

The Relationship QRG

A Quick Reference Guide for Couples

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Introduction

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At this writing, we've been married about twenty years. In the face of all the sitcom humor about married life, we truly enjoy our marriage. People say marriage is hard work. We've had our rough spots, but we wouldn't say much of it has been hard work. Maybe that's because of maturity - we were both previously married. Being both therapists probably helps. Nonetheless, it seems to us that having a happy, successful marriage doesn't have to be as hard as many people make it. We believe people with good marriages can make them even more deeply satisfying.

In our work with couples we have often found ourselves in the midst of a consultation wishing we had a handy summary of the key concepts we teach over and over again - a quick reference guide or QRG like the ones that come with new electronic devices.

So, no more wishing. Here it is. ***The Relationship QRG***. We hope you will find it useful in making your relationship all that you want it to be.

Larry & Evelyn Malone

What makes marriage work?

There is no magic formula that will guarantee permanent marital bliss. However, long-term research has identified relationship patterns that predict marital success with a high degree of reliability. We group these critical success factors in the following categories:

Intimacy: *Know Each Other Deeply*

Friendship: *Manage the Emotional Bank Account*

Vision: *Support Each Other's Dreams*

Traditions: *Create Shared Meaning*

Peacemaking: *Regulate Conflict*

The elements that make up these relationship patterns are interlocking and mutually support each other. For most people, building and maintaining the relationship they want doesn't usually require drastic personal changes. It just involves consciously making relatively small adjustments in the habitual ways they interact. We call these changes *mindful tweaks*.

The term, "mindful" refers to being aware and conscious in the present moment - being fully awake. Mindfulness is simple but it takes practice. That's because our minds have a natural tendency to automate repetitive or similar activities. For instance, if you drive to work the same route every day you develop a kind of autopilot for the drive. You don't have to re-decide every day, at each intersection whether or not to turn, which freeway entrance or exit to take. If there's a traffic jam, you may wake up long enough to choose an alternative route, but then you can go back on autopilot.

Your autopilot leaves much of your mental energy free for something other than the drive - like talking on your cell phone, shaving, applying lipstick, reading the newspaper or messing with your sound system. Of

course, when you're preoccupied with these other activities, you aren't fully aware of changing conditions in the tasks you delegated to the autopilot - conditions like the car ahead of you suddenly slowing down. Your autopilot has a "picture" or mental model of the way things are based on the past, and it assumes that things are still that way. It works fine for maintaining course, but for unexpected changes you need to be fully conscious and aware of the immediate moment.

The mental autopilot function also operates in our relationships. To create and maintain a great marriage - to make those mindful tweaks - you must bring your full awareness to the task. You must shut off the autopilot of your assumptions, beliefs, interpretations, memories and expectations about yourself and your partner. In doing so, you discover that there is more to learn about yourself and your partner, and more possibilities than either of you realized.

1. Intimacy: Know Each Other Deeply

In successful marriages, people know each other in a deep way. They know about and care about their partners' inner life. For your partner to know you deeply you must know yourself. Self-knowledge unfolds progressively throughout your lifetime. You can resist it by living on autopilot or you can facilitate it by choosing more mindful moments. Couples who regularly talk about their inner lives know what makes each other tick. That's a big advantage in navigating the rough periods of marriage. Key parts of your inner life include:

Experiences and Meanings
Beliefs and Philosophies
Goals, Aspirations and Life Dreams
Personality Types
Sexuality Issues

This knowing is what we mean by intimacy (or into-me-see). People commonly use the word "intimacy" when they're really talking about sex but the two aren't interchangeable. You can use sex to avoid intimacy, or you can continuously cultivate true intimacy and discover that your sex-life grows deeper and more passionate than you thought possible - even after 40... or 50! Great sex is the result of a great relationship, not the cause of one.

Experiences and Their Meanings

We all have key experiences and influences in our lives that help shape our character. For instance:

nParents

nSiblings

nExtended family

nSocioeconomic factors

nCultural background

nPolitical & historical

nIllnesses & accidents

nTraumatic events

nReligious or spiritual

nGeographical region

nPrevious relationships

nChallenges overcome

Activity-

At least once each week for the next three months, have a conversation of an hour or more about these topics (or others we'll suggest later in this section). Make it your goal to discover more about the impact and meaning these experiences had for your partner as well as for yourself.

You may have to make a date to do this. Yes, we know you're very busy. You don't have time for this. You might have to cut out some other activity. Turn off the TV and cell phones. You may have to get away from the house and kids. Trust us - they can survive the abandonment.

It's equally important for you to share with each other how current life experiences impact you and the meaning they have for each of you. Feel free to include current events in your personal lives in these conversations.

Beliefs & Philosophy

How well do you know your partner's philosophy of life? Have you updated your information recently?

Our core beliefs and philosophy affect how we interpret everything that happens in the world around us and in our own homes as well. You don't have to agree with each other about everything to accept and respect what your partner believes about even contentious topics like religion or politics.

Do your discussions in controversial areas sound like TV political talk shows with people from opposite sides screaming at each other? The only way you can "win" this kind of argument is to destroy your opponent, who happens to be the love of your life. If there isn't room for differences in your relationship, there will not be room for both of you to be in it.

Activity -

Select one or more of the following as the focus for your weekly conversations (*You are doing that, aren't you?*):

1. Talk about your important beliefs or philosophies and how or why you adopted them.
2. Tell your partner about some aspect of your beliefs or philosophy you have never fully explained. Discuss how you came to adopt this belief.
3. What were your parents' religious or political beliefs? How are yours different if they are? If your beliefs aren't different from your parents, why not? What do you know about your grandparents' beliefs? Your great-grandparents'?
4. Have a **Structured Dialogue** to explore a belief or philosophy about which you disagree. (*You'll find instructions on the Articles & Resources page of our website.*) The purpose of this dialogue is to deepen your understanding of each other. This is NOT a debate or an opportunity to change your partner.

Goals, Aspirations and Life Dreams

Supporting each others' dreams is a critical factor for marital success. Of course, we must first know what those dreams are. If you haven't updated each other about changes in this area on the past few years, it's time to do so.

Activity - Write down three important things you would like to accomplish or experience sometime in your life. They don't have to be big things as long as they are important to you. However, they should be things that are humanly possible for somebody even if you don't think they are possible for you. Then, write down three things you think your partner might list. Use this as the basis for a weekly conversation. Talk about why these three things are important to you - the meaning they have for you. Ask questions to learn as much as you can about your partner's three important things.

Personality Types

We humans tend to assume that "normal" people think, feel, make decisions and relate to other people the same way we do. When you discover this isn't true of your partner you may suspect he or she is crazy or is trying to drive *you* crazy.

It may be that you and your partner simply have different ways of using your brains. In other words, you probably have some fundamental personality differences. As we're using the term here, "personality" refers to fairly stable patterns we all have for how we prefer to use our brains. These preferences seem to be inborn. While people who share the same set of preferences share a personality "type", we are still unique individuals.

Personality type is a broad and general characteristic. It's a bit like the operating system in your computer. PCs can easily share data and interact with other PCs. Macs do likewise with other Macs. Both systems are valid operating systems but they work differently. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. They require special "learning" (i.e. software) to communicate with each other.

There are many different personality type models. The one we use is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI identifies 16 possible types. All types have their strengths and pitfalls. Likewise, any combination of two types in a relationship will have predictable strengths and pitfalls. That's true even when both people have the same personality type (like us!).

Understanding how your personality types interact can give you a very useful perspective for effective communication, conflict regulation, and other aspects of your relationship.

Activity

Go to the following internet website and take the free online approximation of the MBTI:

<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp>

When you have both determined your personality type, print out the ***Couples MBTI Type Pairings** guide. This document shows likely strengths and pitfalls for couples based on their individual MBTI types. For one of your weekly conversations, explore how you see personality type issues active in your relationship. Include the following questions in your conversation:

- n How accurately does the MBTI type description fit you? Your partner? (You don't have to agree with each other about this. If your partner disagrees with how you see yourself, that's useful information.)
- n Which of the likely strengths and pitfalls listed in the Couples MBTI Type Pairings guide have you experienced in your relationship frequently? Which ones don't seem to apply to your relationship?
- n How can you use this personality type information to improve your relationship?

For an overview of the MBTI personality type model, click on [MBTI Overview](#).

Sexuality Issues

Sex is such a huge and complex topic it's futile (*not to mention ironic*) to try to cover it in a Quick Reference Guide. At the same time, we can't discuss intimacy and ignore sex.

In our work, we ask a lot of questions about a couple's sex life because the answers tell us a lot about their relationship. For that reason, we suggest that you open up some dialogue about your sexlife.

Activity -

The next time you have sex, have a conversation about it afterward.

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- n What did you like about it?
- n What changes would you like to consider? What would you like more of? Less of?
- n What would you like to try that you haven't tried before?
- n What are the taboos - the things one of you wants but the other doesn't? Where did those come from?
- n How did your childhood and adolescent experiences affect your sexual attitudes, emotions
- n and behavior?

If you aren't having sex regularly, have a conversation that addresses these same questions.

2. Friendship: *Manage the Emotional Bank Account*

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey popularized the idea of the Emotional Bank Account. We use the term to describe how positive feelings and emotional safety grow or decline in a relationship. This is a joint bank account. You both make deposits and take withdrawals.

When you treat your partner with things like kindness, honesty, patience, tolerance and forgiveness, you make deposits in the account - deposits that draw interest. When you are unkind, disrespectful, hostile, uncaring or mean to your partner, you take a withdrawal from the account.

If both of you deposit more than you withdraw, over time you accrue a large reserve of positive feelings that can override the withdrawals that happen when you hit the inevitable bumps in the road of life.

Research bears out the importance of this emotional economy. In happy, stable marriages, couples demonstrate at least a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative exchanges *during periods of conflict*; 20:1 overall. A ratio of 1.25:1 or less reliably predicts a failing marriage.

Making Deposits

When we make deposits in any kind of account, we expect its value to appreciate. An emotional deposit requires nothing more than a smile, a kind word or compliment, an affectionate touch. These are simple yet substantial ways of appreciating your partner.

Your emotional bank account will appreciate as well. Appreciation nurtures our relationships. Contempt depletes them.

Notice how you feel when you express an appreciation. Compare that to how you feel when you express negative criticism. How about when you're on the receiving end of appreciation as compared to criticism?

When you make a habit of appreciating your partner - *without keeping score* - you build a relationship that will stand the test of time and pay dividends you can't even imagine.

Other vital ways of building your emotional bank account:

- n *Interest* - Continuously cultivate interest in your partner and in what interests your partner.
- n *Attention* - Freely give your attention to your partner's life, needs and desires, including what your partner doesn't say in words.
- n *Excitement* - Share excitement and enthusiasm for and with your partner.
- n *Affection* - Hug, kiss, cuddle, hold hands. Be sensitive to timing and to your partner's receptiveness. Make a distinction between sex and affection.
- n *Humor* - Laugh with each other, not at each other. Teasing or playful putdowns, even though you're "just kidding" can be corrosive to your relationship.
- n *Problem-Solving* - Work together through shared problems. Offer help as your partner works through individual problems.
- n *Validate Feelings* - You don't have to agree to understand your partner's feelings and accept that those feelings are valid.
- n *Support* - Stand beside your partner through tough situations.
- n *Let Go* - Be slow to anger, quick to forgive; don't hold grudges.
- n *Apologize* - When you're wrong, promptly admit it; make amends when appropriate.
- n *Keep Commitments* - This demonstrates your personal integrity and shows that you value your partner and relationship.
- n *Communicate* - Remember that your partner cannot read your mind. State clearly what you feel, want, need, and expect.
- n *Small Stuff* - Make frequent small deposits rather than ignoring your emotional bank account most of the time and trying to make up for it with big but infrequent deposits.
- n *Loyalty* - Stand by your partner even when he or she isn't present. Don't participate in negative conversations with relatives or friends that have the effect of splitting you away from your partner.

Taking Withdrawals

It is inevitable that you and your partner will disagree about some things. At times, you will disappoint each other. When this happens, you take withdrawals from the emotional bank account. The biggest withdrawals, however, are usually avoidable. Thoughtless actions, needless rage or demeaning statements can be minimized or eliminated entirely. *Managing the withdrawal side of your emotional bank account is largely a matter of regulating conflict, which we'll discuss in the Peacemaking section.

- n Repair the damage sooner rather than later.
- n Reach out to reconnect; accept it when your partner reaches out to you.
- n Give up the need to be "right" and admit it when you're wrong.
- n Once you have dealt with a dispute, leave it in the past. Don't add it to the fire of some future dispute.
- n Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
- n Treat each other with respect and compassion even in anger.

When you both regularly contribute to the emotional bank account over time, you will have a sufficient fund of trust and positive sentiment to take in stride the inevitable bumps in the road of life.

3. Vision: *Support Each Other's Dreams*

A great marriage involves two people committed to making their own and their partner's dreams come true. It's not enough to know about your partner's dreams. You must also support your partner in realizing them. Some ways to do that include:

- n *Understanding & empathy* - Find out what this dream means to your partner; why it is important to him or her. Try to feel what your partner feels about this dream.
- n *Participate at some level* - Get involved. If your partner's dream is to start a business, help with the startup, offer to keep the books, do market research etc.
- n *Financial support* - Help fund your partner's dream.
- n *Join in the dream* - In many cases, couples share the same dream. Maybe you want a cabin in the mountains. Make vacations around shopping for the real estate.

4. Traditions: *Create Shared Meaning*

Nothing in your life has meaning to you personally until you assign that meaning. In great marriages, couples co-create their relationship as an entity that is bigger than either of the individuals alone. One way to do this is by creating "rituals" of connection. You probably have some already.

****Rituals of Connection:**

- n *Morning* - Some couples pray, meditate or go running together to begin their day.
- n *Departure & Reunion* - Do you make a point of kissing when you leave and reunite each day?
- n *Meals* - Do you have regularly scheduled mealtimes? A special place or day of the week for eating out?
- n *Bedtime* - Is there a way you like to go to bed at the end of the day that helps you feel more connected?
- n *Vacations, Dates & Getaways* - Do you have a special place for just the two of you to get away? How about a regular "date night"?
- n *Illness and Bereavement* - How do you handle illness together? How do you find meaning and stay connected following the death of a relative or loved one?
- n *Celebrations of a Triumph* - Is there a way special way you celebrate a victory?
- n *Bad Luck, Failure, Fatigue or Exhaustion* - How do you comfort each other and make sense out of disappointing experiences or stresses in life?
- n *Keeping Contact with Friends & Relatives* - Supporting each other in nurturing your other relationships through entertaining or visits keeps you connected with the rest of your "tribe".
- n *Sex and Love-Making* - How do you know when your partner wants to make love? Do you have a way to decline sex that keeps you connected? How do you talk about your sex life... or the lack of it?

5. Peacemaking: *Regulate Conflict*

Realize that some amount of conflict and disagreement is normal. It doesn't necessarily mean something's wrong with your relationship. Dealing with it doesn't usually mean coming to a final agreement about your differences.

Treating your disagreements as power struggles in which only one of you can win guarantees that *your relationship will lose*.

Learn to regulate conflict so that each of you is heard and understood.

Even in anger, treat each other with respect. Approached this way, conflict can become a vehicle for intimacy and meaning.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

All relationships experience conflict, but some conflict behavior is more damaging than others. John Gottman, PhD, who has researched marriage and marital therapies for over thirty years, has identified four conflict behavior patterns that are so destructive to marriages that he refers to them as the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

Criticism — negative criticism of your partner's character as opposed to complaints about behavior. This kind of criticism often occurs in absolute statements about the other person.

"You always..." or "You never..."

Antidote: Focus on specific events and behaviors.

Defensiveness - a reaction to a complaint or criticism in which you deny any responsibility for any part of the problem or reject any validity to your spouse's issue.

"I didn't do anything wrong. It's all your fault."

Antidote: Look for your contribution to the issue and acknowledge it.

Contempt — Expressions that you're better than your spouse; that devalue your spouse; verbal or non-verbal. More damaging when done in the presence of other people. Contempt is the most damaging to a relationship.

Antidote: Create a tradition of appreciation; look for and express positive things.

Stonewalling — Emotional disengagement; turning away; no eye contact; no vocalizations or head-nodding. For the stonewaller, this may be a way to calm down, but it expresses disapproval and makes the partner's emotional reaction more intense. This is more characteristic of men, but women do it too.

Antidote: Self-soothing - learn to regulate your emotionality with breathing and relaxation. If you need to take a break during the discussion in order to calm down, say so but then resume the discussion. Accept your partner's need to take a break before continuing the discussion.

Reining in the “horses”

The “Four Horsemen” kill relationships, but they are simply styles of behavior. You don’t have to change who you are to change your behavior in small but powerful ways. Changing these behaviors requires nothing more extreme than a commitment to *mindful tweaks* – small changes you create with intention and practice.

Solvable Differences & Disagreements:

Some differences are more easily solvable than others. Here are some helpful strategies:

***Softened Startup* - Begin the discussion gently.**

- n Focus on a single complaint and keep it brief.
- n State your complaint but don't blame.
- n Acknowledge your contribution to the issue.
- n Begin with something positive; express appreciation.
- n Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You".
- n Describe the way you see the issue without judging your partner.
- n Be specific about what you want or need.
- n Be polite and respectful.
- n Don't wait until you're about to explode before you bring it up.
- n State your feelings in terms of the most vulnerable emotions (i.e "hurt" instead of "anger").

Accept Influence -

One of the most reliable predictors of marital success is willingness to accept influence from your partner. This is especially true for men! Being open to other views or information from your partner doesn't make you wrong or weak. It demonstrates that you value your partner, which is a deposit in the emotional bank account.

- n Acknowledge those parts of your partner's position that you understand and agree with.
- n Find common ground for at least partial agreement.
- n You don't win an argument by shooting down everything your partner says. Neither of you has all the pieces to the puzzle.

Positive Reconnection -

Another critical success factor for marriages is making repairs after a conflict. After the smoke clears, carefully consider how you handled yourself.

- n Did you say or do anything that was needlessly hurtful? If so, offer a sincere apology and make amends as needed.
- n Accept responsibility for your behavior. Your partner didn't *make* you do it. This is about cleaning up your side of the street. If your partner initiates a positive reconnection, be receptive.

Manage Stress Spillover -

Refuse to let stresses from other areas parts of your lives spillover into your relationship.

- n Make your home a sanctuary where you both can take refuge from problems at work or with relatives or ex-spouses.
- n When you're the one on the receiving end of outside stresses, let your partner know what's going on, share your feelings, seek and accept support and then let it go for awhile.
- n Don't let your whole life revolve around outside problems.
- n When your partner goes through a hard time, be sensitive and supportive. Offer encouragement but don't try to fix the problem. Don't take it as a rejection when your partner doesn't follow your advice.

Find solutions -

When you're sincerely ready for a solution, ask yourself:

- n Do you want to find a solution or do you just want to win?
- n Would you rather be right or happy?
- n What are you trying to accomplish by taking this stand? Is it working?
- n Why does your partner's position make sense from his/her point of view?
- n Why is it so important to have it your way?
- n What does this issue mean to you about you?
- n Is winning important enough to justify the damage this is causing?
- n How can you settle this in a way that respects the needs of both of you?

Recurring Differences:

- n You can expect that there will be some issues you will never agree about - emotionally charged issues that can result in painful, frustrating conflicts every time you bump into them again. For instance:
 - n Parenting and especially step-parenting
 - n Relationships with in-laws and extended family
 - n Money management; financial and estate planning
 - n Leisure time and vacation
 - n Religion; faith-based community activities
- n Having recurring differences doesn't mean something's wrong with your relationship. However, if you don't find ways to deal with those when they come up, they can turn into serious problems. The same principles of conflict regulation that help with solvable problems and disagreements apply here as well.
- n Recurring differences usually involve differences in:
 - n Identity issues
 - n Sexual desire
 - n Personality type
 - n Socioeconomic background
 - n Cultural, social, religious background

Gridlock

Couples who fail to make peace with each other in their recurring differences are likely to find themselves stuck in gridlock. They settle into mutually exclusive positions over the area of disagreement. Neither can move forward because of the position of the partner. Couples who don't create a path out of gridlock typically pass through several stages over a period of years before the relationship ends:

- n Mutually Exclusive Life Dreams
- n Entrenchment – refusal to compromise
- n Preemptive Rejection of Influence – rejection of partners desires without considering them
- n Vilification of the Partner – habit of seeing the partner as negative
- n "Psychological Divorce"

The path out of gridlock means ending the power struggle. This requires:

- n *Dialogue* - develop a tradition between you for staying in communication.
- n *Negotiation* - look for ways you can both get your needs met.
- n *Honoring each other* - honoring the dreams, needs, and feelings of each of you is far more important than which one of you is in charge.
- n *Openness to influence* - this is the opposite of a power struggle.

In Conclusion

We humans are never finished products. So, too, our relationships are not finished products either. We go through periods of stability, but things change over time. We get older. Our kids grow up. We have successes and failures. Throughout this journey that is our lives, having a partner—a real partner to share the highs and lows—makes every moment better. To have such a partner we must be such a partner.

Best wishes on your journey together.

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