

Relational Skills for Couples

A Developing Healthy Relationships Monograph



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InStep Ministries

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Introduction

"Success in marriage is more than finding the right person: It is being the right person."

-Robert Browning, **10 Key Skills**

Welcome to *Relational Skills for Couples*. We wrote this workbook to help couples find greater peace and joy in their marriage. Strong marriages feature two individuals who are committed to being healthy and to developing some healthy relationship skills. However, getting healthy and developing these skills can be a challenge. Key steps in this process include choosing to love like Jesus and being honest about what you feel, think, and need. Another step is to take responsibility for your wellbeing and for own your behavior while not blaming your partner for all the problems in your marriage. Healthy couples do not blame each other; they work together and encourage each other. We have come to understand that problems in marriage are really opportunities God provides to help us to learn more about ourselves and to grow together as we seek mutually satisfying solutions. Actually, many of the problems couples face have no obvious solution, so they must be managed. In many ways, marriage is about personal growth and maturity, played out in the context of a relationship.

Long before we marry, the seeds of marital success or failure have already been planted within us. Childhood experiences and our observations and impressions from our parents' relationship have a way of becoming patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. As adults, these patterns become a filter for our expectations, perceptions, and interactions. Jesus reminds us to get the log out of our own eye before dealing with the speck in our neighbors'. That principle is a good reminder to always work on being the best possible spouse instead of trying to change our partner. Yes, old patterns and habits are tough to change, but not impossible. We can attest to that. God will be right there with you.

Choose to grow together as a couple as you work through the pages of this workbook. Besides our own research and experience counseling hundreds of couples, we have included the thinking of some of the brightest minds in the area of marriage. However, nothing can improve on the wisdom of God. So have your Bible ready as you begin this journey together.

God created marriage as a living, breathing portrait laid out before the eyes of the world so that they might see the story of the ages. A love story, set in the midst of desperate times. It is a story of redemption, a story of healing; it is a story of love. God gives us marriage to illustrate His heart toward us"

—John and Stasi Eldredge, *Love and War*.

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*.

Someone once said that we grow up in our marriage, and we know that is true, but growing up can be difficult. We challenge you to learn some skills to love and serve your spouse, just as Christ loved and served the Church. God bless you as you begin this journey. Stay the course. Be courageous (Joshua 1:9).

Jeff and Judi Parziale

Personal Wholeness *Living God's Way*

There is something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness and finality. Because we are made for eternal life, we are made for an act that gathers up all the powers and capacities of our being and offers them simultaneously and forever to God.

-Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

What happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives much the same way that fruit appear 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 energies wisely. Galatians 5:22-23 (Message)

Wholeness is God's Desire

What a beautiful word picture of wholeness Paul paints for us in Galatians. The word wholeness is similar to the Hebrew word Shalom. We often translate Shalom as peace, but it means much more, it suggests emotional and spiritual wholeness through a vital connection with God. Wholeness symbolizes the totality of how we can become healthy individuals and marriage partners. This is God's desire for us. Wholeness describes individuals who have an identity rooted in Christ, who have learned to manage and regulate their emotions and who can be with people but not become enmeshed and lose their own identity. Wholeness allows us to see ourselves and others as uniquely created by God. It describes those who can differentiate between what they think and what they feel and who are willing to tolerate pain and discomfort for the sake of growth. Jesus embodied wholeness.

Why wholeness?

Why talk about wholeness in a marriage workbook? Because it takes people (you) willing to grow, adjust, serve and commit. Marriage between two imperfect (selfish, anxious, controlling, frightened, etc.) people is always going to be problematic. Wholeness happens when God develops well-formed maturity in us. This allows us to love and cherish our partner freely, without needing to blame, control or change them, out of our fullness in Christ. It recognizes that we are all imperfect beings, trying our absolute best. It helps us to embrace and enjoy imperfect love and allows us to be honest and to share our feelings, wants and needs without demanding that our partner fulfill them. It makes us less selfish and keeps us from expecting more from each other than we do from ourselves. It reminds us to keep growing as well as encouraging our partner to grow. Wholeness empowers us to serve our partner with joy, even when that is tough and unrequited. It is the dynamic of grace, which each of us desperately needs from God and from each other.

To become whole means you must embrace change, not because you are inadequate but because God will always call you to a higher purpose, to a greater level of peace and joy. It takes courage to change. It takes courage to look in the mirror and recognize areas in our own life that are causing or contributing to the struggles in our marriage (read James 1:19-25). Dr. Brené Brown studies vulnerability and shame. In her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, she talks about the courage of those who have struggled with immense shame. "Courage originally meant, 'To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.' Over time...it's become more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important...but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good or bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is

often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today's world, that's pretty extraordinary" (pp. 12-13).

We want to be peaceful, joyful, have great marriages, feel great, make a difference, live meaningful lives, etc.—you get it. Yet many do not. We live in the richest, most technologically advanced country in history—yet we are isolated, lonely, over-medicated and addicted. Why—because we are constantly looking for shortcuts—we want to avoid the hard stuff. You can be all that God intended for you, but you “gotta do the work.”

Talk about it: What ‘work’ do you still need to do on yourself or your marriage? Are you living out Paul’s description of wholeness in Galatians 5? What will you do to change?

First Steps to Personal Wholeness

Personal wholeness is a lifelong journey that starts with the recognition that to be a great partner, parent or friend means you must embrace those things within you that require letting go. So **pray** and ask God for guidance. **Commit** to grow spiritually and emotionally. **Work** on this daily. **Hone** your relational skills. **Observe** how you react to others and how they react to you. **Look** for patterns. **Ask** others for honest feedback. **Surround** yourself with a support network that might include a mentor or coach. **Assume** you have some blindspots and actively work to illuminate them. Do not allow emotional pain to stop you from being all God has called you to be. Study 2 Peter 1:3-9.

In Galatians 5 Paul asks, *What happens when we live God's way?* In Romans 12:1-2 he tells us how to live God's way. *So, here's 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 (MSG).*

Developing or maintaining your own healthy identity is tough however, when you have been wounded by the past or when you have a head full of negative messages from childhood. However, the task for all of us is the same, become whole, and develop healthy relationship skills. You know the ache in your stomach, or the fear that's always present or the negative critical voices playing in your head or the rage just below the surface. You also know the damage they do to you, your marriage and your family. We know that you believe nothing can be done. Good news, you are wrong. Even a few small changes can make a huge difference.

Talk about it: have you embraced doing life and relationships “God’s way” How can you begin to practice wholeness? What are some blindspots that need attention? Have you committed to your marriage, your partner? What is your first step?

Rate your marriage now: 1-10. If it is below 5, what steps do you need to take together and separately? How will you be accountable?

What Does the Bible Say About Marriage?

When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it not primarily by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself.

--Tim Keller, The Meaning of Marriage.

The Bible has a lot to say about marriage and relationships. Let's look at a few key passages. Interestingly, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage. Many, looking at marriage in the Bible, start with 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. However, Paul wrote those beautiful words for every believer, not just for couples. It does serve as a great guide for how we are to treat one another. It offers the best definition of *agape*, or sacrificial love. For our purposes, let's begin at the beginning, after God announced it was not good for man to be alone.

Genesis 2:18, 21-24

God said, "It's not good for the Man to be alone; I'll make him a helper, a companion." God put the Man into a deep sleep. As he slept, he removed one of his ribs and replaced it with flesh. God then used the rib that he had taken from the Man to make Woman and presented her to the Man. The Man said "Finally! Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Name her Woman for she was made from Man." Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife. They become one flesh. The two of them, the Man and his Wife, were naked, but they felt no shame. MSG

Here we see the first couple. We can conclude from this account in Genesis that marriage is God's idea, designed and instituted by Him. In these verses, we also discover that at the heart of God's design for marriage is companionship and intimacy.

Man was created in the *image* of God (*eikon*). The purpose of an icon is to point to something greater. Thinking in terms of humans as icons, at the core, our purpose is to point to the Creator. If man was created to point to the Creator, then when a man and woman join together to become "one flesh," they need to be an "eikon" *together*. The goal of marriage is to reflect the Creator as a couple in the way we interact, make decisions, love each other, and love others.

Ephesians 5:21-28

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. Message

The picture of marriage expands into something much broader, with the husband-and-wife relationship illustrating the relationship between Christ and the church. Husbands are urged to lay down their lives in sacrificial love and protection.

Think about it: *Until you realize you and your mate were placed together for God's purposes, your marriage will be difficult, complicated, and exhausting.* God is already in your marriage working to transform the two of you. Your marriage is a lab for learning how to love like Jesus

loves. Within marriage, God has created an opportunity for us to develop true intimacy and authenticity with another human being. To go this deep requires genuine, heart-to-heart, gut-level sharing, where you and your spouse get honest about who you are and what is going on in your lives. This happens when you share your hurts, reveal your feelings, confess your failures, disclose your doubts, admit your fears, acknowledge your weaknesses, and ask each other for help and prayer.

Different yet Equal: 1 Peter 3:1-5, 7

In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands, even those who refuse to accept the Good News. Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior. Don't be concerned about the outward beauty ... You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God ... In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard. NLT

Clearly, God has powerful expectations for both husbands and wives. Though husbands and wives have different roles, both are equal heirs in God's kingdom. The roles are different, but equally important. Husbands and wives are equal partners. Wives are to demonstrate godly character and quiet inner beauty, while husbands are to honor their wives and show kindness and gentleness.

Could one of the deeper purposes of marriage be to make us confront our own character flaws, the behaviors, and attitudes we would never have seen nor faced otherwise? If we allow the challenges of marriage to force us to confront ourselves, we will be applying a spiritual discipline of tremendous value.

God designed marriage as an instrument to make us more like Christ. In *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas asks, *how can we use the challenges, joys, struggles and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God? What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?* Is it possible that there is something much more profound in the heart of God than simply to make us happy? Thomas says that we must stop asking of marriage what God never designed it to give: perfect happiness, conflict-free living, and idolatrous obsession. Instead, we can appreciate what God designed marriage to provide: partnership, spiritual intimacy, and the ability to pursue God together.

Can we lay down our own ambitions and love and serve our spouse? Through marriage we can learn about unconditional love, respectful honor, how to forgive and be forgiven. We can see our shortcomings and grow from that insight. We can develop a servant's heart and draw closer to God. As a result, true soul happiness can be discovered, and this, we believe is one of God's ultimate desires and purposes for designing the covenant of marriage.

Talk about it: are we committed to being holy?

Five Steps to a Great Relationship

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another. Ephesians 5:21 MSG

In *Five Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*, Terri Orbuch highlights the findings of a 20 year-long study funded by the National Institutes of Health. Starting in 1986, she followed the same 373 couples, which were married that year. What she found that really erodes or tears away at the happiness of a couple were not the big issues but the small, seemingly insignificant things. Her research suggests that consistent, small, and simple changes create a successful marriage.

Step One: Expect Less and Get More From Your Partner.

Many people assume that conflict is kryptonite to relationships, but the real culprit is frustration. Specifically, frustration forms when a partner's expectations go unmet. Frustration is the gap between what you expect to happen in your marriage and then what actually does. So the more "should" statements you have, the less likely those statements or those expectations are going to get met. And then you're going to get frustrated, which leads to unhappiness. Happy couples have realistic expectations, both about relationships in general and about their relationship in particular. The idea that healthy couples do not have conflict is a myth. Conflict is inevitable. In fact, couples that have zero conflict are likely not talking about the important issues in their relationship.

Practical tip: Write the top two expectations, the deal-breakers, for your relationship. Ask your partner to do the same thing. Switch the papers and then discuss each other's expectations. If you are not aware of each other's expectations, how can they meet them?

Talk about it: Do we understand each other's expectations? Are they realistic or reasonable? What can we do to make them reasonable or how can we compromise? How do we avoid conflict?

Step Two: Give Incentives and Rewards.

Affective (emotional) affirmation is a key to marriage happiness. It is not taking your partner for granted, but instead, letting your partner know that they are special and valued. Couples show affective affirmation through words and actions. It is as simple as saying "I love you" or "You're my best friend." Affirmative behaviors can be anything from turning the coffee pot on in the morning for your partner to sending them an encouraging or romantic email to filling their tank with gas. Contrary to popular belief, men need more affective affirmation than women because women can get it from other people in our lives. The key is to give regular, consistent affirmation.

Practical tip: An affirmation a day can keep a couple happy. Orbuch suggests either saying something affirming to your partner or doing something affirming for them once a day.

Talk about it: how well do we do affirmations? Tell each other how you like to be affirmed.

Step three: Have Daily Briefings for Improved Communication.

Most couples will say that they communicate but the type of communication most is referred to as "maintaining the household," which includes talks about paying the bills, buying groceries, helping the kids with homework, or calling the in-laws. Instead, meaningful communication

means getting to know your partner's inner world. Communication about important issues takes time. Happy couples know what makes their partners tick.

Practical tip: Practice the 10-minute rule. That involves talking to your partner for at least 10 minutes about something other than work, family or who is going to do what around the house. Couples can talk over the phone, by email or in person. The key is to get to know your partner. If you are not sure what to ask, try questions like, "What have you been most proud of this year?" "If you won the lottery, where would you want to travel to and why?" or "What are your top five movies of all time?" "What's on your bucket list?"

Talk about it: rate your style of communication. Is it mostly about the news or household needs?

4. Implement Change.

Every relationship gets into a rut. Implementing change can help, and there are many ways to do that. One way is to add something new. Another is to shift routines or areas of responsibility.

Practical tip: To reduce boredom and keep things fresh, change up your routine. For instance, find some new exotic restaurant in the city, vacation somewhere new or take a class together. Another strategy she suggests is to do an activity that gives you a surge of adrenaline or excitement. The arousal or adrenaline produced can actually be transferred to your relationship.

Talk about it: how are we at small changes and "course" corrections?

5. Keep Costs Low and Benefits High.

The first four steps focus on adding or bolstering the positives in your relationship. This step focuses on keeping the costs low. A happy couple has a 5 to 1 ratio of positive feelings or experiences for every negative one. It is not that you need to approach your relationship with a calculator, but it is important to "audit" your relationship regularly and consider the costs and benefits. Positive things really need to outweigh the negatives.

Orbuch's research also suggests that there are **six costly behaviors**: constant fighting, miscommunication, not sharing household chores, jealousy, keeping secrets and not getting along with a partner's family. If these exist in your marriage, **what will you do?**

Practical tip: You can audit your relationship by essentially making a traditional pros and cons list. Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left side, write down all the positive emotions and behaviors connected to your relationship. On the right, jot down all the negative emotions and behaviors. Share your lists. Which side is longer? What will you do with the issues on the right? Orbuch found that happy couples focus on the positives of their relationships. Therefore, it is important to strengthen what is already going well. This increases a couple's ability to deal with the negative issues in their relationship.

Orbuch also discusses way to keep sexuality alive in marriage. She offers three steps. First, add new activities to your relationship. The reason your marriage was passionate, exciting, and sexual at the beginning was because everything was new and different. So try to add some new activities that you're going to be doing with your partner. Second, you want to add a little mystery, surprise. Use the element of the unknown, again, to mirror or mock the beginnings of your

relationship. Third, do arousal-producing activities with your partner, activities that produce arousal or give you both an adrenaline rush.

Of the five issues Orbuch discusses, which is your best, your worst? What steps will you take?

Marriage Health Check

So what **contributes** to marriage health? The truth is that each of you is a product of the meaning you have derived from all your past relationships, starting with your parents and your siblings. For example, how you feel about your marriage right now has as much to do with how you view your parents' marriage as it does your spouse. There are several factors listed below. Put a number value next to each; 1 means very poor, 10 means excellent.

- ☐ Mental health of husband
- ☐ Mental health of wife
- ☐ Mental health of child (if more than one, give each a number)
- ☐ Spiritual health of husband
- ☐ Spiritual health of wife
- ☐ Spiritual health of child
- ☐ Behavioral problems of child
- ☐ Relationship with husband's extended family
- ☐ Relationship with wife's extended family
- ☐ Quality of couple friendships
- ☐ Addictions or self-defeating habits
- ☐ Support network (those who can provide advice, encouragement and accountability)
- ☐ Job satisfaction for husband
- ☐ Job satisfaction for wife
- ☐ Quality of family time
- ☐ Quality of family vacations
- ☐ Quality of communication between husband and wife
- ☐ Quality of communication between parent and child
- ☐ Quality of couple problem solving skills
- ☐ Quality of sex life
- ☐ Quality of couple time
- ☐ Dreams, goals, desire clearly shared

Talk about these. Low scores contribute to your current marriage struggle – these must be dealt with. Those high scores are marriage strengths – build on these. Notice any patterns?

Happy couples sweat the small stuff. That's opposite from what we've learned in the media. A lot of couples sweep little annoyances and pet peeves under the rug. Over time though, these small everyday irritations can add up and become really big (and harder to unpack).

Dr. Terri Orbuch, *Five Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*

How Couples Approach Marriage

We meet, fall in love and get married. Entering marriage, we have three hopes, that all the good things we want in life will happen in our marriage, that we will keep all the good things

(thoughts, feelings, experiences) we have and that all the upsetting, unhappy things that happened in the past will never happen again. Of course, this leads to three premonitions. That those good things will not happen; that we will lose those good things and that those upsetting things from the past will happen again. The reality is that we will be disappointed or disillusioned.

A Marriage Parable Loosely Derived from Tim Keller's *The Meaning of Marriage*.

Everything seems great at first. You think, "my spouse is wonderful, he/she 'gets' me (TRANSLATION: "I don't have to change."). Sooner or later however, your spouse's actions begin to affect/bother/annoy you (oh oh!!!). You respond (appropriately of course) to *exactly* what he or she is doing. If the situation feels bad, for example, you ignore it, or you make subtle hints. Every time you get hurt, you pull back and trust less. You hope (magically) that your spouse will change (for the better, of course); after all, it is all their fault; you could not possibly have done anything wrong. You never really address your own issues—that would be too risky; you just withdraw, sulk, or act out. Of course, all this has nothing to do with you. *"The Christian principle that needs to be at work is Spirit-generated selflessness-not thinking less of yourself or more of yourself but thinking of yourself less"* Keller, p. 66. Can you relate?

However, unknown to us, the seeds of success or failure in our marriages are already within us. If we could take a giant step back and see a bigger picture of marriage and family health, like we explored in the last chapter, we might see some of the reasons. We will just cover a few.

First, we have expectations, ideas about how things should work. Most of these we carry deeply inside, usually so the other person will marry us.

Next we have internalized patterns of how to behave in a marriage.

Next we have a personality, which determines what I need to be happy and how I will react when I am not.

Finally, we have flaws. It could be a temper or a lack of impulse control.

We are drawn to relationships, we want to be love and be loved, but our capacity to pull that off may lacking.

Sure, we would still need to work at our marriage and make some of our own changes, but the marriage would become satisfying. To find true love, peace and joy, some things must be let go. How does that relate to your marriage?

Making Marriage Work

Marriage is glorious but hard. It's a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true.

-Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. 2 Cor. 5:17-18 MSG

To make a marriage work, we must be willing to unlearn some old habits, learn some new skills, be open to new solutions and avoid becoming “stuck” in old, unproductive ways of thinking or feeling. Relationships fail when couples ignore or avoid the issues (especially small ones) that concern them or remain stuck in ineffective ways of dealing with them. In fact, research suggests that the average couple waits seven years before they seek help for their problems. The most common approaches couples use to ‘deal’ with issues are to ignore them, hoping they will magically improve, or to blame the other person, hoping they will magically change. Not only are these methods ineffective, they will stunt your emotional and spiritual growth. There must be a better way.

Making Relationships Work

James 3:2 reminds us that “we all stumble in many ways.” Therefore, there are many areas where relationships can naturally struggle. Let us look at just two. First, there is the ongoing struggle between **autonomy** – being in control, being myself, and **belonging** – being loved and accepted in a close, committed relationship. Marriage features the need to balance the two so that we have closeness and belonging without giving up who I am. In fact, this balancing act continues throughout any relationship. Couples who are flexible and see this as an opportunity to both grow and serve one another tend to thrive. Couples who are rigid or who tend to either extreme tend to struggle. *How would you rate yourself?*

The second way we struggle is totally about us. Each of us has a unique belief system, a filter or lens through which we view and interpret everything. We interpret what our spouse does and why through the filter of those beliefs. More often than not, we misinterpret what is happening and ascribe motive as to what our spouse says or does. (There is actually a name for this, Fundamental Attribution Error, look it up) We overreact without realizing it. When we do not get all we want in the relationship, we attribute (blame) this to our partner. We blame them for any resulting tension/problems and expect them to change. We justify anything we say or do and remain blissfully clueless until either one of us cannot take it anymore.

We believe that what we do is simply respond to what our partner does. We see our beliefs as facts or reality; not as a filter that might be wrong (remember the log in your eye). In fact, everything is filtered through our beliefs, resulting in emotions and actions that are based on and reinforce those beliefs. What are some of those beliefs?

Poor me
If I’m not right I am nothing
You (not me) decide my worth
Can’t I just stay a lovable kid?
I must always get my way
Life is always unfair
Never be vulnerable
I’m afraid...

That’s just the way I am
Don’t make me angry
I’ll show you
I knew this would happen
All women... (All men...)
I know you want to leave me
I don’t trust you
I don’t know what to do

Talk about it: Are any of these your deep, maybe even hidden, beliefs? Describe your filter.

Our behavior (as innocent as it seems) affects our spouse. We may not see it, but we are really reacting from our internal filter. The problem is that we never challenge our own beliefs; we assume they are accurate and how the world actually works. To make matters worse, the more emotionally triggered (or wounded) we are, the more we dig in and hold tight to what we believe. We become immune to change and develop a form of tunnel vision.

The Bible calls our real problem self-centeredness or plain old selfishness (think sin). We do not just see things through our filter; we really think the way we see things and the way we respond to our spouse is right. We want things our way and are more skilled at getting our way than serving our spouse. Few couples take the time to challenge their thinking. "It's all about me" turns out to be a sad reality. Therefore, we perpetually ask the wrong questions like, "How can I get my spouse to change?" "Why can't you see that I'm right?" "How could you think/feel/act that way?" Why are you so stubborn/narrow-minded/obstinate/unreasonable? We would do well to internalize 1 Corinthians 13 and Romans 12:9-21.

Talk about it: how do you discover your filter?

Most relationships struggle because couples are oblivious to the real issues, too fearful to voice their concerns or blind to their own culpability. Many assume a great marriage should work like magic, fit like a glove, with little or no effort and that their own needs/hurts/issues are more significant, more urgent therefore more important than their spouses'. That is simply not realistic. So, here are some truths.

- **Marriage takes work** (work is not bad). More than anything else, marriage has the ability to peel back our layers and display our real self—it is not pretty. So, what does "peeling back" our layers mean? It means looking beneath the surface and not stopping until deep, often-unhealthy misbeliefs begin to surface. We need our layers peeled back, but we do not like it and jump right into denial and blame. In fact, if these layers are not peeled back, we may be forever miserable.
- The problems in your marriage are **likely more about you** than your spouse. This is true because of our irrational need to control and avoid any discomfort and our very jaded filter through which we interpret our spouse's behavior. The irony of Jesus' statement to get the 'log' out of our eye first should not be missed or dismissed.
- All marriages have conflict, but **conflict is really an opportunity** to explore differences, learn to manage some unresolvable tensions and find ways to love and serve one another. Most conflict arises from differing goals, priorities, or preferences. Managed properly, conflict can lead to tremendous intimacy.
- Not everything is great. Losses and disappointments happen. We do not get everything we want every time. Our partners are imperfect. We all have baggage
- Your spouse will DO THINGS that bug/hurt/annoy/upset you--deal with it and do not catastrophize, because you do the same to them.
- **Self-change must occur first**—ouch!! It is more "you" than you think. We typically paint ourselves into an emotional corner. We stop being responsible for our own happiness: "If I'm unhappy, it must be your fault...right? Wrong!!!

- Focus on **personal responsibility**, not blame or fault-finding.
- Anger, rage and acting out really start with frustration, which occurs when our needs are ignored or minimized.

God created marriage for the perfection of our character. It is in relationships that we learn to be unselfish and loving. And no relationship has greater impact on your life than marriage if you get married. The purpose of life is to grow up and realize it's not all about you. In fact, real happiness comes in giving your life away and being unselfish and serving and loving. This is called maturity. Life is a laboratory of learning how to love. It's the most important thing in life because God is love, and he wants you to become like him. He wants to make you like Jesus Christ. He wants you to build character. If you're married, the number one tool that God uses in your life to build Christ-like character is your spouse. Because every day you get hundreds of opportunities to not think about yourself but instead about the other person Rick Warren, Senior Pastor of Saddleback Church.

There is a **slippery slope** in the average marriage. At first, we are content and blissful, and then when an issue first arrives, we are surprised and confused. Since the average couple seldom proactively deals with issues early on, there is a period of struggle over what to do. Left unaddressed, problems typically persist, so couples can become miserable as they hope to ride out the problem or suffer in silence. Finally, there is a moment when one or the other reaches a breaking point. If the issues are still not adequately acknowledged and addressed, couples get stuck, and the marriage is in jeopardy.

Getting Stuck

When you become discouraged or feel hopeless, it is easy to get stuck. Being stuck is like wearing blinders; it can prevent you from seeing a bigger picture, including:

- Your own role in problem
- Any good in the relationship
- God's point of view and His love for you & your spouse
- The commitment you made and the love you had for that person
- The internal resilience you have to hang in there
- The role of forgiveness and acceptance
- The fact that even small changes can have a big impact
- The value of an objective outside party

If you stay stuck long enough, certain things are guaranteed to happen. You will become bitter and resentful. You will close down and stop searching for positive, effective answers. You will become more self-protective and self-reliant. "SELF" thinking usually leads to bad feelings and poor choices. Below are several actions that always lead or contribute to a downward spiral:

- Dwelling on everything your spouse does wrong and telling them repeatedly
- Being defensive whenever your spouse directs a complaint against you
- Telling anyone who will listen how hard your life is or how terrible your spouse is
- Pleading or begging to get things back in order, while taking no responsibility or having absolutely no idea how you got into this mess to begin with

Triggers and Double binds

Because we learn how to react emotionally very early, stress or adverse situations (like being stuck) in our marriage can trigger emotional responses similar to those we experienced in

childhood. This inevitably leads to emotional double binds that are created by hidden expectations, faulty relationship beliefs and self-fulfilling prophecies. For example:

- If you really loved me, you would know what I want and do it. (Since you do not do what I want, you must not love me).
- If you really loved me, you would agree with me all the time (Since you do not agree...)
- If we do not agree, one of us must be wrong (probably you). If it is me, I will feel bad, so I will have to prove it's you.
- If I have to tell you what I want, even if you do it, it does not count.

Talk about It: Which double binds do we use? Are we stuck in some rut?

How to Unlearn Old Habits and Start Doing Things Differently

Ask God for courage and to strengthen your faith. Pray for His guidance and peace as you and your spouse boldly commit to take a different direction. Realize that you are valued, loved, and forgiven by God. Think about the behaviors that are least effective at helping your marriage or the ones that upset your spouse the most. Practice stopping these old ineffective behaviors. We all know Einstein's definition of insanity, "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome." Memorize the word 'stop,' you will need it when you drift back into old habits. Learn some new ways of behaving to replace the old. Set some simple, doable goals for how you want your marriage to be. Start by describing what you want to accomplish, not what your spouse does wrong. Then describe these goals in action terms (things you can see and do). Talk to each other about your needs. Express your feelings in a healthy, nonthreatening, or nonjudgmental way. Speak clearly, listen carefully, and ask questions. Above all, keep it simple, but keep working at it.

Next, look at times when things were working well. What was different about the times you were getting along? Recall what you did in the past that made your marriage satisfying. Do what you did then; do not think-just do it. Focus on what is doable or possible-do what you can do. Pay attention to how your conflicts end. Notice particularly what was different about the times that problems occurred but something constructive happened or it did not bother you as much. Realize that both of you want the same thing—a great relationship.

Talk about it: Now it is time to work the plan. Make a promise to each other and keep it. Read 1 Corinthians 13 together. To break the negative cycle, become adept at communicating your wants and needs to one another. Stay committed. Try different things; do not give up. Celebrate wins. Learn a few simple skills and a willingness to take risks. These skills include:

- Communication: listen with empathy, share your thoughts and feelings honestly, and refrain from criticizing and encourage your partner to share his or her feelings.
- Conflict resolution: stay focused, stay present, be ready to forgive or apologize, know when to take a break, and look for win-win solutions.
- Know your partner: simply knowing a lot about your partner is a powerful way of showing that you care, and makes you better equipped to respond to his or her ongoing needs.
- Self-Management: develop emotional intelligence, awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and always strive for improvement. Know how to interpret disturbing events in positive ways and work hard to reach your goals.

- Sex and Romance: care about how to please your partner sexually, setting aside time for intimacy. Refrain from blaming each other when sex does not go smoothly and try to stay physically attractive for your partner.
- Stress management: use breathing, meditation, or other techniques to deal with stress. Know how to avoid or minimize stress allows you to better love and support your partner.
- Expressing feelings: find ways to tell your partner about your feelings and needs in a way that does not turn them off or make them defensive. Tell your truth in love.

Talk about it: what are your take-aways?

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

What is it about tears that should be so terrifying? The touch of God is marked by tears...deep, soul-shaking tears, weeping...it comes when that last barrier is down, and you surrender yourself to health and wholeness.

--David Wilkerson, *The Cross and the Switchblade*

Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you – your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust. So, don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. 2 Peter 1:3-7 MSG

Peter reminds us that God has given everything we need to live an abundant life. What an amazing verse. *Everything* we need to live healthy, whole lives and to have great marriages has already been given to us by God. It is as if Peter is telling us, all the ingredients you will need to live an abundant life have been given to you, now go put them together and live life-authentically and courageously. Wholeness starts with faith (believing and trusting God) and ends with love (receiving outrageous love for God and then being generous and compassionate toward others).

What if I'm struggling with wholeness (not feeling it)?

Wholeness is indeed a journey, and there are numerous obstacles and roadblocks to overcome. If you feel stuck, perhaps it is in one of these areas.

Denying and covering up our brokenness

We are all deeply flawed and broken. James tells us that we all stumble in many ways. True wholeness can never come from 'image management,' only by honest disclosure and vulnerability.

Minimizing our negative feelings

We were created as emotional beings. As image bearers of God, feelings, both good and bad, are normal and human. We mistakenly assume that fear, anger or worry have no place in our faith. Yet to deny these is to miss an opportunity to work through our own internal struggles. God uses our emotions to help us learn to trust Him and to give us freedom.

Living in false self

False self is actually easy to do; it is choosing to not live in freedom and instead to be controlled by 'shoulds' and the expectations of others. In *The Gift of Being Yourself*, David Benner writes, "The core of the false self is the belief that my value depends on what I have, what I can do, and what others think of me." Signs that you may be living in your false-self include: saying yes when you really mean no; needing approval to feel good about yourself; remaining silent to keep the peace; viewing your mistakes as failures; overcompensating just to be OK; comparing yourself negatively to others and losing your own identity just to please another (or to keep them around).

Talk about it: Which of the above are true for you? Why?

Steps to wholeness

In his amazing book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Pastor Peter Scazzero introduces us to a process for developing healthy spirituality. Below are three steps derived in part from his book.

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.” She lists several elements of authenticity including cultivating the courage to be imperfect, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, exercising compassion, setting boundaries, and “nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe that we are enough” (p. 50).

Living authentically for God means finding strength in your weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), being faithful to your true self, discerning your unique call and mission, understanding how He has uniquely made you and embracing your temperament, personality, likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Clearly, Jesus embraced His true self. In spite of untold expectations, He was always true to His calling. Living faithful to your true self is the ability to hold on to who (and whose) 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. Signs that you are operating in your true self include:

- You are secure in who you are and unaffected by criticism.
- You are certain of personal beliefs, but not dogmatic or closed.
- You can respect others without having to change them.
- You can listen without reacting and communicate without antagonizing or attacking.
- You are free to enjoy life and play.
- You are aware of dependence on others and responsibility for others.

“Self-care is never a selfish act, it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on this earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.” Parker Palmer

Four ways to develop your authentic self

1. Silence and solitude

We need to be alone so we can listen. Our lives are so full of distractions—noise, entertainment, busy-ness, and people who want to fix us or set us straight about how to live. Somehow we need to slow down enough to give ourselves time and space to hear from God.

2. Find traveling companions

Few of us are willing to peel back the layers of our self unless we have a few trusted companions with us. Bonhoeffer called it “Being alone together.” There are two obstacles to being healthy that we must overcome: the pressure from others to stay the same and our own uncanny ability for self-deception. Without mature companions, these obstacles are difficult to overcome. How do you find such companions? Pray for someone you can trust and be willing to be accountable.

3. Leave your “comfort zone”

Moving out of our false self can be scary and feel very awkward. Perhaps the greatest gift you can give is your true self in loving connection with God. Why is this so important? How can you affirm another's uniqueness if you cannot affirm your own? How can you possibly love others if you do not love yourself?

4. Pray for courage

It is tough to change deeply engrained patterns. Change always produces resistance from those nearest to us. From the study of family dynamics, we know that change can threaten the status

quo. Some will embrace your growth to become your true authentic self, others will be apathetic, but a few will be hostile. Ultimately, you must be willing to tolerate the discomfort necessary for growth. Keep growing – it is God call. (Romans 12:1-2)

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. In *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Scazzero calls it “going backwards to go forward.” He asks why so many of us continue to live lives with deeply entrenched parts of us that are seemingly untouched by the power of Jesus. He believes the reason is based on two biblical truths: First, that the blessings and sins of our families going back two or three generations profoundly affect who we are today. Second, that true discipleship (mature faith) requires that we put off sinful patterns of our family of origin and relearn how to live life God’s way in God’s family.

All families are broken; none of us comes from perfect parents. Many of us were hurt by negative messages that were generations in the making. The fear 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 are living out those messages as we speak. 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)

In God’s family, success is being faithful to His purpose and plan for our life. God declares us loveable. We are called to seek His Kingdom first (Matt 6:33). Discipleship is working out these truths in our everyday lives; putting off old false patterns and habits from our biological families and being transformed as members of Christ’s family. God’s intention is that we grow into mature people. We honor our families, but we obey God.

Becoming aware of our family of origin’s capacity for emotional connection is a critical component. 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 secure and healthy was my environment?” “Do I recall being comforted as a child after a time of emotional distress?” Not routine, mundane times, but times of real grief, hurt, stress or crisis. Can you remember being comforted after times like that? 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 our ability to love and to connect emotionally with people as adults. By looking honestly at the patterns that resulted, we can gain a picture of how we responded, and how those responses formed the patterns with which we relate to our world, to others and to God today. Then, we can begin a journey of growth and change – going back to move forward.

The point is that what happens to us growing up in our childhood leaves an imprint on the way we emotionally connect (or do not connect) and relate to others. We must look honestly if we are to be set free – to love and live the abundant life. We’re called to maturity, in our love for God, self and others. This is the basis of discipleship. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that loving God and loving others are connected. We cannot separate the two. So, if we want to

mature as a Christian, it involves our relationship with God, self, and others (The Great Commandment, Matt. 22:36-40).

Step Three: Become an emotionally mature adult- Grow

*By choosing integrity, I become more whole, but **wholeness** does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am.* Parker J. Palmer

Growing into an emotionally mature adult can be terrifying. It's frightening because for some of us, our "emotional awareness meter" is broken. We have never developed the self-reflective skills to even feel. We're 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 and to love well. Grace enables us to take risks and 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.

Emotionally mature adults (how do you score on these eleven principles?)

- ☐ Give people (and themselves) room to make mistakes
- ☐ Appreciate people for who they are
- ☐ Are able to 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, accepting others where they are, never intending to manipulate or control

Vulnerability is not winning or losing it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness it's our greatest measure of courage. A lot of cheap seats in the arena are filled with people who never venture onto the floor.

-Brené Brown, Rising Strong

Talk about it: What are your take-away's? Three steps to wholeness were presented.

Which is your strongest, weakest? What steps will you take to grow? What is your first step?

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

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2

We are God's image bearers. Created in His image as relational beings, we have a deep need for relational intimacy. We yearn to experience an authentic relationship motivated by caring involvement and characterized by deeply knowing and being known and loved. Yet, some doubt they will ever experience such a relationship. You may even be in a marriage right now where you feel your needs are not important, let alone being met.

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. Intimacy is the result of the interactions of personal emotions. People dominated by negative emotions, such as fear, pain, lack of self-esteem, shame, etc. will tend to largely avoid healthy intimacy. People dominated by positive emotions, such as confidence, trust, patience, etc. will tend to demonstrate these emotions in generally more positive and healthier intimate relationships. Intimacy is a 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.

The keys to intimacy include authenticity (knowing/embracing who we are), disclosure (revealing my true self to another), vulnerability (open, candid, accountable) and servanthood (reaching out to serve another vs. serving myself). Authenticity involves believing that as a person, you are enough and 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 increases vulnerability, but 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, and that part of being in relationship with them 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.

Intimacy is relational; it is not something you can do on your own. It is dependent on there being a shared commitment and interest. Building intimacy is reliant on a clear knowledge of your own and your partner's preferences and a willingness to put time and energy into the relationship. In intimacy, you risk being who you are, and risk facing who the other person is in their entirety, not just those parts which are socially acceptable or in some way "useful" to you. Intimacy means

the mutual and honest expression of all parts of one's life: anger, worry, elation, sorrow, and other emotions, as well as one's aspirations, dreams and doubts. Intimacy cannot exist in unhealthy relationships--too much fear and deceit. Many of the lies, manipulations and secretive behaviors in unhealthy relationships are based on our inability to be intimate.

Creating intimate relationships often eludes us. We desperately want one, yet fear being in one. Intimacy takes work and forces us to focus on someone other than ourselves. We fear self-discovery or having others discover who we are. Intimacy begins when you share something emotionally meaningful with someone else. Risk is always involved. You are taking a chance that the listener is trustworthy.

There are numerous fears hindering intimacy, such as:

- fear of losing oneself
- giving up one's personal identity in exchange for being loved or approved of
- fear of not being good enough or lovable if your true self were known
- fear of loss of control or of not being in charge of oneself
- fear of being open and vulnerable to another or the situation
- fear of rejection, hurt or not being liked or accepted

The two biggest enemies of intimacy are a lack of self-awareness and a fear of self-disclosure. Whenever we fear intimacy, we tend to hide it or express it indirectly through manipulation or control. Fear builds strong walls keeping us from becoming self-aware and open to others. However, we need that awareness--it empowers us to let go of fear, and to risk being intimate. The process of opening to another, of self-revelation, takes patience as well as bravery, and an unhurried pace is necessary for the creation of trust.

Another definition of intimacy is *the mutual and spontaneous expression of feelings, thoughts, and beliefs*. To accomplish this, we must be open enough to express our emotions, thoughts, and opinions freely and be aware of what these aspects of ourselves really are. The basis for personal intimacy is personal self-knowledge. However, self-awareness is only half of an intimate relationship. The other half is being openly curious about what another person is like. What that looks like is having a non-judgmental and non-blaming attitude and becoming genuinely interested in discovering who the other person really is. Intimacy thrives when two people know themselves, share themselves, know each other, and accept both self and other without judgment. This leads to three aspects of intimate connections: self-revealing behavior, unwavering supportive attention and a sense of exceptional knowingness

We each bring expectations to our intimate relationships such as, undivided attention, words and gestures of love and caring, 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 could meet them. More often than not, we engage instead in mind reading.

What does God have to say about intimacy?

God designed us for intimacy. In Genesis we read, *Let us make man in our image*. We are relational beings created in the image of God. As relational beings, we are designed for and drawn to close,

intimate relationships. We also have needs and fears, and experience aloneness and loneliness. In Genesis, we also read the God said, "*It is not good for man to be alone.*" Our awareness of aloneness is a sign that God made us relational beings. Aloneness, however, can turn into loneliness—"what's wrong with me?" Relationships can become unhealthy, toxic, and destructive, hardly what God intended. *God wants something better for us.*

God modeled intimacy for us through His Word and through His son Jesus. He told us:

- ✓ I will never leave or forsake you
- ✓ I knew you in your mother's womb
- ✓ I have come to give you abundant life
- ✓ I give you a comforter to validate and enhance our relationship
- ✓ I go to prepare a place for you so you can be with me
- ✓ I love and forgive you

There are several aspects of God's intimate relationship toward us, illuminated in three Hebrew terms.

YADA—to know deeply

This form of intimacy means that you know me. This deep knowing of heart and mind goes far beyond superficiality. It represents deep personal awareness and understanding of another. Illustrations include Job 19:14; Jer. 1:4; Psa. 139:1-4.

SOD—to reveal or disclose

Intimacy here means that I can know you. Hebrew word suggests "secret" or "vulnerable disclosure." Proverbs 3:32 (NASB), states, "God is intimate with the upright." The NIV says that the Lord, "...takes the upright into His confidence." For intimacy to develop in our relationships, we must practice being vulnerable and disclosing. This includes sharing the personal aspects of ourselves, such as our hopes, aspirations, dreams, fears, regrets, and losses.

SAKAN—to be of use to

Intimacy here means that you care about me. "Beneficial or caring involvement" is the motivation behind the mutual knowing of intimate relationships. God's motive for desiring intimate relationships is active, engaging, caring love. Psalm 139:1-3 (NASB) portrays God's intimate knowledge of each person. It says, the Lord is "...*intimately acquainted with all my ways.*"

When we are intimately involved with someone, we know and care about who they are. God's knowing, caring involvement in our lives is a template for intimacy in our relationships. Genuine intimacy is motivated by a desire for caring involvement with each other. The bottom line is that God knows us intimately and loves us. We are imperfect yet forgiven, valued, and cherished by God. He wants us to do the same for others. This is mostly about us-not them

Think about it

Reflect on your childhood; think of someone who demonstrated one of the three aspects of intimacy –

- deep knowing of you as an individual
- appropriate and honest disclosure of his or her thoughts and feelings
- genuine concern for you through some form of active involvement

Questions to ponder

- What kind of relationship do you want?
- What brings you closer to people, what pushes you away?
- Are you aware of your friends or a partner's likes or dislikes, what builds connections in your relationship with them?
- How close a relationship do you want?
- What time and energy are you willing to put in to developing intimacy?

Four factors in healthy intimate relationships

Knowing and liking yourself

By coming to know and value yourself, you identify your innermost feelings and needs and develop the security to share them with your partner.

Trusting and caring

When trust exists, partners feel secure that disclosing intimate feelings will not lead to ridicule, rejection, or other harm. Trust builds gradually as you realize your partner has made a sincere investment in the relationship, such as by making compromises. Caring is an emotional bond that allows intimacy to develop. When people care about each other, they seek to fulfill each other's needs and interests, and if necessary, to sometimes make sacrifices for the other person.

Honesty

We owe our partner honesty and transparency concerning our feelings, needs, concerns and desires. We need to provide that information in a respectful way. Intimacy exists when the gap between our feelings and our expression of those feelings is the smallest.

Clear communication

Communication is sending and receiving messages. The clear communicator must also be a good listener. It is important to listen not only to their words, but also to their non-verbal cues. Nonverbal communication provides valuable clues to feelings. Tone of voice, gestures, body posture, and facial expressions not only accentuate the spoken word but can also express emotion directly. Clear communication can take the guesswork out of relationships, avert misunderstanding, relieve resentments and frustrations, and increase general satisfaction within the relationship.

Know your love language (and your partners)

- **Words of Affirmation:** Compliments, words of appreciation, positive feedback about specific things your partner has done
- **Quality Time:** Togetherness, giving undivided attention, more than just physical proximity; talking about your day, keeping each other up-to-date, expressing your feelings, being available to listen with care
- **Receiving Gifts:** Putting time and thought into creating/buying gifts; the gift of your 'self' – simply being there at crucial times
- **Acts of Service:** Doing practical tasks for your partner e.g., household chores; particularly doing these without being asked
- **Physical Touch:** Loving touch crucial to healthy emotional development for babies and children; affection is also important for adults, in addition to sexual touch.

Key intimacy needs

Experiencing relational intimacy can only occur through the meeting of our relational needs and those needs cannot be known by others, let alone met, if we never disclose them. Each of us experiences three fundamental needs: the need to feel loved and accepted, to have a sense of belonging; the need to feel acceptable, to have a sense of worth; and the need to feel adequate, to have a sense of competence. Many grow up never having experienced those needs fully met. They hope the right person will do just that; some are disappointed. The reality is that often, the reason needs are not met is because they are not verbalized.

In *Discovering Intimacy*, David Ferguson and his co-authors have identified ten key intimacy needs. Ferguson believes these needs can and must be met in the context of a relationship. He writes, "We cannot manufacture by ourselves the intangible value that is realized when another person imparts his or her life to us by unselfishly giving to meet a need that we have" (p. 21). Neediness is not a flaw, but a part of our humanness. We really do need each other.

Examine the needs below. Rank them in order of importance to you. How effective are you at telling your spouse what you need?

- ☐ **Acceptance:** This need involves being accepted as you are, with all your feelings, choices, personality traits and so on, and doesn't try and change you. Accepting others by looking beyond their flaws and faults, by being present, by forgiving and by helping them deal with their failures and disappointments. (Romans 15:7)
- ☐ **Affection:** 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 need involves expressing thanks, gratitude, praise, or commendation; recognizing accomplishment or effort. It gives 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, by focusing on what others do right. (Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 11:2)
- ☐ **Approval (Blessing):** building up or affirming another; affirming both the fact of and the importance of the relationship. Noticing and affirming positive character qualities – affirming people for who they are, not just for what they do. (Eph. 4:29; Mark 1:11) (Eph. 4:29; Mark 1:11)
- ☐ **Attention:** conveying appropriate interest, concern, and care; taking thought of another; entering another's 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. (I Cor. 12:25)
- ☐ **Comfort:** properly responding to a hurting person with words, feelings, and touch; entering another 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:** urging 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, cards or letters and pray for them. (I Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:24)

- **Respect:** valuing and regarding another highly; treating another as important; honoring another. Respect other people's time, property, privacy, and personal preferences. Keep confidences, do not gossip, and eliminate all prejudices. (Romans 12:10)
- **Security (Peace):** 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)

Talk about it: What are your two highest needs? What do you want your partner to know, do? Are you able to articulate your needs clearly? Are you responsive to your partner?

Needs are not wrong, selfish, or sinful. God made you with needs. His plan was to meet these needs through relationships and community. It is not wrong to express your needs to others. It is not wrong to develop relationships with those that can and will meet your needs. It is unhealthy to "jump" into relationships, due to loneliness or a weak personal foundation, which have virtually no chance of meeting your needs. It is unhealthy to "use" other people or to take from them and give little or nothing in return.

Obstacles to having our intimacy needs met

It is clear that we are to acknowledge our needs to our partner and ask that they be met. However, there are several reasons why this does not happen.

1. **Self-reliance** – "I don't have any needs" proclaims the self-reliant individual. "If I had needs, I would take care of them myself." "God said He would supply all my needs." The problem with self-reliance is that it not only blinds us to our own needs, but also to the needs of others. Needs were designed to be met in the context of community. Paul reminds us of this in 2 Corinthians 1:3-6. As we face our own neediness, we are more aware of the needs of others.
2. **Self-effacing** – "There must be something wrong with me" is the cry of the self-condemner. "I shouldn't need others; I must be selfish or inadequate." "I don't want to burden or obligate anyone." The flaw in this thinking is that needs are normal and not a sign of sin or shortcoming. We enter relationships to have our needs met. God encourages us to share our burdens. We must move toward one another and affirm that our needs are of equal importance. Henri Nouwen says that each of us is a minister, in that, we can place our own search for God, with all its moments of pain and joy, despair and hope, at the disposal of those who want to join the search but do not know how.
3. **Selfishness** – "You must meet my needs." "If you love me you will know my needs and want to meet them." "My needs are more important than yours." This kind of thinking typifies the selfish individual. This is a form of self-deception. Selfishness is not defined by the expression of one's needs but by the relative unconcern or insensitivity for the needs of others. In Philippians, Paul reminds us not to do anything out of selfish ambition or vain conceit (2:3-4).

4. **Denial**— “I don’t know what my needs are” is the catch phrase of true denial. These are individuals out of touch with their feelings. They cannot articulate their needs because they really do not know what they are. Their feelings have been pushed down by some pain or trauma. They need the light, the easy yoke of Christ and support, encouragement, and a safe place to begin exploring their suppressed feelings and needs. John 4 tells the incredible story of the woman at the well. Here was a lonely person whose needs were deeply suppressed. Jesus was tender with her, and she responded.
5. **Fear**— “I’m afraid to move toward you; I will meet your needs, but you won’t care about mine.” The fearful person does not trust; he or she has likely been hurt in the past and is therefore extremely self-protective. However, without trust, we can never receive love. This person may actually believe no one would want to meet his or her needs. At its core, this is a spiritual issue. Ultimately, our trust must be in God. He wants to meet our needs – His main tool is community.
6. **Behaviors that can destroy intimacy**
 - Angry reactions to feedback (instead, be non-defensiveness and open)
 - Closed to new experiences (instead, be open to trying new things)
 - Deception and duplicity (instead, be honest, transparent, and disclosing)
 - Overstepping boundaries (instead, respect your partner’s boundaries, priorities, and goals)
 - Lack of affection and impersonal, or routine sexuality (instead, enjoy and cherish your partner; find ways to meet each other’s needs for affection and intimacy)
 - Misunderstanding (instead, seek to understand and accept your partner)
 - Manipulation and control (instead, be cooperative; use non-controlling, non-manipulative, and nonthreatening behaviors)

Do any of the above describe you? If so, what will you do to make a change?

Having our needs met is life-giving. Unmet needs leave us hungry and wanting. Your ability to recognize and take care of your own needs as well as those of your partner has a direct connection to the quality of your marriage. In order to have a healthy, satisfying marriage, you must be able to clearly identify and articulate your needs and be willing to meet the needs of your partner.

Emotional intimacy

When our basic emotional needs are met, we experience intimacy; when our needs are unmet, we experience hurt and loss.

-David and Teresa Ferguson, *Intimate Encounters*

So how do you develop the ability to express your needs and to experience intimacy more deeply? Start by learning to share personally. Talk about who you are, where you’ve been and what you dream. Next, share authentically. Speak the truth in love and let people see the real you. Account for broken promises no matter how small. Acknowledging your failure to have your actions line up with your words will make your partner feel respected and honored. 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. Apologize often. The words, "Will you forgive me?" go a long way in creating strong relationships. Work on self-disclosure. Intimacy develops when couples share deeply with one

another. Move past the superficial. Adopt a servant mind-set. Serve your partner not out of obligation but based on Christ's love for you. He modeled being a true servant. Finally, establish community. Be accountable. Get involved; be a participant. Share yourself with others. If you sit in the bleachers and watch the game, you may stay safe, but you will never be truly connected.

BIG IDEA: In a marriage partnership, two vital skills are needed to deal with this issue of needs. First, you must become adept at identifying and articulating your needs. Which means you may have to face your own obstacles or unrealistic ideas about sharing your needs. Second, you must be willing and able to meet your partner's needs. To do this, it is essential that you listen well and create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance where your partner feels safe to share his or her own needs.

In *Cherish*, Gary Thomas reminds us that we all stumble in many ways. However, the message of cherishing is that although we stumble, we will thank God for each other, and, together, we will grow in holiness. To cherish our spouse is to accept that they will never be perfect and to make allowances for their imperfection without diminishing our appreciation for them. Cherishing means noticing and honoring each other and putting their needs above your own.

Romans 12:9-16 gives us a powerful model for relating intimately to another.

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. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. 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. MSG

Tough questions to consider:

Do you know your deep intimacy needs; does your partner? Can you express those needs in a healthy way?

How do you manipulate your spouse to gain approval?

How do you use deception or control to deal with the fear of losing your spouse?

How do you become complete as a unique person?

How does fear, anger, etc. keep you from getting your needs met?

How well do you *really* do intimacy? Do you fear disclosure? Do you hold back?

Rae yourself on the four aspects of intimacy: authenticity, disclosure, vulnerability, and servanthood.

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

Expressing Feelings

For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. 2 Timothy 1:7 ESV

All emotions, even the darker ones, give us a glimpse of the character of God

-Allender and Longman, Cry of the Soul

We are hardwired to have feelings. Yet many have a hard time expressing those feelings. Often it feels awkward, scary, or stressful. For some, just knowing what they feel is difficult. If we express feelings in unhealthy ways, this wiring can invite a disconnect in our relationships. By contrast, expressing feelings in a safe and healthy way can lead to our feeling more connected to our partner. Knowing how to express feelings tactfully therefore is vital if you want to feel close to others and allow them to get close to you, and to sustain your relationships.

Think of your feelings as energy in motion. Feelings allow us to monitor our basic needs, give us information about ourselves, and provide us with energy to act. They also inform what is important to us in our relationships, help us take a clear position on important life issues, and assist us in clarifying limits around what is acceptable and tolerable to us as individuals.

Because some feelings can be difficult and painful to face, many of us try to avoid or ignore our emotional world. What are the ramifications of not facing and exploring our feelings? Our experience of God, self, our sense of esteem and worth, and our ability to be intimate with others can be greatly impaired.

Many of us avoid being honest about our feelings, largely out of fear of being rejected or abandoned. Have you experienced these thoughts?

If I deal with feelings, I'll get hurt and may have to change; and that sounds scary.

Someone might feel hurt or angry and leave me, and I'd rather sacrifice becoming whole.

When I hurt someone, I feel better. I want someone to hurt as much as they have hurt me.

If I face my feelings, I am afraid I will hurt someone or myself.

Negative feelings do not go away simply because we want them to. Rather, they typically grow in intensity and/or transform into needs for something else, such as alcohol, food, drugs, or control. Indeed, most of our unhealthy coping behaviors are due to avoidance of legitimate pain. Examples include addiction, codependency, need for control, compulsions, and perfectionism. Typically, these behaviors become enacted in an effort to avoid, alter, or escape our underlying feelings.

Sharing positive feelings solidifies relationships. Love, appreciation, gratitude, delight—sharing these feelings builds affectionate bonds. At the same time, stresses occur in everyone's life, leaving them with sad, scared, or mad feelings. In addition, differences and hurt feelings will occur from time to time between just about any two people who often interact. Sharing feelings enables you to talk through the situation that had caused the difficulty. That way you can figure out how the problem occurred and what to do to fix it. Problem-solving together makes negative feelings lift. Otherwise the problem may linger or get worse, negative feelings may fester, and both you and your relationship suffer.

Sharing feelings effectively often begins with two simple words: “*I feel.....*” Fill in the blank then with a feeling-word, that is, a word such as confused, delighted, or exhausted. If you are having trouble identifying the feeling, you can use multiple choice. Try picking from one these four basics emotions: mad, sad, glad, or scared.

The mistake that people often make when they are trying to share a feeling is to say, “I feel *that* ...” The word *that* indicates that what will follow is going to be a thought, not a feeling. Thoughts are fine to share. At the same time, thoughts convey dry information, not the juice of what you are experiencing within. Feelings have a stronger bonding impact. Therefore, while sharing thoughts does build a sense of connection, the connection is less intense than when you also look inside yourself and then share the feelings that you discover there: hope, joy, anger, discouragement, fear, pleasure, frustration, delight, etc.

How to share your feelings effectively

To share your feelings, you must know them. If this is really difficult for you, start small: sad, mad, glad or scared.

1. **Use the 'I think vs. I feel' rule.** If you can substitute the words 'I think' for 'I feel' in a sentence, then you have expressed a thought and not a feeling. For example, “I feel hurt” is correct because you would not say, “I think hurt.”
2. **Be specific rather than general about how you feel.** Consistently using only one or two words to say how you are feeling, such as bad, sad or mad, is often too vague and general. What kind of bad or upset (irritated, angry, frustrated, anxious, afraid, sad, hurt, lonely, etc.) are you experiencing?
3. **Describe the feeling by saying it in such a way that your spouse can experience your feeling to the same degree.** Help your partner understand what it is like to walk in your shoes. You likely want empathy and understanding in return for sharing your feelings.
4. **Verbalize these feelings directly.** Your spouse cannot read your mind. He or she may “pick up” on your vibe, but they have no way to know what is in your head unless you disclose it!
5. **Accept that feelings are neither right nor wrong.** The behavior that results from our feelings might be judged as right or wrong, but not our feelings. Just because you are angry does not give you the right to be violent. Negative feelings must still be dealt with appropriately.
6. **Try to not judge yourself or your spouse because of feelings.** If you want your spouse to continue to share on this level, it is important not to get irritated or defensive about the feeling expressed to you.
7. **Share your deeper underlying feeling, not just the surface feeling.** You might be expressing anger but underneath feel hurt or embarrassed. This is much more crucial to express to your partner to develop closeness and intimacy.
8. **If you have mixed feelings, say so.** Express each feeling and explain what each feeling means. For example, “I have mixed feelings about what you just did. I am glad and thankful that you helped me, but I did not like the comment about being stupid. It was disrespectful and unnecessary, and I found it irritating”.
9. **Practice helps.** If you are not someone who is used to expressing feelings, this may feel awkward at first. Practicing it in small steps will make it easier.

Before you start expressing feelings of fear, anger, frustration or hurt, think about what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. Consider the following:

1. What are your feelings? Do you feel angry, hurt, sad, scared, lonely, jealous, guilty, etc.?

2. Give concrete examples such as, "I feel scared when you don't call."
3. Focus more on what you feel, think, and want, not on your partner's shortcomings. "I feel lonely, and I miss what we used to do together."
4. Tell your partner why it is important to you that you honestly and openly express your feelings. Make sure you explain that self-expression goes both ways, and that it takes courage to talk about feeling vulnerable. Showing vulnerabilities is a sign of strength and talking openly and honestly about how you feel is not a weakness.
5. Be mindful of how you express yourself. Tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and eye contact are more important than most people think. Most of what you actually communicate to your partner has to do with how you communicate.
6. Be open and explicit about your intentions for having the conversation.
7. Make sure you are not having this conversation to get back at your partner. If you are very angry, you might feel vengeful. If that is the case, calm yourself and consider what is most important to you and what kind of partner you would like to be.

Compassion

The word compassion is rooted in Latin, meaning 'to suffer with.' Compassion is sympathy for the hurt or distress of another. It is a simple appreciation of the fact that we are all flawed and imperfect. That is why the experience of compassion makes us feel more humane and less isolated. Compassion is necessary for the formation of emotional bonds. Chances are, you fell in love with someone who cared about how you felt, especially when you felt bad. Most of what couples really fight about is not money, sex or in-laws. Interestingly, those problems seem insurmountable *only* when we are hurt. What causes the hurt, what we really fight about, is the impression that our partner *does not care* how we feel. When we do not experience compassion from our partner, it can feel like abuse. As compassion decreases, resentment automatically rises, making common problems insoluble.

Here are a few pointers for responding to your partner in a healthier way.

1. Be sure you understand where they are coming from and then speak the truth in love
2. Show compassion
3. See and hear what is here now instead of what should be, was or will be
4. Feel what you do feel instead of what you think you ought to be feeling
5. Say what you feel and think instead of what you imagine is expected of you
6. Ask for what you want instead of hoping it will be offered
7. Say yes or no directly and clearly

Talk about it

If you have difficulty expressing your feelings, try this exercise. Because it is easier to express positive feelings and talk about what is right in your marriage, start with five positive statements about yourself and your partner.

- What do you love about your partner?
- What do you love about the relationship?
- What is most important to you?
- Give a concrete example of what makes you feel loved.
- Give a concrete example of what you look forward to.

Dealing with Emotional Wounds

Our wounds are often the openings into the best and most beautiful part of us.

--David Richo, When the Past is Present

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. James 5:16

Marriage is the “great revealer” because better than anything else, it brings out those parts of us we didn’t even know existed—Yikes!! Marriage also has nearly unlimited potential for joy and meaning. When our relationship with God and our spouse reflects a healthy level of intimacy, the oneness we experience can be deeply fulfilling. Sadly, some never experience that level of intimacy. Abuse, neglect, abandonment, rejection, betrayal or disappointment are much more likely to be experienced than deep unconditional love and caring. Life wounds us all. Traumatic events and experiences can manifest in our physical, spiritual, and emotional lives; often resulting in incredible emotional pain and woundedness.

When couples talk to us about how their past has affected them, common responses are hurt, anxiety, anger, fear, guilt and shame. These result in trauma that stemmed from some form of abuse and resulted in deep wounds. Unfortunately, these negative responses become expectations and patterns. “My spouse doesn’t care.” “I will never be good enough.” “No one will meet my needs so I will have to take care of myself.” “I don’t trust anyone, so I will have to protect myself from being hurt or rejected.” “If I’m not perfect he/she will leave me.” For some these patterns can become extreme, leading to deep depression, intense fear, panic or anxiety, or debilitating emotional and/or physical symptoms that make it difficult to function. For most, they take the form of emotional wounds—deep cuts in our soul that cause us spiritual and emotional pain.

While there are many ways these wounds manifest themselves, there are five primary types of severe emotional woundedness.

- Shame—feeling flawed, defective, unlovable or worthless
- Fear—of abandonment, change, the unknown, failure, rejection
- Trust—too much and therefore repeatedly betrayed and hurt; or too little and living in anxiety, suspicion and isolation
- Denial—fantasies, repression, delusions, lack of awareness, numbness
- Alienation—difficulty bonding, loving or committing yet longing for these; intense loneliness and disconnection from others

How do emotional wounds look and feel?

Emotional wounds are invisible scars caused by harmful events in our life; most woundedness is out of our awareness. Wounds are adaptive forms of self-protection. They develop over time to enable us to cope with and survive the toxic events of our lives. The younger we are and/or the more chronic or traumatic the event(s), the greater our need for defense and the more resistant we become to change. At some point, these defenses become defining characteristics of our personality. There are a variety of feelings associated with woundedness, lost, confused, anxious, fearful, cautious, alone, misunderstood; these are just examples. **The reality is that these wounds can become life-guides.**

We choose partners, careers, friends, etc. based on the needs created by these wounds. Wounded people can feel “stuck” in a revolving door of poor decisions, unwanted emotions and situations

over which they feel they have no control. The dynamics of failed relationships, for example, can trigger these wounds—creating a sense of continually being re-wounded. The feelings are immensely powerful; the behavioral reactions are almost reflexive. Below are some examples of the symptoms and consequences of emotional wounding.

- ❑ Guilt— “Things are (always) my fault.” “I do bad things.”
- ❑ Disconnection from others—strong feelings of emptiness, loneliness or isolation
- ❑ Difficulty bonding with others—feeling unlovable; inability to love oneself; confusing love with lust, pity, or codependence
- ❑ Spiritual and emotional numbness—not feeling anything; alienation from God
- ❑ Rigid thinking—seeing things and/or people as black or white, good or bad, right or wrong; lack of flexibility.
- ❑ Perfectionism—must have things “just so,” must be better to be the same
- ❑ Control issues—overly aggressive and domineering or subtly manipulative
- ❑ Conflict avoidance—cannot handle conflict at any level; withdrawal, or overreaction if cornered
- ❑ Lack of affection--difficulty expressing affection; inadequate boundaries; fear
- ❑ Depression—profound feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- ❑ Stress and anxiety—tension, nervousness, restlessness
- ❑ Addictions or self-defeating habits—problems with food, shopping, substances, sex, gambling, work, etc.

Where do wounds come from?

Family is probably the most powerful molding/forming force known. Many of us grew up in non-nurturing families. For most, the awareness of how we were impacted comes much later. Some will spend years trying to understand and undo the damage it has caused. Others who are unable or unwilling to face the pain of dealing with the past will *stuff* their feelings, live with unresolved guilt, shame or anger and struggle with relationships and meaningful intimacy. The effects of woundedness are extensive and keep us disconnected from others and feeling distant from God. Healing cannot occur until the truth is out in the open—we must embrace our past and allow God to free us and heal us. Think about your family-of-origin. How has it impacted your day-to-day life and your marriage?

Talk about it: how has your childhood affected your marriage?

The impact of woundedness

There is a cycle of woundedness: Emotional pain leads to disillusionment and shame...which leads to blaming or self-blame (self-protective defenses to maintain denial) ...which leads to desperate attempts to fix us or hide, leads to momentary pleasure (and guilt) then leads back to pain. Emotional woundedness creates “blind spots” making it difficult to see ourselves or others clearly. Woundedness makes it difficult to do the things relationships need to thrive, such as deep empathy, patient listening or productive, rational problem solving and conflict resolution.

How do these emotional wounds affect our life? The biggest impact is spiritually. Deeply wounded individuals struggle in their relationship with God. They have difficulty trusting God or experiencing joy in their lives. They may even blame God. In addition, they have a hard time

trusting others. Generally, we tend to marry someone who plays the opposite role we learned growing up. What role did you learn? Below are several specific consequences of woundedness.

Underlying wounds is a lifetime of unmet needs. As adults, we are driven to have these needs met in our relationships. Often this intense “neediness” overwhelms a partner, leading to further rejection.

Wounded individuals have self-sabotaging core beliefs and expectations. These distorted beliefs soon become “guiding truths,” out of awareness and not open to scrutiny. Subsequently, unresolved issues get replayed over-and-over again.

Wounded individuals tend to attract one another. Wounded individuals are drawn to one another. Each hopes the other will make them whole and complete – something they cannot do. Relationships between two extremely wounded adults can be very volatile and chaotic – full of love and hate, confusion, turmoil and distortions of reality. Mistrust is common; there is little authentic disclosure. Consequently, patterns of control, abuse, dependency, chaos, neglect or abandonment tend to be repeated.

Wounded individuals are unable to meet each other’s needs effectively. Woundedness leads to self-absorption; therefore, wounded partners are incapable of seeing, let alone meeting the needs of another. Woundedness also leads to self-centeredness, so personal wounds and issues always take precedence. Wounded partners enter relationships to have their own needs met; they become agitated when asked to meet someone else’s needs.

Wounded individuals pass this woundedness on to their children. Wounded individuals recreate the dysfunctional systems with which they are comfortable. Guilt, blame, shame, lack of nurturing, unhealthy rules and roles, denial and poor communication characterize these environments. Since problems are never acknowledged or dealt with, children never learn healthy coping skills. The skills they do learn are generally how to deny problems or pretend everything is fine. Wounded children produce challenges that wounded parents cannot handle effectively.

Wounded individuals are extremely poor problem-solvers and decision-makers because they are usually immersed in and distracted by their own inner turmoil and conflict. Decisions, if made at all, are made impulsively with little forethought, typically creating more chaos. Communication or processing skills are generally absent. *Problems are always treated like catastrophes*, never as opportunities to learn or grow. The result is that conflicts never get resolved; they stack up, leading to emotional blowups and tremendous relational pain and despair.

These emotional wounds *must* be addressed. The traits mentioned above will not go away with time and they will adversely affect your marriage and your life. Each of us will struggle to some degree with emotional wounds. The key to healing is finding the wounds and sometimes finding them can hurt. Healing emotional wounds is a process. To be a healthy individual and a healthy partner, these wounds and the issues surrounding them must be dealt with. Make recovery a priority. So, where do you start?

You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again. Isaiah 58:12 MSG

This verse presents three needs we all have:

- **To be raised up.** The Hebrew means, "To help to lift up, establish, strengthen, confirm, or authenticate."
- **To have our broken and shattered lives repaired.** The Hebrew means, "To walk in or around, to close up, hedge or enclose."
- **To be restored to a healthy path.** The Hebrew translation is "To rescue, recover, or retrieve, to bring back home again or cause to make to return."

To be raised up, repaired, and restored. The first step is to see God's presence and acknowledge His power to transform you. Healing comes from acknowledgment. We must openly declare the existence of personal woundedness and its impact on our life. Commit to make whatever changes are necessary. The biggest hurdle you will face is the tendency to minimize or deny these issues. Partner with God. Become part of His family. Strengthen your relationship with Him. God's Word tells us to cast our cares upon Him, for He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We need to realize that Christ has taken our pain on the cross, and if we will transfer it to Him, He is waiting to heal our wounds. Find other believers with whom to share life. Get as healthy as possible. Eat right, get rest, and cut out any harmful substances. Remove any distractions from your healing. Make amends for the past. Forgive someone. Seek Godly counsel. Talk to your pastor.

Below are a few suggestions to get you started:

1. Review the following scriptures: Gal 5:3; 2 Cor. 1:3-6, 12:9; Rom. 5:3-5; Romans 8:1, 18:26-28; 2 Cor. 7:5-6; Ps. 23; Is. 41:10. What application to your wounds can you draw?
2. Make a *commitment* to deal with these issues now. Start with one area first. Work on these emotional wounds before getting into a permanent relationship. If you are already in a relationship, take some time to address these areas. It is not necessary, however, to leave the relationship.
3. Identify negative self-talk and unhealthy thinking patterns.
4. Practice positive self-talk. The truth will always set us free (John 8:32). We need to experience God's truth and healing in our lives. Catch your negative thoughts and change them into positive ones.
5. Forgive yourself and others; make amends for any wrongs you have done.
6. Find nurturing and acceptance in God's family.
7. Talk to a pastor, mentor or counselor.

My scars remind me that I did indeed survive my deepest wounds. That in itself is an accomplishment. And they bring to mind something else, too. They remind me that the damage life has inflicted on me has, in many places, left me stronger and more resilient. What hurt me in the past has actually made me better equipped to face the present.

-Steve Goodier, Lessons of the Turtle

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

Are you Listening?

Communication is the lifeblood of marriage. Having difficulties with communication does not bode well for marital satisfaction. In fact, one of the most important skills you can learn is how to talk so your mate will listen and how to listen so your mate will talk.

- Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*

True listening, total concentration on the other, is always a manifestation of love. ...Yet most couples never truly listen to each other.

-M. Scott Peck

The ability to listen is the cornerstone of any good relationship. Few people feel well listened to by their partner. Spending time listening and giving your undivided attention to your partner is one of the most caring and loving acts you can offer. Skilled listening requires work, effort, practice and an awareness of your own process. Sometimes honest listening can be enormously painful, but if you are willing to listen with an open mind and heart, trust and intimacy will grow. You do not have to agree with everything you hear, but if you listen intentionally, you will be challenged to reconsider your attitudes and behavior. James 1 says, "*Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue and let anger straggle along in the rear*" (v. 19). "*Don't fool yourself into thinking you are a listener when you are anything but...*" (v. 22).

The capacity to listen to your spouse, to take in both their words and the meaning behind the words, is crucial to intimacy. This is a skill at the heart of acknowledging that what is going on inside their inner world really matters to you. The capacity to listen is an indicator of how well your safe sense of self has developed. Out of that safety, you are able to take in another person's fears, ideas, concerns, needs and wants.

Why is it so difficult to be a good listener?

Most of us think we are great listeners. At times, we may be, but not often and not consistently. Sometimes we are not even interested in listening. Our prideful, 'know-it-all' attitude moves us to stop listening. Self-protection and self-sufficiency are great enemies of listening. Fear or anger will also keep us from listening. Sometimes we do not even want to listen to God. Matthew 13 records seven parables, each one touching on some important aspect of the kingdom. At the end of the parables, Jesus asked this question, "*Have you understood all these things*" (v. 51)? The lessons were simple. In some places, He told them the exact meaning of each specific comparison. Even so, He concluded His thoughts by asking them if they understood. There is a distinct difference between just *hearing* someone talk and listening – for understanding or commitment.

Many of us filter the things people say to us through our own prejudices, opinions and feelings. We find it difficult to listen because we are busy thinking about our response or trying to second-guess what our partner is about to say. Couples often do this by refusing to allow a partner to put a period on the end of a sentence. The author of Proverbs exposed the flaw of second guessing when he wrote, "*He who answers before listening - that is his folly and his shame. What a shame - yes how stupid to decide before knowing the facts.*" Proverbs 18:12, TLB

Most often we fail to listen because we think we might be threatened by what we hear. In marriage, we often fear the other person's suggestions for change. We think it will somehow erode our personal freedom or sense of control. Worse yet, we fear being rejected or abandoned. We may think, "If I really listen to my partner, my worst faults will be exposed." However, not

listening intentionally to your partner can communicate that you do not really care or that you believe what they have to say is unimportant. Lack of listening reflects a lack of respect for your partner. Listening is vital to the development of a caring relationship with the person who helps you meet your essential needs. We need to listen with our heart, head and hands. Listening should be motivated by our love for the other person (heart). Listening is a cognitive process of really trying to understand what our partner is communicating (head). Finally, listening should move us into action (hands). James 1: 19-25 reminds us that listening must lead to obedience – we must do something.

What is Active Listening? (*You cannot talk and listen at the same time, Jeff and Judi*)

Active listening can be defined many ways. For our purposes, it means listening intentionally; putting the full weight of your attention and focus on what your partner is saying (not what you are going to say next). It means putting down the phone or paper and turning off the TV. The goal is to truly understand what your partner is communicating, not just the words but the meaning and feelings behind the words. Active listening builds intimacy because by it we convey that we really care about the person and what they have to say. There are several important intentional listening skills listed below.

Paraphrasing can help you be sure you understand what your partner is saying. To paraphrase, simply find a way to restate in your own words what you understand the other to say. Some suggestions of ways to lead into a paraphrase are "What I am hearing you say is..." "Do you mean..." or "In other words..." By paraphrasing, your partner will feel heard, and miscommunications can be avoided.

Clarifying is when you ask more questions to get more information. Clarifying will give you the details and lets the other person know you are genuinely interested in what they are saying.

Empathy in the listening process involves considering what the emotional experience of your spouse might be. What is your partner feeling? You do not have to agree, but you can listen and validate the feelings of your partner. An empathic response might be, "It sounds like you are really worried about this," or "It sounds like you have experienced a lot of pain over this." Name the feeling as you are listening.

Being Open to what your partner is telling you. Do not jump to a judgment about the issue but try to understand where your partner is coming from. Again, this does not mean you must agree.

Being Aware of the message you are hearing. Does it fit with information you already have? Listening well to your partner equals essential validation.

Talk about it: how well do you do these skills?

Suggestions for Effective Listening (Eph. 4:29; James 1:19-25)

Effective listening says in effect, you and your needs are really important. Listening, really hearing someone is one of the greatest gifts we can give another person. What we often do instead of listening is think about our next response, interrupt or finish sentences because we think we already know what the other person is going to say. When we do this, we not only disrespect that

person, but we miss opportunities to connect with those we love. Listening is a skill we can all acquire. It brings an important positive element to all our relationships. Here are a few ideas:

- Put your partner at ease. Give her or him space, time and permission to speak. How we look at each other, how we stand or sit, makes a huge difference. Relax, and allow the other person to relax as well. Be patient and give them time to speak.
- Do not *stonewall*. Do not stare with a disinterested look or one signaling, “I am going to be attacked.”
- Demonstrate that you are really listening by maintaining eye contact. Nod when you can agree, ask your partner to explain further if you don’t understand. Listen to understand, not just to wait for your turn to talk. Look for body language that validates what the other party is saying.
- Be aware of your own body language. Be sure your words, actions and expressions communicate the same thing.
- Remove distractions. Good listening means being willing to turn off the TV, close a door, or stop reading your mail or the paper. Give your partner your full attention.
- Empathize, especially if your partner is telling you something personal or painful, or something you intensely disagree with. Take a moment to stand in his or her shoes, to look at the situation from his or her point of view.
- Watch your own emotions. If what your partner is saying creates an emotional response in you, be especially aware of what is being said and how you are reacting to it. Strong emotions tend to allow us to miss critical parts of what is being said to us. Avoid shaming and blaming.
- Embrace your partner’s anger. Most anger is for emphasis – to make us *really* listen. If this is the case, do not become defensive.
- Be slow to disagree, criticize or argue. Even if you disagree, let your partner have his or her point of view. If you respond in a way that makes the other person defensive, even if you win the argument, you may lose something far more valuable.
- Ask questions. Ask your partner to clarify, to say more, give an example, or explain further. It will help him or her speak more precisely, and it will help you hear and understand him or her more accurately.
- *Stop Talking*. Listening is about really hearing the other person—focusing all your resources on totally understanding what the other person is saying. Listening honors your partner.

Listening is a key survival skill. Intentional listening means listening to understand. It is the difference between simply hearing someone and listening motivated by care for a person and a genuine desire to understand what they are trying to communicate. The key to good listening is attitude. Listening can substantially reduce anger and defensiveness in another. Since many marital issues are difficult to resolve, healthy listening that continues to explore feelings and seek clarification can keep conflicts from straining and breaking relationships.

The most important marriage skill is listening to your partner in a way that they can’t possibly doubt that you love them. -Diane Sollee Smartmarriages.com

Talk about it: What are your take-away’s?

Are We Communicating?

Communication is the meeting of meaning. When your meaning meets my meaning across the bridge of words, tones, acts, and deeds, when understanding occurs, then we know that we have communicated. ...When two persons can share from the very center of their existence, they experience love in its truest quality. Marriage is a venture into intimacy, and intimacy is the opening of one self to another.

-David Augsburger, Cherishable: Love and Marriage

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Eph. 4:25

Anything that causes some form of change (spiritual, emotional, physical or mental) in another person is communication. Non-verbal cues such as facial expression, silence or touch, convey as much meaning as spoken words. We learned to communicate by watching our parents. Most believe they are good communicators and assume miscommunication must be the other person's fault, a dangerous misbelief. Believing that a spouse will understand perfectly what is being communicated is another misbelief. Communicating, however, is about much more than information. It is critical that we learn how to express our feelings honestly, openly and respectfully. Review the following material on communication and then decide if your communication style is effective. To meet the challenges marriage can bring, you will need to hone your skills as a communicator, listener and problem solver.

Strategies for Successful Connection

How can partners connect in ways that enrich their relationship? There are many elements of successful communication.

Keep it clear. Couples who are able to be clear about their underlying needs are for more likely to experience positive outcomes. The same is true for those who respond in ways that clearly support connection.

Keep it soft. Partners who master the ability to communicate "softly," without being overly aggressive, contemptuous, or insulting, are more likely to get positive rather than negative responses. Those who use gentle humor and playfulness in their efforts and liberally sprinkle it throughout their interactions are more likely to have quality relationships that last. When most of a couple's interactions can be characterized as having a soft-start up and using humor, their connection is generally strong even if they also are high in conflicts This can provide a solid foundation for difficult times.

Keep it safe. Healthy relationships require creating an environment of mutual care and validation. Behaviors such as validating feelings and intentions, soothing, attentive and nonjudgmental listening and responding create a safe environment where intimacy can flourish. Honest, loving communication should be framed positively, without contemptuousness, blame, or sarcasm. Contemptuousness and criticism are highly predictive of relationship instability.

Keep it positive. A predominance of positive interactions is important if communication is to connect rather than isolate and alienate. The amount of positive affect partners show one another, especially during conflict situations, is highly predictive of happy and stable relationships. The emotional tone of everyday interactions seems to build a foundation for how positive couples will be during conflict.

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

Talk about it: how do we do at being clear, soft, safe and positive?

Some Simple Rules (how many do you follow well?)

- The speaker has the floor, no interrupting
- Speak for yourself; speak your truth
- Talk in small bits; take a few breaths
- Stop and allow the listener to paraphrase what he or she has heard so far
- Focus on what the speaker is trying to communicate; don't interrupt or rebut
- Don't invalidate what the speaker is saying
- Understand that everyone (you) hears through a filter
- Bring underlying messages to the surface, no hidden agendas
- Assume your memory of past conversations or events is imperfect
- Body language can speak louder than words
- No distractions

Making Communication More Effective

Take responsibility. Good communicators choose how to respond. They do not react to others, but act from within to express who they really are and what they are thinking and feeling. They make statements like: "Let's look at our alternatives;" "I can always choose a different approach;" "I choose...;" "I prefer...;" "I will..." Your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are not controlled by someone or some circumstance outside you. You always have the choice about what you are saying.

Incorporate what your partner is saying. Do not just react to the last sentence spoken. Most of us tend to ignore what others say and either override their talking with our own or rehearse silently in our heads what we are going to say next. Learn to wait and take in what your spouse the other is saying. They may be agreeing with you.

Focus on what is right and accurate. When we only focus on the disagreements or inaccuracies of what our partner is saying, we become confused and may even respond to something entirely off the topic. If you have a question about what you hear, say "My understanding of what you are saying is.....is that accurate?"

Do not contradict. What the other is saying is always valid for him/her. Others always have a different frame of reference than you, and the purpose of most communication is to mutually understand each other's point of view. You may state your disagreement, but avoid the phrase, "Yes, but..." When you contradict another, you invite defensiveness or justification rather than clarification.

Try to understand before being understood. This is one of Stephen Covey's 7 "Habits." We often "go quiet" or leave the room when we feel frustrated, or use 'no response' as a statement or weapon. Stay with the communication process until you understand the other and believe you are understood by the other (in that order of importance).

Give equal time. If you monopolize the conversation, you might as well be a radio announcer. You may never know if anyone is listening. Talking to yourself can be pretty lonely.

Keep your voice at a comfortable level. Screaming may help relieve you of anger, but it rarely invites others to listen to what you have to say. Yelling does invite others to either defend themselves or tune you out.

Speak slowly; take breaths. We think about four times faster than we can talk. When you slow your speech pattern down, you have even more time to listen, think, and consider a response. Pauses may be extremely useful as communication smoothers.

Stay in the present. Talk about how you feel right now, not how you felt last week, last month, or last year. The past and future are too abstract and dependent on one's own view. Since everyone's view is different, honesty is sacrificed when we talk about our view of past experience or anticipated future events. "I'm angry with you right now" is much more meaningful than "I was sure angry with you last week when..."

Summarize. Regularly take the time to summarize what you have heard, what you have said, and what you have accomplished in the conversation. Be sure and include your understanding of what the other has said as well as a quick review of what you said.

Ask for clarification. It is ok not to understand what the other is trying to communicate. It is not ok to "bust" them or the communication process when you do not understand. Ask directly for the other to clarify or "say more" after admitting you do not understand yet.

Listen to yourself. Do you like what you are saying and how you are saying it? We are often told to listen to others. Which, in fact, is one-half of the communication process. However, listening to yourself is important as well. You might learn something about you as well as the topic you are discussing.

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. Emotional woundedness can keep us at the shallow end of communication. However, with personal growth and 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. There is 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 never addressed. Examples of level five sharing include, "How's the weather?" "How's 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 the vast majority of 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 really don’t like the music at church.” “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.”

Talk about it: how good are we at Levels 1 & 2 communication?

God made us relational beings. Communication is a process of defining the nature of relationships. We communicate on two levels, a content level and a relationship level. The content message is always accompanied by a statement about the relationship. Understanding this process allows us to develop effective communication patterns, which is critical since it is how our needs get met and how we resolve problems. Communication, to be effective, requires us to be aware of our inner thoughts and feelings. How we feel about ourselves and about each other is a critical determinant of our communication effectiveness.

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 are now both part of a team and you need to proceed through the rest of your married lives as a team.

-Steve and Cindy Wright, Marriage Missions blog

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

Forgiveness

True forgiveness is the hardest thing in the universe.

-David Augsburger, Caring Enough to Forgive

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. Eph. 4:31-32. MSG

True forgiveness is hard. 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 role-modeled forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). True forgiveness acknowledges the wound or hurt and extends grace through the pain or disappointment. True forgiveness is intentional, a conscious choice. Forgiveness is character defining. It does not necessarily always lead to reconciliation however, but it does lead to personal peace. Unforgiveness can breed bitterness and resentment. (Hebrews 12:15) Forgiveness leads to freedom. Forgiving others is critical to our spiritual growth. Forgiveness is part of God's character. Jesus modeled and taught forgiveness (Matthew 18).

Healthy forgiveness is intentional, an act of the 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*" (p. 22). Even so, forgiveness is a process one must embrace when the time is right.

In *Care for the Soul*, Myrla Seibold wrote a profound essay on forgiveness entitled, "When the Wounding Runs Deep." Included below are several excerpts from her essay.

"Forgiveness is about learning how to live again without being overwhelmed by self-pity or driven by a passion for revenge. It is facing life soberly and realistically without repression, denial or escape/avoidance behaviors."

"Forgiveness is letting go of the past, but not in the sense of forgetting what happened or disconnecting myself from the pain. Forgiveness is refusing to allow the past to be the sole determinant of my life's course."

The Process

"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*

First, recognize (admit) that you are angry. You must not deny or suppress your feelings. Only by embracing your feelings, no matter how deep, are you able to truly forgive and let go. Also, be clear of the difference between anger and resentment. The latter is a result of re-enacting anger, instead of embracing it and ultimately releasing it.

Second, be clear about the wrong, pain or loss you have suffered. You cannot forgive if you do not fully embrace the pain or the wrong done to you. You must feel the hurt and name it. Don't minimize it, excuse it, or deny it—face it. Acknowledge the impact the pain or wrong has had on you. You must name the damage—clearly and comprehensively.

Third, acknowledge your right to feel the way you feel. "I feel wronged, betrayed, violated, used, abandoned, etc."

Fourth, choose to forgive and 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.”

Fifth, 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.

Finally, 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.

Denial of any of the above will not lead to real forgiveness, but pseudo-forgiveness.

Talk about it: how good are we at forgiving each other? Are there any areas of unforgiveness between us?

Obtaining Forgiveness

If forgiveness is tough, then getting forgiven may even be tougher. Because forgiveness is beneficial for both parties and God asks us to forgive others, there is often a belief that anyone who is a spiritual person should offer forgiveness immediately. Certainly, to be able to forgive is beneficial to the forgiver. However, for the perpetrator, repentance must be a precursor to forgiveness. Repentance does not just mean saying you are sorry, especially if the sorrow is more about being caught than about regretting the original act. Repentance also means communicating sincere regret and taking steps to be sure that you never repeat the action. If you feel you need forgiveness from another person, consider the following steps:

1. Take responsibility for the pain (or harm) you caused. Get real with God and ask for His forgiveness. Accept that, regardless of your reasons, it was your actions or words that caused pain for someone else.
2. Search your heart to be sure that it is the pain or harm that you regret, not just the experience of your own consequences. Develop genuine sorrow for the other person (2 Cor. 7:10).
3. Understand that no matter how much you want to explain, or how much the person wants to know why, once they know, the hurt will not change. Their feelings towards you may change, but do not count on it. The hurt will still be the hurt. “Why” is rarely a useful question and explanations often sound painfully like self-serving rationalizations.
4. Decide what you need to do, how you need to change, to ensure that you do not ever again make that kind of choice and so cause others more pain. Make those changes in yourself. Until you have learned the lesson and sincerely attempted to make the changes it is unreasonable to expect that the human heart will truly be able to forgive you, and it is questionable as to whether it should.
5. Plan how you will communicate with the person you have hurt. Let them know that they need no longer fear hurt from you. Be clear in your mind that you will make an apology without excuses and rationalizations.
6. Decide what could or should be done to make amends to the person(s) that you hurt. This will be in addition to an apology.

7. View your offenses from God's point of view. Only God knows the full impact of our behavior. Confession means to agree with God.
8. Make the apology and offer amends with no strings attached. Forgiving is not the same as returning to old situations. Do not count on a return to a previous relationship as a part of the forgiveness.
9. If the individual wants no part of your apology or your amends, be prepared to accept this too. If that hurts, do not turn the pain into anger against them. They may need time to heal. Know that you have done the best you can, and plan on how you can use the process for your own spiritual and emotional growth.

Steps to Rebuilding Trust

Decide to love and forgive. Decide to love by trying to let go of the past. Stop obsessing about the situations that broke the trust.

Set some goals. 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. To rebuild the trust in your marriage, both of you must renew your commitment to your marriage and one another.

Take responsibility for your actions. Own your behavior. Apologize. Take responsibility, seek forgiveness and pledge your commitment to do whatever is necessary to rebuild trust.

Make a real, sincere apology. A real apology has these elements: Freely admitting fault, fully accepting responsibility, humbly asking forgiveness, immediately changing behavior and actively rebuilding trust.

Recognize that FORGIVENESS might happen quickly, but TRUST happens slowly.

Be consistent. Consistency brings security and security eventually brings trust. There are NO shortcuts to rebuilding trust. It always requires time and consistency.

Do not keep secrets. A painful truth is better than a hidden lie. In marriage, secrets are as dangerous as lies. Secrecy is the enemy of intimacy.

When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts"

-Robert Enright, Forgiveness is a Choice.

Talk about it: Do you need to forgive someone? Do you need to ask someone for forgiveness? Are there amends you need to make? Are you holding a grudge? Are you stubbornly denying responsibility for some action? What behaviors do you need to own?

Solving Problems Effectively

Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.

-Barbara Johnson

Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So, throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life. James 1:19-21 MSG

Conflict will happen. It is a normal part of any relationship. The health of a relationship is measured, however, not by problems, but by how they are addressed and ultimately managed. Dr. John Gottman, a leading authority on marriage suggests that nearly 70% of the problems married couple's faces are not resolvable (fixable) because they are about dreams, preferences and ideals. In fact, problems themselves are not necessarily a sign that a marriage is in trouble. Dealing with problems in unhealthy ways (see below), however, is a sign of a troubled relationship. If a couple cannot develop an effective strategy for addressing problems, the result will be a backlog of unresolved issues, leading to bitterness, resentment and the breakdown of the relationship. Conflict does not have to mean combat.

Most individuals are extremely poor problem solvers, primarily because they dislike and generally avoid any form of conflict or confrontation. In *From Conflict to Resolution*, Dr. Susan Heitler discusses five approaches to problem solving. The first four represent unhealthy and therefore unsuccessful responses to conflict. Successful problem solving involves the ability of two people to listen intentionally as each shares their needs and concerns and to respond to what is shared with understanding and acceptance. A trademark of all maladaptive approaches to conflict is the lack of listening well and responding positively to the needs expressed. Let's examine Heitler's four types of unhealthy responses.

The first type and the most common response to conflict is *immobilization-doing nothing*. Some individuals view a pending conflict as a red flag of danger. As they perceive the danger getting closer, their level of anxiety rises. The anxiety they experience causes them to "freeze," leaving them unable to say or do anything, hoping that the threat will simply disappear. Over time the threat usually does subside, allowing them to return to their normal level of functioning, never dealing with the issues at hand, which would again be anxiety producing. Unfortunately, unresolved issues never go away for long. Anxiety is a common problem in wounded individuals. It exists in many forms: low self-esteem, inferiority, inadequacy, insecurity, pleasing, worry, fear, shame, guilt, tension, nervous habits, somatic symptoms, etc.

The second non-adaptive approach to conflict is *submission—giving in*. For a variety of reasons, some individuals have learned to give in to the other party in a conflict. A domineering parent, for example, could be the seed of this approach to conflict. Common expressions of giving in include depression, suicide, helplessness, hopelessness, martyrdom, perfectionism, "walking on eggshells," passivity, and co-dependency.

The third non-adaptive approach to conflict is *attack*. Anger and a win-lose mindset can fuel this approach. Rage and anger are very energizing and action producing. Individuals who utilize attack always see the problem as "outside" them. They consider themselves as having little or no

control over or responsibility for the problem. They assume that the problem will only improve or be resolved if they can get the other party to change, no matter what approach they must use. Common attack methods include demands, manipulation, criticism, blame, sarcasm, accusations, “you” statements, coercion, threats, violence and intimidation.

The last type of unhealthy reaction to conflict is *escape*. Individuals who feel powerless or overwhelmed will 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 addictions-drinking, smoking, drugs, gambling, shopping, pornography or food. Other common forms of escape include: suicide, work, exercise, traveling, excessive TV viewing, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, denial, social withdrawal, walking out of the room, refusing to talk.

Talk about it: Review the four unhealthy approaches to solving problems. Do any of them characterize your approach to conflict? If so, how will you change?

The final approach to conflict is to *honestly and openly share needs and concerns and search for mutually agreeable, “good enough” solutions.*

Cooperation

Managing problems is a cooperative process between people whose current needs clash. Problems arise when an individual feels his or her deep needs are not being met. Conflict arises when needs compete. The solution is to find ways to meet each person’s needs well enough so that each feels satisfied with the outcome. This is often referred to as compromise.

Successful problem solving requires listening, shared motivation, communication skills and practice. Effective problem solving is a *promise* to honor each other’s uniqueness and to meet one another’s deep needs. To understand problem solving, you must understand core needs. Problem solving is about having our core needs met. Core needs tend to be very basic needs each person has that are usually out of our awareness. For example, the most basic need in every conflict is the need for respect. When mutual respect does not exist, conflict resolution is extremely ineffective. Conflicts in blended families are usually more frequent and complex, involve more people and are more difficult to resolve than conflicts in nuclear families. People are complex; so are their needs and issues. The problems we express are often multi-layered, meaning that each person has one or more unmet core needs underneath their expressed needs. Deep core needs are not easily identified or easily met. Make a commitment to explore, identify and express these needs.

Problem Solving Process

There are three typical outcomes to relationship conflicts.

1. Resolution: everyone’s core needs are met “well enough,” and everyone feels good enough about the outcome.
2. Semi-resolution (the most common): surface needs addressed and met, but most core needs still unmet. Everyone denies, avoids, and minimizes the outcome.
3. Non-resolution: at least one person openly states that their core needs remain unmet and that they are not satisfied with the outcome.

Effective problem solving is based on three important shared beliefs. First, that meeting my partner's true needs (vs. mine) is a primary goal we share. Second, that this shared process is our best available option, and probably will succeed well enough for both of us to feel satisfied with the outcome. Third, that while our needs may differ, as well as our approach to having those needs met, our common goal is to maintain a healthy, connected relationship.

The following are steps that will facilitate effective problem solving:

1. Prayer for peace, wisdom and patience.
2. Honestly acknowledging that a conflict exists-one or both of us has unmet core needs
3. Attitude of equality — your needs and values are just as important as mine; embracing one another as valuable and worthwhile
4. Agree that the relationship is far more important than the issue at hand
5. Understand that any solution that makes one of us deny who we are is not a viable solution
6. Allow emotions, even strong emotions, to be a part of our process. Emotions tell us about our values and needs.
7. Agree to problem solve together — both agreeing to commit to the process
8. Set aside quality time to talk — undistracted, uncommitted time
9. Pray and invite God to be a partner
10. Clarify and simplify the issues — one subject at a time
11. "Dig down" below surface needs to find the true tensions (needs) motivating each person at this moment
12. Stay focused on current needs and the issue at hand
13. Confirm that each person clearly understands their own true needs; their partner's true needs and that each values the other's needs equally.
14. Generate possible solutions.
15. Mutually choose the best-fit option from the "solution pool," and determine if each partner is really satisfied enough.
16. Stay with the process long enough to see positive results (hanging in there) and then appreciate each other and celebrate the process.
17. Look back and re-evaluating if and when necessary.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

This is a big deal in the psychology world. It describes our tendency to explain someone's behavior based on internal factors, such as personality or disposition, and to underestimate the influence that external factors, such as situational influences, have on another person's behavior. So how does this work in marriage? If I make a mistake, I will have a tendency to "attribute" it to some external phenomenon, i.e., I was distracted, I did not have the right information, or the most famous, "it's no big deal, you're overreacting." If you make a mistake, I will tend to "attribute" it to some (internal) flaw in your character, like, "You don't care," "You are a (bad) partner" etc. Remember, this is called an error for a reason. The solution is extending grace to your partner and taking ownership of your behavior.

Attitudes that Enhance Problem-Solving

Problem solving is a promise. A promise to share, a promise to affirm one another's basic worth and value, a promise to stay with the process, a promise to keep our word and a promise to meet each other's needs to the best of our ability. Our attitude can enhance or at the extreme, defeat

the process. Below are some examples of thoughts and attitudes that can enhance the problem-solving process.

- Realizing that problem solving is a process
- Taking the long view – progress rather than perfection
- Accept your differences
- Sharing a commitment to personal self-examination
- Defining together what effective problem solving looks like
- Being clear about personal priorities
- Accepting that personal changes will have to be made
- Keeping a “partnership” mindset
- Voice your feelings
- Committing to practice communication skills
- Focusing on serving one another in love
- Seeing God as a partner in the process
- Seeing your partner through God’s eyes of love
- Committing to love and honor one another no matter what
- Appreciating each other’s uniqueness
- Underneath your frustration, attempt to identify the deeper emotions you typically feel such as, worthless, unimportant, abandoned, undesired, failure, rejected, scared, lonely

How to Quit Arguing

Speaking the unarguable truth is one of our most important skills. Arguing disconnects us; it’s the opposite of being intimate. Anytime we make a statement that is *arguable* (about right or wrong, good or bad) we have moved out of deep connection with ourselves. Intimacy happens when we are able to connect from our true self. If someone is arguing with you, you are likely saying something arguable. The goal of moving from arguable to unarguable statements is to get away from blaming and to shift into fully owning our experience. The skill is to only speak what we truly know. What is unarguable: what we experience, feel or want—our emotions and sensations. Say what you know is true about you.

What does the Bible say?

If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if His love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting the advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. Philippians. 2:1-5 MSG.

Talk about it: What are your take-away’s? Which unhealthy method do you use the most? Are you actively involved in healthy problem solving? Where do you get stuck?

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 & Nan Silver. The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

Developing Healthier Relationship Patterns

Marriage is our last, best chance to grow up.

– Joseph Barth

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Psalm 1:1-4 ESV

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT COURSES

*I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in. I am lost... I am helpless. It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

*I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place. But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

*I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there. I still fall in... it's a habit.
My eyes are open. I know I'm there. It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

*I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

I walk down another street.

How many holes have you walked in to? How hard was it to climb out? Developing healthier relationship patterns is much like this story. The key takeaway from this short poem is “to take a completely different street” that is, letting go of old, unhealthy patterns and embracing new, healthier ways to relate. The potential for being in an unhealthy relationship is forged early in life. No one consciously chooses this, but we grow up programmed to either initiate or tolerate one, as if we had no choice. An unhealthy relationship is one in which two people make an unconscious emotional ‘contract’ to interact with each other in ways the end up being selfish, toxic and self-destructive.

The behaviors below are learned ways of responding that will never allow you to get your true needs met or be part of a healthy relationship. These behaviors reflect unresolved issues within us. Most are learned responses from our childhood, others are reactions to past relationship hurts. The following patterns can predispose you to tolerate a destructive, unhealthy relationship:

- You ignore your own feelings.
- You take orders from others or do things even when you do not want to.
- You apologize frequently for your behavior.
- You find relationships draining and exhausting.
- You believe you do not deserve to be loved or appreciated.
- You are afraid to tell others what you really think or feel.
- You allow others to control, manipulate or abuse you.

- You walk on eggshells and feel trapped.

These patterns can lead one to initiate or participate in an unhealthy relationship:

- You need to be right and/or in control.
- You do not take responsibility for your actions.
- You expect others to meet your needs even when you do not communicate them.
- You have been abused, or you abuse others.
- You need to be admired or taken care of.
- You are critical and tend to blame others for difficulties you experience.
- You live in fear.
- You are suspicious of or disrespect the opposite sex.
- You believe your needs/desires/dreams are the most important.

Relationship Blueprints

We all have certain characteristic relationship patterns. We use these to relate to others and attempt to get our needs met. The most common is the pursuer-distancer, where one initiates (pursues) and the other avoids. The patterns that cause the most stress are rapid escalation and conflict avoidance. In rapid escalation, both partners reinforce each other by rapidly escalating their conflicts. Both keep fueling conflicts and neither backs down. Arguments typically begin over seemingly small issues and then quickly escalate into full-blown battles.

In the conflict-avoidant pattern, partners attempt to keep things cordial and polite. On the surface things may look calm, but this calm is only maintained by never discussing difficult issues, which ultimately leads to a stale relationship or to angry attacks. Conflict avoiders have difficulty forming and sustaining close relationships. Often critical of both themselves and others, they distrust emotions and appear rigid and thin-skinned. More prone to anxiety, approval seeking, unassertiveness, mistrust, and compulsive behavior, they may undergo periods of depression due to their limited emotional connection with others and challenges expressing themselves directly. They prefer to keep others at a "safe" distance and may prove elusive and frustrating to persons desiring closer emotional contact. Because of being frequently out of touch with their emotions, they often misread people and situations. They are very security conscious. If pushed too hard, they may attack with rage or go deeper into depression.

These relational patterns have a predictable path. They tend to create problems that are bigger and more complex to solve than the couple's ability to solve them. This happens because in time, a couple's response to marital issues can become progressively more predictable and less effective. Soon the issue is no longer "the issue," it is how we have come to deal with the issue. The issue in your marriage can never get resolved until "how" you deal with them (your patterns) is identified and changed. They begin to change when you accept a few realities. First, no communication is pure; everything is processed through your filter, which is a conglomerate of your biases, beliefs, expectations, values and experiences. Your belief system is your truth and is very resistant to change. Second, the more intense the interaction with your spouse, the more your belief system filter is activated. Finally, ultimately we wind up reinforcing our partner's belief system, so that both partners end up believing they are right about the other. Change can only happen when you begin to challenge your filter and see that most things are a matter of interpretation, and that your interpretations about your partner (what he or she thinks, why he or she does things, etc.) are likely biased and wrong.

Baggage

Nearly all couples enter marriage with baggage. Baggage refers to anything you carry from your past to the present, particularly anger, hurt, distrust, disappointment, or fear. Baggage is loaded with negative expectations. Most people collect baggage without realizing it. Every time something unpleasant happens, it becomes emotional baggage. It weighs you down emotionally and spiritually. It feels like excessive anger, a need to control others, reactivity, self-doubt, fear, insecurity or anxiety. Some carry their hurts, resentments and fears as badges of honor, or treat them as if they were indisputable lessons life was trying to teach. **They are neither.** They are byproducts of unfortunate situations and a broken world. You must own this baggage if you are going to release it. The sooner you can truly let go the less likely you are to recreate bad situations. Read Romans 12:14-21.

Letting go of the past is amazingly difficult. We hold on to things, even painful things so tightly. God will always call us to let go of the heavy, but deeply cherished things we are carrying because His dreams for us are bigger than our fears of the future. Ultimately, letting go is an act of the will and an act of faith. We really cannot go back, but we can stay stuck. Letting go is placing your trust in a future that you cannot see because you trust a God who has never abandoned you or let you down.

There are several ways to identify baggage in your life and marriage. First, look for recurring themes like internalized messages that keep playing out over and over. Next, look for common triggers, attitudes, behaviors or comments that result in nearly automatic responses. Finally, notice any reactive tendencies, times when you overreact to person, comment or event.

How Can I Identify an Unhealthy Relationship Pattern?

Unhealthy relational patterns always ultimately make us feel awful—fearful, depressed, betrayed, hurt, disappointed, used, abandoned, frustrated or angry. Unhealthy patterns fall into two categories: *I control you or I let you control me.* While both may lead to different behaviors, the outcomes are always the same: no real intimacy, no growth, no authenticity, unmet needs, and lots of pain. Actually, the real trap of unhealthy patterns is ignoring them; something many of us do out of fear of abandonment or rejection.

As you discover your own pattern, pay attention to what you do or what you may tolerate or ignore in an attempt to make a relationship work. An unhealthy pattern will never meet your needs or bring you peace and joy nor do they reflect God's desire for you. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. Live your life pleasing to God. He calls us to be servants and truth-tellers, to do no harm to others, to love from our fullness and to draw our value and worth from Him.

Making healthier relationship choices has a few prerequisites:

- Taking charge of life versus being a passive victim
- Practicing agape love versus just seeking personal or physical fulfillment
- Developing genuine friendships versus looking for lovers
- Building a structure for one's time and relationships versus passively waiting around for someone or something to make you happy or complete
- Developing one's uniqueness versus seeking to be entertained or taken care of
- Accountability and authenticity versus secrecy and isolation

Talk about it: do we do these well?

There are at least five patterns of unhealthy choices:

1. Expecting others to make life interesting, enjoyable and rewarding rather than developing one's own gifts and finding interest, fulfillment and reward in oneself.
2. Entering into relationships more to have one's needs met than to contribute to others.
3. Placing blame on others when problems occur and avoiding accountability or responsibility for one's situation, choices or circumstances.
4. Looking for the "perfect" partner and thus discarding those who do not qualify.
5. Not involving your support network in your relationship choices.

Talk about it: do we do any of these?

Take a deeper look: What can you do?

Even though these patterns are embedded deeply within, you are always capable of change. Below are key elements necessary for change to occur.

Before God, make a commitment to change. It is amazing how powerful an out-loud declaration to change can be. It seems to mobilize our inner energies and makes our goal less intimidating.

Accept that healing yourself is a prerequisite. It is *never* your job to take over another person's behaviors, or emotional life, as if they were some kind of 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. 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.

Denial and self-deception must give way to an honest self-appraisal. Take a hard look at your relationship pattern. Take responsibility for where you are; when you do, then you are not dependent on any one else to succeed.

Become aware of you triggers. What events or experiences trigger the start-up 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 purposively did or said something to push a button in you.

Next, raise your EQ. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to understand and manage your own emotions, as well as those of the people around you. Individuals with a high degree of emotional intelligence know what they are feeling, what their emotions mean, and how these emotions can affect other people. While there are several components to EQ, the three mentioned below are critical to developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

- **Self-awareness** is the ability to perceive your own emotions accurately and understand how you respond in various situations. It also allows you to assess the impact of your emotions on those around you.

- **Self-management** is the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check (self-control), maintain a high standard of honesty and integrity (trustworthiness), take responsibility for your behavior (conscientiousness) and handle change well (adaptability).
- Finally, **empathy** is the ability to understand and relate to others by being aware of their needs, perspectives, feelings, and concerns.

Learn all you can about who you are and the patterns you have developed. Read books, find a counselor and talk to trusted friends. Get as much information and feedback as possible. Become clear on your values and beliefs and commit to living by them. Each of us has triggers, so understand the places you get stuck and the behaviors you keep doing over and over in an attempt to meet your needs.

Own all your behavior. 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 starting with ourselves, because that is where any real change can ever take place. We are back in the driver's seat, creating our life, versus reacting to life situations.

Finally, stay motivated and be willing to exert the effort necessary to complete your journey. Start living in the present, not the past. Forgive yourself and move forward. Learn to be vulnerable and a courageous truth-teller. Speak your truth in love. Face your fears—underneath every fear is a lie. Take every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5), renew your mind (Rom. 12:2), and replace old relational patterns with new ones that reflect the character of God (Eph. 4:22-25).

Talk about it: What are your take-away's from this chapter?

How to Argue with Love

Conflict forces us to be fully present because it shatters our ego – stripping away all hope of escape or sugar coating. It removes everything that is nonessential to our authentic being; it removes all superficial layers. Conflict is painful because it wakes us up out of our created illusions. And if we lean into it, conflict can be the catalyst to our enlightenment.

— Alaric Hutchinson

Look Inwardly

Look hard at your own thought patterns of what you lack, or they lack, or what you are not getting from your partner. These patterns can keep you waiting for something or someone outside you to make you happy. In truth, it is up to you to free yourself from those toxic beliefs so can love and give freely from a place of peace.

Treat your partner ‘as if’ you love them, especially when the conflict is raging.

When we choose to stay loving and respectful of our spouse, we slowly move towards recognizing that they are different, but not necessarily wrong, bad or dysfunctional. Keep the conflict clean. Avoid nasty comments. Attempt to honor, hear and understand a viewpoint vastly different from your own. A major mistake is to think or verbalize, “I am right,” “My way is the right way,” or “Your ideas don’t make sense.” Instead, work to see it the way your spouse does. This is what love would do. However, there is a problem. Frequently we do not see it “their way” because their way seems so flawed. For many this means either “You are right” or “I am right.” Guess which one of these most of us choose? No matter which you choose, neither option is going to help your relationship. Compassion goes a long way in seeing our partners point of view.

Learn to understand and accept the way your spouse’s personality works.

Now, this is easier said than done, because most people do not even know much about their own functioning style let alone that of their partner. Start with your own style and then learn your partner’s. For example, do you pursue your partner when you are stressed or there’s conflict, or do you withdraw, maybe tune out, and give yourself some space? Do you find yourself feeling hurt, scared, confused, defensive, resentful, and maybe eventually angry? And what do you do with these feelings? Eagerly seek to have them heard and understood, or do you distract yourself in some way until they just seem to seep away? It is essential that you discuss and discover what each of you does when under duress, and that you learn what needs are behind these patterns.

Know your needs and express them.

It may seem hard to believe, but the main reason we struggle in relationships, is because we are unable to express our need adequately. Typical *needs ignoring behaviors* would include:

- pleasing others repeatedly at one’s own expense,
- not asking for help when we could do with it,
- helping others in ways that we would not take the time to do for ourselves,
- working too hard and for too long and therefore compromising a life of balance,
- ignoring our feelings and what these are asking us to do for ourselves,

Whenever we overlook our needs, we repeat patterns of childhood when we first learned to do this. However, as adults, we will not take kindly to having our needs ignored, even if we are doing this to ourselves. When it does happen, something inside of us will snap. If we do not attend to this, we will highly likely seek someone ‘out there’ who seems to be the offender

preventing us from getting our needs met. However, this culprit is more often 'in here' where we have learned to overlook the message from our feelings that something has to be done in support of self.

Establish a time after an emotional outburst to process feelings and needs.

Once the drama is over yet again, and you have given it plenty of time to settle, your rational mind will return, and you will now be able to talk with your beloved. Do not do this until both have settled their emotions though, otherwise you will trigger a re-run of the earlier drama.

1. Set aside time to talk. Treat this as a No. 1 priority. Use I messages and active listening to work out a way of meeting each other's needs while also getting your own met.
2. Ask what needs the other had which lead to the comment that pushed your buttons. Do this with compassion and the desire to understand the other.
3. Accept that the other is different. Don't expect them to be like you, or the way you want them to be!! Be sure to find out what the other really means.
4. Spend time asking your partner the most important question of all - "What am I like to live with?" Do not beat yourself up with the answers. Just use them to see how s/he is experiencing the world of your actions.
5. View conflict as a way to learn about yourself. Ignoring these lessons will cost you dearly!! Do not blame the other person. That NEVER helped any relationship and will simply help you avoid finding out why you reacted.
6. Know that conflict has probably caused your offensive or defensive patterns to appear. Be aware of these & notice how they affect the health of the relationship.

Two keys to a lasting relationship

Successful couples are **kind** and **generous** toward each other. A good example is when couples make requests of one another. Once a request has been made, the other partner has the choice to move toward that partner or to move away. Dr. John Gottman has coined these two types of responses Masters and Disasters. Masters make a habit of scanning the social environment for things they can appreciate and say thank you for, looking for what their partner is doing right and expressing appreciation versus looking for what they are doing wrong (Disasters) and criticizing or blaming.

Three schedules healthy couples make and keep

Learning to make advance decisions can be one of the best strategies for protecting your marriage and keeping it a priority. Decide in advance how you will give *time, protection, and investment* to your marriage. If you do not, the frantic pace of life will eventually erode both love and commitment. So, get out your calendar and *schedule dates, getaways and intimacy*, especially when there are young children at home.

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

Essential Ingredients for a Thriving Marriage

Truth without love ruins the oneness, and love without truth gives the illusion of unity but actually stops the journey and the growth. The solution is grace. The experience of Jesus' grace makes it possible to practice the two most important skills in marriage: forgiveness and repentance. Only if we are very good at forgiving and very good at repenting can truth and love be kept together.

-Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*.

Maintaining good relationships is essential to our long-term well-being. Our experience suggests that long-term happiness rests on the ability to find and keep loving connection with a partner. What goes wrong? Many seem to find love but have trouble keeping it. We expect to get all of our needs met by our spouse and have unrealistic expectations of marriage. We want our way and react poorly when we do not get it. We get hurt and say ugly hurtful things in response. Our pride and selfishness get in the way and our relationships are damaged. Below are key essentials that every marriage needs regularly. **If any of these is missing from your marriage, what will you do about it?**

True Partnership. Marriage is 100/100; it is both people giving all they have for the sake of the other and for the sake of their shared dreams. Partnership means never allowing your spouse to face any obstacle without your full presence, encouragement and support.

Kindness. Kindness is one of the most important (and under-rated) ingredients for a successful marriage. If you bring more kindness to the marriage, the relationship will improve. So many people show kindness and thoughtfulness to others and then get home and rudely give their leftovers to their spouse. Give your spouse your BEST, not your leftovers!

Sex. Couples who consistently make love tend to be happier and healthier than those who do not. There are a myriad of factors as to why a couple's sex life isn't where they want it to be and some of those issues (hormonal imbalances, exhaustion, medical limitations, etc.) seem out of the control of both spouses. Still, when you make sex a priority, your marriage will always benefit.

Communication. Talk about everything. Communication does for a marriage what breathing does for your lungs. Your marriage will not survive without it. Communication means more than making small talk about the details of what has to be checked off the family's to-do list. Communication means putting down the electronics and other distractions and focusing on each other. It means actively listening to one another. Make time to do this every day.

Laughter. The healthiest couples laugh a lot...even in difficult seasons. Healthy marriages should have a lot more "comedy" than "drama." Even in the difficult seasons, always find times to laugh together. Sure, there will be moments when you are crying together too, but laughter and joy should permeate your relationship through all life's highs and lows. Laughter can also improve overall health and even your sex-drive, so there are all kinds of reasons to giggle together.

Faith. The More you love God, the more capacity you will have to love each other. There are no "perfect" marriages. All couples make mistakes along the way, but I believe the best decision we can make is to build a foundation of faith. This means praying with each other and for each other, using the Bible as a roadmap for life and being an active part of a healthy church. The Bible says, "God is love." (1 John 4:8), and the more you invite Him into your marriage, the more love He will bring to your marriage.

Friendship. The strongest marriages are between two best friends. Through all the seasons of your marriage, many aspects of your relationship will change, but your friendship with each other can be a steady anchor keeping you strong through all life's challenges. Invest into your friendship with your spouse and you will be on your way to building a marriage that will survive (and thrive) for a lifetime!

Trust. Trust is the foundation of intimacy. Without trust, there can be no real intimacy. A marriage cannot survive without trust. It is that simple. Work hard to build it and work hard to keep it! The strength of your trust in each other will determine the strength of your marriage.

Transparency. Transparency builds and sustains trust. The strongest couples have a "secret-free guarantee" in their marriage. Transparency is basically just another word for "honesty," but there is another word it paints and that is "nakedness." A marriage needs nakedness and not just physical nakedness. You need to be emotionally naked with your spouse. In practical terms, this means having no secrets. You cannot hide anything (your money, your motives, your actions, etc.) from your spouse. The level of your honesty and transparency will ultimately determine the level of your intimacy.

Commitment. Marriages do not fail due to a lack of compatibility. For the most part, marriages fail due to a lack of commitment. The couples who make it are not the ones who never had a reason to get divorced. They are the ones whose commitment to each other was always bigger than their reasons to separate.

Mutuality. In a thriving marriage, both individuals make efforts to grow and change for the welfare of the other and the preservation of their relationship. Both willingly contribute honesty, caring, respect, responsibility, and repentance, which are qualities essential for the care, maintenance, and repair of the marriage.

Reciprocity. Both people in the relationship give and both receive. Power and responsibility are shared and there is not a double standard where one person gets all the goodies in the relationship while the other person sacrificially does most of the work. The apostle Paul validates reciprocity when he gives guidelines how to give our resources sacrificially but not foolishly. He writes, "*For I do not mean that others should be eased, and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness* (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Freedom. Freedom is an essential component in all healthy adult relationships. Freedom allows a couple to make choices, to give input, and to express their feelings without fear of being badgered, manipulated and punished. When freedom is present, we are not afraid to be ourselves nor are we pressured to become something we are not.

Take some time to check on the status of your marriage today. Are these ingredients evident? If not, what could you do to start the change process?

Guidelines for Better Decision-Making

The key to success is to make good decisions. The key to making good decisions is to have experience. The key to getting experience is to make bad decisions.

-Unknown

Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn't first sit down and figure the cost so you'll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you're going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: 'He started something he couldn't finish.' Luke 14:28-30

1. Pray together before starting a serious discussion. Ask God for peace, wisdom and clarity.
2. Remember, you are both on the same side and your relationship is bigger than any problem or decision.
3. Remind yourselves of the importance of love, harmony, and unity between you.
4. Focus on a common goal. Agree on what the problem or issue is, so you are not trying to solve multiple problems at once or work at cross-purposes by trying to address different issues.
5. Avoid becoming too attached to a particular outcome. Determine to discover the truth together. Avoid stating something as absolute fact. Contribute thoughts towards building consensus and watch for when your perspectives coincide.
6. Once you have expressed your thoughts and feelings, visualize them going into a central discussion "pot." This allows the discussion to flow freely without either of you holding on to what you said.
7. Encourage and freely share thoughts, feelings, and opinions with love, respect, and kindness. Strictly avoid criticism or domination of each other. Strive to be open to all expressions without taking offense.
8. Carefully monitor and modify your attitude and tone of voice. If underneath your words is criticism, disrespect, or sarcasm, your spouse will hear them, even when your words are positive.
9. Listen to each other carefully and without interruption and request clarification as needed.
10. Strive for unified decisions, even when it takes longer. At times, consider deferring to the other's solution, but still look at and carry out the decision as a unified couple one. However, avoid deferring regularly rather than taking the time to thoroughly discuss an issue. Thorough discussions usually result in better and more creative solutions.
11. Review significant decisions after some time trying them out to assess whether they are working or whether you need to change direction. Stay aware for when you need to involve someone else in a discussion or decision for maximum effectiveness as well.

One of the best methods for making good decisions is to apply to each alternative the "Four-way Test" used by Rotarians around the world. The four tests are: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build good will and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Decisions work best when you have equal voices in couple discussions, sometimes known as "couple consultation." It is vital for you both to express what is on your minds and hearts freely. Either withholding your input or dominating the conversation will both negatively affect the outcome. If one of you tends to be more dominant in speaking, you will need to use self-discipline to give the other an opportunity to speak. The less dominant of you may also need to practice assertiveness. Free expression happens when you are both willing to listen patiently to one another and not interrupt.

It is vital to ensure the purity of your motives and intentions in any discussion. If either of you has a hidden agenda—an unspoken intention or goal—or you want to manipulate one another, the couple consultation is on a weak foundation from the very start. Be very aware if you have

developed the habit of manipulation, particularly toward those of the opposite gender. Consultation is not a method to get your own way. You will be wise to help one another in changing this pattern, or it will have a consistent negative effect on your relationship.

While it is normal and healthy for people to have different perspectives, and couples need to learn how to reconcile them, serious and regular conflict is an indicator of a marriage in trouble. Dr. John M. Gottman and his team at the Relationship Research Institute have discovered a number of communication warning signs (Based on *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*).

The warning signs are:

1. Starting interactions negatively and harshly (harsh startup)
2. Criticizing your partner's character (character attack)
3. Showing contempt for your partner (sneering, mocking, being superior)
4. Reacting defensively to your partner (blaming, attacking)
5. Shutting your partner out and avoiding communication (stonewalling)
6. Experiencing a flood of strong physical responses to your partner's negativity, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, or sweating (hyperarousal)

If any of these are present, try some new ways of interacting. Make some positive changes to reduce or eliminate fighting or serious disagreements. Learn to disengage and not escalate an argument. Think about how you feel when disunity arises between you and make a determined effort to find new ways of reaching harmonious decisions.

Four key ingredients for healthy decision making

1. **Mutual respect.** Mutual respect is translated in everyday life by our commitment to being empathetic for the feelings and experience of our partners.
2. **Healthy non-destructive communication.** There may be room for "requests for change," but not criticism that makes us defensive and reactive. If we could learn to de-escalate high levels of conflict through humor or well-placed affection, our marriages would grow exponentially
3. **Positive supportive interactions.** Learning how to create a culture of gentleness, soothing, and acceptance in our relationships can go a long way when conflict inevitably arises.
4. **Time to nurture the relationship.** We need to fight the mentality that creeps into our lives by creating deliberate time together to simply be with each other. Couples need time together if they are going to move from "I" to "we."

Talk about it: What are your take-away's? How would you rate your decision making?

Growing as a Partner

Learning to live with our opposite and all their little quirkinesses is part of learning to love

--John and Stasi Eldredge, *Love and War*

Love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself

-Jesus

Self-love

If we cannot receive love, we can never truly love. When we do not love ourselves, we fear not being loved by others. To self-protect, we keep others at a distance. However, in doing so, we leave ourselves feeling disconnected, wounded or even abandoned. By loving self and receiving love from others, we are able to be empathetic and see both others and ourselves more clearly. By loving ourselves, no matter what the voices inside may say, we can be loving toward others. Until we can love ourselves, our need for love from others will be dependent and unhealthy, as if we need them to tell us, "You really are loveable." Often, we don't believe it.

However, when we know that we are acceptable, deserving and worthy of being loved, only then can we be loving toward others even when they are not being loving toward us. We can love from our fullness in God, who tells us that we are worthy. When we are secure in our self-acceptance, we can stay open to others. We can risk staying connected to them, even when they are critical of us. We can risk hearing them without being defensive or resistant.

By loving ourself first, we are not seeking another to prop us up or validate us. We are solid in the knowledge and feeling that we are thoroughly enough as we are in Christ, and that God loves us. In addition, being so, we have something solid to offer - love, acceptance, affirmation, support and appreciation of another, because we can be to them what we are being to ourselves-loving, and lovable.

Now our relationship takes on a different dimension. Instead of being needy, we are prepared to meet our own needs. Instead of blaming, we are prepared to look at ourselves. Instead of asking 'Why don't you...?' we need to ask, 'why don't I ...?' Instead of finding fault, we recognize that there is work to be done, Work that involves a caring approach to my own emotional distress. Now we can ask our partner to help us meet our own needs. We also recognize that we can help our partner recognize, own and meet their own needs also.

We are now in a place of being compassionate towards self, and compassionate towards our partner. Instead of wronging, we will want to support their woundedness. Instead of being superior, we will want to help them heal old unmet needs, just as we do our own. Now we are being loving, caring, supportive and understanding of everybody in this relationship.

Well-functioning partners create well-functioning relationships

We each bring to our relationships our past baggage. For most, this baggage is an invisible entity standing in the center of the relationship, a little like the elephant in the room that is never spoken about. When a relationship struggles, the past is usually a key unseen element. To improve your relationship, consider how you can improve as a person, and then bring this as an offering to your partner.

Do you struggle in this area? First step, challenge and change those inner voices.

Pointers to a happy relationship

1. **Whenever you react, know that this probably says more about you than anyone else.** Start by accepting that this might be so and examine what in your past might be coming into the present. What unhelpful self-beliefs are being triggered by your relationship? What old reactive patterns are familiar? What behaviors of yours, certainly don't seem to work well for your partner?
2. **Notice your style of coping whenever there is conflict.** Do you harangue and follow your partner around the house? Do you withdraw and try to avoid the conflict? Do you close down emotionally, and avoid speaking? Do you erupt into an angry outburst or even a violent one (verbally, emotionally or physically)? None of these common patterns are supportive of a relationship and must be explored and understood before new strategies are developed to cope with stressful encounters.
3. **Notice the familiar dynamics that arise repeatedly during conflict.** Most arguments arise because of mismatches in needs, values or personality preferences. Any mismatch can be worked through, but only if you learn of your unmet needs, core values, and personality tendencies and preferences in other people.
4. **Recognize that relationships offer you a perfect opportunity to enjoy someone who is different.** However, if you find yourself disagreeing with the person who was once enjoyable because they were different, then basically you are trying to get them to convert to being a clone of you. Notice the absurdity of this situation and be committed to accepting others just as they are and working around or through the irritating differences.
5. **Be aware of personality tendencies that would not be helpful in a relationship.** Do you lie, manipulate, coerce, cheat, argue, criticize, withdraw, stonewall, put down, undermine, talk too much, talk too little, gossip, rarely listen, not bother to connect, act as a loner, are needy/demanding, controlling, self-absorbed, avoidant, or paranoid? **Any** of these will need to be dealt with if your relationship with another is to stand any chance of success.
6. **Train yourself to be the ideal partner.** Ideal partners are engaging, communicative, and good listeners. They can talk about and express their feelings. They know well their own idiosyncrasies, take responsibility for and act to address these, and accept and appreciate the idiosyncrasies of others. They are supportive and seek to help meet their partner's needs. They are caring, tolerant of differences, have a sense of humor, support their partner through the tough patches, know how to treat their partner as special, and do special things with/for them. They spend time on the couple relationship and accept conflict and know how through it.

Talk about it: Which of these six tips do you do best? Worst? How will you improve? What are your take-away's?

Seven Principles of a Great Marriage

Our brokenness combines with our sin and produces a style of relating. An approach to life, which to us feels so utterly justified and so perfectly reasonable, but in fact is the very thing that will destroy us and all those around.
--John and Stasi Eldredge, *Love and War*

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil.
Proverbs 3:5-7 ESV

Below are seven principles for maintaining a great marriage taken from marriage expert Dr. John Gottman's *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. These may seem simple enough, but they can be quite difficult to implement. It will take some hard work and discipline to accomplish these. Remember, marriage is a revealer, which means it will reveal our character, our flaws and wounds, and our selfishness faster than anything else. This, for many of us, comes as quite a shock. For us, two spiritual principles serve as umbrella for what follows. First, love God with your whole being. Believe that He is who He says He is and will do what He says He will do. Draw your value and worth first and foremost from Him. Second, commit to love your spouse just as God does. Your spouse is God's son or daughter, so treat him or her with that level of respect.

1. **Enhance your love maps.** Love is in the details. Happy couples are intimately familiar with their partner's world. These couples have a richly detailed *love map*- that 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 is currently stressing them out, to some of their life dreams, and they know yours. The key process is to ask many open-ended questions. The spiritual key is faith. Read Psalms 127:1.
2. **Nurture your fondness and admiration.** Happy couples respect each other and have a generally positive view of each other. Fondness and admiration are two of the most important elements in a satisfying and long-term relationship. They are the antidote for contempt. If these elements are completely missing, the marriage will struggle. Over 90% of couples who put positive spin on their marriage are happy. The key process is changing a habit of mind. Shift from scanning for mistakes to what partner does right, then build a culture of appreciation, fondness, affection and respect. The spiritual key is agape love. Read 1 Corinthians 13.

Talk about it: *list three or more of their partner's positive characteristics along with an incident that illustrates each quality. Then read your lists to each other.*

3. **Turn toward each other instead of away.** Romance is not a cruise, expensive meal or a lavish gift. It lives and thrives in everyday, little things. It is kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life. Leaving an encouraging voicemail for your spouse when you know he or she is having a bad day. Running late but 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").

Turning toward each other in these ways is the basis for connection and passion. Couples that turn toward each other have an "emotional bank account" with plenty in reserve. Having such an 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. The key process is building awareness of how one's partner asks for connection and expresses emotional needs and deciding to turn toward these rather than turning away or against. Spiritual key is forgiveness. Read Ephesians 4:31-32

4. **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. In great marriages, men respect their wives and are influenced by them. Letting a partner influence, you is not about having one person hold the reins; it is about honoring and respecting both people in the relationship. Marriages where the husband resists influence from his wife are 4 times more likely to end in divorce. Accepting influence is clearly an attitude, but it is also a skill that can be honed. The spiritual key is mutual submission. Read Ephesians 5:21.
5. **Solve your solvable problems.** There are two types of marital problems: conflicts that can be resolved and perpetual problems that cannot. According to Gottman, 69% of the problems couples will face are virtually unsolvable, meaning that they must be managed. 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 tend to be situational, with no obvious underlying conflict. The spiritual key is to seek peace. Read Romans 12:18, Hebrews 12:14.

Five-step model for resolving conflicts

Step 1: soften your startup, which simply means starting the conversation without criticism or contempt. Soft start-up tips:

- Complain, do not accuse, blame or criticize.
- Use "I" statements.
- Describe what is happening, do not evaluate or judge.
- Be clear about what your concern is and what you need.
- Be polite and respectful
- Be appreciative.
- Do not stuff or store thing up.
- Do not start the conversation with bitterness or anger.

Step 2: make and receive "repair attempts." A repair is any action or statement that deescalates tension and moves toward resolution.

- Talk softly and clearly, without rage.
- Use language that eases tension and makes your partner feel safe.
- Success depends on the quality of the relationship.
- Repairs are best done using key "positive" vs. stress inducing phrases.

Step 3: soothe yourself and then your partner. When you feel yourself getting heated during a conversation, let your partner know that you are overwhelmed and take a 20-minute break. (That is how long it takes for your body to calm down.) To calm down, you might try closing your eyes, taking slow, deep breaths, relaxing your muscles and visualizing a calm place. After you have calmed down, you might help soothe your partner. Ask each other what is most comforting and do that.

Step 4: compromise. The above steps prime couples for compromise because they create positive feelings and increase empathy. When conflicts arise, it is important to take your partner's thoughts and feelings into consideration. An exercise to help you and your spouse find common ground is to draw two circles: a smaller one inside a larger one. In the smaller circle, make a list of your nonnegotiable 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.

Step 5: remember to be tolerant of each other's faults. Compromise is impossible until you can accept your partner's flaws and get over the "if onlies." ("If only he was this" "If only she was that") Tolerance does mean being a doormat. It means realizing there are few absolutes in marital conflict, only differing perspectives and opinions. 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. Read Romans 12:9-20 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-13.

6. **Overcome gridlock.** The goal with perpetual problems is for couples to move from gridlock to dialogue. What typically underlies gridlock are unfulfilled dreams. Gridlock is often a sign of dreams, hopes or desires that are not being addressed or respected by each other. Happy couples believe in the importance of helping each other realize their dreams.

The first step in 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. The goal is to 'declaw' the issue, to remove the hurt so the problem stops being a source of great pain.

7. **Create shared meaning.** Shared meaning does not happen by magic. Marriage is not just about raising kids, splitting chores, and making love. It has a spiritual dimension that has to do with creating an inner life together. This kind of robust life includes shared values and spiritual beliefs, shared rituals and gestures, a similar way of looking at the world, small daily acts of self-sacrifice that signal an individual's willingness to put 'we' above "me and an appreciation for the roles and goals that link you as a couple and lead to an understanding of what it means to be a part of the family you have become. Happy couples create a family culture that includes both of their dreams. They understand helping each realize important life dreams is a goal of marriage. In being open to each other's perspectives and opinions, happy couples naturally come together. This leads to strong sense of "belonging" as family. The goal is to create an atmosphere that encourages each to talk honestly about his or her convictions.

Shared meaning is reflected in how time and resources are prioritized and stewarded, in the stories you tell about your lives, faith, legacy and beliefs, and in the meaning ascribed to things and events.

Factors that differentiate healthy from less healthy relationships

A fundamental component of intimacy is *engagement*, each partner making an effort to turn towards the other emotionally. Being overly critical, defensive, contemptuous, belligerent, or domineering can lead to emotional disengagement.

- Relationships can endure differences. Nearly 70% of the disagreements between persons will never be fully resolved. Learning to compromise and develop workable solutions makes for a healthier relationship.
- The first three minutes of a disagreement will predict its outcome. During a healthy conflict discussion, making five positive expressions for each negative expression will increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. Look for ways to suggest positive outcomes.
- Stay calm with each other. When our heartbeat reaches about 100 beats per minute, adrenaline is secreted and, along with other reactions, our ability to listen and attend to our partner may become compromised. A discussion that is focused and constructive can help us calm down and problem solve.
- Avoid engaging in verbal or physical violence. Thirty-five percent of relationships have already experienced some form of violence prior to their marriage. Work as a couple to promote supportive and loving solutions to differences.
- Remember that every relationship is a cross-cultural experience; each partner comes from a different place and has a rich story to share. Every individual is a philosopher, with a unique view of life. Learn to cherish and respect each other's points of view.

Behaviors that can ruin a relationship

Angry reactions to feedback vs. non-defensiveness and openness. Whether we punish our partner by breaking down emotionally, by giving them the silent treatment or by screaming at them, we are telling them that we do not want to hear what they have to say. We may provoke additional emotional distance by reacting critically, saying the things that we know will sting our partner the most.

Closed to new experiences vs. open to trying new things. We should always be open to exploring things that expand our world and not limit our or our partner's experience. 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 alive.

Deception and duplicity vs. honesty and integrity. Admittedly, honesty in a relationship can be tricky. We have to know our real intentions and what our real truth is. This means we have to know ourselves. We have to consistently ask ourselves, "Am I being honest? What's my motivation? Do my words and actions really match?" If we say 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 vs. respect for the other's boundaries, priorities and goals. Without even noticing it, we may be intrusive or controlling toward our partner, acting in a manner that is disrespectful or demeaning to the other person's sense of self.

Misunderstanding vs. understanding. We tend to see our partners for who we need them to be rather than who they are. We may distort them by idealizing or putting them on a pedestal, or by picking them apart, denigrating them by projecting negative qualities onto them. When we disrespect the boundary between ourselves and our partner, we're more likely to see them as an extension of ourselves, and we may mistreat or criticize them in ways we mistreat or criticize ourselves.

Eight ways to refresh your marriage

1. **Get intentional.** Create a positive experience for you and your spouse — on purpose. Plan a great date night or a surprise for your partner. Then do it again in a few weeks.
2. **Study your spouse.** What kinds of things does he or she get excited about? What are your mate's dreams? What does your spouse think would make his or her life more fulfilling? One way to make your partner feel appreciated is to express joy as you help make your spouse's life more satisfying.
3. **Sort through the negatives.** Which problems are negligible – things you can live with, and which ones are important and must be resolved? As you sort them out, you may be surprised at how few “biggies” there really are. Also, as you tackle one or two of the problems together, the next one that comes along won't seem so insurmountable.
4. **Set mutual goals.** Offset the tendency to focus on yourself by finding one or more areas that you can purposefully work on together.
5. **Do not let feelings fester.** Find the time and energy to resolve disagreements, even if it requires a “late-nighter.” Long-term resentments can use up more energy than a few hours of wrestling through a problem.
6. **Focus on reality.** As the old saying tries to tell us, “The grass may seem greener, but it still has to be weeded and mowed.” The perfect spouse does not exist anywhere. So, look for what you love and appreciate about the one you have chosen.
7. **Be a servant.** This is how Christ won over the multitudes. So, make your partner the target of some good deeds this week. Serving your spouse will actually make you feel better.
8. **Seek excellence.** Work as hard to maintain your marriage as you do to advance your career or to excel in raising your children. What areas need extra attention? How will you know if you have met your goals? Generate new energy and creativity and apply them to your marriage.

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

Strengthening Your Marriage

In the history of people helping from biblical times until now, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who listen to feedback and those who don't.

-Cloud and Townsend, Boundaries in Marriage

Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. Matthew 7:5 NLT

If you want your relationship to survive, there are some “don'ts” that research has shown must be avoided at all costs. You are no doubt aware that certain of your own behaviors have the potential to create conflict in your relationship, and that other behaviors have the effect of enhancing it. So, become wise to those marriage busting, love destroying, and relationship sinking styles of reacting.

Predictors of divorce

John Gottman and his associates have extensively researched the communication patterns of couples and have identified what they call the 'Harsh Start-Up' and the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.'

The Harsh Start-Up

Imagine starting a discussion with your partner about something that upsets you. If you are feeling frustrated and resentful, you might start with a harsh, sarcastic or critical tone of voice. For example, “Why are you always so selfish?” or “The problem with you is that you always....” When you read these out of context, it is easy to see the accusing and hostile tone. Imagine the body language you might use when speaking in this tone. This is what we call a harsh startup, starting the conversation with a severe, sharp or accusing tone.

According to Gottman's research, ninety-six percent of the time the start of the argument predicts how it will end (usually negatively and without resolution). Once an argument starts off in a negative direction, it very rarely “rights” itself. Harsh start-ups are strongly associated with relationship break-up and divorce.

Talk About it: This week notice when you want to hold your partner accountable or ask them to change. Take a moment to think through your startup before you say anything. Do your best to create the best atmosphere for conversation in your tone when you start the conversation. See how this one second of intention can change the direction of your conversations.

Four Horsemen

Gottman's research demonstrated that anger, disagreements and in fact conflict in general were not predictors of divorce, but the use of any of the Four Horsemen was. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

In every relationship, each partner has a style of conflict that was learned in childhood by observing the significant adults in their life. That style is usually reactionary. For example, most of us do not decide to be defensive we are programmed to be. Therefore, to understand and modify your habitual response to conflict, you must come to grips with what you do, how useful

that is, and what you can do differently when the old habit emerges and wants to run its course. Avoiding the Four Horseman starts by learning to use complaints instead of criticism.

The first horseman, **criticism**, is any statement that implies there is something wrong with a partners' character. It is a judgmental process that places an evaluation on the spouse's behavior. It implies a superior position taken by the critic. Commonly criticism is the choice of those who think they know best, the 'right' way. Blame is a first cousin to criticism. Criticism attacks character not issues; it is generalized and non-specific. Common phrases generally begin with the word you. For example, phrases such as "you always" or "you never."

Such a position overlooks the flawed thinking that anyone's perspective can be superior to anyone else's. Being informed, knowledgeable, or even 'right' is no proof of superiority, because we make our decisions based on many things, not least that which best suits our personality, character, predisposition or need. Since these are all unique, one person's perspective is seldom "superior" to another's. Besides, most marital disputes are not about "facts" but about perspectives and opinions.

A healthier choice is to use a complaint. Complaints are specific statements of concern; aimed at a specific behavior. They tend to be growth producing to relationship. While criticism attacks the person, complaints focus on an issue or event. Complaints tend to begin with "I" while criticisms nearly always begin with "you." To turn any complaint into a criticism, just add... "What's wrong with you?"

Defensiveness is a position taken to defend oneself against potential attack but may feel more like a desire to hide from conflict. It is a general stance of warding off a perceived attack. The problem with being defensive is that the process of closing up shop means that conflict can never be cleared or even discussed. Unfortunately, defensiveness typically includes denying responsibility for the problem, which inevitably fuels the flames of conflict even further.

In that case, the other person can feel shut out, and left feeling wronged, ignored or dismissed because negotiation and open discussion is not permitted. Defensiveness closes the book on communication and is often used by people who do not know quite what to say or do when conflict arises. While it a way of staying safe, it also cuts off meaningful communication. Quite obviously, no relationship can survive such trench warfare, where little gets resolved, and one person at least is remaining invisible to the other.

Contempt is any statement or nonverbal behavior that communicates condescension. It is a way of communicating, non-verbally, something like "Oh my, here he goes again," or "haven't I heard all of this rubbish before." Usually associated with a rolling of the eyes and looking up at the heavens in mock despair, contempt implies that one's spouse is inferior, undesirable, or in some way a hopeless case. Mockery or sarcasm is a common but powerful form of defensiveness. Patronizing behavior, in which one talks down to one's spouse is a close relative of contempt, because it too implies a superior position, the partner being judged "not good enough." Since "I am not good enough" is a common childhood script for many, any behavior that implies that the other is deficient in some way will undermine self-esteem and empowerment. According to Gottman, contempt is the best single predictor of divorce and refers to it as the 'sulfuric acid' of love.

Eventually, couples stop talking. **Stonewalling** is a form of resistance in which one refuses to listen to one's partner, especially any complaints. It has some similarities to defensiveness, but it has more avoidance and silence. It is another strategy for closing down and keeping oneself safe. Stonewalling can also become a way of preventing any discussion, although some are able to eventually engage in discussion once the emotional temperature of the conflict has settled down. In fact, stonewalling is often used when a way forward through open communication is unknown territory. Stonewallers often close down in order to escape vitriolic comments, or rage, but in doing so may not express or discuss their own feelings.

After further research, Gottman added belligerence to the list. Like criticism, belligerence is a preferred strategy for those who like to lash out with their tongue. It is a way of taunting one's spouse with provocative comments that challenges the spouse's power and authority and shows a determination to behave as one wants no matter what the spouse wants or suggests.

The presence of any of these can characterize unhappy, at-risk marriages. All are strategies for venting emotions, but they are unhealthy and undermine the self-esteem and emotional strength of the partner. Whenever a person is being denigrated by one's spouse, the clock is ticking on how long they can continue to be undermined by the person who should be the most supportive and empowering. Sadly, not only do these unhelpful strategies take a toll on your marriage, but they also take a toll on your body and mind. Being unhappily married raises the likelihood of getting sick by 35% and shortens life span by an average of 4 years. The stress contributes to higher blood pressure, heart disease, and issues such as depression and substance abuse.

Talk about It: Do any of the horsemen show up in your interactions? If and when you see them, find a way to change your internal process to warmth, openness and personal accountability. Take a moment to think through your startup before you say anything. Do your best to create the best atmosphere for conversation in your tone when you start the conversation and respond to your partner.

The quality of our relationships with others is the bedrock on which we build our existence. Our closest love relationships shape who we are and, more than perhaps any other single factor, shape our life story. Happiness experts, such as psychologist Ed Diener of the University of Illinois, tell us that our relationships are the strongest single predictor of human joy and well-being. Ever since social scientists started systematically studying happiness, it has been resoundingly clear that deep and stable relationships make for happy and stable individuals. Positive relationships also make us more resilient, advance our personal growth, and improve our physical health.

— Sue Johnson, *Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships*

Some Important Success Keys

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

-Timothy Keller, The Meaning of Marriage

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. 1 Corinthians 13:4 ESV

The key to a successful marriage is to learn what must be done to make the relationship work, and very few people have any idea what that is. Fewer still take responsibility for doing the work, especially if it means they may have to make some changes. The ideas below can help. The goal of this workbook has been to help you discover those characteristics, behaviors and tendencies that sabotage healthy marriage and change them. Then you can begin to make changes in how you relate to your partner. Change is never easy, but it must start with you. This can be especially difficult if your partner blames you or refuses to take any responsibility for the problems in your marriage. So, what can you do?

1. **Get clear on your value and worth.** God has endowed you with His stamp-His image. This allows you to accept who you are, grow and make changes whether your spouse chooses to change or stay the same.
2. **Understand your own personality style** and your partner's. Neither are going to change in a hurry, so it is essential that you see, understand and accept both. In particular, notice what soothes and helps your partner and what enables them to express thoughts and feelings that precede anger, resentment or hostility.
3. Behind personality differences are needs and values differences. Ignorance of one's own needs and that of your partner's are the key reason people get emotional, and conflict abounds. The bottom line is realizing that **you both want the same thing**, to have a healthy, God-inspired relationship.
4. **Real giving**—this means giving your partner what he or she really needs with no strings attached, because you really want to.
5. When needs are not met, or values not respected and accepted, strong feelings arise. **What feelings come up for you? Get to know your own emotional reactive pattern.** Do not assume that everyone is the same – yours is uniquely yours. These feelings basically say "The way I (or you) are responding to life situations doesn't work for me. I want a different response from me (or you) when certain situations arise.
6. **Learn to listen.** Easier said than done when you are upset but get into the routine of listening in **a way that works for the other** (ask them for guidance on how best to do this). Some like their feelings heard, validated, and reflected, others prefer to have their viewpoint reflected and appreciated. Never abuse being listened to by being judgmental or critical – or the listening will not last long. Listen with empathy, sensitivity, and concern to what your partner wants and needs from you.

7. **Be aware of your emotions.** They tell you when things are not working for you and also tell you when they are going well. The blueprint for your emotional reactive style, though, was established in childhood. Get to know your emotional pattern and that of your partner. Once you each know your style, then you can discuss ways of managing it when it arises during conflict.
8. Your emotional reaction in relationship is almost totally about **you** rather than the other person. No one can make you feel anything, much less feelings you do not like. It is unlikely you will come to a full and necessary understanding of this without the therapeutic involvement of someone skilled to help you see this, and all of the steps above.
9. **Develop a servant's heart** and a willingness to work together. Marriage is an opportunity to grow up. Our patterns can change, but a key is a commitment to serve instead of being served, to express our needs respectfully and to accept where each person is right now as you both grow.
10. A good start to your work together is to ask yourself these essential questions.
"What does the fact that I was attracted to my partner say about me, and what does the fact that I'm now bothered by my partner say about me?"

"What am I like to live with? How many others would also find me difficult to live with, and for what reasons?"

"What is my reactive pattern that occurs over and over, and how easy am I to get on with when it kicks in?"

"What do I do in my relationship that adds quality to it?"

The first purpose of marriage – beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else – is to please God. The challenge, of course, is that it is utterly selfless living; rather than asking, "What makes me happy?" we are told that we must ask, "What will make God happy?"

-Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*

Talk about it: What are your take-away's?

What Good Couples Do Right

We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it time and he or she will change. The primary problem is learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.

-Stanley Hauerwas, *Sex and Politics*

If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may also be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:1-3 MSG

Five Tools every good marriage uses to stay healthy

Based on a Marriage Mission Blog by Steve and Cindy Wright

Ownership - taking responsibility for the good as well as the bad

Ownership is powerful concept. When we think of ownership, we can also think of 'being responsible for, possessing and acknowledging.' A good owner is someone who takes responsibility for the betterment and even the improvement of whatever they own. They strive to be good stewards of that which God has entrusted to their care and work on whatever they can to make sure that it does what it is designed to do. They do not give up on that which they own -- especially that which they know God truly values. In addition, we can know that God cares very much about our marriages.

When you think of ownership in light of marriage, it would involve appreciating and celebrating the good, doing what you can to help the good to continue, not letting it die because of neglect. It also involves evaluating that which is negatively damaging the marriage and making it your mission to do your part in finding ways to overcome that which is causing problems. If your attitude and/or your actions are contributing to the problems, then you own up to them, take responsibility for correcting them, and work until the Lord will someday say, "*Well done good and faithful servant. You were faithful to the end!*"

You are not responsible for what your spouse will or will not do to help the marriage to grow to be healthy -- reflecting the love of Christ. However, you are responsible for doing your part. And it isn't a 50/50 proposition. It is putting in a 100 per cent effort on your part. "*Whatever you do, do it with all your might.*"

Hope - believing that good wins over bad

We are told in 1 Corinthians 13 that love "*always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*" In applying that to marriage, we can always know that God is worthy of our trust. We can be assured that He loves us unconditionally and will make a way to redeem whatever pain and problem we offer up to Him. Our spouse may fail us in different ways, but as we look to God, we can put our hope in Him. "*Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*" (Hebrews 4:23) God cares about us and will help us through whatever dilemma we face and will equip us to do whatever it is that we must do. "*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*" 2 Peter 1:3

Empathy - walking in your partner's shoes

In marriage, empathy is seeing our partner as God sees him or her, as His son or daughter. In marriage, we are God's colleague in ministering to the needs of our spouse. It is good to keep in

mind. Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted and keep a humble attitude. 1 Peter 3:8

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor [or spouse] for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me. For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.'" Romans 15:1-4

Forgiveness - healing the hurts you don't deserve

That is truly what forgiveness does. It ministers more to our hurts than it does to the person receiving the forgiveness. We think it is given to release the victimizer from the hurt they have caused us. However, in reality, we eventually discover that we are the ones who benefit the most when we let go of the poison of bitterness. We become the prisoners set free as we make the choice to no longer allow ourselves to be punished every time we nurse and rehearse and revisit the pain that originally hurt us.

When others hurt us in ways we don't deserve, at some point we will come to the crossroads of decision. We will have to look our pain square in the face and ask, 'Am I going to hang on to my anger and do violence to myself, or am I going to forgive those who have wounded me? Am I going to allow bitterness to poison and putrefy my soul, or am I going to invite God to empower me to let the anger go?'"

-Pam Vredelvelt, The Wounded Woman

Commitment - living the love you promised

There is something to be said for those who promise to love as Christ loves and follows through with our promises -- even when our promises strain under the toughest of pressures. "In Thornton Wilder's *'The Skin of Our Teeth,'* a character named Ms. Antobus says, "I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them -- it was that promise." That is a great example of what a commitment to marriage looks like. It's a promise made and kept by two imperfect people -- with flaws, faults, and character weaknesses." -H. Norman Wright, *One Marriage Under God*

Secrets of a happy marriage

- They worship together
- They are plugged into a faith community
- They share key values
- They focus on serving their spouses, rather than on being served
- They look to God for that power to be selfless — because it doesn't come naturally
- Ultimately, they trust God for the outcome

Source: *Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages: The Little Things that Make a Big Difference* by Shaunti Feldman

Talk about it: what are your take-aways?

About InStep Ministries

In the late 1990's, Jeff and Judi Parziale saw a need in the church community for ministry to non-traditional families, such as step and single-parent families. That observation led to the launching of InStep Ministries. InStep is a Christian nonprofit dedicated to providing biblical, affordable care and resources for individuals, marriages, and families. For over 30 years, InStep has provided marriage and remarriage preparation, mentoring and counseling to hundreds of individuals and families, produced a number of resources and presented at numerous conferences and workshops. In 2007, Jeff and Judi were presented with the *John Trent Service Award* by the Association of Marriage and Family Ministries. In 2014, Jeff and Judi were blessed to receive the *Pioneer in Stepfamily Ministry Award* by FamilyLife Blended.

Recently, the focus of InStep has grown to include all family types. Healthy marriage and families are the crucible of spiritual growth. The need today is for individuals, couples, and families to develop and maintain healthy emotional and relational skills. That simple idea informs our counseling, workbooks, and workshops. The workbook you have just read is one of our first efforts to minister to all couples. We hope it has been helpful. If it has, please share it with others. To learn more about InStep, schedule a counseling appointment or order one of our workbooks, call us at 970-775-4836 or email us at instepmin@gmail.com.

Want to learn more, consider reading:

Rebuilding a Marriage Better Than New by Cindy Beall

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman

Boundaries in Marriage by Cloud and Townsend

The Language of Love and Respect: Cracking the Communication Code with Your Mate by Emmerson Eggerichs

Love and War by John and Stasi Eldredge

The Kindness Challenge by Shaunti Feldman

Laugh your Way to a Better Marriage by Mark Gungor

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman

The Meaning of Marriage by Tim & Kathy Keller

Fighting for Your Marriage by Markman, Stanley and Blumberg

Sacred Marriage by Gary Thomas

Cherish by Gary Thomas

The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage by Michele Weiner-Davis

The Marriage Mender by Tom Whiteman

Marriage 911: Hope and Healing for Hurting Couples by Jeff & Judi Parziale

Making Marriage Work by Jeff & Judi Parziale

God's very best, Jeff and Judi Parziale