

WHAT
*Successful
Couples*
DO

24 SECRETS
FOR
BUILDING A HEALTHY
RELATIONSHIP

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Table of Contents

Table Of Contents	1
About This Report	2
PART ONE: Tending To The Relationships	3
1. Attention / Friendship	
2. Fondness, Admiration And Cherishing	
3. Nourish Each Other / Do You Know What Love Is To Your Partner?	
4. Folding Positive Interactions Into The Relationship	
PART TWO: Turning Towards Each Other	4
5. Bids For Connection	
6. Know What Kind Of Listening Is Required	
7. Emotional Connection	
8. Accepting Influence	
9. Tethering To The Other	
10. Talk Without Fear	
11. Handle Thirds Properly	
PART THREE: Developing A Relationship To Your Problems	6
12. Solvable Problems Vs. Perpetual Problems	
13. Overcome Gridlock	
14. Negotiation/ <i>Quid Pro Quo</i>	
15. Fantasy And Disappointment	
PART FOUR: Know Thyself And Thy Partner / Taking Care Of Each Other	7
16. Understanding Ghosts And CNI	
17. Four Truths And Taking Responsibility	
18. Soft Start-Ups	
19. Shifting Arousal/ Flooding	
20. Empower Each Other	
PART FIVE: Shared Meaning/Ritual	8
21. Shared Moments, Customs, And Rituals	
22. Separation And Reunion	
23. Engage In Each Other's Dreams	
24. Vision Of Future	
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY & REFERENCES	12

About This Report

The material presented in this report is based on years of study and the work I have done with couples on improving their relational dynamics. I'd like to extend my special thanks to all my teachers, consultants, and peers for all their help along the way. In particular, I would like to thank Bill Bowen, Dan Wile, John Eisman, Rob Fisher, Staurt Sovatsky, Stan Taktin, and Michael Klein for their personal assistance and guidance.

The material presented is a summary of the main concepts that I have discovered help couples create a more loving relationship. These concepts are presented in summary for self-reflection and self-evaluation. While they are presented through my personal understanding of what makes couples successful, I have cited references (as best as possible) next to each "secret" so that couples may investigate the concepts that interest them the most.

I advise couples to begin by honoring what strengths they already possess. By appreciating what is going well in the relationship, it gives the couple a foundation from which to build and grow. Secondly, don't try to master every skill at once. Pick the skills that feel most important to both of you and start there. Keep in mind that this material takes time for couples to master. Furthermore, the material presented has a depth of understanding that may require a trained third party's help in comprehending and applying.

For those looking for additional information, I explain many of these concepts in greater detail in my blog, which contains book reviews for several of my reference sources as well. To read my blogs please visit:
www.oaklandcouplescounseling.com/blog

I encourage everyone to invest in their relationship in some way. For one of the lessons I've come to realize about my life is this: It's not as important what you do, as much as it is who you've *loved* along the way.

Please do not copy or distribute this report. Instead, encourage others to visit my website at www.oaklandcouplescounseling.com and get their own free copy by subscribing to my newsletter, *The Couples Connection*.

I would love to hear your feedback. Please write to me with your comments at ctoondermft@gmail.com.

To success with the ones you love,

Craig Toonder, MFT

What Successful Couples Do

24 Secrets For Building A Healthy Relationship

PART ONE: Tending to the Relationships

1. Attention / Friendship (Gottman)

Friendship is the foundation of a solid relationship. The ability of a couple to give each other attention, to want to know about the other's world, and to remember what is important in the other person's life can not be overestimated. Oftentimes, however, couples begin to take each other for granted. They stop being curious. They stop making efforts to learn about who the other is. Remember, to truly love another, one must make continued efforts to deeply know the other. Check in with each other. Do you really know what is important in your partner's life? Make sure the attention you show your partner is enough to make them to feel like a priority in your life.

2. Fondness, Admiration And Cherishing (Gottman; Sovatsky)

A step up from friendship is a couple's fondness and admiration for one another. This particular skill is one that reaches depths most people are unaware of. It is one which people easily take for granted, as well. I often hear couples say, "(S)He knows how I feel." This common attitude sells the relationship short. For the power of cherishing one's partner comes through the *act of sharing*. It is a gift to the other, an investment in the relationship, and a gift to the self. Notice this: how do you feel when you allow yourself to admire someone? How do *you* feel when the other allows him or herself to be admired by you?

3. Nourish Each Other / Do You Know What Love Is To Your Partner? (Chapman; Tatkin)

Most of us are familiar with the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Great advice, except when it comes to feeling loved. Not everyone experiences being loved the same way. Let's say you equate love with tomato soup and your partner equates love to chicken noodle soup. If you both give and give according to the golden rule, what are the chances that you'll both end up hungry and annoyed with the other because you gave him or her "love" and he or she didn't give "anything" in return?

4. Folding Positive Interactions Into The Relationship (Tatkin)

This advanced skill involves taking positively-emotionally heightened or pleasurable experiences and using them to enhance the positive sentiment within the relationship. A simple example of this is a couple sitting by the ocean watching the sunset on a warm summer evening. The sky is full of vibrant colors. The sounds and smells of the ocean float through the air. The rich taste of wine lingers lightly on their palates. Softly, one turns to the other and says, "I'm so glad I'm here with *you*."

PART TWO: Turning Towards Each Other

5. Bids For Connection (Gottman)

All couples make requests for connection. We make bids such as: time, attention, help, reassurance, appreciation, sex, etc. It is also true that all couples get busy and miss their partner's bids on occasions. Some bids are obvious. Many bids are subtle and require a deeper appreciation for one's partner's needs. Start to pay attention to what your partner is really saying. Train yourself to ask: "Is my partner reaching out for *me* right now?"

Also, know that there are times you need to be more obvious about your bids. Everyone's attention gets caught up in whatever it is they are focused on, especially during or after an argument. Learn to stay aware of your partner's intentions during an argument. Successful couples recognize each other's bids for "repair" or "reconnection".

6. Know What Kind Of Listening Is Required (Real)

This skill many couples fail unintentionally: What kind of listening is desired? There are many ways to listen and respond: problem solving, brain storming, sound boarding, empathizing, sympathizing, opinion sharing, venting, etc. When couples aren't aware of what the other needs, *both* end up frustrated. The sharing partner usually feels unsupported. The receiving partner typically feels unappreciated. Ask if you are uncertain, and don't assume your partner knows what you need, either.

7. Emotional Connection (Eisman; Gottman)

Intimacy is the sharing of the self and the receiving of another. Intimacy exists on several planes: Intellectual, Emotional, Physical, Sexual, Generative/Creative, and Spiritual. Emotional intimacy is often one that people have been taught to avoid in life (especially with men, but this is true for women, too.) Unfortunately, the absence of emotional intimacy can adversely affect a couple's ability to truly know and support each other. Often the inability to connect emotionally is what drives fighting up and pulls sex drive down. Successful couples have learned not only how to share

a rich emotional life with each other, they have also learned how to support and help each other to feel safe in sharing.

8. Accepting Influence (Gottman)

Successful couples understand that in order for one person to win, both have to win. They consider each other and value each other's opinions. Without this, partners feel unimportant, devalued, and unmet. With it, friendship, admiration, and positive feelings for one another are strengthened. Accepting influence allows one to grow from being in relationship with one's partner. Conversely, people who don't accept influence from their partners inadvertently alienate their partner from themselves, creating stress and negative sentiment, ultimately jeopardizing the relationship.

9. Tethering To The Other (Johnson, Tatkin)

Life gets stormy at times, and sometimes all we can do is ride the waves. Our resilience is greatly influenced by our support network. Oftentimes highly resilient individuals can attribute their success to one key figure who helped them stay solid during difficult times. Successful couples have learned to be this anchor for each other. They have learned to successfully lean on each other in times of need and sooth each other in times of distress. When the storm comes into your lives, do you know how to keep each other from drowning?

10. Talk Without Fear (Tatkin)

Successful couples learn to navigate through difficult conversations together. While not all conversation will feel comfortable, these couples are confident they can discuss anything without it jeopardizing the relationship. This skill can be difficult when insecurities or conflict-avoidant coping strategies are at play. Yet it is important to realize avoidance only postpones healing. Couples need to learn how to share their anger with each other in a healthy way. Misuse of anger creates fear and alienation. Failure to express anger not only delays healing; it leads to built resentment. In the long run, if we have cut ourselves off from owning our anger, we begin to lose our sense of passion for our partner as well. How are you at being intimate with anger?

11. Handle Thirds Properly (Glass; Tatkin)

Successful couples understand that they are in each other's care. They know how to turn to each other for help, support, and reassurance. They prioritize each other. They protect each other. And they know how to do this in relation to a third party. By recognizing their relationship as being primary to all others, they know how to function as a team in handling children, in-laws, friends, co-workers, and any other "third" person involved.

PART THREE: Developing A Relationship To Your Problems

12. Solvable Problems Vs. Perpetual Problems (Gottman; Johnson; Wile)

There are problems that come up between couples that are solvable. There are problems that come up between couples that are perpetual. Perpetual problems are the unique set of problems that arise when any two people get together that will be an issue throughout their relationship. Learn to tell the difference. Learn to solve your solvable problem. Learn to how to build understanding around your perpetual problems so that you can learn to empathize and support each other when they come up.

13. Negotiation vs. *Quid Pro Quo* (Bowen; Gottman)

Oftentimes people comment: "Relationship is about compromise." While compromise is an important skill, couples must be cautious of creating a *quid pro quo* relationship. For relationships based on "fair exchange" are based more on a model of business than on a model of love. Negotiation, on the other hand, is about creating solutions in which both parties win. Knowing how to discuss the deeper meaning and needs involved, and knowing how to stay open to creative solutions allow successful couples to make decisions in which they both move on feeling satisfied.

14. Overcome Gridlock (Gottman; Johnson; Wile)

Gridlock occurs when couples are unable to work through a problem together and get stuck digging in their heels, unable to make any headway on the issue. The couple has lost their ability to negotiate, and flexibility and creativity have flown out the window. Working through gridlock requires couples to soften their stances and explore the deeper meaning associated with the issue. (The more dug-in someone gets, the more meaning is hidden beneath the surface.) By softening into the deeper meaning, couples can return to holding compassion for self and other, and begin to explore creative solutions to the issue once again.

15. Fantasy And Disappointment (Wile)

Not having fantasies is another piece of advice about "mature" relationships that is just unrealistic. For like it or not, we all have fantasies. You can suppress them if you like. You can pretend they are not there. Or, you can learn to bring them into your relationship in a way that allows for greater intimacy. This includes sharing disappointment. (Remember, intimacy is the act of sharing the self with another.)

For example, if both members of a couple had stressful days, each will have a fantasy of what it will like to come home to the other. Let's say one person fantasied about a quiet-pampered evening, while the other fantasized about being listened to and swept away for the evening. Now there's a problem. As a couple, would you be

able to share the fantasies and disappointments in a way that felt comforting, or would you fight about how ridiculous your partner is?

PART FOUR: Know Thyself And Thy Partner / Taking Care Of Each Other

16. Understanding Ghosts And Core Negative Images (Johnson; Real; Tatkin)

Humans are designed to bond to a primary other. In childhood it is typically our parents. In adulthood it is typically our romantic partner. The wounding that occurs in our past primary relationships is *experiential* in nature. These experiential memories create *core images* in our minds of what it means to be in relationship to another (positive and negative). This is why the ghosts of the past often haunt a couple (consciously and unconsciously.) Whenever we exhibit the slightest hint of our partner's past though our behavior *it will trigger our partners core images*.

Successful couples realize this and don't take it personally. They understand that when they take on a partner they are, in a way, taking on responsibility for all the wounds that occurred in their partner's past relationships. They are not accepting fault or blame, but they do take on the responsibility of bringing compassion and love to wounds their partner has suffered.

17. Four-Fold Truths And Taking Responsibility (Gottman; Real; Welwood)

While we like to think of ourselves as objective beings, what we think reality is more about interpretation and derived meaning than we'd like to admit. When we have a disagreement with our partner, there are four realities at play: our Truth, our Distortion, our partner's Truth, and our partner's Distortion. (Distortions are often based on core negative images.)

Unsuccessful couples focus only on their own truth and/or the inaccuracy of their partner's distortion. Successful couples can step back and see all four and discuss them with insight and understanding. When they find themselves having a strong emotional reaction to their partner they know how to own it as their reaction, learn from it, and discuss it in a constructive manner. Keep in mind though, that you can be right or you can have love, not both. For making our partner "wrong" isn't the wisest strategy to get them to love you.

18. Soft Start-ups (Gottman)

The success or failure of a conversation can be predicted in the first three minutes of the interaction. How we open dialogue sets in motion a cascade of reciprocating responses that will either lead towards understanding or frustration. Harsh start-ups, opening a conversation with criticism, will almost always lead to defensiveness and/or shutting down. Learning to open a conversation in a respectful, non-threatening way is important if we want to elicit a positive response in our partner. This often requires a degree of vulnerability that is often scary to express, especially when we are not confident that the other will receive us.

19. Shifting Arousal/ Flooding (Gottman; Tatkin)

Flooding is an experience of being physiologically overwhelmed in a stress response. The nervous system goes on high alert. Adrenaline gets the heart racing and the body buzzing. The guts tie up in knots. We feel shaky, anxious or unsafe.

While this is a natural process of the body preparing for fight or flight, the cost is that it literally starts shutting down the higher functioning parts of the brain. Successful couples recognize when their partner is starting to feel overwhelmed. They know the “tells.” They also know how to successfully help each other sooth into a less anxious state. How are you at recognizing if your partner is flooded? Don’t be fooled by outward appearances. Often the “calm” partner is actually experience more internal distress.

20. Empower Each Other (Johnson; Real; Tatkin)

Successful couples understand that in order for the relationship to survive both members must feel empowered. It is important to make efforts to “set your partner up for success.” This is one if the reasons criticism is so dangerous to a relationship. By focusing on what’s wrong with your partner, you place them in the role of being wrong or a failure. Furthermore, by focusing on what the partner did wrong in the past, we are placing that partner in a position where they are powerless to change things for the better or save face.

While it is important to be held accountable for our actions, we cannot change the past. When you discuss disappointments with your partner, try to focus on what you need in the present moment (and the future) that will place your partner in the role of hero. For repair and reconciliation are the true acts of accountability.

PART FIVE: Shared Meaning / Ritual

21. Shared Moments, Customs, And Rituals (Gottman)

Oftentimes the success of a couple lies in the mundane. It flourishes in the day-to-day customs and rituals that express the couple’s bond to each other. Little shared moments of being together add up to a lot. Similarly, rituals around mealtime, weekends, holidays, etc. also create a “shared experience” together that helps create a sense of shared meaning. It helps create the experience of the “Us.” What do you do to signify special moments with your partner?

22. Separation And Reunion (Taktin)

Another successful ritual for couples is how they handle separation and reunion. How do you and your partner say good-bye? Is there some acknowledgement of the separation? Is there a way you let each other know the other is important to you? What do you do when you get home from work? Do you greet each other at the door,

or do you go into the next task of living? Falling asleep is also a separation. This is why some people want to “talk” till four in the morning if there is a problem in the relationship. How do you say good-bye at night?

23. Engage In Each Other’s Dreams (Gottman; Johnson)

Engaging in each other’s dreams (realistic and fantasy) is another way successful couples let each other know that they are important to each other. It can be a form of influence, as well, in that successful couples take each other in to create a “shared” dream. Remember, intimacy is about sharing and receiving the self, even if the dream is “unrealistic”. Dreams bring excitement, and excitement can be folded back into the relationship just as easily as real experiences can.

24. Vision Of Future (Gottman; Johnson; Sovatsky)

In addition to engaging in each other’s dreams, successful couples create a vision of their future together. This vision of the future holds both the promise of tomorrow, as well as, the comfort of an “ongoing-ness” of connection. What would you like your relationship to look like in 5 years, 10 years, or even 30 years from now?

“Pain pushes until vision pulls.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Craig Toonder is a licensed marriage and family therapist in Oakland, CA. Craig graduated from John F. Kennedy University with a master's degree in clinical psychology and a specialty in Somatic (mind-body) psychotherapy.

Craig specializes in couples therapy, but also works with individuals on improving their relationship, and discovering how to live a more impassioned life. In his work with couples, he help them understand *how* and *why* their fights occur. He teaches them how to shift the way they relate to each other so that they both feel met, respected, and understood. Additionally, Craig teaches couples the skills necessary to deepen the level of connection and intimacy in their relationship.

Craig offers a variety of services for couples at different points in their relationship.

Premarital Counseling: While in graduate school, Craig worked as a special needs aide in the public school system. Talking to a parent after school one day, a student's father told Craig that he and his wife went into therapy once they got engaged because they wanted to catch any problems that they could, before they became an issue. Craig was impressed by their commitment to their relationship and now encourages couples to invest in their relationship proactively to protect it from unwanted surprises down the road.

Relationship Classes And Information: Not all couples need therapy, but everyone can benefit from insight and increasing their consciousness around relational dynamics. Craig offers classes to help couples learn and explore how to make their relationship more successful and to help safeguard it from unconscious patterns taking a turn for the worse. Additionally, Craig writes articles on relationship skills and dynamics. (See Blog for publication links.) He also writes inspirational tweets and thought-provoking questions on Tweeter. (@CraigToonder)

Couples Counseling: Years ago Craig decided to take a hard look at why his relationships were failing. In his typical fashion, his passion for understanding led him to studying everything from the moment someone first takes your breath away to the moment you hold their hand as they take their last breath in life. In doing so, he has developed an in-depth understanding of what it takes to make a relationship work, and also how that shows us what it means to be human. From this place, Craig loves guiding couples through the process of really understanding and appreciating

each other in new and much more intimate ways. For couples therapy is so much more than just working on communication problems. It is about building the capacity to truly be more genuinely present, accessible and responsive to each other.

For more information about Craig's services, please visit his website at www.oaklandcouplescounseling.com. Or, contact him at: 510-499-7137. Or e-mail him at ctoondermft@gmail.com.

Relationship Blog:

You may also find valuable relationship information on Craig's blogs, which contain short articles on relational dynamics as well as book reviews on recommended publications on the subject. www.oaklandcouplescounseling.com/blog

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