

MAKING MARRIAGE WORK



*Building the marriage you
always wanted*

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Making Marriage Work

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Introduction

For marriage to work, each spouse must be working in the marriage. Money has to be made. Kids have to be raised. Bills have to be paid. The to-do list of my average day between work, marriage, parenting, civic duty, personal goals and aspirations, and a laundry list of other categories can be overwhelming.

-Kevin Thompson

What does it take to make marriage work? Well, it takes effort, courage and commitment. Why, because seldom does any marriage fit “like a glove.” We have been working on our marriage since Day One and we have learned that great marriages take hard work, applied regularly. Maybe your marriage needs some work, perhaps some remodeling or decluttering. All we know is that without regular maintenance, things can break down. We do not know where your marriage is, but if you are like most of us, life (kids, jobs, bills, in-laws, etc.) can get in the way, and we can get so busy that our marriage gets neglected.

You may be interested in knowing that the number one cause of marriage problems is not money, sex, kids, or in-laws. It is not even communication. It is **emotional disconnection** and the frustration that often leads to blame or disconnection. The important question spouses ask is, “Are you there for me?” “Sometimes it sounds like, “Do you have my back?” or “Am I more important than your (fill in the blank: friends, sports, TV, alcohol, etc.), Or “Will you be there when I need you?” It is not that one day we said “no” to these. It is just that in the busy-ness of life, we can take that question for granted and then one day our partner is not sure of our answer.

Here’s another interesting fact, the problems in your marriage are far more about **you** than you think (not that your spouse is off the hook). In fact, your ability to hang in there when things are tough and your willingness to look inside yourself may be the **number one** building block to a healthy marriage.

All marriages start out with contentment (“Things are great”). However, because of our humanness (and sin) and the fact that we are all so different, it soon moves to confusion or even disillusion, “Why doesn’t he or she love me, meet my needs, hold my hand or be more affectionate.” “What happened?” “What changed?” This ultimately leads to some form of conflict (we have unmet needs, and we expect the other person to change). There is a good chance that the ways you have tried to “fix” the problem(s) have not been very successful. So, what can you do? Get to work. Stop doing the same things that have not worked, pray, and ask God to change your heart and mind, and start talking and listening. Agree that neither of you is necessarily right nor wrong, that the real focus is your relationship – to God and to each other. Want a stronger marriage, work on the foundation. Remember Jesus story about the house built on sand and the one built on rock? On which foundation is your relationship built? Want it stronger, we can show you how.

This workbook contains the building blocks for a stronger marriage. It consists of the tools you need to make that foundation stronger. Know that God is with you and will never forsake you. He has a lot to say about relationships. Our prayer is that no matter what, you will seek Him and know that He is always there. Work through the following chapters together. Throw out any old worn-out tools. Stop using old methods that no longer work. Listen closely to your partner’s hurts or disappointments, as well as their needs. Look for opportunities to ask questions and offer grace.

God bless you on your journey,
Jeff & Judi Parziale
Loveland, Colorado

Reasons Your Marriage May Need Some Work

All couples have approximately ten issues they will never resolve.

-Diane Sollee, Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education

Just like everything alive or with moving parts, marriage needs regular maintenance. Marriage is a revealer. Just like a bright light can reveal cracks or a spot of missed paint, marriage reveals our differences as well as our internal unresolved issues. That is why conversations can feel forced or unfulfilling and decisions can become difficult. This leads to less intimacy, resentment and frequent but ineffective arguments. Here are some reasons why your marriage needs work. Which are truest for you? Talk about it together. What will you do to make a change here?

Your Commitment to Change is Less Than Your Desire to Change.

Commitment is a **decision** to hang in there no matter what, while desire is mostly **emotion**. So when your desire to change is stronger than your commitment, you stay the same. If you want your marriage to change, you cannot just desire change, you have to be committed. We all know this; think of the changes you would have liked to make but did not. Before you commit, be sure you know the changes you want to make. Fact: change is hard for everyone.

You Want to be Right More than You Want to Do what is Right.

So often, we choose making our point or being right over doing what is right for our marriage: admitting we are wrong, making changes, apologizing, forgiving and striving to understand rather than blame our partner. Pride, ego and plain old stubbornness can create more distance between you and your spouse. Are you struggling because you always have to be right? Fact: you may be “right” less often than you believe.

When You are There, You are not Really There.

Being fully present when with our partner or family is the greatest gift we can give them. This means turning off our phone or the TV when you are eating dinner, playing games or going for a walk. Being fully present is a mindset, and it expresses something very powerful, that the other person (and the relationship) is important and valued. Fact: you are less present than you think you are.

You are Emotionally Disconnected.

Most fights are really protests over feeling emotionally disconnected from our partner. Anger, frustration, criticism, and demands are cries for help and attempts to draw our partner back emotionally and reestablish a safe connection. We are asking: “Can I count on you?” “Do you have my back?” “Do I matter to you?” “Do you need me?” “Do you value me?” Start by seeing these things not as attacks, but as pleas to connect. Think: In what ways have I disconnected from my partner?

You Have Unresolved Hurts or Wounds From the Past.

Any form of abuse, rejection, disappointment, or betrayal can be traumatic, and the affects can leak into your marriage in the form of trust, fear, addiction, or control issues. Coupled with the hurts and frustrations of any marriage, this can lead to secrets, anger, withdrawal, and loss of intimacy. If you do not share these with God and your spouse, you lose your greatest allies.

You Ask God to Change Your Spouse More Than You Ask Him to Change You.

Your marriage will struggle when you are more concerned about what God needs to change in your spouse than in you. When you focus on all that is wrong with them you completely shut off the work

that God longs to do in you. When you begin to pray for your partner and ask God to change you, something remarkable happens – you begin to change (experiencing more peace and joy), and you begin to see your spouse in a different light. Of one thing we are absolutely certain, God seldom changes our circumstances, but He always changes us, if we let Him. He always answers that prayer. Perhaps you are struggling in your marriage because you are really struggling in your relationship with God.

We all Need Some Work

As you start the journey of building a great marriage, are you willing to be honest about your part? Since sin entered the world (Genesis 3), we all have some areas of brokenness. James 3:2 says it this way, “*We all stumble in many ways.*” Are you willing to be honest about your brokenness or stubbornness, and about how that affects your marriage? So here’s the scenario – two broken people, trying to make marriage work. Try asking God for help to see yourself clearly. Face your broken areas and ask for forgiveness. Take responsibility for your part of the problem. Do an about face (that is the word repent) and change your behavior. Connect with a few others, for wisdom, insight and encouragement. Here’s an interesting tidbit – *The best predictor of a great marriage is how you act when your marriage is not so great.* Will you choose to do the work?



Marriage Check-Up

When marriages fail, it is not increasing conflict that is the cause. It is decreasing affection and emotional responsiveness.

— Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*

Take some time and think about what is going on in your marriage. Then, write down your thoughts on the four items below. Compare your answers. What did you learn?

- 1) The problems that most concern me
- 2) What I think some solutions might be
- 3) What would I like my partner to do or change

What do we mean when we say that marriage is work? To me, it’s the idea that entering a long-term union requires essentially becoming an office manager. Partners manage communication, both emotional and logistical. They carve out time from busy social schedules to plan events, such as date nights and sex. They must learn the careful, tricky language of conflict resolution.

-Nina Li Coomes

Only with time do we really learn who the other person is and come to love the person for him or herself and not just for the feelings and experiences they give us.

-Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

Love is a feeling. Marriage, on the other hand, is an invisible contract. Both partners bring to it expectations about what they want and don't want, what they're willing to give and not willing to give. Most often, those are out of awareness. Most marriage partners don't even know they expected something until they realize that they're not getting it.

-Lori Gordon

Are you Ready to Work on Your Marriage?

Even if we disagree about everything, we can still be kind to each other.

– Mathew L Jacobson

There are several ways to work “on” a marriage, but there is one common key—**intentional communication**. This is what prevents most people from ever looking at the big picture. It is always easier in the moment to avoid intentional communication about the marriage and to simply run the kids to the next soccer game or discuss what you should eat for dinner. It is far more difficult, and risky, to ask:

- Are you happy in this relationship?
- What am I not doing for you which you need me to do?
- How am I making you feel used rather than valued?
- Is the housework properly divided in your opinion?
- Do you feel your heart coming more alive or dying?

When you got married, little did you know that you would be taking on a particular set of **unsolvable problems** that you would spend the rest of your marriage working on. Why, because you and your spouse are different! So, there is work to do. Some of that work is about you (how you react when stressed for example). Sometimes it is about how you treat each other. Change can be hard; it can make us feel like something is wrong with us. Here is the truth—sometimes, something is wrong with us, like anger and rage, bad habits, selfishness, or stubbornness. However, most times, it is about adapting to each other’s differences. Things cannot stay the same when you marry; typically, you both have some work to do. It is Ok because great marriages are not made up of perfect people, but people committed, with God’s help, to becoming the best partners they can be.

So, here are some steps we have learned over the years.

First, decide that what God says you will do. God longs for you to have a healthy marriage. Remember, He stands with you and for you. Make God’s Word your True North. How? Read His Word. The Bible is His love letter to us, and through its pages, God makes Himself known and shows us His truth. *Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, **training us to live God’s way**.* Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 MSG

Second, make a real commitment, to your spouse, to God, and to yourself. Commitment is a decision to do whatever it takes to make your marriage work. Plant your flag; take a stand no matter how much you want to run. No matter what the issue, agree to work together to solve it. Remember, by the time most couples realize they have a BIG issue, it has been brewing for some time. This is not the time for quick fixes, but it is a time to be patient and to work together, not against each other. Amazingly, small steps and small acts of kindness can make a huge difference.

Third, come to grips with personal issues that could be impacting your marriage. This one can be tough because we all fear being vulnerable or being rejected. Do you have secrets that you keep from your partner? Or habits that could easily become addictions? Anger or control issues? Perhaps you have unspoken expectations that your spouse does not meet, or you stuff your feelings and become passive-aggressive. Whatever the issue, undisclosed or unresolved, it will harm your marriage. Take some small steps, but the first is being honest with yourself.

Fourth, you will both need to be totally honest in assessing the state of your relationship. A common trait of couples is they have a tough time with hard conversations. So, you will have to continually ask yourself vital questions such as:

- *What is most important – my marriage or my view of the marriage?*
- *Is it more important to me to adjust my own beliefs and actions to improve the relationship or to maintain the rightness of my position?*
- *Am I willing to set aside my woundedness, my unhappiness, or my disillusionment in order to reclaim this relationship? Can I speak my hopes, dreams, needs, and wants?*
- *What role do I play in the current state of our marriage?*
- *Am I willing to forgive or to repent and to receive the same from my partner?*
- *Can I see my spouse, not as my enemy, but as God's child and my partner who may be hurting too?*

Fifth, understand your triggers. Triggers are strong emotional reactions to things your partner says or does. They are almost reflexive. We may feel set off by each other's words, tone of voice, or facial expressions. We may read between the lines and infuse all kinds of meaning into our partner's behavior. That is why conversations start off calm and then explode. When we feel triggered, several things may be going on. For starters, our brain sends us in to **fight or flight** mode. That means we cannot process or respond to our partner in the most effective way. Also, we are usually not just dealing with what the other person is saying or doing, but whatever we are *telling ourselves* about what they are saying or doing. We are full of internal messages from our past; experts label these messages an "inner critic." Not only does this inner critic influence our own sense of identity, becoming the cruel and doubting "voice" in our head, but it also warns us about other people and relationships in general.

Sixth, own your stuff and stop blaming. Honestly, this stunts the growth of most marriages.. Take responsibility for your own behavior. Your partner is not the enemy, although it can feel that way. Blame closes down communication, causes defensiveness, and creates emotional gridlock. In helping hundreds of couples (and us), we have learned a few things. We have learned that in every situation, God wants to teach us something, about Himself and about us. Seldom does one spouse set out to hurt the other intentionally, for no reason. Most of the time, that person feels that their needs (wants, dreams, ideas) are not important, so depending on their personality, they either attack or close down. We have discovered that it is easy to slip into a selfish need to be right that allows us to justify how we treat each other. We have learned that blame comes easy; listening, understanding, and apologizing are much harder. Even a small step toward our spouse can start the healing process.

Seventh, start or keep talking. Pray before you start a conversation. Having face-to-face discussions (not lectures or tirades) regarding your hopes, dreams, concerns, disappointments, and frustrations is critical to the health of your marriage. If talking turns to fighting, stop, take a 20-minute break, and try gain. Remember, this is not about pointing fingers or solving each other's problems, but about listening and supporting each other as you work toward making your relationship meaningful. Each of you is entitled to your feelings. Keep an open mind and heart. Share honestly, listen carefully and respectfully. Be willing to face some uncomfortable truths about your own behavior. These truths are revealed by questions like:

- *Does my insecurity, low self-esteem or pride cause me to behave in hurtful ways?*
- *How have I contributed to the current state of the relationship?*
- *Am I able to abandon those acts for which I am responsible for the sake of our togetherness?*
- *What role do my childhood experiences play in our current situation?*

- *Am I holding on to hurts I need to forgive and let go of?*

A deep need within us is knowing that someone cares deeply about the things we care about. Fights erupt from the deep hurt of sensing our partner does not care about our feelings, ideas, or dreams.

Finally, learn to use some new tools. Stop using tools that no longer work. Your **inner self** has worked perfectly to get you to this place. Here is why: your deep, underlying belief system drives your emotions (anger, fear, unhappiness) which eventually lead to how you behave (thoughts and actions). Yes, you had a hand in creating the system you now dislike. As you deal with just exactly how this happened and how to change it, your character will be tested. So, if you do not like the place you are, commit to work on your inner self.



Here are nine emotional tasks each couple must complete to have a successful, enduring marriage.

1. Separate emotionally from the family you grew up in; not to the point of estrangement, but enough so that your identity is separate from that of your parents and siblings.
2. Build togetherness based on a shared intimacy and identity, while at the same time set boundaries to protect each partner's autonomy.
3. Establish a rich and pleasurable sexual relationship and protect it from the intrusions of the workplace and family obligations.
4. Learn to continue the work of protecting the privacy of you and your spouse as a couple.
5. Confront and master the inevitable crises of life
6. Maintain the strength of the marital bond in the face of adversity. The marriage should be a safe haven in which partners are able to express their differences, anger and conflict.
7. Use humor and laughter to keep things in perspective and to avoid boredom and isolation.
8. Nurture and comfort each other, satisfying each partner's needs for dependency and offering continuing encouragement and support.
9. Keep alive the early romantic, idealized images of falling in love, while facing the sober realities of the changes wrought by time.

Think about it

In *Desperate Marriages*, Christian author Gary Chapman shares six truths that can give direction to a marriage that needs some work. He calls them six realities for married life.

- 1) I am responsible for my attitude. Trouble is inevitable, but misery is optional.
- 2) My attitude affects my actions. Our attitude informs all we do or say.
- 3) I cannot change others, but I can influence them. Influence is about character.
- 4) My emotions do not control me. Our deep beliefs (healthy or not) drive our feelings.
- 5) Admitting my imperfections does not mean that I am a failure. We are all imperfect.
- 6) Love is the most powerful weapon for good in the world. Love in action changes lives.

How are you doing on these six?

Most marriages survive by gritting teeth and holding on. But marriages can and will not only survive but thrive when husbands and wives learn to cherish one another.

-Gary Thomas, *Cherish*

In marriage conflict, spouses don't regret what they didn't say. Hold your tongue, until God has a hold of your heart.

- Mathew L Jacobson

Two sinners living one life for God's glory won't happen unintentionally. It takes work.

-Michelle Myers

It's Time to Change Your Filter

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life. Psalm 139:23-24

I change our AC/furnace filter once a month because it gets dirty and, if not changed, it can get clogged and recycle that dirt and pollen throughout our house. You have a filter, too. Everything that happens to you, things you read, hear, think about, or feel, even things from your past, run through this filter. But your filter has a unique quality, it instantly diagnoses and changes what you hear, think, or feel into something that fits your inner beliefs about life, love, God, and others. Things that do not fit get filtered out or ignored. This filter started working very early (childhood), and at first, completely out of your awareness. As life progressed you started accumulating beliefs about yourself and others and about how things should be. By adulthood, these beliefs, some even unknown to you, became almost permanent and unchangeable. So, this filter determines how you will deal with life; how you cope, behave, decide, avoid, reveal to others or be willing to change.

So how does that work in marriage? Here is the reality: marriage is a revealer of our filter, and your spouse is like a mirror that reveals your soul. What does it reveal? Our childishness, weaknesses, fears, pettiness, selfish and unrealistic expectations, and behavior patterns learned in childhood. Good news, God already knows, and that is exactly what He wants to heal.

So, anything your partner says and does is evaluated and responded to by your filter. Your filter reflects how you believe things should be or even what your spouse should do. However, your lens is imperfect and different from your partner's. Consequently, you frequently misinterpret or overreact without realizing it. You secretly or subconsciously believe your spouse's job is to make you happy (certainly not unhappy) and fully understand and comply with all your needs. The Bible calls our real problem self-centeredness or plain old selfishness (SIN). To make matters worse, you actually believe that what you do is simply responding appropriately to what your partner does. You see your beliefs as facts or reality; not as a filter that might be wrong. In reality, everything is filtered through your beliefs. It becomes your version of reality, and you stick to it.

We react from our internal filter. The problem is that we seldom challenge our beliefs; we assume they are right and accurately reflect how the world works. We discard anything that does not fit. So, we think the way we see things and the way we respond to our spouse is right, and we do not budge. Instead of exploring our own possible false beliefs and trying to understand our spouse, we build our case. We want things our way and are more skilled at seeing and getting our way than we are at understanding or serving our spouse. Frustrated and left unattended, our filter can lead us to some dark places: negative thoughts and feelings and behaviors that hurt those we love as well as ourselves. And we can justify all of it; it is called self-deception. So, challenge your filter. Unless you see things through the eyes of Christ, your filter is likely skewed and fallible.

How Do I Change my filter?

First, realize it needs to change. The basis for change is a heart transformed by love. Change is a process that must be reinforced and re-committed to regularly. The Apostle Paul, writer of most of the New Testament said, "I die daily." He died to self every day to do the will of God, not Paul. Not every change you make will be deep and grueling. Some are easier, like helping around the house, others are deeper, like an anger issue or an addiction. It is your attitude that really matters. Humility allows us to honestly look at ourselves as broken but redeemable and lovable. Vulnerability allows others to peer inside. God

tells us He looks on the inside, at our soul. The soul is you whole person-will, mind, body, and emotions. That is the meaning of the commandment Jesus taught us, love God with your whole being and love everyone else the same way.

You will never be healthy if you do not deal with these things. Yes, it is hard, even brutal, but freedom and peace come from doing the work. Finally, you can see and enjoy your spouse for who he or she is. But you will never get everything you want, and that is OK, because you will get more. There are no quick fixes. Remember, filters cannot be changed overnight.



Tell each other something you have discovered about your filter

What beliefs are part of your filter? Here are some examples. *If I am not in control, I am weak. Can't I just stay a lovable kid? I must always get my way. Life is unfair. If you see the real me, you will leave.*

Where are you stubborn or resistant to new information?

One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, "Here's to helping you discover what you're really like!"

-Gary & Betsy Ricucci

Does your marriage say to the community and the world, "We're a team, committed to each other and whoever and whatever Jesus is committed to. In as much as we're married to each other, we're married to [Jesus] first, to His ways, to his agenda in the world. We let no other story control our ways but His. We are grateful to follow Him and serve together as coheirs of life."

- Charlie Peacock, *A New Way to be Human*

What Does God Have to Say about Marriage?

What marriage is for: It is a way for two spiritual friends to help each other on their journey to become the persons God designed them to be.

-Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

God has been restoring and transforming relationships for a very long time. He instructs us to love Him with our whole being and to love others the way Jesus loves. He includes instructions to be angry but not to sin; to have an attitude of forgiveness so God will forgive us; to go the extra mile and turn the other cheek; to be at peace with all; to speak the truth in love and to love from the center of our being, genuinely.

Here are some key verses to think about:

1 John 3:16 NRSV Sacrificial love

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Sacrifice may look cool in movies, but it is tough in real life. Why, we want our way; we think we are right, we hold secret resentments. Sacrifice takes courage and frankly, a Jesus mindset (not my will, but yours Father).

Romans 9-10, 14-19 MSG - Love

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 MSG - Agape Love of Emotion and Will

So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

Ephesians 5:21-33 MSG - Love and Respect

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another. Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands. Husbands go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor – since they're already "one" in marriage. No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh." This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband.

Forgive, be filled with the Spirit, be transformed, and love, respect, and submit to one another. That's where it starts. You cannot do any of the things these passages ask of you or become like Christ without being filled with God's Spirit. According to best-selling author Gary Thomas, marriage exists to make us holy, not necessarily happy. We do this by serving (submitting to) one another with humility through the power of God's Spirit as we seek to emulate Christ. Christ modeled this for us. The test for knowing if God's Spirit is in control is to see if we are experiencing LOVE, PEACE, and JOY, as in the verses above. Love and respect, serve, submit, forgive, become one flesh – seems simple enough!!! **What happens?**

Life happens! We fail, we are betrayed, abused, rejected, or abandoned. We have traumatic childhoods. There are financial and social pressures. We do not cope well and fall into temptation, addiction, or depression. We experience pain, stress, anxiety, illness and fear, guilt, and shame. We enter marriage with high hopes, but eventually our brokenness comes to the surface. We hurt the one we love, and things go from good too bad to worse.

Good news. God is with you. He brings grace, forgiveness, and freedom. God understands the consequences of sin – wounded people, broken relationships, self-destructive behavior, distressed children. Jesus came to redeem us, but too also show us what God is like. He is the loving father to a lost Prodigal son, who, every day, looks for that son and when the son returns, welcomes him with open arms. So do not be afraid to bring your brokenness, pain, guilt, or secrets to Him. Repentance may seem like an old-fashioned word, but what it means is turning your life around, doing a "180," changing your mind. Here is the way the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 12:1-2, *So here is what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*



Want a great marriage? Try doing it God's way. We KNOW it works. In Galatians and Ephesians Paul answers the question of what happens when we live God's way. In Gal 5:22-23 he writes, *what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely* MSG. In Eph. 5: 21 Paul tells us to submit to one another as unto the Lord. That word in the original language is "subjection" as to someone of higher authority.

The key question is this: Will we approach marriage from a God-centered view or a man-centered view? In a man-centered view, we will maintain our marriage as long as our earthly comforts, desires, and expectations are met. In a God-centered view, we preserve our marriage because it brings glory to God and points a sinful world to a reconciling Creator.

-Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*

How Do I Work on Myself?

So come on, let's leave the preschool finger-painting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ. -Hebrews 6:1 MSG

*"OK, I get that there is work to do, probably some things I should work on. So, what do I do about it? How do I work on me? Great question. Yes, you probably both have some work to do, but we never keep score. **Key principle: You do your work and let your partner do theirs.** The best thing you can do for your marriage is to become your best self, emotionally and spiritually.*

Here are Some Steps You can take

In *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Pastor Peter Scazzero introduces us to three steps to becoming healthier, both spiritually and emotionally.

Step One: Be your true self- Authenticity

In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown defines authenticity as *"the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are."* Elements of authenticity include cultivating the courage to be imperfect, exercising compassion, setting boundaries, and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. Living authentically means being faithful to your true self, understanding how God has uniquely made you, and embracing your temperament, personality, likes, and dislikes. Living faithful to your true self is the ability to hold onto who you are, affirming your distinct values and goals apart from pressures around you, while remaining close to those important to you. Your true self is the person God intended you to be, undeterred by a culture that calls us to be selfish, isolated, and uncaring. **How would you rate yourself on this step?**

Step Two: Break the power of the past—Freedom

True freedom occurs when we can fully live in the present and when we have overcome the destructive patterns of our past. All families are broken; few of us had a 'perfect' childhood. Many of us were hurt by negative messages that were generations in the making. The fear (rejection, criticism, shame) of bringing our issues, feelings, and hurts to light often drives us to denial and compartmentalization. However, looking back - no matter how painful - always illuminates the present and offers a door to freedom. Each of us bears the impact of early messages that continue to affect our current life and relationships. Some of you reading this are living out those messages right now. Denying the past will not help. It will take work to uncover and find freedom from those early influences. The good news is that our family of origin does not determine the future—God does. Jesus says you are family. (Mark 3:33-35)

Our ability to love well as an adult is directly connected to how emotionally secure the environment was when we grew up. Take your own emotional maturity pulse by asking, *"How emotionally safe and secure did I feel growing up?" "Do I recall being comforted as a child after a time of emotional distress?"* These are not routine, mundane times, but times of real grief, hurt, stress, or crisis. The goal is not to find fault, of course, in our parents. Most parents did the best they could with what they had. The key is discovering the truth, because those years shaped your ability to love and to connect emotionally as an adult. By looking honestly at the patterns that resulted, you can gain a picture of how you responded and of how those responses formed the patterns with which you relate to your world, to others, and to God today. Then, you can begin a journey of growth and change—going back to move forward. **How would you rate yourself on this step?**

Step Three: Become an emotionally mature adult- *Grow up*

Growing into an emotionally mature adult can be terrifying. It is frightening because, for some of us, our “emotional awareness meter” is broken. We have never developed the self-reflective skills to even feel. We are stuck and may not even know the first step needed to become mature. Becoming a Christian does not automatically make us emotionally mature, but it does give us the grace, courage, and power to break out of our personal “prison” and learn to become emotionally mature adults who can love well. Grace enables us to take risks and to do some things differently. We love our families and honor our culture in appropriate ways, but now we are all about doing life God’s way in His family in the kingdom of God. **How would you rate yourself on this step?**

Here is how those who have done the work act, they

- Give people (and themselves) room to make mistakes.
- Appreciate people for who they are.
- Ask for what they need, want, or prefer, directly and honestly.
- Recognize and take responsibility for their feelings.
- Accurately assess their own strengths and weaknesses.
- Have the capacity to resolve conflict maturely.
- Respect others without trying to change them.
- Understand that the essence of mature faith is loving others well.
- Live out their faith authentically.
- Offer grace to others and make no excuses for their own behavior.
- Speak the truth in love, accept others where they are, never intend to manipulate or control.

Next, Work Through any Misbeliefs or Distorted Ways of Thinking about Life and Relationships

Common misbeliefs include, “I’m powerless; I’m a victim.” “Life is a struggle; something bad will happen if things are too good.” “If I take a risk, I will fail; if I fail, others will reject me.” “I am unimportant.” “If I ignore it, this problem will go away.” “The world is not safe; the only safety is what is familiar to me.” “To be OK, I must be perfect.” “I cannot rely on or trust anyone.” “I can’t change; it’s too hard.” “I won’t change.”

Much of our unhealthy behavior is due to ideas that we believe are true. Believing any of these can create unrealistic expectations (of yourself or others) in a relationship. Below is a list of some distorted ideas.

- It is absolutely necessary to be loved or approved of by every person.
- In order to like myself, I must be good at everything I try. If I am not good at something, I should avoid it.
- Certain people are bad, evil, mean, etc. and must be punished.
- It is terrible when things are not the way I think they should be or when people do not act the way I want them to act.
- When I am unhappy, I have little or no control over my feelings. Other people or situations or things are responsible for how I feel.
- If I am afraid of something, I should always worry that it might happen.
- It is easier to avoid problems than to deal with them.
- Other people are stronger or more capable than I and should be depended upon.
- Something that happened in my past probably controls how I act now, and it will always control how I will act in the future.

- I should involve myself with and become upset about the problems and struggles of others.
- There is always a “right” solution to every problem, and this perfect solution must be found if the problem or situation is to be solved.

These misbeliefs can distort how we see ourselves or our partner and put undue pressure on ourselves the relationship. Dealing with these can be tough, but necessary if we are to view our marriage through a healthier lens. Please challenge your misbeliefs.

Five Building blocks to Becoming a Healthier Partner

1. *Know who you are in relation to others*

A big challenge in marriage is to be true to who you are and to your values, even when those are being questioned or opposed by your spouse. To be who you are means that you are clear about what you feel, want, think, and desire. It also means that you are able to allow your spouse to have his or her own thoughts, feelings, wants, and desires without needing to control them or feeling “less than” because of their choices. Anxiety can cause us to want to change our own position or that of our partner in order to minimize conflict or reduce fear. To work on this area, make a list of what you believe and value, and encourage your spouse to do the same. Share your lists as you seek to understand one another. Pay attention to things that peak your anxiety; those are areas that need some work.

2. *See yourself (and your spouse) as uniquely created by God*

This means that you are able to respect yourself and your spouse and understand those things that make you who you are. You can see yourself (and your partner) as a unique person made in the image of God.

3. *Learn to tell the difference between your thoughts and feelings*

This means that you can readily recognize and express your feelings in a healthy, respectful manner. Particularly during intense conversations, you can decide which mode - thinking or feeling - will take the lead. In those moments of anxiety, you are able to think clearly and not allow your feelings to hijack your thinking. Regarding your feelings, you can regulate them and express them clearly.

4. *Conquer your fear of being abandoned or smothered in your relationship*

You are able to stay who you are as you engage with your spouse. Ask yourself, *Will I really lose who I am if my spouse wants to move closer to me or needs some space?* You do not personalize or react emotionally to changes in closeness by your spouse (wanting more or less).

5. *Develop the ability to tolerate pain and discomfort for the sake of growth*

Rebuilding a damaged relationship is painful. In reality, the path of growth through pain is actually less painful than the alternatives: denial, stuffing, avoiding, or running. These simply prolong the pain and can even make it worse. Pain is not your enemy; avoiding pain in order to avoid growing or changing is the real enemy. Challenge yourself to increase your pain (discomfort) threshold in order to grow, limit anxiety, and better handle conflict and the inevitable challenges of marriage.



Questions to ponder as you work through the issues outlined above:

How did my family show love, safety, and respect?

How did my family express anger, conflict, feelings of being overwhelmed, frustration, fear, and rage?

How did my family communicate with each other inside and outside of the house?

How did my family model spousal roles?

How did my family react to hurt, loss, and trauma?

What issues that we currently struggle with are related to my childhood?

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1

Perhaps the worst thing about attempting to change your mate is that those attempts can create an unsafe place for your marriage to thrive. And in time your mate will erect walls to ward off your continued push toward change. Trying to change your mate can make your marriage worse and increase its chance of failure. You have the freedom and responsibility to change yourself and how you react.

-Gary Smalley

Much of the New Testament instructs us on to encourage, love and care for other people, especially those in need or facing difficult situations. Don't shy away from asking for someone to help bear your burdens even though it difficult to ask (Galatians 6:2). Getting support is one of the best steps you can make to regain control over your own life.

-Leslie Vernick, The Emotionally Destructive Relationship

We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being the enormous thing it is, means we are not the same person after we entered it. The primary problem is...learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.

-Stanley Hauerwas, "Sex and Politics" in the Christian Century, 1978.

How to Work on Conflict in Your Marriage

It's important to stop keeping score and to try not to win every argument, even when you're in the right. Instead, think of winning an unofficial contest I like to call 'Who's the Bigger Person?' Resolving conflicts is about who wants to grow the most and what's best for your relationship.

-Dr. Pat Love

Understand this, my dear brothers, and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. James 1:19-20

Marital conflict is inevitable. You will disagree with your partner, that's a given. But it is not arguing that is the problem, it is how you argue; how your differences are resolved. Here is the reality, every marriage has two problems: the actual problem and you address the problem. Love means risking occasionally getting your feelings hurt because it is the price you pay for intimacy. In all intimate relationships, conflicting needs for closeness and space exist. How conflict is managed can determine not only the strength of a relationship, but also its longevity. In our experience, about 80% of the time, the wife initiates "sticky" potentially conflictive conversations, and more than 80% of the time, the husband attempts to avoid these conversations. Why does conflict occur? Actually, conflict (not combat) is a normal process for airing and resolving differences. Generally, we enter into conflict when we become frustrated because a deep-felt need has not been acknowledged or met. However, there are behaviors that can escalate a conflict. Below are several "escalating" behaviors.

Angry reactions to feedback. Whether we punish our partner by breaking down emotionally, by the silent treatment, by being critical or by screaming at them, we are telling them that we do not want to hear what they have to say, perhaps ever. We are also invalidating them.

Being closed to new ideas or experiences. We should always be open to exploring new ideas. This does not mean that we have to share all of our interests, in fact, it is essential to maintain our independence and individuality. A relationship does not exist in a vacuum; being open to new experiences keeps it fresh and alive.

Deception and duplicity. We have to consistently ask ourselves, "Am I being honest and transparent? What is my motivation? Do my words and actions match?" If we really love someone, there should be actual actions we take toward them that, to an outside observer, would be viewed as loving.

Overstepping boundaries. Without even noticing it, we may be intrusive or controlling toward our partner, acting in a manner that is disrespectful or demeaning to their sense of self. When we disrespect our partner's boundaries, we are more likely to see them as an extension of ourselves, and we may mistreat or criticize them in ways we mistreat or criticize ourselves.

Misunderstanding. Listening well is the key. Before you react, make sure what your partner is saying and what and what you are receiving (what you think they are saying) line up. If not sure, ask.

The key to healthy conflict is **how a conversation starts**. If it starts harshly or with an attack, it will usually become heated as partners become defensive and blame one another. We use the **"Soft/Hard/Soft."** It goes like this: When you have something "hard" to say, *start* by stating something "soft." Then say the hard thing, but with that same soft energy. Then add another "soft." Here are some examples of soft: *I love you. I believe we can work this out together. I know this might be hard, but we are in this together.* Hints about sharing hard stuff: Stick to descriptions, not labels, make requests, not criticisms and use "I"

messages. Taking the time to resolve conflicts in a healthy way is hard work, but the payoff is tremendous. It is essential that you accept differences rather than define relationship problems in terms of your partner's character flaws.

Generally speaking, men have very low tolerance for unstructured conflict. They dislike their partner mentioning sensitive issues, especially when they are feeling burdened or depleted. In those instances, they often feel 'ambushed' and react with irritation, distancing, or withdrawal. Women dislike being ignored, especially when trying to bring up something important to them. They feel ignored when their partner becomes overloaded and withdraws. In those instances, they react by criticizing and/or escalating, which is just what their partner cannot tolerate.

For men, a good strategy is to be open to their partner's point of view. A good approach would be to embrace (vs. avoid or deny) issues and to not railroad your point of view. If you feel overloaded, it is OK to say so and withdraw until you feel better able to manage a rational discussion. Just be sure to say that is what you are doing. It is critical to let a partner know that you are not dodging the issue. Then, make a specific appointment to resume the discussion ("in 20 minutes" or "Saturday at breakfast") so she will know that you hear her. For women, start discussions calmly and positively. Avoid criticizing and escalating a discussion. If possible, schedule a mutually agreeable time to discuss your issue when your partner is feeling less depleted or burdened.

Triggers

When your partner hurts you, you know how, but you do not always know why that action was so upsetting. The reason is called a **trigger**, some tender or sensitive area inside you. Triggers are how the past wounds us now. You are triggered whenever you feel disconnected, attacked, or emotionally abandoned by your partner; the one you rely on for comfort or understanding. We seldom realize our triggers, often only becoming aware when we find ourselves reacting by numbing out, shutting down, or lashing out in anger. This is because triggers are created early on and out of our awareness. Once created, they become almost reflexive, activated by cues (events, words, body language, tone of voice) from our partner or environment.

Triggers always begin with a physical reaction. They then transition to a mental process, and they finish with some form of retaliation. They are seldom obvious at first, but after a while, a pattern begins to emerge. The best way to deal with them is to talk about them with your partner. Once you begin to talk about the feelings your triggers generate and accept that they are normal, you will understand why you are experiencing them and have an easier time managing them. Further, remember that when addressing your partner's triggers, just because you think your behavior is not a big deal it does not mean it is not hurtful to them. Do not take the attitude that they should just "get over it." You do not get to decide whether your partner has a right to be hurt by your behavior.

Talking about things your partner does that upset you can make your triggers easier to analyze and may even take the edge off. Talking about them does not make them go away, but it is a start. Sharing even negative emotions, provided they do not get out of hand, is more useful than emotional absence. That is because a lack of response will often fire up panic in a partner. Instead of allowing hurt feelings to fester, confront them without lashing out at each other. This is the only way to discover each other's triggers and tender spots, and to figure out how to avoid/heal them.

Dealing with triggers is difficult because you must acknowledge your own vulnerability and be reminded that your partner cannot actually read your mind – which means you might get hurt at times. However, as we are reminded in 2 Corinthians 5 and Colossians 3, growth is possible: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* 2 Corinthians 5:17. *“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”* Colossians 3:9-10 ESV. Remember to seek the Lord as individuals and as a couple, because He can help you overcome and heal your hurts and find healthier ways to respond to, love and nurture one another.

Two Kinds of Conflict

There are two kinds of marital conflict: resolvable and perpetual. According to Dr. John Gottman, most conflict (69%) is perpetual, meaning there is no “absolute” solution. Perpetual conflicts result from relatively unchanging differences in personalities, preferences, aspirations, and needs. In, *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*, John Gottman suggests nine destructive signs that an unsolvable problem is harming your relationship

1. You feel rejected by your partner.
2. You keep attempting to talk about the issue but make no headway.
3. You become entrenched in your positions and are unwilling to budge or be flexible.
4. When you discuss the subject, you end up feeling more frustrated and hurt.
5. Your conversations about the problem lack humor, amusement, or affection.
6. You do not accept your partner’s influence, meaning you do not allow their needs or perspective to influence your position on the issue.
7. You vilify each other during these conversations and in your thoughts, even when alone.
8. This vilification makes you all the more rooted in your positions, and you and your partner become polarized, more extreme in your views, and all the less willing to compromise.
9. You are disengaged from each other emotionally.

So, couples have a choice. They can either dialogue about these issues or live in constant “gridlock.” In great marriages, couples find ways to negotiate and manage perpetual problems. In unstable marriages, they create gridlock. Signs of gridlock include:

- You feel rejected by your partner
- A lot of talk, but no headway
- Entrenched; no one budes
- Talking about the issue makes it worse
- Emotional disengagement
- Talking at one another
- Instant hyperarousal
- Stonewalling
- No humor or affection

The key to dealing with perpetual problems is learning to *manage them* versus trying to fix or solve them. Managing means looking for compromise and collaboration, as well as really hearing, understanding, and accepting each other’s position. They cannot be “fixed” in the traditional sense.

Keys to Dealing with Solvable Problems:

- Take responsibility for your stuff (feelings, point of view, attitudes, and beliefs).
- Accept your partner’s personality and way of seeing things.
- Think “shift” vs. change. We all need to make shifts if life.
- Before you ask your partner to change or shift, be sure they feel understood and accepted. Otherwise, they will resist, and gridlock will occur.

- Avoid right and wrong thinking. No one is ever “right” in marital issues; there are only two subjective realities.
- Building positive feelings during a hard talk turns out to be essential to ensure lasting change.



Try this next time there is an argument or disagreement.

1. Soften your startup.

This is the most important step. Pray before you start. Ask yourself, “*What does love require of me?*” Start the conversation without criticism or contempt. We know that most arguments end where they begin. The goal is to have a conversation, not an inquisition. We suggest the soft/hard/soft approach. Soft start-up tips include:

- Validate your partner and the relationship (“This concern is important to me, but it is not bigger or more important than our marriage.”)
- Take responsibility
- Complain. Do not attack, accuse, blame, or criticize. Complaints focus on issues; criticism attacks the person.
- Use “I” statements (at least far more than “you” statements).
- Describe what is happening that concerns you; do not evaluate or judge.
- Be clear about what your concern is and what you need.
- Be polite, respectful, and appreciative.
- Do not stuff or store things up.
- Remember, you are on the same team.

2. Learn to Make and Receive “Repair Attempts.”

A repair is any action or statement that deescalates tension. This helps if your partner says something that triggers you. Here are some things to try.

- Talk softly, slowly, and clearly, without rage or defensiveness.
- Own your part or agree with what your partner had to say.
- Use language that eases tension and makes your partner feel safe.
- Repairs are best done using key “positive” vs. stress-inducing phrases.
- Lighten the mood or try some humor.

Key phrases:

“I need to calm down” (Can you make things safe for me? I need your support right now.)

“Sorry” (I really blew it; I can see my part in this.)

“Get to yes” (Let’s compromise; your point of view makes sense.)

“Stop action” (I might be wrong here, please stop. I am feeling flooded.)

“I appreciate” (I see your point, I understand, thank you for...)

3. Soothe Yourself and Then your Partner.

When getting heated during a conversation, let your partner know that you are overwhelmed, and take a **20-minute break**. (*That’s how long it takes to move out of hyperarousal*). When you are flooded, you are all emotion and little empathy, compassion, or clear thinking. Try closing your eyes, taking slow, deep breaths, relaxing your muscles, and visualizing a calm place. After you’ve calmed down, help soothe your partner. Ask each other what is most comforting and do that. It is hard to soothe yourself or your

partner if you are flooded (hyperarousal). Generally, it is harder for a man's body to calm down after an argument than a woman's.

Flooding Conversation (ask these of each other):

- What makes you feel flooded?
- Do I store up things?
- What can I do to soothe you?
- What could you do to soothe me?
- What signals can we use?
- What is a better way to bring up tough issues?

4. Compromise.

The steps stated above can prime couples for compromise because they create positivity. Then, when conflicts arise, it is important to take your partner's thoughts and feelings into consideration. Compromise is not giving in or admitting you are wrong; it is finding common ground.

Exercise to find common ground:

- Each draw two circles: a smaller one inside a larger one.
- In the smaller circle, make a list of your non-negotiable points.
- In the bigger one, make a list of what you can compromise on.
- Share them with each other and look for common ground.
- Consider what you agree on, what your common goals and feelings are, and how you can accomplish these goals.

5. Be tolerant of Each Other's Faults.

Tolerance does *not* mean abandoning your beliefs, ignoring or being a doormat. It means realizing there are few absolutes in marital conflict, only differing perspectives, and opinions. If you cannot accept and tolerate each other's faults, you will be stuck in the "if only's." Conflict will be difficult to resolve, and compromise will be next to impossible. Finally, you will be on an endless (fruitless) campaign to change your spouse. The spiritual key of this last step is found in Romans 12:18: "*As far as it is up to you, be at peace with all,*" and in Hebrews 12:14. Also read Romans 12:9-20 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. **Based on material from Dr. John Gottman**

Make it your goal to create a marriage that feels like the safest place on earth.

-Greg Smalley

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.

-Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 NLT

How to Stop the “Blame Game.”

Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you. Ephesians 4:29

Blame will only result in your partner becoming defensive. There may be times when the argument you both thought you were having was in fact about something else entirely, something much deeper. This is a valuable discovery, and one that you will never make if you are both playing the blame game. Keep your attitude and your words non-confrontational, and you will get to the root of an issue much faster.

Pay attention to clues such as one-word answers, subdued or forced tone of voice, or refusal to make eye contact. If you sense that something is bothering your partner, initiate a conversation. It is important not to let things escalate. Choose your words and your timing carefully. Simply expressing your desire to listen can encourage your partner to open up. Let him or her speak freely, without interruption. Then you can embark on the next step, resolution, together.

- 1) Talk about your hurt. Opening up to your partner can make you feel vulnerable and exposed, but it is the most important ingredient of a trusting, intimate relationship.
- 2) Emphasize that the issue is important to you, your partner, and your marriage.
- 3) Do not list all your partner's flaws. Focus on your hurts and make requests of your partner. Be sure they understand why you are hurt and what you are asking of them.
- 4) Make your goal to solve the problem. Avoid trying to prove a point or assassinate your partner's character. Focus on solutions. Own your part.
- 5) Use “I” not “you” messages. Also, use specific examples. Focus on the issue.
- 6) Never make threats or issue ultimatums. Avoid saying things you will regret later.
- 7) Take a short break. If either of you feel overwhelmed or flooded, it can be helpful to take a break. Do not resume until both of you feel ready.
- 8) Celebrate. Enjoy that the process worked; affirm your love and commitment.

Common Ground

If butting heads exposes the differences between you more starkly than you would like, try remembering things you both love. Focusing on common ground can be a valuable way to get unstuck when in a conflict rut. Which interests or pursuits do you share? What makes you both laugh? What dreams do you both hold dear? Make the time to reconnect over these things. It will help you regain some much-needed clarity and perspective, especially if your disagreements tend to revolve around trivialities.

Struggling couples often find themselves repeating the same harmful, unproductive behaviors because they no longer have any idea how else to solve their problems. They are so hurt and overwhelmed by the discord consuming their marriage, they lose all ability to resolve conflict.

Consider the following advice from Paul.

Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting,

backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:29-32 MSG

What to do instead of blaming

You can learn to manage future fights by remembering times when you fell into the rut of mutual blaming or finger-pointing.

- What ammunition did you use to “win?” Do you really want to win if it hurts your spouse?
- What was the typical accusation you threw at your partner?
- What retorts do you most often employ when you feel attacked?
- After the fight, how do you feel about yourself, your partner, and the connection between you?
- Were you able to discuss the fight afterward? If not, how did you deal with your mutual loss of safety? Can you apologize for the hurt, and can you forgive being hurt?

Stopping the game

Begin by stopping the argument. In the future, it will be up to both of you to recognize when you are getting into fiery territory and pull yourselves back from a screaming match. A good start is to take a minute or two and then talk about why you are so upset. Fighting is easy; its consequences are not. *“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city”* Proverbs 16:32 ESV. Think of marriage as a training ground for sanctification. There are exercises in compassion, patience, selflessness, and generosity. Take advantage of how your marriage provides limitless opportunities for growing in holiness. Remember Gary Thomas’s statement, marriage is designed to make us holy, not happy.

Discuss your feelings with your spouse

For this step to work, you must be willing to talk about the feelings behind why you are fighting. It is important to recognize how your own methods of dealing with emotions can knock your partner off balance and trigger deeper fears.

The de-escalation process

Ask about your partner’s deeper emotions. Make sure you have both cooled off from the disagreement. Now that you have taken some time and respectfully asked each other about themselves (even though it is like waiting your turn to tell a story you are dying to tell), it is time to share your deeper, softer and more vulnerable emotions. Talking about feelings is difficult. You must take a risk and trust that your partner will not take advantage of that to belittle you. However, it is crucial if you want your partner to better understand how you feel when you argue. A great many problems happen in relationships because one partner does not realize the other partner feels that way. And since they cannot read your mind, you must tell them.

The better you understand your partner, the better equipped you will be to understand what they say and how they react during a fight. As you continue to share, you will both be more cognizant of things you say or do that upset your partner, which will help you to both prevent arguments and approach them more appropriately when they are upset. This can be challenging. Sometimes you just will not understand why something upsets your partner; you will be inclined to think they should just get over it. This is not the lesson Christ teaches. Compassion is not something we just do when it is convenient for us. Paul reminds us of this in Ephesians 4:1-3, *“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* NIV

Moving Forward After a Fight

When you and your partner have a better understanding of how the other feels, it is time to move toward one another. Sharing feelings helps prevent future blow-ups because you understand each other so much better and are working to cooperate rather than conflict. You are no longer squaring off; you are seeing things from the same side. Discussing how you feel during fights helps you get a better understanding of what sets you off and helps you know what signs of escalation to look for in the future.

There are two crucial elements of de-escalation: **First**, understand that how you respond at a key moment of conflict and disconnection can be deeply painful and threatening your partner. **Second**, understand that your partner's negative reactions can be desperate attempts to deal with a fear of emotional disconnection. Tackling arguments is hard. There are so many intense emotions involved, as well as opportunities for sniping and defensiveness. Part of the difficulty of confronting issues in your relationship is that these discussions trigger so many sensitive emotions; just trying to talk about them can lead to a fight.

If one or both of you oversteps these boundaries, keep your head. Remind your partner gently but firmly of your agreement. This encourages you both to take a step back, and adopt a calmer, more productive approach. When in an argument, it is easy for your perception to devolve into a "me vs. you" mentality. But remember that you and your partner are a team. He or she is your friend, not your enemy. Approaching conflict with an attitude of cooperation, rather than opposition, can shift your perspective dramatically. If you are on the same team, it does not matter who wins. Ultimately, it is not conflict you should be worried about. It is the **never-ending cycle of frustration and blame** that will eventually wear you both down. If you have tried all the above, and nothing seems to be working, then seeking help from a counselor may be the answer.

Get this: *"Under my anger is fear and hurt. I attack you because I sense you pulling away, which makes me feel things (hurt, afraid, insecure, etc.). I hate feeling that way. I want to get your attention so you will understand how I feel. I worry you don't care."*



What is your plan to stop blaming? Blame and attack **NEVER** work. If you are willing to listen, empathize, and forgive, then even the most bitter of fights can have a happy ending. Without the catalyst of conflict, those deep, unspoken issues that poison a relationship may never become known. Accept them, and treat them as a constructive, rather than dangerous, force. See them as an opportunity to grow. It may be the best thing you can do for your relationship.

To the extent that you define the problem or the goal in terms of the other person, you remain paralyzed. You will have no power to change anything. You will remain as helpless to make that person change as a quadriplegic remains helpless to leap from a wheelchair and set a world record in the 100-meter dash.
-Gary Smalley, *The DNA of Relationships*

The most common mistake couples make while trying to resolve conflicts is to respond before they have the full picture. This inevitably leads to arguments. When people respond too quickly, they often respond to the wrong issue. Listening helps us focus on the heart of the conflict. When we listen, understand, and respect each other's ideas, we can then find a solution in which both of us are winners.

-Dr. Gary Chapman, *Marriage Partnership Magazine*, "Solving Conflicts Without Arguing"

Work on Your Misbeliefs about Marriage

The more you invest in a marriage, the more valuable it becomes.

-Amy Grant

Lie #1: I Can Change my Spouse.

Wrong! If your spouse is late, messy, or forgetful, it is not likely to change because of your undying love. Experts agree that the only thing we can change is ourselves and that the only thing we truly have control over is how we respond to things that happen to us (that are mostly out of our control). Truth: All you have control over is your reaction to your spouse, which incidentally, can lead to changes in them.

Lie #2: We are too Different.

Interestingly, we marry people who are different from us. Incompatibility does not kill a relationship; handling differences poorly does. Some differences are tough to resolve, and couples need to learn to accept those. The Bible gives clear guidelines on how to deal with conflict in a Christ-like way (love, forgive, serve, etc.).

Lie #3: I've Lost That Loving Feeling!

Love is a commitment, a decision, an act of will, not just a feeling. Intense passion does not last forever, but love can stay for a lifetime. You may not always feel love, but you must determine to love your partner as yourself. The loving feeling dwindles when couples lock into negative patterns that lead them away from each other. The truth is you can always restore that loving feeling.

Lie #4: I Should not Have to Change.

Every living thing changes. This is the take me or leave me attitude. Funny, this is seldom expressed at the wedding. Unwillingness to change is rooted in rebellion (often from childhood), which is doing things your way instead of God's. Change is hard; it requires a willingness to look at one's behavior and work towards being more like Christ. Change never happens if you do not embrace it. You can change, but it requires desire, obedience, and Holy Spirit driven power (Romans 12:1-2).

Lie #5: Our Marriage is Too Broken.

God can change and mend hearts, do miracles, and work in the toughest circumstances. He is the God of the possible. Draw close to Him, intercede for your marriage, do battle with your true enemy (Satan), and expect God to work on your behalf.

Lie #6: If you Have to Work at Marriage, Something must be Wrong.

Few things in life require "no work." Think of your kitchen, landscaping, or car. We work on the things we value. Work does not mean something is wrong, just important.



Explore. What misbeliefs or unrealistic expectations do you have?

Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."

-1 Corinthians 13:7

A relationship is, in some sense, the attempt to work out the negative side effects of what attracts you to your partner in the first place.

-Dr. Dan Wile

Work on Your Communication Differences

To listen well is to figure out what's on someone's mind and demonstrate that you care enough to want to know. It's what we all crave; to be understood as a person with thoughts, emotions, and intentions that are unique and valuable and deserving of attention. Listening is not about teaching, shaping, critiquing, appraising, or showing how it should be done. Listening is about the experience of being experienced. It's when someone takes an interest in who you are and what you are doing.

-Kate Murphy, *You're Not Listening*

You Both Think you are Right, truth is, most of the time neither of you are.

Remember a time when you argued about who was right or wrong? Soon, you are not even talking about the issue itself anymore – you are just trying to prove whose version of what happened is the right one. Over half of all arguments are just like that. Begs the question: why do we do that and how can we stop?

Strong Emotions are Sticky.

Our memories are deeply affected by the emotions we are feeling. If something feels emotionally neutral, we might not remember it, because we do not need to. It does not threaten our sense of self, and so it does not affect how we approach future events. We tend to remember an event when it carries a strong emotional tone. These include fun times as well as the unpleasant. Unfortunately, negative, painful situations can be especially memorable. We refer to this as the brain's "negativity bias."

Our Interpretations Determine our Emotions

Our emotions are a result of our interpretations of the situation, *not* the situation itself. The process can be described sequentially, like this: *An activating event triggers your interpretation of what happened, with a resulting emotion that creates your particular memory of the event, which can be very different from your partner's feelings and interpretation.*



How to Break the Cycle?

Stop arguing about whose recollection of the event is correct. Both partners usually have some version of the truth, but not the whole truth. It is likely that you are missing some key pieces of information about the other person's experience (or intentions). Try to understand what your partner felt and why, even if you do not agree with it. Accept that it is their version of the situation. Your partner's need is for you to listen to how they feel and to show that you understand it. Try to appreciate how they may have gathered this impression and help them understand that your intention was different than what was received. If you reframe these arguments to understand rather than prove you are right, you will go a long way toward dissolving your relationship conflicts.

In Ephesians 4:15, Paul challenged Christians to live a life of "speaking the truth in love." Our tendency is to do well on 50 percent of that verse. Some of us have mastered "speaking the truth." We're quick to point out anything that we see or perceive in our spouse and are willing to use any method (attacking, judging, etc.) to drive the point home. Others of us are stuck at the "in love" part of confrontation. We've come to believe in complete acceptance and tolerance of any behavior. Often, we become paralyzed with a fear of hurting someone's feelings and withdraw into passivity and silence. Speaking the truth in love combines both of these concepts to allow us to confront sinful behavior without compromise, yet with absolute care and respect for the individual, saying things in a way that the person can accept. When a couple takes the stance of living out Paul's challenge of "speaking the truth in love" to each other, the old models of judging and passivity must disappear.

-Jeff and Lora Helton, *Authentic Marriages*

Seven Principles of Marriage Success

Most marital arguments cannot be resolved. Couples spend year after year trying to change each other's mind – but it can't be done. This is because most of their disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences of lifestyle, personality, or values. By fighting over these differences, all they succeed in doing is wasting their time and harming their marriage.

-John M. Gottman, *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*

Below is the renowned marriage expert, Dr. John Gottman's, seven success principles, along with a few relationship-strengthening activities to try.

Enhance Your Love Maps

Love is in the details. That is, happy couples are very familiar with their partner's world. According to Gottman, these couples have "a richly detailed love map," which is his term for the part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner's life. You know everything from your partner's favorite movies to what's currently stressing them out, to some of their life dreams, and they know yours.

Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration

Happy couples respect each other and have a generally positive view of each other. Gottman says that fondness and admiration are two of the most important elements in a satisfying and long-term relationship. If these elements are completely missing, the marriage cannot be saved.

Turn Toward Each Other Instead of Away

Romance is not a Caribbean cruise, an expensive meal, or a lavish gift. Rather, it lives and thrives in the everyday, little things. Romance is kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life. For instance, romance is leaving an encouraging voicemail for your spouse when you know he is having a bad day. Or when you are running late, it is taking a few minutes to listen to your wife's bad dream and saying that you will discuss it later, instead of saying, "I don't have time."

Gottman acknowledges that this might seem humdrum but turning toward each other in these ways is the basis for connection and passion. Couples that turn toward each other have more in their "emotional bank account." Gottman says that this account distinguishes happy marriages from miserable ones. Happy couples have more goodwill and positivity stored in their bank accounts, so when rough times hit, their emotional savings cushion conflicts and stressors.

Let your Partner Influence You

Happy couples are a team that considers each other's perspectives and feelings. They make decisions together and search out common ground. Letting your partner influence, you isn't about having one person hold the reins: it is about honoring and respecting both people in the relationship.

Solve your Solvable Problems

According to Gottman, there are two types of marital problems: conflicts that can be resolved and perpetual problems that cannot. It is important for couples to determine which ones are which. Sometimes, though, telling the difference can be tricky. One way to identify solvable problems is that they seem less painful, gut-wrenching, or intense than perpetual, gridlocked ones. Solvable problems are situational, and there is typically no underlying conflict.

Overcome Gridlock-*do not stay stuck in a rut*

The goal with perpetual problems is for couples to move from gridlock to dialogue. What usually underlies gridlock is unfulfilled dreams. Gridlock is a sign that you have dreams for your life that are not being addressed or respected by each other. Happy couples believe in the importance of helping each other realize their dreams. Therefore, the first step to overcoming gridlock is to determine the dream or dreams that are causing your conflict. The next steps include talking to each other about your dreams, taking a break (since some of these talks can get stressful), and making peace with the problem. Your spouse needs to know you care about their hopes and dreams. The goal is to 'declaw' the issue, to remove the hurt, so that the problem stops being a source of great pain.

Create Shared Meaning

This means finding common ground as you look at your life today and in the future. Meaning is much deeper than happiness. Meaning is about purpose – what is God saying to us about our life, our mission? Just asking how we can make our lives more meaningful draws us into a deeper level of intimacy.



Putting in the work to connect, communicate, and respect each other, is worth the work for a happy marriage. Focus on each other and pay attention to the small day-to-day moments that help create closeness.

Marriage is not just about raising kids, splitting chores, and making love. It can also have a spiritual dimension that has to do with creating an inner life together – a culture rich with rituals, and an appreciation for your roles and goals that link you, that lead you to understand what it means to be a part of the family you have become. In addition, which is what it means to develop shared meaning. Happy couples create a family culture that includes both of their dreams. In being open to each other's perspectives and opinions, happy couples naturally come together.

-John Gottman

If couples I see are focused on even a small core of positivity, it's a foundation for rebuilding their relationship. Most couples are ambivalent about divorce, but they've gotten into a toxic pattern where they focus mostly on each other's weaknesses. If they can think about the parts of their marriage and spouse that are good, it gives them a springboard to work on repairing the connection."

-From a marriage counselor

Pride pushes us away from each other. It exalts itself, it seeks to win arguments, and it aims to advance self and get noticed. Humility draws us toward each other; it seeks to understand, and it aims to achieve intimacy. Pride is one of the greatest enemies of marriage; humility is one of marriage's greatest friends. Sadly, while pride comes naturally, humility must be pursued. Unless we consciously practice humility in our marriages, we'll naturally fall into prideful disposition. To help us counteract this, Paul gives us an effective spiritual exercise in Philippians 2: Pause for a moment. Don't look only to your own interests – look to the interests of your spouse. Think about him or her. Consider his or her challenges. Empathize with the stress your spouse is feeling. ...Pride is a wedge; humility is a glue. Which spiritual tool will you wield?

-Gary Thomas, *Devotions for a Sacred Marriage*

Getting Our Needs Met

Needs are normal. We all have needs—physical, emotional and spiritual. Having your needs met is life giving. Unmet needs leave you hungry and wanting. Your ability to recognize and take care of your needs has a direct connection to the kind of people you attract and the quality of your relationships. The extent to which you recognize and take care of your needs influences your ability to develop healthy relationships. When you do not recognize and meet your needs, potential partners see these needs as your defining characteristics. Those who are not needy will see your needs and scatter. Only those who do not meet and recognize their own needs will be attracted to you.

At the same time, the haze of unmet and unrecognized needs can cloud your judgment. When a potential partner strongly meets one of your main needs, you may discount his or her lack of other important qualities, which will ultimately make the relationship impossible. This is one way people end up in relationships where there is more anger and hurt than love. In a relationship, even if you are unaware of your needs, your partner will still pick up on them. If you are not taking care of your needs and/or are not directly asking for what you need, your partner may feel manipulated and become resentful or they may move into a care-taking role. Such patterns can only produce unhealthy and short-lived relationships.

In order to have healthy, satisfying relationships, you must be able to clearly recognize your needs and find ways to get them met outside of the relationship. Most people think that being in a relationship will get all their needs met, so why should they find a way to have them met outside the relationship? That's why so many singles abandon their support network the moment they get into a relationship. It is true that some of your needs can and will be met in a relationship, but ultimately you will always be responsible for your own needs. Even when you are sure you have an established relationship, you must be able to meet your needs when necessary. Your partner will not always be able to do so.

We have emotional, physical and spiritual needs. These are legitimate needs we must find ways to fulfill. Often people feel bad about having certain needs. Although they try to suppress these needs and pretend they don't exist, others are acutely aware of them. Unmet emotional needs, for example, always "leak out" in behavior. Our own emotional needs are the most difficult to satisfy. People frequently believe their partner or friends are obligated to meet their emotional needs. In truth, no one has any obligation to meet your needs, but your partner or friends are likely to help you if you ask them.

Physical needs are sometimes ignored in our fast-paced desire to succeed. When it comes to taking care of ourselves, we do as little as we can. This causes our emotional needs to become amplified. One way to meet your emotional needs is to take care of yourself physically. Spiritual needs are often ignored altogether. We can get so caught up in our emotional and relational needs that we put God on the shelf. To be truly healthy, God must be at the center of our lives. Needs are real; they are not selfish or wrong. Asking others to help us meet our needs is not selfish. Seeking to have your deep intimacy needs met in a relationship is God's plan.

Beliefs and reasons that can keep us from having our needs met.

- Having needs makes me "needy."
- Our needs were neglected in childhood.
- Fear that we will upset our partner.

- Never taught how to appropriately express our needs.
- Fear of rejection or abandonment.
- We're convinced we don't need anyone.
- We don't know what we need.
- We believe we aren't worthy or good enough.
- We don't want to be a burden.
- We believe other people's needs are more important than our own.

Tools to Help Your Marriage Work Better

Any marriage can be saved, and any marriage can be lost. It all comes down to whether a couple will stop doing the things that harm a marriage and start doing the things that build a marriage.

–Joe Beam

Below are a group of tools; learn these well, they can help your marriage become healthy and whole.

Tool: Three skills to deepen your relationship

Insight is about awareness and understanding and learning. With insight, you'll have a better idea of who you are, what you need, what you want, and why you do the things you do." For example, let's say you're being really testy with your partner. If you possess insight, she says, "you might notice or realize that it's not that your partner is doing anything; it's actually that you're really stressed out at work, and what you really need is to relax a little bit so it doesn't bleed into your relationship."

"With insight, you'll be able to anticipate the positive and negative consequences of your behavior," says Davila. Having insight means realizing when you say "thank you" after your partner hands you a coffee with a ½ teaspoon of sugar and a slug of oat milk – just how you like it – *both* of you will feel appreciated. Conversely, it also means knowing that when you forget to say "thank you" or delay responding to one of their texts for no good reason, they'll probably feel annoyed or hurt.

"Insight will also let you know your partner better," says Davila. "Let's say your partner shows up late for a date. With insight, you'll know why. For example, maybe your partner is late for everything. It's nothing about you or the relationship. That's just who your partner is."

Mutuality is about knowing that both people have needs and that both sets of needs matter," says Davila. "With mutuality, you'll be able to convey your own needs in a clear direct fashion; that increases the likelihood you'll get them met."

Davila provides an example to illustrate how you might communicate your wishes. "Let's say you have to go to a really stressful family event, and you'd like your partner to be there with you. You might say directly: 'You know, this is going to be stressful for me. I'd really love for you to be there; you'll be a really good buffer for me. Is there any way you can clear your schedule to come with me?'"

Of course, mutuality is about ensuring your partner's needs are addressed, too. "Let's say you know that your partner really likes to go to the gym first thing in the morning – it makes your partner feel better the rest of the day," says Davila. "Mutuality will let you be willing to support your partner in this even though you'd really rather have your partner stay home and in bed with you."

"Mutuality also lets you factor both people's needs into decisions that you make about your relationship," says Davila. "Let's say you get a great job offer that you'd like to take, but you know it means you will have to work more, and you know how important it is for both you and your partner to spend time together. With a mutual approach, you might say, 'You know, I'd really like to take this job, it's really important to me, but I also am concerned about us spending time together. If I promise to protect some time for us, will you be OK with me taking this job?'"

The third – and final – skill is emotion regulation.

"Emotion regulation is about regulating your feelings in response to things that happen in your relationship," says Davila. "With emotion regulation, you'll be able to keep your emotions calm and to keep things that happen in your relationship in perspective."

Emotion regulation means developing the ability to manage those moments when you might worry or snap. Davila gives the example of waiting for a text back from your partner: "That text isn't coming.

You're getting really anxious. You're checking your phone every two seconds. With emotion regulation, you'll be able to tell yourself, 'You know what? Calm down — the text is going to come. I don't need to check my phone every second. I'm just going to put it away and focus on the task at hand.'"

Emotion regulation is an important skill to have in all of your relationships – romantic and platonic – because it enables you to tolerate uncomfortable feelings while also maintaining self-respect and a commitment to your own needs.

Skill: Learn the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse.

When these are present, the marriage is in trouble. They form a slippery downward slope, starting with **first horseman is Criticism**. Criticizing your partner is different from offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is a personal attack on your partner's character. In effect, you are dismantling their whole being when you criticize. Criticism tends to be generalized, non-specific, and involve blaming and/or shaming. Common phrases include: "you always," "you never," and "here we go again." It can be distinguished from a complaint, which typically begin with "I;" criticisms nearly always begin with "you."

The important thing is to learn the difference between expressing a complaint and criticizing:

- **Complaint:** "I was scared when you were running late and did not call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."
- **Criticism:** "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I do not believe you are that forgetful; you are just selfish. You never think of others! You never think of me!"

Complaints are specific statements of concern, aimed at specific behaviors or issues. They tend to enhance rather than damage relationships. To turn any complaint into a criticism, just add... "you." An effective complaint is one that starts softly, with a request for help, observes an action or behavior, states the impact of that action or behavior, defines the desired change in behavior, and asks for input as to how to achieve the outcome.

Skill: Develop the Ability to Offer a Complaint Instead of a Criticism.

Converting a complaint into a positive need requires a mental transformation from what is wrong with one's partner to what one's partner can do that would work. It may be helpful here to review my belief that within every negative feeling there is a longing, a wish, and, because of that, there is a recipe for success. It is the speaker's job to discover that recipe. The speaker is really saying, "Here's what I feel, and here's what I need from you." Or, in processing a negative event that has already happened, the speaker is saying, "Here's what I felt, and here's what I needed from you."

— John M. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*

The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for another, far deadlier horseman, to follow. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the couple to fall into an escalating pattern where criticism reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity, which eventually leads to contempt.

Contempt is the second horseman. What separates contempt from criticism is intent. When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean—we treat our partner with disrespect, mock them with sarcasm, ridicule, call them names, and mimic or use body language such as eye-rolling or scoffing. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless. Contempt goes far beyond criticism. While

criticism attacks your partner's character hoping to effect change, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them. Examples of contempt include insults, cynicism, sneering, mocking, name-calling, hostility, sarcasm. Most importantly, *contempt is the greatest predictor of divorce*. Gottman refers to contempt as the *single most corrosive behavior in a couple's relationship*. The **antidote** for contempt is to build a culture of appreciation and respect in your relationship. Think of the good things about your partner; do not focus on their flaws. In the same vein, remind yourself of your own imperfections.

Defensiveness is the third horseman, and it is typically a response to criticism. We have all been defensive, and it is always present when relationships are on the rocks. When we feel unjustly accused, we fish for excuses and play the innocent victim so that our partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we do not take their concerns seriously and that we will not take responsibility for our mistakes. People on the defense typically feel attacked, victimized, frustrated, out-gunned, and constantly bombarded by unfair criticism and contempt. Common statements are, "*Leave me alone*" and "*Why are you always picking on me?*" Defensive self-protection closes off meaningful dialog, which means things usually get worse. Examples include denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with negative mind-reading, cross complaining, rubber man (things bounce off me), eye rolling, yes-butting, repeating yourself, and whining.

Although it is perfectly understandable to defend yourself if you are stressed out and feeling attacked, this approach will not have the desired effect. Defensiveness will only escalate the conflict if the critical spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner, and it will not allow for healthy conflict management. The **antidote** for defensiveness is learning to take responsibility for your actions by focusing on your behavior, not the "way" it is being criticized or maligned.

Stonewalling is the fourth horseman, which is usually a response to contempt. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to their partner. Rather than confronting the issues with their partner, people who stonewall make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or distracting behaviors.

It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out," but when it does, it frequently becomes a bad habit. Unfortunately, stonewalling is not easy to stop. It is a result of feeling physiologically flooded (hyperarousal), and when we stonewall, we may not even be in a physiological state where we can discuss things rationally.

Tough Times will be in Your Future if:

- All your disagreements begin with a harsh startup.
- Criticisms rather than complaints are the rule of thumb.
- There are numerous displays of contempt and hair-trigger defensiveness.
- There is a lack of validation (particularly stonewalling).
- Negative body language is present.
- Most disagreements become circular.

When a couple reaches the stonewalling stage, certain consequences occur. Marital problems seem impossible to resolve. Talking things over seems useless, even counterproductive. Couples start trying

to solve problems on their own. They begin leading parallel lives, which is followed by loneliness, resignation, and tuning out. They disengage; resentment and anger become apathy, resulting in discouragement and hopelessness.

Skill: Back from Stonewalling? Do these things.

To move away from stonewalling, do not just focus on the negatives. Consider all the value your relationship has had. The **antidote** to stonewalling is to practice physiological self-soothing (moving out of hyperarousal). The first step of self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion and call a timeout. If you start stonewalling (feeling hopeless, frustrated, vindictive) during a conflict, stop the discussion, and ask your partner to take a break. If you do not take a break, you will find yourself either getting angrier and eventually exploding at your partner or more withdrawn and bottling up your emotions. None of these options are healthy or constructive. So, when you take a break, it should last at least twenty minutes because it will take that long before your body physiologically calms down. It is crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation (*"I don't have to take this anymore"*) and innocent victimhood (*"Why is (s)he always picking on me?"*).

Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting. Relax. Pray. Listen to music. When you re-connect, avoid attacking or withdrawing. Listen. Serve. Forgive. Build back your friendship, slowly and patiently. Practice agape love. See God as the true source of your value and worth.

Skill: Learn Some Simple Ways to Enhance your Relationship

Avoid these self-protective triggers

1. Needing to be right
2. Controlling or coercing your partner
3. Unbridled self-expression
4. Retaliation
5. Withdrawal

Develop these positive strategies

1. Saying respectfully what you want
2. Speaking for repair
3. Listening with compassion
4. Responding with generosity
5. Cherishing your partner

Skill: Avoid This Toxic Marriage Pattern

The **silent treatment** is part of the most common toxic pattern in a relationship. It is linked to anger, sadness, fear, and even threats and aggression. It occurs when one partner stops communicating in response to demands for change from the other. It is most often triggered by topics such as habits, personality, communication, and intimacy. Experts call it the 'demand-withdraw' pattern, since one partner is demanding an issue be resolved, while the other, wanting to avoid it, shuts down communication. Both behaviors damage the relationship. Demanding change causes friction, as does failing to communicate. That is why the tactic is linked to low marital satisfaction, negative emotions, and an inability to resolve conflicts. The antidote is to gradually move toward your partner as you share what you need to feel safe.

Skill: Learn How to Disengage during an argument

Disengaging is easy to understand but tough to do well. It simply means recognizing that a discussion is no longer healthy or effective, and finding a respectful way to take a time-out. The key is to recognize when you are emotionally over-aroused and saying that to your partner.

Skill: Checking In

This is as simple as regularly asking, "How was your day?" "How are you feeling?" "Is there anything you are struggling with?" "Are we doing OK?" This is an intentional way of saying, "I care about you?"

Skill: Learn to Identify and Avoid "Love Busters"

In *Love Busters*, Willard Harley identifies six behaviors that can harm a marriage. Harley defines a love buster as a habit that makes your spouse unhappy and, over time, that they will lose love for you. *If you and your spouse are in the habit of being demanding, disrespectful, angry, dishonest, independent and/or annoying, your marriage is being ruined by Love Busters. I call them Love Busters because they destroy the feeling of love that spouses have for each other. You should do whatever it takes to protect each other from these cruel, yet common, habits that cause untold unhappiness in marriage. By eliminating Love Busters, you will not only be protecting your spouse, but you will also be preserving your spouse's love for you.* -Willard Harley, *Love Busters*

Selfish Demands

Demands carry a threat of punishment. In other words, you may dislike what I want, but if you do not do it, I will make you suffer. People who make demands do not seem to care how others feel. They think only of their own needs. Demands depend on power. They do not work unless the demanding one has the power to make good on his or her threats. But who has power in marriage? Ideally, there is shared power, two people working together to accomplish mutual objectives. But when one spouse starts making demands-along with threats that are at least implied-it is a power play. The wise alternative to selfish demands is thoughtful requests.

Disrespectful Comments

A disrespectful judgment occurs whenever one spouse tries to impose a system of values and beliefs on the other. Often, it is simply a sophisticated way of getting what one spouse wants from the other. In the final analysis, disrespectful judgments represent an effort to force our spouses to give us what we want, but it is often cleverly disguised. Instead of making an outright demand, we present our problem as if it were really our spouse's personal shortcoming. We try to "straighten out" our spouse in an effort to get our way. A wiser choice would be to make a request or disagree respectfully.

Angry Outbursts

When requests do not get what you want from your spouse, demands do not produce results, and disrespect does not work either, your instinct has one more controlling and abusive strategy up its sleeve – angry outbursts. When we are angry, we usually feel that someone is deliberately making us unhappy (by not giving us what we want) and that what he or she is doing just is not fair. In our angry state, we are convinced that reasoning will not work, and that the offender will keep upsetting us until he or she is taught a lesson. Instead of using anger, try creating habits that take the place of demands, disrespect, and anger, so that you can get what you need without being controlling.

Dishonesty

Dishonesty strangles compatibility. To create and sustain compatibility, you must lay your cards on the table. You must be honest about your thoughts, feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history, daily activities, and future plans. When misinformation is part of the mix, you have little hope of making successful adjustments to each other. Dishonesty not only makes solutions hard to find, but it often leaves couples ignorant of the problems themselves. Honesty tends to make our behavior more thoughtful. In an honest relationship, thoughtless acts are usually corrected. Bad habits are nipped in the bud. Honesty keeps a couple from drifting into incompatibility because as incompatible attitudes and behavior are revealed, they can become targets for elimination. But if these attitudes and behaviors remain hidden, they are left to grow out of control.

Independent Behaviors

This involves the conduct of one spouse ignoring the feelings and interests of the other spouse. Independent behavior is a problem in most marriages because we are all tempted to do whatever makes us happy, even when it makes our spouse unhappy. We do not feel the pain our spouse feels when we are inconsiderate — all we feel is the pleasure gained from activities that are only in our best interest. A wise alternative is interdependent behavior, which limits our events or activities to those that benefit both partners simultaneously. You are both happy, and neither of you suffers when you behave interdependently, making decisions with each other's interests and feelings in mind.

Annoying Habits

Your habits and activities define your entire lifestyle. And those habits and activities can either be enjoyable for both of you or enjoyable for only one of you. But how should you go about changing your habits so that they are no longer annoying? It begins with the realization that whenever you do something that bothers your spouse, you are withdrawing love units. Tell each other that eliminating annoying habits is a high priority for both of you. And then ask each other what it is that annoys you the most, write it down, and go to work with a plan to eliminate whatever you find.

Which of these skills do you practice? What is your plan to move forward positively?



Here are a few more skills to master.

- Become a better partner. If one does not change their part in a stuck pattern, no change will occur. Change comes from the bottom up: that is from the person who is in the most pain, or who has the least power, or who has lost or compromised too much in the relationship.
- Focus on the issues at hand. When the focus is on changing one's partner, an opportunity to work together to produce solutions is missed. You are no longer on the same team.
- Take responsibility. We are responsible for how our words and actions make our partner feel. Apologize to your partner by taking responsibility for the problem, even just a small piece, and this will validate their feelings, promote forgiveness, and allow you both to move on.
- Complain vs. criticize. Criticism is one of The Four Horsemen that predicts divorce. It is different from offering a critique or voicing a complaint. A criticism attacks the core of a person's character while a complaint focuses on a specific behavior.
- Understand the gap. There are always gaps and healthy people get that. There is a gap between knowing and doing, promising, and keeping, deciding, and acting. Gaps exist because change nearly always is an inside job that gets reflected in outside (visible, quantifiable) behavior. Few things in life are as simple as "flipping a switch." Every change has an emotional component and is securely attached to a habit that has been "perfected" over the years until it is invisible and out of awareness.

Once you understand this, you will be ready to accept one of the most surprising truths about marriage: Most marital arguments cannot be resolved. Couples spend year after year trying to change each other's mind – but it can't be done. This is because most of their disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences of lifestyle, personality, or values. By fighting over these differences, all they succeed in doing is wasting their time and harming their marriage."

-John M. Gottman, The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work

While your character flaws may have created mild problems for other people, they will create major problems for your spouse and your marriage.

— Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

How to Improve Communication

An open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart.

– David Augsburger

Lack of communication is the number one complaint we hear from couples. While this may suggest deeper issues, there are plenty of couples who do not communicate well.

Listening is the #1 Marriage Survival Tool.

Before you can respond to your partner, you must listen carefully, with both your head and your heart. Being fully present when your partner is talking is one of the greatest gifts you can give. Practice active listening, and do not interrupt. It is important that you hear what your spouse is truly saying. This is not just the words, but the meaning and feelings beneath the words. Remember, you cannot listen and be forming a clever response at the same time. The Bible reminds us, *“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry for a man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”* (James 1:19)

Practice: **“What I heard you say...” “Is this what you meant?” “This is what I am trying to say...”**

Common to all unhealthy communication patterns is *self-protection*. The antidote is respect for yourself and your spouse. Here is the pattern: When fear can be conquered and healthy respect for self and spouse developed, then communication can be healthy and congruent. Fear leads to self-protection, anger, and blame. If you want to have meaningful connections, both of you must learn to overcome your fear and share your most private selves in a healthy manner.

Tool: “I-Message”

“I-messages” are a healthy method for sharing your inner experience of a situation. It avoids blaming and takes the focus (blame) off the receiver, putting the responsibility on the sender. For example, “I am beginning to take responsibility for myself when I can let you know what I am feeling in a particular situation.” It can be used even if the other party does not.

The opposite of an “I” message is a “You” message. Starting a conversation with “you” almost always puts the other person on the defensive. It tends to communicate hostility and blame and puts the focus on the other person. An “I-Message” not only avoids escalation of a quarrel.

How to create an “I-message”:

- Describe the behavior affecting you (without blaming).
- State the feeling you have in response to this behavior.
- Describe the consequence this behavior might have for you (without blaming).
- Stress the word “because.” This helps by connecting feeling and consequence elements of the message. It minimizes blame and keeps the focus on you.

Examples of I-messages:

“When you talk to me that way, I feel hurt and discounted because I think I do not matter to you.”

“When you called me from the office today, I felt loved and important to you, because you thought about me.”

“When you forget to record the checks in the checkbook, I feel irritated and concerned, because I have no way of knowing how much is left. We could overdraw.”

Five Don'ts of Healthy Communication

Let every detail in your lives – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way. Colossians 3:17 MSG

Do not always have a bigger story.

Your spouse is telling you their story, and their experience reminds you of your experience. So, naturally, you interrupt their story (or do not appear to be listening closely) because you want to share your story. But remember, right now they are sharing “their” experience. It is important enough to them to share it with you. Do not try to trump their story. It is rude, and it shuts your spouse down.

Do not talk more than you listen.

If this is you, stop talking and listen. Ask questions. Show genuine concern. Be interested in what your spouse is saying. Give 100% of your attention.

Do not always be negative.

All of us are negative at times. Marriage is tough. That is what partners do; they share each other's burdens. But every conversation and every comment we make should not be negative. It makes it difficult to sustain a healthy marriage.

Do not consistently have the last word.

Sure, you have got one more word to share. Most likely you have already proven that point. However, sometimes you should let your spouse have the final word. It is humbling for you, and it is good for both of you. It is about the relationship, not just this conversation.

Do not speak before you think.

This is so important. If we could catch our words before they exited our mouths, filter them through the power of love and grace, and then release them, we could keep from injuring those we love. Your marriage could thrive apart from the injury of inappropriate or awkward - often even mean-spirited words.

Simple Strategy

Keep it clear. Couples who can be clear about their underlying needs are far more likely to experience positive outcomes.

Keep it soft. Communicate “softly,” without being highly aggressive, contemptuous, or insulting. You will get more positive, rather than negative, responses.

Keep it safe. Create an environment of safety, mutual care, and validation.

Keep it positive. The amount of positive affect partners show one another, especially during conflict situations, is highly predictive of happy and stable relationships.

Keep it real. Honesty and transparency are the dynamics of intimacy. Relationships cannot grow without open and honest expression of feelings, wants, and needs.



Understand the Levels of Communication

In *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am*, John Powell suggests that we communicate on at least five different levels, from superficial to deeply personal and honest. Unfortunately, most couples tend to stay

at the shallow end of communication. However, with practice, we can move to deeper, more transformational levels of communicating. This is important because intimacy, which holds relationships together, occurs only at the deeper levels. One of our strongest needs is to be fully known (flaws included) and fully loved.

Level Five: Cliché. This is the safest level of communication since there is little or no personal sharing. Everyone is comfortably behind his or her mask. At this level, communication is never transformational and seldom intentional. Core personal or relational needs are not addressed. Examples of level five sharing include, "How's the weather?" "How is it going?" "I'm fine."

Level Four: Reporting the facts. This level involves minimal sharing. Facts about other people are reported with no personal commentary; much like the news on TV. Examples of level four sharing include, "The Rockies are in town." "Looks like it may rain this weekend." "The neighbors are going on vacation next week."

Level Three: Sharing my ideas and opinions. This is where any real communication begins. Unfortunately, this is also where communication ends for most couples. At this level, a person is willing to give a little more of him or herself. Risk-taking increases slightly. This is where couples begin to find out if it is safe to be vulnerable with one another. Examples of level three sharing include, "I don't think we talk often enough." "We need to go out more often."

Level Two: Sharing my feelings, values, and emotions. It is at this level that sharing of a personal self begins. "The real me is now peeking out to see if it is safe to share." If a person senses a safe response – shared feelings in return – then communication will progress, and personal sharing will occur. Masks begin to come off. Examples of level two sharing include, "It really hurts my feelings when you forget our anniversary." "We don't have fun like we used to." "I am sad." "I am lonely." "I am unhappy."

Level One: Complete emotional and personal truthful communication. This is the level of confessional or transformational sharing that is only spoken in safe relationships. Here are the hopes and fears I may speak only with God. This is the place of deep speaking to deep, of truth-telling and vulnerability. The authentic self, with no mask, is finally present at this level. "I will share this only with someone I trust, someone with whom I have a "grace" relationship." Examples of level one sharing include, "I am struggling with my faith." "I have a need for more intimacy." "I don't have any real friends." "I am struggling with an addiction." **Getting to the last 2 levels will take time, effort, and a certain amount of stretching and discomfort. This is where real intimacy, the kind we all long for, exists.**

The most important thing in communication is hearing what is not being said. The art of reading between the lines is a lifelong quest of the wise.

-Shannon L. Alder

Learning to communicate in marriage isn't solved by applying a magic potion – it's a path of discovery. We individually bring into our married lives, different temperaments, and various "styles" of communicating (and not communicating). Some are learned from our past family backgrounds and experiences, and some ways of communicating we just learned on our own as a single person. What's important, as you enter into marriage, is that you learn how to communicate as a "couple." You're no longer one person making everyday decisions and choices. You're now both part of a team and you need to proceed through the rest of your married lives as a team.

-Author Unknown

Work on Solving Problems Together

Conflict can be thought of as an obstacle one might meet on the road of life. The problem-solver finds a way to ease past the obstacle and then continues down the road. By contrast, depressed individuals give up on going where they had been heading. Anxious individuals stand by the obstacle without figuring out what to do. Angry people attack anyone associated with the obstacle. And those who are avoidant escape, turning away from the problem altogether.
-Susan Heitler, *From Conflict to Resolution*

We tend to adopt one of four unhealthy styles when attempting to solve problems or deal with conflict, we freeze and become immobilized, we submit, giving up what we want, we escape, fleeing from any form of conflict or we attack the other person to gain what we want. Common to all four strategies is the idea that one wins and the other loses. All four can cause emotional pain, yield no healthy solutions, satisfy one party at the expense of the other and typically result in identifiable symptoms like anxiety, depression, or addiction. Which are you?

Immobilizers: High anxiety; “freeze” vs. flee or fight

Immobilizers view pending conflict as a red flag of danger. As the perceived danger gets closer, their anxiety level rises. As anxiety rises, they “freeze,” unable to say or do anything, hoping the threat will simply disappear. Although the threats will subside over time, since the issues are never dealt with, anxiety tends to remain high. Anxiety becomes chronic if, instead of taking action, the individual remains immobilized. Immobilization increases anxiety, action reduces it.

Immobilizing exists in many forms:

- low self-esteem, inferiority
- inadequacy, insecurity
- pleasing, worry
- fear, shame
- guilt, tension
- nervous habits, somatic symptoms, etc.

Immobilizers typically display four anxious thinking patterns: The first is minimization—underestimating their own personal resources. The second is selective abstraction—focusing only on perceived weaknesses. Next is magnification or viewing each personal flaw (no matter how small) as a gaping hole. Finally, catastrophizing—seeing minor problems as major catastrophes.

Submitters: Fearful, depressed, learned helplessness

Some individuals have learned to give in to avoid conflict. Giving up what one wants is usually accompanied by feelings of resignation and negativity toward self, others and the future. Submitters typically feel helpless or powerless to affect change, so they learn to “just go along” with things to keep the peace. In doing so, they lower their aspirations and settle for less. This is a learned response, typically from childhood. Trauma, abuse, or a domineering parent could be the seed of this approach to conflict. In a relationships, we commonly find a dominant-submissive pattern, where one side is insistent and the other gives up.

Common expressions of submission

- agreeing just to end conflict
- helplessness, hopelessness
- martyrdom, perfectionism
- “walking on eggshells”
- passivity, co-dependency
- depression, suicide

Attackers: Coercion, fight, control

Attackers are fueled by a need to block out feelings of vulnerability. Anger is used to control others and to suppress “weak” feelings. Rage and anger are very energizing and action producing. Individuals who utilize attack never consider that they might have even a small part in the problem; it is always the other person’s fault. They believe the problem will only improve or be resolved if they impose their will (solution) on the other party, no matter what approach they must use.

Common attack methods:

- demands, manipulation
- criticism, blame
- sarcasm, accusations
- “you-statements”
- coercion, threats, abuse
- violence, intimidation

Escapers: Flee, denial, addiction

These are individuals who feel powerless or overwhelmed and flee from potential conflict situations. Escape can take many forms, both physical and emotional. Some individuals will flee the relationship entirely. Others will escape via various addictions. Escape is a solution for fear. Commons forms of escape:

- work
- exercise, traveling
- excessive TV viewing
- suicide
- obsessive-compulsive behaviors, denial, social withdrawal
- walking out of room
- refusing to talk

These four approaches never lead to healthy relationships or to the satisfactory resolution of an issue. The final (healthy) approach to conflict is to honestly and openly share needs and concerns, and then search for mutually agreeable, “good enough” solutions. Solving problems effectively is a cooperative process between people who are committed to one another and to the relationship.

Steps That Will Facilitate Effective Problem Solving:

The first step in solving marital problems is to see the problem as an issue and not a person.

-Kevin Thompson

1. Pray for peace, wisdom, cooperation and patience.
2. Honestly acknowledge that a conflict exists; one or both of you have unmet core needs.
3. Focus on solutions, not on the problem, and not on the other person. View the problem as an issue and not as a person. Look for common ground. Agree to problem solve together – both agreeing to commit to the process.
4. Look for the question underneath the problems. For example, *Do you really love me? Do you need me? Am I valued by you? Do my feelings or opinions matter?* See the problem as a need for healthier intimate connections.
5. Adopt an attitude of equality – your needs and values are just as important as mine. Embrace one another as valuable and worthwhile. Listen carefully to each other. Agree that the relationship is far more important than the issue at hand. Stay focused on current needs and the issue at hand.
6. Understand that any solution that makes one of us deny who we are is not a viable solution.
7. Allow emotions, even strong emotions, to be a part of our process. Emotions tell us about our values and needs. Express feelings honestly and respectfully.

8. Set aside quality time to talk – undistracted, uncommitted time. Clarify and simplify the issues – one subject at a time.
9. “Dig down” below surface needs to find the true tensions (needs) motivating each person at this moment. Confirm that each person clearly understands their own true needs and their partner’s true needs, and that each values the other’s needs equally.
10. Generate solutions both of you feel good about. Celebrate the process.



PRACTICE:

Which form of problem solving do you use the most? Do you freeze, attack, escape or submit? Why? How will you improve? How can you help each other?

How can you better use the 10-step problem solving process?

Conflict that is mismanaged can destroy a marriage. It can turn the whole relationship into a battleground where the only winners are sure to be eventual losers – and the losers are sure to be filled with resentment. If the couple decides to eliminate all conflict in the name of maintaining peace, there will be a terrible price to pay. The individuals’ uniqueness is likely to become more and more repressed and stifled. They will develop a mask to hide their frustration. This kind of relationship is bound to become cold and distant.

-Neil Clark Warren, The Triumphant Marriage

When you get married, your spouse is a big truck driving right through your heart. Marriage brings out the worst in you. It doesn’t create your weaknesses (though you may blame your spouse for your blow-ups) – it reveals them. This is not a bad thing, though. How can you change into your “glory-self” if you assume that you’re already pretty close to perfect as it is?

-Tim Keller, the Meaning of Marriage

Ok, Let's Talk Tools

What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility.
–Leo Tolstoy

Tools are simply skills that will help you better navigate the challenges of marriage.

Understand and Regulate Your Arousal Level

This is about anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. There are three levels of arousal: Hyperarousal, Hypoarousal and Optimal Arousal (most productive).

Hyperarousal is the state of being constantly on guard. It functions as a mechanism of self-defense, a way of spotting potential dangers from people or the environment. Hyperarousal creates too much energy and intensity for learning, listening, communicating, or problem solving. It can make a person who has experienced trauma hyperalert and prepared to overreact. It puts the brain and body on constant high alert. This can impact a person's mental and physical health, lifestyle, and relationships in a negative way. Being easily triggered to a state of hyperarousal can be a sign of past trauma and remaining in this state can lead to re-traumatization.

Symptoms include:

- High energy: anger, anxiety, extreme excitement
- Too much energy for learning, listening, communicating, or effective problem solving
- Cortisol released; inhibits release of oxytocin (empathy)
- Flooding and gridlock
- Chronic hyperarousal can lead to physical symptoms

Hyperarousal severely limits one's ability to:

Process information	Love and be affectionate	Solve even simple conflicts
Listen; be attentive	Be empathetic or	Be rational
Laugh; find humor in things	compassionate	Be open to solutions
	Be creative	Control emotions

Hypoarousal is very low energy: withdrawal, numbing, depression, spacing out, shutting down. There is not enough energy, attention, or presence to engage fully with others.

In *Optimal arousal* we think, decide, hear, listen, and learn best. We manage hard things, like differences, best in optimal arousal. We make connections best and are more tuned in, patient, empathetic, and compassionate in optimal arousal.

How to self-regulate. Self-regulation is the ability to maintain or return to optimal arousal. In fact, marriage expert Dr. John Gottman calls self-regulation the most important interpersonal skill. Here are two tips.

- Stop the action: when you sense that the intensity of a conversation is starting to rise, pay attention to your arousal level and say something like, "Can we stop for a moment and check inside?"
- Identify clues: Think about what is going on in your mind and body when you are moving to hyperarousal? "Jaw getting tense?" "Stomach hurting?" "Oh no, here we go again?" When you sense any of these, call a time-out

Strengthen your Commitment

Commitment is defined as the conscious decision to live with each other and to maintain a relationship over time in spite of the difficulties that may arise. In *Choices*, Mary Farrar writes, "We can measure our oneness by the loving commitment we have for each other – emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically. Loving commitment is glue that cements us into one flesh." Some practical ways to strengthen commitment include being available for

each other, honoring special occasions, establishing meaningful traditions, remembering good times, keeping your promises, speaking of your spouse positively, and praying together.

Know your Partner's Love Language

In *The Five Love Languages*, Dr. Gary Chapman identifies five: Quality Time, Touch, Gifts, Acts of Service, and Words of Affirmation. Do not just learn your partner's love language; become an expert. How? Ask questions, pay attention, notice what they enjoy, and listen attentively when they speak of times when they felt loved. To keep it simple, which of these does your spouse's language most resemble: "Touch Me," "Tell Me," or "Show Me." Key: most of us love with our love language, instead of our spouse's. Teach each other how you "like to be loved."

Are you a Pursuer or a Distancer?

Pursuers are the relationship thermometers. Their systems are usually quite aware of feeling disconnected, even if it is a tiny moment. Disconnection sends a danger signal to their brain, and they want to immediately resolve that bad feeling. Distancers typically suppress and numb out bad feelings, and particularly bad feelings they do not feel they can fix or solve. Distancers rarely voice complaints or start a fight; they stuff.

Communication Tools

Focused attention

Over time, we can become inattentive to our spouse's needs and take opportunities for communication for granted. To solve this, become intentional about connecting by making direct eye contact, shutting down distractions, and by initiating conversations about your spouse's concerns instead of waiting for him or her to bring them up.

Clear expectations

Get in the habit of clarifying meaning early in each conversation. Ask questions like: "So you prefer a relaxing vacation. What does 'relaxing' look like to you?" "Sure, I have a minute. Or if we need longer than that, may we connect in a half hour instead?"

Second questions

During a conversation, it is easy to be focused on forming your reply rather than listening to seek understanding. Instead, develop a curiosity about what is under the surface of your spouse's statements. So, listen for feeling, then ask a second question to explore what your spouse has said, it demonstrates caring and builds trust. "So, what were you feeling when your boss took credit for your work?" "You said that was one of the best books you have ever read. What about the book affected you the most?"

Gratitude

Couples often can get in a habit of focusing on the negative and ignoring the positive, which can feel like being constantly nagged at. Catch your partner doing some little thing and offer your appreciation. Being grateful is the mindset that turns us from negative to positive. Sharing what you are grateful for can lift yours and you are partner's spirits.

HALT Rule

A well-known rule about talking; simply means do not bring up really hard topics or those that require a good deal of time and attention if one or both is Hungry, Angry, Ill (not feeling well) or Tired.

Learn to Repair and Exit an Argument

Repair refers to ways you can de-escalate a situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Repair examples include humor, offering a caring remark, making it clear you are on the same side or offering signs of appreciation for your partner and their feelings along the way. If an argument gets too heated, take a 20-minute break, and agree to approach the topic again when you are both calm.

Soft/Hard/Soft

Harsh startups can ruin a conversation. If you have some important but hard things to say, start with something soft, then say the hard thing, but with soft energy and follow up with another soft statement. Examples of soft: express love and caring, give positive feedback, own your part, attribute positive intentions.

Make Requests, not Criticisms or Attacks

Attacks require rebuttals and result in defensiveness. Requests are much easier to hear. Example: *You never make time for me* (criticism). *I would love some time alone with you* (request).

I Messages

Generally speaking, I messages foster more closeness and less defensiveness than the "You Messages." Especially the dreaded, "You always..." or "You never..." Work on starting sentences with "I feel" own your stuff.

Five to One Ratio

After 40+ years of research with couples, marriage expert Dr. John Gottman finds that in the happiest, healthiest relationships, positive moments outweigh negative ones by a five to one ratio.

Have an "early warning" detector.

Many of us "telegraph" when we are struggling or have a problem (silence, sulking, one-word answers). So, learn to verbalize your early warnings and share. *"I have been acting irritable."* *"I have been feeling emotionally distant."* *"There has been a lot of tensions between us."* *"I have been feeling lonely."* *"I have been angry."* *"We haven't communicated very well"* *"We have been fighting more than usual"* *"Lately, small issues seem to escalate."* *"There hasn't been much fun or joy in our lives."*



How will you use these tools? Which is easiest, hardest for you?

What can make a marriage work is surprisingly simple. Happily, married couples aren't smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others. But in their day-to-day lives, they have hit upon a dynamic that keeps their negative thoughts and feelings about each other (which all couples have) from overwhelming their positive ones. They have what I call an emotionally intelligent marriage.

-John Gottman and Nan Silver, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

What Helps a Marriage Work?

Perhaps the worst thing about attempting to change your mate is that those attempts can create an unsafe place for your marriage to thrive. And in time your mate will erect walls to ward off your continued push toward change. Trying to change your mate can make your marriage worse and increase its chance of failure. You have the freedom and responsibility to change yourself and how you react.

-Gary Smalley

Happily, married couples do not have less conflict or tensions, but they are better able to repair them before they get out of hand (before negative feelings override positive ones). In the strongest marriages, partners have a common sense of meaning. This means they support each other's dreams and aspirations. Bad news: most marital arguments cannot be "fixed" or resolved. Many couples try to change each other's minds, which is most often futile. The key is to manage our differences and not give those differences too much power.

Great marriages are based on deep friendship; knowing each other's likes, dislikes, quirks, hopes, and dreams. They do not necessarily have less conflict or tension, but they are better able to repair it before it gets out of hand. Partners have a common sense of meaning. They support each other's aspirations and dreams. They turn toward, rather than away from, one another.

Important Predictors of Marriage Success

Grace when dealing with problems. Healthy couples do not allow arguments to be all-consuming or damaging. They are more apt to begin a discussion softly and to convey an issue in terms of what they need and what they feel, rather than by pointing out a character flaw of the other person. They are also more likely to attempt to repair problems in the relationship, or in a disagreement more quickly.

Responding to bids for attention. There are "sliding door" moments; interactions when couples have two choices to make. Each choice leads to a different outcome. Sliding door moments are bids for attention. It is where one member of a relationship is seeking out the other. One choice, to turn away from the partner, may hurt the relationship. The other choice, to turn into the partner's bid for attention, will build closeness, attunement, and intimacy in the relationship.

Talking through perpetual issues. Only about 30% of a couples disagreements are resolvable. This means the majority of conflicts were about perpetual problems, about dreams for the future, preferences, temperaments, and personality. Perpetual issues involve lots of conversations and lots of listening. Happy couples used the following to keep perpetual conversations positive. First, active listening. Next, "soft" start-ups. The next tool was effective repair attempts, ways to repair damage done by a careless or selfish remark. Finally, positive affect, emotions that communicate love, commitment, and respect. So, some tips would be to keep a sense of humor and be sensitive to a partners needs and desires. Dialogue verses attack is necessary to avoid "gridlock" in conflicts (getting stuck).

See issues as situational joint problems. Happy couples presented issues as joint problems, and specific to one situation. Unhappy couples, on the other hand, presented issues as if they were symptoms of global defects in the partner's personality. Instead of blaming a spouse for feelings of irritability and disappointment, happy couples express how they feel, but then identify their needs, gently and respectfully. They focus on what the other is doing right and acknowledge that first. They recognize that they too are imperfect and so do not expect gratitude for their complaints.

Successful repair attempts. No one is perfect. After years of spending time with someone, they are bound to get on one's nerves from time to time, and vice versa. This is actually a good thing. It helps us to identify areas of

weakness and remain humble through seeking correction. The goal in a relationship is not to avoid these conflict situations, but rather to process the damage done and make repairs. This point of repair is so crucial. Saying sorry alone is never enough. Happy couples work together to identify problem areas, take responsibility, and apologize for those specifics, and ask what they can do to make it up to their partner. Repairs also help maintain the positive balance in the relationship.

Remaining calm during conflict. Once adrenaline and cortisol are flooding our bodies, we are rendered incapable of rational, empathetic conversation. This is called hyperarousal. Healthy couples learn techniques and skills to identify their arousal level and to self-soothe. The key is noticing when tempers begin to rise and calling a timeout, praying, holding hands, or injecting humor into the situation. This serves to stop the negativity and de-escalate the situation.

Accept influence from your spouse. Influence means respecting your partner's viewpoint and being willing to discuss issues. For men, this means agreeing to try approaches suggested by their partner instead of withdrawing, surrendering, or jumping in with a premature resolution at the first sign of conflict. It is not mere compliance; it is not that she always gets her way. Approximately 40 percent of the time, when a woman mentions an issue, men have no clue what she is talking about. The key is to resist the pattern of turning down every request a partner makes. Accepting influence means looking at a partner's point of view, and allowing their way, as long as it is not immoral. This means stretching our comfort zone and reeling in our pride and ego.



Ways to Increase the Positives in Your Relationship

Show interest

Show your partner that you are listening. Pay attention to your partner. Are you interested in what your partner is saying? Are you showing him or her that you are really listening?

Show affection

There are many ways of showing your affection to your partner. Hold hands, sit together while watching TV, tell each other, "I love you." These are all small ways to be affectionate. You can also do thoughtful things for each other, such as helping with chores.

Show your care and concern

Caring acts can take many forms. You could buy your partner his or her favorite ice cream while on an errand. You could take time in your busy day to write a short e-mail, leave a phone message, or write a note. If your partner is worried about something, express your concern. You can also show your concern by giving your partner a hug. Let your partner know that it matters to you when he or she is worried or concerned.

Be appreciative

Think about what you liked and appreciated about your partner when you first met him. Recall the ways in which you did things for each other that were helpful and caring. Encourage positive memories of your partner. Let your partner know what you appreciate. Thank him or her for what he or she does for you. Compliment your partner. Point out the positives that you genuinely appreciate.

Listen so you can understand

Show your partner when you really understand. Verbal and nonverbal expressions can show your partner that you are listening and understanding. Tell him or her how you understand his or her perspective. Listen carefully and completely to your partner before conveying your understanding. Express your understanding when you

really do understand. Show your partner that you are trying to understand him or her by being a good listener and by not giving advice too quickly.

Be accepting

Sometimes you may disagree with your partner. You may not always like or agree with what he or she is saying. However, you can still respect your partner. You accept what he or she has to say, and you can let your partner know you think it is important.

Lighten things up

Be playful, joke, and enjoy each other's company. Use jokes and playful teasing as long as it is not hostile or sarcastic towards your partner. Sharing your memories with your partner about when you first met can be a way to enjoy each other's company. Keep things light sometimes. Find ways to spend time together that is fun for both of you.

Express gratitude

Expressing gratitude on a regular basis can help you appreciate your partner rather than taking his or her small favors or kind acts for granted. That boost in appreciation strengthens your relationship over time. Experts believe that demonstrating positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, pride, and inspiration directly impacts marriage satisfaction.

Aim for more positive interactions

How can you tell if the magic ratio (5 to 1) in your relationship is unbalanced? Pay attention to how you and your partner interact with each other. For every negative interaction that takes place between you and your partner, are there several positive interactions? More positive feelings and actions can lead to happier, more stable, and connected relationships.

*Things don't change in a marriage until the spouse who is taking responsibility for a problem that is **not** his or hers decides to say or do something about it.*

– Henry Cloud and John Townsend

You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God. And ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.

— John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping*

To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it.

–Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

Breaking Old Relationship Patterns

It takes three to make love, not two: you, your spouse, and God. Without God people only succeed in bringing out the worst in one another. Lovers who have nothing else to do but love each other soon find there is nothing else. Without a central loyalty life is unfinished.

— Fulton J. Sheen

Everyone brings baggage into his or her relationships. Abuse, neglect, rejection, childhood issues—each has the potential to affect a relationship. How we deal with that baggage and the triggers baggage inevitably carries can be difficult, especially if those triggers and the feelings they evoke are hard to understand. It feels like the other person is pushing our buttons on purpose. Spoiler alert — they are not.

First, Work on You!

Accept that healing yourself is a prerequisite to healing your relationship. It was *never* your job to take over another person's behaviors, or emotional life, as if they were a fix-it project. When you do, both the fixer and fixed suffer the consequences of getting into "power struggles" that seem to have no end. At best, these struggles can stunt emotional growth. At worst, they build resentment. In either case, there is far more heat than light. It sends several messages that can be very discouraging. These messages communicate that you do not value them as a person, or that you do not value their ability to do their own thinking or their capacity to master and manage upsetting emotions. Meanwhile, reminders, angry outbursts, silent treatment, shame, guilt, intimidating putdowns, etc., do not work *in the long run* — except to make things worse. You cannot fix your partner, or control what they feel or do, any more than they can fix or control you. You can, however, affect huge changes by being *a calming presence* from within. This might be where you and God need to do some work.

The more you *try to force change*, the more this activates your partner's emotional defenses. As a result, neither of you are open to the influence of the other. No one likes being someone's fix-it project. God created us with inborn urges to seek to be accepted for the unique value and contributions we bring to life. These are core *emotional drives*.

In a healthy relationship, partners can offer thoughtful, useful feedback. In toxic patterns, most feedback falls by the wayside *because of how it is delivered or received*. Neither heart is open, and when the heart is closed, so is the mind.

Safe to say, the intense focus you or your partner has on fixing one another (rather than healing yourself) is one of the main problems in your relationship. Any notions that you *should, can, or must* control or fix the other are illusions, perpetuated by romanticized ideals. Your efforts to fix your partner's behaviors or feelings about you, or change a situation, etc., are *the cause* of much discontent, resistance, and suffering. It has also been a way to avoid a life task awaiting you: healing yourself. To heal your relationship, or to be a healing influence on your partner, it requires *an inside job of healing you*. In other words, you cannot do the emotional work for your partner; however, you can *calm your own mind and heart* in challenging situations and allow miracles (God doing His work in you) to happen.

It is simply not possible to change or to heal others against their will, just as it is not possible to "control" what another thinks and feels. You *can*, however, heal yourself, respond in healthy ways, and learn to love and fully accept yourself, honor your needs, aspirations, and life. By doing so, you will increase the chances of healing your relationship, and the possibility of inspiring your partner to engage in their own healing work. You can bring a calming presence to a situation that would create the necessary conditions for personal healing to take place. Is it easy? No. Is it essential and worthwhile? Yes. It can make the difference between living merely to survive and living to thrive. To break free of toxic relating patterns and restore balance, accept the following bottom lines that govern the making of healthy relationships:

- God is the only ultimate Healer.

- You cannot (and should not) fix your partner's behaviors or emotional states.
- You cannot do the work that is theirs to do - learning to stretch in order to love courageously with their whole heart.
- Your focus on fixing or healing one another (instead of yourselves) can become the main problem.
- Your attempts to fix the other with angry outbursts, pleading, intimidation, guilt, shame, etc., are, and have been, the cause of much suffering.
- Healing your relationship *with yourself* is prerequisite to healing your couple relationship.

So, What Can You Do?

Become Aware of your Triggers

What are the external circumstances and internal experiences that triggered the start-up of your unhealthy pattern? When you can identify these, you can catch them early on and stop yourself from escalating into a fight. Triggers typically have been with you for a long time. They are feelings that come easily and are felt deeply. It usually feels like the other person purposely did or said something to push a button in you.

Change your Mindset

There is no going around it-what you think *will* become your reality. We all picked up beliefs from well-intentioned people around us while growing up, and they form most of our internal dialogue. Some of these beliefs might serve us, but some might be quite detrimental. Take an inventory of the top negative beliefs you have on repeat in your mind. Then rewrite these beliefs in a positive way and create a plan to act on them. This is about more than just saying affirmations; it is about being consistent, setting your intentions, and taking action.

Example Old belief: I am not good enough, and I cannot be happy. New belief: I am good enough, and happiness is a choice.

After flipping your negative belief, say the new belief with emotion, write it down, and display it in places where you will see it regularly. Next, visualize what being good enough means to you. How does it make you feel? Have a clear image. Lastly, take action. How does a person who is good enough act? Act as that person now and aim to do this consistently.

Get Comfortable with 'Uncomfortable' Feelings

Many events that cause stress in a relationship, such as dealing with key issues or one another's requests, are healthy and essential. Some couples expect to arrive at a place where, once and for all, there are no more painful emotions of fear or anger, they stop upsetting each other, they perfectly trust one another, and they meet one another's needs in perfect timing. That seldom happens. In truth, life and relationships are challenging; that is how we grow. God designed us to grow and mature through interaction with others.

Strengthen Intimacy

To strengthen emotional intimacy requires each partner to stretch and to grow, and thus to become increasingly comfortable with emotions that are *uncomfortable*. Emotions of vulnerability are inherent in forming intimacy. They are essential to growing the capacity to love courageously in moments when partners face their greatest fears (inadequacy, rejection, abandonment, etc.).

These core fears are connected to emotional drives, such as the drive to matter, to be valued for who we are, to meaningfully connect to a loved one, and so on. These urges directly impact our sense of safety, which leads to building a trusting love-connection with our partner. So, we need to learn how to "get comfortable" with the vulnerable feelings associated with loving and being loved imperfectly, giving, and receiving imperfectly. Part

of this is remaining empathically connected to compassion for self and the other in moments of being triggered. Facing your fears is a way to heal.

When partners remain open to responding out of compassion rather than fear, this stretches and strengthens their confidence and critical ability to feel feelings of vulnerability without being triggered by them. Each needs the courage and confidence to stay connected to their feelings of safety and love, and not get triggered by any feelings of insecurity and fear. An essential aspect of getting comfortable with uncomfortable feelings is growing your awareness and understanding of yourself, body, and mind. It is helpful to identify any toxic beliefs and replace them with life enriching options. You have options. When you feel fearful or anxious, stop, breathe, and become aware of what emotions you are feeling. Then assess what action (helpful, caring, or restorative) *you* can take to restore peace and calm.



Experiencing strong emotions from time to time is just part of life. Avoid keeping your feelings bottled up inside and avoid doing the extreme opposite – blasting another with your feelings. Here are some tools.

Discover How you Invite your Partner into Conflict

A common reason we end up in unhealthy relationship patterns is because we cannot see that we actually *invite and encourage* the pattern by the things we say and do to our partner. If we were aware of this, we would not keep doing them and ending up in arguments. When each of you sees how you perpetuate your pattern, you can make new choices about what you say and do in the heat of the moment, and steer the conversation into new, safer waters.

Look for the Lesson in Everything so that you can Heal and Move On

We have all had experiences where the same things keep happening over and over with different people and situations. That is a message that something needs to be done on *our* part. Once the lesson is learned, we can break the pattern.

Know What you Want

In a nutshell, do not settle – period! What is it you want? What qualities are you looking for? How do you want to be treated? Want to know what the trick is to get it? *Be* all those things. Others are mirrors to us.

Uncover Each Other's Positive Intention

Your partner's intention in conflict is rarely to hurt you, but rather it is a reaction to his or her own fears or pain. However, in the heat of the moment, it can be hard to remember that. So, when the two of you are feeling connected, we recommend sitting together and sharing what you are *thinking* and *feeling* when you get triggered. See if you discover the positive outcome that you are attempting to achieve (albeit in an unhealthy way) by entering the pattern.

Name the Unhealthy Patterns

A switch seems to flick ON in the brain when we name something. It becomes OURS to own. When we name our patterns, we *own* them and can *recognize* them more easily. There is a pattern called the “Knife Dance” because people feel like they have been stabbed in the back and/or stabbed in the heart. Once you **have** identified, understood, interrupted, and named your negative relationship pattern, the final step is to stand

together and unite as lovers fighting the onset of the pattern instead of fighting each other. Being on the same team during conflict is so much more fun!

Own All your Behavior

The best way to make any change is to take responsibility for where your life is right now, owning it so you can improve it on *your* terms. When we do this, we go from waiting for change to happen to initiating change within ourselves, because that is where any real change takes place. We are back in the driver's seat, creating our life, versus reacting to life situations.

Learn How to Receive

The most important relationship we will ever have is the one with God, then the one with ourselves. It is not by mistake that Jesus told us to love God and our neighbor (spouse) as we love ourselves. Making this a priority does not take anything away, but rather it adds more happiness and confidence to our lives. God, through His Spirit, is at work in each of us - to calm our fears, help us love genuinely, forgive generously, and speak the truth in love. The Creator of the universe says that you have value and worth and that you were worth His own son dying on a cross for you. Start to live like you believe that.

In marriage it is never about not falling, it is always about getting back up.

- Dr Emerson Eggerichs

Some dilemmas aren't meant to be 'fixed.' All problems aren't meant to be 'smoothed.' The solutions we see sometimes come for living through them. We spin intricate webs until we have no way around them. We can escape the situation we've created (temporarily), but we can't escape ourselves. Our self-made crises are custom-tailored, painstakingly crafted, and always fit perfectly. We construct emotional knots until, eventually, we are willing to go through them.

- David Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage*

Learn your Unique Relationship Fear Dance

The external problem is rarely the real problem.

-Gary Smalley, *The DNA of Relationships*

In *The DNA of Relationships*, Gary Smalley, shares that our core fears underlie most relationship problems. Many women have a core fear related to disconnection – they fear not being heard, not being valued, somehow losing the love of another. Many men have a core fear of helplessness or feeling controlled – they fear failure or getting stepped on. Below Smalley shares his fear dance, which he says is universal to all relationships.

Typical fear dance

It goes something like this: *I have fears (known but mostly unknown). We interact (fight, argue, blame). The current issue is not the real problem; it is my/our CORE fears. I get triggered and feel an all-too-common feeling or set of feelings. I personalize the interaction (how it makes me feel about myself). To feel better, deny, eliminate, or avoid the fear, I react with a characteristic behavior(s), making you at fault and/or wanting some behavior from you that will calm my fears.*

Below is the most common, four-step fear dance.

Step One: I HURT.

What does your hurt look like? How do you feel when your fear button is pushed? Do you feel anxious, frustrated, intimidated, insecure, guilty, inadequate, angry, or infuriated? Our feelings, within themselves, are neither right nor wrong. When our fear buttons are pushed, these inner emotions come to the surface. God created us as emotional beings, but we are not to allow our emotions to take control of us.

Step Two: I WANT.

When you hurt, you want a solution – you want to feel better, as soon as possible. In our attempt to feel better, we often seek some very destructive outlets: compulsive behaviors, self-destructive habits, or worse. Mostly, we want the other person to change so we can feel better. We see that person as both the problem and the solution – that actually makes solving the problem virtually impossible. Do not expect the other person to be the solution. The solution is not to change them. We really cannot change anyone but ourselves and we cannot depend upon another person to make us happy.

Step Three: I FEAR.

In any relationship, there are certain needs we want met but we fear just the opposite.

- We want acceptance, so we fear rejection.
- We want love, so we fear being scorned.
- We want respect, so we fear being disrespected.
- We want commitment, so we fear abandonment.
- We want success, so we fear failure.

These fears prevent us from having a happy, healthy relationship. What is your core fear: rejection, abandonment, being alone, failure, feeling inferior, insignificant, disrespected, worthless or invalidated? Underneath every conflict lies our core fear.

Step Four: I REACT.

When hurt we react. We scream, blame, minimize, deny, threaten, sulk, freeze, curse, withdraw, or act out. When our fear buttons are pushed, we often react in very harmful ways in an attempt to ease the hurt and to protect ourselves. The reality is that our harmful reactions do not solve anything but actually make matters much worse.

In relationships, there are certain needs we want to be met but we fear just the opposite. So, under our fear is our deep need. If we truly want that need to be met, we need to learn a new dance.



Learning a New Dance Step

Your fear buttons get pushed every day. Yet it's your reaction to those fears that determines whether you get stuck in the Fear Dance – and you control the thoughts that control your reaction, not your external circumstances. Just pause for a moment and ponder this statement: You can choose your reaction and your reaction is based on your thoughts.

-Gary Smalley, The DNA of Relationships

- Identify your feelings. What are my emotions, feelings, and fear buttons in this moment? Feelings are not right or wrong within themselves, but it is helpful to know why those fears come to the surface when triggered.
- Ask yourself how you contributed to getting your buttons pushed. *"What did I do to cause these feelings to surface?"* This is you taking personal responsibility for your own emotions
- Choose to respond positively. Ask yourself, *"How does God want me to respond?" "What does love require of me?"* Prayerfully, we begin by seeking to understand a little more about our fear buttons and our personal responsibility on how we are to think and react when those buttons are pushed.

Share your fear buttons. Look back on a recent argument and see how your core fears were at play. Next time, instead of fighting, talk about how the situation is pushing your fear buttons. Listen, pray, give grace, and forgive. Read 1 John 4:18 and James 1:19-20.

Fear must be displaced by perfect love. Fear will not disappear by wishful thinking. It must be acknowledged and placed under the white-light of God's incredible love. Face your fear and embrace fearful situations. Understand that 99% of the defenses we use for fear are worse than the fear itself. Fear must be confronted. We must embrace it at every level – spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively. Fear only has as much power as we give it. Giving in to your own personal "fear dance" will ultimately make you dependent on your spouse for your joy and happiness, instead of on God and yourself.

Talk about it. Describe your unique 'fear dance.'

Instead of asking, "What will work to get him to change," What if you asked, "What kind of person should I be?" If you choose to travel the road of personal transformation, the worst that can happen is that you will end up with a life that's far more enjoyable, satisfying, fulfilling and helpful to others than the one you had while you continued to insist on changing the other person.

-Gary Smalley, The DNA of Relationships

Work on How You Interact

A good marriage isn't something you find; it's something you make.

-Gary L. Thomas

The best thing about being in a loving relationship is the intimate connection and support. This is why there is almost nothing worse than dwelling where love is not.

How Do you Talk to your Partner?

Start by talking about what you are most afraid of in your relationship. Be sure to use words, images, and feelings that are descriptive, that open the door to your innermost feelings and vulnerabilities. Once you have some concrete ideas about your feelings, it will be easier for you to talk with your spouse about them. If you keep cramming your feelings down on top of each other, eventually they are going to run out of space and spill out somewhere. Moreover, those emotional explosions are no more likely to bring you closer to your partner than ignoring them every time they upset you.

Q, How do I share feelings and still feel safe? Take a moment to think about what exactly it is you are feeling before trying to articulate your feelings. Start small (glad, sad, mad, afraid) and build on that.

- Think about what is keeping you from saying how you feel.
- Make a list of some descriptive thoughts or feelings that come to mind when you think about past conversations with your partner.
- Consider the worst-case scenario. What do you think are the worst things that could happen if you told your partner how you felt?
- Talk to your partner about your fears and how it feels to share them.
- Use "I feel..." statements.

If you are the listening partner, it is crucial to your spouse's vulnerability to listen with warmth, acceptance, and support. This is an opportunity for the two of you to address emotional obstacles that keep you from connecting with each other.

After addressing the fears you have about your partner and your relationship, talk about what you can do to assuage these fears. By knowing and trusting your own emotions and reaching past your fears, your relationship gets stronger and healthier. When you are both able to do this, you can more easily repair conflicts and rifts and shape a nurturing, loving connection. Ask yourself, "What makes it difficult for me to talk about this with my partner?" "What can my partner do to make it easier?" "What do I need from my partner to feel secure and loved?"

It is natural to crave support and reassurance from our loved ones. It is not weak or unreasonable to want your spouse to be there for you. People were designed to need other people.

Forgiving Injuries

When a loved one hurts you, you usually find a way to get past it and move on. Time is helpful because it weakens the pain you felt during the incident, helping you to forget how hurtful it was. However, sometimes the pain is too sharp to be forgotten, so you build a wall between yourself and the loved one who hurt you and refuse to let them in again. Experts see this as trauma - injuries caused by events when one spouse is in desperate need of comfort, support, or validation from the other and is dismissed. This dismissal of needs can be so powerful that it causes the wounded partner to build a wall between him or herself and their spouse, refusing to let them in or turn to them for emotional support like they used to.

Lack of an emotionally supportive response by a loved one at a moment of threat can color a whole relationship... It can eclipse hundreds of smaller positive events and, in one swipe, demolish the security of a love relationship... The mates who

inflict these injuries are not being malicious or purposely insensitive. Indeed, they usually have the best of intentions. Most simply do not know how to tune in to their loved ones' attachment needs and offer the comfort of their emotional presence.

-Sue Johnson, Hold Me Tight

Healing Emotional Injuries

If let unattended, wounds can fester into a wall between you and your spouse, hindering any meaningful growth in the relationship. If this is the situation you are in, the only way you both can work toward resolution is by pursuing forgiveness and renewed trust. Both partners have work to do– the wounded partner needs to come out from behind their wall and relate to their spouse. The person who hurt them needs to acknowledge that (even if they do not think so) what happened is important for the wounded partner, and that they are not in a position to be dismissive.

Many times, people want to minimize their offenses by assuming the wounded party is blowing their actions out of proportion. While this may be true in some cases, it is best to believe your partner and move toward them. Denial and minimization are defense mechanisms we use to self-protect. Be courageous and vulnerable. In addition, it is not unusual for you and your partner to see an offence or its consequences differently. However, the one wounded is the only one with the right to decide how much it hurts.



Moving Forward

Once you have had some practice talking to your spouse about how they have hurt you, do not continue to stuff your feelings. Tell them how they have hurt you. Just as you would want to know what things to avoid saying or doing so you do not upset your spouse, admonishing your partner when they offend you is helpful for them. Afterward, if they come to you with a heartfelt apology, forgive them. There is no reason for you to hold something against someone that they want to make up for. Forgiving is hard. You feel like you are saying, “What you did is OK,” when you forgive someone. You want to protect yourself by holding onto that hurt. And forgiveness does not come naturally to our sinful flesh. Pray that God would fill you with his Holy Spirit and enable you to forgive as He forgives.

As partners become better able to self-confront and self-soothe, they have less need to control each other. They can maintain their own emotional stability and worry less about what their partner is doing. They stop expecting their partner to understand them and focus more on understanding themselves, which, in turn, reduces defensiveness and combativeness, and encourages good will and growth rather than resistance and stagnation.

— David Schnarch, Passionate Marriage

Bonding Through Sex and Touch

The best love is the kind that awakens the soul and makes us reach for more, that plants a fire in our hearts and brings peace to our minds.

-Noah Calhoun

It is no secret that sexual intimacy, actually intimacy in general, is disrupted when couples struggle or disconnect. Hurt, anger, resentment and bitterness can replace loving feelings and lead to avoidance, even disgust. Couples stop touching, stop moving toward one another for comfort and instead shut down, avoiding even punishing one another. It may come as a surprise, but happy couples attribute little of their happiness to sexual satisfaction (less than 20%). However, unhappy couples place the lion's share of the blame in the bedroom, blaming 50 to 70 percent of their dissatisfaction on sexual dysfunction. It is not because physical hiccups lead to marital conflict, but the reverse. When couples do not feel secure in their relationship it affects their ability to connect sexually.

What does feeling secure have to do with sex? Being securely bonded to one another and fully satisfied sexually go hand in hand; both enhance each other. Emotional connection creates great sex, and great sex creates deeper emotional connection. What is really happening is that when couples struggle and lose meaningful connection, they do not feel emotionally safe with each other. That, in turn, leads to less desire and less satisfying sex, which leads to less sex and more hurt feelings, which leads to still looser emotional connection, and around it goes. In shorthand: no safe bond, no sex; no sex, no bond. So, the big question is, "How do we re-create that safe place between us and re-connect?" Let us start at the beginning.

Sex is Not a Sin; God Created

God designed sex. The fact that sex is most enjoyable when practiced in a loving, long-term committed relationship wholeheartedly affirms God's design for sex and marriage. But, like most activities, people do not always practice sex the way God intended. Some couples have sex just to feel good about how they perform in the bedroom. That is when the focus is on personal enjoyment, not serving and pleasing each other. This kind of interaction is toxic to relationships because the focus is on self not on a partner. That selfishness can make a partner feel used, unloved, even unsafe. **Here is the problem:** If you just focus on being good at sex and see your partner as a vehicle for satisfaction, you do not have to think about problems in your relationship. Sex becomes an escape. This is particularly problematic for people who have trouble trusting others. Whether as a result of unhealthy past relationships or cultural conditioning, they seek sexual encounters that promise satisfaction with no emotional risks. Ignoring or escaping from problems sends a very negative message to a partner – you are on your own. What is the solution?

Intimate Trust

This happens when couples, no matter how many issues they are facing, find a way to engage each other with vulnerability, emotional openness and responsiveness, tender touch, and ultimately, sexual sharing. This explains why an emotional connection is so essential to fulfilling sexual relationships. You must be comfortable with someone outside the bedroom before you can be comfortable with them inside it. Establishing an atmosphere of trust enables partners to express their mutual sexual needs in an atmosphere of safety and security. Therefore, God legislated sexual intimacy and marriage the way He did. As a relationship deepens and love grows, sex becomes more enjoyable. And when problems arise, the commitment between the spouses motivates them to get through them. *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* Galatians 6:2 ESV



Intimacy has been defined as, "The gradual development of understanding and appreciation for another person by listening, discussing, sharing, and being mutually involved." It can exist in several realms, not just the physical: one can be intimate and not physical (physical but not intimate). Unpack this definition. One of our favorite book titles is, *Sex Begins in the Kitchen* by Kevin Leman. His point: if you want great (intimate) sex, cherish your spouse from the minute you get up.

To the degree you experience God's love towards you - seeing you as beautiful and radiant - to that degree sex won't ruin your life.

-Tim Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

Real (or intimate) love requires self-revelation. There's no two ways about it. If you're in a relationship and you're not revealing all parts of yourself ("all parts of the buffalo"), then you're not really "in" a relationship, you're only partially in a relationship and what you're doing is you're trying to hide out from life and from the ugly and immature and sick/pathological parts of yourself in a relationship.

-David Schnarch, Passionate Marriage

Responsiveness outside the bedroom carries into it. Connected partners can reveal their sexual vulnerabilities and desires without fear of being rejected. Secure, loving partners can relax, let go, and immerse themselves in the pleasure of lovemaking. They can talk openly, without getting embarrassed or offended, about what turns them off or on.

-Sue Johnson, Hold Me Tight

Work on Keeping Love Alive

In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love dry up. And when that happens you must remember that the essence of marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love. So, what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions you must BE tender, understanding, forgiving and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love.

-Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

For anyone who has just achieved a hard-fought victory, their biggest concern after taking a nap is holding on to what they have earned. It is no different for couples finally seeing some light after trekking through the gloomy forest of marital strife. If you and your spouse are already experiencing improvements in your marriage, you do not have to return to the dark days that sent you running for the “relationship” section of the bookstore. You just must keep implementing the skills you are already using to save your marriage.

Keep Love Alive

The Bible repeatedly cautions us to be alert (1 Peter 5:8, 1 Cor. 16:13, Luke 21:36). It warns us to be aware of temptation and to put on the armor of God because Satan is a “roaring lion.” You must stay alert, or you and your spouse will fall back into the old habits that got you into trouble in the first place. The key to leaving behind marital problems is to actively care for your relationship. It is so important to be aware of and steer away from relationship “potholes,” or situations that trigger emotional wounds or spark nasty arguments that go nowhere. For example, during arguments, one may react to the conflict by automatically spewing the most hurtful thing they can think to say. One way to manage this defensive reaction is by discussing with your partner how their approach triggers your defensive reaction, and then discussing how they could modify it for future exchanges. Once you have recognized something as a pothole, the task becomes figuring out how to avoid driving your marriage into it.

Encourage Your Spouse

You do not have to spend all your time looking for problems to solve; it is also OK to have some fun together. Think for a second about what it is like when one of you has a bad day. The discouraged spouse eventually comes home, collapses somewhere, and starts talking about what happened to get them so low. Does the comforting spouse ignore them? No! Because then they would not be the comforting spouse. They go to their partner, put an arm around them, and commiserate. Most importantly, they let them know they love them and want to help them feel better. As Christ models the necessity of inviting those in need to seek Him for comfort, so should you lend a shoulder to your partner in need.

A major part of keeping your love alive is to recognize key moments of connection and hold them up where you both can see them. These moments can remind you that your relationship is precious. This is what people are looking for in a relationship. More than sex, more than someone to pay half the bills, they want someone to have their back no matter what. That is what strengthens a marriage- mutual support.

Create Habits That will Improve your Marriage

We like rituals. They infuse a semblance of stability in a world that seems out of our control. But they also trigger memories associated with those rituals, for instance, Christmas. One way to create positive changes in your marriage is by implementing small rituals, such as leaving notes in each other’s vehicles or making a point a few nights a week to extend dinner with coffee or dessert and share your days. These small symbols act as breaks from the rigors of daily life to help you and your spouse focus on your marriage and provide an opportunity to remind each other of your affection.

Look Back to Look Forward

Look back on a period of distress, and recap how you both have been stuck in insecurity and then found ways to move out of those mires together. Most of the time, creating a story you both agree on is almost impossible while you are in the midst of marital strife. Neither of you can look beyond your own perspective nor the sense that everything is all your partner's fault. It is only after you have finally overcome your pain and the overwhelming fear of your marriage failing that you can begin to see things more objectively.

Consider structuring your story chronologically:

- How did you get together?
- When did the problems begin/what triggered them?
- How did you find yourselves distancing from one another?
- Did anything come along that made it worse?
- What did each of you do to contribute to this?
- What helped you to resolve some of your relationship problems?
- How do you help each feel more secure/loved?
- How do you feel now compared to when your marriage was limping along?

Just because you begin badly does not mean you cannot end well. As the Bible shows, God can work marvelous changes in anyone. Paul went out of his way to help a group of men stone Stephen; however, ultimately, he dedicated his life to preaching the Christian gospel. David was a shepherd boy with a handful of rocks who eventually became one of the most well-known kings of the Bible. If the Lord can accomplish that, He can certainly fix the marriage of two people who are willing to work to fix it.

Put Your Relationship First

Creating a healthier marriage is a lot like creating a healthier body. Both require you to exchange poor habits for better ones. They also invite you to create milestones, exceed them, and then create new ones. One of the most important practices for maintaining marriage improvement is breaking the cycle of assuming your relationship is doomed every time you hit a snag. Everyone has been programmed by past experiences to have certain expectations about relationships. The more negative experiences you have had, the more ammunition your brain must use against you when something bad happens. This also means you will have to work harder at telling yourself this relationship will not end up like the ones that failed in the past. The key is learning to shut up those negative voices in your head that prey on your attachment fears. Below is an outline of the process.

First, the fear/anxiety machine in your brain goes into overdrive and starts convincing you that your partner does not love you, that you will never be able to get a relationship to work, that you should just quit, and that if your partner really loved you, they would just know.

Second, recognize what is really happening. Your brain is just fixating on your fear/anxiety and magnifying it. So, take a breath. Calm down. Slow down the machine or turn it off.

Next, remind yourself of a time when you found yourself in a negative situation, and think about how you resolved it. Replace the negative cycle with something more positive. Think about a time when your partner demonstrated that they loved you (for example, when they gave a gift that was something you mentioned months ago you wanted). Think about efforts or risks you made in the past that paid off. This might be a time your spouse told you they have difficulty reading subtle signals about certain things and asked that you would be more forthright with them in the future.

"When we learn to foster safe, loving interactions with our partners and can integrate new experiences into models that affirm our connections with others, we step into a new world. Old hurts and negative perceptions from past relationships can then be put away and not allowed to orchestrate our way of responding to our lovers."

-Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*

What we need to know about loving is no great mystery. We all know what constitutes loving behavior; we need but act upon it, not continually question it. Over-analysis often confuses the issue and, in the end, brings us no closer to insight. We sometimes become too busy classifying, separating, and examining, to remember that love is easy. It's we who make it complicated.

-Leo Buscaglia



What steps are you willing to take to keep your love live?

How can you make it safe to talk together about hard subjects?

What habits need to change to make your marriage healthier?

Work on Apologizing and Forgiving

Forgiveness is something we do by a free act of the will, but the ability to forgive is a gift, even a miracle.

-David Benner, *Healing Emotional Wounds*

Apology

Apologizing takes courage; it is tough to face someone you have hurt and ask them to restore the relationship. It involves claiming ownership over how you have intentionally or unintentionally caused someone hurt or pain. However, taking steps to address and resolve issues frees us and allows a resumption in the relationship. Apologizing means that you value the person and the relationship and that you recognize how words (and actions) can hurt.

In *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, Dr. Stephen Post notes that offering an apology is the single largest predictor of forgiveness. To offer and accept an apology is perhaps one of the most sincere, poignant interactions two people can have. More than anything, a sincere apology helps restore a relationship. Apology has the ability to wash away resentment and bitterness. The more honest, sincere, and authentic the apology is, admitting responsibility for a mistake, expressing remorse, and offering to repair the situation, the more powerful it is. The key to apology is remorse because it authentically conveys distress, self-awareness, and regret. It also elicits empathy in the hurt person.

Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas also explore this same principle in *The Five Languages of Apology*. Apologies and forgiveness indicate relationship strength between two emotionally healthy people and can lead to reconciliation when there has been hurt or disagreement. Chapman and Thomas report that their research and experience has shown that saying, "I'm sorry" is often inadequate to restore a relationship to harmony. They also note that 75% of couples have different preferred languages of apology. Different people need different words and actions in order to feel that an incident is complete, closed, and healed.

Here are their Five Languages of Apology:

1. Expressing Regret: "I am sorry."
2. Accepting Responsibility: "I was wrong."
3. Making Restitution: "What can I do to make it right?"
4. Genuinely Repenting: "I will try not to do that again."
5. Requesting Forgiveness: "Will you please forgive me?"

Any or all five of these responses may be appropriate in different circumstances. However, since the intent of each is different, it is important to know which language communicates most effectively with the other person and which communicates most effectively to you. The authors assert that we all find it easier to forgive when we receive an apology in our preferred apology language.

Chapman and Thomas recognize that when you offend someone, an emotional barrier often arises between you. The relationship cannot go forward as effectively until that barrier is removed. Apologizing and requesting (not demanding!) forgiveness helps to remove that barrier and assures the other party that you take responsibility for your offense. Requesting forgiveness can be frightening, as it actually puts the future of your relationship in the other person's hands. You may also feel as if you are setting yourself up for rejection or failure, which is also very threatening. However, if you are in a relationship where trust is established, allowing yourself to feel vulnerable can strengthen the relationship – and your partner's own trust in you can be strengthened by your willingness to be vulnerable.

To help you to determine your preferred Language of Apology to receive from others, reflect on the following:

- What do I expect the other person to do or say?

- What hurts most deeply about this situation?
- What Language is most important to me when I apologize to others?
- What do I consider the most important part of an apology?
- What seemed to be lacking in an apology that disappointed me?

The Importance of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not the misguided act of condoning irresponsible, hurtful behavior. Nor is it a superficial turning of the other cheek that leaves us feeling victimized and martyred. Rather it is the finishing of old business that allows us to experience the present, free of contamination from the past.

- Joan Borysenko, Ph.D.

Forgiveness is essential to repair a damaged relationship. Forgiving yourself and others is about being willing to acknowledge that you are capable of wounding another and being wounded. It also means that you are willing to step out from the role of victim and take charge of your life. Couples who practice forgiveness can rid themselves of the toxic hurt and shame that holds them back from feeling connected to each other.

God asks us to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:32). It is a part of His character (Psalm 103:10-12; Isaiah 43:25; Hebrews 8:12). Jesus clearly taught and modeled forgiveness (Matthew 18: 21-35). True forgiveness acknowledges the wound or hurt and extends grace through the pain or disappointment. Forgiveness is character defining. It makes us free. It does not automatically lead to reconciliation, however, but it does lead to personal peace. Unforgiveness can breed bitterness and resentment (Hebrews 12:15). Forgiving others is critical to our spiritual growth. Forgiveness is part of God's character and needs to be a part of ours. *"Forgiveness is an unnatural act. Truly, it is an act of will. It is a decision you make to cancel the debt owed to you, and that makes it an expensive act. Forgiveness doesn't restore what was broken; it doesn't repair the damage done – it writes it off. And you can do it because on the cross Jesus showed you how. Forgiveness doesn't erase the deed, it simply frees us from its grip on us so we can heal"* (Ron Deal, *FamilyLife Blended*).

Healthy forgiveness is intentional, an act of will. It is a long journey that starts with a decision to forgive. Feelings come later. Forgiveness heals us. In *To Forgive is Human*, McCullough, Sandage and Worthington define forgiveness as *"an increase in our internal motivation to repair and maintain a relationship after the relationship has been damaged by the hurtful actions of the other person."* Even so, forgiveness is a process one must embrace when the time is right.

So, what do I need to do to forgive my spouse?

First, forgiveness starts by acknowledging (not denying or minimizing) your hurt. Then, consciously decide to forgive. Face that decision squarely. Do you really want to forgive? Do you want to live a life of continued anger, pain, and resentment? When anger and hatred have been living in our hearts for any length of time, we become used to them. We may even grow to like our "grudges" and our hatreds. At least, they become familiar

Next, share your hurt. Do not go on the defensive and turn it into a laundry list of accusations against your partner. Be specific and detailed in your descriptions of the incident and your pain. Share how it affected you, how you felt (betrayed, devalued, deserted, etc.). Forgiveness is a journey. It is a process. So, learn to be patient and persistent as you travel the road of forgiveness with the end of the journey, the freedom and internal peace, kept firmly in the forefront of your mind. Acknowledge the impact the pain or wrong has had on you.

Understand that forgiving does not mean giving permission for the hurtful behavior to be repeated. It does not mean saying that what was done was acceptable. Forgiveness is needed for behaviors that were not acceptable and that you should not allow to be repeated.

Do not demand to know "why" as a prerequisite to forgiveness. Knowing why the behavior happened is unlikely to lessen the pain, because the painful event came at a time when you did not know why. Occasionally, there are times when knowing why makes forgiveness unnecessary, but those times are rare. Do not count on it. Do not even count on the perpetrator knowing why he or she did it.

Visualize the person you are forgiving being blessed by your forgiveness. Keep in mind that forgiveness is for your sake alone, for your own healing, and not for the sake of the perpetrator. Your forgiveness frees you from the behavior that hurt you and diminishes the pain of the memories.

Intentionally surrender your right to get even. I have been wronged. I have suffered because of that wrong. I have a right to feel hurt. I now surrender my rights and humbly release my need to retaliate or get even. I can now begin moving from hatred and bitterness to acceptance.

Revise your picture of the one that hurt you by praying that God will allow you to see him or her through His eyes. Pray that God will give you the freedom to wish this person well. Begin praying that God will bless this person. Read Matthew 5:38-48.

Now that you are free from the painful links between the past event(s) and your memories about them, you feel yourself growing lighter and more joyous. Feel free to move on with your life without that burden of hurt. Do not look back in anger. You cannot change what has happened in your past. Nevertheless, without dragging all your painful memories along with you, you can move into your future free in spirit and with a peaceful mind.

Become open to whatever God wants you to do. Forgiveness is about us. True reconciliation cannot occur without repentance. We do our part, and then we ask God to do His part—helping us let go of the anger or bitterness and bringing freedom and healing to our lives. Then decide to do something in a forgiving way. At some point, contact the offender. Repair the damage as best you can. Step by step, move to the compassionate position of wishing well the person who hurt you. At that point, you will know you have reached the end of your journey. Forgiving can be a long, painful journey. The destination of freedom and new life for you makes the trip worthwhile. You have arrived at having a forgiving heart.



How will you begin the forgiveness process? One way is to make a list of hurts that you need to forgive. Forgiveness is first a mindset (an attitude) and then a decision.

Forgiving is not an instant process. Forgiving starts as an act of obedience to God. "Cheap" forgiveness is not real. To entirely forgive requires acknowledging and venting feelings, regaining God's perspective, being faithful and allowing for healing. We know forgiveness has occurred at the deepest level when we are reminded of the memory, but not held hostage by the old feelings.

-Jeff and Judi Parziale, Developing Healthy Relationships

Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.

Matthew 7:1-5

Work on Restoring Intimacy

Intimacy includes knowing someone, allowing that person to know you, and seeking to be caringly involved in one another's lives.

-David Ferguson, *Discovering Intimacy*

We are God's image bearers. Created in His image as relational beings, we have a deep need for relational intimacy. Intimacy is the connection that builds between two people over time. Emotional closeness, spiritual trust, and physical connectedness all play a role in creating intimacy. Intimacy involves knowing and being known, allowing someone to know us fully, and seeking to be caringly involved in someone's life. It can be experienced in every dimension of our being--spirit, soul, and body. We yearn to experience an authentic relationship that is motivated by caring involvement and is characterized by deeply knowing and being known and loved. Yet, right now, intimacy in your marriage may be severely limited, even absent.

The keys to intimacy include **authenticity** (knowing and embracing who we are, being our true self), **disclosure** (willingness to reveal my true self, flaws, and all), **vulnerability** (taking a risk, no masks, open, candid, accountable) and **servanthood** (reaching out to serve another vs. serving myself). So, in a sense, intimacy is two people revealing their souls (their entire being) to one another.

Authenticity involves believing that as a person, you are enough. It is having the courage to be imperfect. It is being who you are, instead of trying to live up to the "shoulds" in your life. Authenticity begins by knowing yourself well. Disclosure, letting you "see" me, increases vulnerability. Without it, relationships stagnate and stay superficial, and needs are left unfulfilled. If we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives. We begin to grasp intimacy when we can acknowledge that we are someone who envies, is fearful, is capable of rage and selfishness, and that our partner is likely the same. It is acknowledging that part of being in a relationship with someone is accepting the reality of those imperfections.

Servanthood demands that we are present with someone and willing to move beyond ourselves. It requires us to think more of others than of self (1 Corinthians 13) and to deal with our natural tendency to be selfish and self-centered. It typically involves some form of "emotional stretching."

The two biggest enemies of intimacy are a lack of self-awareness and a fear of self-disclosure. We cannot reveal what we do not know. Awareness involves accepting myself (warts and all). It empowers us to let go of fear, stop hiding and to risk being intimate. Whenever we fear disclosure, we risk hiding our true self, which can lead to guilt and anxiety. Worse, when in false self, our most important question, "Do you love me for who I am?" cannot be answered. The process of opening to another, of self-revelation, takes patience as well as bravery because an unhurried pace is necessary for the creation of trust.

We each bring expectations to our intimate relationships, such as undivided attention, words and gestures of love and care, loyalty, constancy, sex, companionship, encouragement, friendship, fidelity, honesty, trust, respect, and acceptance. We also know it is possible to find their exact opposites. If we are unaware of our own expectations (and where they come from), there is little hope of expressing them to a partner so that he or she can meet them. More often than not, we engage instead in mind reading.

The Recipe for Real Intimacy

True intimacy requires authenticity that involves being honest in the moment. It is about sharing your feelings about yourself and your partner, about what is happening right now. There is a potent immediacy to it. Your thoughts and judgments are not feelings. Connecting with raw and honest feelings in the moment requires presence and awareness. You need self-esteem to feel secure about yourself, which allows you to be genuine without fear of being judged or rejected. Saying, "I love you," if not sincere, can be less intimate than saying, "I don't love you." When you sugar-coat the truth, you miss the beautiful experience of real intimacy. It requires

courage, especially when you reveal something that might alienate the other person. Rather than merging or pretending that differences do not exist in order to feel accepted, you are acknowledging that you are two, separate adults relating your internal experiences and honoring those differences. That is where autonomy comes in. You have to know you can survive on your own; otherwise, if you are too afraid of losing the relationship or losing yourself, you guard how much you reveal.

The Process of Restoring Intimacy

Pay attention

Intimacy means I know and see you and you know and see me. A starting point can be as simple as paying attention to your spouse, how they talk, what excites or inspires them, what moves them to tears, what brings them joy. One professor of ours said that too many couples have a “elementary school” knowledge of each other. He encourages them to get an advanced degree in “wife” or “husband.”

Share your feeling, needs and desires

Healthy couples are comfortable sharing their needs, feelings and desires and responding positively to what is being shared. They know that intimacy comes from these interactions (positive or negative) if managed with grace, understanding and encouragement. They have learned that even conflict is an opportunity to discover more about one another.

Spend quality time together

The first thing you must do to restore intimacy is to increase the amount of time that you spend together. It is not only the first thing that you must do, but also the most important thing you must do. Set aside a scheduled time at least once per week to start with. Energize this time with all of your passion and creativity. Spending meaningful time together means doing a physical activity that involves the two of you reaching the same goal. Going to the movies together is not meaningful, you are not actively pursuing something that allows you to interact with your partner. A better example would be taking a cooking class together, and then, once you have mastered a certain dish, preparing it for friends and family. This is an illustration of meaningful togetherness, you both acquire a new skill, and when you share that skill with others, it helps restore your feelings of intimacy because you did this together.

Communicate

This is the most important work that you and your partner will do, and every marriage can use it. Empathy, active listening, and awareness of non-verbal cues are a few important elements of communication to consider. To promote intimacy, communication must be more than sharing information, it must come from the heart and intentionally draw a partner closer. Intimacy begins when a partner shares or communicates something personal and important to them and the other partner responds in an encouraging way.

Become a better listener

Remember when you were first dating, how you hung onto every word your partner said? You would have never taken out your cell phone while he was talking to you or jotted down your grocery list all while lending him half an ear. Go back to that way of focusing on your partner. When he comes home and starts telling you about his day at the office, stop what you are doing, turn your body towards him, and listen to what he is saying 100%. He will feel validated, and you will feel closer to him, all because you gave him your full attention.

Learn your partner's intimacy style

Not everyone likes to be touched! Some people are naturally more physical than others, and it comes down to something called “communication style.” If your spouse (or you) find that touch is a bit “creepy” (at least to start with), experiment with other ways to start an intimate connection. It could be with sound (saying something complimentary or affectionate) or sight (a particular look or smile you might give them). Men and women tend to view intimacy differently. For men, intimacy is more physical and sexual, with lots of touch and doing things

together. For women, intimacy is an emotional connection, sharing important issues, knowing one another's hopes and dreams, experiencing emotional moments together.

Take it easy

People can become very distressed when the intimacy wanes in their marriage. They can become hurt, angry, depressed, and even irrational in their behavior if they are starved of intimacy and affection. However, give it time. Allow intimacy to return, rather than forcing it to happen or getting impatient. You will kill the chances if you or your spouse feels under any sort of pressure.

Make love

Never take this for granted. So many couples find they need to postpone lovemaking due to other obligations. This is a mistake. Even if one of you is not really "feeling it," move forward with the caresses and the touching...you will often find that your desire will come along quite naturally if you just give this a little push. Lovemaking is the ultimate intimate act and keeping it on the calendar will help restore intimacy in your marriage.

By God's design, sex is a powerful force. He created it to be an incredible bonding experience between a husband and wife. Having sex releases important hormones in the brain, including dopamine (the "feel good" hormone), oxytocin (the bonding hormone), and endorphins (pain-reducing polypeptides). A couple that has regular sexual intimacy can actually become addicted to each other. The word *addiction* usually has a negative connotation in our minds, but God created sexuality to produce a powerful response for a reason. It is a wonderful thing when a husband and wife learn to find their greatest pleasure through intimacy with each other.

Unfortunately, the power of sex in marriage can quickly be inverted to become a negative force. Sexual issues are a primary cause of broken marriages. When a couple puts their sex life on autopilot, they are taking the risk of allowing the power of sex to become a harmful factor in their marriage. Granted, there are seasons in every marriage in which sexual intimacy *cannot* be a priority. Who would tell a couple with three children under three years old to be available for more sex? Or a woman going through cancer treatment that she is neglecting her marriage? However, many couples who avoid sexual intimacy do so because of normal busyness; they simply do not make it a priority.

Touch base during the day

Sending texts, making a quick check-in via a phone call, or sharing a funny meme via email, these are small ways to remind your spouse that they are in your thoughts. Intimacy is built through hundreds of very ordinary, mundane moments where couples attempt to make emotional connections.

Refocus on your marriage

Sometimes, we need to put our marriage first. This may mean turning down certain work assignments or missing a few of our kids' hockey practices in the name of date night. Ask yourself if you truly place your marriage first, or if you have just been telling yourself that you do without following through.

Get spiritual

Spiritual intimacy comes from sharing how faith informs our daily activities, how we wrestle with sin and temptation, and how we are striving to seek God's will. It comes from being in the Word together, praying for one another, and worshipping together. The Word of God is the nourishment of our souls. Because we are body, soul, and spirit, couples must cultivate each aspect of their being in order to develop intimacy. They must cultivate their friendship (soul), their sexuality (body), and their spirituality (spirit) in marriage.



As the two of you discuss intimacy, where are you stuck? Below are some suggestions for increasing intimacy in your marriage.

- Share personally. Don't use abstracts, share from your heart about what's going on inside you.
- Share honestly. "Speak the truth in love." In the short run, you may make people angry, but in the long run others will see you as a person of courage who can be trusted.
- Account for broken promises no matter how small. Acknowledging your failure to have your actions line up with your words will make others feel that you are treating them with respect and honor.
- Apologize often. The words, "Will you forgive me?" go a long way in creating strong relationships.
- Work on self-disclosure. Intimacy develops when people share deeply with one another. Move past superficial conversations and superficial interactions.
- Adopt a servant mind-set. Reach out to others in need. Sit with someone who is grieving. Pray specifically for your friends.
- Do community. Be accountable. Get involved, be a participant. Share yourself with others. If you sit in the bleachers and watch the game, you won't remember it as well as if you play the game on the field.

Each bump or challenge in our intimate connections offers us a perfect opportunity to deepen our level of intimacy, while allowing us to grow and evolve both individually and together."

-Tracie Sage, The Missing Manual to Love, Marriage and Intimacy

The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us.

-Tim Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

Work on Rebuilding Trust

Trust is the ability to give to another freely because you believe that person will responsibly give to you what you need.

-Terry Hargrave, *The Essential Humility of Marriage*

Trust in an intimate relationship is about feeling safe with another person. When things happen to cause one, or both, of you to feel unsafe with each, trust is eroded. It takes time, patience, and effort to reestablish the sense of safety you need for a marriage to thrive. Trust is the result of mutual and reliable giving and taking. Trust serves as the basis for intimacy. Trust and truth are kissing cousins. In *The Essential Humility of Marriage*, Terry Hargrave defines trust as an ability and willingness to give to your partner freely because you believe they will responsibly give to you what you need.

Here are a few suggestions for rebuilding trust in your marriage:

1. See your partner through God's eyes; a flawed person who has hurt you, but still has God's love.
2. Make a decision to love by trying to let go of the past. Stop obsessing about the situation that broke the trust between you and your spouse.
3. Decide to forgive or to be forgiven. However, do not rush to forgive. True forgiveness is about embracing your pain (all of it) and only then, reaching out to the one who hurt or betrayed you.
4. If you are the one in your marriage who lied, cheated, etc. show that the errant behavior is gone by changing your behaviors. That means no more secrets, lies, infidelity, etc. You must be completely transparent, open, and forthcoming.
5. Together, set specific goals for getting your marriage back on track. Talk openly about these goals and check in regularly to make sure you are on track.
6. To rebuild the trust in your marriage, both of you must renew your commitment to your marriage and one another.

To heal the pain must be shared. The wounding spouse must acknowledge the hurt caused by the devastating experience of being lied to or cheated on. They must also feel the pain of their partner and show that it matters. This empathy will be healing. Listen completely to one another and with your heart, not just your head. Be honest. You must be able to understand and state why the bad behavior occurred. You cannot just say, "I don't know." You must work hard to know why it happened and why it will not happen again. Behaviors that break trust typically have a backstory or some inner undisclosed feelings or thoughts that ultimately lead to the betraying behavior. Here is some advice for the offender.

1. Avoid using words that can trigger conflict. Use non-blaming 'I' statements and do not say always, must, never, or should.
2. Make a genuine, sincere apology. A real apology has these elements: Freely admitting fault, fully accepting responsibility, humbly asking forgiveness, immediately changing behavior, and actively rebuilding trust.
3. Recognize that FORGIVENESS might happen quickly, but TRUST happens slowly.
4. Take responsibility for your actions and decisions. Defensiveness will only perpetuate the conflict or crisis.
5. Be open to seeking counseling to have a better understanding into what caused the trust to be broken. Also be open to self-growth and improvement. Read self-help books on your own and together about how to rebuild trust and strengthen your relationship.
6. Your partner deserves open and honest answers to his or her questions.
7. Refuse to fall back into the same trust-breaking behavior.

Skills that can Help Rebuild Trust

Exit strategies for intense arguments

There comes a point in many relationship arguments where it becomes non-productive. How do you diffuse conversations that are about to become hurtful and destructive? What works is going to depend on the relationship. For instance, humor sometimes works, but not if your partner sees you as not ever taking anything seriously. Another strategy is acknowledging that whenever a particular topic comes up, it is very upsetting for both of you and brings up bad memories. Sometimes it is just a matter of changing the subject.

Acknowledging valid points your partner makes about your flaws

When your partner makes a valid point, it is important to acknowledge the legitimacy of their argument. Changing behavior is hard but acknowledging the presence of an issue is sometimes enough to stop it from causing major relationship problems.

Ways of showing you think about your partner when you are not physically together

It is useful to communicate to your partner that you are thinking about them when you are apart. You will soon find out what types of communication your partner finds thoughtful and supportive, and what they find annoying or disruptive. Because of our need for attachment, it is normal to want to know where the other person is and when they will be coming back.

Communicating when you are prepared to discuss a topic if now is not the right time

It is important for partners to feel that no topic is completely off limits. However, partners can sometimes mention tricky topics the other person is not prepared to discuss. When this happens, the person not ready to talk needs to let their partner know when a better time to talk would be.

Do not Give Up!

The Bible says that “*Love covers over a multitude of sins.*” I love that picture of love being strong enough to cover our imperfections and fill in the cracks of our broken hearts. Do not quit when it gets hard! Keep loving each other and allow God to use the power of love and grace to bring wholeness and healing to your relationship. If your marriage is struggling and you do not know what to do next, **DON'T LOSE HOPE. Your marriage will never be stronger than your trust in each other, so you must always fight to keep trust, and fight to rebuild it when it has been damaged.**

Recognize that rebuilding trust takes time. It will not happen overnight. There is no right or wrong amount of time, but you will know when you get there. It is okay to remember and discuss the incidents and the betrayal. You may not forget what happened, but the pain attached will eventually go away if you are actively working on it.

Be aware of your innermost feelings and share your feelings with one another. You can comfort each other regardless of who the victim or perpetrator is. Both the little things are just as important as the big things. For example, calling when you say you will be late may seem small, but it is significant when trust has been broken. Do not retaliate. When we have been wronged, we usually have an urge to punish the person who wronged us. Fight the temptation to use this past offense as future ammunition in arguments. Do not keep holding it over his/her head.

Use HUG's liberally

- Humility when interacting with one another
- Understanding about how the loss of trust can affect someone and how difficult it can be to re-establish trust
- Grace that loves and forgives while trust is being re-built



Embrace who You are in Christ

God's love and acceptance gives us the freedom to give and receive love in a healthier way because He loves us unconditionally. He knows our flaws, insecurities, and weaknesses, yet He considers us His child. Allow that love to overcome your self-doubts. Love freely and generously, just as He does. Receive love, no matter how imperfect from another, just as He does with us.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Trust is built in very small moments, which I call 'sliding door' moments. In any interaction, there is a possibility of connecting with your partner or turning away from your partner. One such moment is not important, but if you're always choosing to turn away, then trust erodes in a relationship- very gradually, very slowly.
— John Gottman

Forgiveness is about goodness, about extending mercy to those who've harmed us, even if they don't "deserve" it. It is not about finding excuses for the offending person's behavior or pretending it didn't happen. Nor is there a quick formula you can follow. Forgiveness is a process with many steps that often proceeds in a non-linear fashion.
-Robert Enright, *Eight Steps to Forgiveness*

Work on Re-Establishing Respect

Every good relationship, especially marriage, is based on respect. If it's not based on respect, nothing that appears to be good will last very long.

-Amy Grant

Mutual respect is one of the cornerstones of all successful relationships. The loss of mutual respect can destroy a marriage quickly, or, more often, lead to a painful, stressful, and unhappy life for a couple. While mutual respect is not sufficient (spouses or partners can treat each other respectfully but still struggle with major issues), it is necessary for a relationship to thrive. Without mutual respect, couples are unlikely to be able to solve problems or resolve conflicts.

What is Mutual Respect?

- You treat your spouse in a thoughtful and courteous way.
- You accept your spouse just as they are.
- You avoid treating each other in rude and disrespectful ways, e.g., you do not engage in name calling, insults, or other demeaning or condescending behaviors.
- You do not talk sarcastically to or ignore or avoid your partner.
- You view the opinions, wishes, and values of your partner as worthy of serious consideration.

While this sounds very simple, it takes a consistent effort to treat your spouse or partner respectfully. Respect is not just the absence of negative behavior, but it is the *presence of positive behaviors*. Specifically, if you are treating your spouse or partner respectfully, you are doing things such as: considering his/her opinion; consulting with your partner before making decisions that affect your partner; taking an active interest in your spouse's or partner's life (work, daily activities, and interests); compromising and negotiating with your partner about important issues that affect both of you and your family. While this list is far from exhaustive, it captures the essence of a respectful marriage or relationship.

Establishing and Losing Respect

How is respect established in a marriage or relationship? Respect is established when you consistently consider and value the feelings and opinions of your partner; talk to and treat your partner in ways that you would want to be treated; and compromise and negotiate with your partner.

How is respect lost in a marriage? Respect can slowly erode due to day-to-day stresses and strains. If you or your partner is stressed or struggling with your own issues, you may become irritable and negative, venting your frustrations on your partner. This can set off a vicious cycle in which partners are increasingly negative and disrespectful to each other. Similarly, an inability to resolve or manage conflicts and differences can lead to anger and frustration. If expressed in negative and blaming ways, these emotions can start the same cycle of negative interactions and result in the loss of respect. These are only a few of the ways that respect can evaporate in a marriage or relationship.

Supporting and Maintaining Respect

Sustaining respect during the course of a relationship takes effort. We are all human, and if someone begins to treat us negatively, inconsiderately, and disrespectfully, we often tend to respond in kind. This pattern of mutual disrespect feeds on itself. The more one partner is rude and inconsiderate, the more likely it is that the other spouse or partner will behave in similar ways. Thus, disrespect can grow until most interactions are characterized by sarcastic, inconsiderate, blaming, critical, and demeaning behavior. However, the lack of respect is not always so obvious. Spouses or partners can show their

disrespect in more subtle, but equally corrosive, ways, like ignoring the spouse or partner or responding with indifference.



Principles for Re-Establishing Respect

Once a couple has fallen into a pattern of treating each other disrespectfully, it is often difficult to change. If both spouses or partners are angry and hostile towards each other, a standoff may ensue, with neither partner willing to change his/her behavior until the other changes. Similarly, if one person makes a good faith effort to change things, this effort may go unnoticed or may even be rebuffed.

Re-establishing respect draws on two basic principles:

1. **For now, work on changing your own behavior.** Given the level of tension in your relationship, it is unlikely that either you or your partner can effectively influence the other. Instead, focus on your own behavior. Follow the golden rule and *treat your partner as you would like to be treated*.
2. **Do not police your partner's behavior.** This is tough. The temptation to correct your partner's behavior may be great, but it is unlikely to work at this stage. Once a greater level of respect has been established, couples can then begin to work on how they can communicate more effectively, make requests, solve problems, and accept differences.

Create a respectful relationship

Once a more respectful environment or atmosphere is established, you can begin to focus on identifying difficult issues and finding ways to talk about these issues directly without triggering angry and disrespectful behaviors. Creating a respectful relationship is essential if you are going to be able to effectively address difficult issues and differences.

Tolerate and appreciate differences

Finally, work to recognize, accept, and appreciate differences. It is almost a cliché that people marry people who are different than them and then spend the rest of their marriage or relationship trying to change their partner. Part of establishing and maintaining a respectful relationship is learning to accept differences. Partners need to accept the ways in which their spouse or partner is different, whether this involves values, aspirations, or temperament. Tolerating and accepting (and even appreciating) how your spouse is different from you is a key part in maintaining a respectful relationship. Helping couples achieve this tolerance can involve working with couples on recognizing each other's strengths. It can also involve understanding that differences do not have to threaten a relationship but can, in fact, strengthen it.

A marriage is not a joining of two worlds, but an abandoning of two worlds in order that one new one might be formed. In a sense, the call to be married bears comparison to Jesus' advice to the rich young man to sell all his possessions & follow Him. It is a vocation to total abandonment. For most people, in fact, marriage is the single most wholehearted step they will ever take toward a fulfillment of Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

-Mike Mason

In our marriages, we don't have control over our spouse's shortcomings (no matter how much nagging or cajoling we might invest) but we do have control over what we focus on. There's always some good quality tucked in our spouse. After all, he (she) was fashioned in the very image of our Lord. So, there's something in there that reflects the Lord, and that quality is good.

-April Motl

Finishing Well

Admit when you're wrong. Shut up when you're right.

— John Gottman

As we wrap up, here are a few reminders. Things you make sure you remember. The best marriages practice tools like these regularly. In many ways, commitment is an everyday decision to choose your spouse.

If Needed, Reconcile.

Reconciliation is about restoration and transformation. It's about restoring trust, respect, and hope so that your marriage can be transformed. It's a commitment to do whatever it takes to restore the love and connection you both once had. To do this, you must take the hurt (grief, trauma, disappointment, betrayal) you've caused one another seriously, and you must each own your part. An important ingredient is fully acknowledging and understanding (versus denying or minimizing) the pain (intentional or not) that you have caused. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of your partner, is critical if you are to see yourself as a person who is capable of hurting, neglecting, or disappointing your partner, yet also as a person who can forgive and who deserves to be forgiven.

In *Forgiving and Reconciling*, Everett Worthington suggests that there are four planks in the bridge to reconciliation. First is the **decision** to reconcile, followed by a positive **discussion** around the issues that created the need to restore the relationship. This plank involves softening our attitude toward our spouse. With empathy and humility, we share our hurts and listen to those of our partner. Next, we **detoxify** the relationship of past poisons (bitterness, resentment, revenge, loss, and unforgiveness). Finally, we **devote** ourselves to rebuilding our relationship. This involves grieving, love languages, becoming better listeners, and increasing positive interactions.

Restoring a damaged relationship takes commitment, courage, and patience. It involves a commitment to restoring love and trust by owning our part and forgiving one another. Reconciliation requires that both of you are ready to acknowledge violations to the relationship and to experience the pain related to that acknowledgment. It is more than just righting wrongs or apologizing; it brings you to deeper levels of vulnerability, trust, and commitment. Restoring trust is a huge component of reconciliation. It demands courageous reengagement to restore and reshape a damaged relationship. The good news is that God has been in the transformation and reconciliation business for a very long time.

Stop Doing the Same Ineffective Behaviors

Have you noticed words, actions, or attitudes etc. that don't work? Many couples keep trying the same strategies hoping for a different result. Some clues that what you're doing isn't working: the same feelings, the same response from your partner, Déjà Vu ("Seems we've had this conversation before."), or frustration or discouragement. To start, think more about what your partner needs, next learn to phrase your requests in a way you're likely to get a positive response from your partner.

Beware of manipulation

Manipulation, subtle or obvious, is damaging to your marriage.

- Subtle: *"Do you have any plans for this evening?"*
- Obvious: *"If you loved me, you would go to the movies with me tonight."*
- Honest: *"I would like to go to the movies tonight. If you don't have any plans for this evening, would you go with me?"*

Manipulation strategies:

- Guilting or shaming
- Withdrawal, silent treatment
- Pouting and whining
- Threats, and ultimatums
- Criticism and disapproval
- Being coercive or controlling
- Exaggerated disappointment

How to stop manipulation in your marriage:

Recognize when you are being manipulative and stop. Be honest with your spouse. Be specific. Never act as if manipulation is humorous or no big deal. Speak your truth; learn to make honest requests. Realize and accept that manipulation is emotional extortion.

At its worst, manipulation is simply an attempt by one spouse to control the other: 'You will do this, or else.' Perhaps the 'or else' will induce enough fear in the spouse that he or she will acquiesce, but the change will be external and temporary. Real change comes from within, not from manipulating circumstances.

-Gary Chapman, Home Improvements

Repent and Forgive

Ask yourself, “What do I need to say ‘Sorry’ or ‘I forgive you’ for?” True forgiveness can only happen when a person first acknowledges their anger and the pain and loss they have experienced – all of it. Most do not do this. Forgiveness is a process – timing is everything. Healthy forgiveness is intentional; it is an act of the will. It is a long journey that starts with a decision to forgive. Feelings come later. Forgiveness heals us. It is an increase in our internal motivation to repair and maintain a relationship after the relationship has been damaged by the hurtful actions of the other person.

Three factors help us to forgive:

1. Empathy – helps us walk mile in partner’s shoes
2. Humility – reminds us we have hurt people and that we are not morally superior
3. Reframing – helps us look at our partner through a wider lens, seeing them as deserving of our forgiveness

Forgiveness is replacing negative emotions like anger, hurt, and unforgiveness with positive emotions like empathy and agape love. In the process, our motives change from negative to neutral to positive.

Set Some Realistic Goals. “How do I want our marriage to be?”

These goals should be about what you want to accomplish, not about what your spouse does wrong. Set goals in “action” terms (things you can see and do). Talk about your needs; be descriptive. Listen carefully – ask questions. Keep it simple and be sure it is doable. The big question is, “Which part of you is talking?” Is it the mature, present-based part that wants a solution, or is it the immature child part that wants to be proven right, control your partner, or avoid changing? Just one caveat: what changes our behavior is not goals, but habits. Develop some good connection-producing habits and let go of ones that don’t increase closeness and intimacy.

Practice these “Reality Principles”

- I am responsible for my own attitude.
- My attitude affects my actions.
- I cannot change others, but I can influence them.

- People can change (but they decide how and when).
- My emotions do NOT control my actions.
- Admitting my imperfections does not mean I am a failure.
- Love is the most powerful force for good in the world.

Look at Times When Things “Worked.” “Let’s do that one again”

- Do things that worked. Ask, “When did we have good feelings for one another? How do we focus on that?” What is different about the times the two of you get along?
- Recall what you did in the past that made your marriage satisfying.
- Do what you did before. Do not think; just do it!
- Focus on what is doable or possible; do what you can do.
- Pay attention to how conflicts end.
- Notice what is different about the times problems occur, but something constructive occurs and it does not end up bothering you.

Show Appreciation

Couples who feel gratitude for one another feel closer and tend to be more satisfied with their relationships. Gratitude for a partner is a strong predictor of relationship success.

Keep Things Interesting

Keeping up with the daily grind of work and kids can sometimes cause couples to fall into the same old routine. Boredom can lead to greater dissatisfaction as a relationship goes on.

Little Things that can Mean a lot

- Be available for one another; schedule in dates or set aside time each week to focus on one another
- Try new things together; take a class or try a new hobby that you can both enjoy
- Break out of the same old routine
- Look for ways to surprise each other
- Spend time apart once in a while
- Turn off digital devices and spend time focused only on one another
- Find time for intimacy

Big questions: *What do I do that pulls me out of that state of connectedness? What do I need to do to return, to reconnect?* At this crossroad, you need to remind yourself that you want something different. Realize that you both want the same thing—a good relationship. Learn how to date your spouse (again).



learn to Give and Receive Love

Remind yourself that the person you are speaking to is someone you love. A big key is paying attention to what is going on inside you, watching your own thoughts and feelings without judgment or control. Pause-pray-think-breathe and choose. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of receiving. Those who cannot receive love well often wind up not feeling loved at all.

Words from the world’s foremost marriage expert (period).

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face various trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything” (James 1:2-4).

“Blessed is the man (person) who perseveres under trial, because when he stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised...” (James 1: 12).

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” (1 Cor 13: 4-8 ESV).

Ultimately, it is the love of Jesus that compels us to have great marriages. *“No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).*

Great marriages happen when we really get that the goal of marriage is not just about our happiness, but about our holiness. .

Marriage has unique power...

- To show us the truth of who we really are
- To redeem our past and heal our self-image through love
- To show us the grace of what God did for us in Jesus Christ
- To help us grow up
- To learn what sacrifice really means and how it builds our character

With that power you can say to your spouse, “I forgive” or “I repent.” Will you allow God to use your spouse to help grow your faith?

Therefore, when facing any problem in marriage, the first thing you look for at the base of it is, in some measure, self-centeredness and an unwillingness to serve or minister to the other. The word “submit” that Paul uses has its origin in the military, and in Greek it denoted a soldier submitting to an officer. Why? Because when you join the military you lose control over your schedule, over when you can take a holiday, over when you’re going to eat, and even over what you eat. To be part of a whole, to become part of a greater unity, you have to surrender your independence. You must give up the right to make decisions unilaterally. Paul says that this ability to deny your own rights, to serve and put the good of the whole over your own, is not instinctive; indeed, it’s unnatural, but it is the very foundation of marriage.

— Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

A Word from Jeff and Judi Parziale

Honestly, people in long-lasting, happy marriages are no different from those who end up in divorce, *except* that they have learned how to effectively deal with their differences. They have learned how to manage and overcome conflict, how to repair and how to work through the hard times. So, what is the secret to keeping love alive? Actually, there is no secret. **It is deep commitment that leads to real giving, from the heart.** We tend to give to one another in a way we like to receive. Real giving happens when you give to your spouse the things he or she wants or needs. What happens too often in relationships is that couples debate whose way is right, rather than being involved in mutual caretaking. Here is what we have learned (and wish we had learned sooner): If you fall in love with God – if you REALLY fall in love with God - you will notice a difference in your love toward your spouse. Serve your spouse. When you put them first, God blesses you and your spouse, and your needs are met. When you give up happiness to serve your spouse, you get real happiness in return. Call it God's math. We know it works.

Now What?

- Pray for each other and ask God to reveal any selfishness in you.
- Confess your selfishness and self-protection.
- Confess your hard-heartedness.
- Forgive your spouse and repent of your hurtful ways.
- Start serving your spouse, meeting their needs in their way.
- Work on yourself, as a child of God, created for good works.
- Allow God to fill you with His peace, love, and joy.

In this view of marriage, each person says to the other, "I see all your flaws, imperfections, weaknesses, dependencies. But underneath them all, I see growing the person God wants you to be."

-Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

Thanks for working through this workbook together. Many of the strategies covered were from lessons we learned in our marriage. Check out our follow-up workbook, *Relational Skills for Couples* or one of the workbooks below. If we can be of help, please don't hesitate to contact us. 970-775-4836.

God's best on your journey. Jeff & Judi Parziale

Transforming Anger

Antidotes for Anxiety

Building Self-Esteem

Codependency: *Steps to Recovery*

Understanding Depression

Developing Healthy Relationships

Fear in Relationships

Overcoming Loneliness

True Forgiveness

How to Succeed as a Stepfamily

Relationships in Leadership

Marriage 911 *Hope and Healing for Hurting Couples*