

Creating a Strong Family

How To Be Nice

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

What makes a stable marriage? Many researchers in the United States and around the world have focused on that question. University of Washington psychology professor John Gottmann, and his colleagues, conducted scientific experiments for 20 years with more than 2,000 couples.

The research team observed couples interacting with each other in a campus “marriage laboratory,” using video cameras, EKG monitors, and specially-designed instruments. The investigators looked at how couples talk to each other. They examined facial expressions, gestures, fidgeting behaviors and so forth, as well as physiological clues, including changes in heartbeat and breathing during disagreements.

What separated those couples who stayed together after the conclusion of the laboratory research from those who divorced within the next couple years?

Gottmann’s answer: The couples in stable marriages were simply “nicer to each other.”

Gottmann himself said he chuckled at the simplicity of the answer to the question that researchers pose. His work reflects our own understanding of successful marriages and families, also gained through many years of study and reflection.

But if loving one another was all that easy, people wouldn’t have as much trouble creating strong marriages and families as they now seem to be having. What, then, can be done in our efforts to love each other?

High on the list is the importance of keeping our interactions positive. Negative energy — such a common element of human relationships — is destructive and demoralizing. It hurts us, takes away our confidence and self-esteem, and distances us from each other.

When we’re upset about something, which is inevitable in life, the path of least resistance is to get angry and lash out at other people. Loved ones, amazingly, take the brunt of all this anger because if we were to act this way at work or school, we would soon be shown the door.

“Under stress we regress,” as the saying goes, which means adults under stress may regress to the vicious and foolish behavior learned on the playground, among other places, as young children. When adults act in ways that would make a well-behaved 7-year-old shudder, people are at first fascinated, then disgusted and embarrassed that they could be attracted to watching this adult acting like a child. A good tantrum makes us feel important and self-righteous, for a while. A tantrum can give us an emotional high. It feels good. It can give us power. It may be used for justification, to be noticed, or as a defense mechanism.

But soon after, the brain catches up with the emotions. The feelings of shame and foolishness set in. We know we have failed to do what is best. And what, again, *is* best? Search carefully for positive ways to interact with each other. This includes positive talk and positive actions.

In the world of words, there is always a way to say precisely what we want to say, and to say it in a positive manner. In the world of actions, there is *always* a way to behave with grace, dignity, and kindness. You can get done exactly what you want in life without acting like a fool.

Men and women may react differently to angry feelings. The other person isn’t going to think the same way you do. He or she won’t perceive or see the same way and won’t respond emotionally the same way. Couples who are aware of these differences can allow for them.

Example: Oftentimes women will be dismayed when men walk away or shut out a conversation. A raised voice is a signal to a man that a fight is coming, and draws out his physical responses. Walking away is a way to protect himself from doing something he will regret.

Women, instead, tend to want to finish the conversation immediately. They feel empty when there is no closure.

Of course, each person is different and these are generalizations.

Here are some examples of what might help:

- Be aware of your emotions.
- Take a “time out” until you have your emotions under control instead of reflecting the same negative action that you are receiving.

- Allow others to take a “time out” as long as there is an agreement that the discussion will be completed later.
- Use a positive tone of voice.
- Choose words carefully.
- Use “I” statements to help get your point across. An “I” statement begins with, “I feel...” instead of, “You always...” Saying, “You...” first is pointing blame at them.
- Be willing to take responsibility for your own actions and feelings and don’t blame someone else.
- Listen for the meaning behind what the other person is saying.
- Listen to the words you are choosing. Would you use these words with a friend or co-worker?

This is not the easiest path, by any means. It takes more time to use our head and create new ways of talking with each other, more time and thought than it takes to simply bark. But we can do it. No matter what happens, no matter how difficult the situation, we can find a positive way to respond. In both the short and long run, this will be better for our relationships with each other.

Years ago, the Mills Brothers had a popular song with these words, “You always take the sweetest rose and crush it till the petals fall ...” The song went on to wonder why we are often so harsh with our loved ones. Remember the most important people in your world are your partner and your family.

Give this a try: See if you can make sure that 90 percent or more of your interactions with your loved ones today are positive.

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