

# The Secrets of Happily Married Men

Eight Ways to Win  
Your Wife's Heart Forever

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# Introduction

Slam!

That's the sound that one million American men hear each year as their wives push them out the doors of their homes and into the divorce courts. In three generations, the divorce rate has escalated from 14 percent to nearly half of all marriages. But although this "national epidemic" is widely reported, you rarely hear about the fact that it's *women*, at rates much higher than men, who are the ones telling researchers that they are not happy in their marriages.<sup>1</sup> In fact, wives initiate more than two-thirds of the splits.<sup>2</sup>

How can this be? Shouldn't women be fixing relationships rather than declaring them dead? Women are supposed to be the relationship experts. They go to therapists, watch relationship gurus on TV, read magazine articles, or seek answers in self-help books. But still their marriages crumble beneath their feet. Why can't women stem the tide of divorce and make their marriages work? It is because in the vast majority of cases, it's the men that the women are complaining about, so the problems in a marriage won't be solved until *men* do something about improving the relationship.

Husbands must accept this challenge. If they don't, the doors to their homes will irreversibly slam shut behind them. And with the closing of these doors come the devastating consequences of divorce:

broken families, financial devastation, spiritual and physical decline, and damaged children.

## DEFEAT IS NOT AN OPTION

Prior to the 1960s, religion and culture prevented most marriages from falling apart. Now attitudes are more liberal. Our culture says, “If you’re not happy, get out.” And so for many couples, divorce lurks just around the corner every time an argument tears apart the sense of personal bliss.

But divorce is not pretty. It represents the transformation of love, affection, sharing, patience, understanding, and commitment into frustration, anger, distrust, emotional abuse, trauma, grief, and feelings of failure. No one should have to witness marital joy reduced to bitter abandonment of hope.

You don’t want to go there. So it’s time to reject the idea that marital unhappiness automatically means the relationship is over. When the marriage falters, it’s our job as guys, who innately hate to admit defeat, to revive it. We have no other option. Strengthening, improving, and saving a marriage is not something we can do at our leisure. It must be done right, and it must be attended to on a daily—make that an hourly—basis.

But . . . let’s face it, when it comes to securing a better relationship, many men don’t know where to start. These men may know how to smash a backhand, teach their daughters how to ride a bike or drive a car, pursue advanced educational degrees, and have dynamic careers. Many know how to build their own businesses, navigate a narrow channel through a stormy inlet, negotiate a complicated contract, lead a team of doctors delivering health care in a developing country, or defend a friend from unfounded accusations in a community of peers. However, when they face the biggest challenge of their lives—a collapsing marriage and a complaining wife—the most action many of them can muster is a shrug of their shoulders, which just makes their wives complain more.

## Men Can Save Their Marriages

Men don't have to feel so helpless—they can save their marriages. I know. I've worked with hundreds of husbands and surveyed thousands more on the Internet. I've spoken to them in seminars and in support groups. I've interviewed World War I veterans and men just out of college. Each has described times when his marriage was strained. Each has struggled with his place in marriage, questioned his identity as a husband and father, and faced serious challenges to his commitment. Yet through a persistent commitment to fix the problems, these men have saved and improved their marriages.

Unfortunately, far too many men do not have this attitude. They have been conditioned to believe that they can't fix a broken marriage because they lack the necessary skills—and that they lack those skills *simply because they are men*. This book hopes to explode that notion. You possess the means to save your marriage *because you are a man*.

## EQUAL BUT VERY DIFFERENT

Men and women are different. In recent years, it's become politically incorrect to utter such a thought out loud. But it's true. Women have tremendous strengths, capacities, skills, and resources that men don't have. And the same is true of men. They are intrinsically, basically, fundamentally different from women in so many ways: their bodies, their hard-wiring, their hormonal and biochemical makeup, their brains—all different. Everyone knows this instinctively, from the gut and the heart. Boys are different to begin with: they develop differently, and they mature with certain strengths and weaknesses that are different from those of women.

Yet, oddly enough, for several decades now, husbands have been encouraged to read books and articles and to listen to “experts” who say that in order to have a good marriage, men have to reason, react, and talk more like women. They tell men they should be

softer, kinder, gentler, less intimidating, more sensitive—and do more laundry. I've read hundreds of these books and articles and have concluded that it's all bunk.

The reason men avoid self-help marriage experts and make no progress toward improving their relationships is that they get the clear but misguided message that they have to reinvent themselves in order to understand their wives. Most men don't want to do that, and I don't blame them.

I take a different approach. Like most marriage counselors, I certainly will ask you to take stock of the instincts, attitudes, behaviors, and especially the words you use that influence your marriage. But I won't ask you to change anything about yourself.

Let me repeat that: I won't ask you to change anything about yourself. You are okay. Men are okay. You do not have to discover your feminine side in order to become a better husband. You do not have to abandon, dampen, or camouflage any aspect of your personality or way of viewing the world that is commonly described as "male thinking" or "male behavior." You can even remain bullheaded, as long as you are bullheaded about making your marriage better and your life happier.

## **Evolve or Die?**

I honestly believe that men innately possess the skills necessary to succeed at marriage. Being a man is an advantage, not an obstacle. I know this goes against what you read in newspapers and magazines, not to mention the images of husbands depicted in popular culture, and it is an opinion that I guarantee will be met with raised eyebrows in mixed company. In some situations, saying that you are fine just the way you are will be thrown in your face as evidence that men are arrogant, insensitive, and uninterested in understanding women. Indeed, there are some who, upon hearing such a statement, will suddenly see you as shorter and hairier, and wearing a loincloth while carrying a club.

Current thinking is that men need to evolve. We are told constantly that it doesn't count anymore if we're strong and silent, because women expect something different. But I don't believe that women's expectations have really shifted all that much. I'll devote more time to this subject early in this book because it's key to understanding why you really don't need to stop being "a typical guy" to have a good marriage. This evolve-or-die mentality presents a trap for men who attempt to change the tenor of their marriage by living up to some politically correct definition of the New Age husband—in other words, trying to be something they are not.

After more than sixteen years in private practice, I have come to believe that men are born with the ability to make their marriages last for the rest of their lives. They don't necessarily need to unlearn anything. They don't have to stop thinking like a man. They don't need feminizing. They are not, by virtue of their gender, incomplete, incompetent, or incapable of satisfying their spouse's emotional needs. In fact, in one way or another, I tell couples I counsel that if we begin the work of repairing a marriage by assuming that the husband needs fixing, the odds of success are greatly diminished, if not doomed.

I start by reminding couples that men who marry usually do so because of an overwhelming desire to be domesticated. They want to be happily ensconced in an exclusive relationship with a person they chose as more special and deserving of their love than anyone else. During courtship, men are inclined to be romantic, thoughtful, and considerate; they enjoy the challenge of pleasing their chosen mate. They say "I love you" with abandon, and take immense pleasure in connecting with their wives in intimate ways. Most married men—even those whose marriages lay in ruins—demonstrated at one time or another that they have these feelings and can do these things. That's why most women want their marriages to be more like their days of courtship.

So why not give your wife what she wants—and at the same time get from your marriage exactly what you had hoped for the day you said “I do”? This book will give you eight ways to make that happen.

## MAN TO MAN

Since becoming a psychiatrist, I’ve met with thousands of individuals and encouraged them to tell their stories. As they sit across from me, my clients share their fears, joys, and disappointments, but right from the beginning, I noticed that the men I counsel hold back—they struggle to be honest and forthright when talking about their feelings and fears.

This isn’t surprising. After all, current American culture provides few opportunities for men to talk about relationships with each other. After the frat house days, a code of silence binds men to secrecy about their intimate lives. We might talk about investment portfolios or last night’s game, but marriage-building strategies are almost never shared man to man.

That’s why my search for information about relationships led me to the Internet. When I launched my Web site, [SecretsofMarriedMen.com](http://SecretsofMarriedMen.com), early in 2001, I expected that there would be dozens of Web sites devoted to married men. In fact, mine was the only noncommercial site dedicated to researching and supporting husbands’ marriage skills. Slowly over time, people found [SecretsofMarriedMen.com](http://SecretsofMarriedMen.com) through surfing the Web, by word of mouth, or on referral from therapists or marriage educators.

The results were amazing. Through this site I was able to tap into a level of intimacy not found even in the privacy of my psychotherapy practice. I took advantage of computer technology to ask specific questions about men’s marriages. I solicited information in the areas of gender roles, sex, infidelity, work, therapy, and gifts. I asked men about their experiences sharing with other men. I inquired about how problems are resolved in the household. I asked



how they would define a successful marriage. I wanted to know if most married men considered themselves to be happy.

## BREAKING THE BARRIER OF SILENCE

Men wrote openly about the richness of married life—the intensity, the fury, the deceptions, the connectedness, the separateness, and the ecstasy. I got what I was looking for—the answers to my many questions that men would never tell me in face-to-face therapy sessions.

For months, I sorted through the hundreds of posts to my site. Deciding how to compile the contributions amounted to a tremendous challenge. Is this comment about sex or about infidelity? Is that one a confession about past sins or a pre-wedding warning to others? Pro-marriage or antiwoman? Contented or complacent? Not surprisingly, categorizing each comment eluded any simple formula. In the end, I chose to group the contributions into eight different ways that men have found helpful in building and keeping strong, loving marriages. This collection eventually evolved into this book.

The thousands of men who have contributed to *SecretsofMarriedMen.com* have broken the silence barrier. I am indebted to all of them for sharing themselves with me and for allowing me to share their lives with you. In loud, clear messages, they have told me that men do have the skills necessary to build strong and loving relationships. And through their discussions and comments, they have revealed to me a remarkable phenomenon: when these men worked hard to improve their marriages by using their inborn manly skills to put their wives' needs above their own, not only did their marriages improve, but they were happier and more fulfilled than at any other point in their lives.

This is the secret of happily married men.

## Beware of Marriage Counseling

Sure, things in Jack's marriage aren't perfect. Yes, they could be a lot better. Of course he loves his wife and wants to learn how to improve their relationship. Okay, he'll go to a marriage counselor if that's what his wife thinks is the best thing for their marriage.

So thirty-four-year-old Jack and his wife attend therapy together. For Jack, it's a rewarding experience. He writes to my Web site, "Couples therapy forces me (and us) to be intentional about expressing my (our) internal state. It has been quite fruitful to see how we do this differently, how we process our experiences, and how we make decisions. It is in our differences that we deepen our sensitivity to one another. No other person has seen the depths of my goodness and the depths of my depravity more than my wife has. Marital counseling is the place where that dichotomy is accepted and loved."

What a great way to feel about the benefits of therapy.

Jack's friend Bob lives across the country. He's not really all that keen on therapy, but he has talked to Jack every once in a while about life since their fraternity days. He hears about Jack's satisfaction with therapy and decides that's just what his marriage needs also. And so with blind faith and optimism, Bob and his wife walk into the therapist's office and begin an exploration of their relationship. They start to explore their inner feelings, their hurts, and their expectations of the other. But, as the treatment

progresses, Bob finds that his marriage isn't improving. He gets more frustrated as the counseling just seems to stir up bad feelings between him and his wife. Session after session, he leaves feeling unappreciated; she leaves feeling unloved. Bob knows therapy is supposed to help, but he begins to dread the usual Tuesday night meeting. He gets more anxious, feels less in control, and argues more than ever. Now, in addition to the other conflicts he and his wife were dealing with, they argue about therapy as well!

How can this be? Bob's a good guy. He went with the best of intentions—it was even his idea. Isn't marriage therapy supposed to help? Supposed to, yes. But it doesn't always. In this chapter we'll take a close look at counseling. We'll talk about how it can help your marriage. But we'll also take a good, hard look at the reasons why therapy often lets men down when it comes to marriage. We'll see why it sometimes asks them to become something they are not and reinforces their wives' expectation that if the guy doesn't change for her, he just doesn't care enough. We'll also explore how therapists must change their approach in order to bring about positive changes in marriage.

## THE WONDERS OF THERAPY

For about eight hours each day I see clients—individuals and couples—in my office for therapy. As a psychiatrist, I sometimes use medications to treat major mental illnesses. But even when pharmacological management is called for, my treatment almost always includes talk therapy. The clients and I talk about things that are going on in their lives. We talk about how their past experiences affect the way they look at life. And we focus on what their strengths are and how to use these strengths to feel better about their situations and themselves.

There's a lot to be said for the power of talk therapy. Sometimes, as we'll see in Chapter Seven, having someone in your life to listen

to you can have amazingly powerful healing properties. Some people benefit greatly from insight-oriented therapy, which helps them clear out the ghosts from their emotional closets and find new ways to see old problems.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is also frequently helpful. It differs from insight-oriented therapy in that it helps people improve their coping skills, not through gaining awareness into why they are the way they are (for example, this form of therapy doesn't pay much attention to how you developed a fear of elevators), but through specific techniques that will help people gain back a sense of control (by having you gradually, step-by-step, begin to get on elevators again). This therapy has been proven helpful to many individuals who are paralyzed by their anxiety or negative moods.

I've spoken to many people who have expressed appreciation for how these strategies have helped them either individually or as a couple. But too often that potential is never realized, and, as in Bob's case, marriage problems continue or worsen.



**REMEMBER THIS**  
**There's Nothing Wrong with Going to Therapy Because "My Wife Sent Me"**

Many men enter my office for individual therapy, not because of any perceived internal conflicts; they come because, they say, "My wife sent me. She thinks I need help." I welcome these men with enthusiasm. I let them know that if their wife thinks they need help, then they do—at least insofar as it shows the wife that her husband cares enough about the relationship to give therapy a try. I don't usually leave it at that, though. At some point, I invite the wife to come in so that I can hear in her words how she sees the problem.

## THE PROBLEM WITH COUPLES THERAPISTS

It's tough to get two people in a room together to talk. It's hard for two people to work on painful issues. It's difficult for two individuals to understand the other's pain, or the histories of how and why they are the way they are. There are many reasons why couples therapy is challenging. But the problem on the top of my list is the therapists themselves.

I know this statement won't make me very popular with the many social workers, family therapists, psychologists, or psychiatrists in my community. But I'm not interested in being popular; I'm interested in making sure that if you (or your wife, or both of you) seek therapy for your marriage, you know what you are getting yourself into. All psychotherapists are taught some form of family or couples therapy. I myself partook of several seminars on the subject and had a social work supervisor during my fellowship in psychiatry. I thought it was good training. But was it enough for me to know how to counsel couples? I used to think so, but I was wrong.

### **The Problem with Licensing**

The American Psychological Association allows any licensed therapist to hang out a shingle advertising himself or herself as a "marriage counselor" or "couples therapist." The most current statistics show that 81 percent of all private practice therapists in the United States say they do marital therapy. But only about 12 percent of them are certified marriage and family therapists who were required to take course work in this field or have had supervised clinical experience in marital or couples therapy.<sup>1</sup> In other words, most "marriage counselors" are operating on a combination of old textbooks and life experience to guide them in their therapeutic techniques. In the words of Dr. William Doherty, a psychologist who researches this aspect of therapy, "From a consumer point of view, coming in for couples therapy is

like having your broken leg set by a doctor who skipped orthopedics in medical school.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Problem with Emphasizing Personal Rights**

A second problem with marriage counseling is the emphasis on personal rights and happiness. In individual psychotherapy (the type in which the majority of couples therapists are trained), the emphasis often is on shedding those things that are obstacles to personal peace and growth. For many clients, such an exploration into the “self” can be enlightening and liberating. Unfortunately, the therapist who uses this model for counseling a troubled marriage operates on the wrong premise.

Marriage isn’t just about you and your self-actualization as a separate individual. Marriage isn’t all about resolving your conflicts from childhood or providing support for your needs solely. That kind of self-centered, selfish, and immature approach too often pushes one or both partners to view their mate as an impediment to their personal growth. When spouses think “me” and “mine” instead of “us” and “ours,” they end up choosing the short-term route to personal happiness through divorce rather than the longer and often more difficult road to saving the marriage.

Marriage can contribute to your happiness; intact partnerships are associated with longer life and better mental health. It is in negotiating the hills and valleys of living your life with one individual, and in enduring the challenges of raising your family with that person, that you develop a deeper and fuller sense of the self.

Marriage is a crucible for character building. It tests one’s selflessness, interaction, learning, devotion, and commitment. I know it’s tempting to look at yourself, as you do in one-on-one therapy, and aim like the dickens to get what you want out of your marriage by ironing out all your faults and your mate’s faults as well. But you will learn, as you proceed through this book, that setting your sights on nurturing the marriage, not yourself, is the surest way to attain happiness.

Consider the thoughts of Thornton Wilder in his play *The Skin of Our Teeth*: “I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them—it was that promise.”<sup>3</sup>

I recently gave a presentation at a public seminar called Marriage CPR. In advance of the talk, I tried to drum up an audience by asking therapists for referrals. “I have one couple,” said a clinician I work with, “but they’re too far gone. They have no hope for reconciliation.” Ouch! No couple willing to attend therapy to save their marriage should be labeled “dead on arrival.”

### **The Problem with Commitment**

Another flaw in marriage therapy is that it is often lumped together with couples therapy—therapy for two people who are not married and not sure they ever will be. It seems logical, I know. But you’d be surprised at the statistics which demonstrate that marriage and cohabitation are horses of different colors. The level of expressed and implied commitment is dramatically stronger in marriage, particularly on the part of men. To treat these two entities as though they were the same robs the married couple of the chance to use the greatest tool at their disposal, their devotion to each other.

For most people, the active decision to get married signaled an agreement to move past the “significant other” stage. And standing in front of their family and closest friends and promising to stay together “’til death do us part” meant something. A good therapist understands and respects this couple’s vows. This understanding makes the difference between meeting with a couple and saying, “Let’s see if you’re compatible,” and saying, “I know you two were compatible; that’s why you decided to marry. Now let’s find out more about the special qualities of your relationship.”

## The “Problem” with Men

Last on the top of the list of reasons why marriage counseling can let you down is the fact that too many couples therapists still believe the false premise that men have weak relationship skills. Those who follow this school of thinking insist that we must abandon our “typical” male attitudes and traits in order to get in touch with our feminine side so that we can be more “sensitive,” “empathic,” and “expressive” like our wives.

In principle, there’s nothing wrong with asking men to be more warm and fuzzy. We men do need to learn to be good listeners and to communicate our feelings well. Some men are naturally good at this; others have struggled with these skills since childhood. The problem with these rules of engagement for therapy is that, for a man, progress is measured by how well he can successfully become something he is not. That robs the man, and the couple, of the chance to take advantage of the intrinsic skills that a husband brings to the table.

As you’ll see throughout each chapter of this book, men have relationship abilities that are different from their wives’ but equally effective in creating a strong marital relationship. Yet many therapists still sit back and watch men squirm. As the men struggle to get in touch with the woman within, their frustration mounts—they ask themselves, “What’s wrong with me that I can’t do this?” The men leave these sessions feeling that they aren’t good at relationships—hey, that’s what they’re told by their wives and then by the therapist.

Remember that men tend to be competitive; they may not want to be in therapy, but, gosh darn it, if they’re going to go, they want to come out a winner. And when therapy fails, many husbands believe it’s their fault—kind of like when your football team loses, you take responsibility if you’re on the squad. In these circumstances, there’s no way men can come out ahead feeling good about themselves or their marriage.





## REMEMBER THIS

### The Therapeutic Environment Is Created for Females

You can tell as soon as you walk in the door of a therapist's office if the female point of view is likely to dominate your session. The suite will be decorated to appeal to the female esthetic—not the male. Typically, the waiting area is painted in muted pastels. Impressionist prints hang on the wall noting the dates of recent or remote museum exhibits. More than likely, either New Age or light rock music pipes through the waiting area speakers. It's a good bet there won't be a TV tuned to CNN or ESPN. And there won't be any guy magazines lying around. Once inside the counselor's office, you'll find a damask couch, some throw pillows, and perhaps a vase of silk flowers. The overhead fixtures are kept off, as floor lamps and desk lamps provide the oh-so-soothing indirect lighting (even though, compared to women, men have more trouble seeing in dim light). Your needs are not going to be catered to here.

## THERAPEUTIC FALLACIES

My clinical experience has taught me the critical truth that men and women recognize signs of trouble in their marriage in different ways. They also tend to respond to these signs in typically male or female ways. Therapists who are not attuned to these differences make critical mistakes that make men feel like losers. Here are a few of the most common therapeutic beliefs that result in therapy failure.

### **Fallacy 1: Men Need to Get in Touch with Their Feelings**

Of course it's a good idea to reach deep and try to access our feelings, but when we have trouble doing that, it's not necessarily

because we don't want to or because we're too stubborn to try. We often struggle with this part of our psyche because we're not hard-wired to do this easily—blame it on the limbic system, the amygdala, and the hippocampus:

### *The Limbic System*

Current research has found that females often have a larger deep-limbic system than males. The male brain possesses fewer neural pathways to and from the emotion centers in the limbic system. Bingo! Reason number 1 that females may indeed be more in touch with their feelings than males.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Amygdala*

This section of the brain handles aggression and the emotional connection to events. Interesting studies of the amygdala have found that when men and women are exposed to pictures of sad or frightened people and asked to imagine what they are thinking, their amygdalas light up. But then the researchers note that the men's amygdalas shut down in a few minutes, and higher cortical functions light up; men simply don't hold on to emotional responses very long before searching for a rational response to process the emotion. The female brain lingers longer on the negative feelings.<sup>5</sup>

Let's say, for example, that your Aunt Josie dies unexpectedly. You and your wife will both feel the emotions typically associated with grief, but *you* may be quicker to move to the practical side of things: "When will the wake and funeral be? I have that important meeting on Tuesday." Your wife will probably say hateful things about your insensitivity and wonder how you can be so cold. But the fact is, after processing the feelings of grief, your brain shifted your thoughts into the rational realm. That's not wrong—it's just different from the way your wife will deal with Aunt Josie's death.

### *The Hippocampus*

When an emotional event passes, females tend to hold on to the memory, whereas males tend to let it go. That particular difference

can be traced to the brain's hippocampus (the memory center). It is larger in women and has more neural pathways from it to emotional centers. That's why women remember emotional events more than men.

How many times has your wife asked in exasperation something along the lines of, "How can you *not* remember how upset you were when your foreman made you rebuild that deck last summer? I had to console you for days!" Well, here's your answer. A man will remember less of his emotional experiences than a woman will. He can remember the dimensions of the deck he rebuilt, but unless the conflict with his boss was a major issue with him (like something that led to being fired), he hasn't held on to the emotional meaning of the event. That's also why it's so hard for husbands to follow a therapist's dictate to dig deep and recover those feelings. Sometimes they're just not there to remember!




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My "thought life" seems to be the area that is the most complicated to deal with. The thoughts I have are not the thoughts that I want to spend my time dwelling on.

—Bradley, age 54, married 32 years

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## **Fallacy 2: Men Need to Talk More About Their Feelings**

I'm sure that you've been told that learning how to talk about your feelings will increase the quality of your marital relationship. But this therapeutic tactic favors women. Biologically speaking, many men do not have the cerebral ability to put emotional feelings into words as easily as women. It is the female whose left hemisphere of the brain—the verbal expression center—links better with her

right hemisphere—the touchy-feely part of the brain—making her far better than her husband at listening and at communicating feelings.

Men, in contrast, can't simultaneously activate both parts of the brain as readily as females. To talk about their feelings, they need time alone to think and *not* talk. Because they aren't wired to access their feelings as easily as women, it is more difficult for them to put experiences into words, and they take longer to express emotional thoughts. This fact isn't honored in therapy sessions that push men to be more open with feelings. Many men simply can't—not necessarily because their fathers never said "I love you," but because their brains aren't wired to hold on to emotions, never mind verbalize them.

Despite this evidence demonstrating that men can't communicate like their women, therapists urge men to do so and set them up to fail. By trying to generate equality where there is a relative lack of brain ability, therapists increase a man's sense of incompetence, leaving the wife even more disappointed.

For what it's worth, I believe that this whole idea of talking about feelings may be overrated to begin with for both males *and* females. A number of fascinating research findings call into question the long-held assumption among therapists that it's unhealthy to keep your feelings to yourself. In studies involving traumatic events (such as the 9/11 terrorist attack, death of a spouse, or sexual abuse), people who process problems by *not* thinking or talking about them did better in many cases (with less emotional distress) than those who felt the need to replay the negative or traumatic event.

For example, in Tel Aviv, researchers studied people who had had heart attacks to track the long-term outcomes for those who minimized or denied the traumatic effect of this medical event. They found that those who tended to think about, worry about, and talk about their heart attacks had a poorer outcome than those who chose to ignore or deny. Only 7 percent of the more stoic group developed posttraumatic stress disorder seven months after the heart attack, compared with 19 percent of the more reactive group.

Other studies of different traumatic events have had similar outcomes. Research findings like these suggest that in some cases repression and avoidance are healthy coping tactics—and that overly processing negative events can actually *increase* emotional stress in many people.<sup>6</sup>

Although the studies didn't address gender differences, I believe this finding may be especially true for men. Therapists' push to "dig down deep and get in touch with your feelings" may make things worse for many guys who, by nature, feel more empowered and in control when they manage intense emotions by repressing them.




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My wife has said numerous times that she wants me to share my feelings, to open up, not to clam up or shut down. But on the occasions when I do express my angry feelings, she gets very upset. I guess I'm allowed only to have happy feelings.

—Greg, age 26, married 2 years

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### **Fallacy 3: Men Must Learn to Empathize in Order to Understand Their Wives' Feelings**

On average, women are better at empathizing. They are better at understanding how another person feels because they are born with a superior ability to decode nonverbal communication and to pick up subtle nuances from tone of voice or facial expression.

The evidence for an inborn advantage in this area shows itself at a very early age. At birth, female babies look longer at a human face than do males—males prefer to look longer at a suspended mechanical mobile. By twelve months, girls make more eye contact than boys—giving them more opportunity and greater ability to "read" the feelings of others. This greater eye contact by girls at one year is accompanied by a show of more empathic response to the

distress of others, showing greater concern through more sad looks, sympathetic vocalizations, and comforting.<sup>7</sup> Have females been socialized by age one to care more about the feelings of others? In part, yes. But there's more to the story. Some studies have found differences in perception from the first hours of birth. And researchers have found that how much eye contact children make is in part determined by a biological factor even *before* birth. Here's one startling research finding: the more prenatal testosterone measured in amniotic fluid, the less eye contact a boy will have with his mother at one year of age!<sup>8</sup>

As children grow, this gender difference in overt empathy continues. For example, studies show that when children play together with a little movie player that has only one eyepiece, boys tend to get more of their fair share of looking through the eyepiece by shouldering the girls out of the way. Less empathy, more self-centeredness. Or, if you leave out a bunch of those big plastic cars that kids can ride on, you'll see that more little boys play the "ramming" game. They deliberately drive the vehicle into another child. The little girls ride around more carefully, avoiding the other children more often.<sup>9</sup>

I don't know if most therapists know about these studies in empathy and the inborn tendencies of men and women. But if they do, they ignore them each time they insist, "Bob, whenever you answer your wife's question without turning to look into her eyes, you show her you don't love her," or "When you take the last piece of cake without asking her if she would like it first, you demonstrate that you don't respect her." To impute some sinister intent on the husband's part is uncalled for and simply not true. But it is often the case that therapists who use such strategies are attempting to shame men into behaving differently. It doesn't work.

No, I don't think Bob has the right to be rude, even if he is a guy. But here's what the therapist should be saying: "Bob, when you eat that cake, it may feel like a lack of respect to your wife. I think you ought to offer to share because, for her, that's how you let her know you're her friend." Now *that's* useful advice.


 Psst!

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My first experience with therapy was after a severe anxiety attack. I had no idea what had happened to me. A talented LCSW [licensed clinical social worker] helped quite a bit. When my wife and I had come to an impasse we decided to go back to this woman for marital counseling. I would do anything to get out of sitting down and discussing emotions in such a stilted, contrived way. My wife became frustrated with me and blamed me for not wanting work on our problems. Our relationship continued to deteriorate because of it. I've become so frustrated with my inability to get my feelings voiced accurately that I've taken to writing them in an email or letter to her. I have much respect for the counselor, but I couldn't feel like we were going to resolve anything when the method left me at a huge disadvantage.

—Ben, age 45, married 18 years

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#### **Fallacy 4: Men Should Show Their Vulnerable Side**

The ambiance is soft and friendly. The therapist really appears to understand Bob and assures him that all that is said in the office is fodder for growth and will strengthen the marriage. "It's okay, Bob," he says. "Let it all hang out." Now, at last, a man is free to talk about his pent-up emotions.

Hold on a minute, Buckaroo. Men aren't "safe" in therapy, despite the assurances of therapists. In the early phases of therapy, when a man opens up and shows his vulnerable side, there is an ever-so-slight chance that his wife will say, "Ah!" and comfortably accept his view of things. But that's the exception, not the rule.

In my experience, such revelations most often face three possible reactions from his wife—all negative. Let's say that during a counseling session Bob breaks down and cries, saying that he feels his wife doesn't really love him (or, alternatively, that he no longer is sure of his love for his wife). Here's what's likely to happen:

1. She loses respect for him: "I thought you were more mature (manly, secure, and so on) than that. How could you embarrass me and yourself by saying such a stupid thing?"
2. She panics over his loss of emotional control: "Oh no. He's starting to lose it. What if he has a breakdown? I need him to be strong. I need him to support my children and me. My God, if he can't handle all his responsibilities, what will I do?"
3. She responds as if she feels attacked: "How can you say that about me? That just isn't true! You have a lot of nerve to make a personal attack on me when you're the one who doesn't know how to show love."

It's hard for a man to talk about his pain. Vulnerability runs counter to the primitive role of man as "cave protector," which is rooted deeply in the psyche of wives—even in this modern day. I've had women tell me that they lose respect for their husbands when they admit to feeling vulnerable—being scared at the prospect of losing a job, feeling inadequate when standing up to his brothers in a fight over the estate of their deceased father, or feeling uncertain about how to diaper a baby. Some women in my office have taunted their husbands because they have discussed feelings about being physically abused by their wives.

Here's the key point: a man's vulnerability is often taken as a signal by the woman that he might not be strong enough to support her. When therapists insist that such revelations are a requisite for therapy, couples often grow further apart—not closer together.



Many men have learned to put up their shields—in life, yes, but also in their marriage. I do believe that at some point in a relationship, men have to express their needs. I said *at some point*, but I've got news for you: the time is *not* in the first months of therapy.

When, early in treatment, the therapist encourages the man to talk about his feelings and allow his wife to see his vulnerable side, and the hapless fellow lets down his guard and takes the therapist up on his or her offer . . . wham! This is not good for the relationship. The competent therapist first establishes trust in the wife that her husband will be strong and by her side no matter what he's feeling. Once she knows this to be true—and it doesn't happen



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Couples therapy definitely puts men at a disadvantage. My husband and I have been to joint counseling several times, at my request, to help us become “more communicative.” Looking back, I realize it didn't do much more than give me an opportunity to gripe in front of an “unbiased” therapist and resulted in a lot of buried, unarticulated anger on my husband's part. Counseling was never proactive; it was always oriented toward airing our anger, which was not ultimately productive for the marriage. Finding a skilled, pro-active, *trained*, and *experienced* marriage counselor is like finding a grain of salt in a mound of sand. Most therapists call themselves skilled in the realm of joint counseling but they are almost universally oriented toward leading a couple toward acknowledging their resentments, which, by the way, only leads toward more resentment, pain, and possible dissolution of the marriage.

—Rita, age 43, married 20 years

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overnight—she then has a better perspective with which to see his emotional viewpoint.

### **Fallacy 5: Men Have All the Power in the Relationship**

Too often the therapist buys the feminist position that men have all the power in the relationship because in the majority of marriages they produce more money and are physically stronger. Do these advantages give husbands power? Not if you ask men.

Ask most men who was the one who decided where the children would go to school, what kind or color of car the family would use, or what furniture to buy for the living room. Ask men who holds the veto power over whether they do or do not have sex. Moreover, ask men who decided that they had to attend therapy. In some of these cases, guys have all the control, but in my clinical experience, most men don't feel that they have the majority of the power in the household. Yet many men feel unnecessarily labeled as abusive because of their perceived physical advantages.

When men are upset, it's natural for them to raise their voice, pace the floor, and show physical aggression. Of course, if they strike their wives, they are guilty of abuse, no questions asked. But because of their tendency to resort to physical action (for example, pacing, slamming their fists on the table, hitting the wall) to smooth out inner turmoil, many men get unfairly labeled as "unsafe at any speed." (There is more information about how men handle the emotion of anger and frustration in Chapter Six.)

Such an attitude on the part of the therapist only reinforces what a man may be feeling inside: shame at his lack of self-control, guilt about the pain his wife feels when he acts that way, and powerlessness regarding his inability to find a positive resolution to the problems in his marriage.



## REMEMBER THIS

### Marriage Education Is an Alternative to Marriage Counseling

Every couple seeking to improve their marriage should consider marriage education as an alternative to marriage counseling. This book, *The Secrets of Happily Married Men*, is a form of marriage education: you didn't need to hire me as a therapist in order to have me help your marriage. Working with a marriage educator differs from attending therapy because appointments are typically scheduled for groups and because the group leaders don't really ask couples to address their individual problems during the session. Instead, these classes teach strategies and exercises for husbands and wives to improve communication and problem-solving skills. Couples come from different backgrounds and go to the classes for different reasons, yet they are frequently surprised to find that they share similar issues in their marriages. One useful resource for learning more about these education classes is a Web site called [SmartMarriages.com](http://SmartMarriages.com). I regularly refer couples from all over the world to this site to find out about marriage education classes in their communities.

## Fallacy 6: Couples Should Avoid Sex While Working Out Their Problems

Many therapists tell sex-starved men that while they're working to improve their marriage, they must not have sex with their wives unless their wives initiate it. In Chapter Nine, you'll see how studies show that couples who fail to work on improving intimacy—even when their other communication problems are not ironed out—have a greater chance of never getting back on the sexual

bandwagon. Nonetheless, therapists advise this questionable practice; maybe they don't know that during sex, men produce an increased level of the hormone oxytocin, which actually causes them to feel closer to their wives.

Encouraging couples to intentionally avoid opportunities for sex sets up a pattern of chronic avoidance. When therapists fail to integrate this knowledge into their clinical practice, couples suffer an increase in hostility and a decrease in sexual satisfaction. I just don't get it.

I recall speaking to a presenter at an annual conference of the American Psychiatric Association. I was enthralled by his insights into sex as adult play and how play can reengage a de-energized couple. I asked if he finds this approach a useful adjunct to couples therapy. He responded, "Oh, I never use this in marriage therapy. There's too much conflict in these couples already. This is only for partners who are looking for sexual therapy." I don't see how it's possible *not* to bring sex into marriage therapy. There's just no way around the fact that sexual encounters are just as valuable as talk encounters.

I was interviewed about husbands by the *Providence Journal* soon after the launch of [SecretsofMarriedMen.com](http://SecretsofMarriedMen.com). In this interview, I discussed the irony of how recommending a therapy that men would avoid (such as setting aside time each day to talk) was preferred over one that men would relish. I suggested that an equally good piece of advice would be to propose setting aside a half-hour each day for couples to have sex. Of course, this was the part of the article that got put in bold headlines, and I was severely criticized for this advice. (You can probably guess the gender of those most upset by this idea.) But the point remains: verbal communication is overvalued in marriage therapy. Nonverbal communication is equally important, and couples (and therapists) should not ignore the powerfully positive effects of lovemaking.

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I would love to go on and on about how absolutely despicable couples therapy is for men. I am a master's level social worker, whose wife is in medical school. We have gone to several therapists over the past few years and the result of all of them is just more pain. I would most strongly advise men to not go to therapy, but instead go to marriage education workshops (recommended on a forum like SmartMarriages.com). I believe this most strongly. None of the couples therapy that I have attended has ever had any written goals or exercises. It is the equivalent of having weekly discussions about the flat tire. Show me the tools and we can solve this together—without therapy! I'm not sick, OK?

—Roger, age 57, married 30 years

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### **Fallacy 7: Happy Couples Resolve All Problems**

Put on your accountant's hat and wrap your mind around the following data: (1) studies show that wives bring up more than 80 percent of household and relationship problems; (2) in happily married couples, 69 percent of all major conflicts in the household are never resolved even after working on them for five years.<sup>10</sup>

Armed with these statistics, you don't need to be an Einstein to figure that most of the problems that are not resolved in marriage are problems that the wife has noticed . . . and wants fixed. There's a paradox then for the man who simultaneously wishes to avoid emotional confrontation and also desires to resolve his marriage problems.

Enter the therapists, who see their specialty as settling conflict, rather than educating couples that being happily married doesn't mean resolving all your major problems (not even half your problems, actually). The two of you may never agree about whether the kids should go to religious school, whether you should have Christmas Eve

with your parents or hers, or whether the piano should be in the parlor or the studio. (You'd think that the families who were fortunate enough to have a piano, a parlor, and a studio would realize how lucky they were and not argue about such nonsense, but they do.)

Poorly informed therapists try to steer couples toward behavior that doesn't work in even the best marriages—fixing problems. And because women are the ones who tend to raise these problems, guess who's supposed to make them better? That leaves men with an unrealistic task, one that is likely to fail in most cases. After the attempt falls short, the therapist will insist on revisiting the danger zone again and again in hopes of defusing all the land mines. That strategy is not so good for improving marriage—you have to wonder who ever thought of it.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting that couples shouldn't discuss problems or attempt to resolve them. But many couples who can't find solutions find a way to live with the problems and work around them. No, it's not a perfect system. Brushing problems under the rug may be a strategy that men have perfected, but for many couples, that's what works, and that's what therapists should allow to happen. It gives the question "Can we agree to disagree?" new life. (And as my wife would answer, "Sure . . . but I win, right?")

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My wife and I are at present having a very difficult time in our marriage. We have attended counseling and from my point of view it has accomplished nothing! I am a faithful, loving husband. I work hard. I am a good father. I don't cheat, gamble, drink, or otherwise do anything bad to my wife or family. What more do they want?

—Ben, age 37, married 7 years

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## IF YOU ARE IN THERAPY

I'm not suggesting that all marriage counseling is bad and beyond redemption. But I feel strongly that if the sessions are skewed to favor the female mind and the woman's needs, there is always the potential that therapy will do the marriage (and the psyche of the man) more harm than good.

If you and your wife are now involved in, or are considering, couples therapy, here is my list of suggestions that you should use as a measuring stick to decide if the therapist is capable of acknowledging your skills, strengths, and needs as a husband who is perfectly capable of contributing to the improvement of your marriage:

- The therapist should emphasize the strengths of each spouse rather than the varied ways in which each drags the other down. He or she should at least occasionally focus on your strong points. When your wife begins, "He's a great father, a loving son, and a good businessman, but . . .," does the therapist intervene to ask, "If he's so good at all those things, why do you assume he can't be good at being a husband too?" The therapist should acknowledge that you do *not* have an inherent lack of character that precludes you from succeeding at marriage.
- The therapist should show an understanding of the natural inclination of men toward action over talk. If you hear a complaint by your wife, it's natural for you to want to find a way to fix it, rather than continue to talk about it. Is that okay with the therapist? Does the therapist expect you to sit silently and wait your turn while you are being torn apart? Does he or she realize that your strength is in action, not in sitting still and listening?

- The therapist should allow you to meet with him or her without your wife if that makes you feel more comfortable. Why not? If you were seeing a job coach because you were looking for ways to get ahead at work, would the coach say, “I can’t help you unless you bring your boss in too”? Of course not. Although it helps to have both members of a marriage at counseling sessions, it’s also understandable that it can be difficult for men to talk about their vulnerabilities or their intimacy problems with their wives present. Although it helps to have two people committed to improve a relationship, *one person alone has incredible power to change a marriage for the better.*
- The therapist should honor the male need to have a structured session. For the male whose brain mass is greater in the visual-spatial areas, having a clear, organized structure to the session is very comforting. One husband, Jonathan, told me about his former sessions with a very competent male psychologist in our community. Jonathan said that the sessions were very frustrating because he never knew exactly when they would be over. “I would avoid getting into a really big issue, like sex,” he said, “when I thought there was only three minutes left, only to find that we ended up staying another twenty minutes. It was like playing a football game in which the refs arbitrarily decided to throw in a couple overtime periods.” Establishing time limits, clear guidelines, and a general overview of the objectives for the therapy session goes a long way toward helping men arrive at a positive outcome.
- The therapist should not assume that you are open to a trial separation or divorce as a solution to your marital problems. Whether or not it’s scientifically or



statistically true, it seems to me that men perceive themselves as having a greater sense of honor than women, and this translates into the belief that if they gave their word to be married “for better or for worse,” they mean it. Their word is their bond, and they take their obligation to protect and honor their wives and children very seriously. If you feel this way, your therapist should respect your sense of commitment, not try to talk you into being apart from each other.

If you find yourself in a marriage counselor’s office, speak up and ask whether the therapist feels there’s hope for the marriage. If the answer is no, turn around and go to the nearest restaurant, order a light meal, and get out the Yellow Pages. Then find a therapist who believes in your marriage—and is willing to help you fight to make it work.

## Therapists Help Those Who Help Themselves

When the phone rings in my office, there’s a good chance it’s a couple looking for help in their marriage. Across America, there are thousands of therapists who are getting the same calls. And in many of these situations, the man drags his feet, dreading the encounter because of fears—reasonable fears sometimes—that he will feel uncomfortable, unappreciated, and unhelpful. But husband and wife go together for therapy because, at their core, they believe it can improve the quality of their marriage. And it can.

But don’t leave your manhood behind at the therapist’s door. Find a counselor who will honor the strengths you bring to the marriage. The therapeutic process *can* be helpful for you to learn more about your wife. You can learn about marriage as it specifically applies to you. You can learn how to recognize fixable problems and learn how to work through more complicated emotional issues. If you take on this challenge without the preconceived notion that

there's something wrong with your male traits, you can feel elated about your ability to improve your marriage. And that's an emotion you can recognize and talk about!

I'm all for improving your marriage. In fact, I don't want it to be just okay; I want it to be great, and I want you to feel great about it. But the reality is that a lot of men—and women—don't, or can't, access good marital therapy. That's where I come in. This book isn't a substitute for therapy, but it's my firm belief that if you learn the secrets of happily married men and apply my step-by-step approach to your marriage, you won't need a therapist. So read on and begin the process of helping yourself be your best.