions that meet both of your needs.

For example, your spouse might say, "Sweetie, you know most of the guys can't get there until 8:30. That's why we hang out until 11:30. If I leave in time to get home by 10, I'll miss most of it. How about if I text you at 9:30 to let you know everything's fine, and again when I head home at 10:30?"

Interacting with honest requests and responses like this honors and respects both of you as autonomous individuals. You give each other the space to take care of your relationship, because what each of you does impacts the other. Whatever agreement you reach, commit to following through.

And remember, when your initial reaction is to dismiss your partner's requests, yes, you have the **right** to do what you want. Just because you have the right doesn't mean exercising that right is a good idea, especially if you want a long, healthy relationship.

Negative Pattern 3:

UNFILTERED VENTING

Thousands of thoughts and feelings race through our minds every day. Attending to each of these and letting them all out of your mouth unfiltered is destructive. We often restrain ourselves when we're furious or disappointed with other people. When it comes to our spouses, too often, we let loose with our unfiltered anger or dissatisfaction.

It's the emotional equivalent of vomiting on your partner under the guise of expressing yourself and getting your feelings out.

It's called unbridled self-expression. It leaves you feeling better in the moment, but hurts your partner and damages the relationship. Without realizing it, you have crossed a boundary that can be hard to come back from.

CHOOSE RELATIONAL JOY.

Choose mature, loving, connected conversation.

We all want to be mature, caring partners and hold appropriate boundaries with ourselves and others. One way to do this is to remember the person you're talking to is someone you love and cherish. This helps you have the goal of strengthening intimacy and connection when you speak, even when sharing strong feelings or struggles.

When you wait to talk until your mindset is one of love, connection and intimacy, these conversations can nurture your relationship. It's a 180 degree pivot from unbridled self-expression.

So remember before any words cross your lips, ask yourself, "Am I speaking to make things better?" If not, take a break and a few deep breaths. Only speak when you can talk with the goal of taking care of the relationship, not just your own wants and feelings.

Negative Pattern 4: **RETALIATING**

Something happened between you two and now you feel bad. **Really** bad. So bad, in fact, you want your partner to feel just as bad — or worse. Often, this comes from the hope that the other person will understand what they did to you. (We've all thought, "You just don't get it! Well, I'll help you get it.")

The desire to retaliate is a natural, human impulse. It's also destructive to your relationship.

You will not make someone more empathic or accountable by hurting them.

None of us would need therapy if retaliation worked the way we wanted it to. It's good to remember that in a healthy relationship, you can't win if your partner doesn't win with you.

CHOOSE RELATIONAL JOY. **Choose loving, respectful firmness.**

Let's not be Pollyannaish. Your partner is as imperfect and flawed as you. There **will** be times when your spouse hurts your feelings, intentionally or not. When that happens, don't retaliate. Instead, start a conversation with loving, respectful firmness.

For example, you might say, "It means a lot to me to spend time together. When you forgot we had plans for the evening, it really upset me. I'd like us to find a way to reconnect and make sure our time together is a priority. What can we do to make this happen?"

You're not complaining about the past, which no one can change. You're not trying to make your spouse feel bad. Instead, you're making a request for the future, and working together to solve a mutual problem. This approach honors and respects your relationship, your partner and you.

Negative Pattern 5: **WITHDRAWING**

Withdrawing is retaliation's quieter, but just as harmful, cousin.

So it happened again. Your partner hurt your feelings and you're reeling in pain.

You might feel pushed away, so you go silent. You talk only about the things keeping your household running. You avoid sex. You ignore important issues.

Withdrawing connection, affection and intimacy like this builds a wall between the two of you. Over time, that wall becomes thicker and taller, and much harder to take down. This path leads to joining the statistics of divorce.

CHOOSE RELATIONAL JOY.
**Choose to turn toward your spouse
instead of withdrawing.**

You can't get more of what you want by withdrawing.

Instead of adding bricks to that wall, choose to take one down. Turn toward each other. Acknowledge the difficult emotions. Commit to working through things together.

Intimacy isn't rainbows and fairy dust. Intimacy isn't about first getting rid of the problems, the muck of the relationship, and only then feeling close.

Real intimacy is getting into the muck together, and working together as partners, side by side, to clean it up. So when you're hurting, turn toward, not away, from your spouse. It's hard, but it's where you will find relational joy.

Make the math work for relational joy.



You want your most important relationship to be as fulfilling, supportive and loving as you know it can and should be. You have more than enough stress at work. You don't need more at home, where you simply want to be heard, understood, accepted, cherished and loved.

Exchange the five common, profoundly damaging patterns I've outlined with the positive alternatives and you will be choosing relational joy. I hope you start today working toward the loving, connected relationship you and your mate yearn for and deserve.

Lastly, please let me know how this work goes for you. I'd love to hear how your relationship changes when you start recognizing these negative patterns and switching them with the positive alternatives. If you are ready to create a relationship you love with support through couples or individual therapy, [schedule a time to talk](#). I'm ready to help.



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