



Seven Skills You Need for a Happy Marriage
By Shana Stanberry Parker Sc.D,
Licensed Psychologist, Couples Coach
www.facebook.com/Marriage2Deepen

In my 30+-year psychotherapy practice I have come in contact with many couples who are near the end of their capacity to tolerate the anger or pain they live with in their relationship. Even though they want to change they seem unable to create a happy marriage.

I have also come in contact with many couples who have maintained the appearance of happy marriages through the years but have found they are longing for something deeper and more vital between them.

Here are some quotes from couples I have worked with. Perhaps some of these problems sound familiar to you.

I feel lonely in my marriage. Even when we make love I don't feel connected. We don't really talk. I think we are afraid we just don't love each any more but not exploring our feelings and our dreams makes the distance grow. It's easier to get into work mode and not worry about it.

I often wonder what happened to the partner I married. We used to have great sex and we could talk about everything. Now it seems flat. I don't feel appreciated. My partner is unreasonable a lot. My needs don't seem important to her. She doesn't initiate sex so I always have to.

Life seems fine. My marriage is ok. We don't fight. We make love occasionally. I often wonder if this is all there is. I see other couples that seem more connected. I don't know if anything is wrong but I wonder if we are missing something. I feel a little numb. Like there is not much aliveness in my marriage. Maybe we have just grown apart.

We are so busy that we don't make time for one another. It seems like we are ships passing in the night. I don't know how to approach her any more. We are living parallel lives with very little connection except the children.

I am always living with the anxiety of when the anger will flare up. It doesn't make sense to me. I feel like I am walking on eggshells all the time. Even when things are going well I know it's only a matter of time before I'll be in trouble regardless of how hard I try.

We have taken seminars and workshops and after that we can stay in the groove for about 3 weeks. Then something will come up and we will go back to our old patterns of being adversarial with one another instead of on the same team. I'll use the tools but I can't seem to stay with them when I feel attacked.

We fight all the time. I can stand it any more. We do have good makeup sex but I think there is something really wrong with our marriage and I don't know what to do.

These are difficult and painful problems. These are some of the issues that can be resolved when you learn about the proven ways to create a happy marriage. I will be introducing you to how to have more awareness of your process and reclaim your capacity to express your needs and create the relationship you want. I cannot say it will be easy. But for so many it has been priceless.

What are the seven essential skills?

Skill #1. Listening listening listening so that you can start to trust each other and stop fighting.

Skill #2. Appreciating each other so that you can hear how much you are loved. So that you look forward to coming home at night to be appreciated. Appreciations even get your husband to have little surprises for you when you come home after work. Or your wife to invite you bed early. I'll show you how this can happen.

Skill #3. Growing Up so that the skills you have learned can work and you can stop acting like your parents or like you acted as a child. I'll be showing you one of the most important and well kept secrets in all of couples therapy- how to make all the skills you have learned work! And why they haven't!

Skill #4. Communicating from the heart so that you feel safe to be yourself.

Skill #5. Expressing what you need so that your partner can stop guessing and you get what you want.

Skill #6. Sex Ed. so that you can get out of the rut and back to those early days.

Skill #7. Shared Fun: so your partner becomes your best friend.

Here is the short version. Stay tuned for more emails on how you can go deeper!

Skill #1: Listening, listening, listening

Learning to listen requires not just hearing but also being empathetic. This is a specific and fairly simple skill, although not always easy! Listening requires:

1. A choice to listen.
2. A capacity to put what we have to say on hold until it's our turn.
3. Developing a rich vocabulary for feelings.
4. Telling our partner what we hear in terms of the feeling and meaning of what they are saying (*not* what we want them to be saying).

For now we will assume the first 2 steps are in place and start with number 3. Listening involves hearing, not just the words, but also the feeling of the speaker. In order to be able to listen for the feeling experience of your partner you need to have a rich vocabulary for feelings.

Rich Vocabulary for Feelings

While not an exact science, we will use 5 feeling word categories.

HAPPY SAD ANGRY AFRAID CARING

Under each category there are many feelings that go from a small intensity to a high intensity of that feeling. For example, if you recently asked your partner to go to your favorite restaurant and she/he enthusiastically agreed to find a sitter you would have felt *happy*. And now tune in to what degree of happy. You might have felt *really happy* which could be *thrilled* or *great* or *stoked*. Or you could have felt a smaller degree of happiness like *pleased* or *content*. **There are no right feelings.** This is an exercise in identifying the category and intensity of a feeling so you can learn to match what you hear with what you say to let your partner know that you are listening. Another example: perhaps you came home and discovered your partner had not kept a commitment to clear out a mess they had made. You might have felt something in the sad or angry category. More specifically (depending on how important it was to you) in the sad category you could have felt *disappointed* or *discouraged*. In the angry category you could have been *resentful* or *frustrated*.

A feeling word will always fit into the sentence "I hear that you feel _____." We can ensure that we name (reflect back) the feeling being expressed if we begin our practice with this format. Later of course, you will use your own style.

The reason we are refining the intensity of feeling in the category is so you can match the feeling word with the intensity of what is being expressed. If your partner is telling you

about discovering that a friend betrayed them you will want to be able to express that you hear that they are feeling devastated or furious. You can see how much more empathetic this would be than saying you hear that they feel discontent or annoyed which are much less in intensity and would probably not match. Remember this is not rocket science and your partner will help you know if you are accurate or not. Then you can revise your statement to match how they have corrected you.

Examples

<u>Happy</u>	<u>Sad</u>	<u>Angry</u>	<u>Afraid</u>	<u>Caring</u>
<i>Ecstatic</i>	<i>crushed</i>	<i>enraged</i>	<i>threatened</i>	<i>devoted</i>
<i>Joyful</i>	<i>abandoned</i>	<i>resentful</i>	<i>petrified</i>	<i>love</i>
<i>Great</i>	<i>lonely</i>	<i>furious</i>	<i>scared</i>	<i>adoring</i>
<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>hopeless</i>	<i>mad</i>	<i>anxious</i>	<i>smitten</i>
<i>Good</i>	<i>unhappy</i>	<i>annoyed</i>	<i>cautious</i>	<i>concerned</i>
<i>Content</i>	<i>down</i>	<i>frustrated</i>	<i>uneasy</i>	<i>appreciative</i>

Important points:

It will be very important to remember that empathy is not the same as agreement.

You can let someone know you hear what he or she is feeling without agreeing or having the same feelings!

If you cannot find your capacity to be empathetic schedule a new time or ask to be the speaker first if your partner can listen to you first.

When listening, face your partner and lean forward so your body mirrors your disposition of curiosity and heartfelt desire to know what your partner feels and why.

Listening requires practice. Set up some time to practice every day. It's easiest to start with topics that are not too problematic. Later you can move on to the hard stuff.

Agree that you will each take 5 minutes to speak. After each few sentences the "listener" says to the person talking "I hear that you feel _____ because _____."

After 5 minutes switch roles. You can keep going after that if you have time.

Skill #2: Appreciation of your partner: seeing their best

This is simple. When was the last time you said "thank you" to your spouse? If it wasn't today then this will be a game changer! Being appreciated is so important. It allows us to feel seen and to know that our efforts have not gone unnoticed. It makes us happy. It nurtures our heart. It lets us know we are not taken for granted.

Right now name 10 things you appreciate about your spouse.

1. It can be something physical like her smile or his dimple.
2. It can be how he helped you clean up the kitchen or how she helped you clean out the shed.
3. It can be something that they did: his kind way with your mother or her taking the time to write your dad a thank you note for a gift.
4. It can be a memory of when you first met.
5. It can be a way you dream into the future together.
6. It can be something sexual.
7. It can be a small thing you love in a big way like when she kisses you before she gets up in the morning when you are still asleep.
8. It can be a capacity they have like the ability to handle the finances or cook a great meal.
9. It can be a talent they have like that of playing an instrument or shooting hoops.
10. It can be a quality they have like that of compassion or clarity or strength.

Now sometime today share your list with your spouse. Be generous with praise. It's like filling the bank account. And then when there is an argument there will be more credit to draw on.

Every day say 3 things you appreciate to your spouse before going to bed.

Skill #3: Growing Up- Taking care of your inner child and your outer bully

We all have an inner child. This is a good thing! Our inner child holds the qualities of innocence, spontaneity and boundless creativity. It can also hold shame, fear, and lack of trust. When I talk about "growing up" I don't mean to get rid of the inner child. I mean to know when you are acting from a younger part of yourself. When you are being lead by that part of yourself and it is causing problems. Growing up is learning to see when that is happening and learning how to make a different choice. There are lots of times when being playful with your spouse is pure fun. And there are times when your partner is trying to share something that is important or vulnerable when being playful is not appropriate. Kids are notorious for laughing when something is serious. Or for example,

an inner child (a young part of our self) who is always trying to be good (a way they might have learned to get love when they were young) might not be able to stand up for herself or say what she wants.

Here is an example of how Jen began to see when her inner child was the one in her marriage in certain circumstances. This made her incapable of being a grown-up.

When Randy says something critical to Jen about how she has been allowing their daughter to leave the playroom a mess after her finger painting is finished instead of teaching her how to pick up after herself, his harsh tone seems to pierce Jen to the core. She told me if “I could crawl into a cave and hide I would. I don’t know if it shows but if I let myself go into the experience my shoulders would slump forward and my chest would cave in. I usually just leave the room feeling rejected. I feel young- maybe three. Like when my father would constantly be finding fault with what I did or didn’t do. If I could leave the room quickly I was less likely to get punished. It felt like it was unsafe to stay in the room. I might get yelled at or hit. I can see my inner child in her pajamas and her eyes are looking at the floor. My body is tense and I feel a little shaky. I feel the same thing with Randy! Then I withdraw. My inner child has a quality of innocence and shyness that I like. But she is not capable of talking to Randy to fix any problem.”

Here is a little about Tom.

When Tom was 2 his family moved to New England. His dad was a real estate developer and his mom a high school teacher. He had a sister 5 years older than he. Sometimes it felt to Tom like he had 2 mothers and no father. His father was often at work and even when he was home his mother was more of the disciplinarian. His older sister babied him and was very protective. Since he never saw his father standing up to anyone he learned to hide his true feelings and get cute rather than risk rejection. To get his need for love met he was often boyish and funny even as a successful Type A business- man. In his relationship with Laura he was vigilant to be pleasing her and living up to her expectations. Whenever there was conflict her would automatically become like he was as a kid and get cute or funny rather than hear her concern. You can imagine that made Laura feel dismissed and upset.

Imagine yourself as a child. Can you remember feeling small and powerless? Depending on the family we grew up in we find different ways to protect ourselves if the environment is not all friendly and supportive. The examples above are a few ways we coped and there are other ways as well. One way some people protect themselves is to get tough in one way or another. Then the inner child can appear more like a bully. And the Bully worked to keep us safe. But alas, we have neglected to notice that we grew up! Now the Bully is still operating as though we were young and need protection. Part of growing up is to help him (or her) notice it is time for a more grown up way to be with our spouse that gets us closer to each other emotionally not farther apart.

Self -work is taking the responsibility for exploring what part you play in keeping the two of you from having a happy marriage. Look for more on this in the upcoming emails.

Skill #4: Skillful communication from your heart

It seems like this would be a natural thing to do with someone you love. Yet we have not had role models that taught us how and so we fall into bad patterns of communicating that create distance from one another instead of the intimacy we crave.

Here is one place to start in learning how to skillfully communicate from the heart. One simple (but not always easy) skill to develop is to figure out what you are really feeling *underneath* that top layer and then sharing from that more vulnerable or authentic layer.

When your relationship is feeling flat or worse.

When you wish your spouse would stop blaming you.

When you are tempted to blame your spouse instead of reflecting on your own behavior. (We all have these moments!)

Try this:

1. Tune in to what emotion you are feeling when something happens that upsets you. Remember we have just talked about the 5 categories of emotion and that each category has many levels or gradations of intensity.

Happy Sad Angry Afraid Caring

Emotions can be layered one on top of the other with the most difficult to express often hiding underneath another.

2. When you discover the emotion that you know is most real for you- the one that feels the most scary or vulnerable to share- then that is the one to share.

3. Say to your spouse “I have something I would like to share with you. Is this a good time?” When you get the go ahead then share in a new format. For example “I realize that I have been feeling _____ and instead of saying *that* I have been blaming you.” The feeling might be *left out* or *unloved* or *disappointed*.

Here is an example:

Jennifer was constantly getting annoyed with her spouse Ron, for doing what she called “going silent” during the discussions about their relationship. When he did that she would begin her usual rant “why can’t you tell me what is going on?” Or, some statement that implied “what is wrong with you?” Of course that made Ron more silent.

After tuning in to what she was feeling *underneath* the annoyance that led to blaming him, Jennifer realized that his silence actually made her feel nervous and a bit scared because she worried he didn’t care. When he went silent it made her feel unsafe. Rather than stay in touch with feeling unsafe she had protected herself from feeling vulnerable by getting annoyed, which she found easier to handle and express.

So she decided to give the exercise a try. She went to Ron and asked him if it was a good time to tell him something. When he said yes she took the leap and shared this:

“Honey, I realized that when you “go silent” what happens for me is I feel scared that you don’t care about me. I know that’s sounds silly but I want you to know that my annoyance is just covering those feelings.”

Guess what Ron said?

He said “wow. I never would have figured that out! I don’t want you to feel nervous or scared. Sometimes I just need a lot longer to know what to say. If you’d be patient I could figure it out. Thanks for letting me know.”

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN TO TRY. LET ME KNOW HOW IT GOES!

Skill # 5: Expressing your needs

This seems like a “no brainer.” When we don’t express our needs we are less likely to get our needs met. When our needs are not met we are less likely to have a happy marriage. Although this seems straight -forward there are some major ways many people talk themselves out of doing this. Do any of this sound familiar to you?

1. I don’t want to bother or further burden my partner.
2. They will think I’m silly or self centered or...
3. My partner should already know what I need.
4. It’s less risky to not ask and just be resentful.
5. I am scared to be that honest.
6. It was never ok growing up so it must not be ok.
7. They don’t really want to know.
8. I don’t want to discover if they don’t want to know.

If any of the above reasons remind you of reasons you have given yourself for not asking for what you need this is important to explore. Look for ways to do this in upcoming emails.

Skill #6: Sex Ed- not like in 7th grade

Just as the previous steps have made the assumption that you desire to cultivate a happy marriage by having good communication, this step assumes that you desire to have a good (or great) sex life as well. This does not mean that your behavior is always reflective of that! Let me say that again- sometimes we want a good sex life and what we do does not get us what we want.

A sexual interaction is an intimate snapshot of how we connect or avoid connecting with our partner. When we look at how we act we can see we are either being authentic or protective. We can ask for what we need or be resentful and disappointed that we don’t get it. Our culture has not helped us with this one! When in our popular media have you ever seen or read about a woman asking her man to pleasure her in a certain way? When

have you seen a couple have a discussion about premature ejaculation? When have you seen a man telling his spouse that he wants more “blow jobs?”

There is most likely, a part of each of us who is willing and wants to connect sexually with our partner. I call that part the Lover. At its most mature, the Lover in us can be spontaneously passionate, erotic, sensual, full breathed and open hearted. In the beginning many couples find they are swept up in what this culture calls “chemistry.” It’s often easiest to have a great sex life in the beginning. I will be talking about why that is and how to recreate those interactions in future emails and in the Mastery Course for Couples. For couples that learn to cultivate and sustain their open, passionate and loving sexual connection this can serve as the basis for a thriving and deeply satisfying relationship.

Let’s revisit the hierarchy of needs to discover what might enhance or inhibit a healthy, juicy, and nurturing sex life. What might inhibit the mature Lover in us? As you will see this might be different for men and women.

Here is a brief overview of the pyramid of needs I wrote about in previous email.

The need to feel physically and emotionally safe with your spouse.

When this need is not met for women, they usually shut down on the inside and either reject their spouse or just submit sexually without being open. This is what we describe as not having any passion.

When this need to feel physically and emotionally safe is not met for men they might close their hearts and get aggressive in getting their sexual needs met. Or some men might get insecure and act in a needy way. This is where some of the jokes about men “begging for sex” come from: trying to make light of a difficult relationship problem.

The need for belonging and love.

When women don’t feel that this need to belong and feel loved is met in their marriage they sometimes focus on what pleases their partner to try to get this need met, regardless of her own needs and desires. They might become willing to over ride what they want. Eventually this can result in resentment, withdrawal, distance and unhappiness.

When men don’t feel like they belong or are loved or sexually desired, they sometimes start trying to get it right. If this doesn’t work he gives up, decides he can’t ever get it right and make her happy and he can’t take it anymore and gets angry or withdraws.

The need for esteem.

When the need for esteem isn’t met in a marriage it is possible to decide to meet one’s own needs. While some of this can be healthy, the test is whether the behavior is creating closeness or distance from our spouse.

At the top of the hierarchy is actualization or full self-expression. This is part of what I teach in the Seven Skills You Need for a Happy Marriage.

Skill #7: Shared fun- enough work, let's play

The old saying “all work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy,” is true for marriage as well. When our lives are busy we can forget how important it is to kick back. It doesn't have to be 2 weeks in Hawaii. We can schedule two hours on a Tuesday night to give the kids to grandma or a sitter and take a walk and go to dinner.

You might want to make a list of activities you both enjoy. It can be something new you want to learn together. It might be friends you want to see or a movie in that zone between chick flicks for her (ok I'm stereotyping) and the violence of war. The list of things you might chose to do together for playtime is endless.

If you don't want to do this then it is a wonderful opportunity to ask yourself “which of the 7 proven ways to have a happy marriage am I not practicing?” Or “what is the need I want filled that would then allow me to *want* to spend time with my partner?”

Conclusion

Just like when building a good home the builder makes sure there is a strong foundation, in creating a happy marriage the partners need the skills to make a strong foundation. These 7 skills can be your foundation. Each one of these seven steps can add the closeness, safety, love, and joy that you are desire. There are lots of techniques I will be exploring to add skills and examples and practices to these 7 skills. Look for the free webinar on my Marriage2Deepen facebook page. See you there.