

# Presenting Gottman Methods Couples Therapy

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## Common Couple's Problem

The couple's interaction patterns represent the repeated cycles of their problems (Gehart, 2024). Four common interaction types emerge in couples' problems:

- conflict-avoiding,
- volatile,
- hostile, and
- hostile-detached (Gottman, 2024).

In a healthy *interaction pattern*, a validating couple seeks empathy, support, and understanding from their partners. Each of the four problem areas encompasses one or more of the "Four Horsemen" of (a) *criticism*, (b) *defensiveness*, (c) *contempt*, and (d) *stonewalling* (Lisitsa, 2024).



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### Examples

For example, a common problem interaction pattern might have a start-up comment (Gehart, 2024) like, "You're tired? I've been dealing with kids all day. And you expect dinner! You are pathetic!" (Lisitsa, 2024). This comment represents contempt and the "single greatest predictor of divorce" if unchecked (para. 9). Contempt between partners can also lead to repeated infectious ailments such as influenza and colds. Another common problem interaction pattern, stonewalling often follows contempt, by shutting down and withdrawing, "I'm outa here!" and leaves.

In another common interaction sequence, one partner criticizes the other, "You are selfish and think only of yourself." The response often falls into defensiveness, for example, "I am so busy. I can't appease your demands all the time!" All four horsemen, plus a *harsh start-up* comment, result in a 97.5% accurate predictor of divorce (Gehart, 2024). Couples in distress must address these behavior and interaction patterns head-on to become a validating couple and build a "Sound Relationship House."

## Relationship Dissatisfaction

Pay attention to the trends in couple relationships; get the facts.



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Couples who suffer from relationship dissatisfaction face several statistical realities. These realities have changed over time, offering both good news and warning signals of dangers in a marriage. Lower divorce rates represent good news, improving children's well-being. However, damage still occurs to children and individuals if not addressed. The following lists the latest facts about relationship dissatisfaction and its effects.

- Relationship dissatisfaction with divorce predictability of 97% accuracy with five factors played out in a couple's relationship (Gehart, 2024).
- Research shows that divorce or separation presents an increased risk of children's problems in school (lower grades, dropouts), depression, conduct issues, and substance abuse (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019).
- Divorced or separated parents' children experience low income, family instability, and risky sexual behavior more than children from emotionally cohesive parents (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019).
- Couples who experience high levels of dissatisfaction in their marriage also experience high levels of dissatisfaction with friends, family, and life (Regan et al., 2025).
- High dissatisfaction couples also experience higher levels of neuroticism, perceived stress, loneliness, and lower levels of health and self-esteem (Regan et al., 2025).
- Divorce rates now hover at or under 40% and may further decline (Bailey et al., 2025).
- "Gray divorces" (divorces in couples over 50) hit a high in the "divorce revolution" period of the 1970s-1980s, with significantly lower trends starting in the 2000s (Bailey et al., 2025).

## Gottman Intervention

### Framing Interventions with Case Conceptualization and Assessment

Case conceptualization and assessments precede Gottman interventions to understand better the couple's problem (Gehart, 2024). A case conceptualization establishes the couple's potential for divorce using the "Four Horsemen" and relationship repair attempts as the five factors that predict, with 97.5% accuracy, the probability of divorce. The assessment includes several factors:

- The four horsemen and relationship repair attempts.
- A 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions.
- Acceptance of partner's suggestions.
- Harsh start-ups of conversations.
- A distancing and isolation cascade.
- Trust.
- Marriage typology.

### Goals

Two primary goals form a sound relationship. First, create a general *sense of positive affect* between the partners, and second, develop the ability to reduce negative reactions (Gehart, 2024). These assessments and goals form the basis of the interventions and occur in each session. These also form the basis of Gottman's "Sound Relationship House" (Lisitsa, 2025).

### Interventions

The interventions follow a structured approach with status update, a "boxing round" of interactions, the couple offering an intervention and how to carry it out, assessing resistance, and homework (Gehart, 2024). Specific interventions target knowledge of each other, rules of engagement, dreams, and their power structure.

- Knowledge-of-each-other intervention consists of *love maps* that show each partner's friends, rivals, important events, stresses, worries, hopes, and aspirations.
- *Soften the startup* of interactions by following the eight rules of engagement.
- Expressing *dreams* that hide behind the conflict, causing rigid stances.
- Discussing *marital power structure* and how the couple divides tasks fairly and equitably.
- *Psychoeducation* that involves proper interaction patterns (Gehart, 2024; Lisitsa, 2025).

Gottman's interventions focus on mitigating divorce-predicting behaviors and inducing marriage-satisfaction behaviors in couples (Gehart, 2024). In the process, interventions create validating couples with long-term success (Gottman, 2024). Improving couples' understanding of each other during times of crisis significantly enhances their intimacy (Hosseinpoor et al., 2022). Gottman's approach to goals and interventions, grounded in observation and longitudinal studies, has a strong scientific basis (Gehart, 2024).



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## Considerations: Multicultural Diversity and Spirituality

Throughout the Gottman process, case conceptualization, assessment, and interventions, therapists consider cultural, spiritual, and gender issues as part of the process (Gehart, 2024). For example, when working with Hispanic clients, therapists inform their direction by drawing on cultural values and concepts such as familismo, personalismo, respeto, hefe, and machismo. Honoring their family structure and the importance of religion in their lives flows into interventions (e.g., love maps, soften startups, dreams, and marital power) that respect their culture. Working with Chinese American couples brings different cultural influences to embed into the therapeutic process. These influences include respect for authority, need for clarity of goals and the process, psychoeducation, and extreme privacy about issues. Family also influences decision-making and involvement in therapy.

### Spirituality's Role

Spirituality often plays a vital role in clients' lives and, therefore, in treatment with the client's permission (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014, A.1.d, E.8). Forgiveness, central to Christianity and encouraged in other faiths, leads to less anxiety, depression, blood pressure, mortality rates, and a better immune system (Gurney, 2019). Faith and religion have clinical reasons, with clients' permission and in their context (ACA, 2014, A.1.d), to inform the therapy process.

### Gender's Influence and Goals of Therapy

By embedding relevant gender influences within the couple into the process, the couple benefits from treatments tailored to their needs (Gehart, 2024). These address discrimination, internalized issues, and the need to be loved and belong. The Gottman therapist seeks to understand the relevant cultural, religious, and gender issues at each step in therapy. The therapist can then appropriately coach clients to soothe themselves and their partners in difficult interactions to lead them to the goals of (a) having a sense of positive affect and (b) new skills to reduce negative affect during conflicts.



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