

The Secret of Marital Success.

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Any of us who have been in long term committed relationships knows from experience that success in this arena can be a complex thing. And not easily reduced to a single secret. But if you're reading this, I suspect I did get your attention with my jaunty claim, probably because we all really want our committed relationships to be easier than they actually are.

But with this stipulation about complexity, I will forge ahead and offer my promised Secret for Marital Success. It's a simple and familiar concept. It's called **Generosity**.

In my practice I work with a lot of couples, trying the best I can to help them deal with their challenges to intimacy, communication and conflict resolution among many other issues. I see couples where red-hot contempt is the dominant coloration. On the other side of the spectrum are those with cooler hues, couples who are interested in working on achieving a more conscious marriage. On that scale I have seen clearly that the less generosity, the more troubled the marriage, and conversely, the more generosity freely expressed in the marital system, the happier the couple.

I will often employ a simple test. I ask each partner to keep a log of how many times he or she says yes to their partner during the week and how many times they've said no. The resulting ratios are always an eye opener for the distressed couple and usually confirmative of my thesis.

Happy couples say Yes more than they say no to each other.

There's also actual research that backs up my clinical observations. An extensive study by The National Marriage Project found that generosity, along with sexual satisfaction and commitment, are most predictive of a happy marriage. Marital generosity, which they define as "the virtue of giving good things to one's spouse freely and abundantly", was second only to sexual satisfaction in rating their marriage as "very happy". I think we can all also see how generosity and sexual satisfaction go hand-in-hand.

So why do we see couples becoming stingier with their acts of generosity as the years pile up? Psychological studies have often focused on a "tit-for-tat" theory as a way of explaining this strange phenomenon. This theory claims that as humans we are wired to be generous, that is until we encounter another who fails to respond in turn with generosity. In other words-- and this especially true, I find, in longterm-couples— you are initially inclined to extend yourself generously but when you fail to get the reward of similar consideration, you start gradually becoming stingier yourself. And so it goes. Let the games begin. Tit for tat; so there.

Couples who engage in such games create **non-virtuous cycles** that tend to repeat and grow into greater miserly roundelays. In the throes of such activity, couples are likely to forget two very important truths:

One, We all have a choice in terms of our own reactions; to either be virtuous or non-virtuous. And secondly, life is not a zero sum game, especially when it comes to love.