

Focus on What You Have, Not on What's Missing

Don't ignore the very things that brought you and your spouse together.

When a couple are ready to give up on their marriage, they'll often say there is nothing positive going on between them anymore; it's all bad. Researcher John Gottman at the University of Washington found that in a healthy, growing marriage, positive behaviors outnumber negative behaviors by a ratio of at least 5-to-1. This means that every negative behavior directed toward one's spouse requires at least five good behaviors to offset it.

As a couple's marriage begins to unravel, the number of positives compared to negatives begins to drop below 5-to-1. Even in a good marriage, negative behaviors have more impact on us, but they really take on more power when they no longer are being offset by positive behaviors.

Here's an interesting point: By the time two people are ready to divorce, the positive behaviors are actually about equal to the number of negative behaviors. The positives are not absent or even outnumbered—except in the minds of the divorcing couple. But they are overpowered by the negative behavior, which has a way of blocking our vision of the positive.

This feeds on our natural human tendency to focus on the negative. Even the optimist can get caught up in seeing the glass as half empty when it comes to marriage behavior. We seem to take the positive behavior for granted, but we can't let go of the negative very easily.

When a couple focus on what they believe is missing in their relationship, they are looking at what isn't there. They are also ignoring the very things that brought them together.

When I can get them to remember the good things they saw in each other at the start of their relationship, they begin to look again at what they have that is positive. Often a man's or woman's positive feelings for their spouse will last beyond the counseling session and prepare them to take the next step together.