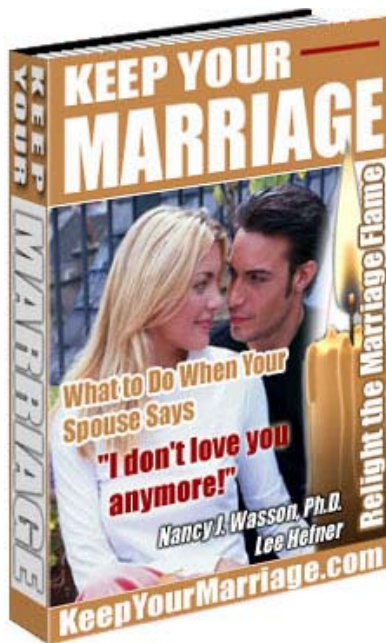


Keep Your Marriage

**What to Do When Your Spouse Says
“I don’t love you anymore!”**



By

Nancy J. Wasson, Ph.D., and Lee Hefner

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Author’s Note

All individuals mentioned in examples and stories in *Keep Your Marriage* are composite characters drawn from our life experiences. Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

For clarity’s sake in the book, we use the term “unhappy spouse” or “frustrated spouse” to refer to the partner who has made the announcement “I don’t love you anymore,” even though in reality there can be discontent on both sides in a marriage. In contrast, we sometimes use the term “surprised spouse” for the partner on the receiving end of the news.

These Tips Can Benefit a Husband Or a Wife

Since both husbands as well as wives can find themselves on the receiving end of a troubled spouse’s announcement, this book is addressed to both men and women. For this reason, we alternate between the use of male and female pronouns throughout the book. This is to avoid the awkward “him or her” phrasing.

Disclaimer

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED AS A GENERAL GUIDE for married couples, and it aims to provide tips to complement other counseling efforts. As a general guide, it is not intended to be used in place of therapy or professional support. The reader is encouraged to consult with professionals such as counselors, psychologists, family therapists, physicians, and attorneys for specific guidance. The authors are not attorneys, and this book is not intended to provide legal advice. If your spouse leaves or requests a separation or divorce, you will want to consult with an attorney and obtain legal advice.

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Marriage is not always easy. Couples should expect to devote considerable time and effort in order to produce their desired results. The recommendations that are offered in this book are not suitable for all partners. Each marriage situation is unique, and no book or approach can cover all possibilities and concerns.

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Introduction

Like so many others, are you a spouse who has been blindsided by an unhappy partner who suddenly announces, “I don’t love you anymore” or “I’m leaving”? Are you now wondering if you can save your marriage?

With the words “I don’t love you anymore,” a marriage can be split wide open, along with the heart of the mate who may not have suspected that anything was wrong. If this has just happened to you, you know the kind of heartbreak and devastating pain that we’re talking about. And since you’re reading this book, our guess is that you’re asking yourself “Can my marriage be saved?”

In the midst of profound confusion, disbelief, and shock, you may find that endless questions haunt you during every waking hour. What should you do next? What would be helpful? What would make things worse? Is there a chance that your spouse may have a change of heart?

The answers to these questions are contained in this book. We’ll explain what steps to take next, which actions can be helpful and which actions you should avoid. And yes, a spouse *can* change her mind—it happens all the time.

No one can guarantee that you’ll be able to save your marriage. After all, no one, yourself included, can predict the intentions, thoughts or emotions of your spouse. But you’ll significantly increase the odds in your favor if you know what other individuals in your situation have done to successfully relight the marriage flame.

The actions that you choose to take now in relating to and communicating with your spouse can directly affect whether or not she heads straight to divorce court or slows down enough to reconsider.

Even if you are dissatisfied and disheartened about your current relationship with your spouse, there is always hope. By keeping positive and by taking constructive action, you are putting yourself in the best possible place for good things to happen for you and your husband or wife.

SECTION I: Get Ready to Take Action

Before you can know what to do about your marriage, you’ll need to do some soul searching. Here we offer you some guidance in how to gauge your level of commitment in your marriage. You’ll want to ask yourself some basic questions. The ten questions we suggest are important because unless you really believe that your marriage is worth saving, no amount of advice we can give you will save it.

Next, it will pay you to be self-aware of your own behavior. Why, you ask? Because many people resort to knee jerk reactions when they’ve been hurt that may not be helpful. If you have any intention of staying married, you’ll definitely want to understand some things you should NOT do with your spouse. Never mind if you feel justified in doing any of these things. Sometimes our emotions can betray us and come back to bite us where it hurts.

Finally, don’t give up prematurely. There’s always hope for your marriage if you’re willing to do your part in keeping your relationship together.

CHAPTER 1: Ten Important Questions to Ask Yourself

These Answers Will Tell You If Saving Your Marriage Is Possible

After you recover from the initial shock of learning that your relationship is in jeopardy, it’s time to decide what to do next. You’ll want to think about what you believe to be the most important priorities in your life. This will include considering all the things that make you feel good about yourself, such as your work, your health, your appearance, your sense of self-respect, your children, and so on. What impact does your marriage have on these areas of your life?

Next focus on what makes you feel emotionally secure. Many people say that feeling loved, appreciated and supported are important factors in their sense of security. How much of your need for security is presently being met in your marriage? How much do you value it?

By establishing what you value the most, you put yourself in a position to decide if your marriage is worth fighting for. This will help you determine what you’re willing to do in your relationship. And what you’re willing to do in order to rescue and revive your marriage is what this chapter is about.

It’s Time to Decide What You Want

Before you do anything else, retreat to a quiet, private place and answer the ten questions presented in this chapter. Your answers to these crucial questions will help you to clarify what will be the best course of action for you to take.

You’ll want to allow plenty of time so that you don’t feel rushed. Notice what thoughts and feelings come up for you as you read the questions. Also notice any reactions in your body, such as a tight stomach, headache, or lump in the throat. Pay attention to your energy level and intuition (sometimes referred to as your “gut reaction”).

Your goal is to take all of your reactions, thoughts, and beliefs into consideration as you make a thorough assessment of your current feelings. In deciding what is most important in your life, don’t forget to consider peripheral benefits of your marriage relationship. These may include the stability in the lives of your kids as well as extended family ties that you enjoy as a result of your marriage. Also consider the spin-off implications of divorce and its impact on your children’s lives and on your life.

Also, don’t be afraid to question your beliefs about yourself and your marriage. Your behavior springs from your beliefs. For example, you may believe that once a partner’s feelings have cooled off, the marriage is over. In this case, deciding to re-evaluate and modify this one conviction could be the deciding factor in saving your marriage.

Ten Important Questions to Answer

The following questions will guide you in deciding what you want to do concerning your marriage. Your answers will help you assess how much effort and energy you are willing to invest in trying to save your marriage.

1. Do you really want to save your marriage? Or would you rather just call it quits and get a divorce?

This first question looks like a hard question to answer, but it’s not as difficult as it appears. Sometimes spouses can feel so betrayed and wounded that they can’t conceive of continued intimacy with a partner. They may experience a profound shift in their feelings toward the other person, and they know on some deep level that the marriage is over.

In other cases, the spouse who is surprised by the news may be secretly relieved that the other partner has finally provided a reason to end the marriage. This spouse may have been moderately unhappy for some time, but has not wanted to take the initiative in ending the marriage. Now the partner who has

confessed, “I don’t love you anymore,” can be the “bad guy” to family and friends, letting the other partner off the hook.

If you are absolutely sure that you don’t want to stay in your marriage, then answer “no” to the first question. But if you have any doubts at all, if any part of you is not completely sure you want your marriage to be over, then answer “yes” to this question. And since you’re reading this book, we assume that you’re at least somewhat reluctant to end the relationship.

2. *Are you willing to do whatever it takes in order to keep your marriage, even if it’s a huge challenge?*

Make an honest assessment of the energy you’re willing to commit to rebuilding your marriage. If you believe that you shouldn’t have to do very much and that your partner is the one who needs to make most of the changes, your marriage might limp along for awhile longer.

But be aware that sooner or later, the original unresolved issues that blindsided you will reappear. In a true partnership, both partners share responsibility for the quality of the relationship. This is true even when it appears that only one spouse is responsible. A satisfying marriage represents the combined energy and efforts of both spouses to keep the marriage flame burning brightly.

3. *Can you persevere even when you feel that the situation is unfair?*

You can complain that the situation is unfair and that your spouse is being unfair, but that won’t change what is. If you get stuck in keeping track of what’s fair, you’ll always be unhappy. You’ll end up spending your energy banging your head against a wall until you wear yourself out or make yourself sick.

Of course it seems unfair that your spouse’s feelings have changed while yours are still strong, if that’s the situation. However, if you continually harp about how unfair everything is, you’ll have less energy available to you in the present moment.

Also, if you focus on the unfairness, you’ll be more likely to express your feelings in terms of “shoulds” or “right” and “wrong.” By stating that your partner’s

feelings *should not* have changed and that she is *wrong*, you are stepping into a judgmental mode that will only make the other person more defensive.

When this happens, some spouses start to care more about being “right” than they do about creating a loving marriage. The language you use is important because it affects the way you frame what has happened to yourself and others. Our subconscious takes in what we say and supports our viewpoint. So if you dwell on how unfairly you’ve been treated, you’ll begin to feel victimized and powerless.

4. *Can you handle being the partner who is working the hardest to keep the marriage flame burning?*

It’s tempting to either feel like a martyr or to feel self-righteous in this situation. Neither will be helpful to you at this time. Ask yourself if you think you can hang in there if you’re giving 80% and your partner is only giving 20%.

Spouses contribute differing amounts of time, energy, and effort at different times in the course of a marriage. Due to various life situations, sometimes the balance of who does what is temporarily skewed all out of proportion.

A common saying states, “You can either choose to be right or choose to be happy.” Which is most important to you? Either way, it’s a choice that you make every day. In a similar way, you also choose whether a perfect balance is more important than harmony in your relationship. The answer hinges on how important your marriage is to you and if you’re willing to take on an extra load temporarily for the long-term benefit of creating a satisfying, harmonious union.

5. *Do you have, or can you develop, the self-discipline to resist impulsive actions that could undermine your marital relationship?*

You need to be able to control impulsive behavior that can be harmful to your marriage, such as asking your spouse the same questions repeatedly or demanding answers on the spot. If you can’t back off emotionally enough to give your spouse some space, your spouse may prematurely leave the marriage in

order to escape. In other words, you’ll be your own worst enemy and will bring about the very thing you’re trying to prevent.

So what do you do if you want to save your marriage but you know how difficult it is for you to bite your tongue? One course of action is to talk to your family physician and ask for advice. Sometimes when a person is very agitated, hyperactive, or anxious, medication is needed to give the person the extra help needed to get through a stressful time. If you are calmer, less agitated, and able to sleep better, then it’ll be easier for you to be less confrontational.

Another option is to increase your activity level so that you are able to release troublesome feelings in an appropriate way. You might take up exercises such as walking, working out at the gym, or swimming at the local YMCA. In addition, you might write your feelings in a private journal. Or you could find a counselor you’d like to talk to about your self-control issues. Any of these solutions relieves emotional pressure.

6. *Will you commit to being consistent in following the recommended strategies for as long as it takes?*

You’ll need determination and patience to be able to live indefinitely without knowing how things will turn out in the end. If you follow the suggestions for a short time only and then stop, your efforts will likely have been for nothing.

It’s damaging to tell your spouse you’re going to do something and then not do it. This makes it even harder for your partner to believe and trust what you say, and it undermines your spouse’s confidence in you and in the future of the marriage.

So the bottom line is not to promise you’re going to do something unless you really are committed to taking action and following through on what you say. It’s worse to say you’re going to do something and then not do it than to do nothing at all. Be sure you can back up anything you promise to do.

7. Can you keep your strategy to yourself without telling all of your friends and family members?

It’s best to limit talking to others in detail about your marriage difficulties. Be discreet about sharing information about the specific problems in your relationship or the details of your current strategy. That way you can take the actions that are right for you without others critiquing your every move. Other people can have good intentions and sincerely want to help, but often their attempts only make things worse.

It only complicates things for you and your spouse if other people get overly involved. This especially comes back to haunt couples when they do work out their problems and get back on good footing in the marriage.

When this happens, the couple is often embarrassed at having told others so much about their personal lives and marriage. They want their family and friends to forget everything negative that they said about each other and to act like the problems never happened. But the people who were privy to the juicy details have a hard time forgetting and often find it difficult to act naturally around the spouse they consider the “bad” one.

8. Can you forego being the “victimized” partner and generating excessive sympathy for yourself?

It can be tempting to adopt the victim role and be the recipient of your family’s and friends’ sympathy. Sometimes we want to hear sympathetic remarks such as, “Oh, you poor thing. How horrible for you” or “How could she have done that to you?”

But if you spend too much time collecting sympathy and singing the “I’ve been done wrong” song, it’ll be harder for you to take positive action. You will be more likely to feel victimized and powerless.

When you take on a victim role, you don’t remember that there are things you can do that *could* make a difference. You forget that you’re not helpless and without resources. Victims don’t feel a sense of their own personal power and options, so everything looks hopeless, bleak, and overwhelming.

9. *Can you talk about what is happening without labeling yourself as “right” and your spouse as “wrong”?*

When we judge others, we close the door to meaningful discussion. Think of the last time that someone told you that you were wrong. You probably felt defensive and reluctant to share anything else with that person.

Saving your marriage and relighting the passion flame is not about labeling your spouse as “bad” or “wrong.” If you really want to preserve your relationship, you’ll need a new way to look at your actions and those of your spouse.

A good starting place is to look at your actions in terms of whether or not they are helping you to achieve your marriage goals. Delivering a stern lecture may only guarantee that your spouse will want to run the other way and won’t look forward to spending time with you. It certainly won’t help the intimacy and trust in your marriage.

Is it “wrong” to lecture your spouse? No, but it’s not helpful, either. It puts you in the role of judge while thrusting your spouse into the role of the “bad” spouse who must change his “bad” behavior.

10. *Can you resist becoming bitter or vengeful and instead focus on taking positive action?*

There are emotional sand traps that can keep you from accomplishing your goal. Bitterness and thoughts of revenge are two huge traps to avoid if you want to save your marriage. Neither one helps your relationship in any way and both have the potential to destroy what is left of your marriage. Becoming bitter and obsessed with getting revenge will poison your emotions and can literally make you sick.

It has been said that the individual who sets out to get revenge should go ahead and dig two graves—one for the other person and one for himself. Intense anger and desire for revenge will keep you trapped in your own misery.

The way you get out of the sand traps of bitterness and revenge is to take positive action. Release your negative feelings with a trusted counselor, write

down your feelings in a journal, or pray and meditate. Focus on what you can do to improve the chances that your marriage will make it.

Your Answers to These Questions Are Critical

If you are having difficulty in answering any of these ten questions, you may want to discuss your feelings with a therapist or minister. Many times we can clarify how we feel by talking confidentially to someone in a safe therapeutic setting.

If your answer to any of the questions is no, look closely at that particular issue and try to determine why you feel as you do. What would you have to do to be able to change your no to a yes? Are you willing to do that? If not, why not? If you are willing, come up with a plan to help you make the changes, such as weekly counseling sessions.

If your answer to these ten questions is “yes,” then there is definitely hope that your marriage can be saved. Now it’s time to get ready to do some of the hardest emotional and relationship work you’ve probably ever done in your life. This will take all the energy, stamina, and willpower you can muster, and the stakes are high. But don’t stress out over it. We’re here to help you.

CHAPTER 2: Twenty-one Mistakes You Don’t Want to Make

Find Out if You’re Unconsciously Shooting Yourself in the Foot

There are numerous common mistakes that many people make when a partner has said, “I don’t love you anymore,” “I want a divorce,” or “I’m leaving.” Many of the responses in this chapter are almost *guaranteed* to drive your spouse further away and make it harder for you to rebuild your relationship.

Before you can save your marriage you must stop doing things that are harming it. For example, suppose you just inherited a house that you would like to fix up and resell. Then you find out that termites are trying to establish a foothold there. You have to rid the house of termites before there can be any chance of improving it.

It’s the same idea with your marriage. If certain of your behaviors are eating away the foundation of your marriage, it’s like termites destroying the house. You’ll want to get rid of or avoid these behaviors if you want your marriage to have the best chance possible.

Anchor these 21 marriage busters in your mind by reading through the list at least once a day. Carry a copy of this list in your purse, briefcase, or day planner so that you can remind yourself of these basic things when you are away from home. That way you can remind yourself of what you should never do. If you are serious about avoiding an explosion in your marriage, take these tips to heart.

Top 21 Marriage Busters

How many of these marriage busters are you doing now? The following behaviors are ones that you should definitely avoid if your marriage is to have any chance of survival.

If you find yourself tempted to engage in any of these relationship-destroying activities, think about the long-range consequences of your actions and do whatever it takes to avoid them.

1. *Avoid repeatedly asking questions that don’t have answers yet.*

It’s hard to accept that another person doesn’t have answers to important questions for us when we want them, but there’s usually no way to rush the process without making things worse. You don’t want to annoy your spouse so much that she wants to avoid you or bolt out the door.

And you don’t want her to make a rash decision or tell you something that’s not completely true just to get off the hook from having to answer your questions. It can help to view this time as an opportunity to increase your patience and your ability to endure frustrating situations.

2. *Don’t grill your spouse over and over about where he has been or about past events that you find yourself obsessed with.*

When problems develop in a marriage that affect trust, a common response is for one or both spouses to begin grilling each other about every move they make.

If you have learned that your partner has had an affair, it’s not unusual that your doubts are triggered when he comes home late or forgets to call. You’re not being asked to be naïve or to overlook what may be happening.

But if your goal is to give your marriage a fighting chance, grilling a partner repeatedly about his current or past actions won’t help you to move in the direction you want to go. Keep a list of your questions and note the current behavior that makes it difficult to trust your spouse.

Then, when you and your spouse are seeing a marriage counselor, you can address these issues in a setting more conducive to solutions and creative recommendations.

3. ***Don’t cling or hold onto him tightly—physically or emotionally.***

He is a separate person and even though you are married, you don’t “own” or “control” him.

Remember the much-quoted saying, “If you love someone, let him go. If it’s love, he’ll come back to you.” Loosen your grip physically and emotionally.

It’s easy for your spouse to make you the villain if you try to keep him captive. When your spouse no longer has to battle with you for his freedom, then you won’t be in the position of “jailer.” Instead, the spotlight will be on him and the choices he is making.

4. ***Don’t beg, plead, or grovel on the ground.***

Remember your own self-worth. Begging and pleading will backfire and make him lose respect for you. Retain your dignity.

As much as you can, keep your speaking voice calm and evenly paced. Hold your head up high and look your spouse directly in the eye when talking with him.

By standing tall and keeping your composure, even in the midst of great emotional pain, you will put yourself in the best possible position to earn his respect. We can’t help but admire someone who handles herself well during a time of adversity, especially when we would have predicted the opposite.

5. ***Don’t put yourself down verbally,*** such as,

“You’re right. I’ve been a terrible wife. And I’m so unattractive. How could I ever have thought you could love me?” Or “No one else will ever love me.”

Putting yourself down is self-abuse and a bid for the other person’s pity.

Remember that everything you say is being heard by your subconscious and by your spouse’s subconscious. And if we hear something often enough, we start to believe it, as does the other person.

Focus on your strengths and on the positives you have to offer the relationship.

6. *Don’t try to make your spouse feel guilty or ashamed.*

These tactics will backfire. Instead, your spouse will probably react defensively and direct his anger toward you, even if it doesn’t make rational sense. It’s easier to find fault with others and to dispute their opinions than to look deeply and honestly at ourselves.

Also, often the easiest defense is to retreat, leave, or avoid the person who is waiting to pounce on you with a new load of guilt or shame. And you don’t want to give your spouse any additional reasons to leave at this time.

7. *Don’t hound your spouse with emails, letters, or phone calls* asking questions about what has happened or going on and on about your feelings.

In the extreme, these types of actions can be considered badgering or harassment. They do not show respect for your spouse and will probably only anger her more deeply and make her even more resistant to staying in the marriage long enough to try to work things out.

Of course you need to be able to ask your spouse questions and to share your feelings. But after your initial discussions, it’s often best to use the safe environment of a counseling session to communicate intense feelings and to ask questions that continue to haunt you.

8. *Don’t spy on your spouse.*

This includes driving around looking for him or his car, asking his friends where he is, calling work to check on him, or peering through restaurant windows.

Most individuals resent someone else snooping through their things, reading their emails, or watching their every move. Many people react to such actions by wanting to keep everything even more secretive than before.

Both spouses can easily find themselves as opponents trying to see who will win the “game”—the spy or the person who is trying to elude the spy. Neither position will help the quality of your marriage relationship.

9. *Resolve to not ask your spouse’s friends to report back to you.*

Don’t ask her family or friends to talk to her about the mistake you think she’s making. This is a surefire way to alienate your spouse and make you look insecure. No one likes to think that another person has talked to their friends about them behind their back, trying to recruit them as spies.

And certainly most individuals would be furious to find out that a spouse had tried to influence what friends or family felt about them. Conversations about “The mistake I think you are making” are usually doomed, anyway.

10. *Reject the “poor me” suffering role.*

This makes spouses want to run the other way as fast as possible. Yes, you’re hurting, but don’t try to look as pitiful and sad as possible just to make him feel badly about how much he has hurt you.

Taking this stance won’t help you to earn the respect of your spouse or encourage him to want to spend more time with you. Instead, he’ll see you as weak and manipulative, and he’ll do his best to avoid you as much as possible.

11. *Curb your impulse to yell at her, to tell her what all her faults are, or to lecture her.*

These will not help you to accomplish your goals. When someone verbally attacks us, either we react with anger and start focusing on the other person’s faults or we withdraw and shut down emotionally. The one thing we’re not likely to do is to listen thoughtfully and reflect on any truth in the other person’s accusations.

Remember the old saying, “You draw more flies with honey than with vinegar?” Scathing verbal attacks and lectures about all of the other person’s mistakes will not create an atmosphere conducive to harmony and intimacy.

12. *Don’t try to make your spouse jealous* by flirting with one of his friends.

This tactic is beneath you. You may think that he’ll get jealous and then realize how much he doesn’t want to lose you. In your fantasy, you may think that he’ll court you and pursue you, egged on by a feeling of competition with his friend.

Even if you accomplish sparking your spouse’s interest again by using this tactic, his renewed interest is likely to be short-lived. Remember, the real trigger for his interest may be the strong sense of competition, not that he suddenly realized how much he really loves you.

And whatever happens, he won’t appreciate that you meddled in his friendships and used manipulation to try to keep him.

13. *Avoid name calling, insults, and sarcastic remarks.*

Would you want to spend time with someone who told you were “stupid,” “worthless,” or a “jerk”? How would you feel if you were told you had the maturity of a two-year old? Or the intelligence of a moth?

Calling your spouse names or hurtling insults his way will only make him want to avoid your presence like the plague. Even if he doesn’t leave immediately, he’ll certainly be tempted to work later hours or plan optional activities just to avoid coming home.

Also refrain from sarcastic remarks such as “I guess I’m not good enough for you any more now that you’ve gotten that big promotion at work. Even your best friend thinks it’s gone to your head.”

You are trying to leave the door to improved communication open. Write in your journal or talk to a therapist when you need to vent feelings and anger that could destroy your marriage.

14. *Don’t badger your spouse into making fast decisions or giving you quick answers.*

Remember that your goal is to buy time right now so that your spouse will slow down and think things through instead of making a rash decision.

If you push too much too often, your spouse may want to bolt out of the door. Or she might give you the first response that comes to mind just to get you to stop asking.

Most people have had the experience of giving a quick answer to someone because they didn’t want to keep being bothered or they were embarrassed that they hadn’t reached a decision yet.

Deciding what to do when a marriage is on shaky ground is not a decision to make quickly. Remember that your goal is to buy time. If you’re having difficulty in handling your emotions during this period of time, that’s a problem that you’ll need to address. A competent therapist can help you become more comfortable with handling ambiguity.

15. *Avoid ultimatums and threats.*

Neither is effective in the long run. Nancy has heard one spouse say to the other spouse, “I’m not putting up with this. Either you tell me right now that you want this marriage to work, or I’m filing for divorce.”

When you have just found out that your spouse doesn’t love you any longer and wants out of the marriage, it isn’t the time to issue threats or ultimatums. You don’t want to make it easy for your spouse to decide to leave and chunk the marriage. Also, you probably don’t have enough information to base this kind of decision on.

Threats just make people want to call your bluff, and until you have spent time exploring the issues in counseling, issuing an ultimatum or drawing a “line in the sand” is premature. Think before you say something you might later regret, and don’t back yourself into a corner

16. *Don’t try to milk your spouse’s feelings by playing the role of “drama queen” or “martyr.”*

Those are automatic turn-offs and only make it harder for you and your spouse to communicate in a meaningful way.

Avoid playing the martyr by making statements such as, “How could you do this to me? I’ve always put you and the kids’ needs first. You got your fishing boat when you wanted it, but what did I get? Nothing!” This response won’t help you to address the real issues in a meaningful way.

It’s quite possible that you might be afraid that you wouldn’t be able to make it without your spouse, that you would “die” without him. And those may be your very real feelings. But the odds are slim that you would just sit down on the porch step and perish on the spot if he really left. Yes, you would most likely be depressed, grief-stricken, and distraught for some time, but the odds are high that you would survive the hard times and eventually go on to rebuild your life.

Clutching your heart dramatically and sobbing that you are going to die if he leaves you will only make him want to run the other way. And he won’t have respect for how you are handling the situation.

It would be more effective to say, “I have such deep feelings for you and such a strong belief that we can still have a good marriage. It will be really difficult and painful for me if we end our marriage without even trying marriage counseling.” Such a statement can provide the groundwork for deeper discussion.

17. Don’t criticize her family or friends or suggest that they have influenced her in this matter.

All that this will accomplish will be to almost guarantee that she’ll turn her anger on you and defend her family and friends. You can easily predict the likely outcome.

It may be true that her mother has never liked you and has taken advantage of this opportunity to criticize you to her daughter, but telling her this will only drive the wedge between the two of you even wider.

Now, your spouse will divert her attention from the real issues between you and focus on the fact that you’re attacking her family. This will keep her from really hearing you and trying to be objective. Instead, her anger, pride, and defensiveness are activated because of your direct attack. Making sweeping

statements that criticize her family will be counterproductive, such as “You’re just like your mother. She couldn’t stick with one man for very long either.”

18. *Be careful about what you say concerning the impact of his actions on your kids.*

There’s a difference between saying, “I’m worried that if we divorce, it’ll cause problems for our kids,” versus saying, “You’re ruining our children’s chances of ever being happy.”

Avoid making blanket statements that predict horrendous outcomes for your children and put all of the guilt onto him for wanting to leave the marriage. Yes, decisions to separate or divorce do have consequences for kids, but those consequences can be influenced and affected by how the two spouses choose to handle things.

Scare tactics seldom work over a long period of time. They attract attention at first, but then we start rationalizing that we’ll be different or what we’ve heard won’t really happen to us or to our children.

Plus, no one can ever state with full assurance what the future holds for another person, and your spouse will resent you for your dire predictions.

19. *Don’t continually talk about your spouses’ weaknesses and flaws.*

No one is all good or all bad. We are what we are—humans who make mistakes and get confused at times.

No one is perfect, and we set ourselves up to take a fall if we start feeling that we’re better than someone else. The old saying, “Pride comes before a fall” is based on real life. It’s dangerous to judge others as inferior because they’re not perfect.

Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts and intentions, we stumble and temporarily lose our way. We make unwise decisions, create hurt feelings, and make tangles and knots in our relationships.

It’s a profound experience to receive merciful treatment from another in spite of our flaws and misjudgments. When we are merciful, we don’t overlook what

has happened, but we temper our response with the awareness of our own humanity and vulnerability. We don’t stomp the other person into the ground to prove a point or to get revenge.

20. *Don’t give in to despair, and don’t give up on your marriage.*

By visualizing the most awful things you can think of, you’re decreasing the positive energy that you’ll need in order to take constructive action. Remember that there is always hope. Visualize having the kind of marriage that you want—one with intimacy, harmony, good communication, and passion.

How would you act if you had an ideal marriage? You certainly wouldn’t call your spouse ugly names or belittle her in any way. So don’t do that now.

Act as if you are the kind of spouse that you would love to have. You can’t make your spouse change, but you can work on changing yourself to be the best partner that you can possibly be.

21. *Don’t blame your spouse for being confused or having questions.*

Very few partners set out to deliberately hurt the other person in this way. In Nancy’s experience with clients, most people try to keep their feelings hidden for as long as possible because they don’t want to hurt their spouse or rock the boat.

They sincerely wish that their original feelings of love for the partner hadn’t changed or that they could keep pretending that their marriage is meeting their needs.

Getting sidetracked by blame will hinder your efforts to transform your marriage. Blame makes others defensive, and it will keep you from looking at the ways you need to change. It distracts you from seeing your own issues and what you have the opportunity to change.

SECTION II: Reclaim Your Marriage with Action Steps

If you have decided that you want to save your marriage, then you’ll have to consider what you’ll do differently. It will take action on your part to salvage your relationship. This ordinarily means acting differently than you’ve behaved in the past.

After all, if you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll keep getting the same results that you’ve gotten so far. And your spouse has probably very clearly indicated that she wants some kind of change in your behavior.

At first this may seem like a tall order and you don’t know where to begin. Relax. We’ll make it easier for you by first showing you how positive activities ensure that you take care of yourself first. You’ll need to be centered inside before you can project a new image of yourself to your spouse.

Next we’ll show you important techniques that’ll smooth the way for you to reconnect with your spouse. Here, it is first necessary to stop pouring gasoline on the fire. Stop what’s not working. Then we teach you some confidence-building tactics that’ll win you points with your partner.

Last in this section, we’ll coach you on how to reinforce your inner resources to become more resilient to life’s storms, improve your coping skills, and enhance what you bring to the table in your marriage.

CHAPTER 3: Sixteen Ways to Take Care of Yourself

Get Yourself in Shape to Win Back Your Mate

Now that you understand the dynamics of your situation and what behaviors to avoid, it’s time to finally take the steps that have the best chance of improving your marriage. This chapter gives you suggestions for health-sustaining activities to help you weather the turbulent emotions that you’re experiencing right now.

The sixteen action steps detailed in this chapter will help you build a strong foundation of support as you prepare to confront core relationship issues. You should implement these steps as soon as possible. Then you’ll be better equipped to achieve your goal of rejuvenating your marriage.

It’s important for you to take care of yourself before you try to fix your relationship. If you’ve been on a long-distance commercial airline flight, you’ll probably remember the safety instructions that if oxygen masks are released, put on your own mask first before you put a mask on your child.

If you don’t take care of yourself first, you won’t be able to help anyone else. By the same token, if you don’t nurture yourself first, you won’t be in any shape to nurture your marriage.

The old saying “You can’t give away what you don’t have” applies here. Until you are peaceful inside of yourself, you won’t have a peaceful relationship. For this reason, we suggest that you follow the sixteen self-care steps before you tackle the thorny relationship issues you are currently facing.

If you skip these steps and jump immediately into the murky waters of your troubled marriage, you are at high risk for going under. And if you do manage to keep afloat, you’ll spend most of your energy treading water and drifting at the mercy of the current.

If you are distraught, frantic, or intensely agitated you can’t expect to be able to create and sustain a harmonious, peaceful relationship. That’s why it’s so important to spend the time being sure you are doing all you can to stabilize yourself, to put in place a circle of support, and to have goals and a plan before you get in over your head.

Read carefully each of the sixteen action steps that follow and make a list of what you need to do today and tomorrow to put the recommendations in place.

1. Commit to Being Okay No Matter What Happens

“When you get to the end of all the light you know and it’s time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.” --Edward Teller

Make yourself a promise that you’re going to take good care of yourself and be okay no matter what happens in your marriage. It’s essential that you commit to having a quality life with or without your spouse.

Without this commitment, everything else is like a house built on the sand—fragile and easily damaged. If your happiness absolutely depends on your spouse being a part of your life, then you will be operating from a place of fear and panic. You will feel powerless and will be more apt to engage in ineffective behaviors such as begging and pleading. The more this happens, the less likely your spouse is to want to stay in the marriage. Why is this?

One reason is that you will be perceived as emotionally needy and dependent. Whatever someone else does for you will never be enough because you’ll always want more from that person—more time, more love, more concern, more of everything. Your spouse can sense this and will be afraid of being consumed by your never-ending demands for attention and care.

Another reason is that it’s too heavy of a burden to feel totally responsible for another person’s happiness. Most people want to run the other way when that’s the case. It’s sort of like having a school-aged child who won’t ever entertain herself and constantly wants a parent to play with her. This soon leads to stress and burnout. If the parent does play with the demanding child when he really doesn’t want to, there will be no sense of playfulness and fun. Instead, the parent will likely feel resentment and anger. The same dynamics apply to the husband-wife relationship.

In the healthiest relationships, partners take responsibility for creating their own happiness. Yes, they love each other deeply and choose to be together, but they do not expect the other partner to “make them happy.” A partner coming from this orientation would have a strong resolve to take good care of herself even when her marriage was in danger. She would believe that no matter how hard it might be, even if she lost her marriage she could create a satisfying life for herself.

By showing respect for yourself and belief in your ability to thrive whether married or not, you’ll be coming from a place of empowerment and strength. The attributes of personal strength and confidence attract others and engender respect, making you a more desirable partner.

2. Accept Uncertainty

*“Do your best today. And...let God take care of tomorrow.”
--Eveyn Heinz*

Resolve to become more comfortable when you have to live for periods of time with ambiguity in your life. You can choose to struggle, moan and groan about how unfair or difficult it is, but that won’t change the situation at all.

Everyone has periods of time when everything is up in the air and how things will turn out is unknown. It’s a challenging time, but it can also be a time of growth and deepening faith. Right now you don’t know if your marriage will survive or what the quality will be if it does. You don’t know what the future holds for you and your spouse.

Use uncertain situations to flex your faith muscles. Search out the spiritual framework and guidance that is the most helpful to you.

Take advantage of this opportunity to develop the necessary discipline to live as much as possible in the present moment. With practice, you can learn to curb your tendency to project your worries and anxiety into the future and can expend more of your energy into making the most of the time you have now. For as poet Walt Whitman reminds us, “The future is no more uncertain than the present.”

3. Take Care of Your Feelings

“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one getting burned.” --Buddha

Plan ahead for how you will handle intense feelings such as frustration, anger, depression, and anxiety. You need to know what to do when you are overwhelmed by emotion.

Make a list of specific things that you can do to handle your turbulent emotions. You might decide to write your feelings in a journal, go jogging, mow the yard, clean the house, take a hike, walk the dog, listen to your favorite music, pound on a drum, or put on boxing gloves and hit a punching bag.

Or you might make up your own anger dance by putting on some fast-paced music and stomping around the room until you wear yourself out. You could write a rap song or poem that expresses your feelings, or you could paint your feelings. Another option is to write a letter to your spouse that you tear up after you get all of your feelings out on paper.

You could also choose to talk with a professional counselor on a regular basis. It’s not a good idea to try to use a family member or a friend as an informal therapist because they can’t be objective. Knowing you like them, they probably already have an agenda about what you should do and how you should do it. There’s no substitute for a trained therapist who can be objective and guide you through this complex, stressful period.

4. Practice Having Fun

*“It is so important to have what I call the enchanted sense of play.”
--Lucille Ball*

Does this action step surprise you? If so, think back to the commitment you were asked to make in action step one: to have a quality life with or without your spouse and to be okay whether your marriage makes it or not. The advice to

practice having fun is perfectly in tune with your plans to take good care of yourself. You need fun in your life even when you’re feeling miserable! Don’t wait until your life is perfect to plan fun activities.

As soon as you can, do something for yourself that you’ve wanted to do but have put off. You have probably said things to yourself such as, “Some day I’m going to take piano lessons,” “I want to learn to dance while I still can,” or “I’m going to build a sail boat and sail along the Florida coast one of these days.”

Sign up for a community class to learn how to do something in an area you’ve wanted to explore, such as kayaking, learning to speak Italian, or cooking. This is the time to pursue your interests such as tennis or the church choir. By doing so, you’ll be in a prime position to meet people and make some new friends.

Make a list of places in your town or a nearby one that you’d like to visit. Your list might include a trip to a new restaurant, touring a museum, exploring an aquarium, or seeing a professional sports team play. What sounds interesting to you? What would you like to do that would increase your skills and broaden your world?

When you’re active and having fun, you’ll be happier. An extra benefit will be that you’ll also appear more attractive to your spouse. Individuals who are happy have a natural sex appeal that makes them desirable and draws others to them. When you’re living life with gusto and a sense of adventure, irregardless of the state of your marriage, your mate is more likely to want to spend time with you.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to wait and see what happens in your marriage before you take steps to create a more satisfying life. The time to start enjoying life is NOW. After all, would you rather spend time with someone who is miserable and unhappy or with someone who is doing interesting, fun things and enjoying life? Enthusiasm and a sense of fun are powerful aphrodisiacs that attract others like a magnet.

A word of caution: As you go new places and meet new people, plan ahead for how you’ll handle any romantic feelings that are kindled. It may seem harmless to engage in casual flirtations, but if you are truly dedicated to rekindling your marriage flame, you’ll need to practice restraint. Avoid the

common tactic of trying to make your spouse jealous by flirting with others. Also be aware of the rebound romance trap which entices spouses who feel rebuffed at home to engage in a “See, I’m still attractive to someone” affair.

5. Get Plenty of Sleep

“That we are not much sicker and much madder than we are is due exclusively to that most blessed and blessing of all natural graces, sleep.”

--Aldous Huxley

Make it a priority to get enough rest. If you are having problems sleeping, tell your doctor about the stress you are under and ask for a recommendation about what to do. You might need medication temporarily so that you can get a good night’s rest.

You won’t change anything by staying awake worrying. And once you’re sleep deprived, everything seems like a struggle, no matter how minor.

In addition, sleep deprivation causes fuzzy thinking and increases your chances of having an accident or making a careless mistake. Since your body uses more energy during trying times, your body needs more sleep to renew itself. You can’t feel your best without getting adequate sleep and rest.

6. Take Care of Your Nutrition

“Despair is perfectly compatible with a good dinner, I promise you.”

--William Makepeace Thackeray

Take the time to eat healthy foods that are good for you and resist the temptation to only eat junk food or fast foods. Instead of eating something from the local fast food chain, make an appealing salad, bake a potato, or grill some fish. You’ll feel better if you stick to a healthy diet as much as possible.

When you’re under intense stress it’s not the time to go on a diet or make radical changes in your eating patterns. But you can stay aware of what

excessive sugar, salt, caffeine, and fats do to your body and what effects they have on your energy and mood swings.

If you’re already anxious and jittery, guzzling soft drinks or coffee with caffeine will only make you feel even more hyper. And if you’re already feeling sluggish, excess donuts, french fries, and pizza may only compound the problem.

Even small changes you make in what you eat and drink can make a difference in how you feel. You might decide to limit your daily caffeine intake or to select fruit as a dessert once a day. Be sure to praise yourself for taking steps to improve your health.

7. Increase Energy with Exercise

“A vigorous five-mile walk will do more good for an unhappy but otherwise healthy adult than all the medicine and psychology in the world.”

--Paul Dudley White

For more energy and stamina, increase the amount of exercise you are getting daily and weekly. Exercise is good for you physically and also helps you stay on a more even emotional keel.

When you exercise, you are relieving stress and anxiety as well as helping with depression. Exercise contributes to your mental well being, helps you sleep better, and increases endurance.

Think of ways that you can increase the amount of exercise you are getting each day. Can you take the stairs at work instead of using the elevator? Can you walk or ride a bicycle to some of the places you normally drive to?

What type of exercise would be fun for you to do? You could swim, play tennis or golf, hike, dance, walk, jog, work out, or go water skiing, canoeing, or kayaking. Or you could join a community basketball or bowling team. Perhaps you might enjoy exploring yoga, pilates, kickboxing, or water aerobics.

When you can, try to get some of your exercise outside so you’ll get the benefits of fresh air and sunshine. You might take a walk, go fishing, or work in

the garden. Spending time in nature can help you to feel more emotionally grounded.

8. Monitor Your Depression Level

*“A sad soul can kill you quicker, far quicker, than a germ.”
--John Steinbeck*

It’s important to get professional help if you find yourself becoming significantly depressed. A certain amount of depression is normal and to be expected when someone is experiencing serious marital problems, but if the depression becomes more severe, it’s time to take action.

Signs to watch for that may indicate significant depression include frequent crying, an underlying feeling of sadness, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, withdrawing socially, feeling hopeless, and having problems with concentration and organization. Another sign of clinical depression is that activities and interests you used to enjoy no longer bring you any satisfaction or happiness.

If you have any thoughts of hurting yourself or not wanting to live, contact your doctor immediately or go to the nearest hospital emergency room. Help is available, and you don’t have to suffer needlessly.

9. Consult with your doctor

“You don’t get to choose how you’re going to die or when. You can only decide how you’re going to live.” --Joan Baez

If you are experiencing severe anxiety, stress, or depression, schedule a consultation with your doctor. Letting your doctor know what is happening and having a routine physical is a good starting place for deciding what else to do. Prolonged stress can take a toll on your blood pressure, organs, and immune system.

You might need medication on a short-term basis to help you get through this difficult time. Some physicians will feel comfortable writing the prescription themselves and others will want you to consult with a psychiatrist.

Don’t be alarmed or offended if this is the case. Many insurance companies require general physicians to refer patients to psychiatrists when medication for depression or anxiety is involved. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who are experts at diagnosing and treating mental and emotional distress. They keep current about new medications and are skilled at deciding which medication(s) would be best for which symptoms.

If your physician feels that you could benefit from seeing a mental health professional, she can give you a referral. It just makes good sense to take advantage of all of your resources during a crisis.

10. Take care of Your Appearance

Think of all the beauty that’s still left in and around you and be happy!
--Anne Frank

Pamper yourself as your budget allows. Join a gym, get a personal trainer, and schedule a massage, pedicure or manicure. Try a new hairstyle or buy some new clothes. Stand up straight, hold your head up, and make good eye contact when talking to others.

It’s important to look your best and feel good about yourself even when it feels like your world is crumbling all around you. In fact, during hard times it’s especially important to make the effort to look well-groomed and attractive.

When you’re at home, instead of moping around in your grungiest clothes, take a shower, brush your teeth, wash your hair, and put on some clean clothes. Pick a color that lifts your spirits. Add scent with after-shave or perfume. You’ll discover that there’s a positive cumulative effect when you take small steps to help yourself.

11. Call Together Your Support Circle

*“My friends are my estate.”
--Emily Dickinson*

Call on your friends and family members for support and ask them to help keep you busy and active. You don’t have to share the details of what you’re going through. It’s enough to say that you’re going through a difficult, stressful time and need some help right now.

If it’s difficult for you to reach out and pick up the telephone to call others when you’re feeling despondent and depressed, ask a friend or family member to make short phone calls for you to the others on your list. The person making the calls could say that you have a great deal of stress in your life right now and that you’d appreciate their support.

While reaching out for support will be helpful, make sure that you stay discreet about the details of the conflict between you and your spouse. (See Action Step 12.)

Another step you can take if you know it’s hard for you to let others know that you need help is to ask your friends or family to call you each day on a rotating basis. Even if you only talk for five minutes each day, you’ll receive strength from the phone calls. And if you do this only as a short-term measure you won’t wear out your friends and family members in the process.

Give yourself permission to reach out to your family and friends and to lean on them temporarily if you need to. In the future, you can be there for them, but right now it’s your turn.

12. Be Discrete

*“Keep your own counsel.”
--Latin Proverb*

You have probably heard of cases where a person told everything about her marital woes in graphic detail to a friend, and then when the couple got back together, that person started avoiding the friend out of embarrassment. This is a

common dynamic that happens when one or both spouses share too much personal information with close family members or friends.

And likewise, when friends and in-laws or other family members are told too much, they often feel awkward around one or both spouses later. For example, if parents are told horror stories about how badly their daughter-in-law treats their son, it’s going to be challenging for them to feel warmly toward her if the couple stays married. The parents may harbor anger and resentment for some time to come, based on what their son told them.

The daughter-in-law will likely pick up on the change in the way her in-laws act toward her, and she’ll suspect that her husband talked to his parents about her. This can cause more problems between herself and her husband, as well as with the in-laws.

In addition, the husband may feel embarrassed for having exposed so many details of his personal life to his parents and, as a result, start spending less time with them. The fall-out from telling too much about the messy underside of a relationship can cause long-range difficulties for everyone involved.

If you and your spouse have children, be careful to be very discrete around them. Never, under any circumstances, try to ruin your spouse’s relationship with his kids. Children need to be protected from the details when parents have conflict.

13. Find Empowerment

*“The human spirit is stronger than anything that can happen to it.”
--George C. Scott*

Find your strong woman or strong man warrior energy. Go rappelling, learn to scuba dive, ride in a hot air balloon, try para-sailing, plan a backpacking trip, go horseback riding, lift weights, explore river rafting, dance around a campfire, sing powerful songs, or sign up for a martial arts class. Do whatever empowers you and makes you feel strong and energetic.

Females in particular are often empowered by playing a drum. Perhaps this is because many females have never had the experience of playing a drum. It’s not necessary to buy an expensive drum set to experience the fun of drumming. Visit a local music store and purchase a hand drum. A drumstick may be optional. Or look in stores and catalogs that sell Native American or African drums. Experiment to see what you enjoy the most—beating the time to music or making up your own power dance as you drum. Drumming can be a strengthening, confidence-building experience, especially for quiet individuals who aren’t used to making much noise.

If you haven’t experienced any of the activities listed in this action step, consider trying at least one of them. Stretch out of your comfort zone and surprise yourself by doing something different. Then congratulate yourself for your spunk.

14. Nurture Your Spiritual Connections

*“Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”
--Rabbi Abraham Herschel*

What centers you and brings you peace and strength? For some people it’s prayer, meditation, or going to church. For others, being out in nature or looking up at the stars at night helps them to feel peaceful and connected to something larger than themselves.

Deepen your spiritual roots and use all of the resources your faith provides you—inspirational books, prayer, inspiring music, retreat centers, meditation, church services, support groups, and conferences with your minister or pastoral counselor.

Connecting deeply with your spiritual source will help combat feelings of isolation and despair. As you tap into the energy and support available to you, you can’t help but feel uplifted and encouraged. And the best thing of all is that this source of power is available to you at any time wherever you are.

15. Laugh Everyday

“Laughter is a great tranquilizer with no side effects.”

--Arnold Glasow

Make it a point to find something to laugh and smile about every day. If you’re having difficulty finding things to make you laugh, then rent a funny video or look at *I Love Lucy* re-runs on TV.

Laughter is good for your body and spirit. It helps your body to relax, and it relieves tension and stress. A moment of laughter can also temporarily take your mind off of your problems and give you a brief break.

You don’t have to go around with a fake grin all the time, but neither do you have to always wear your misery on your face just because you are dealing with serious problems. Smiles and laughter are sexy as well as contagious, and the energy they produce can give you a needed boost just when you need it the most.

16. Keep a Gratitude Journal

“Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has many—not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.”

--Charles Dickens

When you’re in the midst of a crisis and stressful time, it may seem strange to be advised to keep a gratitude journal. But when you stop and really think about it, when do you most need to look for things to be grateful for? When things are going great or when they’re not?

A gratitude journal gives you a nudge to remind yourself of the many blessings already present in your life. As you start noticing the positive things you are thankful for, you will find that your gratitude list increases daily. The more you acknowledge your blessings, the more blessings there seem to be. Being aware of your blessings gives you a broader, more balanced perspective of your life.

Even in stressful times, you can appreciate the support of friends, a spectacular sunset, the kindness of a co-worker, or the pleasure of a hot bath or

shower. You can be grateful for your health and the health of your loved ones, for your dog’s antics that make you smile, and for your cell phone and the convenience it provides. You can feel blessed to unexpectedly see a deer up close or to hear a lovely songbird.

4 Steps for Making a Beginning

- 1. Pick a short-range goal to work on.** Start with a minor goal that is achievable in a fairly short period of time. This might be to write down your feelings in a journal each daily or to eat healthy and exercise more.
- 2. Break the goal down into even smaller steps that are measurable.** Saying that you will eat better is not an objective, measurable goal. Stating that you will cut back on visits to fast food restaurants to once a week is objective and measurable. At the end of the week, you can evaluate your progress and see if you are on course.
- 3. Set a timeline for the smaller steps that you have identified.** If you’re planning to get in better physical shape, set deadlines for joining a gym, finding a workout partner, and setting up a schedule to regularly meet to exercise.
- 4. Remember to give yourself praise for the efforts you’re making.** Small steps lead to bigger steps, and the important thing is to keep moving forward. Don’t look back with regret about what you haven’t done in the past. If you do, you will lose momentum. Instead, focus on the progress you are making now and the positive direction you are going.

CHAPTER 4: Twenty-five Ways to Go Deeper In Your Relationship

How To Enjoy Each Other More

Once you have implemented the basic self-care recommendations in Chapter 3, you are ready to go deeper into your relationship issues. Strengthened by the strong foundation you now have in place, it’s time to get out your magnifying glass and look closely at your marriage.

This part will be both exciting as well as challenging for you. It will be exciting because improving your marriage can be very rewarding. Imagine better sex, connecting at the heart, and laughing more often together. But going deeper into relationship issues will also be challenging because it will require consistent work on your part.

Is the Effort You Make Worthwhile?

Here’s an example that will help you assess if it’s worthwhile to invest time and energy into saving your marriage. Imagine that you and your spouse are living in a grungy apartment, but you have dreams of owning your own home. You’re not happy in the messy environment you live in now – there’s trash strewn on the street outside and you can hear the noisy neighbors through the thin walls fighting next door. It’s stressful for both of you to live there and it affects the quality of your relationship to be in that environment.

Meanwhile, you’ve just discovered a beautiful house in another neighborhood that’s perfect for you. It’s on a well-kept street lined with lovely, shady trees and the house is roomy enough to give both you and your partner your own space. The problem with buying the house is that a down payment is required. But you’ve saved enough money to get it. And you’d have the home you love and the money you invest would be equity in your own property.

So would you buy the house? Most people would jump at the chance. But this scenario is very much like your marriage now! Your present marital situation is

not great, but you do have the chance to upgrade to a better relationship. All you have to do is make the down payment in willingness and effort on your part. Is it worth it? Only you can answer that.

One thing is sure, though. If you keep on doing what you’ve been doing, the prospects for your marriage are not good. On the other hand, even though it takes effort to renovate a marriage, your stress level after you learn new skills would probably be less than what you experience now in a bad relationship. And you’d enjoy your life much more.

How Are You Going to Get a Better Relationship?

The fact is, it’s unlikely that you will be able to directly force your mate to change in any significant way. But by changing your own patterns of interaction with your spouse, you’ll begin to set the stage for other changes in the quality of your marriage. It’s not all about changing your partner. Your objective is to become the kind of partner you want to attract. And that is your best chance to influence your spouse to make some modifications in *her* behavior.

So you’ll also have to upgrade your own mindset if you are to really be successful in improving your marriage. That aspect could make saving your relationship scary for you. In fact self-change and growth require effort and self-examination – activities that frighten many. But don’t worry. We’ll help you learn small steps that won’t overwhelm you so that you can do what it takes to improve your union with your partner.

If you’re like most people, it’s much easier to look closely at other people’s lives and behavior than it is to look closely at your own. But it’s crucial that you stop and honestly examine the various components of your marriage, focusing on your part in what has happened. In each area that you decide needs improvement, you’ll have options about what steps to take to bring about positive change.

What if Your Spouse Doesn't Believe That You Can Change?

How can you convince your spouse that you are serious about making personal changes to improve your marriage? What if he doesn't believe that your relationship can be significantly different?

The only way a person can know if someone else has really changed or not is to observe his behavior over a long period of time. As most people know, it's all too easy to make sweeping promises to change and never follow through. Many individuals struggling in a marriage have observed this dynamic numerous times and, as a result, may hold back with a "wait and see" attitude.

The challenge for the person promising to change is to faithfully follow through with all promises made to the spouse. That's why it's so important not to say you'll do something unless you really intend to do it. Otherwise, the broken promise will harm the trust and intimacy in your marriage. You'll need a large supply of patience and the ability to be consistent over time. You'll also need the ability to tolerate your spouse's initial skepticism and disbelief without getting defensive.

When your spouse tells you that you'll never change, respond "I know it's hard for you to believe that I can change and act differently in our marriage. You probably think that if I do make some changes now, I won't keep them up after a few weeks. But I'm determined to show you that I can change. I know I won't do things perfectly, and I'll make mistakes. But if you'll just give me a chance, you'll see how serious and committed I am to doing my part to help improve our marriage."

Remember that there are people every day who do make significant changes in the quality of their relationships and life. You can be one of those people if you're willing to put energy and action behind your words.

By following the twenty-five action steps in this chapter, you'll begin to make progress toward creating the kind of relationship that will be rewarding for you and your spouse.

1. Define Fair Fighting Rules

“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.” --Carl Jung

Ask your spouse if the two of you can work together to develop a list of fair fighting rules that you both agree to abide by. If the subject is too emotional to tackle on your own, you could enlist the help of a professional counselor to serve as mediator.

Most fair fighting agreements ban name-calling, cursing, belittling, screaming, and pushing or slapping. Spouses are encouraged to stay focused on the original issue, avoid putting the other person down, and to refrain from using words such as “always” and “never” (i.e., “You’re always late,” or “You never lift a finger to help around the house.”).

Until you and your spouse can discuss emotional issues without being disrespectful to each other, it will be impossible to tackle the really crucial issues in your marriage with any lasting success. Without mutual respect and the assurance that you won’t be ridiculed, you will both be reluctant to express your true feelings and show vulnerability.

It’s not unusual for one spouse or the other to take on the role of relationship historian. During an argument, historians remember and bring up every mistake that they think the other spouse has made in the history of the relationship. By doing this, the current issues are passed over as the couple begins yet another fight over the same unresolved issues. Thus, fair fighting guidelines encourage historians to stick with current events instead of reviving past history that can’t be changed.

2. Avoid Fruitless Arguments

*“One of the keys to happiness is a bad memory.”
--Rita Mae Brown*

Don’t get into arguments that go nowhere and hurt your relationship. Just because someone else attacks you verbally, you don’t have to respond in kind. You can say, “I hear you. I admit I’ve made my share of mistakes” while keeping your temper under control. You don’t have to allow someone else to ruin your day. Some things are better ignored or handled with a soft answer.

Another technique that can be effective is to lower your voice volume significantly. The natural tendency when we’re upset is to start talking louder. But doing the opposite can help to defuse explosive situations.

Many couples get caught in the cycle of having the same arguments over and over with the same predictable outcomes. Each spouse knows which hot topic buttons to push to get a reaction from the other and how the fight will probably proceed from there. One partner may always yell and scream while the other one clams up and sulks for the next twenty-four hours. It’s high drama, but nothing gets resolved. And it’s just a matter of time before the argument surfaces again and the whole cycle starts over again.

Whenever you are faced with a choice about whether to get into a “no-win” argument or not, ask yourself if you want to be in an argumentative stance or to feel in harmony. The energy of anger and hurt feelings can stick to you like glue for the rest of the day, affecting your interactions and emotional reactions. If you refuse to take the bait when your spouse offers it, then the fruitless argument can be avoided.

3. Checkout Your Assumptions

*“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.”
--Beverly Sills*

Realize that just because you sleep next to someone every night, you still may not “know” the person. We sometimes make assumptions about our spouse that are not true and that lead to misunderstandings.

We forget that everyone sees things differently and has a unique perspective. And it’s easy to lose touch with the growth and changes your spouse is experiencing. No one stays exactly the same. Most individuals find that their preferences and interests change, sometimes radically, as time goes by.

Think about how difficult it is for you to begin to know yourself, much less to really know someone else. If we make assumptions, we’re often going to be wrong and will be making decisions on outdated information.

Take the time to check out your assumptions about your partner. Ask her directly instead of assuming that you know what she likes or wants. Many arguments and hurt feelings are caused when one spouse makes a decision for the other, assuming that he can predict what his partner would say or do instead of checking it out by asking.

Can you remember a time when your spouse made an incorrect assumption and how you felt at the time? Maybe your spouse assumed that you wouldn’t mind going with her to a certain social event and she went ahead and made plans without consulting you. Even if you don’t mind attending the event, you might be annoyed that she didn’t ask you first in case you hadn’t wanted to go.

It just feels more respectful to have your partner ask for your opinion and input instead of making an assumption. Show your mate the respect of asking instead of assuming.

4. Be Sensitive to Your Spouse’s Reactions

“The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it open.” --Arnold H. Glasow

If you suggest doing something new with your partner and your spouse rebuffs your ideas, then back off for now. Perhaps you are just trying to pay attention to her needs in an honest effort to patch things up. She on the other hand may view your efforts as an attempt to make her think you’ve changed and to manipulate her into staying in the marriage. This may especially be the case if you’ve been controlling in the past.

Nancy has known numerous spouses who became furious with the other partner for offering to do things that they never would do before the marriage crisis. A typical response is, “Why are you just now saying that you’ll do some of the things I’ve been wanting you to do? Why wouldn’t you do them before when I’ve pleaded with you for us to do more things as a couple? It’s too late now!” These angry spouses are suspicious of the other spouse’s motives and sincerity, often with good reason.

It would definitely be a mistake to suddenly shower your spouse with expensive gifts. That would seem like you’re trying to buy her affection so that she’ll reconsider her stance. This tactic can backfire and trigger her anger and resentment.

It’s more effective to think of interests that she has and things she likes to do that you’ve never done together or that you rarely do. You just might hook her interest, and she may surprise herself by discovering that she’d really like to take a motorcycle trip with you. By offering to do something she wants to do, you are communicating that you’re thinking of her and making an effort to please her, even if she turns you down.

5. Decide What’s Changeable

“You decide what it is you want to accomplish and then lay out your plans to get there, and then you just do it.” --Nancy Ditz

Take time to reflect on all aspects of your marriage. No relationship is perfect, and it’s not realistic to think that you can eliminate all of the problems and irritations. You’ll need to begin with the areas that are most important to you.

Think of the small irritants in your marriage as “gnats”—irritating and annoying but minor compared to many other things. Focus on the big issues at first and leave the “gnats” until later. Wisdom includes knowing when to overlook something as well as when to take action.

Begin by answering the following questions:

- What has disappointed you in your marriage?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you change about your marriage?
- Which of those changes are most important to your happiness and the quality of your marriage?
- What would have to happen before those changes could take place?
- Is there anything you can do now to help bring about the changes you desire?
- If so, what are you willing to do?
- How will you get started?
- When will you start?

Remember that the only person you can change is yourself. You can’t control whether another person decides to change or not, but you can decide to make personal changes and get your own house in order. When one spouse changes, the relationship changes.

6. Take Responsibility for Your Part

*“When you blame others, you give up your power to change.”
--Anonymous author*

Can you say, “I’m sorry for my part in what happened?” When you apologize for your part in whatever has happened, you are showing that you’re not trying to blame your spouse for everything that has happened between the two of you. Instead, you are letting him know that you are willing to take responsibility for your actions. This is one of the most important actions that you can take in any relationship.

Apologizing in this way takes the focus off of who is “right” or “wrong.” Instead, it lets you apologize while acknowledging that both you and your spouse are responsible for every aspect of your marriage.

When you take responsibility for your part in things, you are showing maturity. You’re also empowering yourself to bring about change. What you take responsibility for, you can also decide to change. When you blame others, you are taking on the powerless role of victim, and you miss the opportunity to grow and develop.

7. Keep Growing

*“Life leaps like a geyser for those who drill through the rock of inertia.”
--Alexis Carrell*

Often people can benefit greatly from individual counseling before they begin addressing issues in marriage counseling. Common issues addressed in individual therapy include anger management, anxiety, depression, money habits, self-responsibility, long-range goals, and self-esteem. Take action by starting to address the attitudes, habits, and actions that hold you back and that have created problems for you in the past.

You can’t make your spouse change, but you *can* take responsibility for your own growth and emotional health. Make a commitment to develop your potential and to value self-growth.

Keep expanding your interests, abilities, and skills and broaden your world. If you don’t seize the opportunity to develop and improve yourself now, when will you do so? Be proactive and make a beginning. You deserve to be the best person that you can be. And in the process, you’ll be on your way to becoming a more interesting and well-rounded partner.

8. Show Appreciation

*“I can live two months on a good compliment.”
--Mark Twain*

Do you acknowledge what your partner does right and the good things about him? It’s easy to become overly focused on the negative and to overlook the positive. How often do you give your spouse compliments? If she has worked hard to organize the garage, do you express your appreciation or do you focus on the one corner that she overlooked?

When someone appreciates us and lets us know it, we are usually motivated to do more. If all of our efforts go unnoticed and unappreciated, it’s harder to make ourselves go the extra mile.

Nancy says that one of the saddest things is to talk to a husband or wife who says that the spouse seldom compliments them or expresses appreciation to them. They don’t feel that their efforts or contributions to the marriage are valued. When heart-felt appreciation is not expressed on a frequent basis, partners can feel taken for granted, and the relationship suffers.

Keep a list of your spouse’s positive attributes and actions and review the list when you forget why you married your spouse in the first place. Focus on his strengths, and the minor irritations will fade into the background.

9. Use Professional Help

*“In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves.”
-Eleanor Roosevelt*

Address touchy issues involving both you and your spouse in a professional counseling setting, if possible. It’s often easier for spouses to really hear each other and start to understand how the other one feels in a confidential setting outside the home.

In the safe environment of a therapist’s office, you won’t be distracted by ringing phones (be sure to turn off your cell phone!), the television, or interruptions by children. At home, when couples fight, it’s all too easy for a spouse to get upset and end the discussion by exiting the room or jumping in the car and leaving for awhile. When that happens, nothing gets settled and the unresolved issues boil under the surface until the next confrontation.

The role of the therapist is not to tell you and your spouse what to do. It’s to provide a neutral setting with an objective mediator who can facilitate discussion concerning the key issues impacting your marriage. By expressing your thoughts, opinions, and wishes in the counseling setting, you and your spouse can decide what actions you want to take.

For therapy to be effective, a couple needs to commit to more than several sessions. Remember, the problems didn’t appear overnight but instead grew over a period of time. Making changes and finding resolution will take time, also.

The counselor will work with you and your spouse to set up a schedule that works for both of you, based on financial and time constraints. A common arrangement is for a couple to attend counseling once a week for several weeks while the counselor is getting to know them and then to switch to every other week.

If you don’t know who to make an appointment with for marriage counseling, ask your doctor if she can recommend someone to you. Other sources of information are your minister and close friends. It’s always preferable to have a personal recommendation versus just calling a number in the phone book.

10. Know When to Lighten Up

“Total absence of humor renders life impossible.”

--Colette

When you talk casually with your spouse, keep the majority of your conversations light. Avoid talking about heavy subjects all the time.

Being always problem-focused is emotionally draining and hard to tolerate every day. Many spouses wish their partners would lighten up instead of being so serious all the time. A spouse who dreads yet another serious conversation when he gets home from work may decide to work overtime.

Of course you have serious topics to talk about with your spouse and problems to resolve, but give yourself and your spouse some breathing room between deep conversations. If you are both involved in marriage counseling, you may be able to save the most serious discussions for therapy sessions.

If you’re not seeing a marriage counselor, at least establish some guiding principles about when you will have the most serious talks. Some couples agree to set specific times during the week that they will reserve for the heavy discussions. The rest of the time, they each write down their reactions to things that happen and any questions they have. They postpone talking about these sensitive topics until the next scheduled heavy session.

Remember the advice to keep everything in moderation. That still applies, especially in relationships.

11. Compare Expectations

“When nobody around you measures up, it’s time to check your yardstick.”

--Billy Lemly

Ask yourself if you and your spouse share the same expectations about what it means to be married. Your partner’s expectations can change over time without him or you realizing it.

Do you have the expectation that you, your spouse and your marriage will always stay the same? Many people have this expectation, but remember the saying that the only constant is change.

Nothing stays the same forever. You are either changing and growing, or you are stagnating. That’s a sobering choice and one that directly affects the vitality of your marriage.

Look at other expectations you might have such as the expectation that you and your spouse will always share the same views about things. Ask yourself if you ever change your stance when your spouse’s preferences or viewpoints are different from yours. If so, why do you suppose that happens?

If your spouse is willing, ask him for his ideas and reactions to this topic. Is it time for either of you to revise any of your expectations?

12. Redefine Your Marriage

*“You will either step forward into growth, or you will step back into safety.”
--Abraham Maslow*

Maybe it’s time to look at the definition each of you has of marriage. Numerous individuals today are viewing marriage as an equal partnership of two people who love each other and want to journey through life together. They see marriage as providing opportunities to support each others’ dreams and to encourage each other to live up to their highest potential in life. Each spouse wants the other to be all that he or she can be.

More people than ever talk about wanting to find a “soul-mate” to resonate with. They value a relationship with satisfying intimacy and feelings of emotional and spiritual connection.

This is very different from a marriage where the main emphasis is on how each person will be restricted now that they’re married. It’s also very different from the cultural expectations that often accompany marriage about what a “good wife” or “good husband” should do.

How open or how restrictive do you think your marriage is? Are you satisfied with the way it is or do you long for something more? How does your spouse feel? Write your responses to these questions and then ask your spouse if he will do the same. Share your answers and see where the resulting discussion leads you.

13. Allow Space for Growth and Change

“Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it.”
--Anais Nin

Just as small plants eventually outgrow their pots and need larger ones, people need to be able to experience expansive growth. Marriage should help you expand your world, not narrow or restrict it.

Do you and your spouse support each other’s personal growth even when it feels uncomfortable? Is there wiggle room for each of you to pursue your own interests as well as those you pursue together? Can you respect your spouse’s interests and preferences even when they don’t make sense to you at all?

Celebrate the fact that you and your spouse are two different people with different likes and dislikes. It would be boring to be married to someone just like you in every way. Marriage needs the stimulation of two distinct individuals who each bring a unique energy into the relationship.

14. Examine Your Actions

“Life is what we make it; always has been, always will be.”
--Grandma Moses

Are you leaning too much on your spouse? What attracts us initially in a life partner is often what repels us later. A partner who has to always be the strong one, the decision maker, or the action taker in the relationship eventually may tire of this role and feel resentment.

If you depend on your partner to take the initiative in planning vacations, arranging fun activities, and making most decisions, ask yourself these questions: Do you need to become more independent? More confident? More assertive? More involved in making plans and decisions?

If you are the action taker, what has kept you from letting your spouse know in an appropriate way that you are ready for a change? Do you wish your spouse would take more initiative? Do you feel that you have to stay silent to keep the peace? Are you willing to adapt to having a more independent, assertive spouse? What can you do that you haven’t done yet to facilitate change?

If your spouse is willing to discuss these issues, find out what he thinks. Give yourself some time to reflect on the discussion and to decide if you want to make any changes in the status quo.

15. Balance Your Needs

“What we do today, right now, will have an accumulated effect on all our tomorrows.” --Alexandra Stoddard

Has your whole world been focused on your spouse’s needs to the exclusion of your own? If so, it’s time to restore some balance and to broaden your world.

When everything revolves around only one person’s needs, the situation is ripe for the martyr-user relationship to develop. This happens when one spouse always takes the burnt piece of toast or leftovers and never claims the best morsels.

Meanwhile, the other spouse begins to feel entitled to special treatment. He is unaware that the flip side of this pattern of behavior is a growing resentment and anger in the martyr that can lead to habitual passive-aggressive actions in the relationship.

How do you rate your marriage in this area? Do you always go along with what your spouse wants even when you want something different? If so, what stops you from claiming good things for yourself and having your needs met? When did this pattern begin? Are you ready for a change?

If you are living with a martyr, what kind of support do you need in order to confront the “crazy-making” dynamics that a martyr brings to a relationship? If you are used to getting your own way in the marriage most of the time, can you honestly say that you wish your spouse were more assertive? What changes do you need to make in your behavior to facilitate a healthier way of interacting with your spouse and a more equitable balance of needs being met?

The guidance of a professional counselor can be invaluable in helping you begin to see the interaction pattern that exists in your marriage and how you and your spouse both contribute to maintaining this pattern.

16. Analyze Your Communication Style

“In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume it is true and try to imagine what it could be true of.”

--Suzette Elgin

Some styles of communication are turn-off’s, such as always being critical or sarcastic toward the listener. Other examples of negative communication styles include using put-downs, spiking humor with barbs, and having a condescending manner.

A deluge of unwanted advice and moralizing lectures will also produce negative results and make it less likely that the other person will hear you. Lengthy monologues can put a partner to sleep and make him miss the true purpose of communication, which is to have a dialogue with another person.

Do you think that you need to improve the way you communicate with your spouse? Do you have the resolve and courage to ask your spouse for honest feedback about your communication style and then to really listen to what he has to say without getting defensive? Ask him to give you some real-life examples if you don’t understand what he is referring to.

Partners are sometimes intimidated by anger, and, as a result, they may be afraid to state their real opinions. Create a safe environment for your spouse to share his concerns with you and then listen closely to what he has to say.

It can be productive to address communication problems and misunderstandings in joint counseling sessions with a therapist. Because it’s hard for you to see your own patterns and it’s often difficult to accept a spouse’s viewpoint, objective feedback could help you and your spouse to make faster progress.

17. Listen More Than You Talk

“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” -- Epictetus

Do you talk more than you listen? If so, you need to give your spouse equal time to talk. Nancy remembers a wife who said that her husband seldom talked. During the first marriage counseling session, Nancy noticed that whenever he started to say anything, the wife would interrupt him. Finally, he just gave up trying to talk.

When Nancy saw the husband for an individual counseling session the following week, much to her astonishment he talked the whole time. It turned out that he was really only silent when he was with his wife, and that was because he couldn’t get a word in without being interrupted. At some point in their marriage, he had decided that it was too frustrating to try to out-talk her.

So remember to put long pauses in your conversation to give your partner an opportunity to respond. And then whatever you do, don’t interrupt him!

By becoming a good listener, you’ll encourage your spouse to share his thoughts and concerns with you. You’ll also increase the likelihood that you can develop satisfying, enriching intimacy in your marriage.

18. Consider Gender Differences

“Because you’re not what I would have you be, I blind myself to who, in truth, you are.” --Madeleine L’Engle

Recognize the difference in how men tend to solve problems compared to women. Of course not all males will fit one pattern, but these patterns will apply to many of them.

Males often want to offer solutions quickly. They are problem solvers and often jump immediately to the “how to fix it” stage. They want to be helpful, so they’ll tell the female their opinion about how she should handle things.

Females tend to want to talk much more about the issues in depth. They often become upset when males offer solutions too quickly.

As a result, a husband may get angry when his wife doesn’t follow his advice. He’s frustrated because he did what he thought she wanted him to do, which was to tell her how to handle the current problem.

Instead, the woman feels discounted and upset because she didn’t really want him to give a solution to her dilemma; she wanted someone to talk to and process the issues with.

When you know about these patterns, you can let your spouse know more specifically what you need from him. A wife may let her husband know that she wants to talk with him about various aspects of an issue but doesn’t want him to focus on selecting a solution yet. On the other hand, a husband can ask his wife to clarify for him if she wants to brainstorm about possible solutions or if she really just needs to process the situation.

19. Avoid Judgement

*“When you judge others, you do not define them; you define yourself.”
--Earl Nightingale*

It’s important to be a non-judgmental listener so that your spouse will freely share with you, and you can understand his viewpoints and feelings. If he has

different opinions about things than you do, avoid being judgmental and labeling him as “wrong.” Different doesn’t mean “wrong”, it just means different.

Instead, develop a sense of curiosity and allow yourself to explore why he feels the way that he does. For example, say to yourself “I wonder why he thinks married couples shouldn’t ever take separate vacations. I’ll ask his reasons for feeling this way. Maybe he has known someone who had a bad experience in his marriage after taking separate vacations.” Then check it out.

If you don’t agree with him, don’t belittle or discount his opinions. Just being able to talk with each other without getting angry or defensive puts you on the path to being able to work out a compromise or alternate plan of action.

When the time is right, either now or later, you can let him know how you feel and that you’d like to leave the door open for further discussion. A light touch coupled with a good sense of timing often goes further than a heavy-handed approach.

20. Redirect Your Reactions

*“It is in the moment of your decisions that your destiny is shaped.”
--Anthony Robbins*

When you can change your reaction to the situation between you and your spouse, your outcome will be different.

Perhaps you’re frustrated with the situation regarding your marriage. You might have a strained relationship with your spouse and believe that nothing will improve in the situation. Well, our experience shows that you *can change* the outcome of almost any situation that you’re involved with. What counts is not what happens to you; it’s how you *respond* to what occurs. If you take responsibility for deciding how you will respond, you can change the dynamics with your spouse in a way that will set the stage for better rapport with her.

Typically, when something happens to us, we have a habitual response. Say that your wife criticizes you. What is your response? Are you defensive? Angry? Do you lash out? You could decide to change your type of response and to

redirect your feelings. Instead of immediately reacting with anger, you could experiment with what it feels like to detach somewhat emotionally. In this type of response, you would take time to just observe what is happening as if you were a news reporter. Or you could focus for a while on being curious about why your spouse feels and acts as she does.

Both of these approaches can help to change the intensity of your emotional reactions. If you can learn to change your response to triggers that make you angry, anxious, or fearful, you will ultimately benefit.

21. Be Emotionally Available

“Two people may talk together under the same roof for many years, yet never really meet.” --Mary Catherwood

Our culture teaches men to be emotionally detached, but emotional connection is what builds strong relationships.

The common perception in our society is that men are mostly logical, while women are the emotional ones. From early childhood, boys are taught to squelch many of their feelings. They learn to disavow tender emotions like love and compassion, while recognizing only feelings like anger or rage. It’s our belief that this teaching has done a huge disservice to men, distorting their innate human nature.

This social norm is harmful to a man’s right to be fully expressive and emotionally healthy. We have found that relationships deepen and thrive when marriage partners can express positive feelings toward each other.

Under certain circumstances, both genders are emotional. Furthermore, emotions can be powerful tools to help us know ourselves better and to connect at a deep level with others. Partners who deny the tender side of human experiences rob themselves of much of life’s richness.

If you learn to tap into the power of your emotions and use them in helpful and constructive ways, you can develop a relationship with your mate that would not

have been possible otherwise. Enrich your marriage by becoming more emotionally responsive and available to your mate.

22. Refine Your Sense of Humor

*“You grow up the first day you have a first real laugh—at yourself.”
--Ethel Barrymore*

You will be more fun to be around if you can keep your sense of humor intact. To let your spouse see the best side of you, you need to be relaxed and confident. Instead, many spouses find themselves uptight over conflicts with their partners.

One thing that can relax you and diminish the intensity of your negative feelings is laughter. If you can find something funny in the frustrating situations you find yourself in with your mate, you can reduce your irritation and frustration. Laughter creates bonding, and people who laugh together generally feel closer to each other afterwards.

Are you able to see the humor in a situation when the joke’s on you? Being able to laugh at yourself can be therapeutic. If you get to that point, it means that you don’t take yourself so seriously. This can help to reduce stress, and it lets you focus your energy on solutions instead of self-criticism. It’s important to make a distinction between taking what we do seriously and viewing ourselves too seriously.

A note of caution is that appropriate, helpful humor is not the same as sarcasm disguised as humor. It’s not fair to deliver sarcastic zingers and then tell the other person that they don’t have a sense of humor when they are offended. It’s abusive to torment another with cruel laughter and jokes that ridicule. A common retort from the spouse who misuses humor in this way is, “You take everything too seriously. I was just joking.”

23. Work on Kindness

“As the sun makes ice to melt, kindness causes misunderstanding, mistrust, and hostility to evaporate.” --Albert Schweitzer

If you go easy on your spouse and yourself, you will both be happier. How do you define “kindness”? It means being compassionate, caring, and tolerant.

When your spouse is less than perfect and makes mistakes, what do you do? How do you treat her? If she has a lapse, are you overly upset? Do you say things when you’re mad that you later regret?

People can relax enough to learn from their errors and to improve when they are freed from the burden of having to do things perfectly. Acceptance and kindness pave the way for improvement, while harsh criticism can harm an otherwise close relationship.

Your spouse will not care what you know until he knows that you care. Do you yell and criticize without even listening to what he has to say? Is your tone of voice mocking or sarcastic? Even when you have to express your displeasure over something to your spouse, can he tell by your attitude and actions that you care about him and his welfare?

Practicing kindness does not mean letting your partner stomp on your feelings. The kindest thing you can do is to give accurate feedback about behavior that bothers you, but still communicate caring and concern for your spouse.

It’s more important to be loving and kind than to cut someone else down to show that you’re “right.” You can learn to be kind but firm and still express your feelings without being abusive or harsh. Your spouse will love and respect you for it.

24. Reveal Yourself

*“Be yourself. Everybody else is already taken.”
---Gilbert Perreira*

Showing your spouse the real you will increase the authenticity of your rapport. Revealing yourself is the same as “being yourself” when you’re around your partner. This doesn’t mean that you have to explain all of your feelings and concerns, but you need to share enough details for your spouse to feel a part of your life. Intimacy is increased when partners share fears, problems, dreams, and the up’s and down’s of everyday life.

If your spouse asks how things are going at work, you might not share all of the technical details of your job, but you can say something general and express your genuine feelings. You might remark, “I’m really feeling pressured because of the time I’m having to spend preparing for the quality assurance review, and I’m frustrated because I’m getting behind in everything else.”

Some husbands feel that it’s unmanly to share problems they are having, that they should be able to solve them themselves. Or they may sincerely feel that they are doing the right thing in not dumping their complaints and problems on their wife. These husbands often clam up when their wives ask about how things are going at work and just give a stock answer such as “fine.” When this happens, the wife feels shut out and kept at arm’s length. Over time, she feels emotionally distanced from her husband and views him as emotionally closed.

Other husbands may be reluctant to discuss problems with a spouse because they don’t want anyone else telling them what to do. In counseling sessions, a husband sometimes confides that if he ever tells his wife how he has handled something outside the home, she always criticizes his decisions. So, instead, the husband says everything is fine. The wife is then frustrated because she can tell from his non-verbal behavior that something’s wrong, but he won’t share his real feelings and concerns. He doesn’t know how to tell her why he doesn’t share, so communication is blocked.

After years of marriage, it’s not uncommon for couples to stop talking to each other like they used to. But it’s important to keep sharing details of your life so

that you don’t lose touch with each other. Above all, share any positive feelings you have for your spouse. Otherwise, she may never know the true depth of your feelings. The more you show of the real you, especially your feelings, the more your spouse will have a chance to know and love you.

25. Encourage Your Spouse

“There are people who take the heart out of you, and there are people who put it back.” --Elizabeth David

All spouses have a dart gun at their disposal, and it is capable of deflating spirits, dreams, and motivation. This is the dart gun of criticism, which we can aim at others at will. Critical people drain energy, motivation, and joy from themselves and others. Intimate relationships can’t thrive in a climate of criticism.

In contrast, encouragement renews energy and increases motivation. An environment of encouragement opens up channels for creative problem-solving and adds joy to life. When spouses encourage each other, a win-win situation is created. Each feels supported by the other, and each is more likely to try harder in the marriage.

By focusing on your spouse’s potential and minimizing her limitations, you are helping her to recognize her strong points and to be all she is capable of being. Support your spouse’s positive traits and abilities. Encourage her efforts and help her to see how she can develop her talents, abilities, and interests. Tell her when she’s done something well. Give her a boost of encouragement when she’s feeling discouraged or has the blues.

Train yourself to focus on what is positive about your partner. By giving her feedback about her positive qualities, you’re helping her to be aware of traits that she may have minimized or overlooked. Other people are our “mirrors” about how we are perceived and acknowledged.

Too often we underestimate the power of encouraging words. It only takes a minute to offer encouragement and acknowledge effort and achievement. A spouse could float for the rest of the day after receiving words of encouragement

such as, “I’m so proud of you for acing your night class exam. I have such a brilliant husband. You’re doing great!”

And can you imagine how you’d feel if your spouse told you, “I couldn’t ask for a better wife. I’m a lucky man!” Wouldn’t you want to work all the harder to do the things that make a marriage successful? You’ll discover that your relationship will be happier as you become more encouraging and positive in the emotional support you offer your partner.

Three Magic Words

When people are married they sometimes assume their partner knows how they feel about each other. But the truth is that everyone’s feelings about most things are not written in stone, but instead are variable.

For example, think about your favorite food. You might love pizza. But there may be times when you don’t want to see it. Like when you have an upset stomach. Or if you just ate a 16-inch Family Meal with anchovies by yourself. Or if... you get our drift.

The emotional climate in your marriage is similar. Your feelings and your mate’s feeling about each other can depend on a lot of things. Like if you just had a fight. At that point, you’re probably not feeling very loving toward each other.

That’s why when the dust settles and you feel more centered, it’s important to recognize and express your true feelings of love for your partner. The words “I love you” have a magical effect in reminding your spouse of the reason she chose to be with you in the first place.

Say those words to your mate at least once a day. But don’t just mumble them in a monotone. Look her in the eyes and say “I love you” with feeling, taking the time to gently touch her cheek and give her a lingering kiss. Acknowledging your love can put any conflict into a context that makes recovery from bad feelings easier. And saying “I love you” can be preventive maintenance that keeps a relationship from going downhill.

CHAPTER 5: Twelve Ways to Expand Your Inner Skills

Greater Emotional Intelligence Helps Keep Your Relationship Strong

The action steps presented in this chapter are designed to help you in every area of your life. Everything in life is connected. You can’t improve your attitude and become more forgiving with your spouse at home without that affecting how you relate with other family members, friends and co-workers.

As you focus on increasing your self-care, relationship, and inner skills, you’ll have more to offer your partner. The goal is for you to become the kind of partner that you would like to have.

If you wish that your spouse were a more positive person, you know to put your energy into becoming a more positive person yourself. If you change, others around you will also change in response to the difference in your attitudes and behavior. As a great leader, Mahatma Gandhi, once said, “Become the change you want to see.”

The following suggestions involve developing your emotional and thinking skills.

1. Monitor Your Thoughts

*“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”
--Norman Vincent Peale*

You determine what thoughts you give attention to. You don’t have to focus on a thought just because it pops into your mind. You can decide to turn your attention to something else and let the troubling thought pass on by. It’s up to you to choose which thoughts you acknowledge and which ones you ignore.

If you awfulize or catastrophize you may get what you think about. The words you use form powerful images in your mind. When you constantly talk about and visualize horrible things happening, you are increasing the probability that you will be your own worst enemy. Without meaning to, you may set in motion

dynamics that bring about your worst fear. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“If you realized how powerful your thoughts are, you would never think a negative thought,” observed spiritual pioneer Peace Pilgrim. If you frequently say to yourself or others that you don’t think your marriage will survive, then that is what may very well happen. But if you realize the importance of the words you use in creating your expectations of the future, you may choose to say, “I love my wife and believe that we can find a way to make our marriage better than ever. I’m going to visualize what a good time we’ll have on our next vacation to the beach.” By painting a positive picture, you are increasing the chances of bringing positive energy to your marriage situation.

This does not mean that you’re being unrealistic or naïve. It simply means that you are choosing to focus your thoughts and energy on success instead of failure. “Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones,” advises singer Willie Nelson, “you’ll start having positive results.” The secret is to cultivate the kinds of thoughts you want to have and to ignore the others by turning your attention elsewhere.

Questions to Ponder: Have you developed the habit of unbridled negative thinking? If so, do you see a need to change?

2. Adjust Your Attitude

“Could we change our attitude, we should not only see life differently, but life itself would come to be different. Life would undergo a change of appearance because we ourselves had undergone a change of attitude.”

--Katherine Mansfield

Our attitudes are determined by the thoughts we think, which translate into intentions and actions. We can choose to have a positive orientation toward life and its challenges, or we can let our attitude vary based on changing circumstances

The goal is not to become a fake Pollyanna with a painted-on smile. You can be down-to-earth and real and still choose to form an inner resolve to focus on

what is right about your life. You can choose to notice and appreciate the many blessings that are present in your life alongside the stresses and challenges.

A “can-do” positive attitude will help you to get through this difficult time of uncertainty. What is a “can-do” attitude? It’s the belief that you can do whatever it takes to overcome obstacles and bounce back from adversity. It’s the opposite of a helpless “poor me” attitude that encourages you to feel like a victim.

6 Attributes That Support a Positive Attitude

- 1. Belief** that improvement in your relationship with your spouse is possible.
- 2. Patience** with your spouse, yourself, and the process of learning to work in harmony as a team. It takes time to develop and refine how you and your spouse will handle both routine and unexpected situations.
- 3. Consistent Effort** over time with sustained motivation and energy.
- 4. Accepting Responsibility** for your actions, mistakes, and shortcomings.
- 5. Willingness to Persevere** in spite of discouragement and unexpected problems.
- 6. Tolerance** for your spouse’s traits, habits, and differing viewpoints that exasperate you.

There’s another reason to monitor your attitude. There’s a popular saying that “Like attracts like.” If you’re angry, you’ll probably attract more anger before the day is over. You may find yourself in an argument with the cashier in the grocery store who has had a stressful day and is about ready to snap. Or you may find yourself provoking another driver in an incident of road rage.

Your attitude helps to determine the focus and energy you have available to you to work on finding solutions to your marriage concerns. If your attitude is peaceful and positive, you’ll be in the best possible place for good things to happen. There’s no substitute for a positive attitude.

By altering the attitude you take toward your spouse, you can have a positive influence on your relationship. One of the common tendencies for partners is to be stuck in negative emotions toward their spouse. If this is true for you and your spouse, you already know that an adversarial stance can create a daunting emotional wall. The resulting distancing and hostility can make it difficult to enjoy each other’s presence.

The attributes named in the box included in this tip are long-term goals. Do not be discouraged if you fall short in achieving any of them now. The aim is continuous progress. No spouse is a saint, and none of us is perfect. It’s enough that you commit to working on improving yourself. Your partner will notice, and ultimately you will benefit.

Questions to Ponder: What attributes do you need to develop in order to be able to relate more harmoniously with your spouse? Does your attitude help or hurt you? How do you need to change or improve your attitude?

3. Use Affirmations

*“Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year.”
--Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Affirmations are positive statements repeated many times either verbally or mentally, or they can be written down. The individual using the affirmations repeats them numerous times each day so that they will enter the subconscious mind and bring about the desired outcome.

You’ve seen the results of planting ideas in your subconscious mind many times, but you probably weren’t aware of the process. Each time you have said something negative to yourself, such as “I’m jinxed,” “Things never work out for me,” or “I’m going to fail,” you increased the odds that your prophecy would come

true. The subconscious mind absorbs what you’re saying and tries to find a way to make the statement true. Then, sure enough, you do fail or feel jinxed once again.

The same principle is at work when you tell yourself that you *can* do something and that you’re going to succeed. The power of the subconscious works both ways.

Affirmations build mental images in the mind and help you focus on what you want to create or become. To be effective, an affirmation should be worded in the present tense (even if it hasn’t happened yet), express a positive statement, and be short and specific.

“Affirmations are,” said Jerry Frankhauser, “like prescriptions for certain aspects of yourself you want to change.”

Create affirmations that strengthen you. Write them down and carry a copy in your briefcase, purse, daily planner, or car. Leave a copy in your desk at work and keep one handy at home. Read over the list often and anchor the affirmations by saying them out loud or writing them daily.

Affirm to yourself each day that you *will* be okay, no matter what happens. Remember other difficult situations you’ve made it through in your life and remind yourself that you’re a survivor.

Use the following affirmations as a starting place and then develop your own:

- “I take charge of my life.”
- “I’m hopeful and optimistic.”
- “With God’s help, I can survive anything.”
- “God (or Life, Great Spirit, Grace, or the Universe) is supporting me.”
- “On the deepest level, everything is okay.”
- “I’m a creative problem-solver.”
- “I can choose to be at peace no matter what my circumstances.”
- “I am creating a rewarding marriage.”

Questions to Ponder: Are you receptive to the idea of using affirmations to improve yourself and your marriage? If not, can you stretch yourself to

experiment with them anyway? What affirmations fit your situation that you would be comfortable in using?

4. Practice Forgiveness

“He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself; for every man has need to be forgiven.”

--Thomas Fuller

Forgiveness involves letting go of resentment and blame. It’s something that you do for yourself when you are ready to let go of depleting anger.

When you can’t forgive, you have less energy to use in the present moment because you are still emotionally connected to the past event. You are literally fueling your grievances and grudges by using your current energy to keep the resentments alive. Practicing forgiveness releases pent-up energy so that you have more vitality in the present moment.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean that you condone what has been done. It also doesn’t mean that you passively keep enduring abuse or mistreatment. It means that you are ready to move forward unencumbered by bitterness or anger.

Talking to a therapist or minister can be helpful, especially if you feel “stuck.”

Consider the concept of mercy and how at some time or another in life, we all need someone else to cut us some slack and show us mercy. At times, all of us hurt others intentionally or unintentionally and fall short of practicing kindness. None of us is perfect, and life is too short to keep expending energy on past hurts.

According to author Lewis B. Smedes in *The Art of Forgiving*, “We forgive when we feel a strong wish to be free from the pain that glues us to a bruised moment of the past.” Forgiveness releases valuable energy back into your present life and brings you inner peace. You can use this energy and peace of mind to reconnect to your spouse and revitalize your marriage.

Questions to Ponder: Do you think you will be able to forgive your spouse for having doubts about the marriage or his feelings for you? Do you think you’ll be

able to forgive yourself for your part in whatever has transpired? If not, are you ready to get help from a counselor or minister so that you can move past the hurt?

5. Redefine Your Experiences

*“We are not retreating—we are advancing in another direction.”
--General Douglas MacArthur*

Instead of considering yourself a failure because you’ve had problems in your marriage, reframe what has happened as a valuable learning experience. When you reframe an experience, you rename or redefine it.

It’s as though you took a picture out of one picture frame and chose another frame instead. That’s exactly what you do when you reframe an experience. You change how you talk and think about the experience (the mental picture), and you view it from a new perspective (with a new frame around it).

For example, if you are impatient with having a lengthy period of uncertainty in your marriage, you could view this as an opportunity to learn patience. Or you could choose to view it as a time of gestation, when you can’t see the new growth yet but you know something important is happening under ground.

If you end up reluctantly going to marriage counseling to improve communication skills, you might choose to reframe this experience. Instead of thinking of yourself as deficient in communication skills, you might choose to view the experience as “advanced relationship lab” work that will help you in every area of your life, not just your marriage. You’ll find it easier to survive the irritations and annoyances of life if you learn to reframe daily experiences that have the potential to spoil your mood.

Waiting for a late spouse can be reframed as “a chance to catch my breath,” while trying to keep an argument from escalating can be thought of as “an opportunity to practice my anger control techniques.” Trying to stretch the weekly budget to cover a weekend outing with your spouse can become a “creative

challenge.” Reframing is a powerful technique because it helps you to see a situation from more than one perspective.

Questions to Ponder: Has something happened today at work or home that you could choose to reframe? How could you reframe one of your spouse’s annoying traits?

6. Be Aware of Blessings in Disguise

*“There is in the worst of fortune the best of chances for a happy change.”
--Euripedes*

When you can put the daily events in your life into a larger framework, you may find that what you judge currently as devastating and horrible may later be viewed as life-changing in a positive way. For example, a rough period in a marriage may push you to learn better communication and intimacy skills.

Later, you may be grateful that you were pushed to make the changes that enabled you to rebond with your spouse, and you may say that the upset leading to the change was a blessing in disguise. You are too close to your current life events to know how you will label them in years to come.

Ask yourself what the gold nuggets or blessings in your experience are. They’re always there in every experience; you just have to identify them.

Ask yourself what positive results have come out of this painful experience and what you have learned about yourself. The answers to these questions will provide clues about your particular gold nuggets or blessings in disguise.

The words you use to describe your experiences will create a story line—your story line. As you recognize the hidden positives, your interpretation of what happened will change.

A woman named Alice summarized a stressful period in her marriage:

“When Bill told me that he didn’t love me anymore I felt very betrayed, angry, and bitter. But the whole experience, painful though it has been, has made Bill and me look at every aspect of our relationship and decide what is working and what we need to change. As it turns out, his courage in finally telling me how he felt was the real turning point in the marriage. It was the best thing that could have happened and probably saved our marriage. Now our marriage is better than ever, and it meets the needs of both of us.”

Alice’s story about the challenging period of time in her marriage indicates that she is looking at the experience from a new perspective. She has been able to distance herself enough to recognize the growth potential of the situation and to see how this difficult time catapulted her husband and her into making significant changes. In the process, she has found the “gold nuggets” or positive aspects of the hurtful situation.

Questions to Ponder: From your marriage experience, what have you learned about your partner? What have you learned about relationships? Can you identify any hidden blessings in disguise?

7. Trust That There’s a Lesson in Everything

“God allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons we could not learn in any other way.”

--C.S. Lewis

To be able to live your life with gratitude for *all* of your experiences—painful and traumatic, as well as joyful or rewarding-- requires deep trust and faith. You will take a major leap forward when you realize that there are lessons to be learned from everything that happens to you.

In some basic way that is not always easy to understand, everything is as it should be and will lead you to new growth, understanding, and maturity. Times of great stress and uncertainty usually proceed times of great growth and leaps of progress. People don’t normally push themselves to the limits when everything is going well.

During times of hardship and confusion, you have the opportunity to discover hidden strengths and resources you didn’t know you had. “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity,” said Albert Einstein. Experiencing difficulties gives you a chance to practice the skill of keeping a positive attitude even when the future may look bleak. You may access inner courage and determination that you’ve never had to test in this way before.

If you’ve been rather casual about your friendships, you might learn the value of supportive friends and the importance of encouraging words when someone is feeling discouraged. You may come to appreciate family members in a new way and develop increased compassion for others who are going through difficult times.

Or you may develop a new understanding of what it feels like to be stopped in your tracks by depression or debilitating anxiety. Your empathy for others often increases when you experience hardship and challenging times firsthand.

It has been said that experience is the best teacher. If that is the case, then life offers the curriculum for your learning experiences. Your challenge is to learn the lessons presented so that you won’t have to remain mired in the same repetitive cycle.

Questions to Ponder: Can you identify any lessons in your life that you’ve had to repeat more than once? What lessons from your relationship have you learned so far?

8. Continue to Nurture Yourself

*“God helps them that help themselves.”
--Benjamin Franklin*

Don’t drop all the things you have started doing and the changes you’ve made just because your spouse returns home or decides not to leave the marriage. You need to continue to nurture yourself so that your energy and vitality will remain high.

Your marriage may not meet all of your needs all the time, but it should meet your needs much of the time. The same is true for your spouse. In a quality marriage, both partners are committed to finding ways to meet each other’s needs as well as their own.

Make a commitment to take time for yourself, to pursue your interests and hobbies, and to keep learning and growing. You are not being selfish to honor your needs and schedule time for activities that are important to you. Couples who do everything together miss putting important spaces in their togetherness so that new, separate growth can occur. Without new growth and fresh input from each person, a relationship can stagnate and lack vitality.

Of course it’s often necessary to compromise so that both partners’ needs can be met in a marriage. You might only play golf once a week instead of twice, or you may decide to find a new bridge group that plays less often than the one you like best.

Women often tend to put the interests of other family members first and sacrifice their own interests and hobbies. They may feel that they are being selfish if they schedule time to be with friends or time to spend alone.

On the other hand, men sometimes give up getting together with friends or playing golf, for example, because they say it’s just too much hassle. They report that when they do meet with friends they always pay for it later when they return home to a disgruntled wife.

Thus, it’s not uncommon to have two spouses who have given up interests and activities that they enjoy, each thinking they are helping the marriage by

doing so. But when individual needs are not met, unhappiness can erode the relationship.

Questions to Ponder: If you think that it will be hard to keep on nurturing yourself, why do you think this is so? What could you do to make it easier?

9. Develop Humility

“Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change, and when we are right, make us easy to live with.” --Peter Marshall

Willingness to admit mistakes to your spouse sets a good example. A person who is unpretentious evokes respect from others.

Humility is one of the most misunderstood qualities that people can possess, yet it’s one of the most admired. This quality is misunderstood because many people equate humility with humiliation, which it is not. Actually, humility is not about degrading oneself, but instead about recognizing one’s humanity.

As humans, we all have flaws and character defects. We also have strengths and virtues. Healthy humility is balanced. You can achieve it by making an honest self-appraisal of your true nature, looking at the good as well as the not-so-good qualities in yourself. Then you can just be real. You can admit to your flaws without trying to hide them. As long as people see that you’re working on improving yourself, they will usually admire you for admitting your weaknesses.

Owning your mistakes takes courage because you’re admitting to being fallible and exposing the parts of yourself that are not “perfect.” By doing this, you’re setting a valuable example for your spouse in being real and authentic. By being willing to be humble, you will gain a new respect from your mate.

Questions to Ponder: What might be a mistake you’ve made that you would be willing to admit to your spouse? Do you routinely try to hide errors and mistakes hoping no one will find out?

10. Practice Grace Under Pressure

“The winds of grace are always blowing, but it is you that must raise your sails.” --Rabindranath Tagore

There’s an art to developing what is commonly referred to as “grace under pressure.” This term can refer to courage you show in difficult, trying times. It can also refer to an ability to keep on going in your daily life without getting overwrought, even if the sky is about to fall on your head.

Certainly you have every right to panic and fall apart emotionally, but that won’t be helpful to you long-term. If you do repeatedly wail and scream at your predicament, close friends and family will probably understand, but you won’t be winning your spouse’s respect.

What does win self-respect and the respect of others is to hold your head up high and carry on as best you can. This doesn’t mean that you have to always keep a stiff, upper lip and never cry. But it does mean that you go without excessive resistance, kicking, and screaming, as life carries you to the next challenge and growth opportunity.

There is much wisdom in the four words, “This too will pass.” Nothing in life ever stays exactly the same for an extended period of time. Pain lessens, stress lifts, moods elevate, and pressure is relieved just when you think you can’t bear any more. But when you’re in emotional pain, you feel at the time that things will never be different. That’s because you have on blinders that narrow, limit, and distort your vision. This makes it easier for you to lose perspective and hope. You’ll have a better chance to keep a sense of perspective if you remind yourself daily that “This too will pass.”

You’re showing courage and fortitude when you keep going even though you are fearful and anxious. And you’re demonstrating grace under pressure when you answer a friend’s questions about how you’re doing by saying, “Things aren’t always easy right now, but I’m making it and I intend to keep on making it, no matter what!”

Questions to Ponder: How can you reframe your present marriage situation to make it less upsetting? Can you find anything positive that changes your perspective?

11. Stay Calm While Storms Rage

"To worry is like rocking in a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but gets you nowhere." --Anonymous

Deep inside you is a place of perfect quiet and calm. It's like a beautiful pond with clear water that reflects your inner peace.

But in the passing of a moment, this sparkling pond water can become swirling and agitated by the energy generated from excessive worries, anxiety, grief, depression, anger, and hurt feelings. When this happens, it's easy to get caught up in the negative energy, forgetting that you have the power to calm the water again.

Staying calm while an emotional storm rages requires the ability to connect deeply spiritually and to turn your uncertain situation over to God or your concept of a Higher Power. It requires the discipline to choose which thoughts to focus on and which to let pass on through your mind without giving them attention.

You can find peace in the midst of stress if you will make time to sit quietly and meditate or pray. Be aware of your breathing, noticing your in-breaths and out-breaths, and let your breath fill your diaphragm or belly. Picture your belly filling with air much like a balloon as you breathe in and then deflating as you breathe out. See how deeply and smoothly you can breathe. Some people find it helpful to slowly count to four on each inhalation and exhalation. Another option is to slowly count to four on the in-breath and to eight on the out-breath, making each out-breath twice as long as the in-breath. Experiment to see which method works best for you.

Thus, this ability to stay peacefully centered no matter what is happening in your marriage requires you to combine several of the skills mentioned previously.

It’s a coming together or synthesis of discipline, determination, and attitude and is strengthened by faith and practice.

Mastery of this ability can make the difference between living a life at the mercy of any passing emotional tempest versus choosing to remain at peace while transient storms rage.

Janet was having trouble sleeping after her husband Jeff told her that he had fallen out of love with her. At first she was devastated. It was true that they’d been fighting a lot in the last year. But she wasn’t expecting this!

Jeff initially was reluctant to go to marriage counseling, saying that nothing would help their situation. Instead Janet went alone to a counselor recommended by her minister. This is when Janet learned deep breathing techniques that calmed her.

Later, Janet found that she was much less agitated when talking with Jeff. Her newly-found calmness had an unexpected effect on Jeff. He in turn became less uptight and eventually agreed to go with her to counseling.

Today they are still together and have learned to talk through some of their disagreements. They still go to counseling, but their relationship is much less stormy.

Questions to Ponder: What is the most stressful thing that you face right now in your marriage? What new tool have you learned to help you cope?

12. Deepen Your Understanding of Love

“You will find as you look back upon your life that the moments when you have truly lived are the moments when you have done things in the spirit of love.”

---Henry Drummond

When teenagers fall in love, the emphasis is often on each of the partner’s reactions and feelings. She loves the high she gets from knowing he desires her and thinks she’s pretty. She also loves being seen at the high school football game with her special guy, knowing that there are other girls who would love to

be in her shoes. He loves what being with her does to his hormones and how manly he feels with her 5’5” frame next to his 6’ one. And he loves the way she laughs and flirts with him. Each thinks the other “hung the moon,” so to speak.

The falling in love stage that brings ecstatic highs and delights is a very special treat. But over time, either love changes and deepens or it fades away. It’s just not possible to stay in that magical falling-in-love stage forever. A deeper kind of love beckons that involves selfless giving and self-sacrifice. At this stage, the emphasis is on what you can do to help and support your partner.

Deep love helps you to see the best in your partner and to minimize her faults. It helps you to encourage her to be the best that she can be and to pursue her dreams and goals. Because of your love for your mate, you become her biggest cheerleader and fan. You want to show her your love and appreciation in as many ways as you can. When you disagree, you are motivated to do everything that you can to settle your differences and restore harmony to your relationship.

Even when you are upset with your partner, you realize that your anger doesn’t mean that you don’t still love her. The emotional tempest is temporary; your love is deep-rooted and stable. A quote by Soren Kierkegaard beautifully captures the essence of deep love: “Perfect love means to love the one through whom one became unhappy.” Granted, this can certainly be a challenge at times, but it’s an important point to understand. When your love is truly constant, then you want to be sure you don’t say or do things when you’re upset that will tear the fabric of your relationship. It’s all too easy to act hastily on impulse and cause long-term damage.

As you grow and deepen in your capacity to love, your starting place may be your spouse and any children in the marriage. But love that grows cannot be contained, and you’ll find yourself reaching out to those around you in a spirit of sharing and giving. Thus love truly transforms not only the lover but also the world around him.

Questions to Ponder: Do you focus on what your spouse can do for you or do you focus on looking for ways you can help and support your spouse? Are you the loving partner that you want to be? If not, what interferes with your ability to express your love?

Conclusion

Final Thoughts to Improve Your Life Now and for the Future

If there’s one thing we would like you to take away from this book, it’s the idea that small steps lead to great progress. And if you can take small steps toward improvement in yourself, that just might be enough to change the dynamics between you and your spouse.

Your goals boil down to doing two things: keeping your marriage together and improving it. You won’t have the first thing without the other for very long. The very fact that your spouse made an announcement has upset the status quo and challenged you to do something differently in your marriage. Otherwise you risk losing it.

Keeping your spouse from leaving by attracting her to stay could turn out to be the best thing that’s happened in your marriage. It will teach you more about both yourself and about your spouse. And it will reveal the depth of your commitment to keep something that started out good, but that got off track somehow.

You’ve learned what not to do to keep your relationship. If you find it hard to give up any of the behaviors that drive a wedge between you and your mate, get professional help.

You have no control over your spouse in the final analysis. But you can work on yourself. And often that’s enough to keep your marriage and to make it better.

As you begin to stop doing what doesn’t work and start doing what does, both you and your partner will experience growing pains. It takes work to connect more deeply.

But it’s worth the effort if you can hang in there. And the benefits you will receive will by far exceed efforts you make.

May the spirit of love bless your life in every way possible.

“Where there is great love,
There are always miracles.”

--Willa Cather