

Lessons in Love and Marriage

By: Jordan Bartel, Times Staff Writer

Though they've been married for almost 20 years, Bob and Lori Hollander work on their relationship every day.

They work on listening skills and patience with each other. It's all about the little things they do for each other, they said.

Bob makes sure he writes small love notes for Lori every Tuesday, which he tapes on her Diet Pepsi in their refrigerator.

The notes mean so much to Lori that she never throws them out. The stack of small white papers takes up a lot of room in a drawer in her desk.

And every day they help couples with their own relationship issues, something they've been doing for most of the time they've been married.

The Hollanders, both social workers, formed Hollander Counseling Associates in 1989, the year after they got married. They specialize in relationship counseling and couples coaching in their offices in Owings Mills, Westminster and Essex.

In almost two decades in counseling they've dealt with everything from money disagreements - the biggest issue with most marriages, they said -

infidelity and assorted other relationship problems.

"Bob and I really work on and appreciate our own relationship," Lori said. "A lot of things in our relationship have helped us with our counseling others, and we learn a lot from our clients as well."

The husband and wife team are devotees of John Gray's mega-selling relationship advice book, "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus." They have been fans since they saw a television special on the book and later received personal training from Gray before becoming proprietors of their own Mars and Venus Counseling Center.

They apply the basic tenets of the book - that women and men are inherently "wired" differently, especially in matters of the heart - to their counseling sessions.

The two believe women as Venusians and men as Martians are different, emotionally. Thus, they said, the key to a successful relationship is for each sex to understand the other fully and know what each wants and needs.

The couple must communicate in a way that acknowledges these differences.



KEN KOONS / CCT STAFF PHOTO

Therapists Robert and Lori Hollander talk about what makes relationships work

"Each couple needs to have a greater awareness of each other to work through issues," Bob said. "The more you understand and the more you are understood, the anger and the blame starts to yield to empathy and support for one another."

In short, it is really not so much how a man or a woman acts that can be blamed for a faulty relationship. It's more about how they react to each other.

Depending on the issues or how the couple interacts with each other, the Hollanders decide whether to continue counseling the couple together or to separate them, usually with Bob counseling the man and Lori the woman.

Sessions, depending on the severity of the problems at hand, can last for just a couple weeks or for months.

The Hollanders said communication is the most important skill many people in relationships lack. For example, Lori said many of the women she talks to have the mentality that "if a guy really loves me he should know what I need."



"Women don't usually speak up and tell men what they need directly," she said. "Instead, they feel hurt when their partner doesn't say exactly what they want or do what they want."

Men, on the other hand, are frustrated when they feel like they are "expected to read the Venusian mind," Bob said.

"The main thing for men is that they feel very good and successful when they make their partner happy and a woman wants to feel special in the eyes of their partner," he said. "If they don't understand what makes each other tick and what they want from one another, none of that can happen."

So, what are the major complaints that men and women have against their partners?

Lori said that from women she hears concerns that their partner "doesn't care about me" or that "he doesn't listen."

Men, on the other hand, often complain that women are too critical and believe that nothing they do is ever good enough, Bob said.

The Hollanders said most couples expect to have a perfect relationship without each person putting much effort into the situation. "It's easy to love a partner when things are good, but the real test is how you love your partner when things are bad," Lori said.

That takes some work. It's the Hollanders' goal to help men and women put their relationships in perspective, to find out whether they understand how and why their partner acts in the ways that they do.

"That's when you plumb the depths of your feelings and you just have to go through with it," Bob said. "Guys aren't naturally very emotional and are

hesitant to share these feelings. But it really is vital to maintaining a healthy relationship."

In addition to their couple-to-couple "coaching," as the Hollanders call it, the pair also conducts divorce mediation and counseling on how parents can help their children deal with divorce.

They call the latter "Separation with Heart" mediation, during which they help newly divorced couples work together so that their children can adapt to the divorce in a better way.

This part of their work is particularly important to Lori, whose parents divorced when she was 12.

"It was so painful for me, so when I see couples split up I want to help them work out what's best for the kids," she said.

Valentine's Day is on their minds right now, though.

It's not really Bob's favorite day.

"There's more pressure on men than women, I think," he said. "We always worry about whether or not we are doing things right, if I'm going to do a good job or if I'm getting her favorite flowers or candy."

So, have they been communicating well? Has she been telling him clearly what she wants and has he been listening?

Does he remember his wife's favorite candy?

Bob paused for a second, thinking about the question. Lori looked into his eyes as a sly smile formed.

"Um, vanilla creme," he quickly said. Lori nodded.

Then, more confidently, he added: "And Raspberry creme."

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The Hollanders recommend the following tips for men and women on Valentine's Day:

For men

- Plan a romantic evening or a romantic getaway.
- Bring her flowers, not the ones from the grocery store.
- Surprise her with chocolates or her favorite food.
- Write her a love note or poem.
- Give her a day off from all chores and actually do the chores yourself.

For women

- Get him a Valentine's Day card and write in it all the things he does for you that you appreciate.
- Watch a movie he likes.
- Get tickets to an event that he would like.
- Get him a coupon to a lingerie store and allow him to go with you to pick out something that he would like you to wear.
- Write him a love note that describes your trust and confidence in him as a partner.

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