

*Marriage the hard way or the easy way? by Harry Benson 7th February, 2009*

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Meet Harry & Kate

I thought I'd start by introducing you to myself, Harry, and my wife Kate on our wedding day back in 1986. I was a young Royal Navy helicopter pilot. Kate was a lovely young cookery writer.

It was a perfect wedding on a perfect summer day in a perfect English setting. On such a day, the possibility that our marriage could get into serious trouble within just a few short years was very far from our minds. In fact if you'd suggested such a thing, we've have wondered what you were drinking!

Kate and I were great together. What could possibly go wrong?

Marriage the hard way

Now cut forward about eight years to 1994 and we're now based in Hong Kong. I'd left the navy and gone into the finance world. We had moved out to Asia as expats soon after we got married. We started with a couple of years in Hong Kong, moved to Bangkok for two years where our first child was born, and then came back to Hong Kong where our second child was born. Kate had done some cookery work but had had to put that aside once the family breeding programme got underway.

To anybody looking at us from the outside in 1994, we had life sorted. We were young, healthy and had two lovely young children. I was one of four partners in a small financial company riding high on the Asian economic boom. So money was no problem. We lived in an expensive apartment block, we had a thriving social life, and we travelled where and when we wanted. All in all, Harry & Kate looked pretty good on the outside.

But on the inside, things were very different. We had drifted apart as a couple and were finding it hard to spend even five minutes chatting to one another. One day Kate invited me to a meeting with her vicar's wife. Kate was a new Christian and I was an atheist. I had absolutely no idea why she wanted me to go or what to expect. That evening Kate

told me that I wasn't the friend she needed me to be. She warned me that if I didn't get my act together within the next year, we would be divorced. It was a bolt from the blue. I never saw it coming. Our marriage was on the rocks and I hadn't even known it.

### Roots of the problem

So what had gone wrong? Once again, on the outside, my childhood looks like it was pretty good. But the problem was on the inside, in my family background and upbringing.

My father left home when I was three and I would see him typically about twice a year after that. When I was seven, my mother sent me to a smart private boarding school. A couple of years later, she then remarried on holiday in South Africa and moved there to live with her new husband, my new stepfather, to whom she remains happily married. I drew the short straw. It was decided that my best interests were served by staying at boarding school in England and commuting the 6,000 mile journey to South Africa for the school holidays. It didn't feel like the best to me.

I dealt with this situation by becoming very independent. I can do it on my own. I also learned that it was better not to feel. Flying back to England for three months of boarding school and no contact with either parent made that the safest choice. The alternative was just too painful.

So in many ways I had a very privileged upbringing. I was sent to the best English schools. But I never enjoyed my childhood much. All through my schooling and on into adult life, I formed few close friendships and found it generally difficult to relate to others, especially to their feelings.

How I married Kate still remains something of a mystery to me. We probably married because we fit together well socially. And we definitely had a lot of fun together. But it's easy to see how frustrated she must have become that I could be so independent and not her friend. I didn't know how.

### The road to recovery

After the shocking confrontation in Hong Kong, I was terrified that I would never see my kids again. I knew I had to do something. But what?

Fortunately Kate and I were taken in hand by some very lovely and wise English friends whose career seemed to have followed us geographically from Hong Kong to Bangkok and back again. They sat us down to dinner one night and asked me what I loved about Kate. Loved. I had to think hard. I replied that I was impressed by the way she understood the chemistry of cooking. Yes, that's all I could think of. My friends told me I was so emotionally closed that I was almost psychotic. I was rather proud of this label, mainly because I didn't understand it.

My friends persuaded me to go to counselling. The only agency was Christian-based. I

thought it was bad enough going to counselling but if they mentioned God I'd be out of there. Well, they didn't mention God. I hung on in there for about ten sessions and found the experience incredibly helpful. I got angry at my perceived abandonment as a child, and discovered for the first time in my life a whole new world of emotions. I had heard about them but had never experienced for myself. I called it my can of worms. And now the lid was off.

Soon afterwards, I had the truly unexpected and peculiar experience of becoming a Christian. When you are an atheist, this is not what you expect to happen. I do get sad today when people go to church out of tradition or habit but haven't experienced this wonderful and extraordinary transformation that is available to all. Of course my conversion experience and my counselling breakthroughs didn't make my marriage problems go away. If anything they shone a light on the situation and exposed my inadequacies even more. In effect, things got worse.

A few months later, in despair, Kate confronted me with a letter she had written. It was a description of a job specification for the role as Harry's wife. I still have the letter at home today. It is a shocking and bleak read. It ends with a note of despair about whether our marriage can ever recover. "Who cares", she said.

Until that note, I had been motivated by the desire to hang on to my kids or perhaps the fear of losing them. Kate's letter made me realise that everything had to be about her and us. I literally got down on my knees to her. I told her she had no reason to believe what I was going to say. But I would change.

That moment was the real turning point. I wanted to do it for Kate. It's beginning to sound a little more like love, isn't it? We agreed to go on a marriage course as soon as possible. So another few months later, rather absurdly, we left our children in Hong Kong and jumped on an aeroplane to take up a last minute place on a marriage encounter weekend in Taiwan, of all places.

It turned out to be a volatile and traumatic but ultimately transformative weekend. We fell in love in a new way. I fell in love for the very first time. I still have the date of that weekend, 29th October 1995, engraved in my wedding ring.

Meet Harry & Kate today

So here's Harry & Kate today. We've been married 22 years now and have six children aged from five to seventeen. An outsider might describe our marriage as happy. As an insider, I would describe it as a normal marriage. It's certainly unrecognisable from what we had before. We are happy most of the time. But we also have ups and down like everyone else. We occasionally have brilliant times of special closeness together. But we also occasionally have what I call "crevasse" moments, when I realise all too late we've been slowly drifting apart. And then without warning we fall into a crevasse. It feels horrible. It's scary and dark being so disconnected from the one I love. Even though our marriage is now secure, I still have to go through the pain and difficulty of climbing out

of the crevasse. The difference now is that I know how to do that. I also know that the rewards for making the effort are great. Our crevasse moments are mercifully short and we are soon back on track, happy, laughing and connecting with one another.

Making our marriage work well is always best, for us and for our children. As an 85 year old aunt once told me, divorce is not an option. Murder, yes. Divorce, no.

After ten years away, we moved back to England in 1997 and set up home in Bristol, a medium sized city – with the population of Malta – about 100 miles west of London. I completed a psychology degree at Bristol university and a counselling course alongside. Meanwhile poor Kate struggled to settle us all into our new home while I spent my days reading books! We had sold up and moved back in order to follow a vocational calling to do full-time marriage and relationship work with all the other Harrys and Kates out there.

Bristol Community Family Trust – people

After my degree I set up a charity in Bristol aimed at strengthening families and reducing family breakdown through relationship courses. I took my lead from the Americans who lead the field in this area. And I have always aimed at running a gold standard local project based on the best available research evidence.

Today we run over 100 marriage, relationship and parenting programmes per year for over 1,000 people, just in Bristol alone. Our most successful programme is a short relationship session called Lets Stick Together that we run in post-natal clinics. It's the first programme of its kind in the country and we now present it to one in every four new mothers in Bristol.

Bristol Community Family Trust – programmes

As well as Lets Stick Together, we run longer programmes for parents, for prison families, and for couples getting married. A few years ago our project won a couple of national awards, as a result of which I spent a fruitful 18 months helping to compile family policy proposals for a national think tank linked to the opposition Conservative party. After years of almost total neglect, there's now a real prospect of the first ever serious UK family policy that could challenge the relentless rise of family breakdown under all governments since the 1960s.

All in all, it's not been a bad vocation to have followed. And of course it all depends on keeping my own house in order. The strength of our marriage and relationships validates all of the work that I do, my local project and my national policy work. So maybe you can imagine the consequences for me when we hit what for most couples would be a normal marital low-point. It's not just that we are going through a bad patch. It's the little voice in my head that questions whether I am practicing what I preach.

My response is to tell the little voice to shut up, get on with restoring communication with Kate and keep doing what I do. This is why everything I do on marriage and

relationships begins, depends and ends with Kate.

Our personal lessons

What did we learn from all this?

First of all, background matters. All of us are framed by the way we are brought up. In my case, the combination of dad moving out and mum sending me to boarding school impacted me a great deal. But here's another example. I used to take my young children to the beach on Saturday mornings in Hong Kong. I would always try to sneak a copy of the Economist magazine into my beach bag before I went out, so that I would have something to do while the kids were playing. Kate would try to sneak the magazine out of my bag before I got out of the door. Because my dad was never around, I knew I wanted to be around for my kids. It's just that without any positive role model to work from, I had no idea what to do when I was around.

I also learned that attitude is utterly fundamental to marriage and relationships, perhaps the most important aspect of all. For a while it was OK for me to be motivated by the desire to keep living with my children and perhaps the fear of losing them. But this was never going to be enough to make our marriage work. It was only when I made that crucial decision to do it for Kate that things could really change for the better. I'll be talking about the importance of making decisions a little later.

Practical skills are also very important. Our marriage weekend was a transformative experience. It was because we learned how to listen to one another and even how to fall in love. Actually the relationship courses I run now are less emotive and more practical. But I really understand the big lesson here which is that great marriage can be learned. I'm also going to say more about this shortly.

And finally friends and family are so important. We were away from our family. So we were incredibly fortunate to have such wise and loving friends to support us and point us in the right direction. So often friends greet a marriage crisis by taking sides. "It's so hard for you and he's so unreasonable," they might say, "Of course you should get out". This is an unhelpful and counterproductive suggestion. We were lucky enough to have friends who helped us fight for our marriage, rather than fight each other.

The importance of research

Looking back on all this, Kate and I really should never have got into the mess we did. Had we been given a little helping hand early on in our marriage, I am convinced we would never have got into such trouble in the first place. But then again, if we had done it better from the start, I wouldn't be here talking to you now!

If there is an easy way for all those many other Harrys and Kates out there to avoid the pitfalls we experienced and to make marriage work reliably better, it is through relationship education. Relationship education means teaching couples what makes

marriages and relationships work best. Many of you run courses yourselves. I'm sure you're all too aware of the potential benefits.

However there is an obvious trap if we want to teach others. We might be unusual. What worked for Kate and I in our marriage might not work for other couples. What we might think is absolutely crucial for a successful marriage might not actually be that important to many or even most couples. Worse, so long as we run a course competently, we will receive positive feedback that reinforces our confidence in the course content. But that doesn't tell us whether the course helps people once they get home, or five years on. This is why I am so keen, as a relationship educator, that what I teach couples is based on the research first and my experience second.

I'll give you a classic example of why this is important. Communication. Almost all couples, when asked, rate their own marriage in terms of their ability to communicate. In fact researchers find it virtually impossible to separate happiness and communication (Fowers & Olson, 1993). Many courses put communication at the heart of things, often teaching an active listening skill known as the Speaker/Listener technique. A recent study shows that this method is not used in real life by half the couples who have just been taught how to use it, it does not improve closeness as one might assume, but it does reduce conflict as the originators recommend (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007).

Admittedly, I'm being a bit mischievous about communication skills. I suspect the advocates of Speaker/Listener find it easy to use and benefit a great deal. The problem is the rest of us who don't.

So what does work or not work for most couples? What sort of things does the latest research suggest we should be covering in our courses?

It turns out forward-looking research has been far more informative than backward-looking research. Asking couples to look backwards at what made their marriage work tells us less than we might hope. The most promising findings have come from looking at the factors present in relationships today that then distinguish the successful from the unsuccessful tomorrow. Plant different seeds today and get a different kind of plant tomorrow. This is what relationship education is all about. It's what I wish I'd known 23 years ago, before I got married.

Let's look at some of the key findings from the latest relationship research.

### Static and dynamic factors

The factors today that distinguish success and failure tomorrow fall into two broad categories: static and dynamic (Stanley, 2001). Static factors are the things that are hard to change or that you can't change at all. Questionnaires pick up a lot of these.

For example, if your parents divorced, your own marriage is more likely to end in divorce (Amato & Deboer, 2001). If you started with a whirlwind romance, you are more likely

to end up divorced (Kurdek, 1993). But even if you know about these things, it's not obvious what you can do about them. Exploring why they happened and how they influence you now may be very interesting. But it's far from clear that relationship programmes based on this kind of insight and awareness offer sustained benefits for the couple (Halford, 2000). They tell you what went wrong but not necessarily how to do it better.

Since the advent of video equipment in the late 1970s, modern relationship research has been much better placed to study the way couples actually relate to one another, rather than how they say they do. The way couples communicate or argue or treat one another can be observed on video and that information can be scored by independent coders. This establishes the dynamic factors that we are really interested in, the factors that are changeable. If we can identify the patterns of behaviour that make couples do better or worse, we ought to be able to help couples change their behaviour for the better as well as avoid some of the risks.

Relationship programmes based on these kinds of practical skills have been very successful (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

#### Positive and negative factors

One of the most important findings from prediction research is that dynamic factors themselves fall into two different categories: positive and negative (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Bradbury & Karney, 2004). In the early years of a marriage or relationship, it's the negative factors that carry most weight. Later on, the positive factors become more important. All of us have both in our lives. We communicate both positively and negatively. We treat each other both positively and negatively. Positive and negative are not opposites, just different.

This idea fits well with my personal story. Kate survived eight years of marriage before she gave me my ultimatum. For us the only real issue was how I needed to make Kate feel valued, spend time with her, be interested in her, have fun with her, understand how she felt, make her laugh, do things together. The key factor was that I was not her friend. I was not giving her what researchers call positive affect.

But for many couples, the positive stuff is not enough, especially during the early years. Perhaps we survived those years because we didn't have major negatives. We had some. But couples who have more tend not to get very far. The worst ones can be remembered by the acronym that I use called STOP: Scoring points, Thinking the worst, Opting out, Putting down (Benson 2005).

Some of the key researchers in this field have claimed to be able to predict later couple outcomes with over 90% accuracy (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Although recent studies have shown this level of confidence is unwarranted (Kim et al, 2007), the underlying negative and positive factors identified by such research retain strong predictive value.

The best evaluated relationship programme, the US-based course called PREP, contains this mix of positive and negative dynamic factors (Markman et al, 2001). No other programme has yet been able to show a plausible reduction in divorce rates (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). I suspect it may be because other programmes sometimes focus too much on the positives and forget to highlight the negatives. The negatives are what challenge couples first. If they manage to put up with these, the absence of positives eventually takes its toll, as it did for us. So we need to be talking to couples about both positives and negatives. Remember, they are not opposites, just different.

## Big issues

For many years researchers assumed satisfaction and conflict were the big deals in marriage. Happy couples stay together; unhappy couples split up. Happy couples don't fight; unhappy couples do. The problem is that this is not always the case (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Even if it were the case, it still doesn't tell us much. Be happy. Don't fight. But how?

A more interesting line of thought has developed in recent years about the big issues in marriage. These involve sacrifice, forgiveness, and meaning (Fincham et al, 2007a).

Some interesting findings have emerged on these themes. First, the willingness to sacrifice is a key indicator of commitment for men, though not apparently for women who seem willing to sacrifice anyway (Whitton et al, 2007). So a marriageable man is one who is willing to give up that Saturday afternoon on the golf course to go shopping with his wife.

I really like the second one. Negative forgiveness – i.e. mercy – predicts happier marriages for men whereas positive forgiveness – i.e. grace – predicts happier marriages for women (Fincham et al, 2007b). So what men want is a woman who won't keep giving them a hard time for the things they've done wrong. What women want is a man who treats them nicely even when they don't behave especially well. This is another example of the importance of both positive and negative factors in relationships.

And third, couples who view their relationship as sacred or God-inspired also have better quality marriages (Mahoney et al, 1999). So couples who believe their marriage is "what God has joined together" appear to do better if they include Him in it.

The common factor in all three issues is that each depends on a sense of future. In particular, each big issue protects the marriage or relationship in some way from the impact of negative behaviours. Sacrifice involves giving away without expectation of something immediate in return. If I expect my relationship to last, I can be confident that things will probably even out over time. Forgiveness for perceived and real hurts is essential for any relationship to survive over time. If I can't forgive, the relationship can't continue. And applying an overarching meaning to a marriage encourages and reinforces the protective behaviours necessary for a relationship to thrive over time. If my relationship means everything to me, I will do whatever it takes to make it work.

The next generation of relationship education programmes will undoubtedly embrace these big issues.

## Commitment

But the mother of all big issues is commitment, a topic given surprisingly little attention in relationship research considering its perceived importance to the average couple (e.g. Johnson et al, 2002).

One of the most helpful ways to think about a relationship is through commitment theory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Commitment theory suggests that there are two main types of commitment. “Dedication” is the internal force between the couple that reflects the depth of relationship, their friendship. It’s the extent to which a couple see themselves as a couple rather than two individuals. It’s how much they want to prioritise one another and sacrifice other choices for the sake of the relationship. And it’s how they see their future together. In essence, dedication means a couple with a future.

“Constraints” are the external forces that provide stability. These are the friends, family, mortgage, housing, past history, marriage, children, and lack of alternatives, all of which look at two people from the outside as a couple and make it harder for them to leave one another. When dedication is strong, constraints feel positive. It’s nice having kids or family or friends around. But when the fire dies down a little, these constraints can flip into negative territory. They feel like a trap. So couples lash out. Couples who make their marriage work have learned how to keep dedication strong. They talk and think in terms of “we” and “us”. They think about their future. They look out for one another and they sacrifice for one another.

Now as part of their research into dedication, my favourite research group in Denver discovered that men – but not women – who slide into relationships tend to have lower levels of dedication, even if they get married (Stanley et al, 2006a). This has profound implications for understanding the well-known cohabitation effect, why couples who live together before getting engaged are more likely to divorce than those who move in only after getting engaged (Rhoades et al, 2006).

One reason is that living together adds an extra constraint that makes it harder to leave. Another reason is that men and women commit in different ways. Women commit when they move in. Men commit when they make a clear decision about their future. Whether it’s because the initial cohabitation was less than ideal or because the man has never made the decision to commit, many couples get stuck in an unhappy cohabitation, drift on into marriage and pregnancy, and then split.

## STOP signs

I’ve just done a study of new parents in my home town of Bristol (Benson, in press). I asked 236 mothers how they and their husbands or partners use STOP signs. What I

found was that women are 30-40% more likely than men to Score points, Think the worst and Put down whereas men are 30% more likely than women to Opt out. Two thirds of couples use what's known as demand/withdraw (Christensen & Heavey 1990), most typically where women demand and men withdraw. All of this is true for married and cohabiting couples alike.

Where cohabiting couples differ is that 47% of them tend either to Back off – where both partners opt out – or to Fire back – where men put down and women think the worst and also score points or put down in return. Only 29% of married couples exhibit either of these patterns. There may be other explanations for this large and significant difference. But the most plausible is that cohabiting fathers are less committed whilst cohabiting mothers are less secure.

Sliding and deciding, as well as dedication, are concepts that are both easy to grasp and immediately compelling. The latest relationship education programmes have already incorporated these important principles.

### Relationship education

If we want to make a serious and empirically-informed attempt to reduce family breakdown, relationship education has shown considerable promise as an early intervention. The best studies of the best programmes show that relationship education can help couples improve their odds of staying together, treating each other more positively, and reducing levels of conflict (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). There are still gaps in this research but the growing body of evidence should give us confidence that the glass is half full rather than half empty.

Without doubt, the US-based PREP relationship education programme has been more comprehensively researched than any other programme and shown to benefit couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley & Rhoades, in press). Many other programmes have been tested over the years but any gains they claim to induce have not been investigated with sufficient scientific rigour and are therefore inconclusive. Evidence that couples who attend a well-constructed pre-marital programme have 30% lower divorce rates (Stanley et al, 2006b) provides some support for programmes in general, although there may be overriding selection issues.

My approach to relationship education has always been to learn as much as possible from the PREP programme, precisely because it has been so clearly shown to boost outcomes for couples. But most importantly I also want to make sure I focus on the dynamic factors that have been shown to predict improved outcomes for couples.

As Scott Stanley, one of the leading researchers in this field, and whose work I have cited here several times, observes: “In the absence of data we might wish to have now, there are many reasons to believe in the value of engaging in broadly applied, premarital education efforts with couples. We know enough to act and we should take action to know more” (Stanley, 2001).

Those of us who don't have access to the \$1 million research programmes that access large numbers of couples, randomly allocate couples to different conditions, observe and code their behaviour, follow them up over a five year period whilst taking care to minimise attrition rates, and then process the data using the latest sophisticated statistical techniques, can still have confidence that we are pointing in the right direction.

We can expect our programmes to have impact if we apply the key principles learned from the latest and best prediction research.

Marriage the hard way or the easy way

So the choice is simple!

Do we want many couples to have a successful the hard way – the Harry & Kate way?

Or do we want most couples to have successful marriage the easy way – the relationship education way?

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