

Wedded abyss: how to escape

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A HEAVY-SET young man slumps in his chair, looking bored and disengaged, as his wife ticks off a list of complaints about him. In particular he had forgotten a plan to go on a picnic, which was typical of his failure to listen to her.

As the wife whined on, the man's eyes shifted, as if searching for an escape route. But he was trapped in John Gottman's love lab, behind a one-way mirror, being filmed and recorded as part of a 30-year research project. The study has explored what most of us want to know: what distinguishes happy, lasting marriages from those that disintegrate into bitterness or loneliness.

Just over 10 years ago, Dr Gottman published some startling findings of longitudinal research that made him famous. After watching couples interact for a mere 15 minutes in the love lab, he could predict with about 90 per cent accuracy if they would divorce within six years. This week Dr Gottman and his wife and therapist partner, Julie, were in Sydney to run workshops organised by Relationships Australia. "Look for the repair attempt made by the husband and see if she rejects it," he tells the audience of 150 relationship counsellors as the miserable couple loomed into focus on a big screen. "Gottman is the guru of marriage research and counselling," says Anne Hollonds, chief executive of Relationships Australia. "It's like the Pope coming to Sydney."

The former mathematician and rabbi's son from Washington State was the first to apply hard science to the study of marriages, and more recently of gay and lesbian relationships. Some of his findings have been controversial. For example, he found a strong predictor of a happy marriage was a husband's willingness to compromise in marital disputes and accept his wife's influence. It was twisted to imply that only weak men could win in marriage.

But that has not stopped thousands of couples from subjecting themselves to a scientific assessment of their relationship in the love lab or in their homes.

As a couple bats a hard subject back and forth, staff monitor their expressions and body language. Electrodes attached to their bodies measure heart rates and other responses, like the tendency to jiggle with impatience.

Through statistical analysis, Dr Gottman has named what he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that predict an ailing marriage: criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and contempt. And the worst of these is contempt.

"You know what it looks like," says Julie, "when you roll your eyes and curl the corner of your lip up. It's a very good indicator a couple will break up."

The couples headed for disaster evince too many of these negatives in dispute. But the masters of matrimony, as the Gottmans call long-term successes, evince a ratio of at least five positive interactions for every negative.

"In a good relationship, people do get angry, but in a very different way," Dr Gottman says. "The masters see a problem a bit like a soccer ball. They kick it around. It's 'our' problem."

They deal with conflict gently and are also more responsive to "sliding door moments" - bids by one partner for an emotional connection. It can be as simple as a husband drawing his wife's attention to the sunset. Does she look up or keep reading her book? Enough positive responses build emotional intimacy.

For the heavy-set man and his whiny wife, the prognosis did not look good. He had thrown out a "repair attempt" - "I'm not remembering things important to you and you're not remembering things important to me," he says. But alas his wife ploughed on with her litany of complaint.

"Every marriage is a mistake," Dr Gottman tells the audience. "The question is what you do with it."