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Deepen Your Love

Insights and Advice
from Today's Leading
Marriage Experts



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Introduction

Laugh It Up!

By Kelli B. Trujillo

Recently my husband and I celebrated our 12th wedding anniversary. Anniversaries are an annual time for reflection; as we mulled over the joys and sorrows, the challenges and delights of marriage, my husband summed it up well when he said to me, "Marriage is brutal . . . and glorious."

As an engaged young woman more than a decade ago, I was confident that marriage would be glorious—and I was certainly doubtful that it would be brutal . . . at least not for me! I, unlike others, had it all figured out!

Perhaps that's what all—or most—young brides believe. But then the reality begins to hit us: developing and maintaining a healthy marriage is, in fact, quite a challenge.



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Thus the generations-old tradition of many bridal showers: giving and receiving advice. Sometimes a blank journal is passed around so friends and relatives can write their advice; other times it's offered in private conversations. Advice about sex, about communication, about keeping the flame alive.

The very best advice I received as a young bride was: *Laugh a lot, especially at yourself. The key to a healthy marriage is not taking yourselves too seriously.*

It seemed ridiculously light advice to me at the time—*laugh?* That's too easy! Don't you have something deeper to offer me?

But now, more than a decade into marriage, I see the sage wisdom of this advice, because as Christian women we certainly can take ourselves and our idealistic thoughts about marriage a little too seriously. This can lead to unrealistic expectations, a lack of grace, a harsh tone of judgment, and the dangerous poison of pride.

Young brides need advice—but don't we all? We never stop needing experts, mentors, and folks who've been there to speak into our lives and marriages: to cheer us on, to point us in the right direction, and at times to shine a bright light on hurtful habits that are damaging our relationship.

This Today's Christian Woman download brings us the best of the best: expert advice for fostering a healthy relationship from some of Christendom's leading authorities on marriage, romance, and sexuality. These reminders, insights, and pieces of wisdom will challenge you right where you are—



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whether your marriage is flourishing or floundering—as you seek to foster health and vibrancy in your marriage commitment. As you read these articles, dig into Scripture, and ponder the Reflect questions, you'll find inspiration to strengthen and deepen your love.

Twelve years in, I realize I need all the advice I can get! Join me in listening to and implementing these health-giving and love-deepening insights.

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads
Christianity Today

Leader's Guide

How to use “Deepen Your Love” for a group study



“Deepen Your Love” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.

Great Expectations



It's fine to have them—as long
as they are grounded in reality.

By Tim Gardner

“I never expected this. Mark just isn't the man I married.” “Joan” sat expressionless as she stoically described her relationship. “While we were dating, he was everything I wanted. He was fun, caring. We could talk for hours. Now he works late every day and gets home just in time to play with our daughter a few minutes before her bedtime. Then he watches TV. He never takes me out, never helps around the house, and only touches me when he wants sex (which we haven't had for six months). I don't love him anymore. I want out.”



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It's an unhappy story, but a familiar one. Couples who once stood before God promising "Till death do us part" now sit in a counselor's office, complaining that their mate "isn't doing their part." The passions once fueled by visions of happily ever after are gradually extinguished with each failed expectation. Eventually, one of them decides, "Since my spouse can't, or won't, meet my needs, I'll just move on to someone who will."

Call it what you want—disappointment, disillusionment, or despair—failed expectations can bring partners to the point of wanting to chuck it all. And it raises a serious question: Why *doesn't* marriage fulfill all our dreams?

Dream a littler dream?

Like many unhappy spouses, Joan had legitimate concerns—she should be getting more attention from her husband. But her greater problem was that her expectations of marriage were unrealistic. Ironically, the overwhelming popularity of marriage may in some ways explain the high level of marital breakdown.

"The higher the expectations of marriage . . . the greater the number of divorces," wrote Margaret Talbot in *The New Republic*. It is this quest for an ideal marriage that has, in her opinion, made divorce more acceptable. In other words, if your marriage isn't everything you expected, you should get a divorce and try, try again.

But what about those of us who reject divorce as a viable solution to a dissatisfying marriage? Should we simply lower our standards and resign ourselves to live in an unhappy marriage? No, we shouldn't. It's nonsense to say that God's gift of marriage is great, but, "Hey, don't expect too much." As followers of Christ, we shouldn't settle for bad or even mediocre marriages. We need exceedingly high aspirations.



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So what are we missing? The article in *The New Republic* talked about the problem of unfulfilled expectations as if all expectations have equal merit. That's a fallacy. There are certain expectations that marriage and a spouse can never fulfill. Those are the dangerous ones.

"The belief in a happily-ever-after marriage is one of the most widely held, destructive marriage myths. But it's only the tip of the marital-myth iceberg," say Les and Leslie Parrott, directors of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. "Every difficult marriage is plagued by misconceptions about what marriage should be."

In Joan's case, the misconceptions were her belief that she and Mark would always feel they were in love, that romance would never die, that sex would always set off fireworks, and that everything would just get better. Her dreams were so lofty they guaranteed failure.

At nearly every wedding, a man marries the woman he believes will be the ideal wife, and a woman marries what she thinks is an ideal husband. Then, as the pages of the calendar turn, each mate senses the other is changing. Soon they realize their spouse is no longer the person they thought they married—and they feel cheated. What actually happened, though, is that they discovered the real person they married—the one who always lived behind the fantasy. And that unsettling discovery can actually be good for a marriage.

How passion plays out

When Amy and I married, I expected we'd end each busy day by falling asleep in each other's arms. But Amy is more comfortable falling asleep while I keep my arms to myself.



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I also assumed I could meet all of my wife's friendship needs once we'd moved away from her hometown friends and family. I was surprised, and somewhat hurt, to find she still had such a strong need for those other people. But these reality checks gave me a clearer focus on who Amy really is, and it pushed us to greater intimacy.

So the bad news of failed expectations is really good news. By moving from unrealistic ideals to attainable ones, you're set free from trying to achieve the fantasy of marital bliss. You can replace the fairy tale with something better: a real marriage that cherishes two real people.

When couples say "we're just not in love anymore," what they're really saying is they don't feel in love. They mistakenly limit love to its emotional aspects. The truth is much more freeing. Even when feelings come and go, a couple can still be "in love." In the words of the late C. S. Lewis: "Being in love is something you do."

One of my premarital expectations has definitely been fulfilled: I expected Amy and I to have some mammoth fights. More than once my lovely wife has looked at me and said in a voice I don't remember from our dating days, "I love you, but I really don't like you right now." I've expressed the same feeling now and then. We may fight, but always within our promise to each other—a promise that "No matter how I feel, I am committed to love you for the rest of my life, and, by God's grace, I will."

Couples who see their expectations come true are the ones who understand that love, far more than being what you feel, is what you do. That means being committed to serve when



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you don't feel like serving, to listen when you don't feel like listening, and to love when you don't feel very loving.

God cares about passionate feelings, but those feelings won't last uninterrupted, and they can't form a basis for marriage. In some ways I'm glad the feelings of heart-pounding, palm-sweating love haven't gone on nonstop. I remember fidgeting in my office shortly after our honeymoon, getting nothing done because I just wanted to go home to Amy. The days of fidgeting are gone, but I'm thankful those early passionate feelings have returned—over and over, in both new and familiar ways. I'm much more in love with Amy now, but it's a love resulting from our commitment.

Higher hopes

God didn't design your spouse to be the one person who perfectly completes you and fulfills your every desire. He provided a lifelong companion to meet your needs for intimacy and sexual expression in an undemanding, mutually enjoyable atmosphere. Like a stamp and an envelope, or a violin and a bow, you are individuals—but together you become more. You become one. That's an achievable expectation.

In ten years of marriage, Amy and I have sorted out most of our early expectations, seeing which ones we still need to pursue, which need to be tossed out, and which have already become reality. Though we may not fall asleep in each other's arms, our physical intimacy has surpassed anything we ever planned. And now I'm thankful that Amy has cultivated so many outside friendships; these people enrich our lives.

Along the way, we've been able to identify healthy expectations that are worth pursuing. You can expect marriage to be fun.



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You can expect yourself to be faithful, and your spouse to be faithful to you. You can expect to be loved without conditions. You can expect your spouse to be someone you grow with as you fulfill the tasks God gives. You can expect—often through plenty of hard work—to resolve conflict, to accept and enjoy personality differences, and to maintain an active sex life. You can expect to work together to develop a strong sense of shared beliefs, values, and priorities on parenting, money, in-laws, and roles. Finally, you can expect your marriage to honor God.

These are the great expectations of marriage. Studies show that couples with the most vital marriages have very high, yet very realistic, expectations. Research also shows that the ideals aren't nearly as important as the sincere commitment to fulfill them.

Marriage can be "till death do us part," but "happily-ever-after" only happens to couples who are willing to do what it takes to turn their ideals into reality. It's not enough to make the commitment on the day when you stand before friends, family, and God and marry. It's getting up every morning for the rest of your lives determined to make your best expectations come true.

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DO YOU EXPECT TOO MUCH?

Use this quiz to honestly evaluate your own expectations of marriage.

RESPONSE SCALE

0 = Don't know **1 = Strongly disagree** **2 = Disagree** **3 = Agree**
4 = Strongly agree

My partner can and will meet all of my needs. _____

Our current problems can all be resolved by spending more time together. _____

If we commit to it, I believe my mate and I can overcome any problem or struggle. _____

My partner and I want exactly the same things from our marriage. _____

With mutual willingness to teach and learn, our sex life will get better with each passing year. _____

I believe I will always feel in love with my mate. _____

My partner and I fully understand each other. _____

My mate can and should be my best friend. _____

I expect romantic feelings in our marriage to come and go, largely controlled by our own actions. _____

My partner is everything I've ever dreamed a spouse should be. _____

I don't believe there will ever be any serious problems in our relationship. _____

My partner and I have resolved all the issues from our pasts that could affect our relationship. _____

I believe marriage is a gift from God and that overall it will be a very enjoyable experience. _____

I believe our sexual relationship will always be wonderful and free from conflict. _____

Being involved in a church will keep us from having serious marital struggles. _____.

TOTAL SCORE _____



WHAT YOUR SCORE MEANS

0-30

You're wearing dark glasses. Either your view of marriage is somewhat negative, or you are uncertain on a number of marital issues. Seek counsel from a pastor or a wise, older friend who has a healthy, fun marriage.

31-40

Your glasses are clear. You have a fairly realistic expectation of marriage. But seek outside input regarding any areas in which you answered "don't know."

41-50

Your glasses have a rose tint to them. You are very optimistic about marriage, but tend to minimize problems and differences. Find a mentor who will bring realism yet not destroy your excitement.

51-60

Your glasses are completely rose-colored. You are heading toward a major relationship crisis due to failed expectations. Please seek help from an experienced pastor or Christian counselor.

Reflect

- *Do you agree that unrealistic or overly-idealistic expectations of marriage can lead to significant problems or even divorce? Why or why not?*
- *Where should a Christian woman draw the line between God-honoring, high expectations and unrealistic expectations? What are some examples of each?*



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- *Tim writes, "God didn't design your spouse to be the one person who perfectly completes you and fulfills your every desire." Intellectually we know this to be true. Yet often this false belief can creep into our minds and hearts and foster discontent or cause painful conflicts. When has this false expectation crept into your relationship over the past few weeks? When have you felt hurt, angry, or frustrated that your spouse didn't complete you or completely fulfill your deepest desires?*
- *Read **Romans 5:8**, **1 John 3:16**, and **4:7–11**; as you do, reflect for a moment on what these brief passages reveal about the nature of God's love for us. His grace—given freely when we are so undeserving—should overwhelm us! With this in mind, how does your understanding of godly love challenge or inspire you in the way you love your husband?*
- *What unrealistic expectations of your spouse do you feel God nudging you to let go of?*
- *What high hopes do you feel God does want you to place on your marriage? How can you do so in a grace-filled way?*

Get Connected!



Three habits that will get you back
in touch with each other

By Les and Leslie Parrott

“What do you think?” Leslie was twirling in the middle of our tiny apartment modeling her new dress. We’d been married less than a week.

“It’s good,” I responded. “Let’s go then. I’m starving.”

Leslie’s reaction was the first indicator that my wife and I didn’t speak the same language.

“It’s good? That’s all you can say?” Leslie asked.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No.”

“Let’s go.”

“I’m going to change.”



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Five minutes later I heard weeping from the bedroom, where I found Leslie curled up on the bed. Both of us wondered what had just happened. I was bewildered. Leslie was hurt.

It's no surprise that the number-one marriage problem couples report is "a breakdown in communication." But it's a problem that needs to be addressed, since a marriage's success depends on how well partners send and receive messages—and on how well they listen to each other.

Watch your pronouns.

Think back to English class when the discussion centered on first- and second-person pronouns. Then, when you talk to your spouse, use the first-person pronoun ("I") since the second-person "you" will almost always lead to trouble. Here's why.

When you're upset with your partner or feel you've been wronged, your natural tendency is to attack: "You are so insensitive! Don't you ever think about how I might feel about things?" "You" statements make your partner feel accused, blamed, and criticized. And it's highly unlikely he or she will say, "You know, you're exactly right. I really am an insensitive lout." Rather, his or her natural reaction will be to mount a defense: "You are the one who is insensitive. Did you ever consider the pressure I'm under right now?" Exchanging "you" statements is a sure-fire way to spoil an evening.

In contrast, "I" statements dispense clear information and are much more likely to elicit caring concern from your partner. They allow you to express your feeling of being hurt or neglected without judging your mate's behavior. So the next time you feel your mate is ignoring your input, don't level an accusation by using "you." Instead, tear down relational



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barriers by using the first-person pronoun: "I feel hurt and neglected when you don't ask my opinion."

Use your ears.

A sage once said the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth and that ratio should tell us something about the importance of listening. We often equate good communication skills with learning to express ourselves more clearly. But 98 percent of good communication involves listening.

Effective listening can be difficult to learn because in situations where it is needed most, we are usually more focused on what we are going to say next than we are on listening to the message being sent. Consider this typical husband/wife interaction.

Wife: "Look at this. I just got back from the cleaners and there is a gray stain all over this collar. What am I going to do? I planned to wear this dress tonight."

Husband: "Oh, Honey, I don't think anyone would even notice it. Besides, you could wear your yellow dress instead. It looks great."

This husband is trying to be helpful, but he's overlooking a crucial element: he forgot to listen. He's more concerned with solving his wife's problem than with understanding her emotions. If he had listened, he could have made his wife feel heard and understood: "I'm so sorry, I'd be furious too" or "I can't imagine how disappointed you are."

The point of reflective listening is to let your partner know that you heard what he or she said and understood the message behind the words. By the way, reflective listening is a wonderful way to defuse a potential conflict. If your partner starts accusing



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you with, "You're always late," don't respond with, "I am not!" Instead, say, "I know it upsets you when I'm late. It's got to be exasperating." Listen for the message underlying your mate's words. "You are always late" means "I'm upset."

When we teach reflective listening, many couples object on the basis that it feels awkward and sounds phony. That's usually an indication that listening is not grounded in a genuine desire to understand your mate. So make sure your listening comes from the heart. If you truly care, then what you reflect back to your partner will not be mechanical. Like any new skill, it may feel awkward at first. But when you begin to experience the difference it makes in your marriage, the awkward feeling will quickly fade.

Label your next talk.

When *My Fair Lady's* Henry Higgins cries out, "Why can't a woman be more like a man," we all know he's not talking about anatomy. He is an expert in languages and has taught Eliza how to speak "proper" English, but he still can't communicate with her.

Professor Higgins is not alone. At one time or another we've all despaired of ever "getting through" to the opposite sex. To overcome gender-related communication differences, we must accept each other's uniqueness and change our expectations.

Men and women use conversation for different purposes. Women talk to others primarily to form and solidify relationships, while men tend to use words to navigate their way within the hierarchy. They do so by communicating their knowledge and skill, imparting information.



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Women excel at what linguist Deborah Tannen calls "rapport talk." Men feel most comfortable with "report talk." Even though women may have more confidence in verbal ability (aptitude tests prove their superior skill), they are less likely to use that ability in a public context. Men feel comfortable giving reports to groups or interrupting a speaker with an objection—these are skills learned in the male hierarchy. For example, at a party the men tell stories, share their expertise, and tell jokes while the women usually converse in smaller groups about more personal subjects. They are busy connecting while the men are positioning themselves.

How does this relate to communicating with your mate? It comes down to this: conversationally speaking, women share feelings and men solve problems. Once this distinction is understood, an easy solution can be applied. Simply label the type of conversation you want to have and ask your partner to join you. Just because men have a tendency to solve problems and women have a tendency to share feelings doesn't mean that each isn't capable of operating in the other mode. Here's how the conversation could proceed.

Wife: "You wouldn't believe the amount of work my boss is giving me." (She's expressing frustration and hoping for understanding.)

Husband: "Honey, I keep telling you to talk to him about that." (He's offering a solution.)

Wife: "I know, but I'd like to have a 'feelings conversation' right now. I just need to get this out."

Husband: "Okay, tell me about it."



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At that point she can relate the incident, and he can listen to her feelings, reflecting them back to her from time to time. When you realize the two of you are in different modes, labeling a conversation "feeling-talk" or "problem-talk" works magic.

Remember to use "I" instead of "you," practice reflective listening, and label your next conversation mode so you both know if it's feelings-oriented or solution-oriented. You'll soon find that the formerly problematic "breakdown in communication" has turned into the best thing you've ever done to draw closer together.

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Reflect

- *Communication breakdowns are often the most common difficulty in marriage; they can occur on a daily (sometimes even hourly or minute-by-minute!) basis. What types of communication breakdowns do you and your husband usually struggle with? How would you analyze the specific points of miscommunication or differences in understanding in your most recent communication difficulty?*



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- *How close do you feel to your husband? How well does he understand you? Now, how do you imagine your husband would answer these same questions about you?*
- *The Parrotts identified three key communication habits that can help couples overcome common problems. Which stood out to you most as one you need to do a better job at? Why?*
- *Some react to the Parrotts' advice with a feeling that it seems fake or unnatural. Yet, as they point out, "That's usually an indication that listening is not grounded in a genuine desire to understand your mate." In other words, a self-centered focus (perhaps a desire to be heard and understood) rather than an authentic, loving desire to empathize with and care for one's spouse can prevent us from experiencing healthy communication. How deeply do you desire to understand your mate and where he is coming from? How could you foster and strengthen that desire? How might a stronger desire to empathize help you avoid communication breakdowns?*
- *Read the following selections from **Proverbs: 12:18, 25; 15:1, 23; 16:1, 24, 32; 18:2, 13**. As you consider these principles within the realm of marital communication, which strikes you as a truth that you personally need to work on? How might practicing these insights have helped in your most recent marital miscommunication?*

Healthy Conflict?



Six habits to make arguments
work for you

By Gary J. Oliver

"I don't get why you're pressuring me to go to that stupid meeting," Chip told his wife, Cheryl.

Cheryl stared at him. "Pressuring you? I just asked if you'd be willing to go with me. It'll only take an hour. Why is that such a problem for you?"

"Because you 'asked' me in that tone of voice that says I'll be in real trouble if I say no."

"What?" Cheryl said. "Why do you always make such a big deal about a simple request? What's your problem?"

"Well, why do you always have to wait until the last minute to ask me?"



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"Fine!" Cheryl said. "I'll just stop asking. You never want to do anything with me anyway."

Wow. It started with one person's simple request—or what she thought was simple—and ended with hurt feelings, a ruined evening (or maybe an entire weekend), and no physical intimacy.

Wouldn't it be nice if marriage was a smooth ride where we always got along, our spouses saw things exactly as they "should," and nary a conflict arose?

Unfortunately, as much as we try to avoid conflict, we still find it winding its way into our most intimate relationship. But what if God allows conflicts in marriage to grow us rather than simply frustrate us?

In my more than 30 years of working in marriage and family counseling as well as in my own marriage, I've discovered that the deepest levels of intimacy are achieved only at the price of facing our differences and negative feelings, listening, understanding, resolving what we can, and managing the differences we can't resolve.

Conflicts aren't really the problem. What we *do* with them determines the depth of the problem—and whether or not our marriages will succeed.

When a conflict arises we have two options:

1. We can personalize it, interpret it as an attack, and continue the dysfunctional patterns we learned from our families of origin;

2. We can see the positive potential and cultivate simple habits to make that conflict work for us rather than against us, to help



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us understand our spouses and, in the process, understand ourselves better, and to build the trust that can lead to deep levels of intimacy.

If you choose option two—which I highly recommend—here are six habits that will serve you well.

Healthy habit #1: Look for the growth potential.

Conflict is a necessary and valuable part of two becoming one. Unfortunately, since most of us don't understand the potential of healthy conflict, we avoid it and the growth it can bring. We sit on it, hoping the issue will go away, which it never does.

Instead, unresolved conflicts go underground and grow into bigger problems. The more we deny, hide from, overlook, and avoid conflict, the greater the problem becomes. And the more our relationships move into stagnation, deterioration, discouragement, and despair.

When Chip and Cheryl came to see me, they could see only the negative side of each other. "She never plans ahead" and "He always finds something to criticize" were statements they'd both heard and said too many times to count. Rather than looking for the growth potential in working through the conflict, they found it easier to label and lob verbal grenades at each other.

I challenged them the next time they were tempted to throw out a negative comment, to hold their tongues and think about what they could learn from the conflict to help them grow closer.

Healthy habit #2: Study your conflict patterns.

Before a conflict arises, be aware of the situations that set you up for a clash. When are you most likely to disagree? What time of the day or what days of the week do most of your conflicts occur?



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What are your most frequent conflict issues? Since most conflicts tend to be around recurring issues, identifying the common "land mines" can help you avoid them or be prepared for them.

Many of Chip and Cheryl's conflicts revolve around timing issues. Chip doesn't like surprises or last-minute decisions and invitations, whereas Cheryl loves to live in the moment. When Chip gets blindsided by a last-minute "surprise," his response is usually negative. When Cheryl feels minimized and rejected, she goes on the attack.

As I worked with this couple and helped them to identify their conflict patterns, they both were able to take responsibility for their unhealthy reactions and understand what they needed to look out for.

Healthy habit #3: Communicate in healthy ways.

Choose healthy ways to communicate your concerns. Chip and Cheryl's problem was that they verbally attacked each other, which served only to escalate the problem. So I offered them some simple suggestions to make their conflicts more manageable and productive and in the process help them avoid behavior that breeds unhealthy conflict. I encouraged each of them to pick one healthy behavior and work on it for a week.

- **Stay focused on the one issue at hand.** When you start to get sidetracked, call a quick "time" and get back to the main point.
- **Speak for yourself.** Try to say "I" ("I believe," "I feel") rather than the more inflammatory "You" ("You should").
- **Stay in the present and don't bring up past events and old wounds.** Even if you feel they'll help you win, in the end you'll lose.



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- **Don't interrupt.** If your spouse is a talk-hog or monopolizing the discussion, set a timer so that you each get a turn to state your feelings and responses. In the meantime, keep your mouth clamped.
- **Don't generalize** ("You always" or "You never").
- **Don't stonewall your spouse** by running and hiding behind a "stone wall" and refusing to discuss the issue.

Healthy habit #4: Define the one issue.

Make sure there is only one issue and that both of you are discussing that same issue. Sounds simple, right? But most couples don't define their issues, so they end up arguing about different issues when they think they're talking about the same thing.

Chip and Cheryl really blew this one. The surface issue was whether or not Chip would go to the meeting, but in a matter of 60 seconds the covert issues of him once again feeling pressured, her tone of voice, his negativity, her critical spirit, and his minimizing something she thought was important overtook the discussion, and they were off and running.

When I asked them to replay the scenario, they were able to define what for each of them was the core issue: going to the meeting.

Healthy habit #5: Learn from your spouse's point of view.

Too often we enter conflict with the goal of winning and wanting above all else for our spouse to understand us.

Instead, make your primary goal to understand your spouse's point of view. Ask clarifying questions that will help you see the issue through his eyes, hear it with his ears, and feel it with his heart.



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Constructive conflict involves a commitment to stop, look, and listen, and then, *maybe*, to speak.

Proverbs 25:12 says, "Valid criticism is as treasured by the one who heeds it as jewelry made from finest gold." Listen to what your spouse has to say. Even if you think 90 percent is hokey, you can choose to listen for the 10 percent that might be true. Look for even the 1 percent that God could use in your life to help you deepen and mature. And even if you think your spouse is 90 percent of the problem, you can choose to take 100 percent responsibility for your 10 percent.

Regardless of what your spouse chooses to do, you can choose to listen. Listening is one of the most powerful skills in conflict management. If a husband chooses to listen to his wife, she is more likely to think, *I must be important to him if he thinks I'm worth listening to*. If a wife ignores her husband, he's more likely to think, *If she doesn't think I'm worth listening to, she must not care that much about me*.

I encouraged Chip and Cheryl to do a 20/20, where each person has 10 minutes to state a concern with no interruptions and then the spouse has 10 minutes to ask clarifying questions. At the end each person has to share one thing he or she learned that can help each be a better spouse. They flipped a coin, and Cheryl won the toss, so she went first. For them it turned into a 30/30, and they each came away with several "aha's" that they were able to apply immediately.

"The biggest 'aha' for me," said Cheryl, "is that listening and trying to understand really aren't that difficult!"



Deepen Your Love

Healthy Conflict?

Healthy habit #6: Ask yourself one question.

Ask yourself, "What is my contribution to the problem?" It took me years to learn this one. Like most people, I found it much easier to identify my wife's contribution to the problem, how she needed to change, and what she could do differently, rather than to identify my own stuff. Psalm 139:23 says, "Search me [not search my spouse], O God, and know my [not my spouse's] heart." Practicing this one habit alone has had a profound effect on thousands of marriages. Cheryl owned the fact that she could often spring things on Chip at the last minute, and Chip acknowledged that he could often assume the worst and react by "checking out." Once they began to understand and take responsibility for their parts and they stopped making those same bad behavioral choices, their intimacy and trust levels began to deepen.

What is your desire for your marriage? Do you want to decrease those stupid disagreements that blindside you, rob you of joy, and ruin your day? Do you long to be understood and enjoy a greater sense of safety, security, and trust? Do you want to enjoy even deeper levels of intimacy? Every one of those desires is realistic and achievable, and as you choose to cultivate healthy habits, you'll find yourself moving closer to the marriage you've always dreamed of.

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Reflect

- Gary describes this typical response to conflict: "We can personalize it, interpret it as an attack, and continue the dysfunctional patterns we learned from our families of origin." What dysfunctional patterns of dealing with conflict have become a part of your marriage? Which dysfunctional patterns from your family of origin do you personally struggle with?
- What's your reaction to the core idea that conflict can be healthy? Do you tend to think that any and all conflict is negative? Have you ever witnessed or been part of a "healthy" conflict that leads to deeper trust and intimacy? Explain.
- Gary suggests that we study our conflict patterns. So, how about you? How would you answer his questions: "When are you most likely to disagree? What time of the day or what days of the week do most of your conflicts occur? What are your most frequent conflict issues?"
- Read **James 1:19–20** and consider how it speaks to patterns of conflict in your marriage. What does being listened to mean to you? How could honest listening communicate something meaningful to your spouse?
- Gary doesn't pull any punches when he suggests that we learn to honestly ask ourselves, "What is my contribution to the problem?" Even if we feel our spouse is 99 percent at fault, what difference might it make for you to take seriously your 1 percent?
- How can you foster an attitude that is ready and willing to see—and apologize for—your contribution to marital conflicts?

“It” Doesn't Just Happen



A lifetime prescription for sizzling sex
By Clifford L. Penner and Joyce J. Penner

Do you remember the anticipation of going on a date with your future spouse and how desperately you desired one another? And how the sexual tension seemed to mount as you moved toward marriage? Today you may be wondering, *Where's our energy and desire for sex now?* After 20 years as sex therapists, we're convinced that good sex in marriage doesn't "just happen." Couples who keep the sexual spark glowing through the changing stages of marriage are those who are deliberate about their sexual relationship.



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"It" Doesn't Just Happen

The early years: setting the stage

Vibrant married sex depends in part on getting off to a good start. Newlyweds must compare and work through their conflicting expectations. The most common surprises couples face are differences regarding how often they have sex and who initiates it. If couples discuss and negotiate their differences, they can avoid a good deal of frustration and confusion.

A few possible solutions to differences in desire are: compromise on frequency; the husband brings his wife pleasure with or without release, even if he doesn't feel the need himself; the two can cuddle while the husband or wife bring him release; increase the amount of non-erotic cuddling; or enjoying sexual intimacy without intercourse or orgasm.

Surprisingly, couples often think they are arguing about frequency when the real issue relates to who initiates sex. In therapy, when we ask spouses how often each of them initiates sex, a common response is that the husband initiates sex 90 percent of the time and the wife 10 percent. And yet when we ask the same couple how often they each desire sex, he answers three to four times a week, and she says two to three times a week. Frequency isn't the issue, so what's going on?

Men and women differ in how they initiate sex. The wife, for example, might snuggle with her husband and give him a few kisses. If he takes her overture one step further, he seems like the one who is initiating sex since he has become more direct. Over time, this pattern leads a couple to believe the husband is always the pursuer and the wife is never the initiator. Better communication and reversal of roles can help break this negative pattern, as was the case with Jim and Jenny.



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Jim feared that if he left it up to Jenny, they would never have sex. However, he was surprised to learn that she actually enjoyed preparing for and initiating time with him once she gave herself permission to overtly express her desire and he gave her the space to do so.

For some couples, expectations aren't the problem area. Instead, they must work through past sexual experiences that have a way of creeping into their relationship and destroying the joy of new discoveries and unique experiences, as Tony and Beverly learned.

Naturally shy, Tony didn't date much in college. The few relationships he did have involved limited physical contact because of his Christian values. Then he met Beverly. She was everything he wanted in a wife—except she wasn't a virgin. Knowing that Beverly had been sexually active with several serious boyfriends left Tony caught between his attraction to her and his desire to enter marriage as a virgin and marry a virgin.

The intensity of his dismay over Beverly's past didn't hit Tony until a month after he proposed to her. After they married, he continually let her know how disgusted he was with her. He asked detailed questions about her previous boyfriends, then used that information to shame her. Their sex life continued to deteriorate, and finally they sought help.

The first step we recommended was for both Tony and Beverly to experience God's forgiveness. We helped Tony realize that Beverly's actions were not an intentional violation of him as her current husband. He needed to acknowledge that she had been spiritually washed clean before God and could now be considered his virginal bride.



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Next, he had to stop asking questions about his wife's past and then learn to distract his mind from any mental images of her previous involvements. We further recommended that they temporarily stop having intercourse and learn to delight in each other by working through a step-by-step retraining program. This process would eventually lead them to re-consummate their marriage based on a foundation of mutual trust and desire.

Finally, many couples have difficulty transferring their premarital passion into their marriages because they have false assumptions about married sex. Jamie had been raised in a warm, nurturing home, but much of her knowledge about sex came from movies and television—especially daytime soap operas. Curtis, on the other hand, had grown up seeing playful flirting and open physical affection between his father and stepmother. Jamie was devastated when Curtis would come up behind her and start fondling her. She was convinced that a satisfying and delightful sex life should be like what is portrayed on the "soaps." She envisioned the powerful pull of desire and the wooing of a new or "illicit" sexual relationship. Her tears of disappointment left Curtis befuddled, and eventually his frustration over not being able to please her led to outbursts of anger.

To develop a mutually satisfying and delightful love life, couples have to make the shift from the newness of passion to the intimacy of deeply sharing themselves with each other for the joy of companionship and the pleasure of each other's bodies. Jamie needed to counter her myth that passion just happens with the knowledge that she and Curtis were responsible for making great sex happen.

The middle years: making time, finding energy

During marriage's middle years, you may feel as though you



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are merely surviving sexually. The demands of life use up your energy, and your primary desire is often for sleep, not sex.

Jerry and Elaine, married for 13 years, know firsthand that with three kids, two careers, and other commitments, finding the time and energy for sex is a challenge. However, another issue complicates their love life. Jerry clings to the false assumption that Elaine should be available to him sexually whenever he desires. The reality is that marriage is a license to freedom without demand, not a license to possess and control a spouse.

Couples in the second stage of marriage will find their sex life stymied if they continue to believe certain myths about sex. For instance, if Jerry believes that sex has to be spontaneous to be wonderful, he and Elaine won't be having a whole lot of sex. And when they do have sex, it will come at the end of the day when they are both fatigued—something neither of them would prefer.

Another common myth is that spouses must wait for sexual desire before they initiate lovemaking. If they follow that principle, couples can expect to do a lot of waiting and not much acting. Activities and jobs are not the only distractions. At this stage, the privacy necessary for sexual freedom must be protected. For the sexual relationship to survive the challenges of these middle years, private, uninterrupted time for the two of you must be planned into your schedule.

You must keep the pilot light of your sexual relationship lit—even if you don't have the time and energy to turn the flames up as high as you used to. But how do you do that?

- **Keep kissing, passionately, every day.** Kissing is the barometer of the state of your sexual relationship.



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- **Keep open by sharing every day.** Also, plan regular times to talk about sex. Talk about what you like and don't like. Share your dreams and desires. Negotiate your differences. Don't give up.
- **Keep committed to sex, in spite of all the distractions.** Your marriage and sexual relationship must continue to be high priorities. Be cautious of commitments that rob you of time for one another.
- **Keep physically fit.** Rather than watch TV, take a walk together or go bicycle riding. In fact, the best thing you can do for your sex life is to put the TV in the garage!
- **Keep well-groomed.** Maintaining proper care of your body and practicing good hygiene show that you care about and respect your spouse.
- **Keep your sexual feelings turned toward home.** Fantasize being with each other. If sexual feelings are triggered in response to someone other than your mate, immediately put your spouse in the picture and bring the spark home!
- **Keep scheduled.** Just as you need to schedule quality time with your family or individual time with a child, you need to schedule time for your sexual relationship.
- **Keep sex positive.** Your sexual times will be most satisfying if they are free of demand and anxiety and full of care, warmth, physical pleasure, and fun.
- **Keep learning about your own body and your mate's body.** Read books on sexual enhancement out loud together. Experiment with new ideas.
- **Keep coming up with surprises to keep sex from becoming boring.** Leave a love note on your spouse's pillow, light a candle, buy new sheets or change your position in bed.



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The later years: saving the best for last

With children out on their own, personal distractions reduced, and work pressures lessened, marriage's later years can be the most delightful, relaxed years of a couples' sexual life. When our last child left for college, she wondered if we'd get bored. Far from it! We can spontaneously have a candlelight dinner by the fireplace and make love anytime, anywhere. We're once again enjoying the freedom we had in the early years of our marriage, a freedom that we gladly relinquished during the 26 years we had children at home.

In a society that worships youth and disregards the elderly, it is not uncommon to encounter the attitude that sexual activity among the "older set" is suspect or strange. Since sex is so highly connected with the virility of youth, it is no wonder that some people assume sexuality disappears as the skin wrinkles and the hair turns gray. But couples who remain sexually active to the end are likely to be healthier and happier as well as more agile and virile. In fact, the oldest couple we've ever counseled was an 85-year-old man and his 84-year-old wife. They just needed a few sessions for some "mid-course" adaptation!

Certain physical changes are to be expected as the body ages, and those changes naturally affect sexual functioning. However, knowing what to expect can eliminate some of the stress you may experience as you adjust to the changes.

The production of estrogen and progesterone decrease when a woman reaches menopause. Physical and emotional symptoms accompany the hormonal changes. Hot flashes, general aches and pains, and weight gain are common. Emotional reactions such as depression, anxiety, or erratic mood swings can affect the sexual relationship. The physical changes that most affect



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sex are a thinning of the vaginal wall, a lessening of vaginal lubrication, and a sluggishness of the vaginal muscle. Regular exercise, a vaginal lubricant, exercise of the vaginal muscle, and good nutrition with a vitamin-mineral supplement can increase a woman's sense of well-being and sexual pleasure.

Men must also adapt to the changes that come as a result of lower testosterone levels. A husband may experience less urgent, and possibly less frequent, sexual desire. He will likely require direct penile stimulation to get aroused rather than responding to visual stimulation. His erections may not be as firm as they once were, but will still be sufficient for entry. He may not need to ejaculate with each experience, and his ejaculations will be less intense. But neither of these changes should detract from his satisfaction.

At any stage of life, an illness or accident may interfere with typical sexual patterns, but this is more likely true with aging. Touch and the intimacy of closeness are even more important when dealing with physical limitations. Pleasure does not need to stop; it may only need to change. New positions, such as lying side by side, may actually add a new spark. Sex in the morning or after a nap when both of you are well rested may be better.

There is something beautiful about two people enjoying physical intimacy in their fading years just as they did in their blooming years. Older couples can do most anything the young can do—it just may take them longer.

A married life of greater love, passion, and intimacy begins with a husband who adores and affirms his wife, and a wife who invites her husband to share in all her sexual intensity.



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And that can only happen when couples commit time and energy to creating a rewarding, healthy sex life—from the honeymoon night right through to their golden years.

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Reflect

- Privately reflect upon the various stages or seasons of your sexual life with your husband. When have been the "best" times for you so far? In what seasons has it been most difficult to maintain a close and satisfying sexual relationship?
- Clifford and Joyce identify several struggles and challenges that can accompany various periods of married life. Which difficulty do you most identify with? Why?
- What do you imagine your husband might say about your sexual relationship right now? What challenges or frustrations might he identify? Which aspects of your sexual relationship do you think he'd feel good about and want to celebrate?



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- Read **Song of Songs 1:2**. How does your mind-set toward your husband compare or contrast with the bride's in Song of Songs? How can you better focus on and foster a mind-set of sexual desire and appreciation for your husband?
- Regardless of how things have been lately, what's one practical thing you could do this week (or even *today*) to contribute to and enrich your sexual relationship with your husband?

The Love Doctor



Feeling unloved? Author and counselor Gary Chapman reveals a simple prescription that works wonders.

Interview of Gary Chapman by Ron R. Lee

Gary Chapman is a counselor, but he still reminds me of my old football coach. After we'd lose a game, my coach would tell us we needed to concentrate on the fundamentals. When it comes to getting your marriage out of a slump, Chapman draws up the same game plan.

In fact, there's a second similarity between Chapman and my old coach. During practice, when a player would complain about being hot, tired, or thirsty, my coach would counsel: "Suck it up!" Chapman uses nicer language, but he offers basically the same advice: Do whatever it takes to meet your mate's needs, whether you feel like it or not.

*In his New York Times bestselling book *The 5 Love Languages and also Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married (both Northfield)*, Chapman says you can learn to love someone, even if you feel like that person has stopped loving you. It boils down to one fundamental skill: using the language that best communicates love to your spouse.*



People generally get married because they can't bear the thought of not spending the rest of their lives together. If couples start out with so much passion, why does loving each other become such a challenge later on?

Part of it is that when these strong emotions begin to die down, couples mistakenly think they don't love each other as much as they used to. They confuse emotions with love.

But isn't love a pretty emotional thing?

Sure, but love isn't dependent on emotions. Love is what you do and say, not what you feel.

Still, you have a problem if you no longer feel the same amount of love you used to. So what do you recommend?

We all need to do a better job of communicating love, which is a challenge since people usually marry their opposite. I've spoken to large groups of couples all around the country, and I've counseled hundreds of others. And in all the couples I've talked to, I have seldom run across a husband and wife who used and understood the same language of love.

What makes people so different in the way they express love?

I don't know if it's something we learn in childhood or a trait we're born with. But we all have a primary love language that shows up early in life. By the time your kids are five or six, you can begin to see how they express love. If your son is coming up and saying, "Oh, Mommy, let's sit down and read," then he's asking for quality time. Or if your daughter is always hugging you, her language is physical touch. It really doesn't matter how or when we develop a love language, the important thing is to identify what works for those you love, and then to start doing it.



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Why aren't more of us doing what works?

Most people express love in the way that comes most naturally to them, and we assume our mate recognizes those actions as expressions of love. But if our mate speaks a different language, most of the things we're doing just won't communicate. You end up with both spouses expressing love and wondering why the other one doesn't acknowledge it. At the same time, they're both wondering why their mate isn't doing any loving things for them.

What are the languages of love?

Based on case studies of the couples I have counseled over the years, certain themes are repeated. And those themes indicate that people give and receive love in five different ways: sharing quality time; physical touch; expressing words of affirmation; giving and receiving gifts; and performing acts of service.

Can you give an example of each of these languages?

Let's start with words of affirmation. It simply means making statements—either spoken or written—that show you value your spouse. Statements such as, "You look nice today." "I love you." "Thanks for taking the garbage out." These are statements that focus on something your spouse has done or something he or she is.

The second language, giving and receiving gifts, is pretty self-explanatory. You know the old saying, "It's the thought that counts." But it's not the thought left in your head that counts, it's the gift that came out of the thought. It doesn't have to be expensive; it can be anything that shows your spouse you had him or her in mind when you selected the gift.

What are examples of the other languages?

Acts of service involve doing anything you know your spouse



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would like you to do. It could be cooking a meal, washing the dishes, vacuuming floors, or putting gas in the car.

The fourth language is quality time, which means giving your spouse your undivided attention. It could be sitting on the couch together, talking; going out to eat together; or taking a walk.

The last one, physical touch, includes things like hugs, backrubs, holding hands, and kissing. Some men jump to the conclusion that their love language is physical touch because they have such a strong sex drive. But I'm referring to nonsexual touch, like resting your hand on your spouse's leg while you're driving.

If a lot of guys wrongly assume their language is physical touch, does that mean it's not all that easy to identify your own love language?

If you give it some thought, you can pin it down. First, ask yourself how you tend to express love. You may do all five from time to time. But if you think about it, you'll find one that is predominant.

The second clue is to ask yourself, "What do I gripe about the most?" If you tend to complain, "We don't ever spend any time together," then your love language probably is quality time.

The third question is: "What do I request most frequently from my husband or wife?" If you often say, "Honey, remember to bring me something back from your business trip," you like to receive gifts. Put these three clues together and you'll determine your love language.



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Now to the hard part. How can we identify our spouse's love language?

You use the three-step process. You ask, "How does my spouse express love to me most often?" Then, "What does my spouse request from me the most?" And finally, "What does my spouse complain about?" The answers will tell you your mate's language.

If both spouses have been feeling unloved, how does your approach help them get back on track?

It depends on why they are feeling distant. If there has been infidelity, physical abuse, alcoholism or drug abuse, you need to do a lot more than just learn a new way to express love. Those problems call for professional counseling. But if your problems are less serious, learning to speak your mate's language will create a climate that makes it easier to work on other issues. Expressing love is not the whole solution, but it's a critical part of any solution.

If you've been feeling unloved, what would motivate you to learn a "foreign" language just so you can love someone you feel isn't bothering to love you?

Motivation is important, but I never said this was easy. People have all kinds of reasons for not wanting to do this. They say "it's just not me." But there are a lot of things we don't like to do; and there are plenty of things that don't come naturally. But we learn to do them anyway.

One man told me he had been married 17 years and had never known how to show his wife he loved her. Then he realized her language was receiving gifts. But he didn't have the foggiest idea how to buy the right gifts. So he asked his sister to help him pick out some things for his wife. This guy realized he needed to learn a new behavior, so he went out and found the help he needed.



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What do you suggest for people who have trouble putting their feelings into words?

When people tell me, "I didn't grow up in a home where we did that sort of thing. I'm just not a verbal person," I often respond, "So what?" I know it's difficult, but you can learn to do it.

Whenever you hear someone pay a compliment, for example, write it down. Or as you read books or magazine articles, pick out expressions of love and start making a list. Then stand in front of a mirror and read your list out loud. After a while, it will begin to feel more comfortable.

Then, of course, you start saying these things to your wife or husband. Once you do it a few times it becomes much easier.

I can hear people saying, "Gary Chapman is one to talk. He's a marriage expert. This stuff comes easily to him!"

The truth is, some of these things *don't* come easily for me. My wife, Karolyn, and I had terrible struggles the first few years of our marriage. It's terrible to be married for three or four years and lose all your feelings of love for each other.

How did you rekindle your love?

I started studying the life of Jesus, and I saw how much of a servant he was to his followers. That's when the concept of a husband being a servant/leader began to dawn on me. I could see that when I failed to help Karolyn around the house, the climate wasn't very good at home. But whenever I did some little thing to help her, it made a positive impression. I didn't have all the theories worked out back then, but I realized my wife's love language was acts of service. After months of feeling totally unloved, she finally sensed that I did love her after all.



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I'll be honest. I don't like running the vacuum. My mother made me do it when I was a boy, and I never have liked it. But I vacuum the floors about once a week now, and there's only one reason why: I love Karolyn and I want her to know it. Every time I vacuum the floor, my wife realizes, *He cares. He's helping me.*

Vacuuming the floors is one thing, but what if your mate's language is meaningful time? In order for you to deliver on that one, you're going to have to give something up.

You've hit on a key truth about love: It's costly. But if you're not willing to give something up, you're saying the things that currently take up your time are more important than your marriage. It's a matter of seeing marriage as a priority, and then deciding what you can give up. Actually, we make those decisions all the time. If we want to go to a ballgame, we give up the other things we could be doing with that time.

This stuff can feel pretty overwhelming. Is it okay to start off with something easy and then gradually work up to the bigger stuff?

Sure. Even a small step will begin to change the emotional climate of a relationship. I encourage couples to start with a specific assignment that is relatively easy: Each spouse determines one way he or she can express love during the coming week. Let's say a woman's language is acts of service. She could ask her husband: "How about taking out the garbage without being reminded?" He'd say, "Okay. How often would you like me to do it?" And she'd say, "How about every two days?" He would then set that as his goal for the week.

He starts taking out the garbage, and every time his wife sees the emptied waste basket she feels a little tingle inside. *Hey, he's really taking this seriously.* She begins to feel better immediately.



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What does she do for her husband?

Let's say his language is physical touch, and she's just not very expressive in that way. He would ask her to do something nonthreatening. "How about when you enter or leave a room, you touch me on the shoulder as you walk by?" And she'd say, "I can do that." As the week goes by, every time she touches his shoulder, inside he feels, "She's really trying. This is wonderful." He begins to have positive feelings toward her after months of emotional distance.

Does this approach always produce such positive results?

Usually, but not always. I can't guarantee that if you love your spouse, that he or she will reciprocate. But I *can* tell you that emotional love is a desperate need for all of us. So if you'll speak your mate's primary language over the long haul, there's a high probability he or she will respond.

Most people want an intimate relationship. They want to have a sense that, as a couple, they are one. They just don't know how to get it. That's why I spend so much time helping people learn their mate's love language. It's one way you can both get what you need in marriage.

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Reflect

- *Based on Gary's three questions, which of the five love languages do you feel is your most dominant? If possible, rank them in order, from most dominant to least important.*
- *Using the same questions, how do you guess your spouse would rank the five love languages? Why?*
- *Read **1 Peter 1:22**. What do you think it means to love your spouse deeply? What would it look like for you to love your husband in a way that made him feel deeply loved?*
- *Gary points out that love is costly. Loving your spouse with his love language may feel unnatural, take effort, and require sacrifices. What's tough for you about "speaking" your husband's main love language? What's the "cost" to you? Why is it worth it?*
- *What's something that your spouse has said or done recently that has helped you to feel loved? How can you express appreciation for that demonstration of love?*
- *What's one thing you will do today to speak to your spouse in his primary love language?*



Love's Timeline

How to make sure your marriage
gets better with age

by Gary J. Oliver

Mike considered himself a good lover. That is until his wife, Tina, asked him to move out after nine years of marriage. "It has become painfully clear that I don't know much about what it means to love," he admitted. "I mean *really* love."

Why is love so difficult? Why do so many couples like Mike and Tina start out with good intentions and then stumble? The answer is that many don't really understand love. Over the years, I've counseled couples whose functional definition of love could be summed up as "a feeling that you feel when you feel that you're going to feel a feeling that you've never felt before." Add to this confusion the expectation many couples have that love will never change—and disappointment is guaranteed.



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But just as each year has different seasons, there are also seasons to a relationship. God designed each season to produce a different kind of love.

The first season: face-to-face

Falling in love is the first, and sadly for some couples, the *only* season of love. Often couples confuse infatuation with love. A husband might see his wife as he would *like* her to be—a warm, caring person who always keeps his needs foremost in her mind. Who she truly is—a woman who can be angry and upset with him at times—is irrelevant.

Judith Voirst, in her book *Love & Guilt*, provides a humorous, and yet truthful, distinction between love and infatuation. "Infatuation is when you think he's as gorgeous as Robert Redford, as pure as Solzhenitsyn, as funny as Woody Allen, as athletic as Jimmy Connors and as smart as Albert Einstein. Love is when you realize that he's as gorgeous as Woody Allen, as smart as Jimmy Connors, as funny as Solzhenitsyn, as athletic as Albert Einstein and nothing like Robert Redford in any category—but you'll take him anyway."

Tina and Mike, in their nine years of marriage, had never moved beyond infatuation. During their courtship, they experienced the electricity of *eros*, or romantic love. It was new, exciting and intense—everything they assumed love would be.

When they were dating, Tina and Mike experienced an all-absorbing involvement in one another—seeing each other daily and talking by phone late into the night. They yearned for physical closeness and held hands whenever possible. "Our love felt so real," Tina says, "and I thought those feelings would last forever."



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Of course the feelings didn't last. Soon after their honeymoon, life got in the way. Mike worked hard to establish himself as a top salesman in a major communications company. His 60-hour work weeks didn't leave much time for his wife. By their fifth anniversary, Tina was busy, too, keeping up with three active preschoolers.

Looking back, they realized that since their wedding day, they had done little to cultivate their relationship. In fact, with each passing year, they ran their life more as "married singles" than as a married couple. What communication they did have focused on housekeeping and childcare.

Like many couples, they were treating love as a commodity. But love isn't like a piece of furniture that sits off in the corner, needing only an occasional dusting. Love is more like a plant that requires careful, long-term attention. For ten years I lived in Nebraska, where I learned about farming. The first lesson was that planting a seed is only the beginning of the growth process. Many long hours are spent cultivating, fertilizing and watering before the seeds grow into mature plants. It's not always fun, but when the harvest comes it's worth it. And so, in the romance stage of love, the seeds are planted. But without constant care and attention, romance can't grow into mature love.

Mike and Tina were relieved to learn that there were steps they could take to turn their disillusionment into a deeper level of love. I encouraged them to find three other couples who would pray for them and their marriage on a daily basis for the next six months. Then I helped them shift the focus away from the tension between them by having them concentrate on becoming friends as well as lovers.



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To help establish that friendship, I recommended that each day they read a devotional from *Quiet Times for Couples* (Harvest House) by H. Norman Wright. The devotionals are short and easy-to-read, and rather than focusing on problems they focus on growth.

Finally, I encouraged Tina and Mike to go out on a date at least twice a month. Often I encourage couples to see a movie, but with two stipulations. First, the film must end early enough that they can go to a restaurant afterward to discuss it. Whether they liked the movie or not is irrelevant. The point is to share thoughts and feelings. And second, during their dates, they can't bring up any conflict-causing issues. A date is a time to enjoy one another.

By nurturing their friendship, Tina and Mike were able to move beyond the disillusionment of lost romance. This is a necessary step that bridges the first and second seasons of love.

The second season: shoulder-to-shoulder

Many couples miss the rollercoaster highs and lows of early romantic love. But as their love deepens, they will enjoy the beauty of *phileo*—the bond of friendship. Friendship love combines the intensity of romance with the stability of knowing a spouse is committed to learning how to appreciate you for who you are rather than what he or she thinks you should be.

In this second season of love, couples begin to understand that love is a deliberate choice—not merely a feeling. To build on this deeper level of love, I often encourage couples to choose a meaningful act they will perform for each other. I ask them to write it down somewhere so they can keep track of what they've done. Most of us tend to overestimate the loving things we do for our partner, and underestimate the loving things they do for us.



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The action can be something simple like taking out the trash. It might be a phone call or a card. My wife, Carrie, and I have devotions together in the morning. I always try to get her a cup of coffee before she asks. I like to anticipate her need and go ahead and meet it.

The deeper sense of friendship that develops in the second season leads to a different kind of communication. You're eager to learn how to read your mate. What are his or her unique needs and desires? What shows that she's hurt or discouraged? What indicates he's unhappy or anxious?

Several years ago, Carrie and I decided to read the book *Prayer* by Richard Foster. We would read a chapter independently, then talk about it and practice a particular approach to prayer. Often we found out more about one another in meaningful, intercessory prayer than we did in long conversations.

While partners are learning more about one another, it's also a time to learn what methods of communication are most effective. For Mike and Tina, their pattern of communicating—a brief comment here, a short observation there—created what Paul Tournier calls "dialogues of the deaf." They were talking but not being heard.

Carrie and I have experienced that in our marriage. I sometimes hear my wife express concerns in prayer, things she has already expressed to me, but her words didn't register before because we were communicating on the run.

An excellent tool to help spouses draw one another out is the workbook *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby and Claude King. I encouraged Mike and Tina to set aside at least 30



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minutes a week to share what God was teaching them about their individual relationships with him and to ask some open-ended questions of one another.

I reminded Mike that in conversation, men like to get to the bottom line. But women aren't looking for a summary statement. For them, the bottom line is the process of sharing together. What may seem like "small talk" to Mike is probably "important talk" to Tina.

While romantic love is almost always a face-to-face relationship, friendship love is often shoulder-to-shoulder. Spouses are working together on something greater than both of them. They don't just find their oneness in each other, but in shared interests and in working toward a mutual goal. Spiritual growth was such a goal for Carrie and me when we worked through the *Experiencing God* workbook and applied the truths to our marriage.

The third season: soul-to-soul

As Mike and Tina made progress in the friendship stage of love, they were excited to learn that in the third season of marriage they would experience more passion and intensity than ever before. Couples build on the foundation of romantic love and the security of friendship love and then discover that real love involves an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person. That's when agape, or sacrificial love, begins to take root.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis observed that many people have the mistaken idea that "If you have married the right person you may expect to go on 'being in love' forever. As a result, when they find they are not, they think this proves they have made a mistake and are entitled to a change—not realizing that, when they have changed, the glamour will presently go out



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of the new love just as it went out of the old one. In this department of life, as in every other, thrills come at the beginning and do not last. . . . Let the thrill go—let it die away—go on through that period of death into the quieter interest and happiness that follow—and you will find you are living in a world of new thrills all the time."

Couples in this season experience a sympathetic sensitivity that accepts each other's weaknesses and shortcomings. This mutual acceptance comes largely with time. When God makes a squash, he takes six months. When he makes an oak tree, he takes 100 years. Couples who want a deep, sacrificial love know that growing such a love, like growing a tree, takes time.

While acceptance is vital in this stage of love, author Leighton Ford adds an important twist to it. He said, "God loves us just the way we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way." The third stage of love goes beyond acceptance to growth. Because you love each other, you want to see your mate become the person God designed him or her to be.

The seasons of love don't always follow a set sequence. Rather, the growth of love is more circular. I've worked with couples who are experiencing all three stages at the same time. Also, none of the stages has a prescribed time limit. I know couples married less than ten years who were already enjoying the harvest of love in season three, and others married for 35 years who were still riding the roller coaster of the first season.

Most people don't have a clear understanding of the depth and breadth of true biblical love. For that reason, I encourage couples to look up three different versions of 1 Corinthians 13. I then have them write out their own paraphrase in modern-day



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language, of this chapter of Scripture. Couples have told me it helped them personalize God's truth about love.

To make love practical, as well as personal, I challenge every spouse to do one thing for his or her partner every day for the next month. Pick an act of kindness, and practice it for 30 days without calling attention to it. Observe the difference that comes when you work to build, encourage, nourish and cherish the love you and your spouse share.

Gary J. Oliver, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and director of the Center for Marriage and Family Studies and professor of psychology and practical theology at John Brown University. This article was first published in the Summer 1998 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Reflect

- *Gary observes that these three stages of love may occur in a linear, cyclical, or overlapping manner in a couple's life together. What stage would you say you are in right now: face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder, or soul-to-soul? Why?*
- *What do you most appreciate about the stage you are in right now? Why? (Even if you are experiencing hard times in your marriage, seek God's help in honestly answering this question.)*
- *As you look ahead for your marriage, what do you hope your relationship will be like in five years? in 10? in 20?*
- *What practical choices, actions, or habits need to take priority in your life in order to move you toward that long-term vision?*



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- *Read **1 Corinthians 13**, inviting God to speak to you about the part you are to play in deepening your marital love. What do you find most convicting in this passage? What is most inspiring? Why?*
- *Gary concludes his article with a challenge: 30 days of secret acts of kindness toward your spouse. What are some little things you can do? Brainstorm several ideas and commit to take on Gary's challenge.*

Additional Resources



Where to go to learn more

Articles

“The Art of Staying Married”—*Sometimes it takes a big blowup to remind us of the things that really matter*

By Phil Callaway, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“The Bickersons”—*Why our squabbles are good for our marriage*

By Carla Barnhill, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Bigger than Both of Us”—*How my view of our marriage was radically shifted*

By Carolyn Arends, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Can We Talk?”—*7 tips to get your spouse to open up*

By Elaine Creasman, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Christian Sex Rules”—*A guide to what's allowed in the bedroom*

By Louis and Melissa McBurney, available on
TodaysChristianWoman.com



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Additional Resources

“Confessions of a Former Perfectionist”—*How four discoveries helped me realize my unreasonable expectations of my husband*
By Kathy Collard Miller, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“The Date I’ll Never Forget”—*What two octogenarians taught my husband and me about true love*
By Kelli B. Trujillo, available on GiftedForLeadership.com

“Go Ahead. Get Closer . . .”—*With these 8 easy habits of the heart*
By Les and Leslie Parrott, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Growth by Dependence”—*Contrary to what the world may say, our mutual surrenders are what enrich us.*
By Phillip Yancey, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Keep Sex Fun”—*Use these 13 tips!*
By Gary and Barbara Rosberg, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Lift Lines”—*Questions to take your marriage to higher levels*
By Gary and Barbara Rosberg, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Our Best Sex Advice”—*For 20 years MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP has offered real, biblical, practical insight for bedroom issues. Here are 20 of the best!*
By MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP columnists, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“A Team of Two”—*4 steps toward building a vibrant marriage partnership*
By Renee S. Sanford, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com



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Additional Resources

“Timing Is Everything”—*How to make the most of your time together.*

By Christy Scannell, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“What Every Woman Needs to Know About Sexual Satisfaction”

By Joyce J. Penner, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Why Affairs Happen”—*And what you need to know about prevention and recovery.*

By Cindy Crosby, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Books

40 Unforgettable Dates With Your Mate by Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg (Tyndale House, 2002; 200 pages). Is your relationship running out of gas? Bring back the zing by taking your spouse out on some of these fun and creative dates.

The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts by Gary Chapman (Northfield Press, 2010; 208 pages). Marriages may be made in heaven, but they must be nurtured here on earth. In this new paperback edition of Dr. Gary Chapman's bestselling book, *The 5 Love Languages*, he explains how people communicate love in different ways, and shares the wonderful things that happen when men and women learn to speak each other's language. Chapters are categorized by love language and each one ends with simple steps to express a specific language to your spouse and guide your marriage in the right direction.



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Additional Resources

The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment by Clifford and Joyce Penner (Thomas Nelson, 2003; 352 pages). It's harder than it looks on the movie screen! Satisfaction eludes many couples in the bedroom, but with solid, biblical advice, you can experience the gift that sex is meant to be. Guidance on anatomy and physical dysfunction, communication, and techniques make this manual ideal for newlyweds or long-married pairs.

Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage by Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg (Focus on the Family, 2004; 144 pages). Habitual avoidance of conflict is the number one predictor of divorce. Do you avoid conflict resolution because you don't know how to deal with it effectively? *Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* provides you with an excellent examination of conflict and a practical step-by-step process for resolving it in a healthy manner.

I Love You More: How Everyday Problems Can Strengthen Your Marriage by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2005; 208 pages). Learn how marriages can thrive when couples use everyday difficulties to *strengthen* their relationships! Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott reveal the most common sources of marital discord; the fine line between obstacles and opportunities; the importance of accepting the two sides of sex and intimacy; and the five not-so-easy steps for solving problems.

Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires, the Respect He Desperately Needs by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Thomas Nelson, 2004; 324 pages). Communication between a husband and wife is often frustrated because of the vastly different ways in which men and women perceive love. Women are wired to need unconditional love and men need to feel unconditionally respected. This resource provides honest insight about how you can revitalize the love in your marriage.



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Additional Resources

Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy? by Gary L. Thomas (Zondervan, 2002; 304 pages). Starting with the discovery that the goal of marriage goes beyond personal happiness, writer and speaker Gary Thomas invites readers to see how God can use marriage as a discipline and a motivation to love him more and reflect more of the character of his Son.

Sacred Sex: A Spiritual Celebration of Oneness in Marriage by Tim Alan Gardner (Random House, 2002; 240 pages). Self-help books on sexual intimacy often top bestseller lists, but many couples continue to struggle with their relationships. Now you can experience physical love the way God intended. With sensitivity and wisdom, Gardner shows how you and your spouse can enjoy a soul-touching life of intimacy that will bless you far beyond the bedroom walls.

Bible Studies

“Communication in Marriage”—a six-session Bible study examining biblical principles that can help you communicate more effectively and lovingly with your spouse, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.

“Finding Joy in the Difficult Marriage”—a six-session Bible study from ChristianBibleStudies.com exploring how God can help you make it through the rough spots in marriage and find joy in your relationship.

“Fireproof”—a single-session Bible study exploring the movie *Fireproof* and applying its principles to your own marriage, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.



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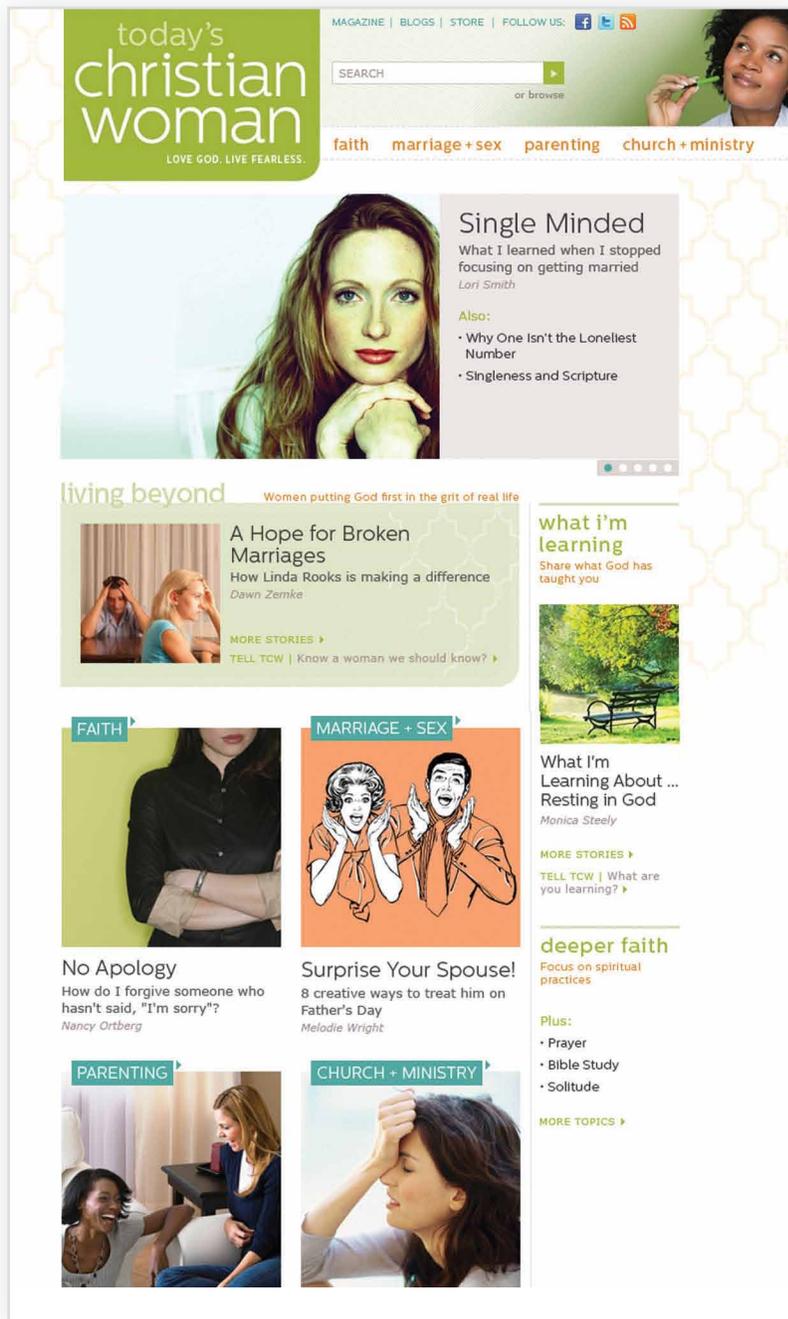
“Marriage and Opposite Sex Friends”—a single-session Bible study about nurturing healthy opposite-sex friendships while maintaining God-honoring boundaries, available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

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