



Marriage Matters

Bids for Connection: Creating Positive Interactions in Your Marriage

Successful marriages have at least five times as many positive interactions as negative ones, according to Dr. John Gottman, Clinical Psychologist from the University of Washington and author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Three Rivers Press, 2000). Usually, this is a pattern that is established early on in the couples engagement and newlywed bliss. Unfortunately, over time, many couples begin to drift apart as work, life and family pressures set in.

One of the keys to maintaining and sustaining more positive interactions than negative ones is by responding positively to one another's "bids for connection." A bid is someone's expression that requests a connection to another person. A bid could be:

- ♥ a question (e.g., "How was your day?"),
- ♥ a gesture (e.g., reaching out to hold hands),
- ♥ a facial expression (e.g., smile), or even
- ♥ a touch (e.g., hugging).

How a spouse responds to their partner's bid for connection can greatly impact the strength and length of their marital relationship. In studying couples' dinner-hour conversations, Dr. Gottman found that happily married partners tended to engage each other one hundred times in just ten minutes. In contrast, he found that couples who would eventually divorce engaged one another only sixty-five times in ten minutes. Dr. Gottman has called this process of responding positively "turning toward" one's spouse.

Turning toward means acknowledging the partners bid and giving positive responses. The underlying messages of these

positive responses serve to communicate the sentiment, "I hear you, I want to talk to you, I understand you, I accept you, I want to be with you." An example of turning toward the bid "How about going for a walk?" would sound something like this: "Sure, I'd love to go for a walk with you. Where would you like to go?" These positive messages help the "bidder" feel good about him or herself and the interaction the couple is having. This exchange, in turn, leads to more bidding and more positive responses.

Turning toward one's spouse leads to growth and development of healthy relationships. Also, these positive responses show interest and care for the spouse. When couples develop a pattern of turning toward one another they are more likely to feel accepted and cared for. Also, they invest in what Dr. Gottman describes as the "couple's emotional bank account." This "emotional savings" helps couples feel more confident in their ability to handle conflict and survive crises in the future.

ACTIVITY



For the next few days, make an effort to make extra "bids" to your partner and to respond in a positive way to any bids your partner makes. Take note of how your feelings toward your partner and your interactions with your partner change. Do you notice more positive interactions? Do you notice more positive feelings toward your partner? After a few days, discuss the differences you each have noticed and discuss how you can make this a part of your everyday interactions.



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