



SAVE MY MARRIAGE TODAY!
Powerful Secrets to Rescue Your Marriage!



DIVORCE HERE

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A Message... From Us to You



You've read the statistics on how many new marriages end in divorce. You've watched more and more couples live together instead of marrying, because commitment will "change" their relationship. You've wondered if it was possible to have a healthy, satisfying, long-term relationship anymore. Is the concept of marriage just plain outdated, now that it's so easy to slip a ring on one minute, and throw it away the next?

We don't believe so. In this book we're going to show you why. We believe that most problems in a marriage aren't caused by lack of love or irreconcilable differences. Most marital problems are caused by ineffective interpersonal skills, such as miscommunication and poor conflict resolution, and being negligent when it comes to establishing priorities.

Your marriage is only as strong as the investment that you make in it. If you're willing to let conflicts slide ... work gain priority ... intimacy fade away ... then you're willing to throw away your marriage.

But if you want to put your marriage at the top of your priority list, learn how to resolve conflicts rather than make yourself feel better, and cope with crises as a team, then your marriage will defy statistics! It's a choice that *you* have to make.

In this book, you're going to get two perspectives. Andrew is going to give you the low-down from a guy's point of view. Amy is going to tell you like it is from a female's point of view. Each chapter, you'll get a fresh outlook on how marital problems look to men AND to women.

Though we have different approaches to solving the things that go wrong in a marriage, we agree on one thing: the first step to solving any challenge is acknowledging that there's a problem, the second step is talking about it, but the **MOST IMPORTANT STEP** is acting to fix it!



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In this book we give you some sample problems that married couples experience. Then, we offer you some theoretical background to understand it. Finally, we give you exercises so that you can apply what you've learned. All the good intentions in the world won't save your marriage—but changing your behaviors, the way you respond to situations, and the things you say will!

This book can change your life ... but only if you decide to use it.

“Thinking is easy, action is difficult;
to act in accordance with one's thoughts is the most difficult thing in the world.”
Goethe





Chapter 1. Introduction

In purchasing this book, you've taken the first step in the long journey of rebuilding your marriage. But before you begin the life-changing material ahead, take a few moments to think about what you want out of the chapters that follow. Ask yourself: Why did you purchase this book? Did any specific incidents or feelings lead you to look for material on saving a marriage? Is it your marriage that needs saving, or is it a loved one's?

If you came to this book seeking to save your own marriage, you should be congratulated. You've made an important breakthrough in recognizing that there is a conflict in your relationship that you can't resolve alone. Many people find it easy to see what's wrong with other people's relationships, but we often struggle when it comes to identifying the problems in our own. The day you realize that your marriage isn't perfect is the day you open yourself to taking action to improving it.

The first lesson in this book is that there is no such thing as a perfect marriage. Like anything good, marriage involves commitment, hard work, and perseverance through the dark stages. You must expect to put in more than a token gesture every once in a while. You must make a small effort every single day. Marriages, like people, grow and develop. Even if things are good in your marriage right now, you must continue to take time out to connect with your partner, renew intimacy, and support one another's dreams.

What Do You Hope to Achieve?

If you expect to read this book and discover that your marriage has been saved once you put it down, you are mistaken. Reading this book should be only the beginning. Although we will suggest topics for you and your partner to discuss, strategies to resolve conflicts, and exercises to bring you closer together, we can't make you act on our ideas. Only you can take the next step.

You may be reading this book because you have a specific problem in your marriage that you want to address. Perhaps your husband watches the television more than he talks to you. Perhaps your wife greets you each day with a litany of complaints about what has gone wrong while you've been at work. Perhaps you have problem with your partner taking the side of your in-laws instead of being loyal to you.



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There is always more to troubled relationships than what first appears. Marriage problems are seldom a result of one issue; rather, they are more likely a result of layers upon layers of underlying conflicts and insecurities that have led to the problems that you are having now. We suggest that you read this book with an open mind and consider any aspect of your marriage that could be improved. You may find, for example, that increasing intimacy leads to less conflicts, or that adjusting your expectations leads to greater acceptance of your partner.

Before you start the book, it would be valuable to take the time to list your goals. You need to be much more specific than “saving my marriage.” This book will not help you pin the blame on anyone. We believe that all marriage problems involve both individuals. Even if your partner did something that was clearly inappropriate, your reaction to your partner’s mistake could neutralize it ... or make it escalate into a marriage-threatening crisis.

Goal Setting

For you to get the most you can out of this book, you need to establish for a mindset of goal-setting, with a specific outcome you’d like to focus on. Without a plan, your mind may wander, you may get distracted, and you may finish reading with many thoughts but no concrete achievements.

Your goals need to focus on a future outcome rather than the negativity of the past. In this way, you’ll avoid repeating bad habits. Bad habits are ones in which negative responses (such as, “You never help me!”) lead to negative outcomes (your partner feeling resistant to helping next time).

This book will help you look at your situation with fresh eyes. We don’t expect you to be able to forgive and forget the past immediately, as past events in your marriage shaped the feelings and insecurities that led to your current disagreements and conflicts. Nevertheless, we recommend that you set your gaze forwards instead of backwards, towards a time in your future when you both will have acknowledged how what you did hurt one another, understood why it happened, expressed regret, forgiven, and moved on.



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You Are Not Alone

Remember, too, that you are not alone. You may look around at other married couples and assume that everyone else is happy in their relationship. But we'll let you in on a secret: *Every marriage has conflicts*. The only difference between a successful married couple and a divorced one is how committed they are to dealing with those conflicts. They don't close their eyes when conflicts arise. They seek ways to deal with disagreements before the marriage gets rocky. And when they're not successful in resolving the conflict themselves, they seek help. That's what commitment means.

Most couples are not that committed. The rate of divorced couples is growing every year, as couples find themselves unable to deal with the complexity of merging two active lives, the natural dips in feelings of love, and incompatibility issues. In fact, the chance of a first marriage failing in the first 40 years is currently at around 65 percent, and the rate of divorce in second marriages is even higher.

No one ever said that marriage would be easy. But every couple will reach a crossroads where they must ask whether they want to commit to consciously connecting with each other, every day for the rest of their lives—or take the easy route of permanent separation.

Divorce isn't that easy, though. Legally, emotionally, and materially, divorce takes a large toll. There will be steep lawyer fees, the division of assets, fights and arguments, and in some cases the arrangement of custody of your children. Worst of all is the sense that the marriage has failed. When you married with such loving hope, it seems sad to wonder if it truly had to end like this.

Taking into account the sobering nature of divorce statistics and the number of unhappily married couples, chances are that at some stage in your marriage you will have some significant problems. Thus, it is especially important that you develop appropriate methods for dealing with conflicts now. Deal with small issues before they become big ones. If you diligently practice the exercises in this book, you are much more likely to save your marriage from becoming a statistic.

Healthy for Life

If you are seeking reasons to save your marriage, look no further than your own health. There are also significant health benefits to staying married. People in long-term marriages tend to experience better health and live four years longer on average.



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Marriage provides a boost to the immune system, a cushion against depression, and even makes you less likely to die from causes ranging from heart disease to car accidents. Married individuals also tend to have higher incomes than single individuals, as well as being more responsible in managing their money. With so much to lose, how can you afford to throw your marriage away?

Learn Valuable Life Skills

As you and your partner learn conflict resolution, better communication, active listening, and other interpersonal skills, you will find that you will deal with people in your everyday life more successfully. The source of life happiness starts at home. Thus, when you experience fewer marital conflicts, you will find yourself in a better mood wherever you may be.

Remember: if you are serious about saving your marriage, you must be willing to see your issues and problems from a fresh perspective, and you must want to work towards a solution. So many conflicts in marriages are a result of nothing more serious than miscommunication. Misunderstandings get compounded by an inability to express feelings of hurt and resentment, let those feelings go, and *move on* with life.

Sometimes, what triggers an argument bears no relation to what the fight is actually about. Because the cause of conflict isn't clear, finding a solution can seem hopeless. Yet as you learn to resolve minor disagreements the moment they appear, you will find that the small issues will no longer fester in the back of your mind. You'll be able to let go of negative feelings. Your partner, feeling a sense of solidarity with you in the project of your life together, will feel closer to you and more open. Intimacy will flourish.

Isn't that the kind of marriage you deserve?



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Exercise 1—Do Yourself

We cannot underscore the importance of setting goals enough. The process of learning and developing the skills necessary to facilitate a resolution and a rebuilding of love and trust between you and your partner will be long and difficult. At times, you may despair. You will have a stronger sense of the progress you're making—and avoid getting confused by all the feelings and emotions of the process—by focusing on clear objectives that you set for yourselves in advance.

The process of goal-setting isn't as simple as saying, "This is what I'd like to happen." Your goals for your marriage must be *attainable, reasonable, and measurable*.

Make Them Specific

You want to get back with your partner. You want to save your marriage. Those are excellent intentions, but they are not goals. Goals must be *specific*.

Begin by sitting down in a quiet place with no distractions and write down a list of general things you'd like to accomplish in your marriage. Write down anything that pops into your head. Don't be too worried about them just yet. We will take the time to examine them as we go along.

Some suggestions are:

- ◆ Increase the level of communication with your spouse.
- ◆ Rebuild your trust.
- ◆ Feel more loved.
- ◆ Feel more appreciated.
- ◆ Spend more quality time together.
- ◆ Be listened to by your partner.
- ◆ A more fulfilling sex life.
- ◆ To feel special.

Keep this sheet of paper. Once you decide which goals are most important to begin, write down concrete actions that you can take to accomplish each goal. For example, under "Spend more quality time together," you might write...



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- ✓ Reserve a half hour after work to talk with one another without distraction.
- ✓ Reserve every Friday night for a “date” night.
- ✓ Wash the dishes together.
- ✓ Cancel conservation committee responsibilities and use extra time to spend with my partner.

Make Them Attainable

If you aren't able to achieve your goals, there is little point in setting them. Start by making the goals small and easy. As you achieve those smaller goals, you will feel a rewarding sense of accomplishment and become more confident in your ability to attack new, larger goals.

Make Them Reasonable

Remember that you cannot save your marriage alone. You will have to work with your partner to achieve your goals. If you set your goals with only your own feelings in mind, you run the risk of making them *unreasonable*. A reasonable goal will respect both of your feelings, needs, and situations.

One of the most difficult steps for two people in a marriage is to step outside their personal feelings and consider their partner as a person, with empathy for the situation they are in. Yet chances are that you know your partner well enough to know what he or she is feeling. Can you set goals that are of value to both of you, and that your spouse cares about enough to work on with you?

Make Them Measurable

Once you have set your goals, it is necessary to take the time periodically to evaluate your progress. Check off those goals that you've achieved. Consider whether the techniques you are employing are helping you towards your goals ... or actually hindering your progress.

Make the time at the end of each week to sit down and look over your goals and refresh them in your mind.



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- ◆ Look at each goal and rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 10 on how well you managed your emotions. Did you get angry or upset? If so, why?
- ◆ How close are you to achieving any of your goals? Again measure on a scale from 1 to 10. Have you made progress this week or not?
- ◆ Do you have any goals you want to change or modify? It's fine if you need to modify your goals. They are fluid things that can change to meet your circumstances.
- ◆ Do you have any new goals you want to work towards?

Review this at least once a week or as often as necessary.



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Chapter 2. The Life Cycle of a Marriage

When Carol and I first started dating, it was great. Everything I did made her happy, no matter how small or stupid it was. We shared everything: the same CDs, the same opinion on movies, even the same toothbrush sometimes. It was like we were the same person. So now I think that maybe I made a mistake in wanting to get married. Everything changed. She backed away, there was stuff I couldn't do, and now I feel like everything I do annoys her. She even wants to have two separate rooms now, as if our marriage bed isn't good enough for her. It's freaking me out. Does this mean that we should get a divorce?

Mike from Providence

No!!! Relationships go through cycles, and although changes can take you by surprise, you can anticipate them using the guide below.

The Relationship Life Cycle

Just as the Bible tells us that to everything there is a season, the same holds true in relationships. Just as we go through changes within ourselves as a result of maturing, advancing in our careers, or simply being at an age where different things are expected, so, too, our relationships will evolve to reflect our new selves and changed expectations. Sometimes the transition in a relationship is relatively smooth and goes virtually unnoticed; other times, the change is abrupt and met with resistance.

There are a variety of theories about the particular stages that each marriage goes through, but the consensus is clear: no marriage stays the same from start to finish. The life cycle below is one guide to some of the changes that might occur during your marriage. Not all couples will go through each stage; some may go through the stages in a different order. The stages may recur over and over again in cycles. But the guide may help you in identifying where you are in your marriage—and prevent you from making a drastic decision about your marriage's insolvability that you will later regret.



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Don't be scared of accepting change. Anticipation is often the worst part of a transition. Fortunately, for most couples, a change to the next stage of a relationship signifies strengthening rather than deterioration.

Step 1 – Romance and Infatuation

You're in love. You identify with every love poem and song ever written. You want to sing out loud and dance like nobody is watching. Your love is spontaneous and consuming, the closest and the most wonderful feeling that you've ever experienced. You're in love, and you're ready to get to the chapel as soon as you can to preserve this feeling forever.

Except, of course, that you can't. A wedding ring is no magic circle that will guarantee you'll experience the high of being in love forever. And that's okay....

This type of love is usually the first step in a relationship and tends to sharply demarcated from the other stages. When you are in this intoxicating emotional state, you tend to focus more on the similarities you both have and gloss over the differences. There is a high level of passion, and the level of sexual activity is high. Romantic expression such as public displays of affection and the giving of flowers are much more frequent and spontaneous. There is a perception among the both of you that this feeling will go on forever and that you will never have any disagreements.

This stage can last anywhere from six months to two years in some cases, and is considered the most exciting stage of relationships.

Step 2 – After the Honeymoon

It's inevitable that the honeymoon period will end. Sometimes the realization dawns on you slowly; other times, an event shatters your romantic bliss and causes you to see things from a more realistic perspective. As it does, you'll open your eyes to a few things that may have gone previously unnoticed: little habits that annoy you, incompatibilities, differences in values.

The benefit of losing "honeymoon goggles" is that you come to know your partner in greater detail and accept her or him more truly for who she or he is. This will prepare you for an even deeper love later down the line, richened by the knowledge of all your partner's complexities.



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At the time, however, it may be difficult to leave behind the fairytale of your initial romance. When you decide to live together, sharing a living space with your partner will teach you much about their personal habits and practical things that you hadn't thought about before. Your first serious argument can shatter your faith in your love. Other stage-changing events may be the decision to buy a house together, organize the wedding, plan a major vacation, or share assets or finances.

You may feel as if the shift away from your early marital harmony is your fault. You may wonder why you keep noticing the little things and allowing them to annoy you when you know that you do, truly, love your partner. Yet try thinking back to your childhood, to the time that you realized that your parents were human, too. Did it irrevocably harm your relationship with your parents? Chance are that it didn't. As you came to see your parents as human beings, with imperfections like everyone else, you gained a much deeper sense of why they'd made the decisions they'd made, why they treated you as they did, and the limits of your ability to change them. Similarly, your recognition that your partner is human and has imperfections like everyone else doesn't mean that you can't love them like you did before. It just means that what once came easy—innocent loving bliss—now requires work.

You won't be able to return to the way you both were, when you'd just fallen in love and thought that every detail of one another was perfect. But that's okay. As you learn to deal with your differences and develop ways to deal with conflict, you solidify and strengthen your bond together. This is part of getting to know each other, and the point at which your relationship becomes a marriage. Welcome to the real world.

Step 3 - Staking Your Territories

As you adjust to living together and learning more about each other, you will find that you have more differences of opinion than you thought—and sometimes the differences may be serious. As you feel each other out, assessing or asserting your opinions and values, there will be small disagreements as well as big ones. You will see a different side of your partner that you may have not seen before. While you both may be committed to the idea that relationships are about compromise, there will be times when neither of you can back down on a power struggle. You both may have much at stake, and there may seem to be no win-win option available.

This is the time in the relationship that you are both staking your turf and determining what is important to you. This can be a very difficult time. You may want your partner



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to be the way they used to and wonder where your feelings of love went. Your conversations, which used to be relaxed and easy, may have become stilted and even hostile as you both feel an edge of defensiveness. You may even consider leaving the relationship or giving up on your marriage.

This is one of the most difficult stages in a relationship because it contrasts so sharply with the infatuation stage. This is when many relationships either come close to failing or do fail. Those marriages that pass through this stage and come out even stronger are those in which both partners have learned to develop and apply skills in negotiation, conflict resolution and compromise.

If you don't learn appropriate ways to deal with conflict, your relationship will never reach its full potential. You have to learn to develop listening skills, so that you can understand your partner's point of view in addition to your own. You must learn to express your feelings, both positive and negative, in a constructive way that demonstrates respect. You must learn to be satisfied with the solutions that you come to together, rather than feeling that each compromise is a sacrifice.

In Chapter 4 I'll discuss ways of dealing with conflict and finding the underlying issues, as well as offer strategies that you can use to deal with anger and let negative emotions go.

Step 4 – Evaluation

After all this work, you may wonder if your relationship was worth all the hassle you've been going through. Surely, you think, it would be easier with someone else. Perhaps my partner and I aren't really right for one another after all. Look at all the other couples who divorce; they decided that their problems were irreconcilable, so how are we any different from them?

These sorts of questions are perfectly normal. In order to decide how important your marriage is to you, you may feel the need to spend some time thinking about how your life would be without your partner. During this period of evaluation, you may withdraw emotionally. You may feel flat and empty, almost apathetic, towards your partner. As a result, communication and sexual activity may diminish considerably.

It is at this stage in your relationship that you will be most tempted to have an affair. At first, you may simply seek out a confidante of the other sex to share your marital difficulties and seek advice. You find, though, that as your emotional bond with that



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person grows, so does your sexual attraction. An affair may recreate for you all of the passion and intensity of feeling that is missing from your marriage. And that, quite frankly, is the danger. Even if you find that your relationship with your spouse improves as a result of the affair, your *marriage*—as a commitment to love and share your life with one person, and that person alone—will be over.

Some couples try a trial separation as a means of giving each other space to put the whole situation in perspective and think about what is important. Yet marriage difficulties can only be resolved together—not apart. The space and the removal of oneself from a negative situation can lead to a reluctance to return.

The best thing that each partner can do for the other in this situation is respect each other's need for space to put things in perspective, while at the same time reassuring one another that the commitment made during the wedding vows—*'til death do you part*—is still honored and true.

Above all, you should realize that while you both love each other, you are still both individuals with separate thoughts and feelings. Now is the time to celebrate those differences rather than make them an issue. You can be different people and still be in love.

In Chapter 7 you'll learn ways to reconnect with yourself and discover how spending time on your personal goals and pleasures can actually improve your marriage.

Step 5 – Reconnection

If your relationship survives all the doubts, challenges, and tests of the previous stages, chances are you'll find that your perspective has changed. You and your partner may now agree that you want to make something of your relationship and try to make it work despite what happened in the past. You both have accepted most of your differences and decided that your love for one another is enough to overcome them. Rather than looking at conflicts as threatening, you will realize that conflicts can be opportunities for growth and ways of learning more about your partner.

The biggest priority for both of you will be your relationship and your desire to make it work. You will have a newfound willingness to work with, rather than against, each other. Flaws will be accepted, and you'll be able to enjoy your togetherness while maintaining a sense of individuality.



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This is an enlightening stage to go through, as it makes you more aware of your partner as a real person, an individual with real flaws and unique opinions. Your acceptance of those unique opinions, whether or not you agree with them, is an indication of how much you have grown as a person as well as part of a couple.

Step 6 - Commitment

This final stage is one in which you both finally seem to have it together. At this stage you are able to integrate the needs of your relationship into your own. You no longer need to think of your needs and the needs of your relationship as separate entities. You are both committed to this relationship and work as a team.

Your feelings of love may not be as exciting or engulfing as they were in the past, but, on the other hand, they will be warm and genuine because there are no false illusions or fantasies about the relationship. You will accept and cherish each other, with faults and all. You will face the world outside and adversity as a team with a united front.

What Is Ahead for You

These steps are by no means comprehensive, but they give you a good guide as to what emotions and phases are quite normal—even in the most successful marriages. As I mentioned before, anticipation can often be worse than reality ... but, fortunately, if you are aware of what stage in your marriage you're going through, you are better equipped to deal with what is to come.

Just remember that negative experiences, emotions, and conflicts do not necessarily herald the end of a marriage. All marriages go through bad times. But bad times are often simply a transition to better times. If you don't put in the effort to pull your marriage through the rough areas of conflict, you'll miss out on the best bits ahead.



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Exercise 2—Do Yourself

You will feel so many emotions as you and your partner journey through this process—both intense and subtle, positive and negative, clear and confused. Sometimes your feelings will make no sense. Other times you'll be completely unable to identify how you feel. That's where this exercise will help.

This exercise will improve your awareness of your feelings and emotions and enable you to identify them more clearly. Armed with a greater awareness of your own feelings, you will be better able to establish appropriate methods of dealing with them, as well as communicate them more clearly to your partner.

Keep a feelings diary for one week. Take a few minutes at the end of each day to write down a list of the key things that have happened over the course of your day. Opposite each event, write down what feelings or emotions you felt at the time. Some of the following descriptions might help you:

- ◆ Is the feeling a good or bad feeling?
- ◆ Give the feeling a name if you can.
- ◆ Is the feeling a big feeling or a small feeling?
- ◆ How did you respond or react to that feeling?
- ◆ What reaction did you get in expressing that feeling?
- ◆ What could you have done better?

If you feel yourself capable, use your feelings diary to initiate changes in how you deal with emotions. For example, if you find yourself blowing your top each time rush hour doubles your commute time, try bringing a cassette of relaxing music or a book on tape to occupy your mind in your car. If you come home each day to a messy house and feel your heart sink into your toes, don't vent to your partner; take fifteen minutes or as long as you need to go to a space that no one disturbs but you, such as your own office or room, and relax into your own space.

Exercise 3—Do Together

If you can, encourage your partner to keep a feelings diary as well. Every few days, when you are both calm and relaxed, come together in a non-threatening space to share your feelings. Practice talking about them in a non-judgmental, non-accusatory



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way. Don't use the feelings diary as an excuse to blame, offer advice, or comment on the other person's feelings. This is just an opportunity to share.





Chapter 3. Life Isn't a Movie

When I was a little girl I always dreamed about what my married life would be like. Until recently everything was like I'd dreamed it would be. I met the perfect guy, our wedding was like a fairytale, and we set up this adorable first apartment. But then it turned into some dull version of reality TV, complete with all the nitpicking and petty jabs. I know it's pretty silly to expect us to act like we did when we were dating. But I sort of expected us to come across like couples do in the movies, all content, arm in arm, morning coffee together, that kind of stuff. Worse, I look at my friends and see how happy they seem to be. Was I just stupid to expect married life to be special?

Ann from Seattle

We all have romantic illusions of what married life will be like. It's so easy to watch a movie and imagine ourselves in a life just like the main characters, holding hands against a sandy sunset. But as we all know, it's dangerous to expect real life to end "happily ever after."

The success of a marriage isn't predicted by how high the flame of passion burns. Rather, a solid marriage is like a slow-burning fire: sometimes it sparks ... sometimes dark coals hide the underlying heat ... and without each partner adding wood to feed it, it will burn out.

Perfection is a Dangerous Illusion

No one is perfect. Not your spouse, not you. A relationship between two imperfect human beings will certainly never be 100% perfect. However, one secret of happily married couples is that they don't expect perfection. They know that they will always fight, always disagree, and often let one another down in the little things. But they are confident in the big things: commitment, trust, and respect.



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Examine Your Expectations of Marriage

It's so easy to slide into married life. You have been dating for some time, perhaps have even lived together, and you may wonder why have a marriage certificate should change anything.

It does. Marriage is more than simply an extension of dating. It introduces a completely new dynamic into an established relationship. Suddenly, neither of you have to please the other person in order to win them over; you've already won the prize. All the energies you invested in your courtship can now be turned to other areas of life, such as your careers or home-buying. As both of you come to take your relationship for granted, you may find yourselves feeling more like roommates sharing a house than lovers sharing a life.

Married life *is* special. It is the chance to experience a higher level of intimacy than you've ever experienced with anyone before. It is the chance to learn to work in the most complete partnership you've ever known. But it may not look like what you imagined.

Did you and your husband discuss what each of you imagined married life would be like before you took your vows? He may have imagined a life of going to work each day, sitting at the television each night, and enjoying the warmth of a bed shared with you. You may have imagined morning coffee, weekends spent on long road trips, shopping to furnish the apartment together. Thus, your husband may be quite content in *his* vision of married life ... without realizing that his vision isn't the same as yours.

Dreams Don't Have to Come True

If you are feeling disappointed in your marriage without anything specific to pin it on, take the time to examine your old expectations of marriage. What did you dream that married life would be like as a child? Did you see yourself eating with your partner each night, or swinging on a porch in the evening? Chances are, the dreams you had of marriage as a child were quite fuzzy and nonspecific. Such dreams give you a good feeling, but they are only two-dimensional pictures of a marriage—which is always a complex and multidimensional thing.

Those dreams served their purpose then. They encouraged you to visualize an adult role, practice partnership skills, and seek healthy relationships. However, now that



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you are married, you need to create new dreams that are based on the individual with whom you have fallen in love ... and preferably shared by him as well.

Creating Marital Goals

Do you feel that your husband and yourself are on the same wavelength in terms of where your married life is going? Many marriages fail because husbands and wives lack a sense of shared purpose. They married because they were in love, but aside from those loving feelings they didn't work on creating a higher meaning for their marriage. As a result, when they fall out of love, the marriage ends.

Successful marriages involve more than just a common feeling of love for the other person. Successful marriages *go somewhere*. Each spouse understands the other spouse's dreams, understands how their personal dreams fit into their shared dreams, and values common goals.

Dream constructively by creating your own marital goals. What can you imagine your spouse and yourself doing in five years' time? Ten? Be specific. Imagine more than simple things like making a home together or helping one another through the aging process. Do you imagine yourselves traveling? Having a child? Moving to the countryside? Starting your own business? Becoming more physically active?

Be Realistic

Now ask yourself whether those dreams are realistic. Does your spouse share similar goals? Do you travel well/work well together? Do you have any financial or other kinds of limitations that would prevent you from reaching those goals?

Dreams that cannot possibly come true are *not* a sound foundation for visualizing a marriage. For example, if either your or your spouse is unable to have children, it will only make you unhappy to imagine biological children as a necessary ingredient for the perfect marriage. A more realistic dream would be to raise a child, as you could then look for other options such as adoption or foster care.



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Share with Your Spouse

Now, share your ideas with your spouse and ask him what his dreams for your marriage are.

When your dreams are:

1. mutual,
2. involve participation from the both of you, and
3. can be acted upon,

they are much more satisfying ... and you'll be able to do more than just wonder why your marriage isn't like that fuzzy, golden-tinged ideal in your head.

Now Act

Thinking about your marriage is the first step; talking about it is the second. Now, you are ready for the third and most exciting step: acting on what you've learned. Making plans and sharing dreams won't create a sense of marital purpose unless you *do* something about them.

When you and your spouse work together towards a shared goal—even something small like eating a healthful meal three times a week, or working through the exercises in this book—you create a sense of *marital unity*. You act in concert with one another and feel a common sense of accomplishment. You can learn more about your partner by working together in this way than you could have in a weekend of conversation ... and you'll learn valuable partnership skills.

As a result, you'll stop gauging your marriage against an ideal in your head and start gauging it against the goals that you both set together.

Resisting Unhealthy Expectations

You'll always compare your marriage to the married couples that you see around you. Yet it's important to remember that when you see someone else's marriage, you are only seeing the surface. The couple that you thought was so happily married, that seemed so much in love, may be divorced by the end of the week.



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Don't jump to quick conclusions and judge your marriage too harshly. Learn to identify unhealthy expectations through asking yourself if they fall into one of the following categories:

1. You can't clearly identify what you expect to yourself.
2. You want your partner to change into who you'd like him to be rather than accepting him as he is. (This does not include specific *behaviors* that you'd like him to change.)
3. You want your marriage or your partner to be like someone else's.
4. You want an instant transformation.
5. You know that your expectation is impossible.
6. Your expectation includes the word "always" or "never," as in: "We will never get angry at one another," "I will always be happy," or, "He will always take the garbage out."

Maintaining Healthy Standards

The following expectations are normal and necessary in a marriage.

1. That your spouse will respect you.
2. That your spouse will not betray your trust.
3. That your spouse will enjoy seeing you happy.
4. That your spouse will not intentionally hurt you physically, psychologically, or emotionally.
5. That your spouse will be committed to your relationship and its health.

Dreaming of the Marriage You Have

Even if your marriage is not ideal—and whose is?—chances are that there are many things that are wonderful about it. Now, your job is to change your ideal to match your circumstances. Think about how your marriage is already great ... and how it can be better. Focus on small, specific, achievable steps, like reserving one night a week to go on a "date" with your spouse, or avoiding any negative comments towards one another in the first half-hour after coming home from work.

In time, you may find that you *did* have the perfect marriage after all ... it was just hidden under unhealthy expectations.



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Exercise 4—Do Yourself

Complete the following sentences with as many words and phrases as come to your head:

- “When I was younger, I thought marriage would be like....”
- “I always thought that married people would do lots of _____ together”
- “When I look at other married couples I see....”

Exercise 5—Do Yourself

Think of the most “perfect” married couple you know. What do you like and/or admire most about them?

Think of the least “perfect” married couple you know. What do you like and/or admire least about them?



Exercise 6—Do Together

Answer the following question by ranking the characteristics in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 10 being the least:

What is the most important aspect to making a happy marriage?

<u>His Ranking</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Her Ranking</u>
_____	Communication	_____
_____	Compatibility	_____
_____	Frequent sex	_____
_____	Fun activities done together	_____
_____	Identical personalities	_____
_____	Lots of time spent together	_____
_____	Romance	_____
_____	Same values	_____
_____	Shared decision-making	_____
_____	Shared responsibilities for maintaining the home	_____
_____	Tolerance	_____
_____	Being seen by others as an ideal couple	_____

Exercise 7—Do Together

Make a list of the activities or small moments that each of you enjoy now that you are married. Make sure to be specific. For example:

- ...unlocking the door and hearing your spouse rattle about the kitchen*
- ...when your partner makes you a cup of coffee or hands you a cold drink without your asking*
- ...the feeling of your partner's warm body next to you as you sit together*
- ...the sounds your partner makes when he/she is content.*



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Chapter 4. Top 7 Mistakes To Avoid

I'm so confused; I don't know where to start. My wife came home from work three weeks ago and told me that she's not happy. Apparently she has been really unhappy in the marriage for quite some time, but this was the first I knew. I'm devastated. I cried, I asked her for a second chance, I pleaded with her to stay, if not for me then for the kids, but she is adamant that she wants to end it. Then I got really angry. How could she treat me this way? I accused her of not making enough effort, the kids need a mom who is there for them, and she hasn't been much of a mom for a long time. I do everything. I asked her if she had been having an affair, and this really set her off. She yelled and screamed at me, told me that my control was pushing her away and that I need help. How can she stand there and say that? I'm not the one that's walking out on the family; I'm not the one that I think is sleeping with a co-worker. I need to know the truth so I can help fix it. My kids need two parents, not just me. Help me! Everything I do or say to her just seems to be making it worse.

-Brad from Miami

When people are confronted with the seriousness of a marital problem, the first thing they do is panic. It's almost like a kind of mental auto-pilot, doing the first thing that comes into your mind in the belief that the right words will come as you are speaking them and you will be able to save your marriage before the problems really set in.

I call this "damage control." It's not that unusual. The problem with damage control is that in many circumstances you are doing far more damage to your chances of saving your marriage.

The key here is to think smart. Your instincts tell you to go into fix mode, but you need to pull yourself away from the situation and get some perspective. The first thing I tell clients after they contact me is how long it has been since the issue was out in the open. Usually it's only a matter of days, sometimes even hours. The first instinct is to get it fixed as quickly as possible. That's the first mistake.



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Mistake 1: Fix it as quickly as possible

Resist the temptation to fix it as quickly as possible. Often when people are confronted with the reality of a serious marital issue, they believe the sooner it is fixed the better it will be. It's not always that easy. Many marital issues are things that have developed over a long period of time, have feeling attached, and need to be acknowledged and processed in a careful manner. If your partner is unhappy, it's imperative that you are able to acknowledge their feelings and address the issues in a structured and considered way, rather than rushing to fix it and trivialize the issues at hand.

Mistake 2: It wasn't me

The next thing you want to do when you are made aware of the fact that there is a problem is deny your involvement in it. You may even blame your partner for the decline in your marriage and believe that if they only knew how to communicate better or if they weren't so selfish, there wouldn't be a problem. The most important thing to remember here is that apportioning blame isn't going to save your marriage. Sure, there will be degrees of culpability, and you may believe that responsibility lies more with your partner than it does with you, but regardless of the responsibility, the solution lies with both of you. Ultimately you are both invested in the relationship, so responsibility for fixing it rests with both of you. Ask yourself, which is more important: being right, or being together?

Mistake 3: Begging for forgiveness

As bad as it sounds, one of the most common reactions to a marriage crisis involves one partner begging the other for forgiveness, promising that they will change, that they are sorry, and that things will be different in the future. I really wish people would avoid this one, as it does so much damage to your credibility. Consider your motivations for begging, being sorry, and promising to change. Is it in reaction to the sorrow you feel at having done something wrong, or is it simply what you believe you need to do to save your marriage? Now I want you to consider it from your partner's point of view. Without completely understanding the implications of what you have done, you are begging for a second chance. Does it appear that you are truly contrite? Do you appear as though you are making the changes for the right reasons? A number of people come to me, wanting to change, sorry for the things they have done wrong, yet when they are questioned, they don't actually understand which of their actions or behaviors has led to the marriage crisis.



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Resist the temptation to be sorry. Resist the temptation to beg. Acknowledge that there is a problem. Listen. Understand what your partner is saying. Understand what the issues are and your part in it. Without accepting or apportioning blame, consider ways that you can both participate in a solution.

If you are guilty of what you are being accused of, your words are going to mean very little. Your actions will rebuild trust and commitment, but only over time.

Mistake 4: If your partner has given up, you should too

If your partner wants out and you have already given up on your marriage too, and need to be convinced that it is worth saving, then chances are your marriage is doomed to fail. If you don't believe redemption and reconnection is possible, then you are going to have a hard time convincing your partner. This really is a time when your heart needs to be in it. The true test of your love is when you are on the back foot, and the love you show your partner is not being reciprocated. If you are feeling sorry for yourself, stop it. Pity gets you nowhere. Self-belief does. So does a commitment to your marriage. And it starts with you.

While you can't control the actions of your partner, you do have complete control over how you choose to react to it. With the right attitude and some sound techniques, you can save your marriage. But you have to believe it first. Start by smiling. It may be a while since you have smiled. Find ways to channel stress and ways to reconnect with friends and be happy. You have a choice: you can be miserable and angry, or you can be calm and focused, maybe even a little nice. Which of those two personality types would you want to come home to? The answer is simple.

Mistake 5: But they say they aren't "in love" with me.

This would have to be one of the most over-used phrases I have heard in marriage breakups, and it clearly tells me that people don't understand what real love is. The "in love" experience that people so commonly refer to is called infatuation, lust, romantic love, and this is a temporary phenomena that occurs at the beginning of a relationship, but dies anywhere from 6 months to the first 2-3 years. Some people go their entire lives in pursuit of love, never realizing that what they are chasing can't be sustained in the long term. Once romantic love dies, chaos ensues before real love can flourish.

When your partner tells you that they aren't "in love" anymore, what they are reacting to is a transition in the relationship, where both of you are being called to a deeper level of loving.



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Mistake 6: Suggesting a trial separation while you both think about what you want.

This is a BIG mistake. A trial separation should never be a first option when looking at ways to get meaning from your marital issues. If you both need space to think, go separate places for the day, but where possible it is imperative that you continue to live together and maintain some sense of routine. Shifting out doesn't always give both of you time to think. What it does is gives you both time to adjust to living as individuals. Once you have adjusted to living apart, your marriage-saving mission immediately becomes much harder.

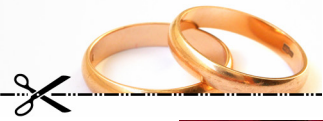
Find ways to channel your feelings and examine the issues in your marriage, but resist the temptation to shift out while this process is underway.

Mistake 7: Wishing that you had your old life back.

Another common complaint about relationships in crisis is that one partner writes to me wanting things back the way they were. More than anything, they want their old life back, and will do almost anything to achieve it. The problem with this is that in doing so, many couples simply stop acknowledging their issues, believing the past is in the past and that focusing on the future is the key to success. This is only partly true. In order to move forward, the current issues in the relationship need to be acknowledged and talked about. Ignoring them usually means the problem will be masked for a few months, even years, before the same issues are raised again, this time with more intensity.

Making the decision to save your marriage involves an acknowledgment of the past, as well as a commitment to solving the issues that are plaguing the marriage. Understand the issues. Understand each other's points of view and values that lead you to formulate opinions. Only once this is done can a marriage move forward.





Chapter 5. Combating Conflicts

My wife and I are having some really big problems right now.

My wife and I are having some really big problems right now. We have been married for three years now, and for the best part of that we have been really happy. But for the last while, it's just been impossible. I work really hard at an engineering plant during the day, while my wife stays at home and looks after our two-year-old son. I get home after work, tired from my long day and looking forward to being with my family. Instead, no one is home. When she turns up, she says she has been at a friend's or down at the mall. It's not like I expect her to have my dinner ready and on the table when I get in, but to have to come home and start cooking a meal isn't my idea of fun. I'm not a sexist pig, but I think I'm justified in thinking that she could be around when I get home at night and that we can share the chores. Our son also needs his dinner at a reasonable time; otherwise, he gets cranky. I tried talking to her a couple of times, but we had a huge fight about it. Why can't she think about anyone but herself?

Paul from Santa Fe

The likelihood of some sort of conflict in your relationship is inevitable. But blaming your partner for being selfish won't help. Neither will thinking that the only way to solve your conflict is your way: having your wife promise to be home when you come back from work. If you learn better ways of approaching conflicts from the start, you'll find that they resolve themselves.

The first step is to consider why you approach and respond to conflict situations in the way you do. For example, you didn't mention that your wife may feel tired and overwhelmed from having to deal with a child (in the "Terrible Twos," no less) all day long, alone in the house with no help. Going to the mall or to her friend's may provide her with emotional relief while entertaining the child with new environments and play situations. Had you started a discussion with your wife with recognizing her situation and how difficult it must be, as well as being understanding of the way she is dealing with the demands on her, she may have been much more open and receptive to listening to your needs.



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The way in which you or your partner react to conflict situations can say a lot about the background you have had as a child or the influence your parents and others have had on you. Some of your reactions will be deeply engrained, and you may find it enormously difficult to change the ways in which you approach conflict situations.

Fortunately, you can learn new ways of dealing with tricky situations like the one above—without making your partner feel hurt, or their needs unimportant. One method is called negotiation.

What Is Negotiation?

Negotiation is a big word for a simple process. The definition of “negotiation” is a discussion intended to produce an agreement. In other words, a negotiation is not an argument. It isn’t a whole lot of talk for the sake of feeling better. It can’t occur when one of the two people doesn’t want to agree. It is a process that has one intended result: to get both sides to mutually come to an agreement.

The Negotiation Mindset

- ◆ Accept the conflict.
- ◆ Be aware of your feelings.
- ◆ Control your feelings.
- ◆ Assess your interests. Are they reasonable?
- ◆ Focus on positive outcome.
- ◆ Demonstrate flexibility.

In order to enter into the spirit of negotiation, you need to have the right mindset. You should accept that conflicts are going to happen. You should approach the situation in a calm and rational manner. You should be aware of your feelings and in tune with them enough to recognize when you are getting upset. The last characteristic is essential: you need to be able to control your feelings such that any interactions during the negotiation process are free from emotional volatility.

One important difference between negotiation and argument is that negotiation removes the emotion while arguments heighten it. When you argue, your heart rate goes up, and emotions feel more intense. You’ll do anything to be right, to get your way, to show the other person how much they’re wrong. Under the intoxicating effect of emotions, you may say or do things that you later regret.



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For negotiation to work effectively, you need to remove the emotions: specifically, anger, hate, and the need for revenge. If these feelings and motivations are still present when you begin your negotiation, you are unlikely to have a positive outcome.

Preparation for Negotiation

- ◆ Define the issue.
- ◆ Clarify interests and feelings.
- ◆ Rank priorities.

Before you begin, closely define the specific issue that you disagree on. Never deal with more than one issue at a time. Don't make the mistake of assuming that both of you have the same understanding of what is wrong. Allow your partner to define the problem in his or her terms, and do the same yourself. You may have very different understandings of the source of conflict.

Your interests need to be legitimate and reasonable. Something may be important to you, but you really need to determine whether it is a legitimate and reasonable issue from someone else's point of view. Choose your battles and decide whether the issue is important enough to warrant a negotiation.

Rank your thoughts in order of importance so that you can determine what things you are prepared to bargain on and what points you are unwilling to trade off. Make sure you are being reasonable if you genuinely want to negotiate a solution. Just as political conflicts are not solved in just one round of negotiation, you may need several. Don't set an unrealistic time limit for the negotiation process; be persistent and patient.

Brainstorm Possible Outcomes

Your focus should be on creating a positive outcome. In order to do this, you will need to avoid being defensive and concentrate on the exploration of workable outcomes. Brainstorming can be useful, as it enables you to examine a range of solutions rather than offering an either-or choice. Be flexible: no one "wins" in a negotiation, and you may have to give way on several points if you want to achieve an agreement.



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Once you have both come up with a variety of possible outcomes, discuss them with one another. The most important thing to remember is that these are just proposals. Offering up ideas should not feel threatening, nor should you feel like you have to advocate every suggestion you offer. The key is to simply be creative and come up with as many solutions as you can. The more you have to choose from, the easier it will be to find a revised proposal that will take into account aspects of each of your priorities.

At this stage, remember to maintain an attitude of respect. If you have to be more formal and institute a meeting-style format, following Robert's Rules of Order, do so. You need to respect each other's feelings and ideas in this process if it is going to work.

Troubleshooting

This is not going to be an easy process. There will be times in the negotiation process that you will have disagreements and reach a temporary impasse. Don't despair! This is a normal part of the process. Try one of the following techniques to break the stalemate:

- ◆ Start the discussion process again from the beginning.
- ◆ Have some timeout and go for a walk.
- ◆ Try some of your different proposals.
- ◆ Think up some new proposals.
- ◆ Try some bargaining.

Looking Beneath the Conflict

When conflict situations arise, they are seldom tied to one issue. During the negotiation process, you may find that a larger problem lurks beneath the specific issue you'd agreed to discuss. Dealing with that issue first might be the positive outcome of the smaller problem.



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Exercise 8—Do Yourself

Step 1 – Issue and Reaction

Make a list of all the conflicts you have had recently and write opposite that the reaction you had to it. For example:

Issue	Feeling
1. You complained that I hadn't mowed the lawn when I said I would.	<i>Annoyed, frustrated</i>
2. You yelled at me for ruining my good shirt.	<i>Apologetic, defensive</i>
3. We had argued over what color sofa to buy.	<i>Defensive, argumentative</i>
4. You criticized me for being late and missing our son's recital.	<i>Frustrated, helpless</i>

Step 2 – Categorize

The second step is to see if you can identify any similarities in any of these issues. Can you group them into categories? For example, using the statements above, you may wish to group issues 1 and 4 together, as they both involve promising to complete an activity and being unable/unwilling to do so.

Step 3 – Identify Recurring Themes

Once you have divided the statements into categories, look for similarities or recurring themes. You may discover a larger underlying problem lurking hidden beneath minor conflicts.



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For example, in the example above, one partner may spend too much time at work, which makes him or her unable to perform responsibilities at home. The recurring theme would be the imbalance between time spent at work and time spent at home. The solution to the problem would not be mowing the lawns or being on time, but rather spending more time at home and less time in the office.

Step 4 – Distinguish Between the Conflict and Its Cause

Once you understand what causes your conflicts, you can attack the root. As a result, the moment you deal with the larger issue, all the minor conflicts that you thought you'd need to resolve one by one will disappear, and you won't have to face them over and over again.





Anger – The Poison of a Partnership

Anger is an enormously difficult and destructive emotion. It's the emotion that people are scared most of. It's also the emotion that people are least equipped to deal with, especially when it comes to anger in relationships and marriages.

Let me clarify: anger is okay. Never feel ashamed of feeling anger—anger produces negative consequences only if you *deny it to yourself, hold onto it, or act upon it*. If you deny your own angry feelings, you will never develop the necessary skills to acknowledge those feelings, deal with them, and let them go.

Anger has two basic components.

- ◆ It is a feeling that elicits a passionate response and is a form of pain and stress that leads people to develop sharp and impulsive responses, usually in an attempt to protect oneself.
- ◆ It is a reactionary response that is sparked by an event or a trigger.

We will deal with this emotion in two steps. The first is to learn how to deal with the pain and stress that comes with feeling anger. The second step is to identify the events and triggers that unleash this volatile emotion.

Managing Pain and Stress

The first thing that is important in managing this emotion is to recognize that you have it. Anger can be characterized by several characteristics.

- ◆ Shallow breathing
- ◆ Redness in the face
- ◆ Tightening in the stomach
- ◆ Increase in blood pressure
- ◆ Inability to think clearly
- ◆ Surge in stress levels

Your first responsibility to managing your anger in a conflict situation is to get your anger under control. If you are feeling anger at something, you obviously feel strongly about it. Having such an intensity of emotion isn't necessarily a bad thing, but the way you choose to express that feeling will determine whether or not it helps your



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relationship. When it comes time to expressing your anger, you need to calm yourself down. Think calming thoughts and assess the situation.

- ◆ If you shout and abuse your partner what is the outcome going to be? At all times you need to consider the outcome.
- ◆ How are the things you say and do now going to affect the outcome of this conflict?

Your management of your anger is your responsibility.

Choose Your Battles

There will be situations that are hardly worth the emotional investment in getting upset. You need to consider whether something is worth having a conflict over if it is not going to make a big difference to either of you. It is unhealthy to argue simply for the sake of contradicting or challenging the other person.

Sources of Support

Accept that there are certain things that your partner will not be able to do for you. In Chapter 7 you'll learn ways to create your own support system for those times in which your partner doesn't share your interests or doesn't have time to give you a shoulder to lean on. This will prevent you from feeling resentful when your partner doesn't want to go skiing with you. You won't feel angry because your partner won't drop everything to give you support on a bad hair day.

Use Your Voice

Many people in partnerships find themselves getting angry and getting into conflicts because they find themselves in situations that they either don't like or find boring. One of the biggest threats to a relationship is lack of communication. If there is something that makes you irritable or annoys you in a relationship, it is pointless to be annoyed and do nothing about it. This is where it is healthy to express yourself rather than bottle the emotion up and become irritable.



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Learn to Let it Go

Sometimes you have to accept that there are things you cannot change. You can invest a lot of emotional time and energy, and the result will be the same. In situations like these, you will have to accept that if anything is going to change, it will have to be you and your attitudes. We can make molehills into mountains—or shift our perspective and make those mountains look like molehills.

Triggers

Like with any emotion, there is bound to be a stimuli or event that starts the whole anger reaction. There has to be a time that you can remember where the angry feeling started. It could have been something that developed gradually over time or it could have been something that happened as a result of an event such as a comment made or something happening. In order to manage your anger relationship you need to know what these triggers or events are, and how that relates to the feelings you feel.



Exercise 9—Do Yourself

Write It Down

One easy way to raise your awareness of things, particularly when it comes to feelings, is to write them down. Below is an example of a trigger diary. Record the times you felt angry and the events or triggers that started that reaction.

Event	Feeling	Trigger
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Do the triggers have any themes in common? For example, do you tend to feel angry when you feel as if events are moving out of your control? Do you tend to feel angry when you're feeling insecure or vulnerable?

Believe it or not, your partner may know your triggers better than you know them yourself. Some spouses even use triggers deliberately to make their partner lose control. I know a couple who used to have that problem. Whenever Bill felt as if he was losing a fight with Janet, he would make a negative comment about her family. It got Janet every time. She'd lose control and end up looking like "the bad guy." Once Janet used this exercise, she became aware of this trigger and was able to control her anger when Bill used this tactic.



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Calm Down

Now that you can identify what triggers your anger, you need to learn ways to calm yourself down and think smart. If you lose your cool, you will be unable to deal with your conflict constructively. In fact, anger tends to cause conflicts to escalate and remove any possibility of a solution.

The key to staying in control of your feelings is by taking responsibility for your own emotions. Only you can stay calm—or give your anger free rein.

Try the following activities to regain control of your emotions:

- ◆ Take long deep breaths, listening to your breathing.
- ◆ Loosen your arms and let them hang loose.
- ◆ Shrug your shoulders and stretch your arms.
- ◆ Bend your back and let the muscles in your back and abdomen relax.
- ◆ Stretch the muscles in your neck and face and let them relax.
- ◆ Have a glass of water.
- ◆ Take a walk.
- ◆ Go and wash your face and hands. The cold water and washing will help you refocus.
- ◆ Close your eyes and focus on your breathing and the neutralizing of those hot and negative emotions. Think of it as a poison you are purging out of your system.

In addition to this, there are a number of key phrases that you can say in your head that will help you remain in a position of control.

- ◆ If I'm calm, I'm in control.
- ◆ Control is power.
- ◆ Neutral and calming words only.
- ◆ Move forward.
- ◆ Insults are unnecessary.
- ◆ Focus on the outcome.
- ◆ Don't let them get to me. Don't let them get the satisfaction.
- ◆ I can be the better person.
- ◆ If the insults get too much I can withdraw and come back to it later.
- ◆ If they expect me to get mad, laugh!



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- ◆ The anger and insults they project belong to them, not me.

Criticism

There will be times in which the anger you have to deal with isn't coming from you: it's coming from someone else. The worst thing you can do is let their anger make you angry. Use the above coping strategies to keep yourself from responding in like kind, and use the following strategies to fend off the verbal blows that come your way in the form of personal attacks and criticism.

There are three ways you can respond to criticism and attacks, and each of them can have very different results. Before you respond to any criticism, you need to think about the consequences. How you react will either feed their anger—or defuse it entirely.

Aggressive Response

You may naturally want to defend yourself from angry words with equally hurtful words hurled back. Thought this may be your most impulsive response, it is not the best one. An aggressive response can cause the other person's anger to escalate until there is no containing the situation.

Your prime motivation in this type of response is yourself and your feelings, rather than how you can make the other person calm down to their senses again. Don't take your partner's hurtful remarks personally—although I know that it's hard to do. Your partner often wants to know if he or she has wounded you, and your aggressive response will just feed the cycle. Refuse to take the bait. Just don't give in to the impulse to give out as good as you get.

Assertive Response

An assertive response to criticism both defends your position and the other person's without trampling on their feelings or compromising yours. This is the most thoughtful and is perhaps the most difficult of all the positions to take, as you need to consider your partner's feelings and rights as well as your own.



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Passive Response

This involves the total compromise of your own thoughts and feelings in order to avoid a conflict. By withholding your own response, you absorb your partner's anger. Perhaps you feel that you deserve it, or lack the confidence to stand up to your partner. You may hope that squashing your feelings will help your partner get over his or her anger more quickly. Either way, the bitterness and resentment that remain are bad for your relationship.

- ◆ "Hey, honey ... look, something has come up at work this weekend that I can't get out of, so we aren't going to be able to go to off for the weekend like we'd planned. Please don't be a drama queen about this."

Aggressive: "Damn you and your stupid job! Why don't you just marry your boss? You see more of him than me!"

Assertive: "I'm really disappointed. I just wish that this didn't happen so often. Tell you what, I'll call the hotel and change the booking to next weekend. Tell your boss that he's not getting you two weekends in a row—you're mine."

Passive: "That's okay, I know your work is important to you."



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Exercise 10—Do Yourself

Think of times in your recent past that have relied on a reaction from you. Think back and write the situation down.

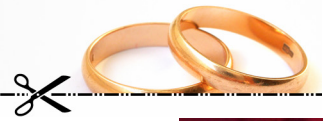
- ◆ What was your first thought or reaction?
- ◆ What did you actually say?
- ◆ How would you describe your reaction? Aggressive? Assertive? Passive?
- ◆ Was your reaction appropriate?
- ◆ What would you do differently next time?

Having a critical awareness of yourself is a valuable life skill. Your feelings and reactions are your responsibility, so it is healthy to take the time periodically to do a little self-analysis.

Accept that you don't always get it right. Nobody is perfect. But if you are mature enough to raise your personal awareness of your reactions and feelings, there is always the opportunity to learn from your mistakes and grow as a person. The same goes for your partner.

And that can only bring you closer together.





Chapter 6. Banking in Your Relationship

I've been married five years, and for most of that time my husband has just taken me for granted. But now I've started a new job where I feel great. Everyone really respects my work and what I do. Now, when I go home, it really irritates me that my husband just expects me to do the same things as always. He isn't interested in my day or even trying to help me with the housework (which is still my job, even though I'm working as much as he is). I'm wondering why I married him, if the people at work value me more than he does. I've even started to think about separation. Would that give him the kick-start he needs ... or at least show me how little he cares so that I can get out before I waste more of my life with him?

Sally from Austin

Relationships take work. Everyone knows that. What few people are willing to do is act on it.

For many partners, a marriage license is an excuse to slack. He's won you over; why does he have to do more? But all the hard work of courtship—everything that you did to win over your spouse, find out what pleased them, and do fun things together—doesn't end with the honeymoon.

It is easy to focus on what you're not getting in a relationship—and blame your spouse. What you don't realize is that your spouse may also not be getting what he needs. Feelings of resentment, guilt, or blame sabotage a relationship. Don't let your perspective get obscured by negative feelings. Instead of trying to show him how much he hurt you or enacting revenge, try brainstorming ways to enhance your connection and get your husband more involved in your life.

Clearly, there was something that was not fulfilling for you in the marriage before you started your new job. Why did you "suffer silently" for five years of feeling taken for granted? If something isn't going right in your marriage, it is much easier to address it immediately rather than let unhealthy behaviors become habits.



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Most people spend more time on their job or daily chores than on improving and enhancing their connection with the one they love. It's a matter of priorities. Others, on the other hand, would rather be poor but happy and living in love.

Ask yourself how important the following activities are, using a scale of 1 (highly important) to 10 (unimportant):

<i>Rating</i>	<i>Activity</i>
_____	Keeping the house clean/lawn mowed/etc.
_____	Participating in clubs, committees, or classes
_____	Sports or hobbies
_____	Putting in more hours at work.
_____	Spending time with friends
_____	Spending time with family
_____	Spending time with your spouse

Just as there are consequences to neglecting your job, such as getting paid less or getting fired ... just as there are consequences to neglecting the daily chores, such as maneuvering around a filthy house and watching the laundry build up ... so there are consequences to neglecting your marriage. You've already noticed one of the symptoms: *growing apart*.

If you want a healthy marriage, you must make it a priority—even if your partner doesn't.

Working on Your Marriage—What Not to Say

Your husband isn't perfect. Neither are you. But telling him what's wrong with him is a surefire way to destroy your marriage.

Men need to feel that their marriage is a safe zone that they can simply enjoy. They need to feel that they can be who they are, without being told that what they do is wrong. Because of that, you need to be careful about how you open up a discussion about what isn't satisfying you in your marriage.

I don't recommend that you tell your partner: *"I've been reading this book, and it says that we need to work on our relationship."* The phrase 'work on' implies that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. It will make him feel as if he's not doing enough and put him immediately on the defensive.



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Avoid telling him, “I think we need to talk about our marriage.” The ambiguity of the statement will lead him to expect the worse. As a result, he’ll close off emotionally rather than opening up to what you have to say.

Rather than criticizing your marriage, you tell your partner that you want to feel even closer and more connected to him. Tell him, “You know, I’ve been thinking, and I want to spend more time with you. I miss all the things we used to do when we were dating. Do you think we could find the time to talk to each other more?”

The Love Bank

One way to begin revitalizing your marriage and paying more attention to one another is by making deposits in your Love Bank.

It is dangerous to feel as if you always give more than your partner. Feelings of emotional inequality like this can damage a marriage. A marriage is no place for scales and balances. When you give to your spouse, you aren’t giving away something that your partner must replace in equal measure. Rather, you’re investing in what I call the “Love Bank.”

The idea is simple: a marriage is healthy when the balance in the Love Bank is high. Loving, thoughtful acts or comments make an investment into your account. Hurtful, insensitive acts or comments make a withdrawal. Happy married couples have a large balance in their Love Bank, and they show it. Couples on the verge of divorce are so in debt that only a declaration of bankruptcy—i.e., complete and total forgiveness—will save their marriage.

How high is the balance in your Love Bank?

Why Invest?

You may be thinking: *I already give more than he does. Why should I keep giving more when he’s obviously not interested in giving himself?*



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I have three powerful reasons for you:

1. Loving acts inspire a response of like kind.
2. Your husband may be showing you that he loves you in his own way. You may just not realize what his actions mean to him.
3. Your “giving acts” might not be as freely given as you think. If you feel resentful at having to give ... if you remind your spouse of how much you’ve given ... if you accompany what you do by adding, “Now you have to do this for me,” your deposit in the Love Bank will be null and void.

Feeling Taken for Granted

Feeling underappreciated in a relationship is common for both men and women. While women often feel as if they give more emotionally, by thinking of creative ways to express love or by keeping a welcoming home, men often feel as if the ways in which they give aren’t recognized by their wives. Men tend to give by filling material needs, such as fixing broken appliances or changing the oil in the car without being asked. They spend long hours at work to earn a certain standard of life and lifestyle from which their spouse benefits as well.

Understanding these gender differences makes it clear why *feeling* taken for granted may not necessarily mean that you’re *being* taken for granted. A wife may feel taken for granted when her husband doesn’t take the time to listen to her or express his feelings for her verbally. A husband may feel taken for granted when he works longer hours to bring home more money and comes home to his wife’s complaints that he doesn’t spend enough time with her. He feels that he’s giving her everything he can by providing them with the money they need to live. As a result, he may withdraw emotionally, making the wife feel even more taken for granted, and so create a vicious cycle.

There are two easy habits that spouses can develop to prevent this.

1. *Women can voice appreciation for the material needs their husbands provide.* When is the last time that you thanked your husband for bringing home the wages that enabled you to live comfortably as a couple while you weren’t working? In today’s world, few marriages can survive on just one salary, and every dollar each partner earns contributes to a couple’s overall material quality of life. Each time you voice appreciation for what your partner does for you and for your marriage, you’re making another deposit into the Love Bank.



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2. Men can learn to offer support and listen to their wives without impatience or interruption. Simply by being a willing ear—without offering any criticism, judgments, or advice—men can make their wives feel supported. Showing interest in her thoughts, feelings, and experiences make her feel valued and pay great dividends in the Love Bank.

Suggestions for Deposits

There are any number of expressions of caring that can increase your account in the Love Bank. Chances are that you know them already. Remember all the ways you showed your partner you cared while you were dating? Simply because you're married doesn't mean that you can't continue doing them. Try slipping notes into your partner's pocket when he goes off to work. Try surprising your spouse with something they like. Compliment your partner often. Surprise them with a kiss. The little deposits that you make every day matter more than the deposits that you might think would be quite big, like celebrating your anniversary or going on vacation. Why? Because small deposits get you in the habit of giving ... and keep you there.

Even if you don't get the response back that you'd like—such as appreciation, a “thank you,” or a grateful kiss—be patient. It takes time to establish an investment-oriented climate in a marriage. The worst thing you can do is feel resentful. If you make a deposit grudgingly, your partner will notice.

Rediscovering Respect

Once you have been in a marriage a long time, it becomes easier and easier to treat your partner with less respect than you'd give a stranger. There's a reason for the old adage, *familiarity breeds contempt*. Feelings of disrespect, disgust, and disappointment slowly erode a marriage.

On the contrary, *formality breeds courtesy*. To last, your marriage must have an underlying foundation of admiration and respect. Couples who have been married a long time know how to maintain respect for one another ... and maintain some of the formality they had back when they were starting to date. That fondness prevents them from saying things that they don't really mean, hurting the other person out of spite, or doing things they later regret.



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We all know that marriage is not a license to treat someone how you want. Yet it is awfully hard to break out of old habits. As an exercise, you might want to try to treat your partner as if he were a customer. Would you give a grumpy glare to a customer who came into your shop? They'd leave without buying a thing. Similarly, when you are having a bad day and greet your partner at the door with a scowl, he will feel as if your emotion is directed towards him and turn away from you emotionally.

Simple acts of politeness and courtesy—such as opening the door for one another, asking before assuming, and always speaking positively of your partner in public—go a long way.





Exercise 11—Do Yourself

A. Make a list of the things that your partner does that make you feel warm, safe, or comforted.

Now, think about when your partner usually does these things. Is there a pattern to when your partner feels inspired to give?

B. Make a list of the things that your partner does that make you feel rejected, unhappy, or pushed away.

Now, think about when your partner usually does these things. Is there a pattern to when your partner feels hurtful or withdraws?

Exercise 12—Do Yourself

Write down your weekly schedule and ask yourself the following questions:

- How much time do you spend with your partner each day?
- Of that time, how much is taken up with daily tasks like eating dinner or washing up?
- How much time is spent pursuing independent activities in the same room—such as when you are on the phone and he is watching television?
- Are there any activities that you do independently right now but could share together and would enjoy sharing? For example, watching television or cleaning out the yard together.
- How many minutes a day do you engage in actual conversation? In other words, a conversation in which you are maintaining eye contact, speaking directly to one another, and engaging in active listening.
- Are there any times of the day in which you feel closest to your partner? For example, at night in bed just before you go to sleep, or when he or you come home from work. Do you tend to cut those moments short?

Now, do you think you could find the time to expand those moments in which you feel close?



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Exercise 13—Do Together

Try scheduling a daily half hour of conversation time after work where you just sit together—without interruption, without doing other things—to share the details of your day, what you’re thinking and feeling.

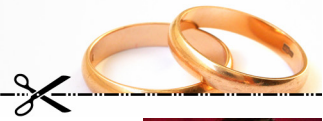
Exercise 14—Do Together

Write down a list of at least 5 things for each of the following categories, then read each completed sentence out loud to your partner.

- ◆ I admire your _____.
- ◆ I appreciate it when you do _____.
- ◆ I like watching you when you _____.
- ◆ I am proud of you when you _____.



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Chapter 7. Teamwork and You

Since we got married it seems like nothing I do is good enough. No matter what I do, I'm told that she could do it better. I earn good money, and our combined income into the home is more than most couples, but she makes me feel as though I should be doing more. I work hard, and on my weekends I like to unwind by playing golf in the mornings with my buddies. Let's call this my "stress-relief." She has her coffee groups and shopping to do anyway, so it's not as if she's missing out. I feel like we are two individuals competing with each other. I guess it has been happening from the beginning of our relationship but I hoped she would grow out of it. Help.

- Doug from Florida

The transition from singledom to coupledness is a difficult one for many people, and this is one of the first skills that is necessary for couples to master. Now while this sounds great in theory, getting into the mindset where you stop thinking about yourself as an individual and think of the best interests of the couple is a difficult one.

Think about it... society rewards people for being independent and competitive in the workplace and amongst wider society, and it's logical that this mindset should overflow into relationships from time to time. Society rewards those that strive to achieve beyond others, and to do this you must be focused on what you want, and achieve it at all costs. This mindset simply doesn't work in relationships because there are two people. It's not about just what you want anymore. A healthy relationship is about fostering the interests of both parties, and doing what is in the best interests of both. For this to work, compromise is necessary from time to time, which goes against the individual mindset.

One of the most common complaints from couples in this position is negotiating a compromise, because one partner feels that their priorities are being replaced in favor of the other. Similarly, one person may feel held back or impeded by having to work as a couple. This is where we run into problems.



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I want to start by pointing out something obvious. Two people are more efficient than one. Two people combined use fewer resources than two individuals, and therefore can achieve more with less resources. This is a good place to start in your relationship.

Take a look at your bills. Gas, electricity, water, food, all of these things are cheaper with two people working together than as two individuals. It doesn't take twice as much electricity to heat a room for two people as opposed to one. Same goes with water, preparing food, or using gas. Two people working as a single unit are much more efficient than individuals.

This is a really important point, because your relationship should be the same.

The most common complaints:

1. I'm not getting what I want
2. I know what I'm doing better than them
3. I know I can do this better on my own
4. Why won't they understand that I know what I'm doing?!
5. They aren't doing it the way I would do it
6. I used to do it fine on my own

These are the sort of complaints that come from people who are still in the "individual" mindset. They believe that despite the efficiencies of the couple, some things are best done on their own.

Each of us have strengths and weaknesses, and the key of a successful couple is in capitalizing on each others strengths and minimizing each other's weaknesses. This means you have to support each other. It may take longer to do some things, and it may not always be the way you would do it. But you have the knowledge that as a couple, you can achieve more things together.

That's the key. By being more efficient, by working as a couple, by working as a team, you can do MORE things together.



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New mindset:

1. With patience, I can get more of what we both want
2. As a couple, we can build on each other's strengths
3. I used to do this on my own, but as part of a team we now share and support each other in doing it together
4. Now that my partner has faith in my abilities, I can show and teach them how it's done.
5. As part of a team, we can now see that there is more than one correct way to do it
6. I used to do it fine on my own, but as part of a couple I am being called to share with my loved one.

Being married calls you to let go of the habits of your past, and invites you into new ways of doing things. Marriage calls you in to connecting with your spouse, not only intimately, but in every aspect of your life. Marriage is not a competition. Marriage is teamwork. The key to your success is in remembering that you are both on the same team.



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Chapter 8. The Power of Money

My wife comes from a really wealthy family, and she is an only child. I come from a middle class family, and I guess we are very normal when it comes to how much money we have. A few months ago she started making very subtle suggestions about the clothes I wear and then went out bought me new clothes. I usually wear a pair of jeans and boots, because that's what I'm comfortable in. I'm not going to wear those designer jeans and fancy shoes, and so I don't see why she wasted the money. Then we had a big fight the other week because she went and spent a fortune on a new sofa for the house. It was about four times what I would usually spend, so I wasn't happy. She told me that she would get what she likes because that is what she is used to. I know she has way more money than me, and up until now it was never an issue. But now I feel that she is making more of the decisions because she brought more to the marriage than me. It just doesn't seem fair.

Alex from Atlanta

Marriage involves the coming together of two couples and inevitably love is something that reaches across all spheres. Race, religion, political persuasion, and social class are all obstacles that love seems to overcome every day. An inequality in wealth is no different to this.

The danger inherent that people from different backgrounds face is that just because you both fell in love doesn't mean that you are going to both live happily ever after. Any obstacle that you overcome is going to involve you both overcoming those differences. Recognizing those differences is the first part. The second part is to recognize the fact that in many cases those differences point to an inequality.

The difficulty in recognizing an inequality is that at that stage in your relationship you don't want to point that out. After all, it is going to make everyone feel really uncomfortable. So the topic generally isn't spoken about. And this is the whole problem. It is something that needs to be spoken about openly because it is an important issue. Any inequality like differences in material assets needs to be spoken



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about openly and honestly. The biggest problems occur when you assume you know each other's expectations rather than just asking your partner what they are.

While it may not be an issue at the time you meet, the difference in material wealth and the lifestyle that brings also leads to a difference in values and priorities. This doesn't have to be a bad thing, but it is a difference that needs to be recognized. If it isn't something that you both talk about, there is a strong likelihood that you will both make assumptions that are contrary to each other's wishes.

The reality of this inequality is that it involves a certain amount of change and integration into each other's lives. In most cases like the one described above, the assumption is that the poorer of the two will integrate to fit the lifestyle of the richer one. It is kind of like the fairytale Cinderella.

The problem with this is that in integrating into the rich girl's life in the example, the Steve may be compromising some of his core values as well as dispelling some of his notions of marriage. An inequality in material assets or money can lead to an inequality of power. This can cause significant problems in a relationship. A marriage is a partnership and this should be reflected when making decisions that affect the both of you.

Having more material assets and money than your partner is no excuse to wield power over your partner. That is an unreasonable expectation. That is why communication is so important. Any decision that affects the both of you needs to be discussed so that you can determine what each other's priorities are. That way if you have different priorities you are able to search for viable alternatives or compromises.

Gender Roles

Another issue that often comes up in therapy is the change in gender roles and how modern couples deal with that. 1 in every 4 women now earns more than her husband, and the associated effect on relationships is noticed right across the globe. What this now signifies is a change in the balance of power that has typically been the domain of the male. Typically the male has been the breadwinner and as a result has controlled the income and expenditure in the household. As women have entered the workforce in steadily growing numbers, these educated professionals are overtaking their male partners in the amount of money they bring home each week. This is despite the fact that women only earn 70 cents compared to every dollar a man earns.



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This has led to a shift in traditional gender roles that have been unshaken for centuries. Men are no longer the power holders in a marriage, and for many men this has been difficult to come to terms with. Many men still cling to the notion that how much they make is related to their worth in the relationship. When the wife earns more than the man, there is the perception that they are now worth less. Of course this perception is quite wrong and quite irrational, but it is still one that remains.

Redefinition

Given this shift in power and the subsequent loss in masculinity, it is necessary for you to firstly acknowledge the issue as a couple and reassure each other that your marriage is a partnership. The next thing you need to do is redefine your roles within the relationship being that they are no longer assumed. By taking the time to sit down and confront those issues you will be able to establish amended roles and define what expectations you have of each other. I think the biggest problem in situations like this is that the male is no longer sure what their role is and what their wife expects of them. In this respect it is vital that you are proactive in your approach and deal with this issue before it becomes a problem.

Examples

Some examples where there may be confusion in role expectation are in areas like domestic chores. Given that around 60% of all married couples are both income earners, there is less time for a woman to fill the role of breadwinner and housewife. If a woman works a full time job, there needs to be a redistribution of work and chores around the home to reflect this. This point is particularly relevant if the couple in question has children. It is no longer appropriate for you as a man to come home, kick your shoes off, and expect your dinner to be on the table. Those days are gone. You need to make equal effort as a couple if you want to look on your marriage as a partnership.

The issue of childcare may also come into question if you and your partner decide to have children. If the female has a greater earning capacity than the male, it may make more sense for the male to become a stay-at-home dad. In fact, this is becoming increasingly common as females climb the corporate ladder. This is a perfect example of how couples can maximize on their strengths to work as a team.



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Exercise 15—Do Together

This exercise focuses on the different roles you play in your relationship and how well you feel you fulfill them. For each role I want you to ask yourself a series of questions:

- ◆ What does this role mean to you?
- ◆ What aspects of this role do you feel you do well?
- ◆ What aspects of this role do you feel you could improve?
- ◆ How would you change this role if you were able?
- ◆ Rate yourself from one to ten in this role.

The roles in your life include:

- ◆ Lover
- ◆ Husband or wife
- ◆ Father or mother
- ◆ Son or daughter
- ◆ Brother or sister
- ◆ Friend
- ◆ Employer or employee

By taking the time to examine the multiple roles you fill in your relationships with others, you will be able to measure how well you are filling these roles and the responsibilities that come with it. Be critical in your approach, as there is always room for improvement. But in looking for areas of improvement you will be better equipped to deal with the challenges that those multiple roles present.



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Chapter 9. It's About You

All my life, I've been the person my husband wants me to be. He wanted me to stay at home, so I did, then we had children, and I had no time for anything else. Our kids have just started school, and I'm starting to realize just how much of my own life I put on hold for this marriage. I know it sounds selfish, but I'm tired of being either a mom or a wife but never just myself. Before I got married I'd dreamed about starting my own business, having a little apartment in the city, and traveling. If I don't do anything now, my life will be over before I've had the chance to do any of those things. Although there's no way I could leave my kids, I need to get out. Help!!!

Jeanette from Cincinnati

Feeling that you need to be yourself, rather than Mom or Missus, is not selfish at all. On the contrary, it is healthy. Good for you for recognizing that your personal dreams are important and that it is never too late to make them come true. Now, you need to recognize another fact. Being married and being yourself are not incompatible. A good marriage will have space for you to be a mom, a wife, and yourself, too.

Not only can you still pursue your dreams and your own activities as a married woman, you should! A major cause of marital discontent is when a partner sacrifices his or her identity in an attempt to compromise and avoid conflict in the marriage. Unfortunately, this kind of sacrifice causes more problems than it covers up. You must be able to be yourself in a marriage. After all, your husband didn't marry you to have a good wife—he married you to be with *you*.

Taking Two Perspectives...

Happy marriages can be seen from two perspectives:

1. As a whole, e.g., the happy couple.
2. As the sum of its parts, e.g., two happy people.



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Most of this book—and most marriage books in general—deal with a marriage from the first perspective. However, taking the second perspective is also essential. If someone in the marriage is chronically unhappy because of something in his or her own life, that person will never find happiness outside the self in the marriage. Your partner is supposed to complete you—not replace your life with his.

Dangers of Ignoring Your Self

In addition to a lack of personal fulfillment, there are four less obvious—but equally insidious—results to giving up your personality, hobbies, social life, and dreams for your marriage.

1. Suffocation
2. Dependence
3. Imitation
4. Acquiescence

➤ *Suffocation*

You may have thought that giving up your friends for mutual friends, or giving up your hobbies for things you do together, was a way of committing to your partnership. But before you admire that couple who always seem to be together (when you never see one without the other), consider this:

Constant togetherness is not necessary. In fact, it can harm a marriage more than it helps. Without time apart or your own private space to retreat to, you can begin to feel bored and frustrated with one another. Worse, you can start feeling shackled to your partner.

Marriage is not a prison! NEVER feel guilty for taking time out for you. Remember that there's nothing wrong with having your own friends, your own hobbies, or a room of one's own.

➤ *Dependence*

Just because you're married doesn't mean that you have to give up your friends. The less time you spend developing a social network made up of close friends and family members, the more you will find yourself going to your husband with all your



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emotional needs. He is going to need a break every once in a while! You need to recognize that there will be times when he won't be available to listen, or give you the kind of support and attention you need.

Although we would like to believe that our spouse will be able to provide all our emotional needs, it simply isn't true. Women still need female friends for girl talk ... parents or siblings for a connection to family. Men still need male friends with whom to watch football and drink beer ... trusted family members to go to for advice.

If you have a strong social network, you won't have to panic when your partner is temporarily unavailable. You won't put so much pressure on him to be the only one who can listen to your troubles or help you out. As a result, you'll be less demanding. You'll both be happier.

I must add one note of caution, however. Don't tell use your support network as a way to avoid discussing issues with your spouse. Women, especially, find it all too easy to tell their friends things that they should be talking about with their partner. Your support network is an extra cushion, not a substitute for spouse heart-to-hearts.

➤ *Imitation*

When my grandparents completed their 50th wedding anniversary, everyone remarked how much they'd changed each other. Grandma had smoothed out Grandpa's rough edges. He'd taught her to be more adventurous.

It's true: husbands and wives grow alike over time. But in the best marriages, husbands and wives never become carbon copies of one another. They know the difference between complementing one another—and imitating one another.

If you give up the unique activities, passions, and quirks that make you unique—and in return adopt your husband's preferences, expectations, and interests—you'll lose the difference that attracted him to you in the first place. That can be dangerous for your marriage.

Remember ... differences attract. Being identical bores.

➤ *Acquiescence*

Sometimes, it's easier to follow our partner's lead rather than think ourselves, especially if our partner is expert or has always made the decisions in one particular



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area. For example, if your husband is interested in politics and you are not, you may simply ask how he voted on a particular issue and vote the same way yourself, without bothering to think it over or become more informed. If your husband tends to take charge of the vehicles, you may hand the decision about purchasing a new car over to him without stating that you expect to be involved in the selection as well.

In a good marriage there is always a difference of opinion and debate. Your opinions and beliefs need not match in a marriage—and it's not necessary to try and make them identical. You need look no further than James Carville and Mary Matalin, or Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver, to see the happy marriage of opposite ends of the political spectrum.

If you can't talk openly about your disagreeing perspectives, don't think that the answer is to avoid the conversation. When you suppress your own opinions or avoid disagreeing for the sake of minimizing conflict, you're setting a dangerous precedent of suppressing your feelings in general.

Benefits of Self-Care

Having your own space to pursue your own hobbies, interests, and female circle of friends will not just revitalize you. It will make you more attractive to your spouse and energize your relationship. Sound too good to be true?

Spending Time on Yourself Will Make You More Fascinating

When you first started dating, chances are that you were both energized by the excitement of the chase. You could spend hours talking and getting to know one another. There was always more to discover about their body, their interests, their past.

Once you got married, that sense of mystery disappeared. You saw each other every day and knew how the other person slept, dressed, even brushed their teeth.

Yet some degree of mystery and surprise is always necessary in a relationship. It's the spice that tantalizes your partner and encourages him to stay interested in you. If you are always doing more new and exciting things, your partner will be curious and want to know more. That sense of not knowing you completely will reignite the feelings he had when he first started pursuing you.



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Spending Time on Yourself Will Improve Communication

When you pursue activities independently, you have more to share when you meet up again. You will find yourselves talking more, because you won't assume that the other person did "nothing interesting" that day.

Spending Time on Yourself Will Make You More Attractive

When you feel good, you project happiness and good health. Your partner wants you to be happy more than anything else; it's just that often he doesn't know how to do it.

When you make the special effort to indulge yourself in little ways—such as going to a spa or having a massage—you will feel relaxed, open, and more loving. When you come home, your husband will enjoy seeing you radiant, happy, and glowing. In this way, giving yourself the gift of a small pleasure is like giving a gift to your husband. Your happy mood makes him feel more loved.

Spending Time on Yourself Will Make You More Positive

When your life is caught up with your husband's life, it becomes difficult not to be affected by your partner's negative feelings. You may find yourself feeling down—simply because he is feeling down.

When one partner in a marriage is feeling upset, angry, unhappy, or depressed, the worse thing the other partner can do is share the negative emotion. If you stay positive while your husband is feeling down, chances are he'll pick up on your soothing energy and start feeling better. If he has had a bad day, coming home to your smile may make all the difference.

If you have an active life in addition to your marriage, you will keep your spirits up even if life is difficult at home—and that will help your partner more in the long run.

Don't Make Excuses!

It's hard to not feel guilty about taking time for yourself. You may feel as if you just don't have the time for the things you want to do, because you have so many other demands on your time. You may worry that your partner will resent you—just as you



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find yourself resenting him when he take time to play golf while you're stuck with the kids.

You may feel guilty spending money on yourself. You may feel guilty about putting yourself first when your first instinct is to put others first.

But you know what? Wouldn't you ignore those excuses for the sake of saving your marriage?

That's how important taking time for yourself is.

When Personal Time Becomes a Matter for You Both

There will be cases in which taking time for yourself will interfere with the time you spend with your spouse. There will be situations in which pursuit of your own goals or hobbies will impact your marriage. In those instances, what you do is no longer the province of you alone. You need to discuss your needs with your partner and decide as a couple what balance is appropriate.

For example, a step as large as starting your own business (which would require a large capital investment, as well as absorb much of your time) should be undertaken mutually. It may be impossible to have your dream apartment in the city, but you may be able to move to a house closer to the center of town—or simply spend more time going into the city to enjoy the atmosphere. If you've always dreamed of traveling, your spouse may wish to come along.

If you keep the boundary between what you personally want to do and what you want to do as a couple too rigid, you will alienate your spouse—which was never the purpose, after all.



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Exercise 16—Do Yourself

Rate the following activities according to how good they make you feel.

- 1 = Amazing
- 2 = Great
- 3 = Good
- 4 = Indifferent or not good

- ___ Writing a letter
- ___ Going to the movies
- ___ Taking a hot bath
- ___ Sitting outside
- ___ Listening to music
- ___ Getting a massage
- ___ Drinking a cup of tea or coffee
- ___ Reading a good book
- ___ Window-shopping
- ___ Going for a walk
- ___ Going for a long drive
- ___ Playing a sport
- ___ Playing music
- ___ Talking with friends
- ___ Visiting your family
- ___ Petting a cat or a dog
- ___ Gardening
- ___ Cooking a meal
- ___ Buying something for yourself
- ___ Sitting in a café

Now, look at the activities that you rated as 1s and 2s. How often do you do them? Do you think you could find time to do them more often?



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Exercise 17—Do Yourself

Write down a list of 100 things you'd like to do before you die. Don't be realistic—anything goes. If you can't think of 100, fewer are okay!

Ask yourself which of the things you'd like to do could be done right now. Ask yourself which of the things could be done in the near future. Finally, ask yourself if there any steps you could take now to make achieving those dreams more likely.

Exercise 18—Do Together

Individually, write down:

- ◆ 10 things that attracted you about your spouse when you first met each other
- ◆ 10 qualities that distinguished your spouse from other men/women you knew
- ◆ 10 quirks that you discovered about your spouse only after getting married

Now share.

Exercise 19—Do Together

Designate one night a week as “lads' night” or “ladies' night.” On that night, your husband might want to stay home and play poker with his buddies, while you go out for a meal with the gals. When you come home, make sure to share at least five funny or interesting things that happened.



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Chapter 10. Workplace Issues

I know that my husband's career is important to him, so I've never made demands on him. But recently I've just wanted to spend more time with him. We had a miscarriage, and it's been difficult for me to spend so much time at home. He's been keeping to himself and dealing with things by spending more time at work. I ran into one of his co-workers recently, and when I mentioned the miscarriage she was horrified. She didn't know! I couldn't sleep at all that night, wondering what else he wasn't mentioning at work. Is his family life so irrelevant, then?

Kara from Sacramento

When work absorbs well over half of your waking hours every day, it's natural that pressures generated at work can spill over into the home, and vice versa. As a result, partners may try to minimize the crossover by keeping work at work ... and home life in the home.

However, it doesn't work that way. The workplace has a very real affect on your home life, and your home life influences your ability to be productive on the job. A sound integration of work and home life is essential. For example, you should know the people your spouse works with, be able to visit him or her on the job if necessary, and attend job-related social events wherever possible. When your spouse keeps you in the dark about what he or she does every day and doesn't share job accomplishments or tell you about interactions with co-workers that might be bothering him or her, your intimacy as a couple is compromised.

On the other hand, work is a professional environment, and not everything that goes on in your personal life should be shared outside it. Talking about something as serious as a miscarriage to casual colleagues may feel inappropriate for your husband ... and rightly so. Work may be giving your husband an escape to avoid dealing with the problem, but that doesn't mean he needs to take his problems to work. What he needs to do is sit down with you and work through his emotions—and yours— together.



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How the Workplace Affects a Marriage

Currently, only 40% of marriages have one spouse who stays at home while the other works. By far, the majority of married couples spend most of their days on the job—and when they come home, the chores are still undone and dinner unmade. Marriages must be more egalitarian and flexible than ever.

When both partners bring pressures from work home with them, marital harmony suffers. And not in the way you might think. Although balancing family life with work remains an issue, one of the biggest ways in which the workplace influences marital life is through *negative mood spillover*. In other words, the problem isn't with the amount of time consumed by work, but rather with the negative mood generated by a difficult job

The feelings of tension generated at work can manifest themselves at home in generalized arguments, emotional withdrawal, and bad moods. For example, when one spouse is in a high-pressure job with a demanding boss and little support, he or she is unlikely to be able to let go of that tension at the front step. As a result, he or she may inadvertently take out that bad mood on you by acting irritably or arguing over petty things.

Ways to Unwind

When job-related pressures are creating a pressure cooker at home, you and your spouse need to sit down and discuss methods for coping. As mentioned earlier in this book, the most important thing you can do is to be aware of your mood and how it is affected by work. If you come home and recognize that the day has made you irritable, take steps to get yourself into a better frame of mind before you take your stress out on your partner.

Sometimes just talking about the negative parts of your day with your partner can help. You may wish to try a stress management course, or try activities such as yoga, meditation, or gardening. One common way to unwind is sitting in front of the television. However, be careful that the half-hour in front of the television doesn't become one, two, or three hours. Watching the television should occupy you just until you are relaxed and ready to participate in family life again, not provide an escape to avoid your partner or responsibilities.



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If everything else fails, you may wish to consider a more drastic solution: changing jobs. Sometimes, no matter what you do, your job will consume your life. You will spend all your free time thinking about your work—or worrying about it. You'll be unable to relax and enjoy the company of your spouse. In these cases, you will have to seriously consider how important that job is to you, and whether it is worth losing your marriage.

Workplace Romances

If your idea of a mistress is a woman frequenting bars to pick up on married men, or a secretary sleeping with her boss, you're in for a shock. The workplace is now the #1 place for affairs to begin, and the vast majority is between co-workers rather than subordinates and superiors. With women now comprising 46% of the American workforce, the workplace provides more opportunities for extra-marital affairs than ever.

Some research suggests that one third of all relationships begin at work, and nearly half of all workers have had an office romance. As men and women work closely together in stressful circumstances, often spending long hours together, they may find a deeper bond developing. They share common interests and consider getting to know one another part of their job. As time goes on, they may even feel that they have more in common than they do with their spouses.

With so much opportunity and temptation, both you and your spouse need to agree on safeguards to increase your accountability to one another. Make sure that your spouse knows what you do at work, who you work with, and where you work. Keep a shared email account, and check in with one another throughout the day. Let your spouse know when you're going out with work friends, and invite him or her along if possible. When your colleagues know your husband or wife personally, they are much more likely to notice if one of your work relationships starts getting out of bounds.

Most importantly, implement safeguards yourself. Avoid thinking about what it would be like to be with one of your work colleagues, as thoughts can lead to actions if there is opportunity. Avoid casual flirting, which may be misread by others. Never put yourself in situations where you know that temptation will be hard to avoid, such as drinking late with a colleague of the opposite sex.



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If you put the above ideas into practice, you will be less likely to find yourself in a situation where a colleague has misconstrued your friendly behavior as an advance. Such situations will embarrass you both and make working together difficult in the future. Don't forget that rape can occur in a workplace situation, so don't let your guard down.



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Exercise 20—Do Yourself

For one week, jot down a record every day of how you are feeling. Do this (1) as you are leaving work, and (2) when you get home. Avoid doing it from memory if possible.

At the end of the week, analyze your entries. How do you generally feel when you are leaving work? Do you feel better or worse when you get home? Do you think that work-related tensions are affecting the way you behave at home?

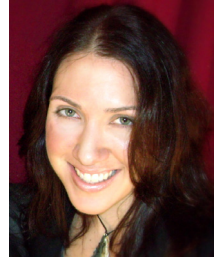
Exercise 21—Do Together

Interview your partner about his or her job. Pretend that you are an intern researching a job that you would like to have. Don't worry if you already know the answers; the fun is in hearing your partner respond. Ask questions like:

- ✓ What characteristics do you need to do this job successfully?
- ✓ What are your day-to-day duties?
- ✓ What's your favorite part of the job?
- ✓ What sorts of challenges or problems do you face in your position?
- ✓ What's the most difficult part of the job?
- ✓ What is the mission statement of your company?
- ✓ How does your company compare with its competition?
- ✓ How does your company measure your performance and provide feedback?
- ✓ Are there any opportunities for promotions or pay raises?
- ✓ How much input do employees have into company policy?



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Chapter 11. When Marriage Is More Than Two

When I married my husband, I knew that his daughter was going to have a hard time accepting me, but I thought that she'd be happy to just have someone as a mother again. Well, I was wrong—REALLY wrong. It's been three years, and I still think she believes I'll go away if she ignores me hard enough. I've done everything! My husband doesn't help: he tells me that the problem is between me and her, so we have to work it out. I've talked to her about there always being enough love to go around no matter how often it's divided, and tried to make sure that she has her own time with her father so that she won't feel jealous of our couple time. But I feel like I'm sharing the house with the ghost of his previous wife. I don't deserve this!

Karen from New York

You don't deserve it. But you still have to deal with it. Other people are always influencing your marriage, in ways you may not even realize. The effect of children is the most obvious, as they shift the dynamic of a marriage enormously.

You can't prevent other people from affecting your marriage. What you can do is recognize when those influences are having a negative effect on your marriage and develop strategies *together* for dealing with them.

The most important prerequisite is that you place your loyalty to one another first. When a child, or an in-law, or a jealous friend tries to get between you and your spouse, it's time for a show of solidarity. Your husband needs to stand beside you and tell your new daughter that her "divide and conquer" tactics won't work. The two of you are her parents now, and she must accept that both of you make the decisions—not just her father.

Three's Company

Many couples have children with the expectation that raising the child will bring them together. On the contrary, in many cases it drives them apart.



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If your marriage is in trouble, having a child is not a step that should be taken lightly. I have known women who stopped taking their birth control pills without telling their husband in hopes that a pregnancy would keep their husband from leaving them. It doesn't work. Even if the husband decides to stay, the marriage will often end within a matter of years—leaving the wife with a small baby and no emotional support.

One of the biggest causes of marital discontent and divorce is the birth of a couple's first child. Raising a child is stressful and demanding. The husband may feel abandoned as the wife shifts her attention and concern onto the child. The wife may need additional support from her husband and feel overwhelmed when she is expected to do it all. Lack of privacy, fatigue, and constant interruptions may send their sex life into a seemingly irreversible downhill spiral.

As the children grow, conflicts in parenting styles can test a marriage. Parents and children may form "camps" against one another, one parent using their children against the other parent. Children may play one parent off another, or use their health or vulnerability to demand exclusive attention. For example, it is not unusual for one parent and a child to feel jealous of the attention given the other by the second parent. Sigmund Freud talked about what he called the "Oedipal complex," in which a male child feels a sense of competition with his father for exclusive access to his mother. In other instances, female children may feel a sense of competition with their mother for access to their father.

Both parents must be aware of how children can manipulate the power dynamic between them. Children are not adults, and parents must not give them the ability to interfere in adult relationships. When parents work together to present a united front to their children, their children will feel safe and secure.

Keeping Your Marriage High on the Priority List

Often, a man and a woman haven't yet learned how to be husband and wife before they're thrust into the role of mother and father. Because children are so demanding, it becomes easy to shift the entire focus of the marriage onto raising them. By the time the last child leaves home, the man and woman have become so used to their roles as father and mother that they've forgotten how to be husband and wife. This "empty nest" period is when many marriages fall apart.



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Successful marriages make couple time a priority from the get-go. They set limits. For example, they may begin locking their bedroom door each night once the children have reached a certain age. They may choose to send their children to public schools so that they don't have to work longer hours for the necessary income, thereby freeing more time for togetherness. They may reserve a night each week for themselves and pay a babysitter so that they can go out.

In other words, they keep their marriage high on the priority list—even when their children clamor to have 100% of their time.

Acting Like Your Parents

For most people prior to getting married, the most influential example of a marriage was that of their parents. The relationship that you saw intimately as you grew up formed your expectations of what a married couple was like. You saw how your parents divided their roles, how they communicated, how much affection they showed one another. This early learning can prove immensely difficult to break. You may find yourself spontaneously acting like your mother or father—even if you don't want to!

One piece of advice commonly given to dating couples is to look at your loved one's mother or father if you want to know how good a spouse she or he will be. Although I don't recommend that you reject anyone because of their parents' lack of marriage skills, I do recommend that you make the effort and take the time to familiarize yourself with your in-laws. You will learn more about your partner than he or she could ever tell you.

For example, if your partner refuses to get involved in parenting, claiming that the situation is between you and the child, not him, he may be repeating a script learned from his father, who was also uninvolved in the parenting process. Sometimes, simply bringing to his attention the parallel between his behavior and his father's (in neutral, non-judgmental words) can be enough to change his mind.

Another way in which parents affect our current relationship is through the ways in which we learned as children to deal with situations of anxiety, abandonment, and rejection. For example, if your father always told you to stop crying and keep a stiff upper lip, you may find expressing emotions to your spouse difficult. If your mother would leave you waiting for her for long periods of time, you may feel an irrational anxiety when kept waiting for your spouse.



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Because the impact of your childhood relationship with your parents is complex, these issues are best discussed with a professional counselor. Later on in this book, we'll show you how to select the best marriage counselor for you.

Friends Who Support, Friends Who Sabotage

There should be three kinds of friends in every marriage: *his* friends, *her* friends, and *their* friends. Friends are a crucial outlet for married individuals. Good friends will listen to you when you need to talk about your relationship, provide feedback, and put things into perspective. They will be able to tell you the hard things about your own behavior that you wouldn't listen to from your spouse. They will reflect back to you your feelings about your partner and marriage, making your ideas clearer in your own mind.

As I mentioned before, it is important that you don't forget that some topics should be the sole province of you and your spouse. You may find it easy to talk about the intimacies of your relationship with close friends, but forget that the person to whom you should be talking is your spouse. To avoid this, follow this simple rule of thumb: don't share anything with friends that you haven't already shared—or plan to share—with your spouse.

Although friends provide excellent sounding boards, you should be wary of thinking, "So-and-So has a great marriage; therefore, I should do in my marriage exactly what they do." Every marriage is unique and has different needs. Advice by friends should be taken with a grain of salt—and you should never make a decision based solely on what someone else thinks you should do. Your friends know as much about your marriage as you've told them, but they will never know as much about your marriage as you and your spouse do.

Some friends feel the need to take a more active role. When my friend Carol was in a relationship with a man whom we all felt was completely wrong for her, two of my friends took the initiative to try to break them up. You need to be careful with friends who cross those sorts of boundaries. At the end of the day, your marriage is ultimately a private relationship between you and your spouse.



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The Ghost of Partners Past

We all have expectations and behavior patterns conditioned into us from previous relationships. This is because we learn social skills by repeating what worked in the past and avoiding what didn't work.

As a result, the ghosts of our past partners tend to linger. Something your partner does may remind you of someone you dated in the past, and you may respond without thinking, in a way that leaves him hurt and confused.

It's so easy to forget that your partner is nothing like that person from the past. But stamping out old ghosts is the most important thing you can do for your marriage. Each individual is distinctive and unique; each relationship is a completely new experience. When you are saddled with the fear of being hurt as you have been in the past, you keep yourself from opening up to your partner completely. Remember that he chose you and loved you enough to make the total commitment of marriage.

I recommend that you never compare your partner to anyone from your past. If your partner asks you to compare him to other people you've been with, say only the ways in which he compares favorably—or better yet, refuse, saying, "I married you, and you are the only one in my life, the only one I care about, and the only person I need." By refusing to compare your partner with anyone else, you reinforce in your own mind the unique nature of your relationship.



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Exercise 22—Do Yourself

Spend fifteen minutes with a pen and paper. Jot down memories of the way in which your parents:

- Talked with one another
- Showed one another they cared
- Made decisions
- Resolved conflicts
- Divided household duties
- Made each other laugh
- Socialized with other people
- Talked about their relationship
- Talked about each other

Now, put a check mark next to any of the behaviors that you find yourself repeating with your spouse.

Exercise 23—Do Yourself

Meander again back down memory lane. This time, think about the three most significant relationships you had before you met your spouse. For each relationship, ask yourself:

- What emotions you felt most frequently when you were around that person
- How that person made you feel about yourself
- Whether or not (and if so, how much) you tried to mold yourself to that person's expectations
- What your conflicts were mostly about (or what usually caused them)
- What that person taught you about yourself



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Chapter 12. Coping With Children

Tiffany and I are having some pretty serious marital difficulties. In fact, things have got really bad the last six months and our home environment has become the scene of quite a few battles of opinion. I hate the fact that this happens at home, as we have two children, Tyler, aged seven, and Amy, aged 5. I am worried that the fights we have been having are affecting them. In fact, Tyler has been a little upset at our shouting downstairs sometimes and I have had to spend some time reassuring him that things are going to be okay. Truth is that I really can't see an easy end to this. Tiffany seems to find fault with everything I do at the moment and we barely have a nice thing to say to each other. I hate what this is doing to my family, and I hate what this is doing to my children in particular. If this doesn't get any better I might have to leave. I don't want to but I hate fighting in front of the kids. At the same time a divorce is going to affect them too. Both situations are hard on the kids and I don't know what to do...

--Todd from Miami

The first thing that comes to mind with couples in crisis is that they should live together at least for the sake of the children. But studies show that whether or not parents stay married is less important than whether they engage in fighting or conflict and whether or not they drag the children in.

Children are more prone to tension and depression, and they become more depressed when they see their parents engaging in constant bickering and fighting.

For any couple the welfare of children comes first, but the critical factor in the ultimate psychological health of a child is the degree of conflict in the environment.

In any marriage there are bound to be differences in opinion from time to time. What determines whether you have a healthy relationship is how you choose to go about airing and resolving those differences. When you have children your first priority is that you don't involve your children in your disputes. Not only is this counter-productive to the idea that you need to keep your conflicts on the issue and simple, but you should consider your child's ability to process this conflict and hostility between their role models and guardians.



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A conflict between parents can have a much more adverse affect than what you first may think. Children are less equipped to deal with conflict and changes in their environment than adults are, and parents fighting can create a lot of fear in children as well as threaten their sense of security. The very stability in their life and all they hold dear may be determined by the outcome of a conflict. Their home, their living environment, their family unit and the familiarity of their life routines may be threatened in this conflict.

As well as the tangible changes, there are the intangible changes to consider:

- ◆ Emotional maturity. In the heat of the moment it is easy to forget that your child is not capable of fully understanding the issues behind your conflict. It is not uncommon for children to get upset as they assume that the reason you are fighting is them.
- ◆ You also need to appreciate the situation that you have put your child in. While your definition of right and wrong may be clear to you, the lines are a little blurry when it comes to children. This is because they love the both of you, and that love is largely unconditional. Despite your differences, you both still love your children. Your child is in a very difficult position as he or she may feel torn between the two of you, and feel as though he or she needs to choose a side. It is important that your child is not made to feel this way.
- ◆ It is vital in times of conflict that you maintain communication with your children. The conflict between two parents affects the whole family. It is important that you reassure your children of your love at this time, and that the fight is not about them. It is crucial that both parents reassure their child.
- ◆ Another important consideration to make this time easier for your children is to maintain their normal routine as much as possible. This means that mealtimes need to be at the same time as always, as well as bed times and regular activities and sports they play. As angry as you may be with your partner, the one thing you should both have in common is your commitment to your children. There will be time for raising issues after you have both seen to the needs of your children.



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Make it clear that you should not keep your marriage together simply for the children. Constant tension at home between the parents will have a negative impact on the child's psychological health. In such scenarios, it may be better for the children to see their parents divorced amicably rather than have to live in a strained and volatile environment where parents are always fighting. While the thought of parents living in different homes and leading separate lives is difficult for a child, if the alternative is Mom and Dad shouting at each other and creating a hostile environment at home, an amicable divorce is in many cases a better and more healthy alternative for all the people involved. Hostile and stressful home environments can lead to deterioration in emotional as well as physical health in children.

What Should You Tell the Kids?

Children have to be the first priority in your situation and every effort has to be made so as not to hurt them. Both of you should sit down with the child or the children, and take the responsibility for the uneasiness and tension in the family that was caused by both of you. At this stage it is not important to focus on the details, other than acknowledging there is a problem and that the two of you are doing your best to work through it. Don't be tempted to apportion blame on your partner or give the children too many details. Consider what they need to know and how what you tell them will affect them. No child wants to hear their mother running their father down, or vice versa. A good idea is to take the time to think calmly about what you are going to say before you talk to them. Try and answer any questions that they may have honestly while at the same time considering how your answers are going to make your children feel. Children feel the effects of marriage conflict much more than parents think. Just because you are fighting behind a closed door doesn't mean they are not aware that something is wrong. Children are very intuitive and at a time like this need all the reassurance that you can offer them.

Does Their Age Make a Difference?

Small children make up their own story and may think they have caused the tension. Teenage kids, however, already suspect there is a problem long before you are ready to tell them. For teenagers, it is better to tell them the true story, instead of letting them guess and save them from spending their energy in thinking how Mom and Dad are doing. Sharing the truth allows them to process the issue with Mom and Dad. At the same time however, it should never turn into a venting session where one partner runs the other down.



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Honesty is the Best Policy

It might seem that you are involving the children in something that doesn't involve them, but if they are part of your family they are already involved. To the children the most important thing is: "Will Mom and Dad make it? Will we stay together as a family?" If you are not sure about your marriage and the outcome of your conflict, tell them to pray and that you are seeing a counselor. Give them lots of hugging and eye contact, as they need reassurance from both you and your partner.



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Exercise 24—Do Together

Kill the TV.

One of the most destructive influences on communication in a family is the television. In many families it is the center of the house and night after night the whole family may sit in front of it in total silence. This lack of conversation and interaction between family members can lead to conflict when important issues are not discussed.

The first step you should take is to switch it off. There should be a period of time each evening when you can all sit down as a family and talk about issues and each others' days. This could happen as you sit down at mealtimes. Make the effort to sit down at the table as a family, rather than eating from your lap in front of the television.

It is perhaps a little unrealistic to turn off your TV for an extended length of time, but the effort should be made to spend more time talking and interacting with each other. You will be surprised at the difference even an hour a night makes.

Exercise 25—Do Together

Switch Roles

A useful exercise to help you appreciate each other's contribution to the household is to swap roles for a week. This means all the chores that are usually done by the mother become the responsibility of the father, and vice versa. If you are unable to do it for a week, try doing it over a weekend.

In changing roles you will be able to develop an appreciation for how much work your partner does and how this affects their family life. A couple of days of this will give you both food for thought, and perhaps a new appreciation for the contribution each partner makes to the running of the household and the family.





Exercise 26—Do Yourself

Let the Anger Go

It is important at this time to think about all the things that annoy you about your partner and write them down in a list. It doesn't really matter how trivial they are, as long as they annoy you they should be written down.

Now that they have been recorded, take the time to examine them closely. The key of the exercise here isn't to trivialize the nature of the things that annoy you, but to put them in perspective. If fighting with your partner about him leaving his socks on the bedroom floor is turning into a huge fight that is upsetting your children, you need to consider whether this is worth it. Put your issues in perspective. Let the anger go. Go for a walk or go to the gym. Once you have let some of the anger go, reconsider the problem.

Make sure the problem is worth the emotional investment both for you and your children before you have a conflict. If you take the time to put the problem in perspective and let go of the anger you may find the fights are less frequent and less traumatic for your family environment.

Exercise 27—Do Together

Talk About It

There is a saying that a problem shared is a problem halved. In many cases this is true, and it is something I want you to consider in this exercise. Talk to your partner about how you feel without accusing them of doing anything. If you have the type of relationship that encourages talking about your feelings you are less likely to let things escalate into big fights.

The funny thing about feelings is that they seldom make any sense, don't always follow logic, yet our lives are ruled by them. The key to maintaining a healthy relationship as well as setting a healthy example to your children, is to encourage the appropriate sharing of feelings and emotions. Your emotions are something that you should never be ashamed of, including anger, love, sorrow and joy. It's how you express or deal with those emotions that determines whether you have a healthy relationship or not.



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Talking about, and acknowledging those feelings will help you, your partner and your children develop an appropriate and considered approach to conflict resolution.

Exercise 28—Do Together

Create Zones

Another important component of maintaining a healthy home environment is having zones in your home. This is especially true if you are having regular conflicts in your home. It is important that you create zones in your home where it is inappropriate to have an argument as well as zones that are considered sanctuaries for each of you where you can both go without the fear of your partner following you and continuing the fight. Therefore, you need to create 3 zones in your home:

- ◆ Action zones
- ◆ Neutral zones
- ◆ Sanctuaries

The Action zones are places where it is appropriate to have an exchange of views. This can include the garage, the bedroom, the laundry or the bathroom.

The Neutral zones are places that are common living space where it is inappropriate to argue. This can include the kitchen, the living room, and the children's bedrooms.

The Sanctuary is a place where you can go to get away for a while and your partner is not allowed to follow you to continue the argument. You and your partner should have separate sanctuaries. This can be a corner of the lounge area, or the garden shed. It can be part of the neutral zone or it can be a separate area, depending on how much space you have in your home.

Take the time to sit down with your partner and map out and label areas of your home on a piece of paper. This is part of your commitment to each other to minimize the disruption to you and your children's home environment.



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Exercise 29—Do Together

Family Time

In the midst of all of your difficulties you need to make time for your children. Just because you or your partner are angry with each other doesn't mean that you have to punish your children too. As much as it may be an effort to put aside your differences, it is vital for the wellbeing of your child that they maintain a routine and are still able to do the things they like. Trips to the park, popcorn and movies, sleepovers and trips to the mall should be maintained where possible. It is vital that your child is not disadvantaged by your conflict or they will feel as though they are being punished.

Of course it will not always be possible to accommodate your child's wants or needs in every situation, but you should try and strike a balance. It is very easy to get caught up in your conflict and neglect the needs of your children. The point of this exercise is to balance the needs of your relationship with the needs of your children.





Chapter 13. Coping With Crisis

My wife and I are going through a really tough time right at the moment. Things were going really well for the first few years, but in the last six months I have noticed a few changes. I suppose it really started when my wife's mother died. Laura has been really withdrawn and unenergetic. It seems as though she has lost some of her spark and vitality that once drew me to her. She doesn't want to talk to me about it and she doesn't leave the house much either. When I leave for work she doesn't get up, but I don't give her a hard time because she has had a difficult time dealing with her mother's death. The last couple of months I have noticed that she has been spending a lot of money, even though she doesn't leave the house much. This got me wondering, but I found the reason why the other week. I came home early and she had fallen asleep on the porch. Under her chair was an empty bottle of vodka. I didn't say anything, but I had a bit of a look around a few days later. I found a box in the basement that was full of empty bottles. The box was hidden behind some old toys. Now I'm really worried. This must have been going on for a while. And it would explain a lot of her strange behavior. I think my wife is an alcoholic. What do I do?

Greg from Phoenix

Stages of Crisis

Looking at the marriage crisis around you, it is hard to know where to start, and it is this confusion about where to start that drives so many couples to further grief.

There is hope. The key to managing crisis in your marriage is in understanding where you are in the crisis experience, and depending on where you are, developing an appropriate immediate response.

I want to introduce you to the stages of crisis, which is a guideline to assist you as you face and negotiate your marriage through the issues, recognizing and implementing resources where applicable, and developing a crisis resolution.



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Stage I

A crisis starts by the sparking of the crisis stimulus, which may be an event such as a talk with your spouse, a fight, a phone call, or it may be something that has been developing over a period of time, such as a lagging sex life, decreased communication, a general feeling of dissatisfaction. Following on from the stimulus is stage I, which is a mounting feeling of tension as your subconscious mind tries to rationalize what is going on and maintain your steady, calm state. Do you deal with the issues or do you ignore them, hoping they will go away?

Stage II

Stage II is recognized as the plateau of your crisis, where you are in your most disorganized and stressed state. The problem is very much present and acknowledged, but you haven't developed a response yet. Common feelings will include feeling anxious and ineffectual, trying a number of different things to fix the problem but not making any progress. This is as bad as it gets, and it may feel as though there is no way forward. It's almost like hitting your head against a brick wall!

Stage III

Stage III is when you start to mobilize your internal and external resources, taking advice from others in order to move forward. You may not be able to distinguish between good or poor advice, and you may try a few, with a range of different outcomes. This is where you reach out for advice, gathering ideas and trying to find the best way to deal with your marital issues.

Stage IV

This stage involves determining the best outcome for you, which involves three possible responses:

1. Dealing with the issues effectively and resolving the crisis,
2. superficially dealing with your marital issues in such a way that they go away for a while, or
3. having a complete meltdown, not dealing with the crisis, and walking away from the problem. This choice may cost you your marriage.

These are the three choices you make, and the outcome of these choices will be the resolving of your conflict or the breakup of your marriage. This is where counseling,



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communication, and research is going to help you determine the best course of action so that this crisis is dealt with and averted permanently.

Stage V

This stage refers to you adapting to the crisis, choosing to meet the issues and deal with them, and reaching this stage where you have learnt what you are being called to and can now move forward in your marriage, having developed new awareness and skills to deal with marriage problems, and you are now back at an emotional equilibrium. Positive patterns of communication have been implemented, and the crisis is over.

Alcohol, Drug and Gambling Dependency

Addictions of any sort in a relationship can have an adverse affect on the stability of a marriage and create an overwhelming amount of stress to all members of the family, not just the victim. In some respect, all people close to the person that has the addiction are victims. The difficulty in having an addiction is that it is a very self-destructive phase for the individual as well as the people around them. Addictions in most cases serve to avert emotional and at times physical pain by enabling the user to escape the reality of life, if only for a little while.

Addictions are more complex than many people are aware. It is difficult for non-sufferers to fully understand the uncontrollable urges and cravings that the body and mind go through. For many, the emotional and physical cravings are chronic and at times painful.

Effective treatment for any of these addictions is not a short-term measure. It involves a structured yet supportive approach from family, friends and counselors.

The first step in dealing with addictions is to recognize it as an addiction. For many couples there is the thought that it can't be happening to them and there is the tendency to downplay the whole problem and not talk about it. That is perhaps the worst approach you can take if you are serious about solving this problem.

The first place you should look for evidence of an addiction is your bank account statements. Addictions cost money to maintain. Any discrepancies in your spending patterns as a couple should be queried. You can either identify the places where the



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money was spent by reading the statements, or look for cash withdrawals. Any discrepancy should be queried.

The second ingredient in maintaining an addiction is time. If your partner is spending large amounts of time away or can't account for their whereabouts then you have a reason to be worried.

If you are still not sure of conclusive proof you may need to look through items of clothing, cars and wallets. You needn't feel guilty at doing this, as long as your motivations are pure. If your partner really has an addiction you need to do everything in your power to help them overcome this.

The key here is to not get angry. As tempting as this is to do, you need to consider what motivated your partner to undertake this type of behavior. Like I have mentioned above, an addiction is often an escape from a larger emotional or physical issue. Your partner needs your help and support at this time more than they need your anger.

Accept the fact that if you are dealing with an addiction that it is a problem that is bigger than you are equipped to deal with. You should seek the help of support groups and trained counselors and rehabilitation experts. Access to these is available if you contact your local doctor or community advice center.

Depression

Depression is a condition that can have an adverse effect on an individual, and if that individual is married, the effect of depression is much more widespread. Depression can work itself into the behaviors, moods, attitudes, and even lifestyle around the home. There can often be so much attention on the depression of the sufferer that the spouse can often get overlooked. Depression is something that has an adverse affect on the spouse too, and in many cases can prove too much and cost couples their marriage.

It doesn't have to be this way. The first step to dealing with depression is recognizing the symptoms. These may include:

- ◆ Trouble sleeping, or the need to sleep too much
- ◆ Reduction in appetite, accompanied by weight loss. Possible increase in appetite and rapid weight gain.
- ◆ Restlessness or irritability



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- ◆ Persistent sad or empty moods
- ◆ Lethargy or apathy
- ◆ Loss of sexual interest
- ◆ Feelings of guilt or hopelessness
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Suicidal thoughts

In recognizing the symptoms of depression you need to realize that your partner having depression is not your fault. Your partner needs all the love and support at this time, and it will at times be really hard to stay focused. But you need to keep in the back of your mind at all times that the depression is your spouse's condition, not yours.

However, being exposed to this condition constantly, it will feel a little overwhelming. The role of the supportive husband or wife can be stressful enough at times without the added pressures that depression can bring. Spouses of depression sufferers have often felt that they have to take on twice the workload to cope with the physical and emotional fallout from the spouse's depression. Some wives have likened it to being like a single parent while still being married. Often the sufferers of depression can lash out and hurt those they are closest to. This is a time when you need to remember that it is the depression talking, not the spouse.

It is a time when you are required to have enormous patience and understanding whilst not letting the sufferer get away with too much. It's certainly something that requires counseling once it has been identified. It might even be beneficial for you to get some counseling too.

It is certainly not a time to keep your feelings or problems bottled up. The old saying, "...a problem shared is a problem halved" rings especially true in this case. Discuss your spouse's condition, and your concerns with friends or other family members. It will be good for you to express your feelings and frustrations, and the input from friends and people who listen could be beneficial. People who can view the problem from the outside can often provide valuable insights and advice.

The most important issue in dealing with a depressed spouse is that they get treatment promptly before it costs you your own sanity or marriage. If your spouse refuses treatment you will need to take a firmer approach, and perhaps enlist the help of friends or family to persuade the sufferer to get help. A lot of the stigma of mental illness has gone in recent years, and public health agencies recognize that around one in five individuals suffer from a form of depression or mental illness. If you seek



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treatment for your spouse's condition it can avoid it turning into a much bigger problem.

Recognize the symptoms of depression and you will be half way towards solving your depression problem. Recognize that the problem is one that belongs to your spouse, but that the approach to treating depression is a team effort. Recognize that you too are suffering as a result of your spouse's condition. Don't be ashamed to admit that it's hard and that you may need some help. You will need to support your spouse, but you will also need some time out for yourself. This is not being selfish. In order to be a good wife or husband you need to have time out to take care of yourself. Make the most of offers of help. That's what your friends and family are there for. Remember, the problem belongs to your spouse, but the approach you take to treatment is a team approach.

Being a spouse can be a rewarding and trying time both when things are good and when things are bad. You need to focus on what is important to you, and the love that brought you together. With this love in mind, and the support of family, friends and health professionals, you don't have to go through this alone. The steps or tips I outlined are a guide to enabling you to focus during a time where focusing can be very difficult.

The key to dealing with all mental illness as a spouse is in 3 basic steps.

- ◆ Education
- ◆ Understanding
- ◆ Treatment



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Mental illness can be very difficult, not only for the sufferer, but also for the spouse. Don't be ashamed of the feelings you have why you deal with this difficult time. Research and educate yourself. Dispel the fears and misconceptions of mental illness and arm yourself with knowledge. With knowledge comes understanding. With understanding comes treatment and healing, both of the individual and the relationship. There is a wealth of information out there, both in libraries and on the internet. In addition to this, there are support groups for sufferers of mental illness as well as support groups for spouses of sufferers. Above all, remember that you don't have to do this alone.

Those things that don't kill us only make us grow stronger. Above all this, however, your love for one another will endure.

Death

The death of a friend, family member or a loved pet is an event that can throw an individual or a family into disarray. Everybody has different reactions to grief, and for each of us it is a deeply personal experience as we come to terms with the emotions that threaten to overwhelm us. For some, the whole experience may be a very temporary thing that is dealt with and processed very quickly, while for others it may be a deeply traumatic and difficult situation that requires intense emotional therapy. Even the way you deal with grief as a couple might be different to what you may have anticipated, and it is here that a grief process may place additional strain on a marriage.

The key to dealing with a marriage crisis is to remember that everybody deals with crisis in different ways. The key here is to respect everybody's need to deal with grief in their own way. As a spouse that is either affected by grief or if you are the one supporting a grieving spouse, you need to allow yourself to feel all the emotions and be there to support your spouse through this.

The difficulty inherent in this is that some people seek the support of others, while others retreat and shut people out. This may also include someone shutting their partner out. As the partner who is being shut out, this may be very difficult for you to deal with.

Accept that this is a difficult time for the both of you and that your biggest focus should be on getting through this as best you can. If you are unable to be there as a support for your partner, you need to ensure that a counselor is able to take your place. Don't look



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upon it as a sign of rejection or failure if you are unable to be that support. It simply means that their intensity of emotion is such that they need some trained help. If you love your partner, your sole motivation will be that you will get through this, either as a couple, or as a couple with some specialist help.



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Exercise 30—Do Together

This is an exercise I want you to try as a couple. A grief event can be a learning experience for many as they reflect on their own mortality and the way they live their life. I want you to be able to use this time to re-evaluate what is important to you as a couple. This can either be a written exercise or a verbal one that you go through with your partner.

There are a lot of things in life that we take for granted and one of the biggest regrets in life is the feeling that you could have told people that you loved them more often or that you could have done that you never took the opportunity to.

Some of the most content and happy people are those who live their life with no regrets. They share their emotions freely and make every moment a special one. Rather than have to search your memory for treasured times you should concentrate on creating new ones with those people that are still part of your life.

- ◆ When was the last time you paid someone a compliment?
- ◆ When was the last time you made the effort to see an old friend?
- ◆ When was the last time you told a friend or loved one how much they mean to you?

Don't let these opportunities pass you by. There may never be a better opportunity.

A Moment in Time...

Look through some of your old photos of your friends and family and reflect on the good times you have shared together. Photos are a good opportunity to reflect on the good times and the fond memories you have. The wonderful thing about photos is that they are taken when people are smiling and having fun. It's a moment in time when you are all happy and laughing and enjoying each other. That is why you want to preserve them on film.

Old photos represent good times, fond memories, and perhaps a few regrets. Sit down with your partner and share those memories and feelings, including the regrets.



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The Present

Make a list or discuss with your partner the things you appreciate about each other and your friends. Discuss what those people mean to you and perhaps your regrets that you don't try harder or make more of an effort with some of your friends and with each other.

The Future

Make a list of the things you want to say to each other and to your friends so that you can create some great new photos and happy memories.
Make a list of some of the things you want to do together and with your loved ones and re-evaluate it occasionally to make sure you are creating opportunities for loving new memories with your partner and loved ones.

Remember, you are here for a good time, not a long time. Old photos remind us of the past and the good times that were once shared. The onus is now on you to create new and happy new photos so that you may appreciate all the good things in your life.



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Chapter 14. Plateau

Nothing's wrong ...and that's the problem, I guess. My husband and I get along fine. We're comfortable, we have great kids, a great house. He brings dinner home every so often, plans our anniversaries, even brings me flowers for no reason at all. That is why I don't get how I'm feeling. Or, actually, how I'm not feeling. I'm bored, I guess. I just would like something different. I even wish we'd argue just so that there was some excitement. Maybe I'm too content?

Maggie from Kansas City

All marriages find themselves in a rut every once in a while. You've become so used to one another that you can complete each other's sentences. Your professional and family lives have settled down. You've done just about everything you can think to do together, and your favorite activities are as well-worn as an old t-shirt. Now it feels as if there's nothing more to do than glide on into old age together. And the prospect is a bit ... well ... dull.

Let me ask you this: how often does your husband *really* surprise you? How often do you *really* surprise him?

As I said before, mystery and surprise are important components of a marriage. You may think that you know everything about your partner—but how much do you really know? Do you know what his favorite book as a child was? Do you know how he got his first job? Do you know who the person he respects most in the world is? If he won a million dollars, do you know how he'd spend it?

There is still more to discover about your spouse, more new ways in which you can enjoy one another's company, more levels of intimacy that you've yet to discover. But there's a catch. You have to make an active effort to go seek for them.



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Mid Marriage Crisis

The plateau in a marriage often coincides with the fabled midlife crisis. Because all the excitement, stress, and challenges of the early years of life and marriage have been sorted out, there is often a period of calm for a few years in which both partners have time to think. They realize that their lives are halfway over and wonder what their lives would have been like if they'd made different choices.

As emotions mature with time, individuals at this stage in life tend to experience fewer emotional highs and lows. As a result, they may feel a need to recapture the intensity of passion that they once held. They may find their comforting routine restrictive and want to break out of the mold. Some make extravagant purchases of luxury items like sports cars or yachts; others engage in wild, risky behaviors, such as affairs.

Movies like *The Bridges of Madison County* make us think that if we are feeling our marriage is in a rut, feeling indifferent towards our partner, and longing for something to sweep us away, the answer is a wild and wonderful affair ... or abandoning the marriage completely. Not so. As long as both partners are willing to try, there are some great, creative, fun ways to rekindle the sparks in your marriage and make it feel new and exciting again.

The Importance of Play and Laughter

Seriousness is a great deadener in a relationship. Couples who play together stay young together, for they know that the true fountain of youth is being in touch with your inner child.

The best way to discharge a tense situation, defuse a conflict, and create connection is through humor. Happy couples can tease and joke with one another in a way that strengthens their bond. They share inside jokes and raise one another's spirits in times of sadness or stress. Thus, it's no coincidence that both men and women rate a sense of humor high on the list of most important characteristics in a mate.

The benefits of laughter go beyond making you feel better. Laughter reduces stress and blood pressure, boosts immune system function, is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, and gives your whole body a workout.



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When you have a healthy amount of teasing, joking, and play in a relationship, you will find that conflicts with your mate can dissolve spontaneously. You'll find it easier to cope with difficult situations, and humor may help to put those situations into perspective. Laughter unites.

Try renting comedies, instituting a joke night where each of you has to share at least one joke, or wearing silly hats at dinnertime. You may also want to try doing some of the activities that you enjoyed as children, such as flying kites, sliding down sand dunes, having a pillow fight, jumping in a pile of leaves, or playing board games.

Whatever you do, institute two rules: never make the other person feel self-conscious, and never use humor to harm. Being silly around another person takes an enormous degree of trust. The sillier you and your partner can be around each other without fear of rejection, the more open you will feel with one another. But humor that hurts, offends, occurs at an inappropriate time, or belittles has no place in a healthy relationship.

Remembering When ...

Sometimes the best way to feel that old spark again is to go back and look for it. Looking over old photos or love letters from when you first started dating, and sharing old memories can be a great way to connect to the couple you once were.

Try recreating one of your old dates by dressing up in the same way you used to dress when you first started dating. If you have any of your old clothes—and can still fit into them—wear them. If not, peruse a secondhand or vintage clothing store. Try styling your hair the way you used to wear it. Do you have any of your old jewelry or accessories?

Put on a cassette of your favorite songs from back then to get yourselves in the mood, and go out! If you still live near the area where you started dating, go to what used to be “your” place. If you can't, try recreating your signature date. Or try one of the following activities: bowling followed by a pizza, having milkshakes at an ice cream parlor, or sharing a brown-paper-bag lunch on a park bench.



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Creating Couple Rituals

One way to re-invest a marriage with new meaning is to create rituals that you do as a couple. Rituals can be big or small. Their only requirements are that you do them regularly and that they have special meaning to you as a couple. For example, you might try to make dinnertime a ritual by eating together at the table with the television off, using candles and soft music to set the scene. You might spend every Sunday morning reading from the newspaper and sharing the most interesting bits aloud.

There are many activities that you can do regularly as a couple. You may decide to take an art class together ... or join a dancing club. Learning together as a couple is highly rewarding, because it gives you a new interest in common to talk about.

You might decide to play sports together. Many couples I know have great fun playing for their neighborhood soccer team. Some couples enjoy competing against each other. Others find that physically letting off their steam in the playing field means they argue less at home.

Holiday rituals form an important part of a marriage by reaffirming shared values. Perhaps you purchase a new Christmas ornament for the tree together for each year that you've been married. Perhaps you invite all your friends and family for a great Thanksgiving feast. You may want to ask your partner what holiday traditions were important to him while growing up, then recreate them for yourselves, adding your own unique twist.

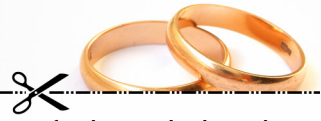
The Grand Design

Shared spiritual beliefs make a marriage stronger. When you and your spouse practice the same religion, you commit to a set of values that emphasizes the sacred nature of marriage. Having a divine foundation to your marriage makes it easier to remain committed when things get tough. Religious texts and leaders can help couples through marital difficulties and give spiritually sound advice that both partners are willing to hear. If you are having marital difficulties, and you and your partner both practice the same religion, see what resources your religious center can provide.

Additionally, volunteering can be an excellent way for you and your partner to take your minds off your difficulties and see your lives in a larger context. When you help other people, you discover a sense of purpose and feel good about yourself.



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Volunteering puts your problems in perspective and makes you feel needed and valued. Together, you and your partner will feel like you're making a difference—and you'll discover that your respect for one another will grow.



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Exercise 31—Do Yourself

Think of some way to surprise your spouse. Perhaps it's just by doing one of the chores that you normally don't do. You may pick up a cup of his favorite coffee and drop it off at his work.

Exercise 32—Do Yourself

Create a questionnaire of all the questions you've never asked your spouse. Include hypothetical questions, such as, "What famous person, alive or dead, would you like most to meet?" or "If you were stranded on a desert island and could only have five books, which would they be?" Include questions about his past, like, "What was your favorite television program when you were a kid?" or "Who was the teacher that influenced you most?" Include questions about his likes and dislikes, such as, "What's your favorite color?" or "What's your favorite holiday?"

Now, you can either give the questionnaire to him and have him complete it, or wait for quiet moments in which you've both run out of things to say to ask him the most interesting questions.

Exercise 33—Do Together

Pretend that you're kids again. Decide on the age you enjoy best. If you don't feel comfortable doing this on your own, offer to babysit someone else's kids for an afternoon as an excuse. Now, go buy fingerpaints, clay, and big sheets of white paper. Make a mess. Drink Kool-Aid. Go to a playground and swing.

Exercise 34—Do Together

Tell each other the story of how you fell in love. Pretend you're telling it to a stranger who doesn't know your spouse.



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Chapter 15. Sex and Intimacy

My husband and I never seem to touch each other anymore unless we're having sex. Sometimes, I could just use a hug or a cuddle, but it's hard to even get him to make eye contact with me, especially once he's got himself in front of the television. Then, if I just want a cuddle, he expects it to lead to sex and feels rejected when I don't want to. We used to spend hours just kissing. What happened? What can I do to get that old connection back?

Janet from Boise

Sex and intimacy are some of the most difficult issues to address in a marriage, because many couples feel uncomfortable discussing them. If you and your spouse can learn to communicate about your intimacy needs in ways that affirm and accept, you can open yourselves to discovering more creative and satisfying ways of connecting ... both physically and emotionally. After all, a committed sex life is one of the best aspects about being married.

What Sex Means to Men and Women

Although we intuitively understand that men and women view sex differently, we rarely think about how those differences affect intimacy within a marriage.

Men's Needs

Making the commitment to be monogamous is a huge step for men. While women naturally seek a committed partner, as child-bearing requires someone in the role of protector and provider, men naturally seek multiple sex partners, as they have an innate instinct to spread their genetic stock. Biology isn't destiny, however. Women can have multiple sex partners, just as men can commit to a lifestyle with one partner.

Yet understanding the importance of sex to men in a marriage can eliminate many misunderstandings. For men, the ideal sex life would have three aspects: anytime,



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anywhere, and often as possible. They feel connected, desirable, and fulfilled when they can sexually satisfy the woman they love. The act of love itself is crucial for their experience of being valued in a relationship. This is why they often need more sex during times of stress or conflict. It provides them with a release from the worries of the day in an arena where they feel confident and capable.

In order to respect your husband's sexual needs, understand that he needs constant reassurance that you desire and enjoy sex with him. When you don't want sex—and don't explain why—he feels rejected in the worst possible way. Make him feel good by keeping your sex life a high priority and telling him exactly how wonderful what he does makes you feel.

Women's Needs

Women, on the other hand, need romance and love before their sexual desire flowers. They need time to warm up to becoming more intimate. The most important thing that husbands can do for their wives is recognize the important role that romance plays in sexual desire. The little ways in which they demonstrate their love and commitment to their wives—such as actively listening to her, complimenting her, or simply saying, “I love you”—enable women to relax into trusting and opening up. When there's conflict in the relationship, however, women find it difficult to feel sexual desire in the bedroom.

The Need to be Touched

For women, non-sexual touching plays an important role in their sense of well-being. Women need to be touched frequently on a daily basis, whether by hugging, holding hands, or just touching an arm to point out something. Yet many men don't understand that this kind of touching doesn't have to lead to sex.

Does the following scenario sound familiar? You want to cuddle and hug; he thinks that you want to have sex. When you withdraw from his advances, he feels sexually rejected and becomes even less willing to hold you. How do you stop this vicious cycle?

Clear communication is the first requirement. Your husband can't read your mind, although he does his best to interpret what your actions mean. For example, if you suddenly start snuggling, the most flattering interpretation of your actions would be that



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you're putting the moves on him because you find him so sexy. If you then told him that you just wanted a snuggle, he'd feel a bit stung.

Instead, why not tell your husband, "I really need a hug right now. Would you mind just holding me for a little bit? In your arms I always feel safe and happy."

I Want More, You Want Less

A common complaint among married couples is that one partner wants sex more often than the other partner. Sometimes, the disagreement can become so hurtful that the couple goes off sex entirely, and when they do have sex it is less an act of connection than part of the power struggle.

Don't look to the experts for answers about how often you should be having sex. There is no "recommended number of times" couples should have sex in a week, in a month, or even in a year. Each couple is different, and their physical rhythms are different. If your husband wants sex three times a night, and you are happy to oblige, then more power to you. If you and your husband have sex once a week and feel satisfied, go for it!

Even if your sexual rhythms are incompatible, you can still both get the loving and physical connection you need from each other. All it takes is some creativity, a willingness to keep to pre-agreed boundaries, and an investment in intimacy.

Remember, though, that there is *never any reason* for either partner to seek satisfaction of their sexual needs outside marriage. True sexual intimacy can only occur in a climate of complete trust. For a marriage to work, it *must be monogamous*.

Increasing Intimacy

Communication

Because our feelings about sex are so powerful, it's easy to feel wounded, rejected, or used when things don't happen as we'd like them to in bed. The bedroom is no place to point out that your partner has gained weight, that they disappointed you earlier, or that their sexual fantasies aren't your cup of tea. Take difficult discussions outside the bedroom—preferably at a time when both partners are feeling happy, connected, and open.



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The three most important ways to maintain a feeling of safety, intimacy, and openness in a conversation, especially a conversation about something as difficult as sex, is:

1. Praise
2. Pay attention
3. Verbalize feelings of love

Even if there is nothing particular that you want to discuss, it always helps to make a habit of talking to your partner about sex. The more you talk about a topic, the more comfortable you become. Tell your partner what you like most about sex with them, when you find them attractive, when what they do curls your toes. Talk about your sexual fears, your views on sex while growing up, your parents' views on sex.

When you're having sex, make sure that you always give feedback so that your partner knows what pleases you. The feedback doesn't have to be verbal. It could be something as simple as moving his hand, or touching yourself in the way you'd like him to touch you. The most important thing to remember is to avoid any negative criticism. The bedroom should be a place where both of you feel accepted and open to experiment, rather than a place where you could be rejected for taking a risk.

Non-Sexual Touching

A friend of mine became engaged to a young man with whom she was very much in love. However, she'd had a checkered sexual history, and this time she wanted to wait to sleep together until they married. Although he wasn't eager to wait, he agreed. In the months up until their wedding, they slept in the same bed, kissed and cuddled, and did basically everything but sex. Once they married, he thanked her from the bottom of his heart, adding, "If it hadn't been for the limit you set, I would have never known there were so many ways to make love."

Learn the many ways of making love. One way to do so is to set a two-day moratorium on sex, in which sex is the only thing you can't do, although you can touch each other in any other way you like. If your husband is in the mood and you aren't, tell him that you're not up for sex at the moment, but that you'd like to try something else. For example, try enjoying one another's bodies with one condition: that your clothes can't come off. Sometimes, just engaging in non-sexual contact with no expectations can put you in the mood.



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There are a variety of ways to connect with each other in a tactile way, such as giving each other a back massage after work, doing physical activities like dance or sports, or being silly and pillow fighting or wrestling. One of my favorites is using washable fingerprint to draw all over each other's bodies. The more frequent and fun your non-sexual contact, the more frequent and fun your sexual contact will become.

Improving an Already Great Thing

Sometimes, both of you will be too tired for sex. That's okay. It's natural that your sex life dwindles during periods of stress like a new job or a new baby. Medications and health problems can also affect sexual desire. However, if you find that your sex life hasn't picked up again after things have settled down, you may want to try the following:

1. *Evaluate your diet.*

Diet can affect your sex drive in a variety of ways. For example, a vegetarian diet may be lacking in zinc, which is essential for the production of testosterone, a hormone necessary for sexual desire in both men and women. If you are severely restricting your caloric intake to lose weight, you may find yourself feeling listless and lethargic as well as uninterested in sex. A diet high in sugar can leave you without the stamina needed to keep up with your partner.

2. *Increase your exercise.*

Your sex life can benefit in a variety of ways by an increase in your fitness level. Exercises such as Kegels can strengthen vaginal muscles, leading to better orgasms. A high level of aerobic fitness can increase stamina and blood flow to the areas that need it most. Exercise can even prolong a man's sex life: a study has shown that men over 50 who maintained a high level of physical activity had 30% less risk of impotence. It's no surprise: erectile dysfunction is much more common among overweight men than for men who are at or near their ideal weight. One of the best investments in your sex life that you can make is just to get fit. Get a subscription to the gym, and make time to go together.

3. *Aromatherapy*

Try setting the mood and caressing your senses with essential oils of cedarwood, jasmine, patchouli, rose, and ylang-ylang. You are likely familiar with the concept that



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scents can affect mood. Aromatherapy takes this concept one step further, grouping scents according to whether they calm, stimulate, uplift, or energize the body. The above essential oils have an aphrodisiac effect.

4. Yoga

Yoga improves flexibility, increases mindfulness, and strengthens the muscles in and around the genital area. As a result, many yoga practitioners find that their sex life improves. As yoga exercises make you more in touch with your body, increasing your sensitivity and smoothing out your movements, you may find that this mindfulness translates into greater sensuality in the bedroom.

Spicing Things Up

So what do you do if you have a stronger libido than your partner? What do you do if their libido is stronger than yours?

There are number of things you can do to overcome the cravings and find new ways of reconnecting. All it takes is a little imagination. One of the key complaints from couples with intimacy issues is that it's something that's not talked about. That's probably one of the worst things that you can do. If you and your partner are having intimacy issues where one of you is feeling unfulfilled, it's imperative that you are able to talk about it together and find ways to reach a compromise. Ignoring it sharply increases your risk of an affair.

So when the urge overtakes you and you need to find ways to keep your partner included, here are a number of tips and techniques:

Explore

Spend some time exploring your partner's body, measuring their response when they react to you touching certain parts of their body. Notice how they move when you touch or kiss their neck, behind their ear, the cleft of their groin, under their arm, down their flank, you get the idea.

Massage

A great way to get your hands on your partner is through massage. Get some of your favorite massage oil or wax and give each other a massage. This is a great way of



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staying connected with each other, massaging the knots and stresses out of each other's bodies.

Masturbation

If you feel the urge, masturbate more! It's a healthy way of taking the pressure off, and helps satisfy your urges without having to hassle your partner. If you are able to intersperse your sexual urges with a mix of masturbation and intercourse, both of you are happy.

No Means No

If your partner isn't in the mood for sex, badgering them isn't going to change their mind. Accept that if they say no, it's what they mean. They might just feel like a cuddle or some affection, without it having to lead to sex. It doesn't have to end in sex everytime.

When You Aren't In The Mood

There are a number of things that you can do if you find your libido is going through a bit of a dip. It doesn't have to spell disaster! Here are a few tips that will rev your engines!

Write An Erotic Story

One way to explore your sexuality is to write a story. This can be a situation you have always dreamed of, perhaps beside a broken-down car on a stormy night, perhaps with the appliance repair man, a celebrity, the changing room at your local department store, in the sand dunes on a hot day with the girl from the video store. Let your mind run wild. You don't have to show this to your partner if you don't want to, but it can be very sexy if you do. This might be something that you could explore or recreate together.

Put It On Paper

Naughty thoughts run through your mind several times a day, yet most of the time you ignore them, letting them slip by. As something to spark the urge in you, write down thoughts as they come to you, almost like an erotic diary, recording thoughts, fantasies, urges, and how they make you feel. While you don't feel sexy all the time, recording your thoughts and coming back to them later serve as a reminder that you are a sexual person, just lurking there underneath the surface.



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Masturbation

It's not naughty and it's not cheating. In fact, regular masturbation shows a healthy sex life. The more you masturbate, the more your body gets used to orgasms, which helps lift your libido and makes you want sex more!

Talk About It

The one person in the world that you can freely talk about sex with is your partner. Tell them how you would like sex to be. Try it in the mornings instead of at night. Try it slow and relaxing instead of fast and furious. Try it in a few different places, such as the spare room, the sofa, in the car. Relive some of the adventurousness of your youth by trying it in a few places outside the bedroom.

The key to spicing your relationship up is to open yourself to the idea of being a sexual being. Enjoy your thoughts. Enjoy your body. The key to your marriage success is in sharing your thoughts and desires, and sharing your body with your partner. Part of human nature means that at one time both of you may be on different sexual planes, but with a little imagination there are lots of opportunities for connection. It all starts with you.



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Exercise 35—Do Yourself

If you are a man, read a popular romance novel. As you read it, note:

- What the hero is like: is he kind, confident, active?
- How the heroine responds to what the hero does or says: what does she swoon over? when does she feel rejected?
- The assumptions the author is making about romance

When you finish, ask yourself whether or not your spouse might share some of these romantic ideals. If you feel comfortable, ask her.

If you are a woman, flip through a popular men's magazine. As you read it, note:

- What the images of women have in common
- The issues that concern men about their relationships with women
- The assumptions the magazine is making about relationships

When you finish, ask yourself whether or not your spouse might share some of these perspectives. If you feel comfortable, ask him.

Exercise 36—Do Together

Go together to a bookstore and browse the erotic literature section. Find a book that appeals to you both. Let it inspire you in any way you like.



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Chapter 16. Infidelity and Trust

When my wife Nina and I got married, I thought it would be forever. I know the deal with what the experts say about the high risk of marriage failure, but my wife and I thought we were different. We had known each other since we were teenagers and she was always hanging around me. So we knew each other really well before I finally asked her to marry me. We have been married for 7 years now and have a four year old daughter. Life for me couldn't have been any better. Recently I came across some information from a close friend and after confronting my wife I discovered that she has been having an affair for the past 2 years. Needless to say I was devastated, and for the last few days I have been in a haze. I can't think straight. My wife has ended the affair and has offered to go to counseling. She is begging me not to leave her. To be honest, I don't know what to do. We have a 4 year old daughter together and I don't want to leave her or lose contact with her. But at the same time I feel so betrayed, and I don't know how to deal with that. I look at her and I don't know what to say. What should I do?

Jerry from Portland

Well the first advice I would give here is don't make any rash decisions. Finding out that your husband or wife has been unfaithful can be one of the most devastating revelations that someone in a marriage can go through. It is the single moment in time that your whole life and your future happiness is thrown into jeopardy. After learning of a partner's infidelity, your life will never be the same. Of course you will feel anger and disbelief, but later that will turn to despair and hurt. There is a whole raft of feelings that you will go through in your reaction to this type of betrayal.

Time Out

It is a good idea that the two of you spend some time apart while you come to terms with those emotions, and counseling and the support of friends is vital at this stage. The decision to shift out should only be a short-term one so that you have the opportunity to remove yourself from the pressure and stress of being around your partner. At the



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same time you should keep the level of communication up with your spouse, even if you don't feel like it. You may even want to shout at or strike your partner. Resist the temptation. Nothing good ever comes from violence, but rather a lack of self-control.

That's why time out works so well. It is an opportunity for the both of you to be alone and examine your emotions and your reactions to a stressful situation. It is also a good time to be alone while you vent your frustrations and deal with your anger. It is quite natural to feel anger and frustration, but it is perhaps better for your relationship to express this anger when you are on your own.

Make sure you don't use your time out as a means of punishment or an excuse to block communications with your partner. Taking time out is not the end of your discussion. It is a time to think clearly so that you are able to have a calm and reasoned discussion later on.

When I talk about leaving your home environment for a while, its up to the two of you to decide who should leave the home. If you have children you will need to consider an option that causes them the least disruption. I know there are therapists that would recommend that neither of you leave the home in times of crisis, but infidelity changes a few things. There are a lot of strong emotions involved and you each need to deal with those. The most important point to make here is that you are taking time apart from each other for the right reasons.

Another consideration you need to make before you take time out is to set a time frame for your separation. This should really be no more than 3 weeks or a month. Any longer than this and you will risk breaking communication altogether. It is also vital that during this period that you maintain communication with each other and allow each other to talk about it and ask questions. No doubt there will be a lot of questions in your mind and you will need answers to those if you want to deal with the issue and move forward. You should aim to have contact with your partner every 2-3 days.

Breach of Trust

Perhaps one of the hardest things to come to terms with is the breach of trust. Without trust in a relationship you are unable to work as a team or think of your partner as reliable and committed. It becomes a union of two individuals rather than a joining of two souls working together as a team. A lack of trust leads to a reduction in communication and sharing of dreams and aspirations. People that find themselves victims of cheating partners wonder how they will ever be able to trust their partner or



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indeed anyone ever again. It is this inability to trust that leads many people to finish their relationships.

This is a very difficult decision to come to and I am not going to tell you what decision to come to here. Your feelings are your own and if you feel that you have tried your best and that you still have no trust then perhaps it is better for the both of you that you go your separate ways.

But the decision about how to react to infidelity is never an easy or a straight forward one. There are often so many factors and consequences influencing your decision that you can barely think straight. The key is to take your time. How you react to your partner's infidelity is going to influence the rest of your life. It is about much more than your desire to punish your partner or get revenge. As legitimate as these feelings are, once the intensity of those feelings dies down you will be left with regret.

Your first priority is to regain control of your feelings. You need to find appropriate ways of dealing with your anger and hurt before you sit down with your partner and discuss your future. Your hurt and anger will be far from gone, but you may be able to sit down in front of your partner and get some answers.

Factors that Influence

You need to appreciate that there are a lot of factors that will either influence or be affected by your decision.

- ◆ How did the affair come to happen?
- ◆ Did your partner start the affair?
- ◆ Was your marriage experiencing difficulties at the time of the affair?
- ◆ How is your decision going to affect your children?
- ◆ If you decide to split, how is that going to affect your lifestyle?
- ◆ Will you be able to support yourself financially?
- ◆ Where are you going to live?
- ◆ How are you going to divide your assets?
- ◆ How much is a divorce going to cost?
- ◆ Do you still love your partner? (this is different to anger)
- ◆ How much do you want to save your marriage?
- ◆ Where do you picture yourself in 6 months time?
- ◆ Where do you picture yourself in 12 months time?



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You need to ask yourself these questions if you are trying to come to a decision. The consequences of your decision will have far-reaching consequences that will affect your life forever.

Hard Work

Making the decision to work at your marriage is a difficult yet brave one. It will require a lot of work and effort, but with effort from the both of you it should be worth it. Your problems will not go away overnight, but if you are both committed to repairing your relationship that is a good start.

Marital problems of this magnitude will almost always require the assistance of a marriage counselor. Not only will they be able to provide you with assistance now, but they will be enormously valuable in helping you get your marriage back on track later.

Stay or Go?

A lot of people faced with the reality of infidelity look to others to make decisions for them. Well I hate to disappoint you, but I am not going to do that for you. Nobody knows how much you love your partner and how far you are prepared to go for them more than you. The decision is yours. But what I will say is that deciding to work on your problems is not easy, and will be a lot of hard work. But at the same time, walking away from your marriage isn't easy either. Its final, its messy, it takes a long time, its expensive, and it has far-reaching consequences on your life.

Make yourself aware of the consequences of your actions before you do anything. It might also be helpful to talk to some friends or acquaintances that have been victims of infidelity. Look for support groups in your area and make yourself aware of what the consequences are. In that way any decision you make will be a smart and informed one rather than an emotive one.



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Exercise 37—Do Yourself

This is a fun exercise that I want you to take the time to do. Finding out your partner has been unfaithful is an enormously stressful time for you. At a time like this it is especially important that you take care of your mental health. It is your mental health that will get you through the dark times and give you the strength to cope with the consequences of your decision, whatever that decision is.

You can either do this on your own or you can take a good friend. The important thing is that you have fun. I want you to make a day of it so that you have a decent amount of time to relax and refocus.

- ◆ Go to a toy shop and buy a kite. It doesn't have to be an expensive one, a plastic one will do. If you are like me, when a friend suggested to me that we go and fly a kite I thought he was mad. But I still went along with it. I haven't felt so carefree in years! It was one of the simplest yet most rewarding things I have done in a long time. It was the most amazing feelings having the wind tug at the string. My focusing on that and making the kite dive and swoop and spin took my mind off my problems completely and made me feel young and free again. Try it yourself and allow yourself to feel.
- ◆ Go for a swim. Swimming is considered to be one of the ultimate cardiovascular workouts that you can do. As well as that it is low-impact considering your joints are all supported by water. This is a highly recommended exercise for people of all ages. There are also a range of different places you can do this, of course depending on your geographic location and your proficiency in swimming. If you are unable to or dislike swimming at the beach, there are a number of community pools that you may be able to choose from.
- ◆ Go and feed the birds or the ducks. This is another simple idea that is a rewarding thing to do when you need time to refocus. The simple act of throwing bread to the birds enables you to see that even the smallest thing you do makes a difference to someone or something.
- ◆ Play your favorite album at full volume. Its amazing how music evokes particular memories in people. Certain songs will bring back very happy



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memories. I can remember where I was the first time I heard certain songs. Playing your favorite album will help you escape albeit briefly into a time in your past that feels familiar and happy.

The key to this exercise is to escape from the stress and intensity of dealing with a partner's infidelity. The escape may be brief, and it may involve an activity different to those that I have listed. But the most important thing is that you escape for a while and experience some of the simple pleasures in life so that by the time you return to the reality of the situation you are facing, you are refreshed and ready to put the problem in perspective





Chapter 17. How to stop cheating dead in its tracks

The danger of infidelity is a reality that all couples have to deal with. This is especially true in times of a marital crisis when a spouse may seek love and affection from another person. Oftentimes, an errant husband or wife could be looking for something that is lacking in their own relationship. A marriage that is incomplete in some aspect “starves” a partner into wandering off. As such, they try to fill the void in the form of an extramarital affair.

A cheating partner feels a sense of validation from a lover because they can satisfy their needs without having to put up with the numerous problems that have developed within the marriage. When unresolved issues are left to fester and eventually grow into poisoning feelings of anger and resentment, this saps the intimacy.

A breakdown in communications is usually one of the first signs of a larger problem. When every discussion has a good chance of turning into a bitter argument, each spouse chooses to maintain silence instead. This naturally leads to a loss of closeness that alienates the husband and wife from one another.

Sometimes, the weight of the problems that a couple faces proves to be too much for one of them (or worse, *both*), and so they confide in someone else. The threat of this situation is that the confidant feels “obliged” to provide what the confused spouse was missing in the marriage: the need to be sexually desirable and someone who will empathize with their grievances.

In the end, a fleeting partner would rather start an affair behind his/her spouse's back instead of bridging the enormous gap that has developed within the partnership.

As we all know, once a marriage has reached this point, the damage brought about by an affair can only grow bigger and bigger with each passing day. The old saying about an “ounce of prevention” being worth more than a “pound of cure” holds very true when it comes to infidelity.

Fortunately, there are preventive measures a couple can take to keep themselves from falling into the trap of unfaithfulness. It's important to note that these are NOT quick-fix solutions that immediately take effect after applying them.

Instead, these are good habits for maintaining the general health of your marriage, and not just to prevent cheating itself.



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Step 1: Keep the communication alive

Sometimes the most obvious of solutions are also the most helpful. Think about it: if you stopped talking to your significant other, would you be inclined to be intimate with him/her? A romantic partnership needs emotional and physical closeness. A lack of communication basically shuts down both of these in one fell swoop. When you allow the silence to come between you and your partner, the both of you are in danger of looking for someone else to bring back that lost sense of intimacy.

When an argument turns into an ugly, mudslinging fiasco, each partner will be discouraged from bringing up future discussions. You'll find less and less of a reason to talk things out after you've come to associate disagreements with such unpleasantness. The gap that follows will threaten to grow larger the longer that those unspoken emotions are kept under wraps. Therefore, effective communication is greatly needed to deal with those unresolved conflicts in a **positive** way.

However, some studies show that some couples who communicate more are *actually* prone to an increased frequency in arguing. With that in mind, each partner has to convey their thoughts and feelings in a **constructive** manner. No spouse is perfect, but that's no reason for taking a confrontational tone when addressing everyday things, or perhaps something that your partner did or said. Even if you feel that you are right, blaming your spouse will make it hard for him/her to see your side of the matter.

An argument should have boundaries, regardless of what you're fighting about.

No marriage is free from disagreements, but what separates the healthy relationships from the dysfunctional ones is a couple's ability to constructively discuss any conflicts, be it trivial matters or serious issues. Always remember to keep it clean. When you're caught up in the moment and the hostilities are flying high, it's easier said than done. Yet, all it takes is a higher self-awareness to keep yourself in check. The first step starts with making a greater effort to be *conscious* about how your words will make your spouse feel.

Look at this this way: if you were discussing a difficult matter with an important client at work, you'd be mindful of how you would phrase your words. You wouldn't sugarcoat an unpleasant situation, but you'd still take their feelings into account before opening your mouth.



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Of course, you wouldn't speak to your partner in the same manner as you would in a business setting, but the important element of respect should still be there. The problem is that we sometimes forget how we first spoke to our partner before getting romantically involved. Back then, you were probably kinder and more aware of their feelings whenever you talked to him/her.

After the familiarity settles in, that same careful sense of respect is taken for granted. Sadly, some partners grow not to care anymore about offending their significant others. We should never be complacent when it comes to treating your partner with respect, *especially* during disagreements.

Therefore, the best way to deal with trampled feelings is to first put them into writing. Feel free to note what you felt whenever your spouse did something that you found abrasive. This new approach might take some getting used to at first, but it's definitely a better alternative to allowing pent-up emotions to suddenly surface and explode into a full-blown fight.

Listing down your negative emotions and identifying what your partner does to raise these feelings is a very healthy way to reduce disharmony in your relationship. The general idea is to bring grievances to light and deal with them in an open yet positive way. We advise you to structure each point of discussion in such a way that puts your feelings on center stage *without* the accusations or blame.

For instance, you can say something like, "I don't feel appreciated and get hurt whenever you give me a list of complaints even before asking me how my day was." That's much better than blurting out "You drive me up the wall with your endless nagging and can't even give me a moment to relax after coming home from work – how inconsiderate can you be!"

The goal is to make your spouse aware of what you're feeling and what you can do as a couple to deal with it. Furthermore, encourage your partner to do the same in order to learn about the things that are bothering him/her. After all, communication is a two-way process. Don't assume that this will be easy, but know that it's a step in the right direction. Remember that an attentive, patient and loving ear will eventually get you past the difficulty of discussing sensitive matters. The more you're able to talk things out openly, the less likely that either one of you will turn a deaf ear and run into someone else's arms.



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Step 2: Self-Evaluation

After you've figured out the things that you and your spouse disagree on, it's time to think about the things you can do to be a better partner. It's always good to keep in mind that you share half the responsibility of keeping the relationship in a good state. Don't forget that this is meant to be a positive analysis wherein you list various points you can improve upon. It's easy to be hard on yourself during these introspective moments. Take a fair and objective look at yourself and again, list them down. It's much easier to get important matters out in the open if they're in a tangible form. Make an effort to criticize yourself as fairly as possible. Give yourself credit where it is due, but note any negative behaviors and *replace* them with positive ones.

As a suggestion, you can write down the specific ways you can endear your partner and avoid the behavioral patterns that ruffle their feathers. For example, you could jot down "to-do" items such as "I should keep in mind not to bring up old fights", or "I need to be constructive whenever I point out the things I don't like about my partner."

Basically, you're seeking a means to be the best spouse that you can be in order to keep the both of you from drifting apart and finding someone else.

Step 3: Don't let boredom settle in

Sometimes, the grind of everyday life can cause couples to momentarily lose sight of what brought them together in the first place. No one is free from the endless list of duties and obligations that a marriage has, such as bills and household chores (hopefully of which you are sharing equally). So, it's in your best interests to keep the "spark" burning as often as possible. Remember, we're in "preventive mode" here. The following suggestions are meant to preserve the quality of your marriage to keep it from straying into the danger zone.

Keeping things on the up-and-up takes a preemptive approach. For instance, you need to plan your weeks and days to allow you and your spouse to enjoy each other's company in a relaxed setting. Many couples spend too much time with the everyday, routine aspects of a relationship and forget to *enjoy* their marriage in the process. Therefore, every marriage should have time set aside for simple activities. This part is entirely up you, since everyone has a unique schedule. You could see a movie, have a nice dinner or any other pleasurable engagement.



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The important part to remember is not to find time, but rather to *make* time. Your dates don't have to be a grand production. You don't have to break the bank in order to have a good time. In fact, there's no wedding commandment stating you can't be cheapskates from time to time! Thrifty options include a vigorous match of badminton or any other equally sweat-inducing sport at the local park or activity center. Bonding can be practical with a little effort and research.

The main goal is to relieve the pressure that slowly builds up from the daily responsibilities of married life. More importantly, exclusive “us time” reminds a couple of their reasons for falling in love. All work and no play makes for a dull marriage. Boredom can be a gateway for temptation.

On the other side of things, physical intimacy also plays a big role in keeping things interesting. Any romantic relationship needs bodily contact. Find any and all opportunities to maintain your physical connection with your partner. Again, be creative with this one, but even basic things like cuddling while watching a movie at home or a picnic at the park means a lot. As with all your activities, keep it within your budget. You don't have to live beyond your means just to foster some much-needed closeness.

Lastly, don't forget to make time for sex. It might not sound overly romantic at first, but given the hectic nature of modern life, a little planning ahead of time never hurt. Remember to make the effort to communicate with your spouse and work out a realistic schedule. A common reason for cheating is a lackluster sex life. Wayward spouses who are deprived of this basic need might end up looking elsewhere instead. Metaphorically speaking, running a tight ship today is better than salvaging a sunken one tomorrow.

For couples, the physical expression of love is just as needed as verbal validation. No husband or wife would want to stray if they were lusted after by their spouse. At the core of every marriage lies a fundamental need to be affirmed by someone, and sex is a big part of this. Be *that* person for your spouse, lest he/she try to satisfy that necessity outside your marriage. Your spouse wants to be flattered, so give him/her a sense of being desired. These are the kind of feelings that keep a relationship from turning bland. Anyone who's married would like to have their efforts rewarded with loving reciprocation.

Something as simple as lying underneath the sheets and entwined in each other's arms will keep the both of you from wandering into someone else's bed. Would you have thoughts of having an affair if your lifelong partner couldn't take his/her hands off you?



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Making love regularly shows that being together is far more important than the problems you face as a couple. A conscious attitude of daily maintenance anticipates problems before they occur.

Step 4: Don't forget to squeeze in some "ME" time.

While spending quality time with your spouse is important, an individual also has to set aside a part of themselves for their own passions and pursuits. When you're too immersed in just one part of your life, it can cause a bad case of burnout. Of course, prioritizing your family comes first, but there's always room to do your own thing. It's all a matter of balance. No matter how fulfilling married life can be, everyone needs to decompress in some way to keep things fresh. A well-rounded spouse is a happy spouse.

It can be a problem when some husbands or wives lose their sense of individuality after they start sharing many things in terms of time, space and activities. It's perfectly fine to be a dedicated family person, but you also need your own space to retreat to whenever you need to recharge. This "alone time" allows you to zone out and take the stress off for just a little while. Your mind and body can only take so much without a break.

As stated in the previous section, "practical" is the key word, so you don't have to book a vacation to some exotic, faraway place nor does it have to interfere with the other areas of your life. Take a moment to note which vacant periods of time in your daily schedule will allow you to do something productive yet cost-effective.

To give you an idea, you could engage in some kind of exercise like a brisk walk, jogging around the block, or even home video programs like Tae Bo or Pilates. If you look hard enough, there are a lot of home-based workout options to suit your needs. If you're a bookworm, then 30 minutes to an hour with a good paperback everyday will momentarily divert your mind from the daily concerns that occupy your thoughts.

The main purpose of this is to give yourself a realistic amount of breathing space. You may think that these little bursts of "me time" are too short, but in the big picture they add up. These scheduled time-outs regularly keep your stress level down. Essentially, it's all about making a small investment of your time to prevent yourself from getting burned out. If you don't give yourself a chance to shut out the chattering buzz of your daily existence, you'll exhaustion will turn into misery.



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These brief pauses from your everyday routine let you grow as a unique person who's alert, refreshed and ready to be the best partner in your relationship. When both of you feel fulfilled in all the areas of your lives, this directly reduces your chances of seeking happiness elsewhere.



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Chapter 18. Getting your spouse to change attitude

Frustrated spouses trying to change their partner tend to forget their own role in the relationship. They throw their arms up in disappointment, complaining that they're doing their best to be patient. However their patience continues to wear thin (if not completely eroded) because they're trying to knock down that brick wall of reality they keep running into - instead of finding ways to get around it.

A lot of marriages keep getting stuck in a perpetual rut because the relationship turns into a blame game. Exasperation boils to a nice simmer when you obsessively repeat a "it's their fault" mantra in your mind. However, you don't have to take the passive route in your relationship. Shirking your responsibility in the marriage is just as bad as relinquishing absolute control to your spouse. No matter who might have started the problem, you have the ability to change things for the better (or for the worse). YOU are the biggest agent of change in your marriage.

Ditch the self-pity parade

When you're faced with a difficult situation, what thought processes or behavioral patterns do you go through? A big chunk of solving a problem depends on how you react to adversity in the first place. Do you just let it happen to you, or do you think of a plan and carry it out? You're pretty much doomed to failure if you already project an air of hopelessness right from the start. Sometimes, the biggest challenge is taking that first step to deal with issues.

It's useless to blame fate, life, your partner or other factors outside of your control. You should be thinking of what part of the situation you can use to turn things around. Doing this empowers you with the means to work with what you have control over. This is what you'll need in order to remedy a crisis. For starters, you should be asking yourself what options you can take to get around your problem. You can also think about how to adjust your viewpoint to see the positive side of things.

In the worst of situations, you don't have to resist the reality of the problem's existence and should find opportunities for growth instead. In an age of instant gratification, we've been deluded into thinking that there will always be a handy, pre-packaged solution to everything that life throws at us. Modern life has lowered our tolerance to the discomfort of adversity. Yet, some measure of emotional pain is inevitable when dealing with all difficult situations.



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Pause for a moment and consider your childhood and how your parents or guardians raised you. Children who suffered a lack of attention to some extent will have a hard time overcoming hurdles as an adult. Parents who didn't put too much effort in going through the difficulty of helping their child through a trying period (bad grades, getting into fights, etc) will cause that person to avoid the pain of hardships later on in life. Therefore, those who've had a dysfunctional family life in some manner will be reluctant to deal with pressing matters in the future.

Now, go back to the present. Breaking free from self-defeating mental habits requires a third-person perspective of one's self. From a "distance", observe the bad problem-solving habits you may have picked up from past experiences. For example, let's say your co-worker was spreading false rumors about you. Did you sulk in a corner and bitterly accept it, or did you find a way to clear up the matter? Previous challenges can teach us a great deal about self-actualization.

Muster the effort to identify what you did in the past which allowed you to get through a hard time. Think of what you could have done differently if you were given another chance. Jot it all down, and let your conscious mind chew on that for a while. Hindsight is a powerful tool for change. Past mistakes and triumphs teach us how to deal with problems ahead.

Once you've narrowed down the good attitudes you should keep, undo the habit of repeating the bad ones. Instead of listening to your spouse's side during an argument, are you already thinking of a nasty comeback? Perhaps you tend to brood over the fact that your problems are happening to you, of all people. Whatever they are, the best way to discard your negative attitudes in handling obstacles is to be aware of them. All it takes a few moments of your time to step back and look at the big picture.

Armed with a higher awareness about yourself, the next step would be to map out a solution to your problems. While you're coming up with the steps to get your partner to open up for an opportunity to discuss touchy matters, we also have some pointers you can keep in mind.



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Importance of Empathy

Understanding is a key component in any tough situation. Be open to the possibility that your spouse also has biases stemming from their own childhood. That's why taking the initiative is the key. Putting your foot forward to change things will help your partner shake off his/her own apathy. While you may have your own idiosyncrasies, your spouse is a unique person with their own experiences that have shaped them in the way they are. Their upbringing is just as connected to your marriage as your own. This could be one of the things behind their resistance to change.

Take the lead

You can “break the ice” by being the first to engage in household tasks and related errands. If your spouse particularly detests taking out the trash, bring it out yourself. Of course, such a common chore may not appear so significant in your eyes, but your partner will see it differently. Plus, it will be much easier to ask your spouse when you need help with something later on. While this is especially applicable to partners who aren't keen on chores, it also shows that you're making an effort in general. Brainstorm other ways to set off an attitude of change in your loved one. Take the car to the dealer to have that pesky noise taken care of, or anything else that will relieve your partner to know that it's already done. Your opening move is a subtle way of encouraging your partner to participate in the growth of your relationship.

Kind words go a long way

After you've gotten your partner into the act, don't forget to complement generously. A feeling of validation greatly fosters a change of attitude. Oftentimes, an unappreciated partner will find little incentive to contribute to your partnership. Loving encouragement is what they need to keep that reciprocal attitude going. It's not about stroking your spouse's ego, but rather showing your sincere gratitude for their actions. Thus, keep a sharp eye out for occasions when your spouse does something wonderful for you. If he/she drove out in the middle of the night to get you aspirin for your splitting headache, a simple “thanks, dear” followed by a warm hug works wonders.

Not only are you affirming their worth as a better half, but you're also giving importance to the marriage as well. It's basically a reassurance that you appreciate the



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lengths they've gone through to make it work. This serves as a glue to keep you together in spite of the difficulties that you share. Valuing one another keeps your foundations strong even if you may not agree on absolutely everything.

If you have any complaints about certain aspects of your spouse, phrase it a positive way without blaming them. For instance, if he/she has the habit of forgetting to turn off the iron after they're done, don't rattle off, "Are you trying to burn the house down?" Instead, you can say something funny like "Honey, please remember to unplug the iron, we don't want the neighbors to think we're a couple of firebugs now!" If you're going to be humorous about it, make sure it doesn't come off as sarcastic. The idea is not to get overly upset about it and make it easy for your spouse to hear you out. Alternately, a polite, straightforward request works just as well if you're not the jokey type.

The "talk"

We've already touched on the subject of marital negotiations in this book, but you should also discuss your partner's views from his/her perspective. Once the opportunity presents itself, take the time to sit down and have a discussion without any heavy pretexts. You don't want to trigger your partner's defenses with a serious "we need to talk" introduction. Casually have a sit-down with your loved one in a relaxed setting with only the two of you present.

Let them tell you what they love about your marriage. It's best to start off with some common ground before getting into the hard stuff. The next step is to ask your partner what are the things they don't like about your relationship as well as their suggestions for working on them. Obviously, this is the delicate portion of your talk, but let them vent all the same. Their side is just as valid as yours, no matter how unreasonable it may seem.

You're not a psychic, so a dialogue is inevitable if you want to know what their underlying concerns and disappointments are. Better to learn about them in the soonest possible time before they grow more poisonous. The more you get used to talking about trying matters, the more it will be easier for you to handle future problems before they get out of hand.

Needless as it is to say it, you're going to need a lot of patience. No marriage is perfect, but that doesn't mean you can't work hard at it. Acknowledge the rush of emotions you go through when you get upset or during an argument. Understand the



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effect it can have on your judgment and tell yourself that YOU control your emotions, and not the other way around. Remember to keep those flaring emotions in check. Just think that a bad blow up will set back your progress, so don't let your temper undo all your hard work. What you say or do in the heat of a single moment can have long-lasting implications in the future.

The point of this chapter is to put your best foot forward as an example to your spouse. A mature, loving person becomes more attractive to his/her partner. Your positivity is the way to cut through hostilities and allow you both a chance to negotiate issues as we discussed in the earlier chapters.

When your good intentions are clearly but non-abrasively put forth, your proactive example isn't a direct means to change your spouse overnight. However, your constant willingness to do your best will definitely make a big impression on him/her. Ultimately, your spouse will do what he/she wants so it's up to you to *make him/her more receptive* to changing themselves and improving the relationship on their own accord.



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Chapter 19. Getting your spouse to fall back in love with you

At the start of their marriage, couples fall into that head-over-heels stage where they can do no wrong to each other. Both partners are swept away by their emotions and are caught up in the rush of romance. It's at this time that everyone puts their best foot forward. The thrill of wedded bliss has temporarily blinded you to your partner's negative aspects – but not for long.

For those who were a couple for some time before getting married, they might assume that they already know everything about their partner. They couldn't be more wrong! In reality, all spouses will have not-so-lovable traits that will only pop up *after* you start living as man and wife. After the initial excitement of married life fades away, disillusionment slowly settles in.

The sudden realization that your spouse is not the perfect person you thought he/she was can be quite a shock. For instance, a wife may reel in disbelief after learning that her husband is a chronic sports fanatic who won't budge from the sofa during game season. Perhaps a man can't figure out for the life of him why his wife can't understand that his new job requires him to be out of town every now and then.

For some partners, this harsh wake-up call is only the beginning. Their emerging personalities begin to surface, and then serious differences arise. Each partner's vision of how the relationship should be begins to diverge. Disagreements are anything but rare among married partners. Eventually, the bitterness drives you apart from your spouse, little by little.

One day, you're surprised by the chasm has already come between the two of you. Of course, knowing how to settle deep-seated issues through negotiation is a must. However, there's more to bridging the gap than talking things out in a structured and civil manner. Your marriage is not as simple as a business deal you're trying to hammer out.

Yes, fixing a struggling relationship is a rational decision of your conscious mind, but look beyond that as well. You also need to remember that it is an emotional investment



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that you made with the love of your life. Remember that it's the heart that drives the logical will to stay together.

Aside from the process of repairing accumulated damage, you should consider how to bring back the lost love. In fact, getting your spouse to fall in love with you again will actually make the whole “negotiation” side of patching up things much easier. A renewed sense of romance helps ease the difficulty of talking about the hard stuff.

Love may not be all that we need, but it will certainly make it loads easier to work out your troubled marriage. When you're both at ease and guards lowered, you remember why you got married – and why you're working hard to stay that way.

So, you may ask: how in the world do I get my partner to see me with that crazy, lovestruck look again?

The power of positivity

This kind of thinking is the first element to draw on during your efforts to put the love back into the relationship. Being positive implies a lot of attitudes that you need to embody, as well as avoid. One of the things you must do away with is self-deprecating talk that your inner critic may burden you with. This little voice in your head is the most unforgiving of them all, and your marriage can do without it. Examples of unproductive self-lashing are lines like “I am the world's worst spouse” or “All of this is my fault.” Blaming yourself is not the key to fixing anything.

Instead, you're better off making a fair review of both your shortcomings and strong points. Think of all the things you can do in the future that will positively contribute to your marriage. Remember to keep good habits consistent, if not more often than before. On the other hand, do make a list of bad habits and attitudes that you find yourself repeating. A little foresight and self-awareness is what you need to avoid making the same mistakes over and over.

This is the first step towards a pro-active mindset. When you think this way, you are fully aware that you have the power to create the reality you want. We're not talking about anything metaphysical here, but rather your ability to *take responsibility* and turn things around. When you're engrossed in doing the best you can, you don't bother blaming yourself, nor your partner. Being at the helm of your life prevents it from just letting it happen to you - and then accusing everyone else for it.



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The power of words and touch

With this positive approach in mind, allow yourself to see the good things that your partner does and complement him/her on them. People appreciate it when others give importance to the little things they do everyday. When it comes to a marriage, it's the little things that count, so adding up the good ones makes a big difference. For instance, if your husband is especially good with technology, then take note of his contributions in this regard. You could tell him something like "Thank you for taking care of that pesky garage door, dear. It was driving me nuts!" If your wife is good with numbers, you can say, "Honey, I wouldn't have known what to do if you didn't help me last night with that financial report. Thanks babe!"

These little acts of validation are vital because you're telling your spouse that you value them and the things that they do. You're reminding them that you love them as well as their efforts to make you happy. Furthermore, taking the initiative to give your partner credit is a great way to reduce the hostilities that may have built up between you. When you sincerely show admiration for your spouse, this poses a greater chance for you to subtly open up a talk about hard-pressing issues.

While you're at it, don't forget to make small, fleeting signs of physical affection during the course of your day-to-day affairs. Think of them as small, little love notes you slip in from time to time. The difference is, what you're communicating with these "small" acts will hardly fit a post-it, let alone a whole notepad! Something as simple as skin contact quickly makes a deep connection. An occasional brief but warm hug, or a quick peck on the cheek reminds your spouse of the love that you share for each other, regardless of the problems you face.

When it comes to being in bed, you don't have to force yourselves to have sex all the time when you don't feel like it. However, there's nothing wrong with a few, well-planted caresses across your spouse's body to see how far you can go. If one of you simply aren't in the mood, then you'll live to make love another day, no big deal. At the very least, you're taking the initiative to show sexual interest in your spouse.

Simple cuddling is yet another way to use the physical proximity in bringing back the love that may slowly be ebbing away. But then again, you may be surprised by how aroused your partner may become when he/she was feeling abstinent just a few minutes ago! This is especially exciting if you've just had a fight. Make-up sex has a bit of mixed-in tension and anger which you'll slowly grind away, until you collapse in each other's arms. You'll both feel as if a great weight has been lifted away from you.



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On saving the date

Think about the last time you had an intimate moment with your partner. This can be any occasion that you did something romantic for each other, whether or not it culminated in sexual intercourse. After bringing up a specific flashback in mind, try to recall what you did to make your spouse feel special and loved. Perhaps it was one time when you went to beach for the weekend and spent the day with warm sand between your toes, and enjoyed each other's company as the sun dipped into horizon at night.

Now, think of a way to get into a situation where you can evoke those same feelings of love and closeness. While it doesn't have to be budget-straining, make arrangements to go out on a regular basis. Have fun at some place where you can relax and get away from the pressures that may have slowly been leading you at each other's throats. It can happen, especially when you're too busy with the humdrum of everyday life. Even if you're not about to have a marital meltdown, the weekly frugal date recharges both of your respective love batteries.

Coming up for air

When it comes to renewing a burned-out marriage, pursuing your own interests and going on separate activities are just as important as spending quality time together. Matrimony is a paradoxical union where two separate people celebrate their love as a single unit, but it also needs balance to remain stable. You have to remember who you were as an individual before you got married. This is important because disregarding your own self for an overextended amount of time in a marriage upsets the harmony of your partnership. When you become indistinguishable from your roles as spouses, the both of you might end up getting suffocated with too much work and no play.

In spite of a busy schedule, any determined couple will make the effort to arrange some time away from each other. They know the importance of setting aside breathing space through hobbies and activities that engage their interests outside their life as a couple. They are aware of the danger of being together too often. Otherwise, they could end up tired and worn out, making it easier for them snap at one another. Don't disregard the danger of being immersed for too long without taking a short breather.

Even the most fulfilling marriage can wear any couple down. The body and mind can only go so far without rest. You're better off making a personal schedule to allow yourselves a brief moment of rest. If you're a dog lover for example, you could head



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down to the nearby park if you want go a few rounds of frisbee-throwing with Fido. Your partner might be musically inclined so the local community center is a good place for similar enthusiasts to get together and jam.

Don't let yourself go

Complacency is a common attitude that married couples tend to gravitate towards to after a few years have passed by. We mentioned earlier that some spouses grow to be insensitive towards their partner's feelings, but some also tend to stop taking care of themselves. Of course, no marriage is free from aging and other natural factors that kick in, but that shouldn't be a reason for you not to keep yourself presentable. How can you hope to attract your partner again with a neglected patch of week-old stubble growing on your face, or forgetting to fix your hair after getting up from bed? As what chefs say, "people always eat with their eyes first."

Therefore, provide them with a visual incentive to get close to you. Attraction is meant to be maintained within your partnership at all times, and looking good is part of this. Yes, there will be times when you don't feel or look your best. However, it isn't about being drop-dead gorgeous or devastatingly handsome all the time, but to always show that you're making the effort to be attractive. Caring about how you look reflects the way you feel about the whole relationship in general. How do you think your husband or wife would feel if you merely fell out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen, untidy and unwashed?

Pay attention to the small details. It's not about vanity, but rather showing an interest in your marriage by being up to scratch on grooming and hygiene. In fact, treat every day of your life with your partner as your first date. Do you remember that time when you were at your best behavior? It may have been many years (and pounds) ago, but at this point, you have even more of a reason to renew your sense of politeness and respect for one another. This is a great time to bring back the kindness that may have dulled during the last few years.



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On one-way streets

Lastly, learn the value of unconditional love. When you give yourself to the person you vowed to love until death, it can be frustrating if your partner doesn't respond in the way you want to. What you need to do instead is let go of this kind of thinking. In case they do reciprocate as you thought they would, then be grateful. If they don't however, then don't set yourself up for disappointment by obligating them to do so.

This can be a painful concept to grasp, but the essence of completely loving someone means doing what you can for their sake, without wanting anything in return. Some fall into the trap of harboring resentment against their partners when they feel that their efforts aren't amply rewarded. They need to focus on the good things about their spouses and come to realize that everyone has their own way of showing love. We might overlook these things when they get smothered by our expectations. Rather than appreciating the things your partner does to make you happy, you're too distracted looking for something more than what they have to offer.

However, you shouldn't allow yourself to be abused in any form, be it physically or verbally. There is no need for you to be treated like a doormat because that's not what unconditional love is about. If you find yourself in an abusive relationship, that is a different case altogether which requires third-party intervention.

Otherwise, your marriage will benefit a great deal once you stop waiting for your spouse to love you back in the manner you imagined they would. With this mindset, your attention is centered on being the best possible partner, following the advice we've covered so far.





Chapter 20. When to Seek Professional Help



Heather and I have been married for more than twenty years. We have had our share of ups and downs, but for the best part we have managed to stay on an even keel. I really don't think that we are all that different from most couples trying their best to make ends meet. Our kids are all grown up now and have left home to go to college. Up until then things were going fine, but now it all seems so different. We seem to be fighting about every little thing and our fights seem to be having a real effect on our lives. We have barely spoken a nice word to each other in the last month. A friend of ours suggested that we go to marriage counseling, but I'm not sure. Our problems aren't big ones, they are just silly ones. I mean, we have been married for over 20 years, so it's not like we are going to split up now. But it got me wondering, at what stage do you think we should see a counselor?

Hank from Salt Lake

In every relationship conflict, couples will entertain the idea or notion that the problem may be too big for them to handle. One of the biggest and perhaps most telling decisions to make is to firstly admit that there is a significant problem, and that you may both have to seek the impartial advice of a third party to help solve the issues in your conflict.

Making the decision to involve a third party in your relationship can be a difficult yet rewarding experience. The most difficult process people go through is to share the intimate details of their issues and relationship problems with somebody who is in all respects a complete stranger. For a couple that is having significant relationship issues, the reality of having to explain their situation may be uncomfortable, difficult, and even embarrassing.

Part of the conflict resolution process involves the creation of ideas and workable alternatives. One of the first things many couples will realize when working their way through the conflict resolution process is that things seldom ever go to plan. There is always the hope that you will be able to find a workable alternative and reach a solution to your relationship issues on your own. However, when this does not happen



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you need to find a way forward if you are serious about saving your marriage. One of the most viable options at this stage is to seek the advice of a professional.

One of the benefits of a professional marriage counselor is that you have to explain your relationship situation and issues to them. Even the way you do this with a professional can be very telling. It will force you to confront your issues and explain them to somebody in a logical and cohesive manner. The way you do this will explain to a counselor what you feel the most important issues to you are. You are most likely to voice your main gripes or issues first, as those are the ones that will be at the forefront of your mind.

A counselor can gain a good insight into your problem because they are able to view the situation objectively without any preconceptions or prejudices. As well as that, they are equipped to deal with problems like this and can provide valuable insights as well as exercises to help couples calm down and put the problem in perspective. Problems that may at first have seemed insurmountable will be able to be broken down and dealt with in a structured and cohesive manner.

Dangers of Counseling

While counseling can have a positive effect on your ability as a couple to communicate and negotiate your way through a marriage crisis, counseling can also be extremely dangerous. The key is in having a very clear idea about the role of counseling. Basically, you get out of counseling what you are prepared to put in. If you enter into counseling, not all that willing to explain your situation and participate, the job a counselor can do is compromised. In order to have an effective counseling outcome, a counselor needs to be in possession of all the facts, no matter how small or big, or how relevant you may feel some of the issues are.

Without the correct information passed on by you, there is a danger that the counselor can diagnose your problems incorrectly, and recommend a course of action that makes your marriage problems even worse. The point to be made here is that it is better to give the counselor too much information than too little. If you trust this person to facilitate in this process and make recommendations, they need to be in possession of ALL the necessary facts.

Similarly, you may need to go to a couple of sessions with a counselor to make sure you have a good fit. Each counselor may have specialized skills in particular fields, and it is important to have a rapport with your counselor in order to facilitate free and easy



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discussion. If you feel uncomfortable with your counselor or don't feel they grasp the issues of your marriage, you have a duty to say so, and possibly seek counsel elsewhere.

The mark of a good counselor is in sticking with the issues. There may be a range of issues surrounding your core marital issues that your counselor will want to touch on, but at each part of the process you will want to make sure the issues being discussed are relevant. How does each peripheral issue fit into your core marital problems? How do the recommended exercises help you rebuild your marriage? How does your counselor help you build skills or perspective to overcome your marriage problems?

Ask questions every step of the way. Counseling can really benefit a marriage, but don't forget that the two people ultimately in control of your destiny are you and your partner.

Counseling Benefits

The benefit of having a counselor is that you will all be motivated to make progress. You will be motivated to get value from the money you have spent, and your counselor will be motivated to help you come to a successful resolution. At the same time, you shouldn't expect all your problems to be magically solved simply because you have decided to pay a counselor to help. You are still going to have to do some hard work, and confront some issues that you may not like having to deal with. Don't think that just because you have paid the money that you can hand the problem over to someone and that they will solve them. It is still your problem.

There is also a growing trend among couples to go to counseling even when they aren't having marriage problems. Many couples are seeking advice on how to keep their marriage strong while it is strong rather than waiting until there is a problem. I think this is real progress and shows how far couples have come in their awareness of their relationship.

How to Choose a Counselor

There are so many so-called experts out there it is hard to tell the good from the bad. Price differentiation doesn't always guarantee you quality either, as many bad or under qualified counselors charge the same rates as the good ones. So the first thing you



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should look for is experience. When I refer to experience I mean credentials, training, personality and demeanor.

I would encourage you to use some caution when selecting using credentials. There have been many cases of fraudulent qualifications or those with little real value. When interviewing a counselor you should focus on what specific training they have received as well as what experience they have had in this field. You need to know that the training they have had is relevant to your situation and that they have also had experience in dealing with couples in your situation.

You should ask them what approach they take to couples therapy as well as what sort of duration they think this will take. While I am not encouraging you to tie your problems down to a set time frame, you do need to consider your time and money constraints. Many couples can't afford months of counseling. In this case it would be wise to establish a rough idea of how much counseling you require so that you and your counselor are aware of the constraints. You may even be able to enquire about the availability of a short-term course.

References will also be a good thing to consider when choosing a partner. References are a good way of determining whether a counselor is any good or not. If any of your friends or acquaintances have had dealings with a counselor that they found to be good, it may be worth checking them out. You may even be able to enquire at your local doctor for their opinion as to who they may recommend.

Another equally important consideration is to find a counselor that you are able to strike a rapport with. It is vital that you feel comfortable with your counselor as you will be discussing some very important and at times very personal issues with them. You should be able to talk freely with them about your problems. After all, you will only get as much out of counseling as you are prepared to put in. If you have personality differences that prevent you from fully opening up your problems to them it will compromise the quality of the therapy that you receive. Given the importance of the situation you are facing, you should take your marriage and your counseling seriously. In this respect it is very important that you feel comfortable with your counselor so that you may come to an effective and successful solution.

There is nothing wrong in consulting a few therapists before you make a final decision. Choosing the right therapist or counselor can have a huge effect on the outcome of your sessions. Just be sure when booking appointments that you let the therapist know that you are looking at a few therapists before committing to a further session. It is not a decision that should be rushed.



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Communication

When addressing the issue of seeking professional help you should also consider how well you deal with communication. How much communication do you have? This might seem like a pointless question, but how much communication do you have in your marriage?

- ◆ How much time do you set aside as a couple for chatting?
- ◆ How important is this time to you?
- ◆ What time of the day does this happen?
- ◆ Where does this talk time happen?
- ◆ Do you follow up on issues that are raised during this time?

A marriage is something that continually needs to be worked on or maintained. In fact, this process will never end. So it is important that you set aside the opportunity to talk about issues that are facing you as a couple. This can be difficult as people get caught up in their busy lives with work, chores, hobbies and raising children. There is often little time to focus on other things like talking with your partner. But given the importance of your relationship, it should be at the top of your list of priorities.

But it isn't. So why is that?

Because so many couples get caught up in the everyday issues of life and forget what is important. Communication is the key to couples working as a team and facing the obstacles that life presents. If you are not giving your relationship the time it needs then you need to reassess your priorities. Your relationship should be at the top of your list. If it isn't, you need to juggle things around a bit to make sure it is.

Consider what time of day this talking time happens. It needs to be a time that you both have where you can be alone and free from distraction. A number of couples make the time at night just before they go to sleep. I can see a few problems in this. The first is that you are both tired and less likely to be able to have a reasoned discussion if you are ready to go to sleep. You will compromise on the quality of your discussion of issues as well as your ability to create appropriate alternatives to the situations you face. Your ability to have reasoned discussion at 11:00 at night almost speaks for itself. The second issue is that you should never have really important discussions so late at night. There is always the possibility that a chat may raise a few more issues than you had both anticipated. If you don't allow yourself the time to discuss the issues there is the fear that you will go to sleep with those issues unresolved. In addition to this, there is a school of thought that bedrooms are supposed



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to be havens or tranquil zones. Your bedroom should be a place of rest and tranquility rather than a place you go to raise your issues. Try and choose a more appropriate place like the family room, on the sofa, after the children have gone to bed.

Another consideration when assessing the effectiveness of your communication is whether you follow up on issues. While it is important to discuss your issues as a couple, for it to be affective or meaningful you will need to make sure that you follow up on the issues that are raised. If you fail to act on the issues that you talk about, there is the danger that you will lose credibility in your partner's eyes. Don't let it all be talk. If you both make the commitment to taking your issues seriously you will make real gains in your marriage and your commitment to each other.

Divorce

As your relationship deteriorates to the point where you are considering getting professional help you will have no doubt entertained the thought of divorce. For many, and especially those who are feeling trapped in an unhappy marriage, divorce may seem like the quick and easy way out of the relationship. In fact, many people in this situation glamorize the idea of divorce and demand one from their partner in the heat of passion. What they fail to realize is that the reality of divorce is quite different from the fantasy.

Divorce is much more than a short term option, so it should not be a decision that is entered lightly. One of the biggest problems with people divorcing is that they don't fully appreciate the consequences or the gravity of the situation until it is all too late. Given the dramatic impact that a divorce has on your life both in the short term as well as in the future, it surprises me that so many people rush into this decision rather than face the much easier task of trying to resolve their issues and repair their marriage.

At the same time, there are also couples that really should divorce. For some couples it is better to be divorced than be constantly fighting in an unhappy marriage. I'm not going to tell you whether or not to get a divorce. That decision relies on a lot of factors and should be a last resort. As difficult as marriage counseling and therapy can be, as well as your reluctance to deal with issues, it is still much easier to deal with than a divorce. In fact, the majority of divorced people I have spoken to say that if they had known how much is involved in a divorce at the time they made that decision, they may have been more willing to give marriage counseling and other alternatives a try.



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Time

Divorcing your partner is not something that is going to happen overnight. A divorce can take as little as 6 weeks if you have already divided your assets, arranged access and custody for your children, and that you both consent to the petition. This is usually called an uncontested divorce. However, this is quite rare, as separations are usually a little messier than that. If a divorce is contested, the time frame can stretch anywhere from here to several years. The fighting and bitterness can easily be stretched out and for some couples there may seem to be no end to it all. If you imagine that a divorce is going to give you results in a short period of time you are mistaken.

A divorce is a legal separation and dissolution of your marriage. Being a legal process there is a lot of paperwork and procedure to go through. You have to reach a lot of agreements before you are ready to have your divorce petition approved by a judge.

Money

Not only is a divorce a messy and long procedure, it is also a very costly one. Lawyers need to draw up and file the necessary paperwork, and the rates they charge is prohibitive. Especially if your divorce proceedings become messy and involve disputes over property and child custody, the cost of your legal counsel is going to escalate sharply. Considering the reality of trying to live alone after dividing your assets, the amount of money you have left after a divorce is somewhat limited. Considering the long-term costs of alternatives, marriage counseling is a far cheaper option and is one that should be explored.

Lifestyle

Two people can always live better than one, and the reality of divorce is that you will have a lifestyle radically different to what you may have had in your married life. Part of the grieving process in a divorce involves people missing their old life. What I mean is the really obvious things. Dividing your equity in the family home is not going to give you enough to have a home like you used to have. All of the furniture that you once shared will be divided. Whatever way you look at it, your life is going to be very different. You will have half of what you once had.



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Change

As well as the considerable cost and length of a divorce proceeding, you need to come to terms with the reality that your life is going to be radically different from your old life. Other than the division of assets and the resulting change in lifestyle, for the first time in many years you will be facing life alone. You may be in your thirties and facing the dating scene for the first time in many years. The world can be a daunting place for a newly single and recently divorced person. You may need to get some new single friends so that you have something in common with people. This doesn't mean you have to lose contact with your married friends, but you will need the company of single people too.

Life will be different in so many ways, and you will discover those differences over time. The many things you once took for granted will be all the more noticeable. Cold bed, meals for one, coming home to an empty house, the loss of companionship, company, conversation, and intimacy will all be factors that will be keenly felt.

I know this paints a dreary picture of the single life after a marriage breakup. But for many this is the reality. But it is not a reality that couples consider when they make the decision to give up on their marriage and seek a divorce. For some people, the fear and uncertainty of change is still better than living with an abusive partner. But for many, this type of life isn't at all what they had pictured single life to be.

The most important point to take from this is that you need to consider the alternatives very carefully before you make a decision in the heat of passion. An awareness of the realities of the alternatives is will help you make a careful and balanced decision.



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Exercise 38—Do Together

It is all too easy for couples to fall into the non-communication trap and forget to take the time to discuss the important issues. All too often small issues become big issues when they aren't dealt with. If only couples would talk about issues as they arose, they might avoid a lot of needless conflicts.

Set a night aside for just you and your partner one night a week for the next four weeks. The first week you choose something, the second week your partner can choose something to do or somewhere to go. It doesn't have to be something expensive or extravagant, so long as you spend some quality time together. The focus for the first two weeks is spending quality time together and getting out of the house. Choose from a variety of things to do such as a picnic dinner, a nice restaurant, the movies, a walk on the beach, a drink at a local bar, the possibilities are endless. Just as long as you have a good time and discover a couple of nice places to go together.

The third and fourth weeks I want you to concentrate on communication. The first couple of weeks are about establishing a routine or a set time to spend together. It doesn't always have to involve going out, but there should be a commitment to spending some time together. So after you have established a brief routine in the first couple of weeks, you now need to concentrate on increasing your communication skills so that the time you spend alone as a couple is both enjoyable and productive.

You can choose to do this either away from home during a walk on the beach, or if you prefer you might choose to do it at home. The important thing is that you are alone. You need to create an atmosphere where you are both relaxed and feel good about sharing your feelings. You might want some light background music on and a glass of wine each to help ease the tension.

When talking about issues you should focus on statements like:

- ◆ I feel...
- ◆ I felt like this when...
- ◆ I...
- ◆ My feelings...

Try and avoid statements that are accusing in nature. These statements usually start with:



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- ◆ You...
- ◆ You made me...
- ◆ Your...
- ◆ You are...

Your focus has to be on your feelings and how you feel when things happen. Its not as much about the event as it is about how it made you feel. The other key factor is to use your listening skills. This would have been pointed out in an earlier chapter. When sharing your feelings with your partner it is important to listen to what they have to say and that you listen to them in return.



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In Conclusion...

It is our hope that by the end of this book you will have a few more answers. The tricky thing with marriage and other relationships is that you don't get a manual on your wedding day telling you how to get it all right. You don't get all the information from your parents either.

You do your best to battle your way through your marriage journey, sometimes laying back and enjoying the scenery, and sometimes hanging on while the ride gets a little bumpy. We are by no means "experts". We make mistakes in our relationships, too, and we learn from them. But the important thing is that we are prepared to hang on in the bumpy bits with the expectation that the scenery will get better. And it does.

When we wrote this book, we didn't think we had all the answers, and, to be honest, we still don't. Neither will you. But our hope is that you will have a greater awareness of yourself and your partner, and that you will be better equipped to deal with the issues that may be threatening your marriage. Anyone who tells you they have all the answers to save your marriage is wrong. Human relationships are enormously complex, and marriage would be at the top of this list.

People who have successful marriages have a few things in common. The first thing is that they have communication. The second thing is an awareness of their feelings as well as the feelings of others. The other thing they all have in common is hard work. There is no such thing as a successful marriage without hard work. This means a little effort every day, to make bad things good, and to make good things even better.

We really enjoyed writing this book, and we really think you will benefit from this material. But you have to do more than just read it. You have to take what is written on the page and apply it to your marriage. Do the exercises. Where applicable and where it is appropriate, get your partner to do them too. The exercises are fun and helpful. Best of all, you may learn something about yourself, your partner, and your relationship.

So what are you waiting for? Start using this information now and save your marriage today!



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