

# Love Maps

The 1999 New York Times bestseller *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman identified **love maps** as the first principle and indeed the very foundation of strong marriages. Gottman defined love maps as “that part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner’s life.”

But it’s not just data. Sure, a good love map includes knowing what your partner likes to eat for lunch, what music they enjoy, what their favorite color is, what movies were their favorites, and all that sort of thing.

But more than this, it means really “getting” how your partner feels about things. What are your partner’s most cherished hopes and dreams? What are they looking forward to in life? What makes them truly happy? What lights them up – or brings them down?

How does your partner feel lately about their boss or their job? Who’s their favorite friend? Whom do they trust, and why? Whom do they look up to? How do they comfort themselves?

Love maps are about knowing your partner in a deep and meaningful way, and in such a way that your partner *feels* deeply known. (And hopefully you feel the same way.)

## Updating Our Maps

Love maps are not static. If you keep a 1995 Rand-McNally road map in the glove compartment of your car, it may be of some use because many topographical elements and highway routes are the same as they were. But some of them will have changed. That’s why Google puts a ton of resources into continually updating Google Maps. Likewise, to keep your relationship current, you need to stay in touch with what’s changing in your partner’s world.

When we’re in the courtship phase of a new relationship, we’re naturally curious about our partner and we ask all kinds of questions. Where do they come from? What is their family like? What artists and writers do they like? What are their political and spiritual values? Etc. But if we’ve been cohabitating a while, especially if kids enter the picture, there’s a hazard of going on automatic pilot. For example, when you’re overwhelmed with caring for a baby, you may feel too exhausted even to check in with your own feelings, let alone your partner’s.

Babies and kids change rapidly. When they’re very small, they’re not even the same little person from week to week. We see that. We remark on that. We say, “Wow, isn’t that amazing!” But what we might miss is that our partners are changing too, though perhaps more subtly. Our partner may even feel differently about being a parent than they did a few weeks or months or years ago. It’s worth investigating. Ask your partner, “Hey, how are you feeling right now? How you holding up with all this lack of sleep? Are you okay about not having more time to yourself?”

It may be hard to imagine right now, but at some point, your children will be gone and it will be just the two of you again. What will you have left then? Will you look at your partner and see a virtual stranger? Or will you feel so deeply connected that you hit the ground running together when the nest is empty?

Also, it's good role modeling to stay well connected with your partner while your kids still live at home. As a parent, you may not have the bandwidth to prioritize your connection with your partner like you did when you were dating, but there are plenty of ways to keep that flame of communion lit. Maybe you can't have a designated date night every week (at least for the time being) but Gottman suggests maintaining "rituals of connection," meaning simple things, like how you enjoy being greeted when you come home from work, or how you celebrate birthdays, or just making a habit of checking in at certain points of the day.

At the very least, when you lie down together before going to sleep each night, have a little conversation. "Tell me about your day. How ARE you?" Just connect a little while with each other, keeping cell phones and Netflix and the internet out of sight. Even 30 minutes of this simple connection can rejuvenate and refresh your love maps.

### **Stories and Maps**

The stories we hold about our relationship are like cities on our love maps. But sometimes our stories don't quite match our partner's stories. They don't "map onto" each other, so to speak. Sometimes, we may recall the same details, but interpret them very differently.

For example, maybe the wife remembers the couple's wedding as a disaster. Her husband's brother got too drunk and made an ass of himself! The caterer was late! Her hair didn't turn out the way she had wanted! But then her husband says, "Oh, it was a great wedding! It's not a real wedding if stuff doesn't go wrong. Ha ha!"

So one partner treasures the memory as a joyful celebration, while the other recalls it as an ordeal. This is not necessarily a problem. It depends on what significance partners place on the story. How important is it to them that their respective stories about the wedding do not share the same meaning?

It may be very important. The husband might say to himself, "Well, I'm a glass-half-full type of person and she's a glass-half-empty person. I see it now all the time in how she responds to things. She's so negative." Or the wife might think: "Well, that's how it's been ever since. He doesn't care what happens so long as he doesn't have to feel responsible for it. That's why the kids depend on me more than on him."

Then again, the husband may frame it this way instead: "I love how deeply she cares about getting things right, and not letting things get sloppy. It's been helpful to me, and she's slowly but surely made me into a more careful, detail-conscious person." For her part, the wife may reflect, "I love how easily he takes pleasure in things. It's been such a healthy example for me when I get stuck on the little stuff."

The key is, are we nurturing fondness for one another in the stories we hold (or build up) in our minds? Are we using our stories to strengthen our relationship? Or, in the stories we cling to, are we undermining our feelings for one another?

This is especially critical if a story involves an episode of conflict with our partner. Even if we have widely differing perspectives, can we acknowledge them and somehow use this information to adapt and grow stronger together? What actually happened (as we recall it) and how we feel about what happened are certainly important. But even more important is what we decide to do with all those thoughts and feelings, where we decide to take them, what our intentions are with respect to our stories.

Sharing and periodically reevaluating our stories – and the meanings we attribute to them – is a critical part of maintaining our love maps.

### **Letting Our Partners Change**

Sometimes we like to hold our partners in a certain light, even though they have changed. This can be corrosive to a loving connection. We need to allow each other space to become different over time. (Change is inevitable anyway.)

It can feel threatening to see our partner change, even in a positive way, because ... what will it mean for the relationship? “If my partner is changing so much, will she still love me? Will she still want to be married to me? If she’s spending time with a new friend, making new discoveries, having new self-insights, or finding new interests, will I remain just as interesting to her?”

In truth, we never really know.

But keeping in touch with each other’s changes, staying involved with each other’s worlds of feeling, habitually listening well to each other ... these love mapping activities have a life of their own. They bring fresh vitality to relationships over and over again, on a continual basis.

So you can at least rest assured that your relationship, rooted in a deep knowing of each other, will be extremely difficult to replace or leave behind.

### **Listen Listen Listen**

The more we listen, the deeper our connection grows.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking our partner needs us to fix their problems. Then we’re quick to offer solutions that our partner isn’t actually asking for.

Or we may “cheerlead” rather than listen well. For example, if our partner has a beef with her boss, we may state forcefully, “God, what a jerk!” And, granted, maybe sometimes that actually is what our partner wants and needs to hear.

But generally speaking, the trick with listening is simply to be present – present with the story, present with the feelings, present with any discomfort or vulnerability that arises -- without trying reflexively to change anything. (And we might show we are listening by reflecting back what we’ve heard.)

More than problem solving or agreement, what we mostly need from our partners is witnessing and acceptance and understanding. In other words ... love mapping.

In the end, it’s really not so hard. After all, you did it when you were courting. You can do it again. It really only takes a small amount of effort to keep your love maps healthy.