

# Habits Used By Successful Couples

By Barrington H. Brennen, December 18, 2013

Over a year ago I attended a professional seminar conducted by one of the world's leading experts in marriage relationships and emotional intelligence, psychologist Brent J. Atkinson. The seminar was entitled "**Habits of People Who Know How to Get Their Partners to Treat Them Well: Dealing with Differences.**" Dr. Atkinson presented six habits that successful couples use when dealing with differences. These are habits "that are characteristic of people who are skilled at eliciting respect, caring and cooperation from their partners." These habits were discovered while conducting a scientific study of thousands of couples over a several years.

What are these habits? These are habits couples use when they are having potentially heated arguments and serious differences in points of views. Dr. Atkinson says that "studies suggest that the ability to react effectively when feeling upset is not optional—it is a must for anyone who hopes to have a satisfying intimate relationship." I will provide several direct quotes from Dr. Atkinson's report to help us clearly understand these habits. *(see photo on the left)*

## **HABIT #1 - AVOIDING A JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDE**

For almost two decades I have been sharing with my couples in therapy that having a non-judgment attitude is one of the key ingredients for having a healthy relationship. I have observed the when a partner have false assumptions about his or her partner it results in serious discord. Dr Atkinson states that "A hallmark of people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well is that they know that when they get upset with their partners, it doesn't necessarily mean that their partners have done anything wrong. It's normal to be upset when you're at cross-purposes. Nobody has to be right or wrong. . . . Studies suggest that concluding that one's partner is wrong when he's really not is a mistake you do not want to make. It's one of the most damaging things that people do in relationships. If you make this mistake, it will lower the odds that your partner will be able to see your needs or expectations as legitimate, will care about how you feel, and will be willing to make changes. Your accusation will arouse his natural defenses and make it very hard for him to keep an open mind. You'll breed ill will in him unnecessarily. There's nothing more demoralizing than being falsely accused."

## **HABIT #2 - FINDING THE UNDERSTANDABLE PART**

I've found this habit most special. This habit will work miracles in a relationship. Here's how Dr. Atkinson describes this habit: "When disagreements arise, most of us tend to think of our own position as reasonable and the other person's as unreasonable. However, at some point in the argument, those who know how to get their partners to treat them well manage to find something understandable about what their partners are saying or wanting, even if they can't agree overall. **They seem to understand an important principle: If you want to receive understanding, first give understanding.** If you fail to acknowledge anything about your partner's viewpoint as reasonable, it will be very difficult for him to truly care about your viewpoint, regardless of how legitimate it is. If you want to make it as difficult as possible for your partner to see and acknowledge the legitimate reasons why you feel the way you do, just counter or criticize each and every point he makes during a discussion. . . Many people are hesitant to acknowledge anything understandable about their partners' points of view, thinking that if they give an inch, their partners will take a mile. People destined to succeed in their relationships don't worry about this, because they know that they can always stand up for their own points of view later. There's no rush. They know that just because they acknowledge something legitimate about their partners' viewpoints doesn't mean that their own viewpoints aren't legitimate too. They are able to do two things in succession: acknowledge the understandable part of their partners' opinions, and hold on to the legitimacy of their own opinions, if needed. . . People who know how to get their partners to treat them well are good at finding reasons for their partners' viewpoints and actions—reasons that are sometimes difficult to see at first."

## **HABIT #3 - IDENTIFY THE UNDERLYING NEEDS, VALUES AND WORRIES.**

"Many times, people find that when they're motivated to keep open minds and they try problems with what their partners want. However, there are other times when they still find that they see things differently than their partners, or that they have different priorities or expectations. In these situations, skillful people try to dig beneath the surface and explain to their partners the important things that drive their priorities, preferences or expectations. Arguments often fail because partners argue about the wrong things. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset or have trouble doing what their partner wants sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level, saying something like, "OK, I think I just figured out why this bothers me so much... I'm worried that... Unless you are able to identify the bigger issues that lie beneath your reactions in the present situation, you may end up arguing over superficial things and leave the real issues unaddressed. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships look for the bigger needs, dreams and fears at stake in any given situation."

#### **HABIT #4 - GIVING AND ASKING FOR EQUAL REGARD**

Many of my couples talk about lack of respect in the relationship. The following habit will speak directly to that. Note carefully the “regard” is more than the superficial understanding of the word “respect.” It is deep concern, care, sympathy. This is what Dr. Atkinson says: “The most successful intimate partnerships operate like democracies: one person, one vote. In a democratic society, when people go to cast their votes, there is no obligation to prove that their reasoning is good enough for their votes to count. Their opinions count as much as anyone else’s, regardless of what anyone thinks of their reasoning. The same is true in successful intimate relationships. Successful partners are willing to give and take, regardless of whether they agree with each other or not. The willingness to give equal regard doesn’t necessarily come at the front end of an argument. In fact, sometimes when researchers looked at the arguing style of partners destined to succeed, they couldn’t distinguish them from partners destined to fail. The differences only became clear later, after each partner had exhausted his or her efforts to convince the other. Both successful and unsuccessful partners often argued vigorously for their own points of view, and showed little regard for their partners’ viewpoints during the argument. However, in the end, successful partners were willing to count their companions’ opinions and preferences as much as their own. Relationship studies clearly suggest that if you want the kind of love and respect from your partner that most of us would like to have from our partners, when you disagree, you won’t try to trump your partner’s feelings or priorities with your own. Studies suggest that there’s a line you simply can’t cross in relationships and get away with it, and that line involves winning at the expense of your partner. The bottom line is, if you want your partner to treat you well, you need to be willing to count his feelings as much as your own, even—actually, especially—in situations where the stakes are high and you feel strongly about your positions. . . . Willingness to give equal regard is a fundamental requirement for having a satisfying relationship. If you aren’t willing to compromise with your partner in areas where you disagree, you’ll be putting yourself squarely in the company of people who rarely get the kind of love and respect from their partners that they would like to have. Studies suggest that if you’re not willing to give equal regard, any attempts to get more respectful treatment from your partner will be fatally flawed.”

#### **HABIT #5 - OFFERING ASSURANCE**

You need to read this one carefully. Dr. Atkinson skillfully addresses this habit. “One thing is clear from research on intimate relationships: Arguments don’t have to be pretty in order to be productive. In fact, they can be downright ugly without causing lasting negative consequences. Studies reveal that partners destined to succeed are often defensive, bull-headed, and unresponsive to their partners. The difference is that, after a failed argument, partners who succeed in their relationships are effective at repairing the damage, whereas partners destined to fail are far less successful at repair. This finding is of vast importance, because it means that partners who want to succeed don’t necessarily need to do better in the first round of arguments. It is more important to be good at repairing than to avoid getting off track in the first place. Researchers have found that there is a wide variety of methods that people can use to repair the damage of previous arguments, yet it is difficult to find any single method that works all the time. A self-deprecating comment might work well on one occasion, but the same sort of comment in another situation might make things worse. Even apologies are surprisingly unreliable in their reparative effect. That said, over the years one method has emerged as more reliable than others in successfully repairing damage done during previous arguments: the offering of specific forms of assurance. After a failed argument, people who possess this skill begin by asking themselves, “Did my partner think I was saying that he was wrong, or out of line in some way?” or “Did my partner think I was saying that my opinion or preferences should count more than his?” When arguments have gone poorly, the answer to these questions is almost always “yes.” The most powerful thing that can be done at this point is to simply offer one or two kinds of assurance.”

#### **HABIT #6 - STANDING UP FOR YOURSELF WITHOUT MAKING A BIG DEAL ABOUT THE FACT THAT YOU HAD TO**

This habit is really a great one. Many of us could never fully articulate this in clear words but when reading what Dr. Atkinson says there is a “Ah that’s it!” response. “The five habits discussed thus far are all important predictors of relationship success, but unless a person also has the sixth habit, it’s unlikely that he or she will be able to continue implementing the first five over time. . . . On any given day it’s possible that, in spite of one’s efforts to have a good attitude and willingness to work cooperatively, one’s partner may not return the same kind of generosity and cooperativeness. Studies suggest that this happens in most relationships at times, and the ability to react effectively when it happens is not optional. It’s one of the core requirements for having a successful relationship. People who are effective at these moments require that their partners make some adjustments in their attitudes and actions, but they do it in a way that makes it easy for their partners to make the adjustments. They know how to stand up for themselves without putting their partners down.” Dr. Atkinson explains that “Standing up for yourself involves asking (and requiring, if necessary) that your partner give your priorities, viewpoints or preferences equal regard.” He says “the first situation that requires standing up for oneself skillfully happens if one’s partner criticizes harshly. There are situations where a partner uses accusatory words such as “stupid,” “dumb,” “selfish,” or “thoughtless” to describe his/her mate’s viewpoints or actions. When their partners criticize them harshly, skillful people temporarily skip over the first five habits and begin the process of standing up for themselves without making a big deal of it (the sixth habit). They return to the first five habits when their partners show at least a minimal level of regard for their explanations or viewpoints.

Skillful people realize that it does no good to persist in attempts to be reasonable with someone who isn’t willing or able to be reasonable with them. The second situation happens when people approach their partners using the first five habits—they avoid criticizing their partners and instead ask their partners to give and take—but their partners won’t! In spite of sincere attempts to keep open-minded and flexible attitudes, explain their viewpoints without criticism, recognize and acknowledge

the reasonable parts of their partners' arguments, listen non-defensively, and assure their partners that they are willing to be flexible, their partners aren't willing to do the same. In these situations, people who know how to get their partners to treat them well begin the standing up process and return to the first five habits only when their partners show at least a minimal level of regard for their explanations or viewpoints. . . People who are skilled in standing up for themselves begin with the attitude that it's normal for their partners to be biased toward their own viewpoints and to want to have things go their way, and they don't expect their partners to necessarily volunteer to give up ground when disagreements occur. They don't see it as a crime when, in the beginning, their partners are critical or inflexible. When this happens, they avoid making a big deal of their partners' temporary uncooperativeness and simply make it clear that they're going to need their partners to become more open-minded and flexible. They assure their partners that they are willing to do the same. If their partners don't respond, they express distress and reiterate that they don't expect their partners to adopt their priorities or to do things their way, but they do expect their partners to be respectful, flexible and willing to "give and take."

Dear reader, explaining how all this work require some intense, long seminar. I just wanted to wet your appetite and help you to know that there are habits used by successful couples. Also, successful couples are not pain-free but are certainly highly skilled in preventing the pain from continuing.

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