

Turning Toward vs. Turning Away



“Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. ‘Pooh!’ he whispered. ‘Yes, Piglet?’ ‘Nothing,’ said Piglet, taking Pooh’s paw. ‘I just wanted to be sure of you.’” – *A.A. Milne*

In relationships, most of us find it a comfort to know that the other person is “there.” But what does this really mean? What is it that gives us that intangible sense that someone we care about is truly present in the relationship? For some, it is the absence of presence that is most easily detected – the sense that the other person is not hearing you, not understanding you, or not engaged with you. For others, it is the presence of presence, if you will, that tells us that we are turned toward one another in a relationship. A relationship begins to lose meaning when we sense that the other person is not interested in turning toward us. But once again, what does this actually look like?

According to Dr. John Gottman, renowned marriage/relationship therapist and researcher, turning toward versus turning away is all about “the everyday, small moments that, when added up, can make or break a relationship.” In our daily routines we are presented with a multitude of opportunities to turn toward our partner: channel our attention, focus, and presence towards them. Most partners will offer up chance after chance to engage with them, if only you will take notice.

This can be as simple as one person attempting to connect with the other by saying, “Hey, did you notice that new restaurant that just opened down the street?” This is an example where the other person can choose to turn toward his or her partner by responding in an attentive loving manner (“Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed. What is it called?”) or in a distracted uninterested manner (“Honey, I’m really busy right now.”) The truth is that we often *are* “busy right now.” How do we handle opportunities to turn toward our partner when our attention or resources need to be temporarily invested elsewhere?

It is unrealistic to expect your partner to be able to actively engage with you at any given moment. After all, he or she may be busy or immersed in something unrelated to you or to the relationship. This does not necessarily mean that your partner has chosen to “turn away.” When individuals in a relationship consistently attend to the foundation of the

relationship through listening, support, and commitment, temporary lack of “presence” is not as damaging as when the basic foundation of the relationship is not attended to.

Leaders Guide-

- Print out copies for each participant.
- Have couples face each other and discuss each section. Read the following instructions to the group.

Gottman Method Couples Therapy: Turning Toward vs. Turning Away

Gottman suggests that any typical day with your partner should include 20 to 30 minutes spent engaging in active supportive listening. The goal of active listening within a partnership is to recognize your partner’s perspective from an empathic stance and without judgment. What follows are some very basic guidelines, adapted from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman, 1999), to explore with your partner:

(1) Take turns

Each partner gets to take the active talking role for approximately half (15 minutes or so) of the discussion.

(2) Don’t give unsolicited advice

Try to refrain from the temptation to give quick “solutions” to your partner’s dilemma. This can be interpreted as you trivializing the importance of what your partner is saying. Gottman has found a significant gender difference here, worth noting: women are more sensitive to advice-giving than men. Gottman found that women were typically more interested in support and understanding than a “solution.”

(3) Show genuine interest

Focus your attention to the conversation at hand. Let your partner know, through subtle facial expressions and other cues, that you are really present and listening.

(4) Communicate your understanding

Let your partner really *know* that you “get it.” If he or she is complaining about a current stressful situation, something as simple as, “What a bummer! I’d feel stressed if that happened, too” can go a long way.

(5) Take your partner's side

This means being supportive *even if* you view his or her perspective as unreasonable. This can be difficult for some of us. Gottman notes that the idea when your partner comes to you for emotional support is to *be there* for him or her, not to “fix” the situation. Brainstorming about possible solutions to your partner's situation are better left for a specific conversation where he or she is asking for your advice directly.

(6) Express a “we against others” attitude

All this really means is that when your partner is struggling, it is helpful to express your solidarity. Let your partner know that you're truly “in it together.”

(7) Express affection

Depending on the particular style and wants of your partner, this can mean extending an open hand, touching your partner's arm, or offering a hug.

(8) Validate emotions

Take away-The idea here is to directly let your partner know that his or her feelings make sense to you. Something as simple and direct as “I can tell you are feeling really sad” is sometimes all that it takes.

As you consider the meaning of turning toward versus turning away in a relationship, what tendencies do you identify yourself with? Do you notice that you are more likely to turn toward or turn away when you are in particular moods or in particular situations?

The next time your partner presents you with a simple opportunity to “turn toward,” why not take it? Even a brief empathic response, smile, or hug, can do wonders for solidifying the foundations of relationships.

Each opportunity to turn toward or turn away from your partner is a chance to either chip away from or strengthen the base of your relationship. All it takes to turn toward or turn away is a few brief moments of offering our presence or denying our presence from our partners. What direction would like your relationship to go?

Gottman, J. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York, NY: Three Rivers

Closing Prayer- Lord continue to bless and enrich our marriage, in love and companionship, mutual support, and oneness of heart! Amen!

