

A Plan for Immediate Improvement in Social Interactions and in establishing attitudes and routines for improved social functioning (some marriage specific examples are given—generalize them for other relationships).

1. Manage negative emotions much better. We all experience negatives from various setbacks--miscellaneous losses to deaths to bad feelings.....and when the smiling stops—WATCH OUT! It's not that we are clinically depressed, but rather that we can easily become more vulnerable to reacting poorly and doing something that we will regret immediately, or later (...and guys, that testosterone will give you the power to go over the edge a little quicker and harder! Anything that you do wrong is likely to be remembered longer than those moment of perfection that we all have, from time to time.) Have a plan as to what you will do to MINIMIZE all negative responses. If you are noticeably above average in your negative responses--you may need very frequent practice on you plan! Maybe a bit of breathing time, at a place away from the point of tension. You may experience shame as you notice that you need some private practice. Go ahead, keep it private—it's best to learn some of our skills alone. Know that men can easily scare women with their noisy ways, but women must become massively out of control to frighten men (this is a VERY important gender difference). Women must have emotional safety, and in its absence, the potential for good relationships can end immediately, if sensitive events are mishandled--and major problems can begin. Women, feeling unsafe, cannot give men the validation (for their contributions and efforts) on which they thrive. Always remember that half of all people are below average, and that you and your mate may be afflicted by poor abilities or skills.

2. Realize that influencing another (others) is by far the riskiest social endeavor ever to be attempted in life (and there are bound to be numerous attempts to influence, every day, in married life and family relationships). Planning patiently through specifically designed and tailored techniques (skills) is the only way to do this successfully. Refer to the work of PREP or PAIRS in preparing an outline and making a plan for how you are going to do this for the rest of your life! If you find that you are already following most of this outline, you are indeed lucky as you have had great teachers and examples.....and you probably lucked out in being born with the ideal disposition, so this was somewhat automatic for you. You are probably in a blessed 1% of the population. However, you might be cursed in finding that no one around you, seems to “get it” as easily as you do, and that you very readily notice the failings of your spouse, family members or co-workers. So, you might have to work overtime to learn essential patience here, and certainly don't punish yourself, if this is needed, as most others have a good deal of learning (and unlearning, to do). Remember, it took years to lay down negative patterns and assumptions and the best thing to do is to make sure you each really hear the position and idea of the other person—any stressful moment is NOT the time to solve anything! And it certainly isn't the time to slip into name-calling or ascribing a pathological diagnosis to the other person! Patience! Patience! You've made it this far through this little teaching tool—the structure here may be the best way to understand the problems and turn them around—without years of “therapy” or drugs.

3. Choose a peaceful, non-conflictual moment to discuss potentially conflicted areas of couple and family life. If it's not peaceful now, defer, and plan for a better time. And don't push for a time and place before the other party(ies) are ready. They may really wish to avoid the discussion, altogether, if there is ANY history of poorly handled and resolved negative emotions (see #1 above). Be prepared to wait awhile as you make the best possible plan. NEVER randomly seek a counselor or minister, and be EXTREMELY cautious about a psychotherapist (there are many in all fields that will only help you to clarify your differences and many will advise to give up and “move on.”. The concept of relationship education is relatively foreign to many of them, though it has been a fundamental of human life for millenia.) Cash for a phone consultation with proven marriage savers like Michele Wiener-Davis and Willard Harley is money well-spent. In fact, you can fax them this outline to let them know that you are using this structure—they will help plug in specific suggestions of what to start, what to stop, and what efforts to continue. They are very results oriented—and they can help you obtain positive results in a hurry, because they know what they are doing, and they have plans that work!

4. **Be aware of the PAIRS (pairs.com) sequence and get ready to use it now.** PREP (prep.com) is also very good and in some ways has broader application (for varying social/ethnic/life station status), but PAIRS has a wonderfully, simple outline that is very useful in redirecting bad, past relationship interactions, and can easily be learned and used on a continuing basis). Here it is: (they call it the daily temperature reading)

a. appreciations after establishing a quiet, non-distracting environment, sit face to face, preferably with no furniture between you—touching knees and hands is the best. Each calmly state briefly a recent or long term satisfaction or appreciation that you have of the other. Make it sincere, not long. Especially emphasize any recent work or effort on their part, making note of as many events and actions as is possible—don't make up minor stuff, be honest and appreciative.

b. new information Each briefly state new “business of life together” items that effect you, the other, and for certain the family unit. It might be something new about your circumstance or work, but it is expressly NOT about problems (they can wait—we want the validations and news, first).

c. puzzles Each move into the area of things you don't understand well. You are asking for more information, from the other or from some source they know of. It is acceptable to respond, “I wonder about that too.” (The assumption is that the topic will be revisited—it's OK, now, to make a plan for time to talk more in depth.) For now you are merely establishing safe, short, even tempered—and loving and caring exchanges.....RELAX!

d. complaint with requests for change Oh, oh! Careful now. Note that this is singular. One complaint, SOFTLY SPOKEN with care showing in your eyes—could such and such be considered? Note that this comes MUCH AFTER more positive, caring exchanges. Keep it brief and be VERY cautious—NO BLAMING OR CRITICISM, EVER! The odds are overwhelming that both of you have done this poorly in the past—and the other person remembers, all too well. The goal is to immediately break past, bad habits (and memories).

e. wishes, hopes, and dreams Stick to these categories, no additional requests and for certain, no demands. This is the time to explain that you may be interested in 4,5, or 6 now, even though you have been known to be interested in 1, 2, or 3. Reiteration and stronger resolve to pursue known preferences are fine, too. Life has many phases and there is much to bring into this area, but again, don't make a long discussion. This whole section (a- e) shouldn't take more than ten minutes a day. It cannot be allowed to become drudgery or be seen as an unnecessary delay of important personal or family tasks. If, upon your first attempt, you are really cautious and can trip through an initial five or ten minutes without having any of your customary squabbles, you maybe on your way. Repeat this soon (as the goal is daily, very brief, predominantly structured exchanges) and DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN, just because you don't feel the restoration of enough warmth just yet. Keep it up. You know you feel better, already, in the absence of open conflict.

5. see William Doherty on the basic rules to **initiate couple and family rituals** in *Intentional Families* p194. To not have rituals and structure is to invite the free-form deterioration that afflicts far too many families.

6. **Understand the value of refined, polite, non-conflictual conversation and small talk.** (see the work of Debra Fine)

7. **Understand the evil effects of “let it all hang out,” venting and “repressing your feelings will cause health problems” thinking from past, wrong “therapeutic” assumptions and recommendations.** Take pride in how you are learning and practicing positive control and channeling of negative feelings.

8. **Do whatever you can to build fun and friendship in your relationships.** This sense of celebration is from Markman and Stanley (fifteen years of NIMH research-U of Denver), and is highly similar to the family rituals of Doherty (above). As proof, note that fun and friendship is totally

absent in dysfunctional families, isn't it?

9. All of the above will build a structure which can withstand the very bad news which life brings to us all. The relationships can now be durable enough that the many positives will carry you through what to others would be negative and catastrophic.*

10. Note that the cost of family dissolution is VERY high—much higher than customarily reported by those with an investment in the divorce industry. Children, even adult children of state-sanctioned repudiation of holy matrimony and vows experience many negative effects. There is much to indicate that men experience negative social consequences at a very high rate—notably higher than women.

*For further reading, see the **Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education** website for many free papers and book excerpts. Place early July on your calendar for their next annual conference (additional useful information and research documents are available free and without sign-up at smartmarriages.com).