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## Book Review: The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

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## Book Review

### *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

**Neal Van Zutphen, M.S.**

Gottman, J. M. & Silver, N. (2015). *The seven principles for making marriage work: A practical guide from the country's foremost relationship expert. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. 320 pp., \$9.59, ISBN: 978-0553447712.

*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* is a relationship self-help book for individuals who have chosen to be in a relationship and also those who aspire to be in a relationship. This book has proven helpful to those in relationship counseling and coaching professions as well. The principles, quizzes, and exercises were developed and refined based on 42 years of clinical research and “longitudinal data on the importance of marital friendship” (p. xvi). The book covers why marriages work and why they fail. The seven principles provide the roadmap to ways of being together and methods for resolving conflicts and solving problems, including money.

The Seven Principles are based on in-depth studies of over 700 couples in seven different studies (Gottman & Silver, p. 8). The studies revealed how successful couples communicated and successfully negotiated disagreements resulting in positive outcomes and stronger bonds. The studies also revealed that couples knew each other well enough to know how to avoid situational triggers that might lead to unsolvable issues.

### **SUCCESS**

Successful couples are emotionally intelligent and find ways to keep negative thoughts and feelings from overwhelming positive thoughts and feelings every day (Gottman & Silver, p. 4). Successful couples build on their friendship and strengths. They value each other as individuals and their couple-ship. They love and appreciate each other. They maintain a sense of friendship, support, understanding, warmth, affection, and caring for each other. They feel empathy, acceptance, and authenticity toward each other. Successful couples feel a strong sense of safety in their relationship (Gottman & Silver, pp. 4-6, 16, 18-19). Successful couples also nurture their relationship, and the principles

provide them the means to deepen their relationships as well as tools to resolve conflicts and solve problems. When successful couples experience emotionally escalating arguments they are able to offer and accept attempts to repair that prevent emotional flooding and deescalate tensions.

## **FAILURE**

The authors also identify the reasons relationships fail. These relationships fail to nurture their friendship and arguments begin with harsh start-ups and embrace what the authors call the “Four Horsemen” of (a) criticism, (b) contempt, (c) defensiveness, and (d) stonewalling. Stonewalling is the fourth and most difficult emotional response to conflict and stress. It “is a protection against feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed” (Gottman & Silver, p. 40). Research has shown that couples who exhibit harsh start-ups, the four horsemen, and the inability to recognize repair attempts end up divorced 90% or more of the time. The key in marriages that succeed is the couples’ ability to recognize and accept repair attempts (Gottman & Silver, p. 45).

*“The Seven Principles ... are the cornerstones for short-term do-it-yourself experiential therapy for couples”* (Gottman & Silver, p. 9). Each of the Seven Principles uses self-assessments for couples to begin conversations and learn about each other. The questionnaires and assessments facilitate the understanding and integration of the individual partner’s characteristics. The Seven Principles outlined by Gottman and Silver are: (a) enhance your love maps; (b) nurture your fondness and admiration, (c) turn toward each other instead of away, (d) let your partner influence you, (e) solve your solvable problems, (f) overcome gridlock, and (g) create shared meaning.

The focus of the first three principles is on building and renewing friendship and enhancing the couples’ “positive sentiment override” (p. 22). The remaining principles are designed to help couples learn and understand how to handle arguments, offer and recognize attempts to repair, and engage in positive ways when they are not fighting. The last principle explores building shared focus and meaning.

## **WHAT ABOUT MONEY**

The book includes a section on basic budgeting and financial planning and encourages compromises to ensure the couple is spending within their means and saving appropriate for future needs. The reader is potentially left with the idea that this is easily done. The book does not discuss dysfunctional money beliefs or behaviors and pairing the book with financial therapy tools and techniques could enhance the couples’ understanding of how each individual deals with money.

## **APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

One practical application would simply be to gift the book to couples seeking to enhance their relationship, as simply reading and doing the exercises have proven efficacious.

When interviewing prospective clients, the planner or therapist should listen for how positive their stories are about their courtship and the early years of their marriage. The more positive the stories, the greater the likelihood the couple has a strong friendship and bond. Negative memories, or no memories at all, are an indication of marital difficulties and may present hidden challenges and resistance to the personal financial planning process and recommendations. It may also indicate the need for therapy beyond the scope of the planner or financial therapist.

In conversations with clients, listen for and look for harsh start-ups and negative interactions referred to as the Four Horsemen. When discussions start off negatively, there is a high probability they will end negatively. Harsh start-ups may begin with accusations, sarcasm, cynicism, and/or criticism. These harsh start-ups are about the other person's character or personality. When conversations go negative, it is time to take a break, to de-escalate, and regroup. The planner or therapist should attempt to redirect the focus toward other less contentious topics. This may reduce the risk of the couple becoming emotionally flooded, which is an emotional state which prevents the individual from reasonable and constructive dialogue (Gottman & Silver, pp. 30-45).

The Seven Principles includes tips for stress-reducing conversations, dealing with anger, sadness, and fear, and exercises for building mutual respect. The communication tips and strategies serve the couple in financial therapy as well as other interpersonal communications. In financial therapy couples, explore their relationship with money and their value systems with the goal of resolving money issues. The money issues may be solvable with new knowledge, or they may need better financial management skills development.

For the planner or therapist, helping the couple build a successful couple-ship will help couples develop the "tools" to deal with money stress and dysfunctions. The Seven Principles is a great book for any person seeking better relationships. Both planners and therapists could benefit themselves and their clients by first practicing The Seven Principles and learn firsthand the power of this evidence-based process to a happier, healthier, and wealthier way of being.