

How to Save a Marriage or Relationship

By Margaret Kohut & Steve Slavik

Modern commentators on marriage have long said that without a mutual perception of equality, partners cannot negotiate the many daily demands of life. Without this perception, one partner is continually striving to be “first” or “better” than the other; each partner wants to be “right.” There is the insidious game of “one-upmanship” within the relationship that will ultimately destroy it. In this type of partnership, “score-keeping” is prevalent; each partner keeps a mental tally of perceived wrongs that have been done to them by the other partner. Evening the “score” becomes the primary agenda in this relationship. In this environment, how can any emotional closeness and bonding take place between these partners? More than a few marital therapists have heard at least one partner say “Last year he/she did...” Last *year*? Keeping score and holding grudges are relationship “Deal-Breakers.” And just as many therapists have asked “Do you want to be right all the time, or do you want to be happy?”

However, with a perception of equality, each person can help to create a balanced relationship in which co-operation is valued and is emotionally close and reliable. This type of equal relationship is what makes a secure relationship a “soft place to fall” according to psychologist P.C. McGraw; a place where *true* partners can make mistakes in the macrocosm of the world and in the microcosm of the relationship, and know that their partner neither judges nor hold him/her in contempt. In a stable and happy marriage, contemptuous superiority never occurs.

Close, committed, and secure relationships create a shelter against the ongoing stresses of life. The knowledge that a spouse or partner is also a friend and companion who will be available in times of stress provides the courage for both partners to engage in life, take risks, pursue goals and feel the safety of being less than perfect. The need for affection and closeness to others begins in childhood and develops into adult relationships. Adult loving relationships require mutual devotion and cultivation in which each person subordinates self-interest to the well being of the other. Early psychologist Alfred Adler (1943) emphasised that equality of partners is essential to a successful relationship: “If each partner is to be more interested in the other partner than in him or herself, there must be equality. Neither partner can feel subdued or overshadowed. It should be the effort of each to ease and enrich the life of the other. In this way, each is safe. Each feels that he or she is worthwhile: each feels that he or she is needed.”

Relationships will fail if the members are motivated primarily by self-interest. Romantic relationships, close friendships, and family connections satisfy the need for relational closeness, experienced through mutual companionship, respect, loyalty, and shared interests. Through love, people transcend their own interests, needs, fears, and desires by forming connections to others, serving others, and working with others to achieve common goals.

Saving a troubled marriage, then, requires much self-insight and willingness to forgo the need to be “right” and keeping score of wrongs done by the other partner. A divorce due to “irreconcilable differences” usually indicates that *someone* is being habitually disrespected and held in contempt by the other. Most of these unfortunate divorces could have been salvaged if the partners understood their relationship’s pathology and were willing to make changes that would salvage their love for each other and result in the marriage “going the distance.”