

The Sound Relationship House

(The Gottman Institute)

There are seven parts of the Sound Relationship House theory. Each of these parts involves the need to build a fundamental process. The first three parts of the house describe the essential components of the couple's friendship.

- **Build Love Maps.** The foundation of the house, *The Love Map*, is a road map of one's partner's inner psychological world. The fundamental process is *asking open-ended questions*. It involves the couple knowing one another and periodically updating this knowledge.
- **Share Fondness & Admiration.** The second story of the house is *The Fondness & Admiration System*, which is the antidote for contempt. The fundamental process is *changing a habit of mind* from scanning the environment for people's mistakes and then correcting them to scanning the environment for what one's partner is doing right and building a *culture of appreciation*, fondness, affection, and respect.
- **Turn Towards.** Bids for Emotional Connection. The third story is *Turning Toward versus Turning Away* in everyday moments, or what we call building the *"Emotional Bank Account."* The fundamental process is building awareness of how one's partner asks for connection and expresses emotional needs, and deciding to turn toward these bids (rather than turning away or against them). The movie "Sliding Doors" is about how small choices can hugely affect the course of a couple's life. Life is full of these "sliding door" moments, which are opportunities to turn toward one's partner.
- **The Positive Perspective.** These three stories build the fourth story, that we claim one gets as a free add-on: Bob Weiss's idea of Positive Sentiment Override (PSO). This determines a lot of things, including the presence of positive affect in problem solving discussions, and the success of repair attempts during conflict resolution. If the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House are not working, then people are in Negative Sentiment Override (NSO), in which even neutral or positive messages are perceived as negative and the person is hypervigilant for negativity. There is a "chip on the shoulder." We claim that it is not possible to change NSO to PSO, except by changing the quality of the couple's friendship. People are in negative sentiment override for good reason: they see their partner as an adversary, not a friend. To change that state, we need to build the couple's friendship, using the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House.
- **Manage Conflict.** The next story of the house consists of two parts of conflict regulation. Couples need to identify the core issues and the anatomy of repeating negative cycles in their relationship. By "anatomy" we mean that couples need help to understand what triggers escalation (e.g., defensiveness, criticism, contempt, belligerence), and what the story is of these triggers in each person's past history (either within the relationship or not). Conflicts are one of two types.

Type 1: For couple problems that are resolvable, there are *Four Parts of Effective Problem Solving*. These are Softened Startup, Accepting Influence, Repair and De-

escalation (including physiological soothing), and Compromise. The use of positive affect in the service of de-escalation is a part of this, too, but it is not programmable--it just happens by itself when Positive Sentiment Override is in place.

Type 2: For couple problems that are not perpetual and probably not resolvable, in order to avoid couple "gridlock," it is necessary that the couple establish what we call a "dialogue" with the perpetual problem. This involves a great deal of positive affect (e.g., neutral affect – which is positive during conflict discussions, and interest, affection, humor, empathy, excitement, softening) even when discussing a disagreement. Again, physiological soothing is a critical part of this process. There needs to be a ratio of 5 to 1 positive-to-negative affect.

- **Make Life Dreams and Aspirations Come True.** What is the basis of a continued positive emotional connection even during conflict? Therapists once believed that if conflicts were resolved, positive affects or feelings of all types would rush into the couple's world by themselves, like air rushes into a vacuum. Not true. Positive affect systems need to be built intentionally. This includes play, fun, and exploration/adventure. This level of the Sound Relationship House is also about helping one's partner realize important life dreams and making the relationship, in general, effective at *Making Dreams and Aspirations Come True*. This aspect of relationship is the basis of unlocking conflict gridlock, in which the couple's values *within a position in the gridlocked conflict* are explored and understood.
- **Create Shared Meaning.** Finally, we have "the attic" of the house, where people either intentionally create, or do not create, a sense of shared meaning in their life together. A relationship involves building a life together, and that life is full of meaning. In the way the couple moves through time together, in how they prioritize their time, and their resources, in the stories they tell one another about their lives, their ancestors, their culture, their beliefs, and their legacy, in the way they decide to have things and events in their lives have meaning, they create this shared meaning system.

Here is where the symbolic meanings live of many of our ideas about emotion (our idea of "meta-emotion") and the relationship. In the "attic" our important *Dreams, Narrative, Myths, and Metaphors about our Relationship and Family* find a home. Here lie the narratives about what life means. Here are the informal and formal rituals of connection in a relationship and a family. This is what people tell themselves about emotion and their internal thoughts, metaphors, myths, and stories about the relationship. Here is where the photo albums and the memorabilia live.

The creation of a relationship and a family involve the active creation of **a new culture** that has never existed before. Even if the two people come from the same racial, ethnic, and geographic background, the two families they grew up in will be very different and so their union will always involve the creation of a new world of meaning. Every relationship is a cross-cultural experience.

Adapted From: <http://www.gottmancouplesretreats.com/about/sound-relationship-house-theory.aspx>