

Christopher Dollard  
Professional Writing Portfolio

## The Washington Post – “Five Myths About Marriage”

Marriage is one of the oldest social, economic, religious and legal institutions in the world, and there’s no shortage of opinions on what makes it work. But much of the conventional wisdom is not based on evidence, and some is flat-out wrong. After researching thousands of couples for more than 40 years at the Gottman Institute, these are some of the myths we’ve encountered most often.

### MYTH NO. 1

#### **Common interests keep you together.**

Some dating sites, like [Match.com](#), ask users to list their interests to help attract potential mates, and [LoveFlutter](#) matches users solely based on shared hobbies and activities. In a Pew [survey](#), 64 percent of respondents said “having shared interests” is “very important” to their marriages — beating out having a satisfying sexual relationship and agreeing on politics.

But the important thing is not what you do together; it’s how you interact while doing it. Any activity can drive a wedge between two partners if they’re negative toward each other. It doesn’t matter whether two people both enjoy kayaking if, when they head out on the lake, one says, “That’s not how you do a J-stroke, you idiot!” Our research has shown that criticism, even of paddling skills, is one of the [four destructive behaviors](#) that indicate a couple will eventually divorce. A stronger predictor of compatibility than shared interests is the ratio of positive to negative interactions, which should be 20-to-1 in everyday situations, whether a couple is doing something they both enjoy or not.

### MYTH NO. 2

#### **Never go to bed angry.**

It’s one of the most cliched pieces of relationship advice, immortalized in Etsy [signage](#) and a ’90s R&B [ballad](#) by Silk: Don’t allow an argument to go unresolved — even overnight. No less an authority than the Bible agrees: “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath” (Ephesians 4:26).

This advice pushes couples to solve their problems right away. Yet everyone has their own methods of dealing with disagreements, and research indicates that about two-thirds of recurring issues in marriage [are never resolved](#) because of personality differences — you’re unlikely to work out that fight about the dishes no matter how late you stay up.

In our “Love Lab,” where we studied physiological reactions of couples during arguments (including coding of [facial muscles](#) related to specific emotions), we found that when couples fight, they are so physiologically stressed — increased heart rate, cortisol in the bloodstream, perspiring, etc. — that it is impossible for them to have a rational discussion. With one couple, we intentionally stopped their argument about a

recurring issue by saying we needed to adjust some of our equipment. We asked them to read magazines for 30 minutes before resuming the conversation. When they did so, their bodies had physiologically calmed down, which allowed them to communicate rationally and respectfully. We now teach that method to couples — if you feel yourself getting overwhelmed during a fight, take a break and come back to it later, even if that means sleeping on it.

### **MYTH NO. 3**

#### **Couples therapy is for fixing a broken marriage.**

This is a common misconception. A 2014 New York Post [story](#) on “the crumbling marriage of Jay Z and Beyoncé” noted grimly that “they’re allegedly traveling with marriage counselors.” Seeking help early in or even before marriage is often seen as a red flag. As one skeptic [noted](#) in New York magazine, “If you need couples therapy before you’re married — when it’s supposed to be fun and easy, before the pressures of children, family, and combined financials — then it’s the wrong relationship.”

This idea often keeps spouses from seeking the sort of regular maintenance that would benefit almost any relationship. The average couple waits [six years](#) after serious issues arise before getting help with their marital problems, and by then it’s often too late: Half of all divorces occur within the [first seven years of marriage](#). In a therapist’s office, spouses can learn conflict-management skills (like the [Gottman-Rapoport intervention](#), based on a method used to increase understanding between nations during the Cold War) and ways to connect and understand each other.

The point of counseling is not to salvage a bad marriage or sort out trauma. It’s about revealing the truth about a relationship. As Jay-Z told David Letterman, he gained “[emotional tools](#)” in counseling to help him *maintain* his marriage.

### **MYTH NO. 4**

#### **Affairs are the main cause of divorce.**

An affair is traumatic for any monogamous relationship. “Extra-marital affairs are responsible for the breakdown of most marriages that end in divorce,” an article on Marriage.com [reads](#). Today.com [offers](#) a similar analysis: “Cheating is one of the main drivers of divorce.”

While affairs can destroy the foundation of trust upon which a marriage is built, the cause of divorce typically precedes the affair. In a [study](#) from the Divorce Mediation Project, 80 percent of divorced men and women cited growing apart and loss of a sense of closeness to their partner as the reason for divorce. Only 20 to 27 percent blamed their separation on an extramarital affair. In their clinical work, John and Julie Gottman learned that partners who have affairs are usually driven to them not because of a forbidden attraction but because of loneliness. There were already serious, if subtle, problems in the marriage before the affair occurred.

### **MYTH NO. 5**

#### **Marriages benefit from a 'relationship contract.'**

It's important to do nice things for your partner and to do your fair share around the house, principles that an increasing number of couples have decided to formalize with a contract. One essayist [explained](#) in the New York Times how hers "spells out everything from sex to chores to finances to our expectations for the future." Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan also hashed out some [rather specific](#) details in their contract, such as: "One date per week, a minimum of a hundred minutes of alone time, not in his apartment and definitely not at Facebook." Far more couples opt for informal agreements, written or verbal, delineating who's responsible for what. The concept, though, has no basis in science. In 1977, researcher Bernard Murstein [found](#) that marriages oriented around reciprocity were less successful. And from what we've seen [in our clinical work](#), keeping track can cause couples to keep score, which can lead to resentment.

Dealmaking, contracts and quid pro quo mostly operate in unhappy marriages. Criticism and contempt can arise from unfulfilled expectations, especially if those expectations are quantified. And when one partner does something nice for the other and there is a contract in place, they may expect something equally nice in return. That response may not happen for any reason — a busy week, forgetfulness — which can create resentment and an environment of trying to "win."

Consider one thing nearly all couples fight about: housework. A couple wants to have an even division of chores and responsibilities, so they make a contract. But a few months later, there's a pile of dishes in the sink, and they're fighting again. According to a [study](#) of 3,000 couples by Harvard Business School, the solution is to ditch the contract and spend money on a cleaning service. Why? So the couple can spend more time together having positive interactions and fewer arguments. Instead of a contract, it's a compromise.

Couples need to act in kind and loving ways, intentionally and attentively, as often as they can. Some things simply cannot be mandated, not even by contract.

## Thrive Global – “How to Know When Breaking Up Is the Healthiest Choice”

Some relationships won't work out. It's not a nice thing to think about—that a relationship may have reached its expiration date—but it's a reality. Sometimes, [our mission](#) at The Gottman Institute to create and maintain greater love in the world actually means helping you part ways and move on so that you can find the love you need and deserve.

In fact, in an interview on [The Loveumentary](#), John Gottman noted that if he could tell his younger self one crucial piece of advice, it would be to end hurtful dating relationships as soon as possible. Why prolong the pain when you can get out and find something that's right for you?

We're not in this work to save marriages and keep couples together no matter what. We're in this work because we want to help people reveal the truth about their relationships and help them determine the best path forward—even if that means calling it quits and looking for a new partner that can meet their needs.

It's not just misguided to try and salvage a car wreck of a relationship. It can actually be damaging. For example, I was once in a relationship where the [Four Horsemen](#) weren't just showing up on a daily basis, but they were constantly trampling me and my partner, their swords and arrows piercing us. And we kept at it, kept trying to make it work until it essentially destroyed itself, and it was an intensely painful and traumatic emotional experience that had lasting effects on my ability to connect with others in a healthy way—effects that still arise from time to time, four years later.

Even Cupid, the cute babyish angel that we associate with love, was not cute in its original conception by the Greeks. I mean, think about it. Cupid *shoots you with an arrow* of uncontrollable desire. It's not hard for something so intense as love to bring people to irrational states of mind, to try and make something work despite all odds.

Trust me, breaking up and getting back together over and over wasn't a fun experience. I wish I knew to get out of it sooner and call it quits for good. It would have saved me a lot of pain. So, if you find yourself in a similar situation, here are some indicators from [What Makes Love Last](#) that might be signs that it's good to move on—not just to avoid the pain, but to find a better, happier, and more successful relationship in the future.

### Disconnection due to serious personality differences

Sometimes it's as simple as understanding that one partner really just wants out, or may be unwilling to acknowledge their part in the relationship's downfall. Sometimes it even comes down to mental illness, like clinical narcissism (a personality disorder) that can block authentic connection with another person. The other partner in that relationship may cope with the narcissism by feeling angry, fearful, doubting themselves, or even

becoming anxious, depressed, and feeling hopeless. And isn't necessarily the *fault* of someone who suffers from a personality disorder; even if actions or words are intended to be hurtful, their condition truly inhibits connection beyond their control.

That's a very clear-cut example. If the rejected partner simply accepts that someone with a [narcissistic personality disorder](#) lacks the empathy they need, then they can call it quits, get treatment for their depression, and look for a healthier relationship with someone else—a relationship that will bring joy and connection, not suffering.

### **More common examples of splitting up**

Other examples are not so clear-cut. Some couples may really want to stay together despite a vortex of negativity that is dragging the relationship down. And it may be possible to help those couples overcome their differences and reconnect if they are willing.

But there's another way to tell if it's really time to go, and that's the "Story of Us Switch." It's not a gradual process—like moving into a negative state of mind for a period of time due to difficult circumstances—but it is a true switch. A couple will either have happy, positive memories about their relationship, or they have bitter ones.

There is very little middle ground here. If the switch is on positive, then the couple has a strong bulwark against negativity, even if it surrounds them at the moment. They can fight off the Four Horsemen. They can use their positive memories, which creates positive sentiments, as ammunition to take those horsemen down.

But if the switch is on negative, for whatever reason, that is a result of [negative sentiment override](#), which is when partners simply assume the worst about each other. Even if only one partner's switch is pointing toward negative—like a light switch, simply on or off—then that is a reliable predictor of breaking up or divorcing.

We can tell this through the [oral history interview](#) assessment technique. When we ask the couple to tell their "Story of Us"—how they met, some of their struggles, their most positive memories, what they believe to be true about their relationship—there may be a fair dose of negativity. But if the couple can *glorify the struggle*—that is, make light of the bad and deeply appreciate the good that came from it—then they can likely fix whatever's wrong through effective interventions.

However, if that story is entirely negative, if even the positive memories of first becoming attracted, of first becoming intimate, etc. are absent or viewed negatively, then the couple will likely split or stay together but lead parallel, non-intersecting lives in which they do not trust one another and won't feel connected. If you feel like you're in the throes of negative sentiment override—if your switch is clearly off—you can work with a couples therapist to determine the best course of action.

### **Why would you put yourself through that?**

[Love](#) is a powerful state of mind that transports you to some of the most beautiful experiences that humanity has to offer. And if you feel that fire of attraction and bonding with someone, it's hard to say no, even if you feel like you're punchdrunk after 15 rounds and can barely stand up.

But why go through the pain? Even if you choose to call it quits, a therapist can help you discover what went wrong and what you may need, specifically for your personality and communication and attachment style, for a relationship to bring you happiness.

There are the right people out there for all of us, people who will adore our quirks and validate our perspectives and treat us with true affection, admiration, and appreciation. It may not be easy to find the right one for you, but it's more damaging to your mental and physical health, more dangerous for your happiness and well-being, to stay in a relationship that's firmly in the negative.

Instead, moving on may be the healthiest choice. It's not a failure if you learn and grow from the experience. There is plenty of hope out there, and there are more ways to meet someone than ever before.

## **The Gottman Relationship Blog – “Emotional Intelligence Is Key to Successful Leadership”**

Leadership skills are, in many contexts—the workplace, schools and classrooms, politics, volunteer organizations, and even within families—fairly recognizable. People who take initiative, who have a vision, and who can strategize, plan, and accomplish goals to achieve their vision are considered good leaders. They display those skills when working in a team setting and, hopefully, their team members are appreciative of those skills.

But what about other kinds of skills that make up a good leader? Not just professional skills—you may be highly trained and proficient in your field—but skills that contribute to your ability to work well with others and to lead your team to success?

That’s where emotional intelligence comes in, which, as we’ve defined in the [first part of this series](#), as “the ability to accurately perceive your own and others’ emotions; to understand the signals that emotions send about relationships; and to manage your own and others’ emotions.”

Think about a great manager that you’ve had in the past. You likely felt comfortable going to that person with your questions, concerns, and needs, and they were likely receptive to you and worked to address them and make sure that you felt supported. And if (or when) you both had disagreements, they were likely respectful and productive exchanges.

That kind of dynamic between employee and manager is similar to what we encourage couples to create in their own relationships—keeping a [positive perspective](#), validating each other’s positions despite disagreement, and being intentionally respectful, even during difficult times. It’s a dynamic that works. It helps everyone involved feel supported and valued.

And let’s be honest: teamwork, especially when attempting to achieve difficult, long-term, and even lofty goals, can lead to intense emotions, such as (if things aren’t going well) frustration, anger, worry, or disappointment, or (if things are going well) excitement, anticipation, enthusiasm, and shared celebration. For example, look at the vivid displays of emotion from players on cohesive sports teams. They celebrate each other when things go well. They lift each other up when things don’t. Emotions, even on the field, play a huge role in working with others to succeed.

Yet all of those emotions, even the good ones, can lead to immense stress under challenging circumstances at work. And understanding and managing both your and others’ emotions in that team setting, just like in a relationship, is an important trait of all good leaders.

**Emotional intelligence is necessary for good leadership**

Daniel Goleman, an authority on [emotional intelligence in the workplace](#), notes that “[n]o matter what leaders set out to do—whether it’s creating a strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on *how* they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should.”

Many of us have likely been in this situation before. Think back on, maybe, the job you had in high school with a manager that had a negative attitude. They might have had excellent skills in their role, but *how* they did the job and communicated to their employees was a problem. Think about how you and your coworkers may have felt around that manager—undervalued, disrespected, and not driven to accomplish team goals.

In that kind of workplace, it’s easier to simply keep your head down, do the minimum, and get that paycheck at the end of the week. And when employees feel that way, they won’t necessarily be happy in their roles, productivity will likely decline, and work will stall. It will be more challenging for that team to do what needs to be done.

The same, according to our own research, applies to romantic relationships. A negative outlook can result in poor outcomes, like resentment, disconnection, and even separation or divorce. When [negative sentiment override](#) kicks in, it’s hard to change course back toward a positive perspective.

On the flip side, appreciation, respect, and enthusiasm, coupled with emotional support and validation, can be contagious. Positivity begets positivity. Because emotions are [strongly correlated with performance and productivity](#), teams whose members feel emotionally supported and appreciated through their challenges and successes will likely be happier and more productive. They will want to celebrate their successes, so they will work harder and more effectively together to be successful.

This dynamic applies to many job settings—wherever there’s a leader. That could be the sous chef in a restaurant kitchen, a head nurse in an emergency room, a foreman on a factory floor, a chief executive in a boardroom, or a high school teacher in a classroom. Effective emotional understanding and management will help team members cohere and be more productive and feel more valued and understood.

### **Emotional intelligence helps leaders to adapt**

Leaders also need to be able to adapt to changing circumstances in their workplaces, or in their own roles and those of their team members. President Xi of China [told attendees at a job fair](#) that emotional intelligence will enable an individual to be more adaptable in society, which makes sense. Being aware of, understanding, and managing your emotions and of those around you should help you to navigate through an ever-changing world, and even to become a successful leader in it.

According to the Harvard Business Review, emotional intelligence is a [key leadership skill](#)—and for a leader to truly be effective, they must be masterful at managing their relationships in a positive way. Being a leader of a group of people is to have a very important relationship with those people. In the HBR, Goleman writes:

The most effective leaders are all alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence. It's not that IQ and technical skills are irrelevant. They do matter, but...they are the entry-level requirements for executive positions. My research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader.

This isn't to say that emotional intelligence is enough to get you to that leadership position in your job—you will still need the professional knowledge and experience—but it means that if you take a leadership role and have a higher degree of emotional intelligence, you will likely be more effective and more successful. Because emotions are always in flux, adaptability is key to being an outstanding leader.

### **Great leaders dramatically improve their teams and organizations**

When it comes to the workplace, and especially business, the bottom line is crucial and managers and executives are often held responsible for successes and failures. Researchers Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joseph Folkman, co-founders of the leadership development and training firm [Zenger Folkman](#), gathered over 100,000 direct reports from employees about their leaders from hundreds of different organizations and found [nine key traits](#) the most successful leaders possess. Here are a few that are most related to emotional intelligence:

- They work to inspire and motivate those around them
- They focus on collaboration between team members, which creates synergy and a better experience for employees
- They “walk the talk,” or act with integrity and honesty with every team member
- They build trust, which stems from consistently acting with integrity and honesty
- They develop and support others, and they always celebrate the successes of their employees and encourage them to learn more and develop their skills
- They always build relationships, which communicates that each team member is valued, and that their concerns are important and will be addressed.
- 

There is a steady rise in employee satisfaction with the development of a great leader—poor leaders' employees have poor job satisfaction, and great leaders' employees are much more committed and happy with their work. Zenger and Folkman even came up with [38 different ways](#) in which leaders can “harness” the power of emotion, which makes an emotional impact on their employees and helps them connect emotionally with others, hence making them a more effective leader.

Some of those methods include focusing on opportunities and possibilities instead of problems, celebrating successful events, being curious about individual employees' career aspirations and helping them to achieve them, and, just like we suggest in the [5:1 ratio](#) for couples in conflict, accompanying every piece of negative feedback with five positive statements.

Even more interesting is that when you have a truly great leader, they can [double a company's profits](#). That's right—double the profits! Most of us would think that emotional intelligence may not have to do much with a company's bottom line, but when you have a great leader who possesses and utilizes effective emotional intelligence, your organization as a whole—ranging from employee satisfaction and engagement to revenue and profits—will greatly benefit.

Marriage Minute Sample Email #1

### **Subject Line: The Failure of the Grand Romantic Gesture**

We see grand romantic gestures all the time in film and TV. The [boombox scene](#) in *Say Anything*. Romeo at Juliet's window. Forrest Gump [diving](#) into Jenny's arms. More common examples: an extravagant bouquet, an expensive dinner at a fancy restaurant, or a week-long trip to a tropical resort.

While these are indeed grand gestures, our research shows that they are not a "quick fix" if you're unhappy in your relationship. You might just end up fighting on the beach or over dinner, and you won't feel closer.

Instead, to reconnect with your partner, start small. Turn toward your partner, even for the smallest [bids](#). Tell them how much you appreciate and admire them. Support them in their difficulties and celebrate their successes.

Those small, everyday moments are the most important romantic gestures, and they will build up a wealth of positivity and connection in your relationship.

### **Related blog posts**

- [Invest in Your Relationship: The Emotional Bank Account](#)
- [3 Daily Habits That Are Better for Your Marriage Than an Exotic Vacation](#)
- [5 Ways to Make Small Gestures Count in Your Marriage](#)

## Marriage Minute Sample Email #2

### **Subject Line: All work and no play...**

We know how that saying goes. But really, when was the last time that you and your partner were *playful* with each other?

Like, had a random dance party in your living room, or jumped in a pool together with your clothes on, or teased each other until you both burst out laughing?

Sure, relationships can be a lot of work. And to really work well, they need us to be intentional, mindful, thoughtful, and respectful.

But they also need us to be playful, too. Even silly! Laughing together is always a wonderful way to connect. And having fun together is a great way to find some relief from the serious stuff in life.

And doing that with your partner can lead to good memories and positive experiences. Have some fun together. Make a ritual of connection out of it. What do you have to lose?

### **Related blog posts**

- [Choose a Partner You Can Be Playful With](#)
- [The Magic Relationship Ratio, According to Science](#)
- [Marriage Is a Dance](#)

## Marriage Minute Sample Email #3

### **Subject Line: Time for a pit stop...**

Imagine driving home with your partner on a beautiful summer afternoon. The windows are down, the sun is out, and you've got a song you both love on the stereo.

Sounds awesome, right? Then you hear a loud bang from the front end, the steering goes wobbly, and you know you've got to pull over and see what's wrong.

In relationships, just like with automobiles, repairs are essential to success. During conflict, they keep things from spiraling out of control, and they help bring you and your partner closer together. A repair attempt can be as simple as:

- Making a joke (without sarcasm!)
- Giving a compliment or showing affection
- Taking responsibility
- Expressing that you understand your partner
- Reminding your partner that you're in this together

All couples fight, but what matters is that your repair attempts succeed. If you learn when to make repairs and how to understand and apply them, you and your partner will stay positive and keep going for that lovely ride together.

### **Check out this podcast with two of our Certified Gottman Therapists!**

Zach Brittle and Laura Heck discuss the Four Horsemen and how to combat them in your relationship in [this episode of Marriage Therapy Radio](#).

### **Related blog posts**

- [How to Make Repair Attempts So Your Partner Feels Loved](#)
- [How to Repair the Little Things So They Don't Become Big Things](#)
- [Love Quiz: How Well Do You Repair Your Relationship?](#)