

7 Habits of Highly Effective Couples

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In 2012, the world lost one of its most highly effective teachers. Stephen R. Covey died on July 16, 2012, age 79.

Covey will be remembered as a transformative thinker on leadership and personal effectiveness. His book 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' is and continues to be an extraordinarily influential book delivering powerful lessons in personal productivity and growth.

The seven habits are not a quick and easy formula for success, but together they form a powerful model for personal change. Adapted for couples, this series of posts is a respectful homage to his most lasting legacy - the 7 habits: The seven habits are a step-by-step model that empower couples to be intentional, to make decisions and to act, to move towards a known destination rather than reacting to whatever is happening at the time. Emphasising the importance of self-awareness before successful engagement with your partner, the model is a process of learning new habits to create personal and interpersonal effectiveness.

The seven habits can be divided into two groups - the first three focus on "private victory" and the second three on "public victory", with Habit 7 rounding the previous six to work towards refinement, self-renewal and continuous improvement. Covey says "Private Victory precedes Public Victory" which means that you must master yourself before enjoying success outside of ourselves and with our partner.

Habit 1: Be Proactive

Being proactive is more than just taking action. In this first habit, you have the ability to consciously choose how you respond to your partner rather than responding

to the prevailing conditions or instincts or conditioning. As Gottman says in his book 'Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How to Make Yours Last' you must ere from using criticism and contempt with your partner, alter your usual response. Stop being a 'hot reactor' and start being a cool, responsible chooser.

By consciously choosing the way you response to your partner, you act to achieve growth and mutual benefit in your relationship. As a proactive partner, one who is self-aware, you accept responsibility for your actions and you dont blame or accuse when things go wrong. You work continuously within your circle of influence, you change and develop yourself first in order to be a better partner. You work to reject past behaviours and ways of reacting and you determine your own destiny to become who you want to be for your partner.

By being proactive you take responsibility for your response, often looking for what you can learn from what happened. You are always intentional and proactive in your thoughts, words and actions.

Habit 2: Begin With The End In Mind

Stephen Covey talks about how easy it is to get caught up in the busy-ness of life, working hard to climb the ladder of success, only to discover that all this time the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall. By being intentional and making an effort to start with a clear understanding of your destination and where you are going, you create a sense of hope and purpose. By creating the future in your mind, you can imagine a course of action, pursue it and then conscienciously decide what you will do (and wont do) with your time, talents and tools. This ensures your ladder is up against the right wall before you start climbing.

In marriage, "Beginning with the end in mind" ensures you take a long term perspective - you can see above and beyond the day-to-day activities. Through careful planning and constant assessment and reevaluation of your plans, you know where you are going, you can plan

where you are heading and you take time to see the bigger picture. This leads to greater personal effectiveness and synergy as a couple.

A practical approach to keep you on track is to develop a couple or family mission statement. Through developing this with your partner (or family) and by the process of defining and sharing your objectives and clarifying your vision and purpose - creativity, innovation and empowerment are activated. Through negotiation, the agreed mission statement demonstrates your commitment to a shared mission fostering mutual understanding and greater intimacy.

Habit 3: Put First Things First

If Habit 2 is about beginning with the end in mind, or imaging and establishing the end state, then habit 3 is about focusing on the important matters to achieving your mission. If you tend to spend a lot of time doing things that are not that important, Habit 3 recommends you identify what is important in order to keep you heading towards your destination. Putting first things first is about staying on track, taking the initiative, exercising willpower and getting the important things done.

Determine and schedule priorities and give more attention and time to the high priority, high leverage activities.

Think leverage and influence and do all things in a disciplined way. Balance the short and long-term priorities to ensure your effort is expended effectively.

Manage your time and what you do in that time.

Implement and live the values and principles of Habits 1 and 2.

If you don't practice Habit 2, if you don't have a clear idea of what is important, of the results you desire in your life, you will be easily diverted into responding to the urgent. The urgent things are often those that keep you away from focusing on what is important.

A practical approach to keep you on track is to review your couple or family mission statement on a weekly basis.

Habit 4: Think Win/Win

Habit 4 is the first of the Habits dealing with what Covey calls interdependence - working effectively with your partner. This is the habit of always looking for a solution that benefits you AND your partner. It's not your way or my way; it's a better way, a higher way.

In marriage, Habit 4 reminds you about how to respond to your partner. Be compassionate and share recognition and power. Through implementing Habit 1, resist criticism and contempt. Again as Gottman says, free from defensiveness and stonewalling and imagine yourself responding in a mature, wise, self controlled manner. Don't rely on the usual ways of response. Choose the positive response and conscientiously reject the old habits and imagine hope and faith.

Drop the usual win-lose mentality and think abundance for both you and your partner - cooperate for mutual long-term benefit. Whilst Win/Lose is socially acceptable, reassess YOUR usual attitude. Learn and practice Win/Win in your marriage and discover the better way and the intimacy that ensues.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

Stephen Covey believes this principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication. This habit is about communicating effectively with your partner, developing the habit of listening carefully and really understanding your partner BEFORE giving your thoughts.

Also termed Active Listening, this habit is not easy to learn and do, but by really listening and understanding your partner - by truly listening, your relationship will be

transformed. It's not about agreeing or disagreeing, it's about seeing how your partner sees the world - through their heart and mind. Listening with empathy and having the courage to really stop and listen, to consider, to restrain, respect and act with reverence. This habit can bring immense intimacy and love to your marriage.

To listen effectively requires us to arrest our ego, to contain our defensiveness and to reduce stonewalling. It's about probing and questioning without the desire to respond but with the intent to listen and understand - empathic communication. If you seek to understand your partner's ideas and needs, sharing feelings and emotions and you also gain an accurate view without judgement, nor defending or attacking. Put your natural and automatic responses aside and focus on genuinely understanding your partner.

It is often easier to give your opinion or to give advice. You may spend more time trying to get your partner to understand your position than listening and understanding their position. Ask questions that encourage further understanding such as "Tell me more..." or "What happened next...?" Encourage effective 2-way communication, seek to understand, then request to be understood in return.

Using 'I statements' is a practical way of implementing this habit. Whilst using a 'You' statement points the finger or puts blame onto your partner, using I statements says how it is from your side, how you see it. I statements enable us to be clear about our feelings and to state what we need. I statements are assertive without arousing the defensive behaviour from your Partner.

Habit 6: Synergise

The word synergy comes from the Greek synergos meaning 'working together'. In the marriage context, synergy refers to two respectful minds communicating to create solutions - greater than the sum of their parts - solutions that are better than what either proposed

originally. Beyond positioning and compromise, seek to understand your partner's needs and interests and find solutions to satisfy both. Resist defending and stonewalling and listen to each other and seek new alternatives. You can achieve so much more when you engage synergistically in your marriage than if you acted alone.

Commit to loyalty and openness and never bad mouth your partner. People and relationships are more important than things. When you have an issue, seek to resolve it - choose your attitude and behaviour, communicate openly and seek win/win solutions. This creates trust and intimacy.

Whilst independence is promoted as a strong value in the world today and is difficult for many of us because we have been trained or have learnt that others cannot be trusted, achieving synergy requires high trust and high cooperation and therefore we need to practice empathic communication. You must exhibit trustworthiness and build trustworthy relationships and synergy - interdependent synergy. Trust grows through synergistic interaction, replacing fear and doubt.

Synergy is possible when we have the support of all five previous habits.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

Habit 7 is about self renewal or continuous improvement, it's about looking after yourself and to overcome entropy, and many of us have to learn to take time to look after ourselves. Stephen Covey suggests consistent and continued refinement and attention to all of the following four areas in our lives: 1. Physical; 2. Intellectual; 3. Social and 4. Spiritual. Often we find we live our lives narrowly focusing on work or home. The daily grind becomes our focus to the exclusion of others. The most important thing you can start doing is looking after yourself by focusing on the four areas above.

For marriage, it is essential that we continually review and draw our attention to these four areas to ensure an upward spiral of growth, change, and continuous improvement. The importance of renewal in our lives can not be underestimated. Learning, growing and developing new capabilities and expanding on the old ones is the process through which continued success is made possible. Through applying the 7 habits in our relationships and through continued commitment and loyalty, will ensure a sharpened saw, one ready to tackle the ups and downs of our marriage.

Through your consistent and continued refinement of the four areas and through continued focus on your mission statement, your focus will be on the important aspects, those that will define you as a highly effective couple. Attempting to balance exercise, nutrition and stress management (physical); by reading, visualising, planning and writing (Intellectual); focusing on clarifying values and our commitment, dedicating time to study, our faith and/or meditation (Spiritual); and through our service, being empathic, being synergistic and ensuring security (Social), ensures success.

Dont get caught up in the demands of life or even developing the Habits, that we forget ourselves and our marriage. Be proactive and do this for your marriage. "We are the instruments of our own performance, and to be effective, we need to recognize the importance of taking time to regularly sharpen the saw in all four ways".

You don't have to get it right the first time. This is part of a life journey, of learning and developing. You will get there if you are willing to invest the time and effort to developing new habits.

In 2004, Stephen Covey published the 8th Habit to answer the challenges presented by the new digital economy. "The 8th Habit...is not about adding one more habit to the 7. It's about seeing and harnessing the power of a third dimension to the 7 Habits that meets

the central challenge of the new Knowledge Worker Age. This 8th Habit is to Find Your Voice and Inspire Others to Find Theirs" - feels like a challenge for the author.

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People is a tremendous book containing effective principles for personal change and growth and for leading change in organisations. I highly recommend this book and the practice of the principles contained in it.

