

Determinants of Changing Attitudes of Marital Partners toward Each Other

Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D.

Featured in the Journal of Individual Psychology, Vol. 49, Nos. 3 and 4, September/December 1993, pp. 488-505.

First appeared in *The Marriage Relationship: Psychoanalytic Perspective*, edited by Salo Rosenbaum and Ian Alger. Copyright ©1968 by Society of Medial Psychoanalysis. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers.

To the casual observer it is puzzling why two people should want to get married if they obviously seem to be unsuited. Even more baffling is the breakup of a marriage in which the partners seem to be exceedingly compatible, amicable, and harmonious. In between these two extremes is a wide range of marital relationships that seem to offend common sense, intensifying the mystery in which love and sex have been shrouded for ages.

The confusion is not much relieved by the outpouring of scientific and semiscientific literature, guiding the bewildered and explaining the seemingly irrational. Many interesting conclusions have been offered, both from experimental research and from clinical observations; so far, they all have failed to provide a reliable guide either to an understanding of the phenomena or to a prevention and correction of marital conflicts and discord. It has been reasonably well established that certain factors and qualities promise a high probability for success or failure in marriage; but no prediction, regardless of how accurate it may be, will indicate in which category of prediction any given couple will fall in identical circumstances. Even under unfavorable conditions there is some chance for success. In the same samples under

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

investigation, other factors, neglected by the original investigators, are assumed to be perhaps even more accurate in permitting a valid prediction. Hall¹ took the thousand couples studied by Burgess and his associates² and demonstrated that family size and ordinal position in the family of each partner are related to success in engagement and in marriage, factors totally absent in the original study. Although Toman³ demonstrated that dissimilarity of birth order in each partner's family constellation and opposite-sex siblings have a higher prediction of success in marriage, Levinger and Sonnheim⁴ found no association between birth order of either partner and adjustment of the marriage, nor did they find that the person with the opposite-sex siblings makes a better heterosexual partner. These are only a few aspects of the examples of existing uncertainties. The writer is fully aware that his interpretation of the dynamic factors in a successful or disrupted marriage is merely one of the many possible forms of analysis. It is based on his clinical observations, which here as everywhere else depend on their subjective evaluation by each practitioner. One would assume that no single factor can be made responsible for success or failure in marriage. Upon careful scrutiny, however, one factor does emerge as a crucial variable. More important than real events and experiences, by far outweighing the impact of any favorable or disastrous contingent, is the attitude taken by the persons involved. The same set of circumstances may permit or even produce opposite attitudes and thereby change the behavior and reverse sentiments and emotions.

Choosing a mate or rejecting one is an expression of a favorable or an unfavorable attitude. We are usually more concerned with the reasons for *rejection*, because it has more ominous implications. When two people become engaged or get married, whether one considers

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

the choice sensible or not, one wishes them success and hopes for the best. While the possibility of divorce is always in the background at a time when the divorce rate is steadily climbing, it is—at that moment—merely a faint and remote possibility. It is different when a marriage breaks up. In only a few cases has the union been so unfortunate that everyone is happy about its dissolution. Usually disruption, torture, suffering, and many financial, social, and parental hardships accompany the final act of mutual rejection. Then the questions arise: Why did this have to happen? Would it have been possible to avoid the breakup with all its accompanying agony? Efforts at reconciliation usually precede the final break, but frequently with little success. One can well understand the desire to comprehend the dynamics of marital breakup; hostility and misery seem so futile and destructive. It is sad to face the fact that so many marriages begin in heaven and end in hell. The height of happiness and fulfillment is in stark contrast to the sense of failure, frustration, and disappointment that marks the end of the single organic process called marriage.

The apparent contradiction of the happy beginning and the sad ending is actually far less contradictory than it seems. A better understanding of the mechanisms of attraction may lead to a clearer perception of the process of rejection.

A simple inquiry into the reasons why two people fell in love or why they now hate each other or cannot stand each other will generate an abundance of apparently reasonable explanations. In each case, the two people involved are the same human beings; but how different they are when viewed at one or the other time! It is obvious that factors exist of which the two partners are not aware. In general, no individual knows much about the real reasons for his

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

actions. Explanations given are usually rationalizations. This fact should not be considered with misgivings. Our relative unawareness of our motivations is essential not only for the process of choosing or rejecting mates, but for any action we contemplate. We need a personal bias to choose, to prefer; without such predilections we could not participate in the give and take of social living. True objectivity would prevent any forceful action; action needs a personal bias. But we cannot be biased if we would know what we are and what our personal bias is. Therefore, we have to operate as if life were as we see it, not realizing that we interpret life and events only within the framework of our bias.

The same holds true for the game called “falling in love” or for “I can’t stand you.” If we were to be fully objective, in a dispassionate way, seeing the good and bad qualities in the other clearly and fully, probably we could neither love nor hate.

Let us examine the reasons people usually give for choosing a mate. If these reasons were valid, there would be no need for separation and divorce because usually little has changed in the person; only our views and attitudes have changed. Let us take one of the most frequently mentioned grounds—physical attraction. We know that sexual appeal comes and goes, without any appreciable transformation of the partner. Sexual attraction seems to be a poor excuse for marriage; it usually is a mere byproduct of a choice made for deeper reasons, which, however, may not be any more trustworthy as a basis for marital bliss.

There is, then, the desire for companionship, the fear of loneliness, the assumption of being a failure if one cannot or does not get married. But in almost every case of a marriage for

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

convenience, there was more than one possible candidate. Even the most incidental, impulsive, seemingly unpremeditated choice is usually based on deeper reasons for the attraction.

One of our patients, a young, pretty, unstable, and impetuous divorcee, went on a short trip. To our surprise, instead of returning, she sent us an announcement of her wedding. She had met a young man who fell madly in love with her and married her immediately. A short while later the boy's mother came to town and called for an appointment. She wanted to see me or one of my associates who had worked with me in multiple therapy with the girl. The mother could not understand why her son, who always kept free from entanglements with women, had decided to marry so suddenly; he did not know anything about the girl, what kind of person she was, and what he could expect from her. At this point my associate and I looked at each other and began to laugh. It was obvious to us that the girl looked like his mother and was the same type of person, vivacious, aggressive, and seductive. It did not take him long to get to know her. He merely married his mother; she was mother's younger edition.

It is not always obvious what we seek and find. The moment of decision in favor of someone concludes a number of mutual interactions that precede this final step. Two persons who meet for the first time communicate untold impressions, opinions, and promises without either of them being aware of his role in the transaction. They talk with their eyes, expressing admiration, consensus, support. Little movements of hands, facial expressions, tone of voice, the whole appearance reveal the entire personality and the reaction of one to the other. Whatever goes on between two human beings is reciprocal and promoted by *both*, although it may look as

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

if *one* started the motion and hence is solely responsible for the established relationship. Such an assumption, however, is the result of inadequate observation.

We know more about one another than we realize. Our conscious impressions are only a small part of our actual knowledge, which is what we call intuition or, less flamboyant, a hunch. Acceptance or rejection of another person is based on much knowledge and agreement that may entirely escape our attention. As a matter of fact, whatever two people do to and with each other is based on mutual agreement and full cooperation. No relationship is possible without both partners' communicating to each other what they think and feel about each other, and without full cooperation, be it for the good or for the bad. We are so accustomed to using the term cooperation only for constructive interactions that we overlook the fact that one cannot even fight without the others' full cooperation. Without one man's communicating his intention to the other and reaching agreement, no fight would be possible.

This is a most important consideration if we want to understand why two people feel attracted or repulsed; in each case, the established relationship is based on a secret pact. Unfortunately, neither of the partners realizes his own role and contribution and each attributes to the other whatever happens between them.

When a wife complains about her husband or a husband about his wife, a mother about a child or a child about the mother, each is puzzled and confused about the other's being mean, unreasonable, inconsiderate. One could listen for hours to the endless recitation of the unbearable provocations to which each feels exposed. However, this recitation is like a dialogue in which only the lines of one actor are spoken. If the lines of one are omitted, the utterances and actions

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

of the other make no sense. In order to understand, each must know what the other does. In all conflict situations we know only what our *opponent* says and does—and this makes no sense. No one knows the lines that he himself is speaking, the part that he is playing in bringing about the conflicts and hostile acts. We are influenced by our opponent as we influence him. But we do not know the influence that we ourselves exert, and therefore we usually feel like victims of forces and circumstances out of our control.

When we enter a relationship or when we break it up, we act in accordance with goals that we have set for ourselves and that are reinforced by our partner. We share secret aims and expectations which guide us like a compass. We respond only to those stimuli which fit into our plans and recognize only those opportunities which confirm our expectations. We feel attracted when we meet someone who offers us, through his personality and his intentions, an opportunity to realize our own goals. We play a very important part in evoking and stimulating in the other person precisely the behavior that we expect and need.

A great many people fall in love with or feel attracted to a person who offers the least possibility of a harmonious union. Often good marital prospects are neglected in favor of a very questionable choice. Two secret tendencies are chiefly responsible for this: the desire to maintain one's superiority, and the prospect of suffering. The one induces the selection of an inferior or inadequate mate; the other, the choice of someone who brings dissatisfaction or even torture, justifying pessimism and granting only the solace of martyrdom. The factors that induce the choice of a partner are identical with those which lead to conflicts later on. The relationship is not merely the result of a conscious choice and of logical considerations; it is more profoundly

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

based upon the integration of two personalities. At the instant when two persons decide to marry, they sense the congruity of each other's life style.⁵ Even a marriage contracted as a thoughtless incident of drunkenness and sexual excitement represents a deeper agreement of two personalities. Their general directions in life have merged, regardless of how long the agreement may last.

Matching of the life styles does not mean identity of the life styles. On the contrary, opposites often attract each other because they complement each other. An aggressive, determined person may want a mate who is willing to be led and supportive, just as a passive, submissive person needs one on whose strength he or she can rely. A creative person, who is likely to go astray, needs and wants someone who is solid and realistic, with both feet on the ground. One who tries to please in order to have a place will choose someone who demands, often in a selfish way, admiration and submission. It is the role that each one plays in life that fits him to the role which the other one plays. One may call it playing games.⁶ In reality it is much too serious to be considered a "game," which implies the possibility of "not playing games." We all play the role that we unknowingly decided to play in our formative years; it was our movement within the family constellation into which we were born. In order to function, we follow our concepts of ourselves and the world, we take on certain roles and look for people whose roles provide what is missing in us, a role that supplements ours.

If it is true that deeper personality needs and patterns lead to a strong attractions, how is it then possible that the same two people who fit so well into each other can come to the point where they can no longer tolerate each other? To understand this strange phenomenon, one must

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

keep in mind that any human quality and trait—and it is true for every single one—can be seen in a positive way of life, appears either economical or stingy; and the generous may be considered spendthrift or extravagant by those who do not profit from his generosity. One person is considered to be either kind or weak, another strong or domineering, depending on how one looks at him. We do not like a person for his virtues or dislike him for his faults. When we like him, we emphasize his good points, and when we reject him, we use his weaknesses as an excuse.

A girl falls in love with an unselfish man and then complains that he never thinks of himself and his family, only of others. Or a boy feels attracted to a girl who tells him what to do and is protective; but after a few years of marriage he cannot tolerate her dominance. Many a woman chooses a man who is gentle and considerate and wants to please. And then she is disgusted because he cannot stop submitting to the needs of his parents, trying to please them. Then mother and daughter-in-law fight for the loyalty of the hapless idealist. The wife seldom recognizes that, without his submissiveness to his mother, he would have never chosen her as a wife, nor would she have gained a compliant husband.

Naturally, attraction needs more than the difference in personality and character. The two partners must have something in common, be it interest, background, values, or preoccupations. It is a test of their positive or negative attitudes toward each other whether their common interests continue or disappears, or whether within the same field of interest a diversity replaces the previous congruency. As long as she is in love with him, she does not mind his interest in sports and joins him; but when their mutual good will disappears, she can no longer share his

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

enthusiasm. Or they both love music and enjoy it together; and then comes the moment where their so-called “incompatibility” penetrates even the field of their previous common interest. He loves Wagner and she can’t stand his music!

Before we enter into a discussion of the mechanisms that bring about a change of attitudes, turning the positive reaction to the mate’s personality into hostility and eventual rejection, we may first investigate further the basis for the mutual attraction, the role that the life styles play when they meet.

The wife comes for help. She has been married for seventeen years and feels that something has been going wrong for a long time, at least for seven years. They were in love and perhaps still are. But he has utter disregard for her. He is very busy and takes on more than humanly possible. He thrives on pressure and has no schedule. He is so negligent that he may invite people to the house and then not show up. She can’t take the tension any longer. He admits that he is inconsiderate. The accumulation of pressures bothers him, he says. His wife, he admits, is charming, attentive, a good wife, and he loves her. But she has a tendency now to scold him, and he is extrasensitive. He clams up. He is always late but hates to wait for others. He always undertakes too much, loves activity, but hates details. He always underestimates how long things will take.

What are their life styles? She is the middle of three children, the only girl, in an extremely ambitious family. The older brother chose social success; she, intellectual and moral superiority; the younger brother, material gains. Each sibling was successful in some way, the woman stressing righteousness as her chief goal, patterning herself after a successful, effective

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

mother who subdued and tamed a strong father. It was a family in which the pretense of harmonious relationship was mandatory; consequently, the family maintained that the father was the boss, while actually mother dominated him and them. The patient, not realizing her own success in being right, was impressed with the success of her two brothers. She was so bent on being always right that she despaired of ever being successful.

Her early recollections expressed her pessimistic attitude toward life. She believed that she had no chance to be right except when she could criticize others for doing wrong. Nothing she could do was right; everything she wanted turned out to be wrong.⁸

Her basis mistakes: (1) She sits in judgment on herself and others and the whole world. (2) She does not expect to find anything in life but wrongness. (3) She has no faith in her ability to do anything about it. (4) She uses criticism as a means to establish her moral superiority.

How does his life style fit into hers?

Family constellation: He was an only child, overprotected and overindulged by mother, but also put on a pedestal by his otherwise rough and belligerent father. He was the only good thing that happened in their marriage, and he relied more on their support than on his abilities. He lived away from the outside world, in a world of imagination, with fantasies of being a conquering hero. All his actual accomplishments failed in comparison with his ambitions and his parents' expectations, so that he could never feel satisfied with his accomplishments. He did not fight openly; but his rebellion came out in many devious ways, like bed-wetting and hypersensitivity. His criticism of others was concealed behind his self-criticism. The heaven that

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

his family constituted for him made the outside world appear as hell. He lived in a fool's paradise, not wanting to see reality, but indulging in the compensation of fantasy.

His early recollections show that to him life is full of fight, unpleasant surprises, and dangers. Only if he is high up in the masculine world and in the driver's seat can he enjoy life and be sure of his place. But life isn't like that. He can't trust others or himself to find a solution, so he has to rely on pretenses.

His basic mistakes: (1) He over emphasizes the need for masculine superiority and his right to an elevated position. But they are all pretenses, beclouding his real opinion of life. His success can only be temporary. (2) Actually, he is a pessimist; He demands harmony and love but does not believe that he can get them except from his parents. (3) Even if he tries to be good, he can't be sure of approval. (4) He probably provokes discord and failure by his exaggerated idealistic demands and his unwillingness to accept reality's demands.

What did these two have to offer each other? First of all, the certainty of failure. Neither expected to get anywhere, and they chose each other to make sure of the failure that each one expected in life. But what really attracted them? He was on top of his family, she on the bottom of hers, in terms of status and success. She, too, believed in masculine superiority, and he gave her the picture of a successful, superior male. He, in turn, wanted admiration and support, which this "good," humble woman obviously offered him. Little did he know that her goodness also was a pretense, like his masculine superiority. Two overambitious idealists, full of pretenses of good intentions, met and found each other. And each provided the other with sufficient reasons to be disappointed. He arranged his whole life in such a way that, despite his best intentions and

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

efforts, everything went wrong. And in doing so, he gave her a chance to look down on his wrong-doing and thereby gain her much-desired sense of moral superiority. As long as they united their efforts against a hostile world, they got along very well. But before long they recognized that the mate was part of that hostile and unfair world.

Here is another story, one about a couple who “had to get married,” because the girl got pregnant. For years she considered divorce, but each time, as soon as they both agreed on it, they changed their minds. From the first mutual report about their consideration of a divorce, it was quite clear that neither really wanted one, although both had done their best to bring the marriage to a rupture. He was overpowering, verbally, intellectually, physically. Her only defense seemed to be passivity, withdrawal. It seemed that she looked for a superior male and at the same time resented and defeated him. He was thirty-seven years old, she twenty-seven. Now she felt that he was too old for her and complained about age discrepancy. But it was exactly his being so much older that had first impressed her. At seventeen she was proud of the attentions of an older man. Now he objected to her neglect of their child, her time spent either working or with her neighbors; she doubted his affection and complained about the lack of common interest. At the same time she called him a wonderful person, father, and husband, but she could no longer love him. She became interested in other men, having grown—according to her report—further apart from him, mentally and physically. He began to woo her again—they made up, but after a while they again discussed the possibility of divorce.

This pattern of wanting and rejecting each other had characterized their relationship from the beginning. Originally it was strictly physical attraction, they thought; but she was impressed

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

by his intelligence, flattered by his being attracted to her, was in love with him, and wanted to marry him. He only wanted to make love, to prove his masculine prowess. While she had no orgasm, she could not stop the relationship because she was afraid of losing him. Her sex appeal was her power. She always wanted and hoped that he would propose, but he did not before she became pregnant. She was not happy, and he became a wonderful father, very proud of her, still adoring her.

What do they have in common, how do they fit together? Let us look at their life styles.

She is the younger of two, next in line after a successful older sister. She had her own way, by means apparently out of her control, like fears, temper, and oversensitivity. In her family, tensions were covered and conflicts did not impair outwardly good relationships. Preferences were equally covered up, as was hostility between the members of the family. She tried to avoid looking beneath the surface, unable to admit to herself her own motivation, or the true picture of her relationships with the other members of the family.

Summary of early recollections: I am passive; dependent entirely on what life is doing to me. I want the most intense pleasure and fear the most horrible dangers. I am small and weak and cannot admit my real intentions because I want to blame others for what is happening to me. I want excitement, but life is empty.

Basic mistakes: (1) She does not take into account her strengths and what she is doing. (2) She wants to be good, but only does what she likes. (3) She wants more from life than life can give her. (4) She tries to fulfill her life by *getting* more instead of seeing what she could *do*. She is an idealistic dreamer.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

Let us look at his summary. He is the eldest of five, the older of a group of two (a sister two years younger), with a second group (one brother and two sisters) much younger. He maintained his superiority, primarily through intellectual and moral righteousness, following the superior picture of father, without being able to assert himself in reality, probably doubting his masculinity in comparison with his father. The family had high ambitions and exaggerated masculine standards, with all children except his younger sister striving for superiority. He was in a masculine alliance with father and younger brother against the women, trying to keep them down.

Summary of early recollections: In contrast to the air of superiority that he successfully maintained in life, his early recollections do not reflect any self-confidence in his masculine superiority. His recollections indicate that he is in the dark, seeking the sun; but even if he finds it, he will not get the benefits. Only with a woman can he be a man. But depending on a woman, he would become restricted by her. And he is sure that he will not succeed even if he were to fight the limitations. He believes that even a strong man can't succeed in this life, and he is not even that.

Basis mistakes: (1) He expects something special from life, but is sure he will never get it. He is an idealistic dreamer. (2) He is a pessimist, underestimating his chances to get anywhere. (3) He overestimates the significance of masculinity and at the same time underestimates his own power in a masculine world. Only through women can he have his place. (4) Things are not right; he gains status only by being the only one who knows what is right. Through his pessimistic criticism he gains moral superiority.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

Now let us examine what they have to offer each other. Both are idealistic dreamers. (This statement in the summaries was made in interviews in which the life style of the other was not known. It was a spontaneous evaluation of each person.) Both underestimate their strength; but each one goes about it in a different way. She remains passive, blaming him for what happened to her, not seeing that she contributed to the events in her life. He, on the other hand, tried to maintain the fiction of his masculine superiority by looking down on her and criticizing her. She looked for a strong person to lean on and found it in the much older man; he looked for a woman to be superior to and found it in this apparently weak young girl. Both are pessimists, sure that they will not get anywhere, thereby pushing each other into actions that justify their pessimism. He demands domesticity, and she seeks pleasure from other superior men. Actually, they need each other and probably never will give each other up. Each contributes to the fiction that the other is unfair, and the constant alternation of acceptance and rejection creates excitement as well as despair.

The common bond between the mates is often an identical attitude toward life—unfulfilled idealism, pessimism, and certainty of failure, intellectual and moral superiority—which unites two people in a common stand against the rest of the world. When they discover that the partner also belongs to the rest of the world, they begin to look down on each other. This indicates the causes and circumstances in which positive attitudes become converted into rejection and hostility.

There are certain rules of cooperation, in line with the “ironclad logic of social living,” which Adler¹⁰ recognized. As was said before, all people when dealing with each other cooperate

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

fully with each other. There is merely a distinction between constructive and destructive cooperation. It seems that the basis for each has been well established.¹¹

The ability to cooperate is primarily based on a feeling of belonging. The extent and intensity of such a feeling determines the tolerance level for each partner. It implies confidence in the other as well as confidence in one's self within the given relationship. The limit of the tolerance is reached when distrust and suspicion enter into the relationship, when the certainty of being accepted and considered worthwhile disappears, and when fear and inferiority feelings undermine the willingness to participate and to contribute.

A universal tendency to regard a marriage as a fifty-fifty proposition leads inevitably to a breakdown in constructive cooperation, either temporarily or permanently. It is unavoidable, under this premise, to begin to wonder whether one gets only 49 percent and is expected to give 51. Then cooperation turns into conflict, undermining the harmony, the friendship, and eventually even the love. Differences of opinions and interests are unavoidable in any close relationship. They become a conflict, engendering hostility and "disjunctive affects,"¹² only if they stop being regarded as a common problem. Then each attempts to win. Losing would mean humiliation, losing face, losing status, losing a sense of equality that is essential in a harmonious relationship within the present social climate of democracy.

It was much easier to maintain a marriage and to find peace in one's home as long as the man was dominant. There was no conflict about sex; women considered their sexual role merely as one satisfying the needs of their husbands. It made no difference whether he wanted much or little, or what he wanted; she was obliged to comply. Naturally, there were conflicts at times and

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

in some cases; but they were not so widespread and general as they are today. Women now seek their own satisfaction and determine what they want sexually and what not. When both sexes reached a state of equality, free to decide what each wanted, sexual conflicts in marriage became almost unavoidable. It is impossible for two people always to want the same thing at the same time and to the same extent. As soon as one wants more than the other, the relationship becomes disturbed. The one who wants less feels imposed upon, and the one who wants more and senses reluctance in his partner feels rejected. This may not be true so long as both are still “in love” and are sure of the other one’s respect and good will. Then discrepancies in interests and desires can be tolerated and evoke an understanding and mutual effort to overcome frustrations and to reach a satisfactory agreement.

The example of sex can be enlarged to any area of living together. It is not disturbing if each wants something different so long as each feels secure in his relationship. But this is difficult to maintain at a time when intensive competition pervades the fabric of our whole society, and especially the relationship of those who are close to each other, as are members of a family. Here everyone easily becomes the other’s enemy, regardless of their love. This is the rule, occasional exceptions notwithstanding. Without realizing it, each one is afraid of losing status, and each in turn tries to establish his superiority over his competitor. In this atmosphere it becomes difficult to regard conflicts as a task for both. Instead, one pitches his strength against the other, and each feels victimized, not realizing that his opponent is equally afraid. If one could eliminate the question of status, the need for superiority, and the fear of humiliation, one could find ways to cope with inevitable problems. A mother-in-law becomes a source of friction only if

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

a wife fails to unite her efforts with those of her husband and instead puts the blame on him for listening more to his mother than to her. Economic stress can either intensify the cohesiveness of the family or disrupt it. If it is a problem for both to face and to solve, they probably will come closer. But if the wife blames the husband for not earning enough, or he his wife for spending too much, then the problem becomes unsolvable.

It is amazing how insignificant the occasion may be to mobilize each one's hostile forces. The husband comes home tired; his wife, tied down with home and children, has been waiting all day for him for a moment of diversion, to go out with him. As long as their relationship is not disturbed, as long as they trust each other and feel understood, there is no problem: "All right, let us go out another time." But if he feels imposed upon by her demands, and she neglected in her needs, instead of going out or staying peacefully at home, they may quarrel the whole night.

This is the point at which most people are utterly unaware of the role they are playing. They remain united in their efforts; but what is their common goal? Regardless of the variations of the "game" that Berne¹³ described, its nature is always the same. There seem to be only a few variations. The most frequent endeavor of each party is to demonstrate how wrong the other is. This is the reason that endless arguments indicate the collapse of harmony, friendship, and love. Why do the partners argue? In reporting their arguments, each often refers to the puzzling fact that usually they are about trivia, about insignificant little problems, not worth any attention or concern. They fail to realize that the issue is most important, in any single case. It is most important for each to prove that his is right and the other one is wrong. Only by blaming the other one for what he has done to the relationship can each justify his or her own hostility and

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

unwillingness to function. Each one knows that he is doing wrong, but he thinks it is always the fault of the other. Neither sees how his own behavior and attitude contribute to the wrongdoing of the other. Instead of realizing the psychological basis for their disputes, they remain on the logical level, each finding new proofs for his position.

Such concern with who is right and wrong often yields to a much worse form of warfare. It is no longer a question of right or wrong, or whose faults are responsible for the marital conflict. Instead there is a desire to hurt each other, with no limits. Each one wants to punish the other for what he is suffering. One can truly say that they deserve each other; each punishes the other for the often inhuman way he is treated. The war of the sexes no longer is one of power and control, of superiority and status; each partner brings out the best in the other, a hatred that has found cultural support in writers and philosophers from Nietzsche to Strindberg. The mutual antagonism between the partners can be so strong that it becomes impossible for them to agree on anything, even on the conditions of divorce. And often the fight may continue for a long while afterward, with children providing the battlefield. For each, agreement means giving in; and submission seems worse than death.

It is impossible to predict when a couple may turn against each other. All marital predictions merely indicate the lesser or greater *probability* of such an event, pointing to beneficial or harmful factors and circumstances. But even in optimal circumstances the fear of losing status and significance still hangs like the sword of Damocles over all men and women in our present cultural climate. Some are more insecure; others are sure of their place and values and therefore less vulnerable. Sometimes the disturbing aspects of the relationship are visible

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

even before the wedding. Instead of facing them courageously, a couple may indulge in wishful thinking; after the wedding, things will straighten out. Sometimes they do, once fear and apprehension are overcome and mutual confidence and acceptance are established. However, because of the intense and general warfare between the sexes, each is only too susceptible to a feeling of neglect, abuse, imposition, and rejection. Such apprehensions are supported by our general concern with status and superiority.

One of the crucial factors in bringing about marital discord is the prevailing pessimism in regard to the prospect of a happy, lasting marriage. When a couple embarks on marriage, they hope against hope. But the slightest incident may set off and evoke a condition that they feared from the beginning. Little do they realize that fear usually brings about what we fear the most. Anticipation is still one of the strongest motivations. We move toward what we expect, without being aware of what we expect or what we are doing to actualize it. It is interesting to note that a broken home is more inductive to marital failure among the children than the loss of one parent through death.¹⁴ The latter makes marriage desirable; the former is a confirmation of its hazards. Such hazards are constantly impressed upon our children so that it is almost impossible to eliminate apprehension and anxiety about marriage. They certainly sensitize the spouses to an exaggeration of all conflicts of interests and desires.

One has to distinguish between the individual's capacity and preparation for marital fulfillment and the pitfalls of situational perils. Many "ideal" relationships go on the rocks after a child is born; the father may resent sharing his wife's attention and service, and she may switch her loyalty from husband to child. Or a husband's earning capacity may diminish and put a

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

burden on their relationship, forcing the wife to go back to work when she got married to avoid working. In our time of equality between the sexes, the possibility of infidelity is always there. In an autocratic era, the wife would not have dared to commit adultery, but in turn took it almost for granted that a man needed extramarital satisfactions. Any predicament may tax the spouses' morale and tolerance and thereby provide the turning point in their relationship, from love to indifference or even hate.

The most frequent source for marital breakup seems to be the nature of attraction that originally drove the couple into each other's arms. Whether the mate was chosen for his faults or for his virtues, the crucial factor is whether they can continue to use them for mutual supplementation or decide to turn against each other. It is this decision which spells success or failure in marriage, although neither of the partners is usually aware of having made a decision and why. Nor do they know that they have it in their power to change their negative attitude into a positive one, if they only would be willing. Many efforts at reconciliation fail because nothing is done to help the partners recognize the reasons for their attitudes and change them.

Shifting attitudes toward each other, the ups and downs in mutual satisfaction and dissatisfaction, are unavoidable at a time when people are concerned more with what they like and dislike than with what they have to do. The best definition of a good marriage is still the statement that the mother in the film "The Best Years of Our Life" makes her daughter, who thought her parents did not know anything about the tribulations and tortures of love: "We never had any trouble? [To father:] How many times have I told you I hated you—and believed it in

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

my heart? How many times have you said you were sick and tired of me—that you were all washed up? How many times have we had to fall in love all over again?”

Hardly any marriage can avoid a serious crisis; but most crisis situations would not need to lead to a marital breakup if the people involved knew how to extricate themselves or had the courage to let themselves be pulled down by the whirlpool of life and be spilled out safely, if the only could hold their breath and wait.

The following example shows dramatically to what extent attitudes can change and reverse refection into acceptance. A patient (this happened in Europe) was suffering from various nervous symptoms. He could not stand any pressure and was unable to go to a dentist even for the most urgent needs. He had to be in complete control. He was the younger of two, and dominated his older sister and his mother, imitating a domineering father. While he strove for “masculine superiority,” he was constantly on guard, not sure that he was enough of a man. He developed a peculiar system of tyrannizing and charming others to give in to his every whim, avoiding very carefully any situation where his dreaded inferiority might become apparent. He remembered an incident at the age of eight, when he was walking along and encountered a man who gave no indication of stepping aside. So he did the same and consequently bumped into the man.

He married rather young, when he found a girl deeply devoted to him and willing to do anything he wanted. She took care of him and provided him a kingdom where he reigned supreme. After a few years, however, he became apprehensive and rebelled. She exerted certain pressures on him—for his comfort and benefit, to be sure, but nevertheless pressures. She

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

brought him his house slippers when he came home, made him put on a housecoat, etc., etc. This threatened him and increased his fear of being dominated. Abruptly he decided to leave her. She became hysterical and literally fell on her knees, embracing his legs, imploring him to keep her as his slave. He could do whatever he wanted as long as she could stay with him and serve him. His feeling of superiority was restored and he stayed. To test his power, he ignored domestic efforts by entering the house with dirty or wet shoes and ignoring any order. It broke her heart, but she suffered in silence. He went further: he had a number of mistresses, and told her of the gifts he received and of other exploits and successes. She was hungry for his love and affection, so he denied her both.

During therapy he not only began to understand his mistaken concept of dominance and rebellion against pressure; he began to change. First, his nervous systems diminished. Then he dropped the multitude of girlfriends in favor of one. And then something strange happened to him. For years he had found his wife sexually repulsive. One night, while lying awake in bed and looking at her, he suddenly thought that she was not so unattractive, even younger and better looking than his mistress. He felt sexually aroused, had intercourse with her, but could not understand what happened to him. It came so unexpectedly. As he began to understand, he gave up his girlfriend, whose admiration and gifts he no longer needed as proof of his masculine superiority.

Such changes from negative to positive are not infrequent; but they are not necessarily all for the good.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

A young man fell in love. The girl did not respond and rejected his proposal of marriage. But he was used to getting what he wanted. He was unwilling to take no for an answer, particularly since his ardor was so great. So he persisted; but she remained adamant. He became desperate and threatened suicide. At this point she weakened. He had proved how much he loved her, and they were married.

Soon afterward he lost his interest in her and neglected her, even sexually. When she complained, he merely told her that he was no longer in love. She had not really cared for him, and they were divorced. Whereupon he “fell in love” with her again. He discovered that he could not live without her. This time he was really in love with her. He again pursued her, even with greater urgency than before. To escape his pressure, she married someone else.

Now he was truly challenged, determined to have her back as his wife. He began to threaten the life of her husband. To protect him, she divorced him. Now the intensity of her first husband’s pursuit increased. He convinced her that his divorce had taught him a lesson. Knowing how much he needed her, he was a “changed man,” and his love was now deep and eternal. They were married again.

It was not long before he again began to neglect her. Of course it was not his fault. He could not help being again out of love.

It is obvious that this was a man who merely wanted to have his own way and particularly wanted to impose his will on a reluctant adversary. When she did not want him, he forced her into submission; and when she expected love and affection from him, he denied it. In many a marriage, the basis for attraction, physical and personal, may be of a very questionable

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

nature. In such a case, falling in love again, changing rejection in to acceptance, may merely serve to prolong the agony. It is important not only that we love but also whom we choose to love. Changing negative into positive attitudes in a marriage is not desirable in itself. Sometimes the rejection is long overdue; it may be more constructive than continuing a marriage that saps the strength and courage of each partner, provides the children with a conviction of hostility between the sexes, and intensifies the marital pessimism characteristic of our times.

If any one attitude may be considered conducive to a marital breakdown, it is this latent pessimism, which increases with the percentage of marital failures. The decisive factor for considering divorce and refusing reconciliation is a defeatist conviction that nothing good can come of a continued union. It is this pessimism which makes one or both partners look at every shortcoming and inconvenience, regardless of how small, as a sure sign of doom. Such an attitude precludes any glimpse of hope. The breaking point occurs precisely when hope fades and pessimism prevails.

Which attitudes, then, permit a continuation of marriage despite all conflicts, differences, and disappointments? First of all, courage, belief in one's ability to cope with whatever problems may arise. The courageous person can succeed where the timid is bound to fail. Beyond that, the willingness to contribute, to be useful, instead of the increasingly prevalent concern with pleasure and getting.

Marriage is one of the most difficult assignments for modern man. It is easier to keep a job than to maintain a marriage. Once it was a haven to which a man could return from his

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

struggle in a hostile world to find peace and comfort. Today, many a man prefers working late at the office to coming home to friction and demands.

These difficulties, which discourage and demoralize husbands and wives alike, are partly due to this new relationship of equality, which developed as part of the democratic evolution. There is no tradition that teaches us how to live with each other as equals, in mutual respect and trust. We have not learned to solve problems through agreement, without winners or losers. It is this lack of technical knowledge in problem-solving on the basis of confidence in one's self and the other which undermines the feeling of belonging that is the source of tolerance, good will, and optimal participation.

Notes (as they appeared)

¹Everette Hall, "Ordinal Position and Success in Engagement and Marriage," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, XXI (1965), 154-158.

²E. W. Burgess and P. Wallin, *Engagement and Marriage* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1953).

³W. Toman, "Family Constellation of the Partners in Divorced and Married Couples," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, XVIII (1962), 48-51.

⁴George Levinger and Maurice Sonnheim, "Complementarity in Marital Adjustment: Reconsidering Toman's Family Constellation Hypothesis," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, XXI (1965), 137-145.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

⁵The concept of the life style is basic to Adlerian psychology. The life style is the unique configuration of an individual, indicating his pattern of concepts about himself and others and his movements through life. It is based on the ideas, convictions, and goals that each person develops in his formative years. The recognition of a person's life style permits a holistic perception of him as a unit. Adler provided us with a technique for determining a person's life style (*Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind* [London: Faber & Faber, 1943]). An analysis of the family constellation permits an understanding of the way in which the person found his place within his first group. The sociogram of his family indicates the role that each member of the family played. Early recollections then indicate clearly how the person looks at himself and life. An individual remembers from all the myriads of early childhood experiences only those which fit in his outlook on life. If he changes his personality pattern in psychotherapy, his early recollections change accordingly. When we know on which principles he operates, we can then visualize the basic mistakes which he makes in his evaluation of himself and life.

⁶Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

⁷We are presenting here only the conclusions of the information that was gathered about each person, as described in note 5.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Adler, *op. cit.*

¹¹Rudolf Dreikurs, *The Challenge of Marriage* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946).

¹²Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature* (New York: Greenburg Publishers, 1927).

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

¹³*Op. cit.*

¹⁴G. Gurin, J. Veroff, and Sheila Feld, *Americans View Their Mental Health* (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com