

KISSED BY KINDNESS

by Emily Esfahani Smith



P sychologist Ty Tashiro reports in *The Science of Happily Ever After* that only three in 10 couples remain in healthy, happy marriages. Psychologist John Gottman, in New York City, has studied couples for four decades seeking to understand

successful relationships. He and his psychologist wife, Julie, founded The Gottman Institute that helps couples build and maintain loving, healthy relationships based on scientific studies.

Using data from his Love Lab at the University of Washington, John

separated thousands of couples into two groups: masters (still happy after six years) and disasters (separated or chronically unhappy in their marriages).

One of Gottman's studies watched 130 newlywed vacationing couples and found that partners regularly

made bids for connection, requesting responses from their mate. Choices to “turn toward” or “turn away” revealed the level of engagement and respect in the relationship. Couples that divorced within six years had shown “turn toward” bids a third of the time while couples still together responded to their partner’s emotional need nine times out of 10.

An integral element is the spirit couples bring to the relationship: kindness and generosity or contempt, criticism and hostility.

“There’s a key habit of mind that the masters have,” Gottman explains. “They are scanning the social environment for things they can appreciate and express thanks for. Disasters are scanning for partners’ mistakes.”

People focused on criticizing miss 50 percent of positive things their partners are doing and see negativity when it’s absent. Deliberately ignoring their partner or responding minimally to opportunities for small moments of emotional connection devalues and kills a relationship.

Kindness, conversely, glues couples together, making each partner feel cared for, understood, validated and loved. In a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers found that the more someone receives or witnesses kindness, the more they will be kind

themselves, creating upward spirals of love and generosity.

Practicing kindness during a fight is vital. Letting contempt and aggression spiral out of control during a conflict can inflict irrevocable damage. “Kindness doesn’t mean that we don’t express anger,” Julie explains, “But it informs how we choose to express it. You can either throw spears or explain why you’re hurt and angry, which is the kinder path.”

Kindness can also solidify the backbone of a relationship by being generous about our partner’s intention and avoiding misinterpreting what’s motivating their behavior. “Even if it’s executed poorly, appreciate the intent,” Tashiro advises.

Clearly, if we want to have a stable, healthy relationship, exercise kindness early and often and let a spirit of generosity guide happy years together.

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