

Relationships: Bids for Connection

In research led by John Gottman, at the Relationship Research Institute, they observed married couples in interaction. They found one vital indicator of how likely the couple is to stay together for years: how they respond to each other's "bids" for affection and connection.

When interacting with others (whether it's with our partners, kids, or co-workers), we often make bids for connection. These can come in the form of questions that we ask, statements that we make (and expect them to respond to), non-verbal gestures, a glance, or a touch. Bids can be very low-key, or very high energy; they can be presented as a serious request, or a lighthearted joke. Some are easier to recognize than others! Some examples of verbal bids:

- Would you like to go out for lunch next Monday?
- There's a fun movie showing. I thought you might be interested.
- I miss Sunday morning sex with you.
- Tonight seems like a nice night for a walk.
- Can't the dishes wait? Wanna come sit here on the couch with me?
- Bob & Sue have a babysitter once a week so they can have a date. That would be nice.
- I heard a story on the radio today that you would have enjoyed.

Bids also include a welcome-home kiss, a goodnight hug, a glance at the partner, and so on. Gottman found that a happy couple can make as many as 100 bids over the course of a meal.

When someone bids for your attention, and for a connection with you, there are three main categories of ways that you might respond.

Turn Toward

- **Act in a responsive, interested, positive, and loving way.**
- **Physically:** turn towards them, reach out, touch them, look at them. Nod, smile, wink.
- **Verbally:** Say "I hear you", "I want to be with you," "I'm interested in you." Ask a question.
- **Actions:** Change your behavior in response to their bid.

Turn Away

- **Act in a way that ignores them, or dismisses their bid.**
- **Physically:** stay neutral, wander away, or don't look in their direction.
- **Verbally:** No response, or a response that has nothing to do with what they said.
- **Actions:** Continue what you are doing, without (seeming) to notice their bid.

Turn Against

- **Act in an angry way that rejects them and their bid.**
- **Physically:** Walk away, glare at them, make threatening movements.
- **Verbally:** respond angrily, use sarcasm or put-downs. Make fun of them.
- **Actions:** Do the opposite of what they have asked you to do.

Try to “Turn Toward” As Often As Possible

If you want a relationship to succeed, listen closely for the other person’s bids, and respond positively whenever you can. Even if you have to say no to a specific request, you can do that in a connecting manner that lets them know that you heard their bid and that you would also like to connect with them. For example: saying “I would love to go for a walk with you. Unfortunately, I have to finish this work now” is much more connecting than turning against by refusing the bid, and/or attacking: “I’m way too tired for a walk” or “Can’t you see I’m busy? Why did you even ask!” And any response, even a “turning against” is better than turning away and ignoring that the question was even asked.

Gottman found that successful relationships had a 20:1 ratio: the couple had 20 positive bids and/or turning towards for every negative bid and/or incident of turning against or turning away.

Happy couples who stayed together over the years would typically ignore less than 20% of their partner’s bids. And, in a successful relationship, if the first bid is ignored, because the partner is caught up in something and doesn’t hear it, the bidder will often try again. Partners who ignored 50% or more of their partners’ bids typically end up divorced. In a relationship where turning away or turning against is common, partners rarely re-bid for fear of being shot down again.

Turning toward someone says:

- I hear you
- I am interested in you
- I’m on your side
- I want to help
- I love you so much
- I want more of you

Making Sure Your Bids Are Clear

If people seem to consistently “turn away” from you, and you wonder whether anyone even listens to you, you may want to consider how you communicate your bid for connection — is it clear enough that someone can hear it and understand it?

Positive interactions

Happy couples keep their love alive through a series of small, everyday interactions. They talk, laugh, work on projects together, ask the other person about his/her day, check in with the other before making plans, smile when talking to each other, and so on. Another ratio Gottman reports is that successful couples have five positive interactions for every negative one. This builds a reservoir of good feelings.

When one of you has the inevitable bad day, when you’re sick, or tired, and you snap at your partner, they are able to reach into this reservoir of good feelings. They know not to take your crankiness as an attack, and realize that your snapping just shows that you need a little extra nurturing and support that day.

What can you do today to “turn toward” your partner?

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