

By: Dr. David Bricker

General Intro: In the Gottman Method I often say that we have one big technique, Dreams Within Conflict, and a lot of little techniques. My attempt in putting together the Positive Behaviors Checklist is to get a lot of the Gottman techniques together in one place. If you just glance briefly at the PBC you'll see that it's not just a list of things to do, it's also a checklist, so there is going to be a way of keeping track of what you do, and we'll get to that later. And in the future we'll put this out as an XL Spreadsheet. So there will be the potential, if anyone wants, to keep score and use your computer to track your results. You can keep score, see what you're doing more of, what you're doing less of.

The first word is Positive so I want to emphasize that this is a list of things you should do, it's not a negative behavior checklist of things to avoid. For instance if we're just beginning marriage counseling we might agree that there will be no insults, or shouting, no fighting in front of the kids or involving the kids in any conflicts. But this is a list of things to do more of, and it's also a list of Behaviors, it's not emotions, or ideas, or intentions. It is about behaviors, helping you to do the things that will make for a better relationship.

The theoretical background comes from an area of cognitive therapy called Behavioral Activation. In its simplest form, it says that people are depressed when they're not doing enough of the things they enjoy doing. So the treatment for depression is to get people doing what they like to do, and there's a lot of variations on that, and the last few years there have been some impressive studies showing that this gets rid of a lot of the depression very quickly. Also when I work with individuals I'm often struck by how quickly they can get out of it, especially just getting from severe depression to mild or moderate depression. So my idea was to integrate the two systems: Gottman Method and Behavioral Activation. Can we make the Gottman method a little more behavioral? So the important point here is that if you do the things that will make the marriage better, that will be to your advantage in the long run.

Part of the philosophy is also if there's ever any conflict between what you're feeling and what's in the long-term best interest of the marriage, do what's in the long-term best interest of the marriage. So for instance, let's say John is talking, and Sally feels like interrupting him and she knows it's in her best interest to listen to him and hear his point of view. From this point of view she should choose to listen, to do what's best in the long run. My point here is that you should do what is right as much as possible and not get distracted by feelings that pull you in the wrong direction. If you have any doubt about it, the question I usually ask is: "Think about it from your partner's point of view. Let's say he or she has a choice between what s/he feels like doing and what's best. What would happen a week later or a month later or a year later in either case?" Or another example is if you want to quit smoking, but you want a cigarette now, but how will you feel a year from now if you just throw the cigarette out? Or if you have

one more cigarette?

Softened Startup is a Gottman term. It's number one, not because it's the most important thing but because of the time sequence. The system I recommend for a softened start-up is this. You should start with four disclaimers, then the content, and end with a question. So for instance, if your complaint is about helping out around the house, you might say something like:

I just want to bring up something briefly.

It's about the house and you have done a lot lately

You've been doing more than your share of cleaning the bathroom and the yard work

And you do almost all the shopping

But I just wanted to briefly remind you that we had agreed to put the salt and pepper shakers back on the counter after we use them and this morning you left them on the counter.

Is it OK that I brought this up this way?

But it can also be much simpler. Here's an example from one of my clients about three weeks ago. There was something he wanted his wife to do, and she didn't do it. He asked her again, and again she didn't do it. So after a week or so he said "It feels to me like you don't care about what I want," and then he added "I'm not saying this in a broad pervasive way, you obviously do care about what I want." And then he gave a few specific examples and said "So clearly you're doing these things because you care about my needs, but in this particular area it feels like you don't care about my needs." So, that was a softened startup. Another brief example would be a few months ago, there was a couple who came in, and they were talking about the week and the wife said: "I don't have time for a softened startup" and before she could go any further I interrupted her and said: "That's a softened startup." Just showing the intention to do it, it's certainly worth the 5 or 10 seconds it took to say it.

Making and accepting repairs is a very big concept, maybe the most important of all. The idea being that if we can't make repairs, that we'd better be perfect. In other words, without the possibility of repair, I'd be terrified to talk to you right now, because what if I accidentally say something hurtful and I can't fix it. Because I do make mistakes. All the time. The opposite idea is that there is a slippery slope, and once I'm angry, I'm angry and I'm going to go with the anger. But repairs can be kind of simple like apologies, or a lot of times in real life here's what happens. Somebody says something that's maybe a little harsh. And there may be some discomfort for several minutes and the conversation may stop. But then one of the partners says: I'm going to go to the bodega; do you want me to pick up some Diet Coke for you? And that's a repair. It's also about accepting repairs.

A lot of this is based on research on couples in the Seattle area who came in and talked about problems. The core study is this: once you have five-year-old tapes in a warehouse you go back to them and see who is married and who is not married and

then you compare the couples. The ones who are close to a divorce and then those who aren't, and that's a large part of what the system is based on. What's interesting is they found a very, very big difference in acceptance of repairs. The couples who are staying together and getting along well enough almost always accept repairs. Couples heading towards divorce are more likely to hold on to the grievance for a long time.

Okay, **apologies**, I think the ideal way is to do it early and to do it quick. The framework I recommend is pretty straightforward. Say "Sorry about that," then a few words about what it is that you're sorry about, and then "How can I make it up to you?"

So it can be: "Sorry about that, I was rude, how can I make it up to you?" or "Sorry about that, I interrupted you," etc. Just something real brief and to the point. And usually the response is something like "It's no big deal," or "Let's just can we move on?" or "You could listen to me and let me finish my point." That's usually all people want.

Now if you want to make this a little more powerful, you could include one more step. After acknowledging your error you could include a brief statement of empathy a few words about how your partner must be feeling. So now it can sound like:

Sorry about that
I was late again
And I know it must make you feel like I don't care about you at all and I know that's bad
What could I do now to start to fix this?

Expressing feelings is a very important part of good communication. Obviously I could go on for a long time about this, but for our purposes here I'm going to be brief. If we don't express feelings we would have to consider the realistic alternative to it, which is the feelings built up inside us, and then they come out in really awful ways. What I would also say here, is that anger is an exception. And we could spend a lot of time just on anger. Anger is generally not to be expressed, and if it is expressed it's best to keep it to a minimum. It is very destructive to the person on the receiving end of it. Its only value is as a portal to the feelings that should be talked about. One example I like to use is that anger is like a door to a museum. It's good because it lets us get to the rest of the feelings, but if somebody said I went to the museum and stayed at the door the whole time, that wouldn't be so good. Or if somebody says I'm angry at you I would want my response to be "Tell me what's underneath the anger," or if I find myself saying "I'm angry" then I would want my follow-up to be to think about what's underneath the anger.

So **asking about feelings**, is of course very important, because this is how you show you care and how you guide the conversation into the areas where it should be going. A

woman may be very upset with a bad pattern in the marriage, maybe the husband has been very critical of her. So she tries to confront him on this and brings up a lot of hurtful details and tries to convince him that he's an awful person for doing this. And of course the pattern would just continue. But if the husband can ask her how she feels when he does this they can break the pattern. She can tell him about the sadness and the loneliness that she's going through and this is going to be a big part of the solution.

Asking about point of view is kind of straightforward. As one partner is talking the other one shows an interest in what they are saying. There may or may not be any disagreement, but the person listening shows an interest in why the other one sees things the way they do. Your partner may say that even though she always wanted to go to Stanford, that looking back she thinks it was a mistake. And you might just say "Oh, why is that?"

Expressing understanding is like empathy, but it's more on the surface level. You might say "I can see why you wouldn't want to spend all that money to go to my cousin's wedding." Or "I can see why you don't want to shop there anymore."

Now, next one is to **ask about wants**. Sometimes when there's a bit of a standstill or even if there isn't if you could just say "What do you need from me on this one?" And that will almost always get the conversation moving in the right direction again.

At the beginning I said that in Gottman Method we have one big technique and many small techniques. The big technique is called Dreams Within Conflict but for this list we'll include it under **discuss and support dreams**, because when we word it that way it allows for more of the moment to moment positive behaviors. I won't have time for a full discussion here, but I'll describe it briefly. This is an exercise where each partner can talk about his or her story concerning a specific problem. In doing so you can talk about all the history, all the meaning, all the stored emotions, in short anything that's personally meaningful to you. And then we bring the discussion around to your dreams. So a problem which starts when a wife is critical of her husband may allow for him to talk about any issues, any history of criticism and lack of acceptance. And he can talk about how his dream is to be accepted by people, especially a dream to get his wife's approval. And, finally, there can be discussion about how each of them can support each others' dreams, and even taking some steps to do so.

So, on a day to day basis you could turn to your partner and say something like "got any dreams?" or "That dream about feeling connected, how are we doing on that?"

It's probably impossible to do the previous five items without **listening**. But there is also something to be said for listening just by itself. Women especially want to know that their husband or boyfriend will listen to them. They are rarely looking for advice; usually it is enough for the husband to just pay attention without any distractions and then just to briefly respond in a way that shows that he hears what she has said. This can be a

very powerful and positive experience.

Coping with flooding, consists of three different strategies. First let me define what flooding is. Flooding is a very specific Gottman term, which means basically an emotional overload. This occurs when the sympathetic nervous system is activated and adrenaline is released into the bloodstream. You may describe this state as being highly agitated or aroused. We have a lot of different expressions we use to describe that state, lots of colorful slang: juiced, uptight, freaking out, going nuts, out of control.

The first way to cope with flooding, the one I emphasize the most, is taking a timeout. Now some of you may have children and you learned about using a timeout to control unwanted behaviors. This timeout has nothing to do with that. And most of you have watched some sports at some point where a team calls a timeout when things aren't going too well. That's what this is based on. The way it works is that when things start going bad one of you should call a timeout as soon as possible. All you have to do is to say "Timeout" and include a time from 30 seconds to 20 minutes. And just like in basketball there's no court of appeal. Basically, do whatever you need to, to calm down. Then at the end of the timeout you would get back together to resume the conversation.

Relaxation training can be very helpful. This is a skill that you can learn and practice, the habit of relaxing your body. The more you practice you better you get. Generally relaxation exercises are available on CDs or mp3 files. In the typical relaxation exercise you will hear someone giving instructions such as telling you to breathe slowly or to focus on different parts of your body or to visualize relaxing scenes. There are always new exercises coming out, but for today I recommend the following:

Total Relaxation, by John Harvey
meditationoasis.com
themeditationpodcast.com

The third approach to coping with flooding is at a calm moment, to just say to each other "What's likely to make you start flooding?" And that is a positive transaction right there. This is very valuable information for you to have. Think about this. If you know the one thing that's most likely to get your partner flooded, wouldn't that help you to stop doing it as often?

Have you ever seen the TV show **Colombo**? Well, Colombo has two signature lines, one of which is: "Can you help me out here?" Now he uses it in opposition, which we don't want to do; the basic idea is he's this working class New York/Italian detective who goes to upper-class Hollywood, and every show starts out the same way. Someone in the film industry kills somebody, so you know who did it. Colombo always talks to the perpetrator, and he says something like "Can you help me out here, Mrs. O'Hara? We really want to figure out who killed your husband and a couple of things don't make

sense to me...." He's questioning in a nonthreatening way and people will open up more to him when he does that. And the wording doesn't have to be exactly the way he does it. You could say "Can you help me understand your point of view a little bit better?" And the times to do it are anytime you want to say "shut up," or "you're crazy," or anything like that. So anytime you have one of those moments is a good time to say: "Can you help me understand your point of view a little better here?"

Next, **suggest collaboration**...this is short for my favorite line for couples communication, which is, "Is there some way we can work this out?" One of my colleagues told me that line in 1995 and I said then that this is a really good line. I didn't know that after 13 years and counting, that I would still be thinking that that is a great line, in fact my single favorite line. What this does is it puts both partners on the same side of the table. They work together as a team, not in opposition.

The first fourteen items refer more to conflict resolution, and the next cluster of items refer more to day to day living and increasing the marital satisfaction level. If you consistently do the first thirteen items you will have fewer fights and they will be much shorter and have much less negative emotion. In fact, if you do these things, the amount of destructive conflict will be very close to zero. Also, you will find that you and your partner are meeting each others' deeper needs to a much greater extent than ever before.

Before I discuss the next set of items I'd like to briefly describe a new idea: the emotional bank account. When John Gottman discusses this he says that the emotional bank account represents the sum of all the positive behaviors in the marriage. Every time there is a positive moment the account increases. And this balance of positive feelings and experiences helps the couple to feel better about each other and to get through some of the tougher challenges in life.

To understand this better I'd like you to imagine a chart or bar graph in your mind's eye and to notice a zero line to the graph. Now let's imagine that there's a representation of all the things that you do wrong in your marriage. All the mistakes, all the bad habits, all the little acts of insensitivity and stubbornness. Now this bar graph is going to have to have a negative value, because none of us are perfect. The most you can hope for is a zero score, which is pretty bleak. And as long as you are focused solely on this graph you're going to be focused on not making mistakes. You'll be very cautious about what you're doing. And that's a good thing, but here it might be too much of a good thing and lead to a dull, unbalanced life.

Now let's imagine that off to the side there's another bar graph and this one represents all the positive things you do. All the fun things, the generous things, the loving and kind things you do. Any of the items from this list. And this bar graph can go infinitely high; there's no limit. You can get points for every positive thing you.

Now let's imagine that you combine the two bar graphs. This changes everything. You don't have to strive for perfect anymore; you can be good enough. The next several items refer to ways in which you can improve your marriage by increasing the number of positive behaviors. And by increasing the number of positive behaviors you increase your emotional bank account.

Giving compliments is pretty straightforward. Both men and women appreciate this in slightly different ways, but no matter what your partner's gender is, it's going to be helpful if you can practice noticing the positive things that he or she does and giving credit for them. In the Gottman model we would emphasize the level of the Sound Relationship House called Fondness and Admiration. Couples that are getting along well take the time to express appreciation for each other. And we have specific exercises that couples can do to get in touch with what they like and to practice expressing these things.

Expressing gratitude is a good thing, and will increase the amount of positive sentiment in the relationship. Also, by giving our partners information about what we like, we will get more of it from them. And they will feel good about doing it.

Expressing affection can take many forms. I'd like to emphasize now that the important thing to do is to talk together about what would work for each of you. And again, the important thing is to do the behavior, much more so than having the correct emotion. Often when couples are not getting along they make demands that are going to be hard to fulfill. They may want a level of mind reading and experience of love that are going to be hard to grant. But if they are both motivated to make things better then they can usually talk about the specifics that they want. You may want your partner to rub your neck as s/he is walking by or to send you a text message from a busy meeting. These are the kinds of realistic things that imperfect people in imperfect relationships can do to make their relationships better.

Giving emotional support is also one of those items that speak for itself. But it's important to remember to talk this over. What one person considers to be loving, another person may find controlling. Everyone has different tastes and preferences for what they want. So you always want to ask your partner what he or she needs.

Offering to help, number 18, is a lot different than number 9, this is more of a day to day offering to help out. While it seems obvious that this can be helpful for either gender, one of my colleagues was recently explain to me that it's much more important for men to make this offer than for women. He recommends that in every couple, without exception, that the husband should make this offer three times a day. And I notice that when I mention this in sessions with couples, that the women always get it right away. And the men that do this are always happy with the return on investment.

Accept influence and compromise, now again there's a lot of Gottman research on this. In couples that get along well they are willing to hear what their partner has to say and

accept it without fighting back right away. Compromise is a little different. Sometimes when a couple tries to reach a win/win solution, they can get only so far. He may want to go to Colorado for vacation and she wants to go to Jamaica. So they talk about it and they connect and understand each others' feelings and dreams much better. And he still prefers Colorado and she prefers Jamaica. So they find some way to compromise, maybe plan the next two vacations together so they can each get what they want.

Enhancing Love Maps is a very specific Gottman concept, where the core question is: "Do you know what's going on in each other's lives?" Couples can ask each other questions about what's been going on in their lives recently, or share information about what they are doing.

Joint activities means taking the time to do things together. In some families it's more important to address this than in others. There is actually a quick Gottman exercise that I sometimes use with my clients. It's a list of 89 activities people can do together. And all you have to do is just check off what you would like to do together. Women in particular should pay attention to this item. Women usually want to connect more with their partners and they try to do so by talking, but men find this scary and run away. Men do want to connect, but they do so by doing things together. So women who are looking to get closer should think about the kinds of activities that both they and their partner want to do and start initiating more of those activities.

Making and Granting Requests. It's partially as an antidote to number 26, which is criticism. If you say what you want, then you will get more of what you want and you won't be in a position of criticizing. If you can't, then it's more likely to built up inside and eventually come out as criticism.

Bid for connection is a Gottman term. Some of the later research focuses on that, that a healthy marriage requires making bids for connection and interpreting them correctly and then responding correctly. One of the real simple examples is that they have what's called as a "love lab", which is an apartment in a grad student housing. They have a camera filming people who stay there for the weekend to watch how couples communicate in a more natural setting. The guy is on the sofa with his back towards the camera and his feet up and he's reading the newspaper. The woman is looking at the window, and has her back turned. The woman says, "That's an interesting boat." And the husband says nothing and the image fades to black. Then, here's another couple, in the exact same positions, and the woman says the same thing verbatim - "That's an interesting boat." And the guy says, "Uh-huh." Now, a lot of people might say, what's the big difference? And I would say, there's a tremendous difference. The second husband acknowledged what his wife said. It doesn't mean he had to jump up and start talking about naval architecture for the rest of the day; just, I heard you, because otherwise she gets very frustrated that I said something and he didn't realize

it. A lot of guys think, well, I don't really have anything to say other than "uh-huh", so why even bother saying that? I recently saw the movie *The Painted Veil*. By the way it's an excellent movie in its own right, Edward Norton and Naomi Watts are in it. And I don't want to give away too much of the plot here but there is a moment where there's a failed bid for connection - you can't miss it if you're looking for it - and it turns out to be an important part of the story.

Bad/worse is very similar to number two. It's basically the idea that when something bad happens, you have a choice: you can accept that it's bad and choose either bad or worse. I recommend choosing bad. So you can say, this is bad, let's accept that it's bad and start coping with it, or you can make it a whole lot worse. And if I had to say what the difference is between **bad/worse** and **repair** I'd say that in bad/worse you might still be more passive but recognize that even this is a better choice. But when you are making a repair, you are actively doing something to fix the situation. Also, sometimes my clients like to think of it more in terms of who made the recent mistake. If it's my partner, I might start with **bad/worse**. If it's me I should start with **repair**.

Now, you'll notice that the next six items are in italics, the reason being that they all begin with the word "no", so they're not really positive behaviors, so they're set apart. If you read the Gottman material, you'll notice that he frequently discusses the Four Horsemen, which are the four things to absolutely never do. Those are the four best predictors of divorce, if you compare couples that get divorced and couples that stay together. The couples that get divorced have much, much higher levels of contempt and criticism and stonewalling and defensiveness.

Contempt is when you act as if you're better than someone else. It could be nonverbal, usually a facial expression. Or it could be verbal, saying something like "How could you be so stupid?"

Criticism overlaps it a lot, but it's pretty much more like, you're wrong about this and you're wrong about this and you're really, really wrong about that.

Stonewalling is the refusal to discuss issues.

Defensiveness refers to counter-attacking and arguing about everything that's said.

Belligerence and **dominance** are also big predictors of divorce. They don't predict quite as well as the four horsemen, but they are clinically important, and they are danger signs when they appear in a marriage.

Belligerence refers to having a hostile attitude and doing hostile things.

Dominance refers to insisting on being in control of the relationship.

Finally, or maybe I should say, penultimately, **checklist PM** or project manager: let me talk a little bit about how to use this in real life. Ideally, each of the partners will score for both as the day progresses. In its extreme form, if John says to Sally, "You're looking good", they'll both take out their forms and in the H-box for **compliments** for that day, they'll put in a check mark, and then they put their forms away. Then Sally might say, "Oh, thank you", and then they'd get their forms out again and put a check mark in the W-box for **gratitude**. It's hard to do that quite that methodically and compulsively, but if you could have a period where you approximate that, it really pays off in the long run. Then, it's much, much easier to do a more relaxed version of the above. Ideally, what would happen is, towards the end of the day, one of the partners would say, "Do you have 5 minutes? Let's go over the lists," or they might even say, let's just try to catch up trying to remember all of the good things we did today. Ask each other questions to verify that we did these items. Then, go down to the totals box, and write what the total is.

As we've seen, there are so many ways of fixing things in a marriage, that it's just impossible to focus on all of them at once. Perhaps the most important step in using this checklist is for each of the partners to say what they want from the other. We've tried having clients ask for different numbers of things here. So I've tried having them say: "What are the five things you want the most?", or "What are the three things you want?" And now I'm finding that the best number to use is *one*: What's the one thing you want for tomorrow? That seems to work pretty well. If you think of it, that's powerful, and that can shift the momentum. If you have a couple and the husband never accepts influence, and if the wife makes just that single request, he can make it his goal to accept influence on something within the next day. One meaningful request can be incredibly important.

And before I end let's spend a moment on 33-35, the idiosyncratic things - if she wants him to take the garbage out before 10 PM on Wednesday, or call during the work day to check in. If we left anything out, then they can include it here.