

Marriage Good to Great

How do Marriage Experts define *Great*?

- ❖ *Enjoy their differences and refuse to give up on each other.*
- ❖ *Continue investing in the relationship.*
- ❖ *Maintain a strong friendship.*
- ❖ *Playful with one another.*
- ❖ *Respond to intimacy bids positively.*
- ❖ *Mutual respect.*
- ❖ *Know each other's fears, dreams, thoughts, and habits.*
- ❖ *Supportive of one another's dreams.*
- ❖ *Keep Christ at the center.*

How does God define *Great*?

Matthew:1-4, *"Who gets the highest rank in the Kingdom?" "Whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

Matthew 20. Jesus overturns worldly notions of greatness; teaches that true greatness is not about power, status, or self-promotion, but measured by humility and service. Greatness is aligned with obedience to God and love for others.

What about marriage? We must apply all Jesus taught: Not power, control, or status but servanthood and humility.

Myths

- We can't all have great marriages
- It's too hard; have you met my....
- My childhood issues...
- Haven't had good luck with relationships
- Too stuck in my ways

So how do we go from good to great?

Five Practices

1. Faith-informed behavior
2. Pursing real intimacy
3. Learn to manage unsolvable problems
4. Do conflict well
5. Make repairs regularly

FAITH-INFORMED BEHAVIOR

Personal and marital behavior aligned with a biblical worldview.

It is not just asking “*What makes a marriage work?*” but “*How should we treat one another in light of Christ?*”

In scripture, every command or instruction about our behavior toward others can be applied to marriage. Instructions to love, encourage and submit to one another, to be angry but not sin; to have an attitude of forgiveness and; faithfulness; to go the extra mile and turn the other cheek; to be at peace with all; to speak the truth in love, to have the mind of Christ and to love from the center of our being, genuinely.

Ephesians 5:15-33

- Live wisely, do good, don't live carelessly or thoughtlessly
- Be filled with the Spirit
- Mutual submission
- Love & Respect
- *Good to great starts in the heart.*

1 Corinthians 13

Love is the polar opposite of self-seeking. Self-centeredness blinds us to our own selfishness; yet it makes us think we can see our spouse clearly. Love allows us to truly “serve” one another.

Colossians 3:12-14 Dress Code

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. MSG

1Thessalonians 5:18: *Gratitude - “Thank God no matter what happens”*

Presence: Knowing and being known. Greatest gift I can give is being fully present, fully available and fully knowable.

Romans 12 and Philippians 2
Mindset

Two Dynamics: Being personally responsible

- I am responsible.
- I have a past that manifests in how I act or react in this present moment, fully responsible for what I say or do.
- What guides my behavior? My correction?
- What set of beliefs and principles determine my actions?

My task is to behave in a way that integrates and aligns my spiritual beliefs with my everyday interactions and guides my thoughts, emotions, and actions, particularly as it relates to my wife and family. It affirms that we are both spiritual and emotional beings.

Questions:

- Am I acting for my spouse's good?
- Am I being honest and vulnerable?
- Am I responding with mercy and grace?
- Do I own my part of an issue?
- Conversations together

Real Conversations Together

The ability to work through issues honestly and effectively is more crucial to compatibility than even how much a couple is in love.

How are we involved in community ?

Places where we can learn the truth about ourselves. About unity in Christ, sharing experiences, trusting each other and being vulnerable, committed to each other and being accountable. Where real transformation happens; Christ being formed in us.

How do we participate in these aspects of community?

Confession: the free and appropriate disclosure of my brokenness, temptation, sin, and victories given for the purpose of healing, forgiveness and spiritual growth.

Application: schools of life

Accountability: *"The process of having someone take us 'kicking and screaming' to a place to we really want to go."*

Guidance: spiritual direction. Love and encouragement.

Covenant: How do we honor and stay faithful to our covenant commitment?

Mission

What has God called us to do? How will we use our gifts, our experiences? Who is in our circle of influence?

Questions to discuss

- Do we seek to love, value, honor and serve each other?
- Do you feel controlled, ignored, diminished?
- Do I receive your words with respect and acceptance.
- Do our interactions reflect our faith?
- How can we encourage one another?
- How can we practice gratitude?

TALK TIME...

REAL INTIMACY

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.

We are God's image bearers; created in His image as relational beings, with a deep need for relational intimacy. Relationships motivated by caring involvement and characterized by deeply knowing and being known by one another. Intimacy is fully sharing one's real vulnerability (fears, flaws) and mutual understanding (connection, trust, closeness). Risk is always involved.

Intimacy is about tuning into someone else's reality, and risking being changed by that experience. It's feeling safe in someone's presence and being accepted in your rawest form. Yet, we can fear such relationships since they can only develop through the vulnerability of self-disclosure. We fear rejection, ridicule, or disappointment and many have stories to reinforce those fears.

True intimacy cannot exist in unhealthy relationships--too much hiding, fear and deceit. All the unhealthy or toxic behaviors result from the inability to be intimate. Why? Because of fear of self-discovery or having others discover the real us (so we wear masks).

Most couples do not experience real intimacy. Why?

Three fundamental needs:

- 1) to feel loved and accepted, to have a sense of *belonging*.
- 2) to feel acceptable, to have a sense of *worthiness*.
- 3) to feel adequate, to have a sense of *competence*.

Our willingness to risk the vulnerability intimacy requires determines whether these needs will be met. A partner must understand these needs and be willing and able to meet them. We must be able to express them well.

"Needing" others can feel risky, so many avoid appearing needy at all costs. Still, experiencing relational intimacy can only occur when we allow a partner to see us as we are.

To do this, we must know who we are. Paradoxically, we can only truly know ourselves when we are deeply known by others. And intimate relationships prepare us for intimacy with God.

Why is real intimacy so uncommon?

FEAR—fear of vulnerability, fear of rejection, abandonment or fear of losing one's independence.

These fears can create emotional walls that prevent us from fully opening up to others; so, we wear masks.

One of the primary causes of fear is past experiences of hurt abuse or neglect. Such experiences can lead to mistrust, lack of safety, and a reluctance to become vulnerable; many learned early on that closeness can lead to pain.

Real intimacy happens when my desire for closeness and connection is stronger than my fears, pride or self-protection.

Keys to intimacy

- Trust and respect (trust and being trustworthy)
- Authenticity (knowing, embracing who we are; self-awareness; commitment to real self)
- Disclosure (vulnerability; willingly revealing my true self to another)
- Self-acceptance (accept and trust who we are and who they are)
- Servanthood (reaching out to serve another vs. serving myself)

Trust creates a secure environment where partners feel free to express feelings, fears, and dreams without fear of being dismissed or punished; it demonstrates reliability and emotional availability. Trust must go both ways.

Authenticity involves believing we are enough in Christ and having the courage to be imperfect. It is being real (no masks) instead of trying to live up to the “shoulds” in one’s life. It begins by knowing oneself well.

Disclosure is telling the truth; it invariably increases vulnerability, but without it, relationships stagnate and stay superficial, and needs are left unfulfilled. If couples shut themselves off from vulnerability, they distance themselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to their lives.

We can begin to grasp intimacy when we can acknowledge that we are someone who envies, is fearful, is capable of selfishness and rage (sinful) and that the other person is likely the same, and that part of being in relationship with them is accepting the reality of those imperfections.

Self-acceptance is being at home in one’s inner world. Too much, we become self-centered; too little, we become victims. It is trusting and accepting one’s brokenness; that trust is not dependent on anyone else. Without this, it’s nearly impossible to know, love and trust someone else.

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 Corinth. 13). It’s dealing with one’s self-centeredness and typically involves some form of “emotional” stretching.

Necessary prerequisites

- Safety to feel free enough to let go and be oneself
- Awareness of your inner experience in the moment

- Courage and openness to share what you're feeling with someone who also shares intimate feelings with you.
- Willing to reveal who you are and facing who the other person is in their entirety- not just those parts which are socially acceptable or in some way "useful" to us.
- Mutual and honest expression of all parts of one's life: selfishness, anger, worry, elation, sorrow and other emotions, as well as one's aspirations, dreams and doubts.
- Exists when we are fully present, fully alive, fully real and fully available.
- Being genuine without fear of being judged or rejected.
- Honesty and transparency in the moment requires courage, especially when you reveal something that might alienate the other person.

Our deepest intimate interactions require an authentic, present expression of deep feelings, not facts; an awareness of each other's feelings in the moment; honoring each other's separateness. Sharing real feelings about oneself, the relationship and the other person and being fully present and self-aware. Attuning nervous systems.

My non-negotiables

- Being fully present in the moment
- Being curious
- Being vulnerable

Outcomes

- When couples sugar-coat the truth of what's going on in or with them, they miss out on the beautiful experience of real intimacy.
- Whenever couples fear intimacy, they tend to hide it or express it indirectly through manipulation or control. Fear builds strong walls that prevent them from becoming self-aware and open to others.
- Awareness empowers them to let go of fear, and to risk being intimate. When we are aware, present and honest, partners know that they can trust us and the relationship deepen.
- Rather than pretending that differences don't exist in order to feel accepted, couples acknowledge both their connection and their uniqueness.
- Awareness, however, is only half of an intimate relationship.
- The other half is being openly curious about what their partner is like; to be genuinely interested, with a non-judgmental and non-blaming attitude, in discovering who their partner really is.
- Intimacy thrives when two people know themselves, share themselves, know each other, accept both self and other without judgment and relate in the moment

Talk time: Below are some suggestions for increasing intimacy in relationships.

- Share **vulnerably** and **authentically**. Let people see the real you - flaws and all.
- Account for **broken promises** no matter how small. Acknowledging when your actions do not line up your words will make others feel respected and honored.

- Be willing to have **emotional** conversations.
- **Challenge** your beliefs and self-defeating thoughts.
- **Learn how to receive.** We may be good at giving or “getting” things for ourselves, but most of us are not good at graciously receiving from others. People who cannot receive love never truly experience love.
- Do not let **fear of rejection** keep you from asking for what you need.
- **Apologize and forgive often.** The words, “Will you forgive me?” or “I forgive you,” 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.
- **Reach out to others** in need. Sit with someone who is grieving. Pray specifically for your friends. Be fully present when others need you.
- **Reach out for others** when you are in need. Don’t be an island.
- **Create** trust by giving yourself permission to be vulnerable and take some risks.
- **Establish community.** Be accountable; get involved. Share yourself with others. If you sit in the bleachers and watch, you may stay safe, but you will never be truly connected. God made you for community; it is His answer to loneliness.
- **Shift** to more positive self-talk.

Ten key intimacy needs

Examine these needs. Rank them in order of importance in your life. How will you get these needs met? How effective are you at telling your spouse what you need?

Acceptance: This is the need to be accepted just as you are, with all your feelings, choices, personality traits and so on, and to not be required or forced to change. It also involves accepting others by looking beyond their flaws and faults, by being present, and by helping them deal with their failures and disappointments. (Romans 15:7)

Affection: This need involves expressing care and closeness through non-sexual physical touch, kindness, thoughtfulness, considerateness, playfulness, romantic gestures and saying tender words like, "I love you." (Romans 16:16; Mark 10:16)

Appreciation: This is the need to experience gratitude, praise, or commendation from others, having our efforts or accomplishments recognized. It provides depth to acceptance. "I admire you. I delight in you. I prize you. I acknowledge you. I appreciate you as unique." We demonstrate this by praising people verbally, and by focusing on what others do right. (Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 11:2)

Approval (Blessing): This is the need to be affirmed or built up by another or someone affirming the importance of their relationship with you. Approval is a confirmation of our OKness and value to someone else. The focus is on who we are, not what we do. (Eph. 4:29; Mark 1:11)

Attention: This suggests being given appropriate interest, concern, and care; someone taking thought of us or entering into our world. We demonstrate attention by spending time with people, by listening, by being fully present and by encouraging them to talk about their hopes and dreams, feelings, goals, and plans. (1 Cor. 12:25)

Comfort: Involves feeling properly responded to when hurting with words, feelings, and touch; entering a person's grief and pain; to hurt with and for them. To show comfort, learn the vocabulary of comfort: "I'm sorry you are hurting" "I hurt for you" "I am here." Use appropriate physical gestures—being physically present, a warm embrace, holding someone's hand, wiping a fevered brow. (Romans 12:15; Matt. 5:4; 2 Cor. 1:3-4; John 11:35)

Encouragement: Being urged by another to persist and persevere toward a goal; stimulating toward love and good deeds. To encourage, learn to recognize people who are weary or discouraged. Stay in touch via phone calls or texts or send cards and pray for them. (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:24)

Respect: The need to feel valued and regarded, being treated as important or significant, being honored by another. Respect suggests we honor other people's time, property, privacy, and personal preferences, that we keep confidences, do not gossip, and eliminate all prejudices. (Romans 12:10)

Security (Peace): Suggests harmony in relationships; freedom from fear or threat of harm. Be faithful, dependable, consistent, and trustworthy. To provide security, keep your promises and provide for those to whom you are responsible. Let people know that you are aware of their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs and that you are committed to being a part of God's provision to meet those needs. Be consistent in how you relate to others. (Romans 12:16, 18)

Support: Coming alongside and gently helping with a problem or struggle; providing appropriate assistance. To show support, notice when people are experiencing periods of high stress and be available, offer to use personal resources to help (1 John 3:17) and be willing to do practical tasks to help others. (Gal. 2:2)

Issues with change

Couples want it, but they are rarely explicit what “it” is. Personal change is both an internal and external process. Most see change as a simple external event with a beginning and an end

Behavioral versus developmental change

Classic examples:

“All I ask is that you call me when you are going to be late. Why can’t you do that when you know it upsets me so much when I don’t hear from you?”

“Why can’t you remember to—take out the trash, put your dishes in the dishwasher, turn off the lights, pick up your shoes?”

Behavioral change is a relatively quick change in thinking, emotions, relationships, or interpretations, while developmental change is a gradual evolution that takes time

Behavioral change: pick up your shoes, turn off the light. If no confounding issues, relatively fast.

Developmental change: unlearning old and relearning new; best if highly motivated and some payoff. Slow, nearly always confounding issues (then very slow).

Behavioral change takes awareness, willingness, and motivation. It is conscious or at least semi-conscious. There is not a strong habitual or emotional component.

Developmental is deeper, more layered, and more emotional; childhood issues interfere. Requires change in patterns likely developed since childhood.

So, when change doesn’t happen quickly, especially if the person is willing, it’s likely (internal) developmental.

Problem: spouse asking for change nearly always assumes it’s a behavioral change (because to them, it is). Every behavior or pattern serves a purpose; one that’s both out of awareness and resistant to change. It will not change until the purpose is understood and addressed.

Ending a behavior nearly always feels like a form of loss; something must be “let go” (even when not certain what, why or how difficult)

So, change is hard because of the internal process of dealing with loss, something must end—our freedom, comfort, independence, selfishness, manhood, childhood identity, view world or self. Worse, this internal process is, at best, obscure to us and invisible to our partner.

The Problem

When one asks the other to change, it is seen by them as a (simple; no brainer, if you loved me) behavioral, external change when in fact it is likely a (difficult, time-consuming, personal) developmental, internal change. Why? Our brains are self-organizing, any change demands re-organization, which is never instantaneous. Language of change: “Something must be wrong— with me...or you!”

Core needs that preclude change

Am I safe?
Am I secure?

Am I loved?
Am I wanted?

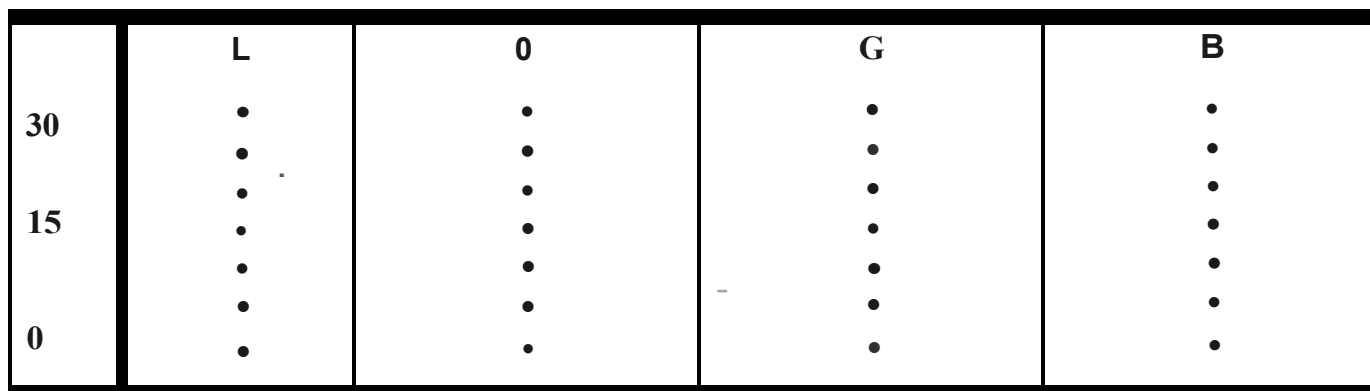
Am I good enough?
Do I have a purpose?

Family Personality Overview

In each box, circle each word or phrase that describes a consistent character trait of yours. Total the number circled and multiply by 2.

Lion		Otter	
Takes charge Assertive Bold Enterprising Decision maker Goal driven Enjoys challenge	Determined Firm Purposeful Competitive Leader, Self-reliant Adventurous	Takes risks Motivator Fun loving Very Verbal Enjoys change Group oriented Avoids detail	Visionary Energetic Likes variety Promoter Creative Mixes easily Optimistic
“Let’s do it now.”		“Trust me, it will work out”	
Total x 2 = _____		Total x 2 = _____	
Golden Retriever		Beaver	
Loyal Even keel Enjoys routine Good listener Sympathetic Nurturing Tolerant	Non-demanding Avoids conflict Dislikes change Adaptable Thoughtful Patient Deep relationships	Deliberate Reserved Practical Factual Detailed Inquisitive Persistent	Controlled Predictable Orderly Discerning Analytical Precise Scheduled
“Let’s keep things the way they are.”		“How was it done in the past?”	
Total x 2 = _____		Total x 2 = _____	

Chart the totals from above on the following graph



Personality Descriptions

Lion (Choleric)

<i>Basic motivations</i>	Results, challenge, a tendency to gravitate to leadership in whatever group you're in.
<i>Greatest strengths</i>	Takes charge, decisive, strong leadership, loves a challenge. Desires situations which allow freedom from being controlled by others, authority. Responds best to others who provide direct answers, stick to business, stress logic.
<i>Time orientation</i>	Let's do it now!
<i>Greatest weakness</i>	Insensitivity, failing to listen to others. Needs to learn that they need people and that relaxation is not a crime, everyone has a boss, even if it's God!

Otter (Sanguine)

<i>Basic motivations</i>	Recognition, appreciation, approval.
<i>Greatest strengths</i>	Enthusiasm, getting people motivated, having a good time; love developing relationships, verbalizing ideas.
<i>Time orientation</i>	The future
<i>Greatest Weakness</i>	Subject to peer pressure, needs to be liked, can make quick decisions without the facts. Needs to learn that time controls and deadlines are important. Such a thing as being too optimistic. Favorite saying, "Trust me, it will all work out."

Golden Retriever (Phlegmatic)

<i>Basic motivations</i>	Deep relationships, genuine appreciation for being part of a team.
<i>Greatest strengths</i>	Loyalty, nurturing, listening skills, looks for situations that allow being part of a team, clearly defined goals and steps to reach them.
<i>Time orientation</i>	The present
<i>Greatest weakness</i>	Can carry the weight of the world on shoulders, can absorb emotional pain. Needs to learn to say "no!" and that change can provide opportunity. Can't be best friends with everyone.

Beaver (Melancholy)

<i>Basic motivations</i>	To do things right, quality control, check the details, fine print.
<i>Greatest strengths</i>	Accuracy, quality, following instructions. Desires situations which allow clearly defined tasks, security in relationships, stability, limited risk, assignments that require precision and careful planning.
<i>Time orientation</i>	How was it done in the past?
<i>Greatest weakness</i>	Can use their critical skills and high expectations to become critical of others. Needs to learn that thorough examination isn't always necessary.

MANAGING UNSOLVABLES

When you marry someone, you marry a particular set of unsolvable problems you will then work on for the next 10-20-30 years.

Nearly 70% of the issues or problems will be unsolvable or perpetual. Marriage inevitably brings a particular set of challenges due to differences in values, expectations, personality, backgrounds, experiences, and ways of thinking. A relationship is two people with differing ideas, experiences, and wants that compete for resources.

Unsolvable are dangerous because it is too easy to:

- drop into a right-wrong mindset
- think 'true love' means no problems
- fail to see differences as opportunities for intimacy and growth

Here's the challenge

We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training.

We have to expect there will be problems, recognize our rigid, myopic way of looking at them, and find healthy ways of managing (vs. solving) the problems our differences create.

Managing -what does it look like?

- Not controlling or looking for quick fixes.
- Finding common ground solutions instead of win-lose.
- Finding peace, serving one's spouse, caring.
- Letting go of being right or having your way.
- Finding meaning; what God is trying to teach.
- Sharing wants and needs; mutual submission.
- Being curious, listening, accepting.
- Focusing on marriage enrichment rather than trying to change our partner.
- Aligning our nervous systems.
- Regulating our emotions; optimal arousal.
- Self-regulation

Summary: The key is recognizing our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors and how they affect our partner. Controlling our emotions and behavior to be able to respond thoughtfully and respectfully and to foster empathy, reduce conflict, and strengthen intimacy. Wanting what's best for our partner and marriage.

How?

- Looking inward for need to control, dominate or play martyr
- Ability to handle (well) discomfort/pain/not winning
- Pausing before reacting to avoid escalation
- Staying calm during disagreements to listen and understand.
- Channeling emotions into constructive communication.
- Willing to live/love in the GAP
- Optimal arousal

Problems, conflict, disagreements, and unmet needs can lead to heightened emotional arousal. We call this hyperarousal. *Optimal arousal* is the sweet spot.

Problems cannot be solved at the level they are created. They are buried in our genes, past experiences, observations and emotional makeup. That mix of differences is what creates tension in our relationships. Marriages don't fail due to the presence of perpetual issues, but the *mismanagement* of them. It is seldom big things, but lots of little "misses" that can derail a marriage.

What makes a problem unsolvable?

- They are rooted in identity, not behavior.
- They reflect lifelong traits (personality, temperament, family of origin, preferences), not temporary habits.
- Attempts to "fix" them nearly always lead to gridlock, resentment, or emotional shutdown and the conflict feels like a threat to the relationship's future.

Examples of perpetual problems

- One partner is habitually running behind, the other wants to be early.
- One partner is more of a spender, the other is a saver.
- One partner is more extroverted, the other more introverted.
- One partner wants more we-time and the other wants more me-time.
- One partner is more spiritually involved, the other is less or not.
- One partner wants sex more frequently than the other partner.

When couples don't manage unsolvable issues -

- One or both feels rejected by partner.
- Discussions lead to dead ends, no headway.
- Both become entrenched in their position and unwilling to budge or be flexible.
- Discussing the subject invariably leads to frustration and hurt.
- Conversations about the problem lack grace, humor, amusement, or affection.
- Neither accepts their partner's influence, meaning they do not allow their partner's needs or perspective to influence their position on the issue.
- No search for the bigger meaning God intends.
- Stunted emotional and spiritual growth.

What to do when stuck?

Stop trying to "fix" the problem

- Perpetual problems become more frustrating with each attempt to fix it, so stop looking for a solution.
- Accept that the problem isn't something you can make go away.
- Acceptance doesn't mean giving up. It means seeing the issue for what it is.
- Clarity comes when we stop asking, "*How are we going to fix this?*" and ask "*What can we learn from this?*" *How can this deepen our relationship?*"

Build a framework for honest dialogue

In the process of exploring or uncovering one's hidden or unexpressed dreams, anxiety or fear around the lack of fulfillment can emerge. That can make starting a dialogue with your partner even more stressful. The key is to create a space of mutual respect, validating each other's feelings, focusing on how you relate to one another and listening well to fully understand what the other wants and needs.

Explore how to discuss the issue and manage differences.

Every relationship issue is two problems: the actual problem and how we address it. Satisfaction is not related to the actual issue, but rather *how* we discuss and manage the issue.

Identify the patterns

If you keep coming back to the same issues, investigate the pattern these conversations take. Example, when dealing with an issue, you find yourselves back on a topic that never seems to resolve itself. Identifying the pattern can help break the cycle or at least create awareness of what drags every conversation back to the same issue.

Identify the core issue

Slow down and get curious. Ask each other about the dreams behind the issue. Sometimes it's a story from childhood. Other times it's an unlived goal.

Learn to honor/validate/value differences

As dreams or unexpressed issues, needs, or wants are explored, validate and honor each. This doesn't mean tacit agreement but honoring your partner. Embracing differences is an act of love.

Be open to digging deeper

When we're aware of the root cause, an unsolvable problem becomes more concrete in our minds. It stops being an abstract issue looming over the relationship, which lowers the emotional stakes for everyone involved.

Helpful Questions

1. Are there any core beliefs that you hold around your position on this topic?
2. Is there a meaningful story behind this? Maybe something from your childhood or other past experiences?
3. Why is this issue so important to you?
4. What is your ideal dream here?

Here's how to start:

- Encourage each other to express their unmet needs and listen without judgment or criticism.
- Learn how to soothe each other when emotions become overwhelming.
- Define areas of compromise.
- Talk through and understand the GAP.
- Last, decide (not slide) to embrace the GAP.

Too many couples 'slide' through issues or life experiences rather than deciding who they are and where they intend to go.

Choose how to support each other's dreams and how to serve each other in the GAP. Couples who thrive don't try to *solve everything*—they stop fighting and learn to self-manage and live gracefully with their differences.

Questions to discuss

- Can you help me to understand the differences between our needs or values?
- What are your guiding feelings here?
- What feelings and goals do we have in common? How might these goals be accomplished?
- Help me to understand your flexible areas. Let's see which ones we have in common.
- How can I help you to meet your core needs?
- What temporary compromise can we reach on this problem?

I like the idea of **attunement**. Here's the acronym:

Awareness of your partner's emotion

Turning toward the emotion

Tolerance of two different viewpoints

Trying to **U**nderstand your partner

Non-defensive responses to your partner

Responding with **E**mpathy and grace

TALK TIME ...

CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE

Never think your spouse shouldn't be hurt or upset by something that wouldn't hurt you.

Here's what we know:

- Most fights are really protests over emotional disconnection.
- Most people hate/fear conflict and consequently do it poorly.
- Few couples learned how to handle conflict well and tend to repeat their parent's style. Most have no clue how to communicate their anger in a healthy way.

The problem is seldom the 'problem.' The *REAL* problem is:

- typically, something unsaid, perhaps not fully known.
- not what they're arguing over, but inability to recruit one another as resources in dealing with it.
- inability to manage their own anxiety when things inevitably began falling apart.
- people are never the problem.

More than 80% of the time, the wife brings up "sticky" potentially conflictive issues; the husband attempts to avoid these issues at a similar rate.

What is conflict?

Conflict is an opportunity for growth, healing, clarity or not!

What's your mindset? Your training?

Key: How you see conflict determines what happens next.

How we are trained

Most couples have been trained to see conflict as combat, win or lose.

Some see it as a personal attack on their character.

Some are frozen by the possibility of a partner leaving.

Some simply give in to avoid being hurt.

How do you view it?

Marital conflict is inevitable. The real key is *how* conflict is managed. How a conflict is managed can determine not only the strength of a relationship but also its longevity.

Conflict does not have to become combat, but it often does.

Causes

Conflict is most often about competing or unmet needs, or a lack of emotional responsiveness. Over time, frustration builds.

Think about that for a moment.

Even when poorly presented, it's bid for closeness, connection, or understanding a deep need. That means dealing with the message under the conflict.

Conflict simply means that the couple is still engaged; still trying to connect and frustrated; with competing needs.

Why does conflict happen?

Something is missed, neglected, misunderstood, or taken for granted.

That means...

Either I missed it or you weren't communicating your needs clearly OR most likely both.

Reasons

- We are not mind-readers.
- We don't really listen well.
- We are self-absorbed, selfish.
- Our brain doesn't like change, but it can adapt.
- We operate in a semiconscious state based on childhood training (we assume things) i.e., "Men don't care" "Women are never satisfied" "I never get my way."

What are your false beliefs and expectations?

Hint: What feelings are evoked with your earliest memories?

Change how you do conflict

Change your preconceived notions about yourself and your partner.

Assume it's about your issues first, then investigate.

Remind yourself that the other person is someone you love and value.

Wait before responding.

Look for the need under the attack or anger.

What is your conflict cycle?

It's always more important than the topic.

Criticism always leads to defensiveness.

Reframe the cycle from criticism to complaint; from character attack to vulnerable need.

Ex. *When you don't help you don't care about me* VS-

When I feel alone with responsibilities, and become anxious and resentful, I need to know we are a team.

Conflict Styles

Conflict-Avoiding – Minimize persuasion, focus on common ground, avoid expressing needs; may lack emotional expressiveness; maintain a 5:1 positive-to-negative ratio.

Volatile – Highly emotional, debate-intensive, but respectful; have a 5:1 ratio, express connection and honesty, and often use humor.

Validating – Calm, neutral, and easygoing; somewhat expressive but mostly neutral, avoiding extremes. Still 5 to 1.

Hostile – Use criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling; more likely to stay unhappy in marriage.

Hostile-Detached – Combine hostility with emotional withdrawal, making them the most divorce-prone.

Healthy Conflict

- Starts with a soft vs. hard start-up
- Involves active listening and curiosity
- Remember- this is a person you love.
- Respectful, constructive communication
- Maintains a 5-1 ratio
- Pauses, ask clarifying questions, seeks to understand
- De-escalates
- Take breaks
- Uses “I” statements
- Owns their part

Healthy conflict transforms how relationships evolve by inviting honesty and vulnerability, encouraging deeper intimacy. When couples engage in healthy conflict, it can provide the pathway to understanding, creating a shared language where both voices and feelings matter. Healthy conflict strengthens trust and opens pathways for growth.

By adopting effective communication strategies and reframing conflicts as opportunities, you can build a resilient partnership. It is not about fighting to win; it’s about fighting for the relationship. Navigating conflicts with love and respect forms the *cornerstone* of a lasting, fulfilling bond. This transforms the perception of conflict from a destructive force to a constructive tool in deepening your connection.

Here is the Secret

- Conflict is not the problem, managing it well is.
- The key is to maintain a 5 to 1 ratio.
- Learn how to regulate emotions and de-escalate hyperarousal.
- People are not the problem.

Habits to Form

- Stay emotionally regulated
- Speak respectfully
- Listen to understand, not rebut
- Take responsibility for your contribution
- Repair after the conflict

Four Horseman

Criticism vs. complaint

Contempt

Defensiveness

Stonewalling

Conflict Rules

- Communicate clearly and calmly using “I” statements.
- Whoever brings it up first says what they *need*, not what the partner did wrong.
- Not relitigating old fights. Stay on today’s issue only.
- Listen to understand; practice active listening.
- Assume good intentions rather than jumping to accusations.
- If either is too heated to talk, name a time to come back ‘later.’
- Identify the real issue; surface arguments often hide deeper needs or fears.
- Focus on the problem, not the person.
- Never go to bed still upset; however, talking it out isn’t the goal, naming the *need* is.
- Take breaks when needed; brief time-outs prevent escalation and hyperarousal.
- Apologies come with change, not just words.
- If we’re stuck, we ask, “What would this look like if we were on the same team?” OUT LOUD.

TALK TIME...

REPAIR

Healthy couples are not conflict-free; they repair quickly. ***Our intent doesn't trump or erase the impact. The goal is to protect the marriage, not yourself.***

Repair attempt

Any statement, action, small word or gesture —silly or otherwise—designed to de-escalate tension, reconnect emotionally, or stop a conflict, prevents negativity from escalating out of control.

Anything that helps us shift from “me vs. you” to “us vs. the problem.” It doesn't have to be perfect, poetic, or dramatic. It just has to signal: “I care more about us than about winning this argument.”

Simple repair phrases:

“That came out harsher than I meant.” “Help me understand.”

“I can see why that hurt.” “We're on the same team.” “Can we restart?”

Examples:

- Humor: a gentle joke, playful comment, or light moment
- Acknowledgment: “I hear you.” “You're right that this is important.”
- Taking responsibility: “I shouldn't have said it that way.”
- Soothing gestures: Reaching for a hand, softening tone, or offering a hug.
- Time-outs: “I want to keep talking, but I need a minute to calm down.”
- Reframing: “We're on the same team. Let's figure this out together.”
- Curiosity: “Help me understand what you're feeling.”

Healthy sustainable relationships are not built on endless self-sacrifice (one-sided martyrdom). They're built on two regulated nervous systems that take turns caring for each other—and themselves.

Successful repair attempts are one of the strongest predictors of long-term marital stability. Not because couples never fight—but because they know how to come back to connection quickly. Repair attempts can differentiate healthy from unhealthy (toxic, close to splitting) couples. Forgiveness is not the same as repair. Forgiveness addresses the offence; repair addresses the relationship.

Repair rules

- Acknowledge the disconnect
- Stop the escalation; prioritize getting your nervous systems regulated
- Own your part, share your wounds and concern
- Create safety
- Validate the hurt
- Apologize specifically (identify the behavior)
- Make and respond to emotional bids.

- Repair is built on actions.
- Ask what would help repair it.
- Both make and receive bids for connection, touch, warmth.
- Speak your needs without attacking each other; use “I” messages.
- Point is to understand, not win.
- Take as much time as needed.
- Make a commitment to change.
- Look for the deeper meaning, the spiritual lesson. What is this trying to teach us.

TALK TIME...

REPAIR TOOLS

REPAIR TOOL #1—Apology

A simple sincere, heartfelt apology can do wonders for a relationship, especially if you are seen as a person who never admits they are wrong or at fault.

Ex.: *I'm sorry; I apologize; What I did was really stupid; I don't know what got into me.*

REPAIR Tool #2—Confide feelings

Be honest and share feelings underneath the anger such as fear, embarrassment, or insecurity. Confiding what is in your heart and in your mind can make a huge difference in promoting understanding, closeness, and intimacy.

Ex.: *I was really afraid for our daughter when I got so angry; I didn't want to hurt you; I just lost my cool.*

REPAIR TOOL #3—Acknowledge your partner's point of view.

This doesn't mean you have to agree with it; just acknowledging it can decrease tension and conflict because it shows your partner you are at least listening to them. It also demonstrates empathy.

Ex.: *I can see what you mean; I never looked at it that way.*

REPAIR TOOL #4—Accept responsibility for the conflict.

Very few conflicts are 100% the fault of either partner. Instead, most are like a dance with both parties making moves to contribute to the problem. Inability to accept any responsibility is a sign of defensiveness rather than openness or humility.

Ex.: *I shouldn't have done what I did; I guess we both blew it; I can understand why you reacted to me that way.*

REPAIR TOOL #5—Find common ground.

Focus on the issue at hand and what you have in common rather than your differences.

Ex.: *We seem to both have the same goal here; we don't agree on methods but we both want the same outcome.*

REPAIR TOOL #6—Commit to improve behavior.

"I'm sorry" doesn't cut it if you continually repeat the offensive behavior. Backup words with action. Show concrete evidence that you will try to change.

Ex.: *I promise to get up a half-hour earlier from now on; I'll call if I'm going to be late.*

REPAIR TOOL #7— "Catch Method"

1. Starts with validating what your partner is saying. What about their story can you agree with? Words like: "*it makes sense to me that....*" and "*I can understand where...*"
2. Next, communicate that you understand the primary emotion that they are feeling.
3. Then, if your partner will allow, gently reach for their hand, or lightly touch their shoulder, arm, or leg.
4. Next, if you need more information in order to understand more of the situation, ask a curious question.

Thanks for participating!