

REBUILDING YOUR Relationship “House”

From many studies of successfully married couples, we know that in order to repair your relationship, there are three essential changes to be made:

1. We must increase your positive emotions overall
2. We must decrease the negative emotions you have during disagreements
3. We must increase the positive emotions and repair efforts made during a disagreement

We accomplish these three changes by rebuilding seven aspects of your relationship “house.” We rebuild from the ground up! So begin at the foundation of the house to read through the seven steps of relationship repair.

Step 1 - The Foundation – Reconnection

- Getting to know each other again
- Devoting time to the relationship, Friendship building activities
- Increasing positivity, Healing begins

Step 2 - The Walls – Shared Fondness and Admiration

- Expressing appreciation
- Increasing gratitude and positive communication
- Praising your partner for doing well
- Encouraging relationship enhancing thoughts
- Expressing fondness and admiration in everyday life

Step 3 - The Insulation – Deepening the Connection

- Building an emotional bank account
- Working as a team
- Turning towards each other, as opposed to turning away
- Allowing your partner to influence you

Step 4 - The Doors – Positive Sentiment Override

- Managing and reducing stress
- Challenging distress maintaining thoughts
- Negotiating power
- Starting rituals of connection
- Processing failed bids for connection

Step 5 - The Nuts and Bolts – Conflict Management and Regulation

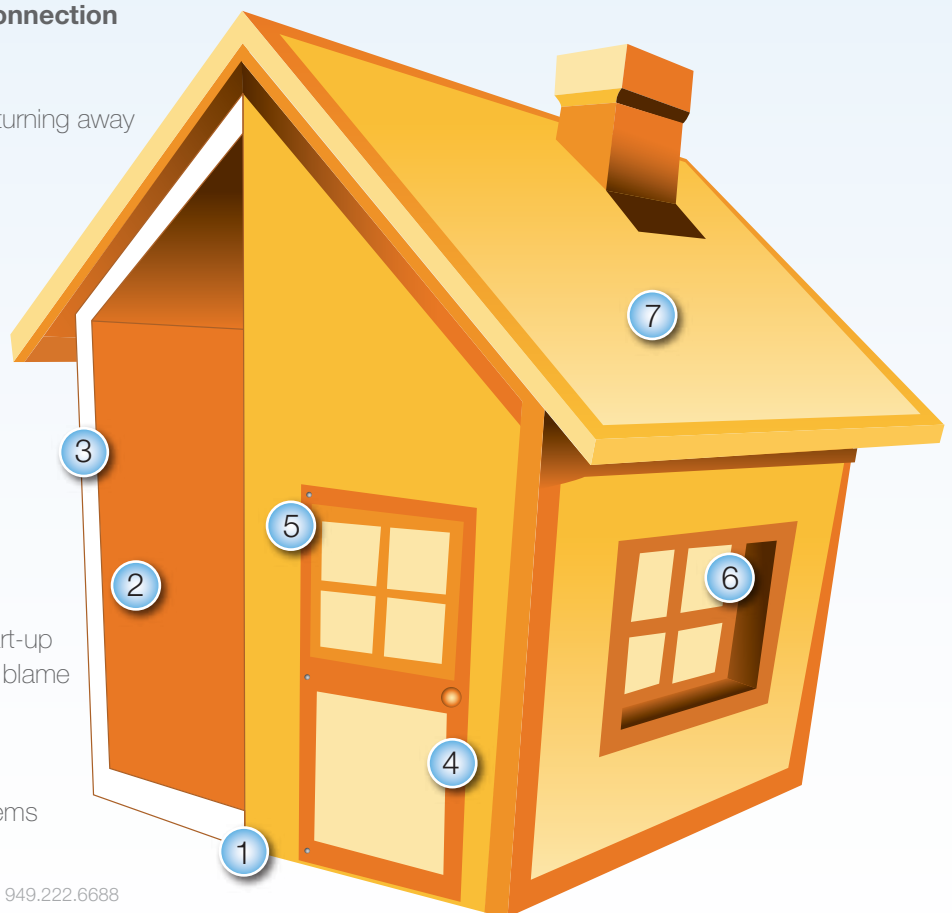
- Differentiating solvable problems from perpetual problems
- Catching the 4 Horsemen, Softening the start-up
- Structured listening; communicating without blame
- Learning to repair and soothe
- Accepting influence
- Compromising and understanding triggers
- Dialoguing peacefully about perpetual problems

Step 6 - The Windows – Creating Shared Meaning

- Establishing connection rituals
- Establishing goals and plans
- Sharing dreams, ideas, values
- Honoring each other

Step 7 - The Roof – Relapse Prevention

- Thanksgiving and appreciation
- Spending time together (magic five 30-minute segments)
- Emotional Communication
- Using solid repair strategies
- Markers of divorce are all reduced



We must increase the positive before working on the negative.

Many people come to my office and want to immediately work on their problems. This is great and this is indeed a goal, but as you will see from the chart above, it is not the first goal. Why not? Solving the problems and managing the conflict is an emotionally draining process. In order to successfully manage conflict, you must have enough positive emotion built up that you can work through the conflict and still have a bit of positivity left over. For this reason, we cannot start therapy by focusing on solving problems. Rather, we must start by building up some positive feelings and some positive regard. Think of your emotions like a bank account: positivity adds money to your account; negativity drains it. Managing conflict is a very, very expensive process. In order to afford conflict, you need to have a couple of weeks with a positive cash flow and some savings before you can spend it on conflict.

Constant fighting is not as worrisome as numbness.

If you and your partner are fighting all the time, this is not as worrisome as you may think. It is not fun and it certainly does not feel good, but fighting is a form of communication. While you are fighting, you are still trying to communicate. Much more worrisome is when people give up on fighting, stop trying to communicate at all, shut down and go numb.

Relationships deteriorate and improve by a known process.

There is a relationship deterioration cycle and it goes like this:

- 1 Partners fight constantly without any resolution; both people feel upset and flooded with negative emotion.
- 2 Both partners feel they have "severe" problems.
- 3 One or both partners try to work out their problems alone.
- 4 One or both partners start leading parallel lives, where there is little or no connection or overlap between these lives.
- 5 Loneliness sets in.
- 6 Partners become emotionally numb, there is no fondness or admiration left. Many choose to divorce.

Just as relationships deteriorate by a known process, they are repaired through a known process. This process is the seven step process in the chart. A study by the California Divorce Mediation Project showed that 80% of divorcing couples cited "growing apart, losing a sense of closeness, not feeling loved or appreciated" as the reason for divorce. Only 40% cited severe and intense fighting. This and many other studies shows us that our focus must be on increasing positive emotion first, then we can deal with negative emotions and conflict.

Look out for the four horsemen.

Dr. John Gottman, a leading marriage researcher, has identified 4 behaviors to be on the look-out for in any relationship. These behaviors, known as the four horsemen, erode the foundation of your marriage:

- 1 **Criticism** - speaking negatively about your partner's character or personality.
- 2 **Contempt** – sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, hostile humor.
- 3 **Stonewalling** – turning away from your partner, tuning them out, ignoring your partner.
- 4 **Defensiveness** – defending yourself by blaming your partner.

You don't necessarily need to solve all of your problems, you need to find a way to talk about them.

Not every problem is going to be solvable. The good news is that you don't need to solve every problem in order to have a successful relationship. What seems to be most important is whether or not a couple can establish a dialogue about their perpetual problems. They may come to some acceptance of the problem and they can communicate about it with affection and amusement.