

Bids for Connection: How do You Respond?

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In research led by John Gottman, at the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle, they observed married couples in interaction over a period of years. They found one single vital indicator of how likely the couple is to stay together for years, rather than divorce. It relates to how they respond to each other's "bids" for affection.

When interacting with others (whether it's our partners, kids, friends or co-workers), we often make bids for connection. These can come in the form of questions that we ask, statements that we make to them (and expect them to respond to), non-verbal gestures, a glance, or a touch. A child bids by asking you to play with them. A bid to a co-worker may be an invitation to grab lunch together, a bid to a partner could be a flirtatious massage. Bids can be low-key, or very high energy; they can be presented as a serious request, or a lighthearted joke. Some are easier to recognize than others!

When someone bids for your attention, and for a connection with you, there are three main categories of ways that you might respond.

Turn Toward

- Act in a responsive, interested, positive, and loving way.
- Physically: turn towards them, reach out, touch them, look at them. Nod, smile, wink.
- Verbally: Say "I hear you", "I want to be with you," "I'm interested in you." Ask a question.
- Actions: Change your behavior in response to their bid.

Turn Away

- Act in a way that ignores them, or dismisses their bid.
- Physically: stay neutral, wander away, or don't look in their direction.
- Verbally: No response, or a response that has nothing to do with what they said.
- Actions: Continue what you are doing, without (seeming) to notice their bid.

Turn Against

- Act in an angry way that rejects them and their bid.
- Physically: Walk away, glare at them, make threatening movements.
- Verbally: respond angrily, use sarcasm or put-downs.
- Actions: Do the opposite of what they have asked you to do.

Try to "Turn Toward" Others' Bids As Often As Possible

If you want a relationship to succeed, listen closely for the other person's bids, and respond positively whenever you can. (Even if you're saying no, you can do that in a connecting manner. For example: "I would love to go for a walk with you. Unfortunately, I have to finish this work now" is much more connecting than just saying "I can't" or "Can't you see I'm busy? Why did you even ask!")

In Gottman's research, he found that men who would eventually divorce ignored their wives' bids 82% of the time, versus men in stable marriages only ignored 19% of bids. He discovered that successful relationships had a 20:1 ratio of positive bids and turning toward for every negative bid and every incident of turning against or away. If that 20:1 ratio seems too intimidating, just aim for turning toward more often than you turn against or away.

Making Sure Your Bids Are Clear

If people seem to consistently "turn away" from you, and you wonder whether anyone even listens to you, you may want to consider how you communicate your bid for connection – is it clear enough? Sometimes people can be slow to catch on, and reaching out as clearly as possible helps them get it.