

# **Marriage 101:** Tools of Influence

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Counseling Center, Inc.**  
(FMCC)

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## Introduction:

When working with couples, I often hear: “Why don’t they teach this stuff in school?” I agree that the tools of influence ought to be made public information, and so this manual is my attempt to get this information into the hands of those who are interested in improving their intimate relationships, and want to learn the basic tools of influence over how to get their needs better met within their relationships (which is the basic function of intimate relationships).

In doing marriage counseling for over 25 years, and in supervising and instructing new counselors and psychologists in marriage counseling, I have found a few tools that I tend to use repeatedly to enhance marriages and to develop a marriage counselor’s ability to improve their patients’ marriages. This article is a compilation of these “tools of influence.” None of these are solely my ideas, but rather I have acquired and developed them over years of training, attending workshops on various topics, and reading a multitude of others’ books and articles. I, therefore, “stand on the shoulders of giants” when I share with you my version of these tools. ■

## The Platinum Rule:

**Y**ou have probably heard of the “Golden Rule”: “Do unto others as you would want them to do to you,” but this rule doesn’t work well in intimate relationships. Think about it. My wife’s birthday is coming up and I buy her an awesome 8 foot fly rod. She’ll love it, right? Yet most of us use this rule in trying to get our needs met within our relationships. This generally leads to asking, complaining, and criticizing our mates for letting us down and not meeting our needs. One guarantee in intimate relationships seems to be that if you want something, ask for it, and you are guaranteed not to get it!

Yet, the relationship didn’t start out that way. I thought I had picked the right person because she was delivering on mine without ever being asked, and therefore I thought I would always be happy because she would always be meeting my needs like she did in courtship. But, if you think about it, early in the relationship, I didn’t know her well enough to know what she desired and needed from me, and so, to hedge my bet that she would go out with me again, I threw all the spaghetti on the wall hoping something would stick, and I made sure I remembered what she responded to. Likewise, she was doing the same thing. So really, it was me who

was making her so attractive (which is the good news because since I was making her so attractive, I can do it again).

At first, when we were courting, we were both “other-referenced”, trying to impress the other. Because she did such a fine job at impressing me (meeting my needs) I figured she was the right one for me! But after some time, this faded away and she didn’t seem to be so interested in impressing me (and I was less interested in impressing her). This is when I began to wonder if, maybe I hadn’t picked the right person after all. Some even wonder if they were being duped and this is the real person they married.

At this stage of the relationship, when the well runs dry, we turn to being self-referenced and become responsible for attempting to get our own needs met. It becomes “Every man for himself” and we go to the golden rule out of desperation. But getting our needs met in a relationship is like getting tickled; you can’t tickle yourself. We then become like the beggar in the children’s story of stone soup. Remember that story? It was where a hungry beggar came into a village, and the villagers, seeing that he was so needy, closed their doors and shutters to him to protect what little they had left (which is often what our part-

ners do when we come abegging). The clever beggar, after knocking at several doors to no avail, went to the middle of the village, built a fire, put a large pot of water to boil, and began adding stones to the pot. The curious villagers began to inquire what he was doing and he replied: “You all are clearly hungrier than I am, so I am going to feed you. I am making stone soup.” The villagers, finding the idea of

“If you think about it, we were doing the “Platinum Rule” in courtship, and that is why our partners were looking like Prince or Princess Charming!”

eating stone soup unappealing, began to come up with a few scraps of food such as a few old carrots, or half a head of cabbage, and before long there was enough soup to feed everyone! This is the essence of the platinum rule and how one goes about getting their needs met in relationship when they are “hungry.”

The “Platinum Rule” is that, if you have a need in your relationship, say to feel loved, then give them this, in their language first,

and they will automatically, and unconsciously (this is why it is so predictable and works) give us ours in our language.

So if I am wanting to feel reassured, I throw all the spaghetti on the wall, looking for something that works to reassure her, and as I hit the home runs and fill her cup with reassurance (and sometimes there are holes in the cup so it takes more than one gesture or

act) then she smiles at me, approaches me, and gives me a hug or a kiss, then I get my reassurance in my language from her.

If you think about it, we were doing the “Plati-

num Rule” in courtship, and that is why our partners were looking like Prince or Princess Charming! We, through giving them everything they didn’t even ask for (and so meeting a variety of their needs without even being asked) were making them attractive to ourselves.

But the platinum rule, often, is like taking a shower on a cold morning, when the water heater is at the other end of the house.

I go into the shower, turn the knob to the right (not my language, I am wanting a hot shower), and at first cold water comes out. Even though this is nothing like what we are wanting from the shower, none of us goes to the hot water heater and curses at it or goes out and buys a new one, and yet in our marriage this may cross our minds. Instead we will turn the knob further to the right, and patiently wait for our hot water, knowing it will come soon. So if we follow the same approach with patience in our marriage, we are likely to get the same results- get our warm shower (our needs being met automatically).

With the Platinum Rule, we are not waiting around for our partners to hopefully remember what we are wanting, or be in a good enough mood to deliver on ours; instead, we are generating whatever we are wanting, whenever we are wanting it, ourselves. Therefore, we are more likely to get our needs met.

The platinum rule is like the vacuum cleaner my brother has in his pool. It roams around, aimlessly and randomly, all day long, but eventually touches every part of the floor of the pool. With the platinum rule, we are each working on getting various needs met, and likely covering most of them over a span of time. So say I want to feel loved. By me

giving her hers in her language first, without even asking for it, my wife is feeling loved by me. While, let's say, she wants to feel reassured. So by giving me mine in my language first, without me even thinking to ask for reassurance, my wife is meeting this need of mine. In this way we both get more than what we were looking for, and covering a wide variety of needs, instead of begging and getting hungrier and more frustrated with each other.

A couple I was working with really got the essence of the platinum rule via tragic circumstances. His wife was assaulted and clearly in need of his comforting, so he wrapped her in an electric blanket (she liked the warmth) to help her sleep even though he was sweating and burning up. Even though this was not his language for comfort, he reported to me that

he was feeling so comfortable. I pointed out to him that he was feeling so comfortable because his need for comforting was being met, automatically, by her, who was asleep at the time, merely by feeling he was importantly needed by her and he was making a significant difference in her comfort level (his language for comfort and reassurance).

I pointed out to him that this was the equation for a healthy relationship and that that they were on track by applying the platinum rule! So you don't have to wait until tragic circumstances when it is obvious our partner has needs; you can "turn the shower knob to the right" on a regular basis in order to get regular warm showers from your partner! ■

# Learning Your Partner's Language

One of the challenges with utilizing the platinum rule is learning your partner's language for all of your relationship needs. To help with this challenge, I often recommend the following exercise:

**1** Ask your partner to tell you about a time when they did feel \_\_\_\_\_ (whatever the need is). When I asked my wife to tell me about a time when she felt loved by me (because I was really needing to feel loved, quickly), she told me about a time in our courtship when it was pouring down rain, and I got out of the car, got soaking wet, held a newspaper over her head while she walked inside the movie house. Now I'm thinking I am really sunk because I have to wait for it to rain, when a good movie is showing, and I better not forget the newspaper!

**2** So the second step is: "Tell me what about this worked to make you feel \_\_\_\_\_ (whatever the need is)." So my wife points out three main ingredients: 1) that I went out of my way and made myself uncomfortable (soaking ringing wet) to make her comfortable (kept her dry with the newspaper, 2) I considered what she wanted versus what I wanted (that I was being "other-referenced" and not "self-referenced"), and 3) without being asked.

**3** And the last step in the exercise is to make a "new dish" with these main ingredients (so that I don't have to wait for all those planets to align again). So the next morning (remember it sometimes takes a little time before you get yours) I wake-up early (I am not a morning person and so this is making me uncomfortable to make her comfortable), make her tea (I am a coffee drinker and so I was being "other-referenced" and considering what she would like), and served her tea in bed (without being asked).

In this example, I used three of the main ingredients she expressed to me to make her a "new dish" and almost immediately she was smiling, sharing her appreciation, and loving on me in ways that represented my language for feeling loved!

I often recommend that couples keep a journal of their partner's language, with a page devoted to each relationship need in order to keep track of all they will learn (we are complicated people). For example, a page for: feeling loved, appreciation, feeling cared about, feeling secure, etc.

So by applying the platinum rule in your marriage, there are lots of positive "side-effects": you influence the attractiveness of your partner, you get your needs better met, when you are feeling that need, without talking about it (which often has negative results and makes talking a four-letter word), and build more positive feelings between you and your partner! ■

## Notice It, It Will Happen More Often

**A**nother tool of influence relates to the social nervous system. Because we are all social animals and our nervous system develops in the context of relationships (when you place one brain cell in a Petry dish it dies, but if you place two brain cells in a Petry dish they communicate to each other and live), there is part of our brain (in the unconscious brain) that notices whenever

instead notices me for the one time, probably by accident, that I close the door softly (or simply for a close approximation): “You are so sweet and considerate for closing that door so softly; Thank you sweetheart, that warms my heart when you do!” From that time on, I have been closing doors softly, whenever she is around anyway; mainly because my social nervous system remembered what I was doing

to get the social goodies from my wife and repeats this as a way to get more. Especially salient and helpful, is pointing

out what their action or words means to me or makes me feel. If she was, instead, relying on my memory of what works (which is in the thinking part of the brain) then she would likely not see the same consistent results from her noticing.

Therefore, when there is something that your partner does or doesn’t do that is bothering you, rather than talk about the problem (which if you notice that, it will continue to occur), you can notice them for the opposite/for doing it, instead (if even for a close approximation, as the unconscious social brain will remember what you noticed I did and not

what I actually did). And besides, we are far more willing to listen to compliments about us than criticisms of us, which we can consciously disregard due to the pain it inflicts.

To punctuate the power of positive notice to psychology students, a professor, usually in social psychology class, will ask a student to leave the classroom and then ask the rest of the class to come up with a task they want the student to perform; something like picking up a certain book and placing it on the podium. She then instructs the class to clap louder as the student gets close to doing this and clap softer when they move further away. The unsuspecting student comes back into the classroom and as they move towards the book the clapping gets louder, and as they move farther away, the clapping gets softer. It is amazing that within five to eight minutes the student will accomplish whatever task the class has decided on, simply by giving only positive feedback. ■

“*You are so sweet and considerate for closing that door so softly!*”

someone talks to us, looks at us, or touches us (it doesn’t matter if the look, talking, or touch is positive or negative) and remembers what we did half of a second before to elicit this, and so will repeat it in an attempt to get more of this social stimulation.

So, without knowing this, my wife is trying to get me to close doors softly by noticing me when I slam the door: “I wish you would stop slamming the doors.” Remember that guarantee I told you about? This is probably why asking for something in relationship guarantees you won’t get it!

However, armed with this knowledge, she

## The Professor and the Classroom:

**A**long these same lines, another tool to keep in mind and practice comes from a study I heard about called: “The professor and the classroom.” A researcher was studying this unconscious part of the social brain and went to a college classroom (psychology experiments often use college students for their studies) where the professor would come into the room and move from the right side to the left side of the classroom as he lectured. So the researcher went to the class before the professor got there, and asked that they not pay any attention (look down and not engage him) whenever he was on the left side of the classroom, and whenever he moved to the right side of the classroom, everyone look interested (give eye contact, nod their head, etc.). The students agreed, and

when the professor came in to lecture, before the end of the class period, he was standing on the right side of the classroom without even being aware of that he was.

It seems that his unconscious social brain was picking up on the stimulation that came from the students engagement and interest (they were looking at him, nodding, and talking to him) in contrast to the lack of social stimulation (they were not looking at him, nodding, or talking to him) whenever he was on the left side of the classroom, because he was not even aware that he was doing this.

So in an intimate relationship, one tool of influence over our partner’s actions or words that bother us, is to notice them socially (talk to them, look at them, and/or touch them) whenever they are doing that which we prefer,

and socially overlook them (not talk to, look at, or touch them) whenever they are engaging in the actions or saying the words that bother us.

It is as simple as recognizing: “Oh, they are on the left side of the classroom” (no hard feelings) and looking away or not engaging them for that moment, and looking through the corner of your eye, or listening attentively for them to be on the “right side of the classroom” and engage them with lots of social goodies (looking at them with a stimulating smile, talking to them using compliments or appreciation, and even touching them softly or lovingly. Although three out of three are far more stimulating and effective, this is certainly a case where “two out of three ain’t bad.” ■

## The Vending Machine:

**S**ome of you may be in relationships where you are usually “other-referenced” and tending to your partner’s needs regularly, but your partner seems to be mainly “self-referenced” and focused more on tending to their own needs too. I am reminded of a vending machine at our church when I was a young boy. Our family didn’t have the money for extravagant extras like vending machine candy or crackers, but at the church, where I spent a lot of time, there was a vending machine that I could get my little arm up into and grab whatever candy or crackers I desired. Even though I didn’t have much, when I got these free crackers, I would generously give most of them away (they had little value to me because I didn’t have to put anything of value towards obtaining them). Also, I had little value for the vending machine and would not think twice about banging on it or pushing it side-to-side to get my crackers. The owner of this vending machine must have noticed the disparity between the amounts of candy and crackers he was putting in the machine and the amount of money he was getting from the machine, because he

eventually replaced it with a spiffy new machine (one that took dollar bills!). Now this machine did not allow for my arm, as tiny as it was, to reach up inside it, and so I had to put money in first to get my candy (remember the platinum rule?). Therefore, when I did purchase candy or crackers, because it would take me weeks of collecting empty soda bottles to return for two cents apiece to get the money for candy, I valued the candy more (I only gave away a small portion of the candy or crackers) and I valued the machine more. I wouldn’t dare rock or bang on this machine for fear that when I did put my hard-earned money in, that I wouldn’t get any candy or crackers; I wasn’t going to take that chance!

Similarly, in intimate relationships, when we are giving the candy away for free and they are not putting any quarters in the machine, then we lower our value and therefore, open ourselves to a reduced quality of treatment; and yet, when we are expecting quarters first and give a commensurate amount of candy or crackers, then our value in their eyes improves, and so does the quality of the treatment we receive! ■

## Dealing with the “Threat-Response” System:

**W**ithin the nervous system of every mammal, and we are mammals, is a threat-response system or survival system commonly referred to as the “fight or flight” system. When we, as couples, are in conflict, this is the system that is running the show. It is the non-thinking part of our nervous system because in an emergency (for which this system was developed to react to) we do not have the time to think and

“*When we, as couples, are in conflict, this is the system that is running the show.*”

only have time to react. These reactions, then, are preprogrammed in this system with the purpose of responding effectively to threats to our life (like a tiger jumping out of a tree suddenly) by fighting or by running as fast as we can in order to survive the threat. In fact, the reason we therapists are in business is in a large part due to this system’s inability to differentiate between a threat to our life from a threat to our feelings. Therefore, when I believe that my wife is going to yell at me for

being late to dinner (a threat to my sensitive feelings), this system is triggered, believing my life is being threatened, and responds in kind.

Let me explain how this system operates. It is about the size of your fist and at the base of the brain, with the thinking/ human part of the brain on top (this is where you and I reside). Whenever there is a sound or something is different (in the wild when there is

a difference this often is equated with a threat) the stimulus goes quickly to the fight or flight (F/Fl) system and more slowly to the thinking part of the brain

to figure out whether this is a threat or not. The survival system has an almond-shaped trigger (the amygdala) that determines if this is a threat or not, and if it is (it errs on the side of caution), then it turns on the F/Fl system. Once turned on, our hearts palpitate, our muscles constrict, and all sorts of preparations occur within a half of a second to respond to this threat. Some preparations that are important to human relationships are: 1) that we get tunnel vision and through

this tunnel, everything appears threatening (when I am fighting a tiger for my life, I don’t think empathic thoughts like: “She’s the mother of four cubs I better be gentle with her” or I would die; instead I think “Watch-out her tail could strangle me!” and so my F/Fl turns up more to meet the threat so that I am likelier to survive the attack), 2) the blood flow (which our brains operate on) drains quickly from the thinking/ human part of our brain to run this system at the base of our brain, and so we are no longer loving human beings but rather scared, reactive animals, and 3) these systems are reciprocal, which means that when my wife’s F/Fl system is on, then mine will turn on automatically (as a way of meeting the threat as she is unpredictable and has rocket fuel in her veins). This is how a dog can sense that you are afraid of them; they have a F/Fl system too. I was bitten by a brown Doberman named Lady about 40 years ago. Now my F/Fl is triggered by anything close to this, say a black Rottweiler (even though I know in the thinking part of my brain that Lady has been dead for many years now), and when my F/Fl system turns on in response to seeing a black Rottweiler, then hers turns on automatically too. Now I am reacting to the dog’s hair on the nape of her neck rising, she is reacting

to my nervousness, then I react more to seeing her teeth, she reacts more to my turning and running, and “ouch”, I get bit again. This interaction exemplifies a reciprocal system.

Now let’s examine how this comes up in a marriage. I am coming home all stressed out from working long hours and so my F/Fl system is on. My wife is having a good day, let’s say, and hers is off. When I engage her at the door, mine being on automatically triggers hers and I no longer see my loving wife in front of me, but instead she appears as threatening as the Doberman (remember that tunnel vision of negativity that magnifies threats). So I see her as threatening and hear her words as sarcasm, and she begins to react to my biting words, and soon we are fussing.

The good news is that these systems are reciprocal. And so if I can turn mine off, hers will follow automatically. To have influence over these automatic systems, we each need to be aware when our F/Fl system is on (when you are mad, frustrated, scared, anxious, or stressed then it is on) and turn it off. There are two main ways to turn it off: 1) by taking slow, deep breaths through the nose, holding it, then slowly exhaling through the mouth, or by doubling the amount of time you ex-

hale compared to inhale, and 2) by viewing the situation as non-threatening.

I grew-up in Baltimore, and so my F/Fl got programmed there, where we lock three locks on every door whether we are in or out of the house. Now I live in rural West Virginia and I am coming home at night. I leave the doors of the house opened so that our cat can go in and out at will. As I approach the house, I hear a noise coming from the house. This noise travels to the thinking part of my brain to interpret it (a much slower route) and to the F/Fl system (a much quicker route). Here, the amygdala believes it’s a burglar in my house that made the noise (a threat) and triggers the F/Fl, and so my heart is palpitating, my muscles constrict, I feel scared, and start to run (the flight part of the F/FL); then I see my cat come out of the house and start to believe (in the thinking part of my brain) that it was just the cat that made that noise, and this message, which I believe, goes to the amygdala and turns the F/Fl off. Now it takes about a half of a second to turn on but fifteen minutes or so to turn off, so I sit on the back porch and catch

my breath. Now I haven’t been in the house yet, so really I don’t know for sure, but when I believed it was a burglar (a threat) it turned on, and when I believed it was just the cat, it turned off. That is the power of our thinking!

So in our relationships, when our own F/Fl is triggered, we need to turn it off by taking deep breathes, viewing it as just a cat, or both (preferably). It is also helpful to help turn our partner’s F/Fl off in order to be two human

“*The good news is that these systems are reciprocal. And so if I can turn mine off, hers will follow automatically.*”

beings in relationship (a prerequisite to getting along and getting our needs met) instead of two reactive animals out of control. The latter situation is when we are all capable of domestic violence!

To turn off the F/Fl with our breathing, there are two main techniques: 1) take a slow deep breath through your nose (there are glands in our nose that mix nitric oxide in with the breath), hold the breath as long

as possible (allowing this gas to get into the blood stream where it dilates our blood vessels, lowering our blood pressure), then slowly exhaling through your mouth (3 nasal breaths usually does the job), and 2) tap a beat with your foot and count how long it takes to slowly fill your lungs with air, then double that number for the exhale (continuing this breathing and counting until calm). Someone, some 5,000 years ago, recognized that the inhale is connected to the F/FL system and the exhale is connected to the relaxation system (when one system is on the other system is off), and so when we double the time it takes to exhale compared to the inhale, we turn on the relaxation system and turn off the F/Fl system.

By thinking “It’s just a cat”, the amygdala gets the message there is no threat and turns off. This is a very simple system, though, and so it does not hear double negatives such as: “It will not hurt you”. Instead it hears: “wa, wa,

wa, wa, HURT” and turns on. Therefore we have to think in exclusively positive terms such as: “All is well”, or “It will be OK.”

To turn our partner’s F/Fl off requires ours to be off first, then to calm theirs by appearing non-threatening. We appear non-threatening when we lower our voice, move away, and “throw them a treat” such as apologizing, saying “It’s OK”, “I understand where you are coming from”, or by being other-referenced and considerate.

Because “practice makes perfect” it is real helpful to practice: 1) being aware of when our F/Fl is on, 2) turning ours off (with breathing techniques or “It’s just a cat”), 3) noticing when your partner’s F/Fl system is on, and 4) turning theirs off (by giving them a treat, a smile, or a T-bone steak). If both parties are practicing this regularly, you will gain influence over this automatic survival system that if left unchecked can ruin the best of marriages. ■

## Summary:

**S**o in summary, to improve the quality of your intimate relationships, it pays to: 1) operate from the platinum rule and learn your partner's language for a variety of your relationship needs, 2) notice your partner in words, with looks, and/or touch when they are meeting your needs or engaging in favorable behavior, 3) become aware of when your partner is on "the left side of the classroom" and disengage, waiting for them to be on the "right side of the classroom" and engage them with talking to them, touching them, or giving loving looks to them, 4) become a vending machine and wait for quarters first and giving an equal value of candy or crackers when you notice that what you are giving is not being reciprocated or returned,

and 5) become practiced at the art of noticing and turning off the F/FI systems.

You may have already realized that these tools for influence within intimate relationships also work with all relationships (even with pets!). So you can apply these same tools to improve relationships, your value with others, and the quality of treatment by others, with neighbors, teachers, family members, and yes, even with in-laws.

Because we are the relationships we have been in and are in, and since in many of these relationships we were not very influential in and so took whatever they gave us, it is incumbent upon us to use these tools to improve the quality of our relationships in order to improve one's health and well-being! ■