

ONE

WHAT MAKES MARRIAGE WORK?

Have you and your spouse ever planned a big romantic getaway only to find that once alone together, you fall into the same argument you've had twenty times before? Maybe it's about plans for the future—whether to buy a bigger house, when or if to have a child, how to save for retirement. Or perhaps it's a past wound—the way he acted on the honeymoon, or her fling with a co-worker that ended years ago. Or it could be a never-ending debate over housework, disciplining the children, when to have sex, or how to spend vacations.

I know a woman who traveled with her husband all the way to New Zealand, only to have a nasty spat the night of their arrival. He wanted to go deep-sea diving the next day; she wanted to sun on the beach.

"Your ideas are always so reckless," she fumed. "Why can't you just act like the middle-aged man you are?"

He retaliated, "You stifle my sense of adventure," adding a note of quiet contempt: "You bore me to tears."

Soon she *was* in tears, as their cross-fire continued for about an hour, until they finally called a truce. Stinging from one another's insults, they sat there realizing a worse pain: they could travel to the

end of the earth together and still be stuck in a war that started fifteen years ago, fighting the same battles over and over again.

Sound familiar? Or are you and your spouse more likely to avoid such skirmishes at all costs? Perhaps you're more like another couple I'm familiar with, who will float through such a vacation together, giving in to one another's wishes, carefully sidestepping any potential disagreement, burying past disappointments, stifling any complaints, ignoring any suggestion of conflict. If you and your spouse are this way, the odds are neither of you would say what's really on your minds; that way there's no friction and nobody gets hurt. These are peaceful matches—except for this occasional, unpredictable twinge of restlessness. It might surface, say, when he tosses his jacket over his shoulder in a certain way, or when she brushes a wisp of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand. It's these small, familiar gestures that can make you remember: *There used to be more passion here.* You wonder what happened to all the laughter and affection. When did life together become so flat and colorless?

Or, maybe, at least sometimes, your marriage is like that of another couple I know. They go out for a Sunday afternoon in town together. She wants to do some browsing in shops; he starts to get visibly impatient. She begins to sulk, thinking, "He doesn't really want to spend time with me. He's so uncaring." Meanwhile, he broods, "She's spending too much money—she's so selfish. Why can't we just enjoy going for a walk?" And for the rest of the afternoon the two are caught in separate ruminations about each other's faults.

Or, perhaps you and your mate are like still another couple, no longer even spending such time together. Come Sunday, she's caught up in a whirl of chores, helping the kids with school projects, trying to get the laundry done and the house in order; he's out playing softball, working on the car, or watching football on TV, or puttering somewhere. If your relationship has lots of times like this, the two of you may be living in parallel universes under the same roof.

And yet this is the person you loved so deeply when you got married, the person you sincerely meant to stick with through the joys and hardships of life. But despite your best wishes, there are moments when it seems impossible. It's as though some powerful, subterranean current takes hold of you both and leads you down a path of negative

thinking, destructive feelings, painful action and reaction, drifting toward isolation and loneliness.

What is this mysterious current? Today, as we witness the dissolution of so many marriages, it becomes more crucial than ever to find an answer. And finding that answer has been the mission of my research these past two decades. Through intense, detailed observations of hundreds of couples like these, I have charted the invisible emotional currents between husbands and wives, underground streams of feeling that can burst to the surface either as a spring of harmony or a well of discontent.

In pursuit of the truth about what tears a marriage apart or binds it together, I have found that much of the conventional wisdom—even among many marital therapists—is misguided or dead wrong. For example, some marital patterns that even professionals often take as a sign of a problem—such as having intense fights, or avoiding conflict altogether—I have found can signify highly successful adjustments that will keep a couple together. And fighting—when it airs grievances and complaints—can be one of the healthiest things a couple can do for their relationship (indeed, how you fight is one of the most telling ways to diagnose the health of your marriage). You will see more clearly why such conventional assumptions are dead wrong as you read my explanation of the often elusive emotional dynamics of marriage, dynamics I have mapped in a simple model that can serve as a template for seeing your own marriage with new eyes.

The good news is that if you become familiar with these maps of what shapes the emotional currents in marriage for better or worse, the seemingly elusive forces that are at work in your own relationship need not be so mysterious to you, nor are you at their mercy anymore. In this book I will show you how to detect these forces in your own relationship so that you can see the hidden emotional profile of your marriage as though through an X ray. By making these hidden forces visible, you can start to control the direction of your marital journey—calling a final truce on destructive arguments, corrosive ways of thinking about each other, and the downward spiral of reactions that can destroy a marriage. Instead, you can open the door to a more vital, fulfilling relationship.

DEMYSTIFYING THE MARRIAGE CRISIS

If you are worried about the future of your marriage you have plenty of company. There's no denying that this is a frightening time for American couples. More than half of all first marriages end in divorce. Second marriages do worse, failing at a rate of about 60 percent. Although many social scientists believed that divorce rates had leveled off in the 1980s, new data suggest the opposite: the divorce rate is actually getting worse as time goes on. A 1989 study of U.S. Census records by researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that, based on 1985 data, divorce among *recent* first marriages stood at a shocking 67 percent. In other words, two out of every three new couples are headed for divorce—unless something changes. That “something” is what this book is about—how to change your marriage to save it.

There's no question that the statistics are distressing, especially if you fear that your own marriage may be in danger. What makes the numbers even more disturbing is that no one seems to understand *why* our marriages have become so fragile. It is as if some hidden, evil force is loose in America that is making marriages fall apart. But the reason marriage and its troubles seem so mysterious is really quite simple: until recently, almost no scientific studies of this complex relationship had been done. The vast majority of books of advice to couples have been based, at best, on the insights marital therapists have gained from the couples they happened to see, and, at worst, on mere anecdote and theoretical musings.

And most of the research on marriage has suffered, in my opinion, from a number of flaws ranging from asking the wrong questions to conclusions that are simply not valid. The solution, of course, is to conduct solid experiments that examine stable and troubled marriages, systematically tracing the emotional currents that lead one couple to drift apart and another to flow through life together. For the past two decades my research teams have been doing just that. The result has been a number of surprising, scientifically sound findings that go a long way to filling in the knowledge gap. I have written this book to share our latest results with you and to offer my best understanding of

just how you can strengthen your marriage, no matter how rocky it may seem.

Of course, not all couples ought to stay married. But I do think it's disturbing that the majority of people marrying today will be unsuccessful at nurturing and holding onto their most precious relationship—all the more disturbing because, I believe, an accurate diagnosis of the fault lines in a marriage can help any couple build a stronger union.

On your wedding day you had hopes for a happy, blissful union, and I believe that despite the rising divorce rate you can still fulfill that dream—even if your marriage has started to show signs of trouble. Although our research is far from complete, our current findings offer the most accurate picture available of why some marriages succeed and others fail—and what you can do to improve your own chances of ending up on the positive side of the odds.

BOB AND WENDY: THE PIONEERS

Early in my career as a psychologist, a young couple came to me for help with their ailing marriage. Bob and Wendy, as I'll call them, were a passionate, loving pair who had been attracted to each other's opposite nature. Wendy was energetic, spontaneous, and had a flair for design. Bob was more conservative, intellectual, with a penchant for order. He loved her vivaciousness and found her exciting—"a bit of a gypsy." She was drawn to his reason, his dependability, his even temper.

But once they were married with a child, the stresses of family life began to bear down. Wendy worked full time in a fast-paced media job. Bob was struggling to get through graduate school while caring for the baby and the house. By the time I met them, rather than marveling in the charms that had drawn them together, they had begun to disdain one another's habits.

"I don't know how you can be so sloppy," Bob fumed. "You don't even appreciate all the work I do to maintain your house."

"My house?" Wendy countered. "We both live here, but because I'm a woman, you automatically assume that housework is *my* responsibility."

"That's not true," was his comeback. "It's just that you've done all the decorating. I don't give a damn about all this furniture and all this . . . stuff! I'm just doing my best to keep up."

"So it's *my* fault that you don't value living in a beautiful environment? You know what your problem is? You're always afraid of anything the least bit adventurous or new!"

And so it went day after day. Despite their best intentions, conversations seemed to deteriorate into an endless loop of criticism over housework, child care, and personal habits. And once they took their positions, they felt trapped, as if there was no way to break out of their defensiveness and anger. One day, on a hunch, I suggested that we videotape their discussions so I could take a closer look at the dynamics of their interaction.

We made three tapes in all. For the first one, I proposed that they play a game called "The NASA Moon Shot Problem," in which two people rank in order a set of items needed for survival on a trip to the moon. Here, the couple shined. They had a lively, productive discussion, filled with lots of laughs. They got superb scores for cooperation and problem solving. But perhaps more important, their affection for one another was palpable. Clearly, this was the pair who had met years ago and fallen in love.

With the second tape, however, the harmony faded. I asked them to discuss a major problem in their marriage, and before long, they were back to bickering, pouting, whining, feeling angry and bitter. The third session, which they recorded on an audiotape at home, was even worse. They rehashed the same issues over and over again. Each time they got anywhere near a solution, one of them inevitably would sabotage the process. When the tape finally ended, Bob and Wendy were exhausted and full of despair.

I watched and listened to these tapes over and over again. Then I listened to them with Bob and Wendy. I asked them to tell me what they were thinking and feeling at certain critical or puzzling moments in the conversation. What I detected hidden beneath their seemingly trivial skirmishes was a rich and painful history of unresolved issues concerning his need for autonomy and her need to feel valued by him. I learned that Bob and Wendy, like most couples I've worked with over the years, really wanted just two things from their marriage—love and respect. But, also like so many distressed couples, their com-

munication had become distorted. With increasing frequency, they would find themselves cornered into interactions where all each one could hear was the other one's criticism and contempt. The recurring episodes scared both of them. Although neither one wanted to divorce, each feared that's where they were headed.

Still, Bob and Wendy were committed to saving their marriage and they had gained insights about their interactions from our work together. Determined to find better ways to express their needs to one another, they worked hard in therapy. When I last saw them some twenty years ago, they seemed to be on track toward a more stable relationship. And, thanks in part to their willingness to help me with this videotaped experiment, I was on a new track as well. I was determined to find out why some marriages fall apart while other marriages thrive. I felt that a better understanding of the destructive interactions that lead to divorce might help save couples who feel trapped in a downward spiral of hostility and bitterness.

PREDICTING DIVORCE

This was uncharted territory in the early 1970s, a time when divorce rates were already soaring. There was a plethora of psychological theories about how to fix broken marriages. The problem was these theories were based mostly on psychologists' intuition and experience with their own clients. That's not to say their ideas were bad. But preventing divorce can be compared to preventing heart disease. You wouldn't rely solely on the knowledge of a doctor who had treated a dozen heart attacks; you'd turn to a body of scientific work based on carefully designed experiments with hundreds of people—some with heart disease and others without. The same could be said for treating the heartbreak of a marriage in distress. But this sound, systematic research had not been conducted among divorced and stable couples, to tease out the differences between them. Trained as a mathematician and a research psychologist, I decided to take such an approach. Using scientific methods, I would observe the conversations of husbands and wives, distilling out of the mists and confusions of anger, frustration, and isolation the differences that lead some couples to stay married and others to divorce.

Two decades later, this strategy has reaped an enormous reward. For the first time we can name with precision the subtle early warning signs of a troubled marriage, and tell you how to put these insights to good use, setting your own marriage on the right track and keeping it there for years to come.

X RAY OF A MARRIAGE

My laboratory conducts what amounts to the most intensive studies of couples interacting ever attempted, something akin to an X ray or CAT scan of a living relationship. My research teams have compared, microsecond to microsecond, how couples talk to one another. We've examined their facial expressions, monitored how much they fidget, and how they gesture. We've asked what happens to partners' heart rates when they try to work out their conflicts together. Do unstable couples express more sarcasm or contempt in these situations than stable couples? Do they breathe harder? Do they find it more difficult to listen? How well do they understand one another's emotions? And what about discrepancies in the way couples describe the history of their relationships? Does it make any difference if he recalls she wore yellow the first time he saw her? Does it matter whether they laugh when they reminisce about hard times?

What we have found is that all of this matters. What's more, gathering such information has allowed us to identify the specific processes that lead to the dissolution of a marriage, and those that weld it more firmly together. To use the heart disease analogy again, preventing heart attacks requires an ability to predict the events leading up to the crisis: plaque formation on arteries, high blood pressure, chest pain, and so on. Divorce prevention requires this same foresight. That's why I have geared my research to identifying which responses, thoughts, and physiological reactions place couples on a path toward divorce. In doing so, we have been able to predict with startling accuracy which couples will stay together and which couples will split. In one study, for example, we were able to foretell with an astonishing 94 percent accuracy which couples were headed for divorce three years later, based solely on couples' views of their marital history and their

current perceptions. That remains the highest prediction rate ever achieved by a scientific study on marriage!

I don't mean to imply that our findings are foolproof, nor that every couple who experiences certain problems is inevitably headed for divorce. The predictions of marital outcome in my research were arrived at after about twenty hours of direct laboratory observation and contact with each couple, and even then the predictions were not perfect. Many couples who at one point in marriage have difficulties are able to find their way to a stable, satisfying marriage.

But being aware that specific patterns and interactions in your marriage are part of a process that leads to divorce—and knowing how to reverse those patterns—may indeed help you back away from that slippery slope. It's in this spirit of prevention that I offer you advice about improving your marriage. I do so with some hesitation because I know that my research is not yet finished; the dynamics of marriage are complex and I feel we have much to explore. Still, we have learned a tremendous amount from comparing how couples treat each other in thriving and failing relationships. I hope that by sharing our insights with you, we can help you improve your marriage today, and help it last through many tomorrows.

OLD MYTHS DIE HARD

Over the years, plenty of theories have attempted to explain the underlying cause of the surge in divorce. Read through popular and psychological literature and you'll find your pick of culprits. Some social scientists point to our society's shift from a family farm economy to factories, which undercut the importance of family, as the core of the problem. Others have blamed changes in law that make divorce easier, or women's emerging financial independence, which enables wives to leave bad marriages more easily. Some experts point to our society's increasing levels of violence; the psychological abuses of contempt and hostility that often precede divorce may be considered a low-level form of violence.

Looked at together, these explanations point to a weakening of the social threads that keep marriages intact. But they don't explain why some marriages last despite these pressures while others disinte-

grate. These speculations don't help you very much if you are trying to navigate your way through marital difficulty. If you are currently married or planning to marry, what you most want to know is how to avoid falling on the sad side of the statistics.

Because there hasn't been much solid research on why specific marriages fall apart, we're tempted to believe comfortable old notions that, on the surface, seem quite plausible. Take the money myth, for example. Some figures show that if you have financial difficulties you are twice as susceptible to divorce. But many couples with low incomes stay together. You can earn \$15,000 a year and have a marriage as solid or shaky as couples making \$150,000. In his book, *Children of the Great Depression*, G. H. Elder, Jr., gives an interesting account of how money problems affected families in the 1930s. Those who were strong couples before the stock market crashed seemed to become even stronger afterward, as wives and children chipped in to help support the family. On the other hand, families that were already troubled were more likely to be torn apart by economic strife. Husbands in troubled marriages moved further and further away from their families at the dinner table as financial problems worsened—a concrete expression of the widening distance between husband and wife. In essence, such studies show that your marriage's existing strengths or weaknesses simply get amplified by external crises like unemployment or money problems.

Similar conclusions can be drawn about sexual disagreements, which are also widely held to be marriage busters. Long ago, some psychologists believed the more often you and your partner had intercourse, the happier you'd be. We know now this isn't true; what really matters is that you agree on what's acceptable. Remember the scene from the movie *Annie Hall*? When Annie's therapist asks her how often she and Alvie have sex, she replies, "Constantly. Three times a week." Alvie's therapist asks him the same question and he answers, "Never. Three times a week." The issue isn't how frequently you make love—nor even that you agree that sex 1.43 times a week is optimum. The issue is how well you handle the inevitable differences that arise whenever two people form a partnership.

A closely related myth holds that compatibility—both in and out of bed—is the bottom line when it comes to making your marriage

work. Say you love to spend your leisure time surrounded by family and friends, but your mate would rather stay home alone with you. Or you think credit cards are a gift from God while your partner believes in paying as you go. Maybe you feel day-care centers are fine even though your spouse is convinced that babies belong at home with their mothers. The marriage counselor's prediction: trouble ahead.

At first glance, it seems to make sense that compatibility would be a necessary foundation for a successful marriage. Take the research conducted by David H. Olson, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota. He has developed a premarital test called PREPARE that detects differences between prospective husbands and wives. Administered by clergy during premarital counseling, this 125-item questionnaire covers eleven areas of the couple's life including personality issues, finances, sexual matters, children, and religious orientation. The goal is to predict areas of conflict in a marriage, supposedly to avoid disharmony and eventual divorce. Olson's questionnaire does a fairly good job of identifying potential hot spots and predicting marital satisfaction. Checking in on couples three years after they were married, Olson reported that those who were currently satisfied had indeed scored higher on the PREPARE test before their wedding than those who were dissatisfied or divorced.

What his evaluation could *not* predict, however, was which among the many *dissatisfied* couples in his study were destined to stay married and which were headed for a fall. This is the crucial question. After all, many marriages that are basically stable go through occasional periods of dissatisfaction. You must know people who find their marriages less than ideal yet stay together for a lifetime, or couples who are quite dissimilar but find their marriages very satisfying. And you probably know others who remain in marriages that are full of conflict because they find the rewards worth the battle.

Olson assumed similarity in opinions safeguards against divorce. That does not seem to be true. In my research, where I actually observed couples hashing out disagreements and then tracked them down years later to check on how stable their marriages were, I found that couples who initially had complaints about each other's attitudes were among the most stable marriages as the years went on. My research shows that much more important than having compatible views

is *how* couples work out their differences. In fact, occasional discontent, especially during a marriage's early years, seems to be good for the union in the long run.

Clearly, marital bliss and perfect compatibility are not the only glue that holds couples together—and may not even be the most important glue. The challenge for my research teams has been to identify the truly crucial ingredients to a sound marriage. That's quite a tall order. It required us to follow marriages over a very long period of time. There is simply no shortcut to staying in touch with the same couples for many years if you want to find out which will go on to live happy, fulfilled lives together and which will end up separating.

IN THE MARRIAGE LAB

It's 6:30 on a Thursday night when Phil and Diane Thompson (not their real names) arrive at our facilities on the University of Washington campus in Seattle. After walking down a spare corridor in the office building that houses our lab, they seem surprised to see what lies before them: a comfortably furnished studio apartment, complete with a hide-a-bed, kitchen facilities, and a view of the canal that connects Portage Bay to Lake Washington. Once inside, the only clues that the Thompsons haven't escaped to some cozy Northwest getaway are the three remote-control video cameras perched in corners of the ceiling. It's here that we observe couples who want to get at the heart of what makes their marriage tick.

After a brief get-acquainted session with two research assistants, the Thompsons complete a form that asks them to describe how much they disagree about topics that often trouble couples—issues like money, in-laws, sex, and religion. By now the couple is used to such probing questions; as volunteer study participants, they've already responded to several questionnaires and interviews regarding the state of their marriage. If they continue their involvement in our research, they'll receive phone calls and questionnaires from time to time, asking them about the status of their relationship. This is how we track the progress of couples over the years.

Once they fill out the form, the Thompsons are taken to an adjacent room to be seated in opposing chairs surrounded by an array

of electronic equipment specially designed to gather physical and psychological information about couples as they interact. A shifting platform beneath each chair measures how much each partner wiggles during the session. Two more video cameras are suspended above, filming every visible movement from the waist up.

"This feels like an electric chair," Phil jokes, as a research assistant wraps a strap across his chest to measure how deeply he's breathing.

"Or a lie detector," Diane muses. Actually, she's got it right. Various electronic gadgets will measure the nervous system's response to all sorts of psychological stimuli in much the same way that a polygraph test would. Electrodes are placed on the pair's chests to track heart rates. Devices are taped to their fingers, monitoring their pulse and how much they sweat in response to stress. Sensors are clipped to their ear lobes to tell how fast blood flows from their hearts to their extremities. Finally, microphones are hung from their clothes to capture every sound they utter.

When all the equipment is arranged, a research assistant reviews the questionnaire with Phil and Diane, helping them to decide which "area of disagreement" they will discuss for fifteen minutes. (In some of our studies, the couple begins by simply discussing the events of their day, after having been apart for at least eight hours.) According to Phil and Diane's answers, sex is a problem in their relationship; conflicts arise because Phil wants to make love more frequently than Diane does. Both agree it's a topic ripe for discussion.

This decided, the staff members disappear into an adjoining room stacked with computer equipment and video monitors. As instructed, the couple sits quietly for five minutes while the researchers gather baseline data. Then a blinking light on a nearby display panel appears—the couple's cue to begin talking.

They start by discussing their respective families. Neither were terrific models of affection, they agree. Then the subject switches to their courtship. They reminisce about the thrill of those first few months, and how the magic faded. Soon, Diane is complaining about Phil's work, which seems to consume him. She says if he would express more affection outside the bedroom, maybe she'd find the prospect of sex more appealing. Phil falls silent for a while and then brings up their child. "Things might be better if you didn't let Jason stay up until eleven o'clock every night." Diane concedes that Jason is an

obstacle. Then she suggests that they get some books on love-making. Phil offers a weak smile. "We've been over all this before," he sighs.

When fifteen minutes have passed, the light on the panel fades and a research assistant reappears. She sets up a screen to block the couple's view of one another. She directs their attention to a video monitor where they can see a split-screen image of the conversation that's just transpired. Using a dial that turns 180 degrees from "positive" to "neutral" to "negative," Phil and Diane watch the tape twice. The first time, they rate their own feelings at the time the conversation unfolded—how positive or negative they felt moment to moment. The second time, they use the dial to guess how their partner was feeling minute by minute. This exercise evaluates how accurately the couple can "read" one another's emotions.

Later, the same tape will be viewed by psychologists specially trained to analyze the emotional content of people's words, facial expressions, and gestures. Using a dial with settings that range from "disgust," "contempt," and "belligerence" to "validation," "affection," and "joy," these researchers will code every moment of the conversation, assigning a label to each nuance. If a researcher sees Diane's lips tighten when Phil mentions her permissiveness with Jason, the record will register her anger and just how long it lasted. If Phil sighs deeply as she tells him she wishes he would work less, the record will show his sadness. And if either one shuts down, unable or unwilling to respond to what the other is saying, there will be a record of withdrawal as well.

These codes, when correlated with data from the couple's physiological responses, as well as their answers to various questionnaires and interviews, produce a gold mine of information about a couple's interaction. Combined with a multitude of data we've collected from hundreds of other couples in the past two decades, Phil and Diane's simple conversation lends tremendous insight to our understanding of the hidden emotional dynamics of marriage. It is from this mountain of data that I have distilled a scientific model of the often invisible forces that hold a marriage together or tear it apart—a model I want to share with you, so you can get a reading of these forces in your own marriage.

THE STUDIES

I first refined the methods used to measure Phil and Diane's interaction at Indiana University in 1980, when I teamed up with Robert W. Levenson, a scientist with considerable expertise in measuring physiological responses in social situations. Studying the interactions of thirty married couples, Levenson and I proved for the first time that marital satisfaction is linked to spouses' physiological responses to one another. But these experiments were significant in another regard as well. They showed us that it was indeed possible to get couples to act naturally toward one another despite the intrusion of video cameras, electrodes, and microphones. Amazing as it sounds, once these couples were in our lab and put at ease by our assistants, the wires, transducers, and cameras seemed to recede into the background, and their interactions showed the full range of authentic emotions displayed by married couples in "real-life" conversations.

Confident that our methods worked and our findings were valid, we then began a long-term study to see what happens to marriages over time. Was it possible to pinpoint certain behaviors or processes that lead to divorce? What are these factors and, once they are identified, can we use them to predict which couples will stay married and which couples will split? Seventy-nine couples of all different ages came to our observation lab in 1983 to help us find these answers. Checking back with them in 1987, we found links between the information we collected in 1983 and the couples' marital status four years later. Further analysis allowed us to understand in great detail the processes that lead to the dissolution of marriage. These findings were repeated in a similar study I conducted at the University of Illinois with fifty-six couples beginning in 1986. These two studies continue to yield results as we contact both the Indiana and Illinois couples periodically for updates on the state of their relationships.

In the meantime, two new studies are under way. In one, we are following 130 newlywed couples for at least five years to find out how the arrival of children affects their relationships. A second new study, conducted with Robert Levenson at the University of California at Berkeley and Laura Carstensen at Stanford University, involves 160 marriages among couples now in their forties and sixties, who have

never divorced. These folks have been married for an average of twenty and forty years, respectively. Our goal is to learn more about how people manage successful, long-term relationships. For example, we're taking a close look at their capacity to break away from defensive behavior in the middle of an argument and get their conversations back on a more productive track.

What does all this have to do with your marriage? This growing body of research has taught me a great deal that may help you improve your marriage. To benefit from this insight, you needn't hook yourself up to wires or videotape your fights the way we do with couples in our lab. Rather, this book will share with you the essence of what I've learned over the years, and show you practical ways you can put our findings to work in your own relationship.

CONFLICT: A KEY TO HAPPINESS?

If there is one lesson I have learned from my years of research it is that *a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship*. Many couples tend to equate a low level of conflict with happiness and believe the claim "we never fight" is a sign of marital health. But I believe we grow in our relationships by reconciling our differences. That's how we become more loving people and truly experience the fruits of marriage.

But there's much more to know than how to fight well. Not all stable couples resolve conflicts in the same way. Nor do all couples mean the same thing by "resolving" the conflict. In fact, I have found that there are three different styles of problem solving into which healthy marriages tend to settle. In a *validating marriage* couples compromise often and calmly work out their problems to mutual satisfaction as they arise. In a *conflict-avoiding marriage* couples agree to disagree, rarely confronting their differences head-on. And finally, in a *volatile marriage* conflicts erupt often, resulting in passionate disputes.

Previously, many psychologists might have considered conflict-avoiding and volatile marriages to be pathological. But our current research suggests that all three styles are equally stable and bode equally

well for the marriage's future. In chapter 2, I will go into detail about these three styles and help you decide which is closest to the marriage you currently have or would *like* to have.

Of course, following one of these three styles won't guarantee a happy marriage. These adaptations work only to the degree that they allow you to achieve the right balance between positive and negative interactions with your spouse. Amazingly, we have found that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula: no matter what style your marriage follows, you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable.

If you and your spouse do not arrive at a stable equilibrium, when this balance, or "marital ecology," becomes upset, you and your mate will find yourselves frustrated, sniping or lost in a dead end, quarreling more and more. These are the signs of the failure to find a stable marital style you both find comfortable.

In chapters 3 and 4, I will map out for you the downward spiral that begins in couples who are unable to find the equilibrium of a stable type of marriage. And in chapter 5 I will show how strong differences between men and women in how they handle emotions can feed this process. Negativity builds, with increasingly damaging results. It begins as laughter and validation disappear, and criticism and pain well up. Your attempts to soothe one another's hurt feelings and get communication back on track seem useless. Partners become lost in hostile and negative thoughts and feelings, as their bodies react to the stress, making it harder to think rationally, to respond calmly. Soon, the destructive interactions I call "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" take over. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal. At this point, unless a couple makes changes, they are likely to find themselves sliding helplessly toward the end of their marriage. In chapter 6, I'll help you review the results of your analysis of your own marriage, to see the ways in which these destructive forces have begun to eat away at your marriage.

Is the solution simply to be nice the next time your spouse insults your sister, readjusts the thermostat, shrinks your favorite shirt, or engages in some other crazy-making behavior? Hardly. But there are specific steps you *can* take to resolve conflicts constructively and

strengthen the positive side of your marriage. And if you follow them regularly, they should inoculate your relationship against the forces that can lead to divorce.

These steps—outlined in detail in the second half of this book—include communication techniques that proved to stabilize marriages in therapy studies I conducted among couples at Indiana University in the late 1970s. Several researchers, including Howard Markman, a psychologist at the University of Denver and a former student, and Neil Jacobson at the University of Washington, have corroborated my early findings: learning these strategies counters the destructive tactics that can tear a marriage apart. Couples who master these crucial techniques—particularly how to settle disagreements without escalating conflict—are strengthening their marriages.

My method of diagnosing the fault lines in a marriage, and the advice that follows, spring from scientific data collected from hundreds of couples, and they represent the most complete information available anywhere about the way men and women interact in marriages that succeed and in marriages that fail.

If you choose to follow the steps outlined in this book, keep in mind that they are not band-aid solutions. They will require vigilance and commitment, and they may involve changing the way you perceive yourself, your partner, and your relationship. They may also require you to change how you habitually listen and react to your spouse. Most of all, you'll need to work at making these new, more productive habits so familiar that they will be automatic responses when you need them the most: at the difficult, tense moments between you and your spouse. To do this, you'll need a thorough understanding of where your relationship stands today. That's why the book also includes several tests to help you assess and diagnose what kind of marriage you prefer, as well as the character of your present bond. These tests are not meant to predict whether you're headed for divorce, but they can help you identify the trouble spots in a way that will clarify the antidotes you need to try. In the second half of the book, each of the difficulties you've diagnosed in your marriage will be matched with a specific remedy, something you can change to strengthen your marriage.

Marriage is an extremely complex relationship and there is no

single test that can predict its survival or dissolution with 100 percent accuracy. You and your partner are the only ones who know the sacrifices and rewards of your marriage, and you are the only ones who can decide its future. I hope this book can help you make thoughtful choices, and identify and change the emotional currents that if left unchecked, can undermine a marriage.