

5 Biggest Little Ways to Improve Your Marriage

Lesson 25

A few small actions carry surprising power in building a lasting relationship.

By Shaunti Feldhahn



Not long ago, the marriage of some close friends—I'll call them Daniel and Jessica—suddenly imploded. We did everything we could to stand with them in their crisis to speak hope for their future together. Unfortunately, their marriage didn't survive.

I'll never forget a conversation I had with Jessica one day. Through her sobs, she said, "He worked so hard for a year to take us on that amazing vacation to Hawaii. But all I really wanted was for him to put his arm around me at church!"

Huh? Do you think in the midst of all her pain that she was thinking clearly? Actually, I do.

I could fill in lots of other details, but ultimately the pattern is a sadly common one. You may have seen it too. Daniel was a godly, well-intentioned husband who showed his love in several ways, including working long hours to provide for his family and to do nice things for them. You see, for him, providing is love.

Unfortunately, he didn't realize that what he was working so hard for wasn't what Jessica most needed—and in some ways was actually robbing her of the closeness she needed the most. (And of course there were ways she didn't know she was hurting him.) What she needed most, more than all the expensive vacations in the world, were a few simple, specific day-to-day actions.

But as simple as loving gestures in public? you wonder.

Yes! My research on happy couples showed that an extraordinarily high percentage of them were (often without realizing it!) doing a few little specific actions that were making their spouses feel deeply cared for. Jessica, as it turns out, is like nearly all other men and women in her deep rooted desire for these surprisingly meaningful gestures.

Day-to-day actions

Clearly, a few small actions won't fix deep relationship problems. But for most of us, a handful of simple day-to-day actions increase *the likelihood that our spouse feels that we care deeply about them, instead of feeling that we don't*. There's just enormous power in that!

For nearly every man or woman, the same few small, gender-specific actions not only matter but have a huge impact on a couple's level of happiness. But these little actions take on even more power when accompanied by those that matter to your spouse individually.

Let's begin with the few small actions that the surveys indicate matter a lot to almost every man or woman—what we might call the Fantastic Five.

When individuals were asked on the survey if a particular action made them happy, the affirmative response numbers were staggeringly high for *five specific actions* for each gender, even among the struggling couples. Close to 100 percent of all husbands and wives said these actions mattered, with between 65 and 90 percent of all husbands and wives saying these actions would deeply please them.

In other words, *you are very likely to make your spouse feel deeply cared for if you make a habit of doing the same five things consistently*.

The Fantastic Five for him

A wife will have a big impact on her husband's happiness when she does the following:

- 1. Notices his effort and sincerely thanks him for it.** (For example, she says, "Thank you for mowing the lawn even though it was so hot outside." Or, "Thanks for playing with the kids, even when you were so tired from work.") This deeply pleases 72 percent of all men.
- 2. Says "You did a great job at _____."** This deeply pleases 69 percent of all men.
- 3. Mentions in front of others something he did well.** This deeply pleases 72 percent of all men.
- 4. Shows that she desires him sexually and that he pleases her sexually.** This deeply pleases 85 percent of all men.
- 5. Makes it clear to him that he makes her happy.** (For example, she expresses appreciation for something he did for her with a smile, words, a big hug, etc.) This deeply pleases 88 percent of all men.

The Fantastic Five for her

On his side, a husband will have a big impact on his wife when he does the following:

1. Takes her hand. (For example, when walking through a parking lot or sitting together at the movies.) This deeply pleases 82 percent of all women.

2. Leaves her a message by voice mail, e-mail, or text during the day to say he loves and is thinking about her. This deeply pleases 75 percent of all women.

3. Puts his arm around her or lays his hand on her knee when they are sitting next to each other in public (at church, at a restaurant with friends, etc.). This deeply pleases 74 percent of all women.

4. Tells her sincerely, “You are beautiful.” This deeply pleases 76 percent of all women.

5. Pulls himself out of a funk when he’s he’s having a sullen and gloomy disposition, being grumpy, or upset about something, instead of withdrawing. (This doesn’t mean he doesn’t get angry or need space; it means he tries to pull himself out of it.) This deeply pleases 72 percent of all women.

Keys that unlock any door

Did you notice that *all* these happiness-inducing actions are simple, learnable, and doable by any wife or any husband? If you put each of the five biggest little things to work every day, I’m betting your marriage will improve—in some cases, radically.

And here’s more great news: All these small but powerful actions matter *regardless of what the person’s love language is*. For example, most wives (82 percent) are affected when her husband reaches out and takes her hand, regardless of whether physical touch is her thing.

There’s no looking back for our friends Jessica and Daniel. But I’m so thankful that God is good. He is always at work to redeem our broken hearts—and I know He’ll do it for our friends. Still, a corner of my heart mourns the heartbreak that might have been prevented if they had truly understood the power of doing these best little things.

We all know that small, thoughtful acts are not a magic cure-all for every marriage problem. But having talked to so many who nurtured much happiness with simple but powerful actions, I know all of us can build that all-important foundation that helps us believe that our mate notices and cares.

Because as it turns out, *believing that the other person cares* is far more important to building a happy marriage than most of us ever realized.