



JOURNEY TO A MARRIAGE YOU'LL BOTH LOVE

SPEAKER TRAINING HANDBOOK

WELCOME!

Focus on the Family is committed to seeing families, communities and societies redeemed through Jesus Christ. We are thrilled that you — as a Journey to Us speaker — are championing marriage and allowing others to be blessed by your marriage!

Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley
Focus on the Family Marriage



TODAY'S PRESENTER



Dr. Greg Smalley

Dr. Greg Smalley serves as the vice president of Marriage at Focus on the Family.

Greg has a doctorate in psychology from the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in Southern California and a counseling degree from Denver Seminary.

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SCHEDULE

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2021

9:00–10:00 a.m.	TRAINING INTRODUCTION Introducing fellow attendees & Dr. Greg Smalley U.S. Distribution Strategy – Why we do what we do What is a marriage champion? Requirements
10:00–10:30 am.	EVENT OPENING – Setting the Right Tone
10:30–10:45 a.m.	BREAK
10:45 a.m.–12:00 p.m.	SESSION 1: Open Hearts
12:00–12:45 p.m.	LUNCH
12:45–2:45 p.m.	SESSION 1 (cont'd): Safe & Secure
2:45–3:00 p.m.	BREAK
3:00–5:00 p.m.	SESSION 2: The Reactive Cycle

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2021

9:00–9:45 a.m.	Q&A – Day 1 Topics
9:45–10:00 am.	BREAK
10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.	SESSION 3: The Care Cycle
12:00–12:45 p.m.	LUNCH
12:45–2:15 p.m.	SESSION 4: Godly Self-Care
2:15–3:00 p.m.	SESSION 4 (cont'd): Healthy Marriage Model
3:00–3:15 p.m.	BREAK
3:15–5:00 p.m.	SESSION 5: Heart Talk

SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2021

9:00–9:30 a.m.	Q&A - Day 2 Topics
9:30–9:45 a.m.	BREAK
9:45–11:30 a.m.	SESSION 6: Teamwork
11:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m.	WRAP-UP
12:00–1:00 p.m.	LUNCH
1:00 p.m.	DEPART

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SESSION OUTLINE

1

INTRODUCTION/BEFORE YOU TAKE THE STAGE

How to set the tone for a Journey to Us event

2

SESSION 1: SAFE & SECURE

Feeling safe and secure is the key to closeness and connection in marriage.

3

SESSION 2: THE REACTIVE CYCLE

Help couples identify their own unique conflict style to discourage blame and stop the cycle.

4

SESSION 3: THE CARE CYCLE

Empower couples — as individuals — to stop the Reactive Cycle

5

SESSION 4: CARING FOR SELF

We are fully responsible to care for ourselves so we can be full, whole, healthy and fully empowered in Christ.

6

SESSION 5: HEART TALK

Couples learn how to deepen their friendship by knowing each other and being known.

7

SESSION 6: TEAMWORK

Marriage is a team sport; you win together, you lose together. Find solutions that strengthen the team.

GETTING STARTED

BEFORE YOU TAKE THE STAGE

OVERVIEW: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. The first few minutes of your presentation are the most important moments of the entire conference. Learn how to prepare for these vital moments and engage your audience from the start.

PLAN YOUR INTRODUCTION

Why is your introduction so important? A good introduction sets the tone for the entire event and helps your audience get in the right mindset.

THINK ABOUT IT: HOW DO YOU WANT YOUR AUDIENCE TO FEEL?

NEGATIVE VS POSITIVE FEELINGS

NEGATIVE

- Bored
- Sleepy
- Confused
- Uncomfortable
- Judged (by you)
- Discouraged

POSITIVE

- Inspired
- Confident
- Relaxed
- Disarmed
- Empowered
- Happy

Set the right tone with your introduction. Your audience will feel the difference and respond to it.

ACTION ITEMS

- Write out how you want to be introduced.
- Write out your session introduction and include the personal story you will use.

NOTES

BEFORE YOU TAKE THE STAGE

WHEN BEING INTRODUCED

- **Write your own introduction.** Ask that it be read verbatim.
- **Keep the introduction brief** — Under 150 words. (Approximately 1 minute)
- **Include your name.**
- **Include credentials.** What makes you the marriage expert?
- **Add a relatable fact.** Create a connection.
- **Pitch the content.** Why is your event important?

THREE GOALS

A good introduction is important for three key reasons:

- Capture attention
- Create connection
- Establish credibility

NOTES

WHEN INTRODUCING YOURSELF

- **Give your name.** Who are you?
- **Share your credentials.** What makes you the marriage expert?
- **Add a relatable fact (or story).** Create a connection.
- **Grab the audience's attention.**

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own 150 word introduction. Be sure to include the information above. Remember to keep it to 150 words.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

WRITE YOUR INTRODUCTION

Using the form below, write your own 150 word introduction.

Remember that a good introduction includes your name, credentials, a personal connection and something important about your content.

01. What do you want your audience to know about you and your spouse?

02. Why are you and your spouse qualified to speak about marriage?

03. Put your answers together and write out your personal introduction.

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

MEET THE SMALLEYS

Erin Smalley serves as a spokesperson and content creator for Focus on the Family's marriage ministry. Erin holds a master's degree in clinical psychology from Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, and maintains a counseling practice, specializing in working with married couples. She is the author of six books.

Dr. Greg Smalley serves as the vice president of Marriage at Focus on the Family in the United States. Greg earned his doctorate in clinical psychology at Biola University and a counseling degree from Denver Seminary. He is the author of 20 books. Greg's dream is to someday drive a Ford F-150 Raptor!

After overcoming struggles early in their own marriage, Erin and Greg knew they wanted to be hands-on in helping other couples. Together they have led marriage seminars around the world.

Married since 1992, Greg and Erin live in Colorado with their four children.

DID YOU NOTICE?

Greg and Erin's bio:

- Short (144 words)
- Easy to read
- Simple, but contains key information
- Lists Erin first

WHAT IS A BIO?

A "bio" is short biography. A sketch of your professional or personal life.

For training purposes, we're using bio as another word for introduction.

TAKING THE STAGE

OVERVIEW: You're finally here! The event is starting and you're standing in the wings. Before you step on stage, make sure you're ready to grab the audience's attention and give them a reason to listen to your presentation.

ACTION ITEMS

- Write out a personal story you will use in your introduction.

ONCE YOU STEP ON STAGE

1) **Introduce yourself.** If the host or emcee didn't introduce you, take one minute and introduce yourself (using your written introduction). If you've already been introduced, skip to the next step.

2) **Establish connection.** Share a fun fact about yourself or tell a brief story that is personal and relatable.

3) **Give an overview.** Let the audience know what to expect from your presentation.



Erin and Greg Smalley keep the overview brief and to the point: "We want you to relax and laugh. We won't embarrass you. We'll share simple tips to instantly use in your marriage."

NOTES

AUDIENCES NEED TO :
KNOW TWO THINGS :

- 1) **Are you credible?** (You're an expert, right?)
- 2) **Can you relate to me?** (I'm not alone in this.)

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STORY

Your introduction answers the question, "Are you credible?" Your personal story tells the audience that you are relatable. Help your audience get to know you and your spouse.

01. Is there a memorable incident that gives people a glimpse of your life?

02. What are the details of that incident?

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

TAKING THE STAGE

GETTING PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

Seconds count. Once you take the stage, you have just a few seconds to capture someone's interest. Here are some time-tested tips to help you catch and hold the audience's interest.

10 ATTENTION-GETTING IDEAS

- Share a funny fact about yourself
- Give a quick overview of the event
- Ask a thought-provoking question
- Tell a captivating story
- State a problem
- Share a shocking stat or headline
- Use a powerful quote
- Show a photo
- Use a prop or creative visual aid
- Play a short video

GOT A BETTER IDEA?

”

"I like telling stories. That's my strength. But it's not for everyone. Some people find great quotes and use them. Find what works for you and use it." — **Dr. Greg Smalley**

ACTION ITEMS

- Choose one of the ten attention-getting ideas to start your presentation.

NOTES

DAY 1

If you are hosting a two-day seminar, teach "Open Heart" and "Safe and Secure."

OPENING SESSION

THE OPEN HEART

OPENING CONTENT: OPEN HEART

JOURNEY TO US: AN OPEN HEART

KEY TAKEAWAY

- **The secret to a great marriage is an open heart.** When two people feel safe and secure, they relax and open their hearts, and then, friendship, passion, fun, intimacy and connection happen effortlessly.

OPENING CONTENT

- **ESTABLISH THESE TWO THINGS:** First that two open hearts are necessary to experience a marriage where both partners feel safe and then that hearts will only open when people feel safe and secure in the marriage.
- **ASK WHAT MAKES A GREAT MARRIAGE.** Audience questions are interactive. This gets the audience involved and interacting with you and with their spouse

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

The secret to a great marriage is an open heart.

INTERACTION

- Encourage your audience to engage with you. Ask them questions and listen to and debrief their answers.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 1-7

READ THIS ARTICLE

"The Open Heart"

JTU WORKBOOK

N/A

PROP

Roly-Poly Bug

OPENING CONTENT: OPEN HEART

START THE SESSION BY ASKING: *Turn to your spouse ... pretend you are talking to a newly-engaged couple. What is the secret to a great marriage? We're going to give you 39 seconds to come up with your best piece of advice to help that engaged couple build a great marriage.*

ALLOW COUPLES TIME TO TALK.

- **ASK THE AUDIENCE:** *Shout out your "one thing" for building a great marriage. (Invite the audience to interact with you.)*

REPEAT THE AUDIENCE'S RESPONSES.

FOLLOW UP THE RESPONSES WITH A CAPTIVATING "CONNECTION" STORY.

ANSWER THE OPENING QUESTION: *What is the secret to a great marriage?* The secret is an open heart.

- Illustrate the difference between an open and a closed heart. (Prop: Roly-poly bug prop)
- *When two people feel safe and secure, they relax and open their hearts, and then, friendship, passion, fun, intimacy and connection happen effortlessly.*
- Repeat audience's answers from a few moments ago and then add: *To get what we want in marriage, hearts must be open ... or none of those things you shouted out will happen.*

TRANSITION: *"Let's talk about some simple and powerful ways to create a marriage that feels like the safest and most secure place on earth."*

“

**Love one another
deeply, from the heart**

- 1 PETER 1:22 (NIV)

SESSION 1

SAFE & SECURE

SESSION 1: SAFE & SECURE

KEY TAKEAWAY

- **Feeling safe and secure** is the key to closeness and connection in marriage.

SESSION GOAL

- We want to show you the easiest way to maintain a close connection with your spouse. We want to give you the most important tool for fully engaging the journey of deeply knowing your spouse and being fully known (Intimacy).

KEY CONTENT

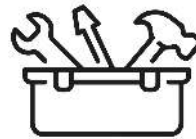
- Define Safety
- Create Safety
- Ephesians 5:29
- Cherish Your Spouse
- Nourish Your Spouse

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

Safety happens if both people are committed to cherishing and nourishing each other. They will naturally relax and open, and a close connection will take place.

HOMework

- Write/research your own "Cherish" and "Nourish" stories. See template on page 11.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 8-21

READ THIS ARTICLE

"Safe and Secure"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 3-7

PROP

Diamond

SESSION 1: SAFE & SECURE

KEY TAKEAWAY: Feeling safe and secure is the key to closeness and connection in marriage.

SESSION GOAL: We want to show you the easiest way to maintain a close connection with your spouse. We want to give you the most important tool for fully engaging the journey of deeply knowing your spouse and being fully known (Intimacy).

SAFE AND SECURE:

- **Safety Definition:** *Feeling free to open your heart and be fully known ... to trust that, even though you are an imperfect person, your spouse will unconditionally love, cherish and nurture you for a lifetime.*
- **Creating Safety:** Based on Ephesians 5:29 - "For no one ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church." (ESV)
 - Cherish Your Spouse
 - Illustration: Diamond prop
 - Illustration: Greg Smalley's "Cherish List" story
 - Nourish Your Spouse
 - Create a "Nourish List" - "I feel loved when you..."
- **Outcome:** *If both spouses are committed to cherishing and nourishing each other, they will naturally relax and open ... and a close connection will take place!*

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Cherish" and "Nourish" stories. Remember to keep them concise but descriptive.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"CHERISH" & "NOURISH" STORIES

How do you and your spouse maintain a close connection? Think of the ways you cherish and nourish your spouse. Share some of those ideas with your audience so that they can learn from your example.

01. What are ways you cherish and nourish each other as spouses?

02. What are the details of those incidents?

03. Write out your stories in 200-250 words.

[illegible]

DAY 2

If you are hosting a two-day seminar, start Day 2 with "The Reactive Cycle."

SESSION 2

THE REACTIVE CYCLE

SESSION 2: THE REACTIVE CYCLE

KEY TAKEAWAY

- **Underlying all conflict is a consistent, predictable cycle.** Each spouse has his or her own unique buttons and reactions that have nothing to do with the other. You alone can stop the cycle.

SESSION GOAL

- Help couples identify their own unique conflict cycle to discourage blame and empower them as individuals to stop this cycle.

KEY CONTENT

- Opening Video: Women in Cars
- Unpack the reactive cycle
- Talk about pushing buttons
- Talk about closed hearts

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

Unhealthy conflict ("combat") sets us up as adversaries. This makes the relationship feel unsafe. When we feel unsafe, our heart closes and we react. The heart that stays closed will slowly harden.

HOMEWORK

- Write/research your own "Conflict" story that shows buttons and reactions.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 23-51

READ THIS ARTICLE

"The Reactive Cycle"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 8-22

VIDEO

Women in Cars

PROP

Roly-Poly Bug

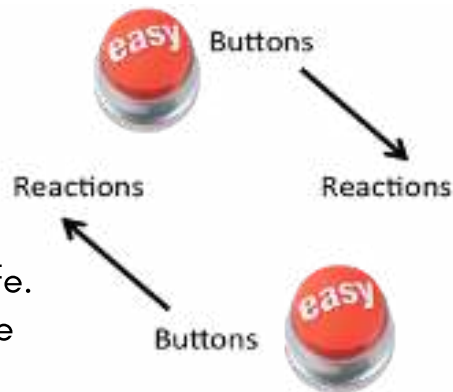
SESSION 2: THE REACTIVE CYCLE

KEY TAKEAWAY: Underlying all conflict is a consistent, predictable cycle. Each spouse has his or her own unique buttons and reactions that have nothing to do with the other. You alone can stop the cycle.

SESSION GOAL: Help couples identify their own unique cycle to discourage blame and empower them as individuals to stop the cycle.

THE REACTIVE CYCLE:

- **OPENING VIDEO:** *Two Women Fighting with Cars*
- **EXPLAIN THE REACTIVE CYCLE:**
 - **Tell a story** that illustrates a past conflict in your marriage. Explain how your "buttons got pushed" and how you reacted.
 - **Unpack the buttons** (the deeper emotions, the lies written on our hearts). Talk about your reactions and how your heart closed.
 - **Prop:** Roly-poly bug. Use it to explain how your heart opens and closes due to threats and safety.
- **Outcome:** Unhealthy conflict ("combat") sets us up as adversaries. This makes the relationship feel unsafe. When we feel unsafe, our hearts close and we react. The heart that stays closed will harden.



HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Reactive Cycle" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"REACTIVE CYCLE" STORIES

01. Share a time when you and your spouse struggled with the reaction cycle and "pushing each other's buttons."

02. What are the details of that incident?

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

SESSION 3

THE CARE CYCLE

SESSION 3: THE CARE CYCLE

KEY TAKEAWAY

- You alone can stop the Reactive Cycle by using the Care Cycle.

SESSION GOAL

- Empower couples as individuals to stop the Reactive Cycle

EXERCISE (OPTIONAL)

- Have couples take assessment (pages 15-21) and chart their own diagram.

KEY CONTENT

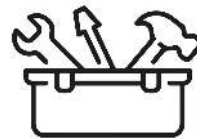
- Opening Video: Coffee Line
- Show how to stop the cycle
- Personal empowerment
- Explain the Care Cycle
 - Aware
 - Attend
 - Act
- Have the audience practice

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

We want you to identify your own buttons, reactions and desires ... and to understand how all of these things are interconnected.

HOMEWORK

- Write/research your own "Care Cycle" story that shows buttons and your reactions.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 53-67

READ THIS ARTICLE

"The Care Cycle"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 22-25

VIDEO

Coffee Line

SESSION 3: THE CARE CYCLE

KEY TAKEAWAY: You alone can stop the Reactive Cycle by using the Care Cycle.

SESSION GOAL: To empower couples as individuals to stop the Reactive Cycle.

EXERCISE: Invite couples to take the assessment on pages 15–21 of the conference workbook.

HOW TO STOP THE CYCLE:

- **Personal Empowerment** (What am I responsible for?)
 - Get the log out of your own eye (Matthew 7:3–5)
 - Draw a line (in your book) separating you and your spouse. Focus on your side first (buttons and reactions) to get your heart open. Then, you are able to have a productive, Christ-like conversation.
 - Create space — between you and your reactions.

THE CARE CYCLE:

- **Aware:** Recognize you are triggered and your heart is closed. Recognize your feelings and your responsibilities. You may need a timeout to get your heart back open. If so, communicate. "My heart is closed and I need a break to get my heart open. BUT, I'll be back and we will talk through the conflict."
 - Question: How can you tell if someone's heart is closed?
 - Question: How can you call a timeout (if needed)? A code word, a hand signal. Have couples choose a timeout sign.

SESSION 3: THE CARE CYCLE

THE CARE CYCLE (cont'd):

- **ATTEND:** Invite God to help care for you. Ask these questions:
 - What am I feeling?
 - What is the truth?
 - What do I want right now?
- **ACT:** With boldness and integrity

EXERCISE: Have the audience practice filling in the blanks to this statement: "Sometimes when I want (button), I (reaction), but what I really want is to feel (want)."

- Why practice this? So the audience can identify their own buttons, reactions and desires to understand how all three are connected.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Care Cycle" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"CARE CYCLE" STORY

01. How did you and your spouse stop the "Reactive Cycle" and start using the "Care Cycle"?

02. Share details about the incident.

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across the entire width of the page, providing a guide for writing. The background is a solid off-white color.

SESSION 4

CARING FOR SELF

SESSION 4: CARING FOR SELF

KEY TAKEAWAY

- You have to accept the responsibility to fully care for yourself in four key areas: spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Caring well for yourself is always in the best interest of both spouses because you can't give what you don't have.

SESSION GOAL

- To teach couples that we are fully responsible to care for ourselves so that we can be full, whole, healthy and fully empowered in Christ.

KEY CONTENT

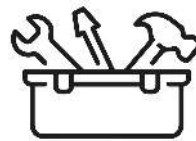
- Opening Video: Seabiscuit
- Godly Self Care
- Self Care Exercise
- Healthy Marriage Model

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

The Healthy Marriage Model is a vision of how God designed marriage to work and a tool to make your marriage work.

HOMEWORK

- Think about ways that you and your spouse practice self care.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 69-85

READ THIS ARTICLE

"Godly Self-Care"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 26-31

VIDEO

Seabiscuit

SESSION 4: CARING FOR SELF

KEY TAKEAWAY: You have to accept the responsibility to fully care for yourself spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally.

SESSION GOAL: To teach couples that we are fully responsible to care for ourselves so that we can be full, whole, healthy and fully empowered in Christ.

VIDEO: Seabiscuit

- **Point:** Like Seabiscuit, Satan has us so beat up and running in a circle (busyness) that we've forgotten what we were born to do.
 - What were we born to do? (Love is our destiny!)
 - Establish the biblical foundation: The Greatest Commandment. (Perverting the Gospel - "Love your neighbor *instead* of yourself.")
 - Illustration: Oxygen Mask. If your tank is empty you're useless to the Kingdom. And unless it's "quality stuff," what you give others will be of poor quality.
 - Important: Self care is not optional. This is foundational. (A design feature) You cannot be successful without it.

GODLY SELF CARE: The God-given responsibility to care for yourself so you can love others from a place of fullness and abundance. (Proverbs 4:23)

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE:

- Recognize your incredible value.
 - Illustration: Diamond prop

SESSION 4: CARING FOR SELF

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: (Cont'd)

- Regularly do things that fill you up spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally.
 - The Goal: Each of us should be well cared for in all four areas. We should be full, whole and healthy.
 - The goal is not to become self-centered. Rather, we should care well for ourselves so that we become healthy individuals.
 - Self care should never become a behavior ... not a chore.

AUDIENCE EXERCISE: Self-Care Test



"Taking great care of yourself is always in the best interest of you, your spouse and your marriage. Godly self care is the essence of being an adult."

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Self Care" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"SELF CARE" STORY

01. Take the self-care test. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

02. Based on your strengths and weaknesses, how do you practice healthy self-care? What difference has it made in your marriage?

03. Share details about the incident.

04. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

[illegible]

SESSION 4B: HEALTHY MARRIAGE MODEL

KEY TAKEAWAY

- The healthy marriage model is a vision of how God designed marriage to work and a tool to make your marriage work.

SESSION GOAL

- To show couples how God's design for marriage (the Healthy Marriage Model) is different than what I've been doing.

KEY CONTENT

- What is a healthy marriage?
- What is a healthy adult?
- The central role of faith (Diagram)
- Two healthy adults (Diagram)
- Healthy relationship (Diagram)
 - Defining intimacy
 - Covenant marriage boundary

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

The Healthy Marriage Model is God's design for marriage. What aspects of this model do you want to include in your marriage?

HOMework

- Think of ways you and your spouse model a healthy marriage to others.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 78-85

READ THIS ARTICLE

"Healthy Marriage Model"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 27-28

DIAGRAMS

Healthy Adult
Central Role of Faith
Two Healthy Adults
Healthy Relationship

SESSION 4B: HEALTHY MARRIAGE MODEL

KEY TAKEAWAY: The Healthy Marriage Model is a vision of how God designed marriage to work and a tool to make your marriage work.

SESSION GOAL: To show how God's design for marriage (the Healthy Marriage Model) is different than what I've been doing.

THE HEALTHY MARRIAGE MODEL:

- **HEALTHY MARRIAGE:** *What I'm about to show you is a picture of what a healthy marriage looks like as well as God's design for marriage. It's likely to be a relationship you've never seen before because of problems in parenting.*
 - The Primary Responsibilities of Parenting
 - Nurturing, Caring, Protecting (Over time we release these responsibilities)
 - Modeling how a fully-responsible adult cares for themselves (Heart, soul, mind and strength)
- **DIAGRAM:** What Is a Healthy Adult?
- **DIAGRAM:** The Central Role of Faith
- **DIAGRAM:** Two Healthy Adults
- **DIAGRAM:** Healthy Relationship – Defining Intimacy & Covenant Marriage Boundary

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Talk about the Healthy Marriage Model. Which aspects do you want to include in your own marriage?

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Healthy Marriage" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"HEALTHY MARRIAGE" STORY

01. How do you and your spouse live out God's design for marriage?

02. What changes did you both need to make to live a healthy marriage?

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

[illegible]

SESSION 5

HEART TALK

SESSION 5: HEART TALK

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Secure friendship means you have someone you can count on in good and bad times.

SESSION GOAL

- Through Heart Talk, couples will deepen their friendship by knowing each other and being known.

KEY CONTENT

- Opening Video: It's Not About the Nail
- Explain how the video shows Heart Talk and Work Talk.
- Define Heart Talk and Work Talk
 - What is Work Talk?
 - What is Heart Talk?
 - People long to be deeply known
- Show where Heart Talk fits into the Healthy Marriage Model
- Heart Talk: The ICU Model

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

Heart Talk deepens your marriage relationship. It is a safe conversation that invites you to know your spouse and to be known by your spouse.

HOMEWORK

- Think about a personal story that illustrates Heart Talk.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 87-89

READ THIS ARTICLE

"Heart Talk"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 32-35

VIDEO

It's Not About the Nail

SESSION 5: HEART TALK

KEY TAKEAWAY: Secure friendship means you have someone you can count on in good and bad times. To be a good friend to your spouse means that you listen, care about and show up (be present) for them.

SESSION GOAL: Through Heart Talk, couples will deepen their friendship by knowing each other and being known.

EXERCISE: Invite couples to share their "bucket list" with each other so that spouses can practice Heart Talk.

WORK TALK VS HEART TALK

- **Different Goals**
 - **Work Talk:** Is linear, problem-solving, focuses on facts and opinions. The goal is to fix something so that you gain a sense of accomplishment.
 - **Heart Talk:** Is messy, cares about the inner life, focuses on feelings and longings. The goal is to validate and show empathy so that you gain connection and bonding.
 - People long to be deeply known – "Into me see."
- **Show where heart talk fits into the Healthy Marriage Model.**
- **Heart Talk: The ICU Model**

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Heart Talk" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"HEART TALK" STORY

01. Share a conversation with your spouse that illustrates "heart talk."

02. What types of things did you talk about?

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

SESSION 6

TEAMWORK

SESSION 6: TEAMWORK

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Marriage is a team sport. You either win together or lose together. Find solutions you both feel good about.

SESSION GOAL

- To help couples find ways to act as a team and find healthy solutions to issues.

KEY CONTENT

- More info on "Work Talk."
- Who is your enemy? Satan. But when you're in a power struggle, your spouse seems like an adversary.
- Satan's goal is to create division.
- Myth: Win/win is always better than win/lose.
- Truth: You're on the same team. Win together or lose together. No-Losers Policy.
- Seven Steps to a Win/Win Solution.
- Video Illustration: Get Smart.

REMIND YOUR AUDIENCE

You and your spouse are on the same team. You either win together or lose together. When you work together, you can create win/win solutions.

HOMework

- Think about a personal story that illustrates a "Win-Win" situation in your marriage.



SPEAKER'S TOOLBOX

POWERPOINT SLIDES

Slides 91-109

READ THIS ARTICLE

"Teamwork"

JTU WORKBOOK

Pages 36-39

VIDEO

Get Smart

SESSION 6: TEAMWORK

KEY TAKEAWAY: Marriage is a team sport. You either win together or lose together. Find solutions you both feel good about.

SESSION GOAL: To help couples find ways to act as a team and find healthy solutions to issues.

EXERCISE: Invite couples to write their own "no losers" policy.

TALKING ABOUT TEAMWORK

- This is Work Talk — We spoke a bit about Work Talk in the previous session.
- Who is your enemy? Satan. But when you're in a power struggle, your spouse seems like an adversary.
 - Satan's goal is to create power struggles and disunity ("A house divided.")
 - Myth: In a marriage, a win/win is always better than a win/lose situation.
 - Illustrate point with a personal story.
 - Truth: In a marriage, you're on the same team. You either win or lose together. (Matthew 12:25)
- No Losers Policy
 - Make it unacceptable for either spouse to walk away feeling as if he or she lost.
 - Redefine winning as finding a solution you both feel good about.
- Seven Steps to a Win/Win Solution.

SESSION 6: TEAMWORK

SEVEN STEPS TO A WIN/WIN SOLUTION

- Invoke the "No Losers" policy.
- Use Heart Talk to get to the underlying desires.
 - James 4:1
 - Illustration: Iceburg analogy - 10% on the surface, but 90% below the surface. Get to the 90 percent.
 - Video Illustration: Get Smart
 - Video: The jammed copier wasn't the underlying issue ... he was feeling helpless about being stuck in the office (Someone "pushed his button.")
- Pray for Unity and God's will.
- Brainstorm possible options.
- Evaluate your options and pick one you both feel good about.
- Try it.
- Re-evaluate and make changes as necessary.

AUDIENCE EXERCISE: Write your own "No Losers" policy.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT



Using the form on the next page, write your own "Win-Win" story.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

"WIN-WIN" STORY

01. Share a time you and your spouse struggled to "win" an argument.

01. How did you turn the situation into a "win" for your marriage?

03. Write out your story in 200-250 words.

[illegible]

CLOSING THOUGHTS

CLOSING OUT THE EVENT

OVERVIEW: You're about to close the event. How do you end it well? Follow these steps as you wrap up your presentation and dismiss the couples.

NOTES

ONCE YOU STEP ON STAGE

- **Talk about each session in relationship to the Healthy Marriage Model.**
 - Open Hearts
 - Safe and Secure
 - Reactive Cycle
 - Care Cycle
 - Godly Self-Care
 - Heart Talk
 - Work Talk
- **Close with this thought:** "You are blessed to be a blessing!" Our goal is that your marriage is so strong that others want what you have. Keep your marriage strong so that you can help others have a strong marriage.



Direct people to the Focus on the Family website: Point out helpful articles, talk about our counseling consults and remind attendees that we have resources available to help their marriages and families.

“

Our goal is that your marriage is so strong that others want what you have.

- DR. GREG AND ERIN SMALLEY

RESOURCE MATERIALS

RESOURCE MATERIALS

SPOKESPERSON INFORMATION

SPOKESPERSON INFORMATION

EXPECTATIONS & REQUIREMENTS

Focus on the Family requires the following commitments from marriage speakers

MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

- Married couple that is passionate about marriage and helping couples thrive.

CREDIBILITY

- Married for 10+ years and in a healthy marriage (per Couple Checkup Assessment).
- Experience ministering to married individuals/couples as a therapist, lay counselor, formal/informal mentor, church marriage ministry, small group facilitator, Sunday school class instructor, etc.
- Subject matter experts (i.e. counseling degree, familiar with current marriage books, conferences and trainings. Must be a lifelong learner.

PRESENTATION PROFICIENCY

- Communication skills and stage presence.
- Engaging, likable and relatable.
- Authentic and transparent: Demonstrate a willingness to share personal stories and struggles; disarming (augment the content with meaningful and relevant personal stories)
- Ability to engage the audience, ask/answer questions, take informal polls and facilitate couple interactions among other tasks.
- Able to set up computers, slide shows and correct simple audio/visual problems.
- Adhere to the content and PowerPoint slides. (Focus will conduct ongoing research. Content uniformity is a must.

SPOKESPERSON INFORMATION

PRESENTATION PROFICIENCY (continued)

- Willing to receive feedback and grow as a professional speaker (Based on evaluation data collected at each event).
- Willing to coach couples during breaks and Q&A sessions (But not provide counseling).
- Ask for monthly FOF sustainers at each event.

EXPECTATIONS

- Agree with the FOF statement of faith.
- Sign the non-compete agreement and NDA for FOF speakers.
- Keep up with the travel information: fees, length of presentations, travel policies and limits on hotel, meals and rental cars.
- Attend the regular FOF speaker summit for additional training and collaboration with other speakers.
- Participate in a pre-conference phone call with the pastor/event team to learn about your audience.
- Be accessible and responsive. Keep your cellphone with you. Check email and voicemails regularly.
- Keep your Outlook calendar up to date. This includes events and out-of-office dates.
- Provide a brief social media greeting for each event.
- Complete all training requirements.
 - Read *9 Lies* and watch the *Journey to Us* videos.
- Keep up to date with Focus events and initiatives.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

POTENTIAL ISSUES

ANSWERS

9. How should you respond if someone interrupts your presentation to share "a word from the Lord"?

10. What should you do if people act crazy or monopolize your time?

11. How do you call the audience back from breaks if no one at the church emcees the event?

12. What do you do if product is missing or doesn't show up?

13. What should you do if you forget to promote Focus resources?

RESOURCE MATERIALS

MISSION, VISION & PILLARS

MISSION, VISION & PILLARS

VISION

Redeemed families, communities and societies worldwide through Christ.

MISSION

To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible by nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide.

Ultimately, we believe that the purpose of life is to know and glorify God through an authentic relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. This purpose is lived out first within our own families then extended, in love, to an increasingly broken world that desperately needs Him. Through our radio broadcasts, websites, simulcasts, conferences, interactive forums, magazines, books, counseling and much more, Focus on the Family equips parents, children and spouses to thrive in an ever-changing, ever-more-complicated world.

VALUES

Since Focus on the Family's primary reason for existence is to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a practical outreach to homes, we have firm beliefs about both the Christian faith and the importance of the family. This ministry is therefore based upon six guiding philosophies that are apparent at every level throughout the organization. These "pillars" are drawn from the Bible and the Judeo-Christian ethic, rather than from the humanistic notions of today's theorists. In short, Focus on the Family is a reflection of what we believe to be the recommendations of the Creator Himself, who ordained the family and gave it His blessing.

THE 6 PILLARS

THE PREEMINENCE OF EVANGELISM

We believe that the ultimate purpose of life is to know and glorify God and to attain eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, beginning within our own families and then reaching out to a suffering humanity that needs to embrace His love and sacrifices.

*"He said to them, 'God into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.'" — **Mark 16:15***

THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE

We believe that the institution of marriage is a sacred covenant designed by God to model the love of Christ for His people and to serve both the public and private good as the basic building block of human civilization. Marriage is intended by God to be a thriving, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman enduring through trials, sickness, financial crises and emotional stresses. Therefore, Christians are called to defend and protect God's marriage design and to minister in Christ's name to those who suffer the consequences of its brokenness.

*"'Haven't you read,' He replied, 'that at the beginning the creator 'made them male and female,'" and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.'" — **Matthew 19:4-6***

THE VALUE OF CHILDREN

We believe that children are a heritage from God and a blessing from His hand. Parents are therefore accountable to Him for raising, shaping and preparing them for a life of service to His Kingdom and to humanity.

*"Has not the Lord made them [a husband and wife] one? In flesh and spirit they are His. And why one? Because He was seeking godly offspring." — **Malachi 2:15***

THE 6 PILLARS

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

We believe that human beings are created by God in His image. Therefore every person, from conception to natural death, possesses inherent dignity and immeasurable worth — including pre-born children, elderly individuals, those with special needs and others marginalized by society. Christians, then, are called to defend, protect and value all human life.

"For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." — Psalm 139:14

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

We believe that God has ordained the social institutions of family, church and government for the benefit of mankind and as a reflection of His divine nature. Therefore, Christians are called to support these institutions, according to God's design and purpose, and to protect them against destructive social influences.

Such involvement is in obedience to Christ's lordship over all creation and is required by His command to care for the well-being of all people.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." — Genesis 2:24

"And God place all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body." — Ephesians 1:22-23

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is not authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." — Romans 13:1

THE 6 PILLARS

THE VALUE OF MALE AND FEMALE

We believe that God created humans in His image, intentionally and immutably male and female, each bringing unique and complementary qualities to sexuality and relationships. Sexuality is a glorious gift from God to be offered back to Him either in marriage for procreation, union, and mutual delight or in celibacy for undivided devotion to Christ. Christians are called to proclaim the truth and beauty of God's design through the redemption of sexual brokenness in our lives and culture through Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — His good, pleasing and perfect will." — **Romans 12:1-2**

RESOURCES

ORTHODOXY

ORTHODOXY

Definition of Focus Orthodoxy

Adherence to a biblical worldview and fidelity to the mission, principles, philosophy and communications approach that have shaped and defined Focus throughout its rich history and continue to do so today.

Basic Principles

The following are general principles applicable to materials produced by, resources and viewpoints offered through, and statements made by Focus on the Family. In certain cases, exceptions may be made with respect to some of the guidelines noted below. Such exceptions should be approved in advance by the Office of Ministry Values.

Scripture

We hold the Bible to be God's holy, inspired, infallible written Word. Therefore:

- We will only feature viewpoints that ascribe to an inerrant view of Scripture.
- We will not convey questionable or unorthodox biblical teaching.
- We will not take excessive liberties with biblical accounts or take verses out of context in order to make a point.
- We view the canon of Scripture as closed and thus reject any purported new "revelations" or direct communications from God intended for all of humanity.
- We affirm that the Bible and basic doctrine and theology take precedence over an individual's personal experience, feelings or perceptions.
- We understand individual verses and passages are to be interpreted within the context of all of Scripture.
- We recognize all Scripture as God-breathed and having equal weight and authority, whether spoken by Jesus in the Gospels or written by one of the biblical authors.

ORTHODOXY

Scripture (continued)

- In most cases biblical quotations should be excerpted from the English Standard Version (ESV). Other versions acceptable for use are: Amplified, Holman Christian Standard/Christian Standard, King James and New King James, New American Standard and NASB Updated, New International Reader's Version, NET Bible (New English Translation) and Revised Standard Version (not the New RSV). The Living Bible and the Message also are acceptable provided they are noted as paraphrases.

Theological Issues

Recognizing our calling as a nondenominational evangelical ministry, Focus will feature perspectives or resources that:

- Have an explicitly Christian focus.
- Portray each Member of the Trinity in an appropriately reverent manner.
- Comport with an orthodox evangelical understanding of Scripture (avoiding views reflective of the Prosperity Gospel, Emergent Church, Open Theism, New Age movement, and other distortions of biblical teaching).
- Acknowledge and value the God-ordained role of the local church and its leadership.
- Affirm humanity as created in God's image.
- Avoid dogmatism on non-fundamental theological issues (e.g., specific forms of baptism, eschatology, Sabbath observance).
- Identify everyone's most basic problem as internal (sin) rather than external forces or factors, while acknowledging the solution as external (salvation and growth through Christ) vs. having the power within ourselves.
- Could not be construed as irreverent or sacrilegious.

ORTHODOXY

Theological Issues (continued)

- Embody both grace and truth, avoiding the extremes of legalism or license.
- Do not contain non-Christian religious perspectives (including LDS).
- Do not reflect evolutionary ideology.
- Refrain from dubious claims of supernatural involvement or miracles.
- Do not present supernatural interventions and miraculous healings as the expected norm for Christians.

Denominational Issues

In light of Focus' evangelical Christian character and our mandate to reach a wide spectrum of the Body of Christ, we will not feature perspectives or resources that:

- are denominationally specific.
- are critical of particular denominations (with the exception of cases in which a denomination has abandoned orthodox Christian perspectives).
- are critical of differing theological positions within orthodox Christendom.
- are overtly charismatic (or anti-charismatic).
- include distinctly Catholic viewpoints.
- fail to portray pastors or church leaders in a positive light.

Family Issues

Recognizing marriage and the family as God-ordained institutions, Focus will feature perspectives and resources that:

- depict marriage and parenting in a favorable light.
- uphold the two-parent (mother and father) family as the ideal.
- value children and childbearing.

ORTHODOXY

Family Issues(continued)

- convey that divorce is outside of God's plan (with allowances for cases with biblical justification) while extending grace to those victimized by divorce.
- recognize that the genders are equal in worth but different in design (support a complementarian vs. egalitarian view of marriage).
- promote respect for parents and parental authority.
- do not exalt the concept of working mothers or day care at the expense of stay-at-home moms.
- do not promote the idea that "men, husbands or fathers are fools."

Author or Artist Issues

In order to maintain integrity and ensure "our walk matches our talk," Focus will seek to highlight messages from those who maintain a strong Christian witness.

Therefore:

- We will give a platform only to professing believers and, more specifically, those whose demeanor and conduct is marked by Christlikeness and moral uprightness.
- We will not feature individuals who hold views on significant theological or moral issues that fall outside the mainstream of evangelical Christianity.
- We will exercise caution in featuring individuals who have been involved with prior projects that Focus deems offensive.
- As it pertains to marital topics, we will not feature those who have divorced without biblical justification (does not include divorce prior to salvation).

ORTHODOXY

Alignment with Focus on the Family

In order to maintain fidelity to our mission and consistency of message, Focus will not feature perspectives or resources that:

- contain alternative views on fundamental moral issues (e.g., sanctity of life, institution of marriage).
- conflict with Focus' publicly stated position on other key issues.
- are unfairly critical of Focus or its leadership (whether explicitly or implicitly).
- promote or contain positive references to groups or individuals with whom Focus has significant concerns.
- convey a tone or style antithetical to that of Focus.

Sexual Issues

Focus views sexuality as a sacred gift designed for physical expression solely within the marriage covenant. Therefore, we will not feature perspectives or resources that:

- fail to uphold the ideal of abstinence outside of marriage or promote "safe-sex" ideology.
- contain graphic sexual content (with the exception of appropriate treatments of sexual intimacy within marriage).
- discuss sexual issues in a manner that is not age-level appropriate.
- portray improper sexual relations in either a neutral or positive light.
- condone homosexual behavior.
- depict immodest dress.
- downplay or discount the destructive nature of pornography.
- fail to hold out the hope of forgiveness and redemption for those involved in sexual sin.

ORTHODOXY

Other Moral Issues

Focus will not feature perspectives or resources that:

- condone gambling, drug use, or other immoral activities.
- advocate alcohol consumption or condone excessive drinking.
- contain an inordinate focus on sinful behavior while giving insufficient attention to God's redemptive work.

Violence and Evil

Calling to mind Philippians 4:8, Focus will not feature perspectives or resources that contain:

- overly graphic and/or gratuitous violence.
- depictions of violence that are not age-level appropriate.
- overly graphic depictions of evil.
- an inordinate focus on darkness and/or death (with the exception of appropriate treatments of death and the dying process.)

Language/Taste

Recognizing our role as ambassadors for the Gospel, Focus will not feature perspectives or resources that contain:

- offensive, crass or tasteless remarks or humor.
- cursing or offensive language.
- the use of the Lord's name in vain.
- overly critical or caustic tones.
- potentially libelous and/or slanderous material.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

POSITION STATEMENTS

POSITION STATEMENTS

Focus on the Family's Position on Select Issues

The following briefly outlines Focus' position on various issues. For a more in-depth discussion on many of these topics, please consult the Ministry Values Reference Center.

Abortion: The taking of pre-born life victimizes both mother and child. We view it as morally wrong in all cases except that in which the mother's life is in grave danger.

Abstinence Education: We support abstinence-based education and oppose "safe -sex" instruction in the schools.

Adoption (single-parent and homosexual): We do not actively promote single-parent adoption, though we do offer support to singles who choose to adopt. We oppose adoption by unmarried couples, including same-sex couples.

Alcohol: We take a neutral stance regarding the use of alcohol in moderation.

Alternative Medicine: We have chosen not to promote alternative therapies, including naturopathic medicine.

Animal Rights: We affirm the need to properly care for all creatures, but we stand against the philosophy that fails to recognize people as specially created in God's image and attempts to place animals on an equal, or higher, plane than humans.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Artificial Reproductive Technologies:

- Artificial insemination: We do not oppose if the husband's sperm is used, but do in the case of donor sperm.
- In vitro fertilization: We do not oppose provided the married couple's sperm and egg are used, and provided no more embryos are created than can be safely implanted in the mother's uterus at that time.
- Embryo adoption: While we oppose the process of creating frozen embryos, we support embryo adoption.
- Surrogacy: We discourage surrogate motherhood.

Baptism: We view baptism as an important command, though not essential for salvation. We avoid debates regarding specific forms of baptism.

Capital punishment: We regard this measure as a legitimate use of governmental authority for particularly heinous crimes.

Catholicism: While affirming that many Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ, we also acknowledge significant theological differences. At the same time, we have long counted the Catholic Church a key ally in promoting biblical morality.

Cohabitation: We view this living arrangement as immoral, as well as harmful to the couple's potential prospects for marital success.

Contraception: We encourage married couples to prayerfully determine their approach to this issue, though we do oppose forms of birth control that function as abortifacients.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Courtship vs. Dating: Though wary of some of the potential pitfalls posed by dating, we do not advise one over the other.

Creationism: We readily acknowledge God as Creator and reject evolutionary theory. We do not take a position on the “young earth or old earth” debate.

Dating or Marrying Nonbelievers: Given the biblical admonition against being “unequally yoked,” we counsel against both.

Discipline of Children: We advocate a balanced approach, avoiding the extremes of harshness and rigid control on the one hand and permissiveness on the other.

Divorce and Remarriage: We believe divorce and remarriage are scripturally permissible for Christians in three cases: 1) If the divorce occurred prior to salvation; 2) Unrepentant or continuing sexual immorality on the part of the spouse; 3) Willful permanent abandonment by an unbelieving partner.

Education: We encourage parents to choose the best educational option for their children, be that public, private, Christian, charter or homeschooling.

Environment: God calls us to be wise stewards of His creation; however, we oppose environmental efforts that exalt nature at the expense of the welfare of humanity.

Euthanasia or Physician-Assisted Suicide: We oppose active killing or withholding basic sustenance to cause death. We do not believe it’s morally required to employ “heroic measures” to sustain life in the case of imminent natural death.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Family, Definition of: A family consists of two or more people related by blood, marriage or adoption (marriage being the union of one man and one woman).

Gambling: We oppose all forms of government-sanctioned gambling.

Gender Roles: We recognize men and women as equal in value and worth but unique and complementary in design.

Gender-Neutral Bible Versions: We recommend gender-accurate translations of Scripture.

Government: We recognize civil authority as a God-ordained institution. It is intended to be limited in scope, and obligates both our submission (except when requiring action in direct contradiction to Scripture) and our prayers.

Holidays: We view most secular manifestations of various holidays as harmless fun, provided they do not obscure the real meaning of the celebration (a notable exception is certain aspects of Halloween that seem to extol evil).

Homosexuality: We view homosexual behavior as incompatible with scriptural teaching.

Human Cloning: We oppose.

Human Genetic Engineering: We view gene therapy to treat individuals as a legitimate and morally acceptable use of genetic technology. We oppose gene engineering that is designed to alter the genetic makeup of successive generations.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Immigration: We avoid commenting on specific policy proposals while urging that our government's actions on this issue be motivated by both justice and compassion.

Intentional Childlessness: We view this as a negative, unbiblical societal trend; however, we respect the right of couples to make this decision based on their specific situations.

Israel: We strongly support the right of Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state and homeland.

Living Wills: We advise against living wills in favor of durable power of attorney for health care.

Marijuana: We oppose the legalization and use of marijuana for recreational purposes. We do not support the legalization of medical marijuana for various reasons, ranging from demonstrated abuses to lack of evidence concerning its supposed benefits.

Marriage: We believe marriage is designed exclusively for one man and one woman, and that it is intended to last for a lifetime.

Masturbation: We avoid definitive statements on the question of the sinfulness of the act while acknowledging that self-gratification is inconsistent with the purpose, goal and basic nature of sex.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Mormons: We regard the basic doctrines held by Latter Day Saints as falling well outside the bounds of biblical Christianity.

Political Involvement: We view Christian engagement in the political process as a vital obligation while recognizing that politics is not the ultimate solution.

Population Control: We strongly oppose all efforts to curtail births via coercion, abortion or a devaluing of human life.

Pornography: We recognize pornography as categorically harmful to all participants and users.

School Choice: We support efforts to expand educational options for parents relative to their children.

Sex-Change Operations: We view such procedures as contrary to God's will and design.

Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) or Reparative Therapy: We support the right of professional therapists to help clients deal with unwanted sexual attraction.

Spanking or Corporal Punishment: We support the right of parents to choose this disciplinary technique; it should be administered only to younger children, judiciously and with love, and only in cases of willful disobedience or defiance.

POSITION STATEMENTS

Stay-at-Home vs. Working Moms: This decision is for each married couple to make, though we believe it is generally in the best interests of young children if the mother is able to care for them in the home.

Stay-at-Home Dads: Though each couple must take into account their specific circumstances, we do not believe this is a societal trend to be encouraged as it runs counter, in certain aspects, to the basic design of men and women.

Stem-Cell Research: We support non-embryonic stem-cell research; we oppose embryonic stem-cell research.

Theistic Evolution: We affirm the historic Christian understanding that God created mankind in His image, completely distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom and without the use of evolutionary processes.

Transgenderism: We believe that God created human beings as distinctly male and female, and that one's gender is biologically determined and is not changeable. Further, maleness or femaleness constitutes a vital part of one's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual make-up.

Vaccinations: We support childhood immunizations, though we understand the moral dilemma parents face in cases where vaccines have been derived from aborted fetuses.

War: We subscribe to Augustinian "just war" theory.

Women in the Pastorate: We do not take a position; "we minister to all who minister."

RESOURCE MATERIALS

POLICIES

POLICIES

TRAVEL POLICY

Reimbursement for the following, unless otherwise agreed to by Focus, for each Event: Hotel accommodations for one night, coach roundtrip airfare, meals (up to \$140 per day total), rental car, and miscellaneous travel expenses such as parking and airline luggage fees. Reimbursement shall be made within thirty (30) days after submission of receipts. For the Journey Training Summit, Focus will provide lodging and meals and Focus will reimburse Speakers for coach roundtrip airfare, rental car, meals while traveling and miscellaneous travel expenses.

Speakers understand and agree that Focus shall not reimburse Speakers for any other expenses which Speakers may incur in connection with the Events or Journey Training Summit, and that no additional fees or royalties will be paid to Speakers for Speakers' participation at the Events or for the grant of rights with respect to their speaking services.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

MARRIAGE TOOLS

TOOLS — MARRIAGE ASSESSMENT

FOCUS MARRIAGE ASSESSMENT

Based on research and experience from the Smalleys, Focus on the Family has created valid and reliable questions that evaluate the strength of 12 essential traits for a marriage—areas such as communication, conflict and commitment. The assessment is free and takes about 10 minutes to complete. Access it here: www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/focus-on-marriage-assessment.

The questions are designed for married couples. Every marriage has areas that are working well and areas that could use improvement. The assessment allows the individual to identify their strengths and find tools to help them grow.

HOW TO TAKE THE ASSESSMENT

1. Each spouse should take the assessment individually. The assessment takes about 10 minutes.
2. After completion, each individual receives immediate results (on screen and via email). The results can be printed, downloaded or saved. Individuals may also email results to their spouse.
3. Individuals should discuss the report with their spouse and review suggested resources to strengthen the relationship.

TOOLS — EVENTS

HOPE RESTORED is a crisis counseling program designed to help marriages survive and thrive.



This intensive experience addresses needs around a variety of topics including: communication, infidelity, intimacy and sexual issues, financial strains, blended families, children and career conflicts. Most couples who attend an intensive are experiencing a significant amount of marital distress. Many of these couples have already started the divorce process.

Each intensive features an all-inclusive, multi-day experience with a marriage counseling team that can fully focus on the specific needs of an individual or couple. Every detail of our retreat center was designed with the couple and their marriage in mind, allowing them to escape the daily distractions of life and focus on their most important relationships.

WEEKEND MARRIAGE RETREATS allow couples to participate in sessions that move them to a greater sense of closeness and understanding of the Healthy Marriage Model.



The getaways are offered at the Focus on the Family Retreat Center near Branson, Missouri. Every detail of this secluded refuge was created with the couple and their marriage in mind.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

COUNSELING

COUNSELING

ABOUT THE FAMILY COUNSELING DEPARTMENT

A few important things related to language—we do not refer to our calls as “sessions” nor do callers have a specific “appointment time.” We do not want to seem like we are doing online or phone therapy, because we are not; they are “consultations and referrals” on the phone.

Speakers thus need to refer to what we do as a consult (not phone counseling or anything that insinuates ongoing counseling). The only ongoing work we do is through “coaching” sessions for Hope Restored alumni who are assigned to counselors, post-intensive.

APPROVED LANGUAGE

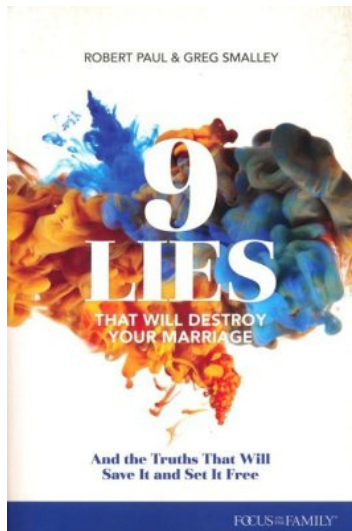
- Best description: Focus on the Family has licensed and pastoral counselors who will return a call and offer phone consultation.
- Find a local counselor at www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/FindaCounselor.
- More details are available at www.FocusOnTheFamily.com/GetHelp.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

BOOKS

BOOKS

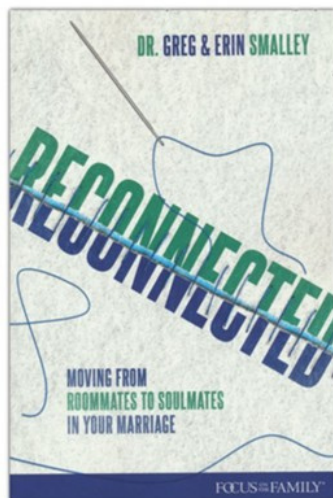
9 Lies That Will Destroy Your Marriage: And the Truths That Will Save It and Set It Free



By Robert Paul and Dr. Greg Smalley.

LIKE THE SERPENT'S WHISPERINGS IN THE GARDEN, DANGEROUS MISTRUTHS HAVE ARISEN IN OUR CULTURE AND CHURCHES ABOUT MARRIAGE. SMALLEY AND PAUL SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON THESE LIES, EXPLAINING HOW DESTRUCTIVE THEY ARE TO MARITAL BONDS AND REVEALING TRUTHS THAT CAN SALVAGE FOUNDERING RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPROVE ROCKY ONES. INCLUDES TESTS FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT. 288 PAGES, SOFTCOVER FROM TYNDALE.

Reconnected: Moving from Roommates to Soulmates in Your Marriage



Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley.

OVER TIME, THE BUSINESS OF LIFE CREEPS IN AND EVEN THE MOST DEEPLY COMMITTED COUPLES CAN FEEL LIKE THEY'RE LIVING PARALLEL LIVES RATHER THAN ENJOYING LIFE TOGETHER. THEIR ONCE HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER CAN QUICKLY TURN INTO AN ENDLESS GRIND OF WORK, CHORES, ERRANDS AND CARPOOL. AND THE PULL OF SOCIAL MEDIA BECOMES MORE COMPELLING THAN ENGAGING WITH ONE'S SPOUSE. IN THIS BOOK, DR. GREG AND ERIN SMALLEY OFFER PRACTICAL WAYS TO REKINDLE THE PASSIONATE, INTIMATE, HEART-TO-HEART SPARK OF CONNECTION BETWEEN HUSBANDS AND WIVES.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

ARTICLES

THE OPEN HEART

By Dr. Greg Smalley

In our work with couples, when we hear the statement, “I don’t feel love for my spouse anymore,” we just blow by it. “What?” you might be thinking, “How can you simply let that go, isn’t not feeling in love with your spouse a huge problem?” It’s not that we ignore the fact that someone does not feel “love” for their spouse; instead, we know that they need to shift paradigms (or look at their situation differently). Instead of discussing “love,” we usually ask them something that really gets them thinking: “Where does love come from?”

Love is not about chemistry or magic. Love cannot be generated. One’s inability to create love for their spouse is not a sign that something is wrong with them, their spouse is unlovable, their marriage was broken or their spouse isn’t their “soul mate.” (We hate that term!) It was simply a function of the reality that, as humans, no love originates with us. God is the author, creator and generator of love. Love comes from God, and God is love (1 John 4:7-8). As a matter of fact, the only reason we can love at all is because He first poured His love into us (1 John 4:19). None of that love we talk about, write about and sing about comes from us. We do not generate a single drop of love. It all comes from God.

By design, here is how the process of love works. When we open our hearts to God, we receive His love. He then fills our hearts abundantly full of His love (Romans 5:5). Once our hearts are full of God’s love, we then open our hearts and share love with others. His love feels good to me, but I am just passing it through from God to others. When I engage God and my spouse with an open heart, the flow of love is full and complete. God’s love is the never-ending supply that flows through our hearts.

King Solomon is the wisest man who ever lived. One of the most fascinating proverbs wise King Solomon offered was when he wrote, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23, ESV). When the wisest man to ever live writes, “above all else,” it’s probably something that we should pay close attention to. But why did he compare our heart to the “wellspring of life” as some versions of the Bible translate the end of this verse? A wellspring is a fountain or spring, a source of continual supply. Basically King Solomon is saying that our hearts are a never-ending supply of God’s love.

This is also how we live out the greatest commandment: Love God with all your *heart*, soul, mind and strength, and love others as you love yourself (paraphrase of Mark 12:30-31).

The key is to understand that the ultimate source of love is God. We cannot even love God until He fills our hearts with His love. The condition for loving others is to *first* experience God’s love. Listen to 1 John 4:11-13:

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ... If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

The bottom line is that when people say they no longer feel love for their spouse, the problem isn’t love. God is love and His love is always available (it’s a never-ending

wellspring). God's love is like air—it's all around us. You don't have to be a "Christian" for God's love to flow through you. God's love flows through us when we open our hearts.

When couples have "lost that loving feeling" we assume they have the door to their hearts closed for some reason. But the problem is that people want to make the issue about love. Remember, we are not the creators of love. God is love. No love comes from us! We love because God first loved us. The real issue is never love, because God's love is always available. Let us say that again. In relationships, the real issue isn't *love*, the issue is the state of your *heart*—is it *open* or *closed*?

This is the common link in most every hurting couple we've worked with: those individuals have shut down. They are completely disconnected from each other. People often use other words to describe a dead heart: detached, indifferent, numb, lifeless, heartless, alone, emotionally unavailable or hard-hearted. Do you feel that way? Do others accuse you being this way?

Here is the real problem: When our heart shuts down to someone (especially to our spouse), then God's love is no longer flowing through me to her. This is why someone says that they don't feel "in love." If my heart is closed, then I have shut God's love out. This is what is actually happening when people do not feel love for their spouse. They have simply closed their heart to their mate (for good reasons I'm sure). Jesus replied, "Because of your *hardness of heart* Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8, ESV, emphasis added).

This is extremely freeing. Instead of putting efforts and energies into doing something we have zero ability to do (create love), we now focus on the condition of our heart: Is it opened or closed? If we put a lid on our heart, we shut off God as well. This is how we become the biggest barrier in living out the greatest commandment. When our heart is closed, we don't get filled up with God's love; therefore, we don't have anything to give out. We can't love God, ourselves or others. Obviously, God will continue to love us and others because He doesn't "need" us to fulfill His promises. But He wants us to be a part of the process. We get so much when God uses us to love others. This is where we receive things like patience, kindness, encouragement, politeness, selflessness, self-control, forgiveness, rejoicing with the truth, protection, trust, hope and perseverance (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

The good news is that we have a choice when it comes to our heart. We have control over our heart. God created us with the capacity to choose. We can't always choose our relationships—we didn't choose our parents or our siblings or our children—but we *can* choose who we open our heart to. First and foremost, we get to choose if we want a relationship with Christ, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20, NLT). What "door" do you think He's knocking on? The door of your heart. Christ is a gentleman. He doesn't break down the door of our heart; instead, He knocks and then waits patiently. We choose who we open our heart to and we choose when we close it down. No one shuts our heart down. People do things, and we sometimes react to

their choices by shutting down. But it's still our choice. That's great news. It's *our* choice.

The Open Heart

One of the greatest truths about relationships is that for you to get exactly what you most desire within your marriage—things like intimacy, deep connection, emotional closeness, understanding, empathy, kindness, appreciation, love, affection, encouragement, care, tenderness, passion, adventure— hearts *must* be *open*.

This is why the Apostle Peter urged “Love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22, NIV) and the Apostle Paul encouraged the new Christians, “We have ... *opened wide our hearts to you*. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—*open wide your hearts also*” (2 Corinthians 6:11-13, NIV).

“Open wide our heart” and “love deeply from the heart.” Wonderful advice from two of our greatest spiritual fathers.

The heart is the fountain from which the true nature of a person is revealed. Several statements are made in Scripture:

- “Above all else, guard your heart for everything you do flows from it (it is the *wellspring of life*).” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV and paraphrase)
- “Out of the *overflow of the heart*, the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34, Berean Study Bible)
- “A good man out of the *good treasure of his heart* brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.” (Matthew 12:35; NKJV)

But what is the heart? Our favorite definition of the heart is “the vital center of the real you.” Another way to look at the heart is through the analogy of the “Holy of Holies.” In the holy place of the tabernacle, there was an inner room called the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place. Judging from its name, we can see that it was a most sacred room, a place no ordinary person could enter. It was God’s special dwelling place in the midst of His people.

Whoever entered into the Holy of Holies was entering the very presence of God. Anyone except the high priest who entered the Holy of Holies would die. Even the high priest, God’s chosen mediator with His people, could only pass through the veil and enter this sacred dwelling once a year on a prescribed day called the Day of Atonement. Even then, the high priest had to make some meticulous preparations: He had to wash himself, put on special clothing, bring burning incense to let the smoke cover his eyes from a direct view of God and bring blood with him to make atonement for sins.¹ It has been said that because the high priest could be killed by God if not properly prepared according to divine instructions, a rope was tied around his ankle. Then, if he dropped dead, his body

could be dragged out without someone else going in to retrieve the body. How would you like a rope tied around your ankle as part of your regular work attire?

This is how sacred and precious the Holy of Holies was. Our heart is just as sacred. Our heart is just as precious, but how many of us treat our heart like the Israelites treated the Holy of Holies? Many people ignore, reject, abandon, judge, abuse and are careless with their heart. Our heart is the most valuable part of who we are.

Like us, you may be wondering how we have missed the importance of the heart and why we don't spend more time at church, in marriage books or at marriage conferences talking about our heart. What's going on here? I think John Eldridge, in the excellent book *Waking the Dead*, summed it up the best:

“I find it almost hard to believe a case must be made that the heart is ... well, at the heart of it all. Of life. Of each person. Of God. And of Christianity. It is diabolical, despicable, and is downright evil. This bears the mark of the enemy. The enemy knows how vital the heart is, even if we do not, and all his forces are fixed upon its destruction. For if he can disable or deaden your heart, then he has effectively foiled the plan of God, which was to create a world where love reigns. By taking out your heart, the Enemy takes out you, and you are essential to the Story. Once you begin to see with the eyes of your heart, once you have begun to know it is true from the bottom of your heart, it will change everything. The story of your life is the story of the long and brutal assault on your heart by the one who knows what you and your marriage could be and fears it.”ⁱⁱ

The Evil One wants nothing more than to keep our hearts closed to God and to others—especially to our spouse. When two hearts shut down to each other, no one wins except Satan. A closed heart misses out on God's most precious gift—His love—from flowing through us and into our most important relationships. “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV).

Remember, above all else, guard your heart, for it's the wellspring of life and relationships!

¹ http://www.the-tabernacle-place.com/tabernacle_articles/tabernacle_holy_of_holies.aspx

¹ John Eldridge. *Waking the Dead*. p. 34-39.

SAFE AND SECURE

By Dr. Greg Smalley

In the popular ad campaign for her jewelry line, actor and businesswoman Jane Seymour declares, “If your heart is open, love will always find its way in.”

Cheesy? Undeniably. Her famous quote is dripping with Hallmark mushiness. Profound? Absolutely. Next to our relationship with Jesus Christ, keeping your heart open is the most significant relationship truth we’ve learned over the past 27 years of marriage. A soulmate marriage is only possible when hearts are fully open to each other. It’s exactly what the Apostle Paul was saying to Corinth Christians, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also” (2 Corinthians 6:11-13, NIV).

Open wide your hearts. This is a wonderful poetic notion, but it’s much easier said than done. Many people struggle with keeping their hearts open because openness requires vulnerability, as Drs. Arch Hart and Sharron Hart May explain,

“When a husband and wife love each other, they literally give their hearts to each other for safekeeping. This is such a delicate, trusting act that any violation or injury of this trust can cause the most painful of reactions. Imagine taking the very essence of your being—your heart—and placing it in the hands of your spouse. Your heart becomes your mate’s to care for, safe-guard, cherish, and love. This necessitates a willingness to be vulnerable and take a bold, risky step. If your partner reciprocates, you both have chosen to risk being hurt, rejected, and abandoned. Placing your heart in the hands of another is a giant step of faith. Afterward, you can only wait to see what your spouse will do with your heart. Your desire, of course, is that your spouse will be a safe haven for your heart. And that is your spouse’s longing as well”ⁱⁱⁱ

Love is risky because it requires vulnerability. This is the ultimate dilemma in marriage. To reach the most profound levels of connection, you have to give your spouse access to the most vulnerable part of yourself—your heart. The risk is there’s no guarantee how he or she will handle your heart. Once open, will you be unconditionally loved and accepted? After seeing the real you, all of your flaws, imperfections, embarrassing stories and past mistakes, will you be cherished and protected? In the song “Unconditionally,” singer Katy Perry captures the vulnerability of opening your heart,

“I will love you unconditionally
So open up your heart ...
Acceptance is the key to be ... truly free
Will you do the same for me?”^{iv}

If I love and accept you, will you do the same for me? We long to be unconditionally loved and accepted. But many people enter into marriage already afraid of being open and vulnerable. As young children, we quickly learn that the world is full of pain and heartache. We all have emotional bruises and relationship scars from the past. We’ve placed our trust in people who’ve hurt us.

Maybe your childhood included abuse in all its insidious forms. Perhaps you watched your parents divorce. Maybe you had a bad experience in a previous dating relationship. Perhaps a best friend unexpectedly ended your friendship. Maybe you were physically or sexually assaulted. Perhaps you made a mistake and believe it's unforgiveable.

Traumatic experiences only reinforce that people or relationships aren't safe. This collective damage causes us to come up with a whole host of strategies to avoid intimacy and keep from being hurt:

- Put up emotional walls.
- Maintain shallow relationships.
- Use humor to distract people from seeing the real person.
- Veg out in front of the TV or computer.
- Spend countless hours on social media or playing video games.
- Use anger to control others from getting too close.
- Overly invest in the children, work or hobbies.
- Exist in a sexless marriage.
- Turn to food for comfort.
- Prioritize spending time with friends.
- Project certain images on social media.
- Avoid talking about feelings.
- Isolate and hide out in a "man cave" or "she shed."
- Anesthetize pain through addictions.
- Get involved in an affair.
- Become self-reliant so to avoid depending on anyone.
- Disappear when people get too close.

If you or your spouse uses one of these strategies, the problem usually isn't a lack of desire to connect. Instead, it usually has more to do with the fear of being vulnerable and attempting to avoid being hurt, rejected or abandoned. Unfortunately, the strategies we use to keep from being hurt are self-defeating because they require significant energy and severely affect the intimacy in your marriage. It's hard for your spouse to get close when you're on the other side of a thick wall.

John Mayer, in his song "Daughters" sings about the frustration of loving someone with a heart locked behind an emotional wall,

"She's just like a maze
Where all of the walls all continually change
And I've done all I can
To stand on her steps with my heart in my hands
Now I'm starting to see
Maybe it's got nothing to do with me"

When we employ strategies to keep from being hurt, our spouse ends up feeling isolated and alone. This keeps us stuck in a roommate marriage.

Other people want to open their heart and deeply connect with their spouse, but the relationship feels unsafe. It's like the insurance salesman explained to his customer. "Your application was filled out correctly except for one thing, Mr. Smith. Where it asks the relationship of Mrs. Smith to yourself, you should have put down 'wife' not 'strained.'" "

It's very difficult to open your heart when your marriage feels strained and you constantly feel like you're walking on eggshells around your spouse. Instead of your marriage feeling like a safe haven, you feel apprehensive or stressed being around your spouse.

While there are probably hundreds of ways to offend, frustrate and hurt each other—causing our hearts to shut down—we consistently see several that top the list. Trying to better understand why people close their hearts, we asked hundreds of couples to answer the question: "What causes you to feel *unsafe* in your marriage?" Here are the top responses and the behaviors that make a marriage feel unsafe:

- Criticism. (This was No. 1.)
- Being physically threatened, intimidated or abused.
- Feeling put down or belittled.
- When your spouse emotionally withdraws.
- Hurtful jokes or sarcastic comments at your expense.
- Having your feelings, thoughts, beliefs and opinions judged.
- Being ignored or minimized.
- Feeling controlled.
- Being verbally attacked.
- When your spouse intensely defends himself or herself.
- Anger—being yelled at or spoken to with harsh words.
- Broken promises.
- Incessant nagging.
- When your spouse shares private information without your blessing.
- Having past mistakes repeatedly brought up.
- When your spouse doesn't listen.
- Feeling unloved, rejected or abandoned.
- When you don't get the benefit of the doubt.
- Being deceived.
- Feeling disrespected.
- Being embarrassed or humiliated in front of others.
- When your spouse won't open up emotionally.
- Betrayal or infidelity.
- When affection or sex is withheld or used as a weapon.
- Feeling like your opinion doesn't matter.
- When your spouse is unwilling to admit when they're wrong or to seek forgiveness.
- Being forced to do something that you're uncomfortable with.

- When your spouse tries to “fix” you.
- Feeling unappreciated or being taken for granted.
- When your needs are dismissed as unimportant.

It might be obvious, such as something from the above list, or it might be subtle, like a certain negative look, tone of voice, shake of the head or rolling of the eyes. But when we encounter these things, we feel *unsafe* and instantly go into “fight” or “flight” mode—we counterattack or withdraw. Wild animals do the exact same thing. Think of a turtle that retreats into its shell when threatened, a skunk that sprays its repugnant odor when danger approaches or a possum that plays dead. But far more important to realize is that your heart has just closed. This is how we protect ourselves. So, how can you tell that a heart has closed? Here are some signs that someone’s heart is shut down:

- Little or no eye contact.
- Negative body language (i.e., folded or crossed arms, glaring, pouting, etc.).
- Silence or withdrawal—disconnecting relationally or physically leaving the room.
- Bitterness and resentment.
- Anger (i.e., yelling, intimidation).
- Harshness or acting cruel.
- Refusing touch.
- Insensitivity or callousness.
- Selfishness.
- Unwillingness to forgive.
- Emotionally distant or coldness.
- Despair and hopelessness.

How would your spouse know when your heart is shut down? Is it something from the above list or is it something else? The key is to better understand what it looks like or feels like when your heart is closed. What is the sign that *your* heart is closed?

When my (Erin’s) heart is closed, I become critical so that Greg knows that I’m upset or that he really hurt me. However, a closed heart makes us dangerous relationally. Author Adam Anderson puts it this way,

“When hearts are closed, we more readily become defensive. We are more likely to become angry, sarcastic and display short sightedness. We tend to be more prideful and selfish. ... We are less likely to have meaningful interactions in our relationships.”^v

When my heart is closed and I become critical, I’m really not a very safe person to be around. Not only am I likely to say or do something that will hurt my husband, I’m unsafe because I’m consumed with *me*. I’m trying to get rid of *my* hurtful feelings and I’m not really thinking about Greg. I’ve lost perspective. When a turtle’s head is retracted or a roly-poly bug is curled up tight, it can’t see beyond itself. The world around becomes dark. King David spoke about not being able to see when his heart was troubled, “For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see ... and my heart fails within me” (Psalm 40:12, NIV). When our heart is shut

down, we become confused. Our judgment is clouded. Awareness, insight and discernment are non-existent. In this closed state, we often end up making brain-only decisions that are heartless. It's so easy to rationalize our choices when we lack perspective and are just using our brain. This is why good people are capable of making terrible choices when their heart is shut down. We've all heard someone say, "He was the last person on earth who I thought would do that." or "I never thought she was capable of doing that." We become capable of practically anything when our heart is closed. And the longer our heart remains closed the more likely that our heart is going to slowly fossilize or *harden*.

One of the things that we've learned over the years of working with marriages that are in crisis is that every failed relationship stems from a *hardened heart*. This is exactly what Jesus explained when asked about divorce. "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard" (Matthew 19:8, NIV). A hardened heart is the real destroyer of our marriages.

Max Lucado agrees, "Jesus identified the hard heart as the wrecking ball of a marriage. When one or both people in a marriage harden their heart, they sign its death certificate."^{vi}

In Matthew 19:8, after Jesus talks about divorce in the context of a hardened heart, he also explained that this wasn't God's original plan. Jesus said, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." His last statement suggests that God's perfect plan for our marriage is the opposite of hardheartedness: *two open hearts*.

Creating a Marriage that feels like the Safest Place on Earth

Love is risky and there is no guarantee that we won't get hurt. So, how do we create deep connection with our spouse in spite of the obvious risks? It's important to create the right type of environment so hearts open. It's what singer and songwriter Calum Scott is promising to his lost love in "You Are The Reason,"

"If I could turn back the clock
I'd make sure the light defeated the dark
I'd spend every hour, of every day
Keeping you safe"

Calum Scott is absolutely right—hearts open to each other when people feel *safe*. This is why your marriage needs to feel like the safest place on earth. Safety isn't simply a list of behaviors, "do this or don't do that," it's who you are. Being safe is a way of life. The movie, *Lone Survivor*, provides a powerful example of the difference between *being* and *doing*.

In 2005, a four-man Navy SEAL reconnaissance team was quietly inserted into the mountains of Afghanistan for a secret mission called "Operation Red Wings." After

moving into their surveillance position, the team was discovered by local goat herders. Once the mission was compromised, the SEALs released the civilians and retreated to a fallback position for extraction. However, within an hour, a large Taliban force attacked the U.S. soldiers. Unfortunately, they could not establish consistent communication and their comrades were unable to help. Three of the four SEALs were killed, and the only survivor, Marcus Luttrell, was left unconscious with a number of serious wounds. A local Afghani tribesman, Gulab, found the lone surviving SEAL in grave condition and took Luttrell into his home. Instead of turning the American over to the Taliban, the tribesman enlisted the assistance of the other villagers to protect the SEAL until American forces could be contacted. This was in accordance with an ancient tradition called *pashtunwali*, whereby a person is given refuge from an enemy until the situation can be clarified. For days, the villagers fended off Taliban attack and protected Luttrell until U.S. forces rescued him.^{vii}

When we saw the movie *Lone Survivor*, we were astonished by the actions of the Pashtun tribesman, Gulab, who took Luttrell into his home and protected the wounded SEAL. The fact that this man would risk his home, family and life to follow an ancient ethical code and protect a complete stranger is truly amazing. This wasn't simply a kind act; *pashtunwali* was a way of life for Gulab and the other villagers.

But the indigenous Afghan people aren't the only ones who practice *pashtunwali*. Our heavenly Father has been doing this long before the earth was even created. God is passionate about you. He desperately wants a personal relationship with you. After all, He sent his Son to die for you so that you could spend eternity together. This is the purest love. And a foundational characteristic of God's love is *safety*. He makes this message clear through the scriptures:

- “The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.” (Proverbs 18:10, NIV)
- “Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.” (Psalm 16:1, NIV)
- “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.” (**Psalm 4:8, NIV**)
- “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.” (**Proverbs 29:25, NIV**)

These are just a few of the many verses that show how the God of this universe goes out of His way to make you feel safe. He wants your heart open so you can receive His everlasting love and so you can love Him wholeheartedly. When God is trying to win back His unfaithful bride (the Israelites) in the book of Hosea, He talks about the importance of making His bride feel safe: “...and I will make you lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:18, ESV). God wanted His bride's heart fully open to Him, and He makes it clear that He is safe—He is *pashtunwali*.

Your marriage needs *pashtunwali*. When hearts are closed and people are disconnected, your spouse needs to feel protected, and your marriage needs to feel like a refuge—like

the safest place on earth. We like what John and Stasi Eldridge say about why creating a safe marriage is so important.

“Marriage is the sanctuary of the heart. You have been entrusted with the heart of another human being. Whatever else your life’s great mission will entail, loving and defending this heart next to you is part of your great quest. Marriage is the privilege and the honor of living as close to the heart as two people can get. No one else in all the world has the opportunity to know each other more intimately than do a husband and wife. We are invited into their secret lives, their truest selves; we come to know their nuances, their particular tastes, what they think is funny, what drives them crazy. We are entrusted with their hopes and dreams, their wounds, and their fears.”^{viii}

We couldn’t agree more. In a marriage, we get the privilege of being invited into our spouse’s “holy of holies”—their heart. The holy of holies was the most sacred area of the ancient temple of Jerusalem. This special room contained the Ark of the Covenant and was accessible only by the Israelite high priest once a year. To enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would have to go through an elaborate cleansing ritual and put on special clothing.^{ix}

However, tradition says the high priest would have a scarlet rope tied around his foot and bells around his waist. If the high priest’s sins were not atoned for properly, he would die in the presence of God. If the bells stopped jingling, this would signal that the priest had fallen dead. Since nobody else could enter the Holy of Holies without also dying, they needed a way of retrieving the body of the dead priest if necessary.^x In the same way that the Israelites treated this special place in their temple with the utmost respect, we must treat our spouse’s heart—their deepest feelings, desires, hopes and fears—with *pashtunwali*. Only then will we be given access to their holy of holies.

So what is emotional safety? We define emotional safety as *feeling free to open your heart and be fully known, and to trust that, as an imperfect person, your spouse will unconditionally love, cherish and nurture you for a lifetime.*

In other words, you feel safe with someone when you believe that he or she will handle your heart—that deepest and most vulnerable part of you—with the utmost caution and care. One author explained emotional safety this way:

Oh, the comfort— the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person—having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are ... certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.^{xi}

What we love about this quote is it was written in 1859. Feeling safe is as true now as it was back in the mid 1800’s.

So, how do we pull this off? How do we create a marriage that feels like the safest place on earth? What does *pashtunwali* (feeling safe) look like in your relationship? We asked

couples at our marriage seminar to define emotional safety. Listen to some of their responses:

- Feeling secure—a deep sense that our relationship is unbreakable.
- Being loved unconditionally and accepted for who I am.
- Relaxed and peaceful.
- Cared for above anyone else.
- Being fully known—to see me for who I am.
- Free to express who I really am.
- Feeling respected.
- Feeling valued and cherished.
- Not being judged.
- Accept my flaws as part of the whole package.

That's a pretty amazing list, isn't it? Wouldn't it feel wonderful to have these things as the foundation of your marital relationship? Feeling emotionally safe is vital for the marriage relationships to flourish, as one author put it,

“One of our most basic needs ... in an intimate relationship is the need to feel safe. I'm not talking about physical safety, but rather the feeling of emotional safety. It is the deep sense that the relationship is solid, that our partner's affections are serious and committed, that we can trust the love we feel, and thus allow ourselves to open fully to give and receive it. This emotional safety is the key that unlocks a person's heart and soul. When we feel safe, we are able to open up. When we feel safe, we are able to risk. When we feel safe, we are able to relax. When we feel safe, we are able to shine.”^{xii}

When your spouse feels safe, she is naturally inclined to relax and open her heart. In this open state, connection occurs effortlessly. You don't have to force closeness or do things to create intimacy when you feel safe. This is true because God designed our heart to be open. It takes much more effort and energy to stay closed or locked behind an emotional wall. Think about a recent time when your spouse hurt or frustrated you. Remember how quickly your heart closed and how you disconnected from your spouse? But your heart was not designed to stay closed. Maintaining a closed heart is like trying to force a huge beach ball under water. You have to strain and push to keep a ball full of air under the water. It's the same with your heart. You have to work really hard to keep a heart full of God's love shut down. Have you ever noticed that when your spouse takes responsibility for his or her actions and seeks forgiveness, how quickly your heart opens back up? Like that beach ball under the water, once you feel safe, your heart will explode back open. You can go from feeling closed to instantly feeling open and connected.

So, how do we practically build a marriage that feels like the safest place on earth? It's easier than you may think.

Creating Safety in Your Marriage

The key to creating a marriage that feels like the safest place on earth is found in Ephesians 5:29: “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church.” Creating a safe marriage involves both an *attitude* and an *action*. *Cherish* is the right attitude and *nourish* is the powerful action. Let’s look first at the attitude that we need to foster safety in our marriage.

CHERISH: Recognize your mate’s incredible value

The primary attitude that will help your spouse feel emotionally safe is their confidence that you understand how incredibly valuable they are. This is the essence of *honor*. The literal definition of honor is “to give preference to someone by attaching high value to them.”^{xiii} Honor is the decision we make to view our spouse as a priceless treasure—a person of high worth and value.

This is what King Solomon encouraged as well: “A man’s greatest treasure is his wife” (Proverbs 18:22, Contemporary English Version). Honor isn’t based on their behaviors or subject to our emotions. You grant your spouse a place value whether or not they want it or deserve it. Honor is simply a decision you make and a gift you give. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul encouraged the early Christians to do when he wrote, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor” (Romans 12:10, NASB). What great marriage advice. However, we don’t have to rely on our own interpretation to attach value to our spouse. Look at some of these great verses that show how much our heavenly Father values and cherishes us:

- God made you in His image. (Genesis 1:27)
- He chose you when He planned creation. (Ephesians 1:11-12)
- You are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Psalm 139:14, ESV
- You are His “treasured possession.” Exodus 19:5, ESV
- You are His “glorious inheritance.” Ephesians 1:18, ESV
- You are God’s masterpiece. Ephesians 2:10, NLT

It’s amazing to think that the God of this universe considers my wife his treasured possession and that Jesus says that she is His glorious inheritance. She is God’s masterpiece. That’s powerful! However, when Erin and I (Greg) are in the midst of the Reactive Cycle and my heart closes, the first thing that goes is my awareness of her incredible value. And in those moments when I fail to see her as my heavenly Father sees his daughter, I’m not safe. When I lose sight of her value, when I’m not cherishing her, I’m more apt to react and treat her in dishonoring ways. Thus, Erin has every right to put a wall up and protect herself when I forget about her incredible value.

Honor—to cherish your spouse—is that attitude that creates safe marriage. Marriage expert, John Gottman, says that, “without honor, all the marriage skills one can learn won’t work.”^{xiv} Another expert, Scott Stanley, says that, “honor is the fuel that keeps the lifelong marriage loving and functioning. If only a spark of respect or adoration remains, the spark can be turned into the flame in a few days.”^{xv}

Your heart will be open to what you value. Luke 12:34, ESV, says, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Our heart will open to and pursue only what we truly cherish.

Couple exercise: the cherish list

In the space below, list all of the reasons why your spouse is so valuable. For example, it might be a character trait, gender difference, faith pattern, values, morals, parenting skills, spirituality, the roles they play that you appreciate (i.e., worker, friend, parent, sibling, son or daughter), personality characteristic, how they treat you, and so on.

Here are some words to prime the pump and get you thinking about your spouse’s value:

Humble	Fun-loving	Mannerly
Brave	Successful	
Integrity	Responsible	
Courageous	Helpful	
Funny	Dreamer	
Loyal	Happy	
Caring	Leader	
Unselfish	Gentle	
Generous	Loving	
Self-confident	Neat	
Respectful	Joyful	
Considerate	Cooperative	
Creative	Curious	
Independent	Determined	
Intelligent	Energetic	
Honest	Cheerful	
Adventurous	Thoughtful	
Hard-working	Calm	

Be sure to keep this list nearby so you can periodically add to it and revise it when you need to remember your spouse's value. Also, don't keep this amazing list to yourself—share it with your spouse. Let them know that you recognize their value. When this happens not only does your spouse benefit, but you are positively affected as well.

As wonderful as cherishing your spouse's incredible worth is, attitude alone without action is meaningless. James encourages this same thing when he wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. *Do what it says*" (James 1:22, NIV, emphasis added). Once you recognize your mate's value, you need to back that attitude up with action.

NOURISH: Treat your spouse in valuable ways

Understanding your mate's incredible value is the beginning of safety, but to create a marriage that feels like the safest place on earth, you must express honor through action and behavior. "Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18, ESV). Honor in action means that you learn how to handle your mate's heart—their deepest feelings, thoughts and desires—with the utmost *care*. You need to visualize their heart tattooed with the words, "Handle with care."

Let's quickly review the definition emotional safety: *feeling free to open your heart and be fully known, and to trust that, as an imperfect person, your spouse will unconditionally love, cherish and nurture you for a lifetime*. As you can see, the last part of the definition communicates a powerful message: "You are incredibly valuable, so don't be afraid of letting me see your heart. You can share your deepest feelings, thoughts, opinions, hopes, dreams, fears, hurts and memories, and I will still love and accept you." Safety in action means that you handle your spouse's heart in extremely careful and honoring ways.

So, let us make the idea of safety in action practical. "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor..." (1 Peter 3:7). One of the greatest and most practical ways to begin to nourish your spouse and "show honor" is to understand what helps your spouse to feel loved.

To nourish your spouse's relational desires, you must realize that everyone's desires are different, based on personalities, interests, gender, backgrounds and expectations. So, before you can begin nourishing your spouse, you have to know what they want from you to feel loved. We can't make an educated guess or treat our spouse the way we would like them to treat us. Don't apply the golden rule here! The problem is that your guess might be wide of the mark or your "love language" may be extremely different from what your spouse desires.

To give you an easy method of discovering your spouse's love language, have your spouse complete the statement: "I feel loved when you ..."

Be sure to update your nourish list periodically and keep current with what each other needs to feel loved. The longer your list becomes, the more ideas you will have to remember how important it is to nourish each other. Also, add to the list as you travel through the different seasons of your marriage journey! During each season (health problems, busyness, moving, job loss, kids, empty nest, etc.), you each will need something different, and these needs can change in an instant. Stay current with each other!

We'll say it one more time: *In order for closeness and deep connection to occur, hearts must be open. Thus, the foundation of a soulmate marriage is feeling safe—physically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally.* This is why the Apostle Peter beseechs us to “love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22, NIV). And a heart will open only when it feels safe. Therefore, create *pashtunwali* in your marriage—a relationship that feels like the safest place on earth. Follow God's lead and focus on establishing grace, patience, compassion and a lifelong commitment into your marriage.

¹ Archibald D. Hart & Sharon Hart May, *Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want To Come Home To*, p. 28.

¹ Songwriters: Henry Russell Walter / Katy Perry / Lukasz Gottwald / Max Martin. Unconditionally lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.

¹ <http://instituteforfamily.org/2010/09/a-heart-condition/>

¹ http://thoughts-about-god.com/blog/2011/02/19/ml_hard-hearted/

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Red_Wings

¹ Love & War, p. 37.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Holy-of-Holies.html>

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/high-priest-rope.html>

¹ Dinah Craik, *A Life for a Life*, p. ?

¹ Barbara DeAngelis. (2001). *What Women Want Men to Know*, p. 117.

¹ Gary Smalley. *Secrets to Lasting Love*, p. 127.

¹ <http://www.marriagemissions.com/quotes-on-communication-and-conflict/>

¹ <http://www.marriagemissions.com/quotes-on-communication-and-conflict/>

THE REACTIVE CYCLE

By Dr. Greg Smalley

Conflict in a marriage is inevitable and can actually be a really good thing for your marriage if you manage it in healthy ways. But unfortunately, the old adage, “Easier said than done.” aptly applies when talking about conflict. In other words, it’s one thing to say that conflict can benefit your marriage—in theory that makes sense. However, it’s quite another thing to go from a disagreement to connection.

There is no doubt about it: It’s hard to put into practice healthy conflict principles. We were reminded about this reality not too long ago when we were doing a marriage seminar in Tokyo, Japan.

Before the start of the seminar, we took a few days to sightsee around Tokyo. As the travel planner, I (Greg) bought a great book on what to do in Tokyo. One of the most popular tourist destinations turned out to be a beautiful park called Meiji Shrine. It’s located in a dense forest that covers about 175 acres. There are several ponds, old bridges and paths that zigzag throughout the park. In preparation for our day trip, I thoroughly researched how to walk there from our hotel, which paths to take in the park for the best sightseeing spots and a variety of other important information. I had this all worked out and planned perfectly.

However, it took us a long time to walk to the park because I got lost a few times, so when we arrived at the entrance gate, we were pretty exhausted. Once we got into the park, the path immediately forked. I had planned on us taking the “long way” through so we could see this one particular bridge overlooking a gorgeous pond—a perfect selfie location!

But, when we arrived at the fork, Erin and our 17-year-old daughter, Murphy, wanted to take the shortest route because they were already worn out from all the walking we’d done just to get to the park.

So, instead of following me as I turned down the path that I had mapped out, Erin and Murphy started walking the other way.

“You’re going the wrong way.” I cautioned.

“We’re tired,” they said in unison, “and this looks like the shortest route.”

“But this way is the more picturesque way, and I want to have a family picture by the bridge and pond.”

“But we’re exhausted,” Erin responded.

“Fine,” I snapped, “let’s go *your* way.” And I started walking in their direction—the opposite way.

I think Erin and Murphy were stunned by my reaction. I really don’t think they realized how much I wanted to go the other way. So, once they realized how important the “scenic” route was, they started walking in that direction—my planned route. However, I

was already huffing and puffing down the shorter path not even looking back because I was angry with both of them.

I remember looking back at my wife and daughter thinking that they'd turn around and follow me. I'm sure they thought the same thing about me, "Surely Greg wouldn't leave us and storm off mad."

Sadly, my wife and daughter greatly underestimated my stubbornness!

Once I realized that they weren't going to follow me, I really got upset and wanted to "teach them a lesson." Since I had carefully studied the map, I knew that the two paths would eventually merge back together further into the park. So, I figured that I could angrily march my way for a while and then we'd meet up and the girls could then apologize. At that point in time, I still thought I was the one who had been wronged!

My revised plan seemed perfect, but the girls never showed up at the spot where the trails merged. I waited and waited until I realized something awful: *My wife and daughter are lost ... in a foreign country ... without any money or clue where they are.* I quickly surmised that I was in big trouble!

So, before I explain how this conflict could possibly have a happy ending—one that resulted in a deeper level of connection and intimacy, I want to explain an extremely important point about conflict. As in our story, when you argue, it's never really about whatever the issue or topic is that you're fighting about (i.e., money, household chores, children, sex, work, leisure time, in-laws, which walking path to take, etc.). These topics appear to be what's driving the conflict but it's an illusion. What's really happening during an argument is that your "button" gets pushed. I'm sure you've heard the expression, "He just pushed my button." or "She is totally pushing my buttons." When we argue, picture one of those big buttons from Staples (the office product retailer), the Easy Button that says, "That was easy," getting pushed. We all have Easy Buttons throughout our bodies. One author described it this way.

"Everyone has 'hot buttons.' They're your tender spots, the places where you're most sensitive, the points where you get irritated, or hurt, or angry, and have to react. ... Hot buttons are ... triggered by specific events or circumstances [and] ... typically take over and direct your behavior. They also carry a strong emotional charge when they're activated, so that behavior is going to be emotional and extreme. There's nothing rational or considered about a response that comes from a hot button. It's pure emotion. ... You'll know you were acting under the influence of a hot button when you regret what you did or said the moment you cool off. The words just popped out, you turned away and slammed the door behind you. You didn't think about it until afterwards. At the time, it was simply what you had to do. *That* was a hot button."¹⁶

Buttons represent sensitive emotions that are easily triggered. We're not talking about simple feelings like mad, depressed, annoyed, worried, upset, sad, jealous, bored or tired. Instead, buttons are intense feelings and childhood wounds that are often out of our awareness. For example, a button is a deep, sensitive emotion-like feeling:

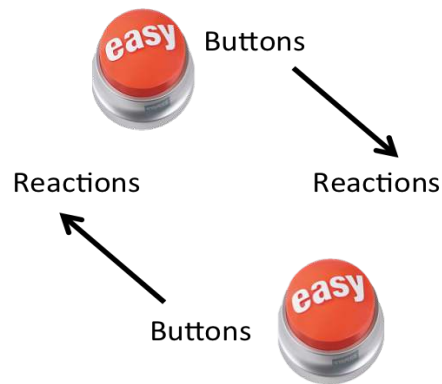
Unloved
Disrespected
Rejected
Failed
Controlled
Abandoned
Inadequate
Worthless
Not good enough
Invalidated
Unimportant
Misunderstood

Therefore, beyond the facts that we have a sin nature and that our default setting as humans is selfishness, a more accurate way to explain what happens when we get hurt, frustrated or argue is that our “emotional buttons” get pushed.

Remember, it’s not the day-to-day squabbles over money, chores, in-laws or directions that drive conflict. The real issue is our sensitive emotions that get triggered and stirred up. This is what’s so misleading about most arguments. We get so focused on the topic (i.e., money), that we miss the underlying root cause of conflict, the button that got pushed (i.e., feeling controlled).

Once a button is pushed, our heart closes instantly. This is one of the most important parts of understanding conflict. Think of those little roly-poly bugs. You know the ones we’re talking about? Those grey little armadillo-like bugs that roll up into a small ball when they’re touched. Our heart acts just like those roly-poly bugs. When we feel emotionally “flicked,” our heart shuts down and it rolls up into a tight ball. Just like you can’t force open the roly-poly bug without killing it, once your spouse’s heart closes, you can’t pry it open either. Over time, if a couple continues to practice unhealthy conflict, a closed heart will eventually harden. This is how unresolved or unhealthy conflict can kill a marriage.

After our buttons have been pushed and our heart is closed, we instantly go into reaction mode. Here is what the *Reactive Cycle* looks like graphically:

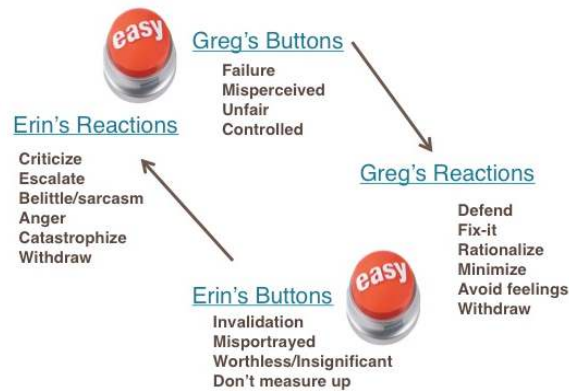


This is never good! When we're all stirred up internally (buttons pushed) and our heart is shut down, we're capable of saying or doing any number of things (reactions). Every reaction will be either a "fight" or a "flight." (A few people "freeze.")

Fighters directly engage the other person to persuade them in some way. They don't back down or remain silent—they go "toe-to-toe" or pursue the person around the house. They might become angry, use calm logic, criticize, get sarcastic, yell, throw a tantrum, debate their position, make belittling comments, defend themselves, invalidate their feelings, try to fix the problem, find a solution, complain and so on. It's like the fighter ends up thinking, *Since we're not going to connect relationally, I might as well win the argument.* Fighters jump right into a conflict discussion and advocate for their own opinion, viewpoint or perspective. Thus, fighters spend the majority of their time in persuasion mode—defending their point of view. The problem with this reaction style is that it always sends the same message: *I'm not safe for any meaningful interaction with you.*

"Flighters," on the other hand, disconnect emotionally. We flee when we avoid conflict or withdraw when the conversation becomes difficult. The key trait of a "flighter" is a reluctance to get into a disagreement (avoidance) or stay in an important conversation (withdrawal). They don't want to rock the boat, so they stay out of the fray. Withdrawal can be as obvious as walking out of the room or as subtle as staying put but "logging off" emotionally. A "flighter" may withdraw by becoming silent or may quickly agree to a solution just to end the discussion with no intention of ever returning to the conversation. It's not as if they don't talk or interact; instead, they avoid sensitive issues, work hard to minimize conflict and believe there is little gain from becoming upset. Their motto is "Relax—problems have a way of working themselves out." In avoidance mode, flighters may use the phrase "agree to disagree" time and time again—which means that they avoid conversations they think will end in conflict. A person who chooses "flight" and disengages always sends the same message: *I'm disconnecting from any meaningful interaction with you.*

To recap, unhealthy conflict happens when your buttons get pushed, your heart closes and you go into reaction mode (fight or flight). In the end, you can't have a healthy discussion because it's almost physically impossible—you're stirred up emotionally, your heart is closed and you're reacting. Here is a graphic of Greg and Erin's Reactive Cycle with their unique buttons and reactions:



Do you see why this doesn't help a marriage thrive and why this can kill a marriage? Nothing good will ever come from this unhealthy cycle because it's the exact opposite of love. Whereas love is patient, kind, content, humble, polite, selfless, calm, grateful, etc., closed-heartedness generates negative reactions that drive you both apart. Sadly, when your heart is closed, God's love is no longer flowing between you. And this is exactly where Satan wants you—loveless, disconnected and isolated.

This is why we are warned in 1 Peter 5:8, NIV: "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Satan wants to devour you and your marriage. And all he needs is a small foothold that instantly appears when you argue. "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26-27). So, instead of staying in reaction mode when we experience conflict, how do we use the disagreement to drive us into the deepest levels of intimacy and connection? We promise it's possible!

¹ <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/don't-let-your-hot-buttons-spoil-your-chances.html>

THE CARE CYCLE

By Dr. Greg Smalley

We now want to share some ideas of what to do when the inevitable conflicts do arise. Toward that end we want to make sure you understand a basic tenant we ascribe to.

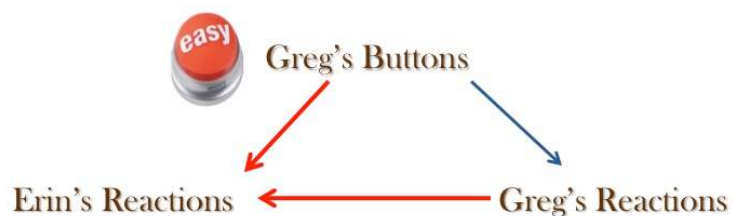
We totally reject the idea that the “end justifies the means.” Many people either believe, or act as if they believe, that it doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you end up in a good place. It’s hard for us to calculate how much damage and pain has resulted from marital battles, regardless of whether they arrived at a resolution.

We believe that how you get from point A to point B is every bit as important as where you end up. We’re proposing that couples approach working through differences and dealing with conflict only using methods that are respectful and kind, as if they’re actually dealing with someone they like (maybe even love!), rather than an enemy. We’re suggesting that in the long run, you can’t afford to have marital conflict lead to casualties.

We’re not even going to teach you “fair fighting” rules. You fight with an adversary. Your spouse is *never* your enemy! Your spouse is your friend and your lover. You need to create a “no-fight zone” in your home. You still need to deal with conflicts and differences but handle them with tremendous respect and care—as friends would.

Breaking the Reactive Cycle

To break out of the unhealthy cycle of conflict, it’s important to understand what people normally do to stop the madness. When Greg’s buttons are pushed, where will he naturally focus his energy and attention?

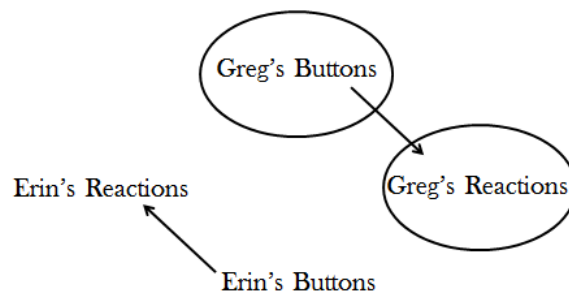


He’ll try to get Erin to stop or change her reactions. It makes sense, but that strategy hurts everyone immediately. How much righteous power and control does Greg have over Erin’s free will? None! To get Erin to change her behavior, he has to figure out how to convince her to react differently. As a result, she will normally feel manipulated, invalidated, judged, criticized and unloved.

And to make matters worse, if Greg succeeds in manipulating or controlling Erin into behaving differently (even if it’s better for her in the end), he’s had to become manipulative and controlling to get there. It’s not how the Lord handles us when we use our will poorly. We know Greg ultimately wants to be more conformed to the image of our Lord. So it’s not the man Greg wants to be, and it’s not the man God has called him to be.

What can we righteously and effectively do to break the cycle? Where do our responsibility and power actually lie?

As a full-functioning adult, Greg is responsible for himself. How he shows up, regardless of what comes at him, is ultimately what he will be responsible for when he stands before God. So in the Reactive Cycle, Greg is responsible for how he feels (his buttons) and what he does (his reactions).



The good news is that this is also where his power lies. We've found that it only takes one person to stop the reactive spin, and either Greg or Erin can do it without the cooperation of the other. Now that's power! This is exactly what Matthew 7:3-5, NIV, says: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." This is amazing advice from Jesus himself, and it's a necessary mindset for breaking out of unhealthy conflict. Here, Christ is saying that before you focus on your spouse and their speck, you need to *first* get the log out of your own eye. In other words, before you try to talk through the conflict, first deal with yourself.

Therefore, we say that the best thing you can do after your buttons have been pushed is to get *your* heart back open so that instead of reacting, you can *respond* to your spouse. Responding is the opposite of reacting. Responding is Christ-like because the focus is on things like being loving and caring, listening, understanding, validating and empathizing. This is why King Solomon wrote, "The heart of the wise man instructs his mouth" (Proverbs 16:23, Berean Study Bible). In other words, an open heart will guide a healthy conversation. So, how do you get your heart back open? Let's go to Tokyo and the Meiji Shrine.

I (Greg) ended up searching for Erin and Murphy for about 30 minutes to no avail. The longer I looked, the greater my worry and frustration mounted.

Finally, I found my wife and daughter as they exited from touring the temple shrine built for one of the Japanese emperors. By the way, the shrine tour was the whole reason that we had walked there in the first place—and they did it without me.

I was fuming!

“Where were you guys?” I shouted.

“Once you left us,” Erin sarcastically answered, “we just kept on walking. We assumed that you would eventually show up and apologize.”

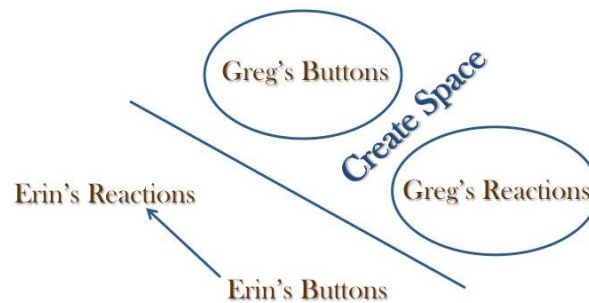
“Apologize!” I reacted, “*Me?* You’re the ones who left me. We were supposed to do the tour together. Besides, I’m the only one who knows how to get home!”

At this point, we’ll spare you the rest of the conversation. We’re quite certain that you can imagine how our conflict quickly spiraled downward.

However, we hope you notice how pointless it is to attempt to work out the conflict as a couple *before* your hearts are open. So, in this type of conflict, instead of trying to talk it through as a couple, what is a better first step?

As we walked back towards our hotel in complete silence, we eventually followed Christ’s directive in Matthew 7 and we each stopped focusing on what the other person did or didn’t do—we focused on the log in our own eye.

So what can Greg do? Create *space*.



Typically when we encourage people to create space and then ask them what we mean, they think we’re talking about space between them and their spouse. While we recognize that sometimes is helpful, it’s not what we mean here. We’re talking about creating space between your button and your reaction. That is what breaks the cycle. That’s where your power lies.

Much like a tug-of-war, the Reactive Cycle can only continue if both people are playing. If two people are pulling in opposite directions and either drops the rope, that game is over. In the Reactive Cycle, if either of you does not react, the cycle ends. Erin can’t continue with Greg if Greg won’t play. She may stay upset, but the cycle between them ends.

Realistically, not reacting can feel like it requires superhuman strength! It demands a powerful level of self-control. In fact, when Greg is able to muster the self-control needed to not react, he may walk away flexing his muscles, saying to himself, “You stud. Any normal man would have popped off at his wife when she said that, but you resisted. Way to go!”

And Erin is just as capable of exercising that much self-control and power to stop the madness. Both benefit when either stops the cycle. The Reactive Cycle is a “go-nowhere” spin for all parties involved.

The Care Cycle

The most frequently asked question we get is, “What do I actually do as I create space between my buttons and reactions?” Great question. The Care Cycle is a simple three-step process that can equip you to manage what goes on inside yourself when you get triggered, hurt, disappointed or angry. This tool works no matter what your typical reaction is to your feelings. It works if you tend to get upset, if you easily become overwhelmed by your emotions, or if you’re more inclined to shut down and avoid.

However, as much as we like being more empowered when we’re in conflict, we’ve got even better news for you. The Care Cycle also works perfectly to help manage all aspects of caring for yourself. As you develop a little skill with this tool, you can expertly handle all of your adult self-care responsibilities for your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being too.

So, the Care Cycle is *one* tool that you can use whether you’re upset and need help handling your reactions or you’re doing regular proactive self-care maintenance. The goal is to make sure you’re always well cared for. This process helps you to be fully who God created you to be, invest those valuable assets entrusted to your care and fulfill all He put you here to do—no matter what any person or set of circumstances throws your way.

Let’s look briefly at the Care Cycle’s three steps.

1. Be aware

Tune into signals that alert you to your feelings. Your body sounds the first alarm. Your heart rate goes up, you start to sweat, your shoulders clench tight with tension and a host of other indicators signal that negative emotions have kicked in and you’re in the Reactive Cycle. It’s a little different for everybody. The key is to become *conscious* that you’re triggered so you can make intentional choices to take good care of yourself rather than remaining in a purely reactive state. Once you “wake up” and become aware, in your mind it sounds something like this, *Wow! I’m triggered. I’m in the Reactive Cycle. Something’s going on in here that needs my attention!*

Instead of continuing to argue and debate the situation, sometimes it’s necessary to take a time-out. In other words, move away from your spouse for a brief amount of time to de-escalate your stirred up emotions. This is what King Solomon wrote, “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end” (Proverbs 29:11). Instead of continuing to react (fight or flight), you want to keep yourself under control. Some of the things that can help de-escalate your pushed buttons include taking some deep breaths, exercising, taking a walk, cleaning the house, listening to music, praying, journaling your feelings and so on. The key is to do something that will calm you down.

As you take a time-out, make sure to let your spouse know that you're taking a time-out to get your heart back open and that you'll be back later to finish the discussion. This is not "withdrawing." Withdrawal is an extremely deadly "flight" reaction. Calling a time-out insinuates that you just need a short break before continuing the conversation. The research suggests that you might need about 20 minutes to calm down when your buttons have been pushed. We have made it a rule that the person who calls the time-out should also be the one to initiate getting back together to talk about the conflict—but only when both hearts are open.

2. Attend

Now you get to work. This step involves asking lots of questions as you seek to understand yourself better in order to devise a great self-care strategy. Ideally, the goal is to come up with options that you can do without the need for much help from anyone else so you remain fully empowered.

Ask yourself questions such as:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What are these feelings trying to tell me?
- Where is this feeling coming from? Have I felt this way before?
- Is this feeling reminding me of something from my past?
- Do I *believe* something here that might not actually be true? What is the "truth"?
- What do I want in this situation?

Next, welcome your feelings, even if you don't understand them or they're unpleasant. Feelings are God's self-care data set. They were designed to provide critical information about what's really going on. If you ignore or try to get rid of them, you've eliminated that data, and your ability to effectively care well for yourself is virtually gone. Instead, you'll now say to yourself something like, *OK, this feels terrible, but my body and emotions are talking to me. I need to figure out what's going on and what I can do to make sure I stay well cared for or I become useless to everyone.*

Ask anything you can think of to help you understand what's going on, where it's coming from, and what you want or need. Keep in mind that you're working to develop a self-care plan, so more information tends to set you up better to succeed.

When we're hurt and frustrated, our thoughts are racing with what the other person did or didn't do. This is called "stewing." We can't stop stewing about how much we were wronged or mistreated. If we continue to think about *them*, we will stay stirred up. Remember Matthew 7:3, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" If you're going to get your heart open, you have to shift from thinking about your spouse to focusing on yourself. The way to make this important shift is to do what King David suggests, "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent." (Psalm 4:4).

As you're in your time-out, start focusing on your emotions—the voice of your heart. Ask yourself, *What button just got pushed?* You want to name the button—identify the

emotion. This will continue to calm you down and open your heart. Research done at UCLA shows by simply “naming” what you are feeling, you will cause your brain activity to shift from the amygdala—your fight or flight center—to a much more rational part of the brain—the prefrontal cortex. Thus, this simple act not only begins to impact the state of your closed heart, it impacts what is going on in your body physiologically. The goal is to de-escalate, and this allows it to happen!

One quick note: We’ve found that one of the most profitable questions you can ask is: “Is there anything *I’m doing* that is turning up the volume or causing these feelings?” The more you find here, the better. If you’re causing it, you can change it without any help from anyone else. That’s power!

Once you have a good understanding of what’s going on, shift your attention to crafting an awesome self-care plan. The best options are ones that you alone can implement and make you feel well-cared for and empowered. It can include steps you can take to make yourself feel better, how to set good boundaries, how to talk to someone about a difficult or awkward situation, what you can do if the conversation doesn’t go well, how to assure you keep God with you in all of it and so on.

Even though it’s your responsibility to care for yourself, God did not design you to do it alone, nor does He expect you to. Prayerfully allow God to help. Note that you’re not asking God to do absolutely everything for you while you simply sit there. You’re asking Him for help as you care for yourself. You are still maintaining 100 percent of the responsibility for the job. It can sound like this, “God, I could sure use a hand here. Can you help me understand what’s happening in me and what responsibly caring for myself would look like here? I could sure use some extra strength, wisdom, insight and patience because right now I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

After the Meiji Shrine, as I (Greg) walked in silence behind my wife and daughter toward the hotel (in my self-imposed time-out), I started trying to put a name to what I was feeling—I tried to identify my buttons that had been pushed. I quickly realized that I felt disrespected and unappreciated. It wasn’t that Erin or Murphy were trying to disrespect me or not appreciate me, this was just how I interpreted their behavior. I put a lot of time in researching the attractions at the park. It was very stressful to be the one in charge of planning our trip. To me, it felt like they weren’t respecting or appreciating how much work I’d put in to figuring out all of the details.

Two of the biggest mistakes people make with their emotions is to either ignore them or act upon them. Emotions represent nothing more than information. But we should never mindlessly act upon any information without evaluating it first. The best way to evaluate your emotions or feelings (the buttons) is to take that information to the Lord. You are searching for His truth about you and your spouse. As humans, we’re not the source of truth. The Scriptures make it extremely clear that Christ is truth. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ ” (John 14:6). If we try to determine the validity of our emotions and thoughts about our spouse, we’re at risk for believing lies.

Remember, we have an adversary. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) and he wants you to believe lies about your spouse. He wanted me (Greg) to see Erin as a disrespectful

and unappreciative wife. But I don't want his lies; I want the truth. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2, ESV). I don't want to trust my own interpretations and perceptions of what my wife does; I want God's perspective because ultimately—He is the source of truth (John 14:6).

When my heart is closed, my view becomes distorted. I lack God's insight, wisdom and truth. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Ephesians 4:18). This step is all about abandoning your own conclusions about your spouse and pursuing God's truth. The great news is that God is so faithful. He only wants what's best for you and your spouse, and he is committed to restoring unity. "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). God will give you a peace that surpasses all understanding about your emotions and will help you see the truth about your spouse.

As I (Greg) walked and prayed, God gave me such clarity about my wife and daughter. I quickly realized the truth; they were tired—they weren't trying to disrespect me. "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32, ESV). Armed with God's truth, my heart was open to my wife and daughter.

After realizing what was really true, we were then ready to talk and restore our relationship. Do you see why it's so important to first get your heart open before you attempt to talk through a conflict with your spouse? To us, this is why King Solomon's advice "the heart of the wise man instructs his mouth" is so appropriate. We will never have a Christ-like, loving conversation until our hearts are open.

As the three of us walked toward the hotel, I (Greg) gently asked if we could talk about what happened. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). I knew my heart was fairly open and that I had a pretty clear sense of God's truth. So, I asked them to help me understand what happened at the fork in the path—what it felt like when I walked off upset.

Erin talked about how she felt "misunderstood" and "misjudged." These were the buttons that got pushed for her. In the first place, she didn't understand how important going the long way was for me. She thought that I was judging her for something that she didn't even know about and that I didn't take time to understand how much her feet were hurting. Once she realized that I really wanted to go the scenic route, she had then wanted to please me. But when I walked off upset, it confused her and it left her feeling misunderstood and judged.

Since my heart was now open, I was able to validate the feeling she expressed. If my heart was still closed, typically, I would again begin to defend my actions. If this is the case for you, start over with step one—a time-out. The important thing to realize is that it's worth it! The conversation will never go anywhere helpful or satisfying because ultimately a closed heart will just do further damage to the one you love most!

For Murphy, she felt controlled and abandoned. Murphy has such amazing strength, and she is independent just like Erin. I love this about my wife and daughter. But when I tried to get Murphy to go the longer way, she felt like I was trying to control her. And then when I stormed off, she felt that I abandoned her. Wow! I had no idea that Murphy would feel abandoned by me.

Once I listened, understood, validated and empathized with Erin and Murphy, their hearts quickly softened towards me. They asked why I had left in the first place. It felt great to have them validate and appreciate the difficult job of being tour guide. The three of us stood hugging in the middle of the sidewalk in downtown Tokyo. I'm sure we received some strange looks and interesting comments: *Those crazy Americans!*

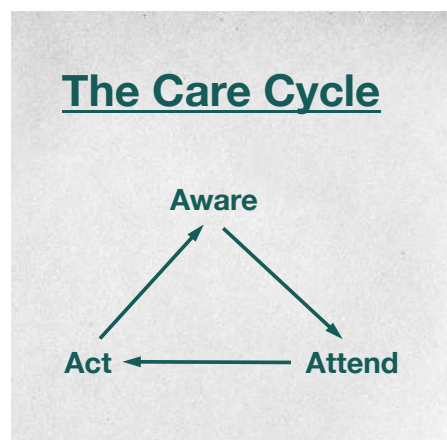
You can't erase or do away with your buttons, but you can deal with them in a healthy way by discerning when they are pushed and learning to keep them from raining down anger and insults on the person you love and the relationship you care so much about.

Once you've got God alongside, if needed, you can also *allow* another person to help. He created us as communal beings, and we often function better in supportive teams (i.e., same-sex friends or trusted colleagues, spouse, etc.). In all cases, though, remember that as an adult, you have to maintain full responsibility for the job. All support people are purely volunteers, including your spouse!

3. Act

Care for yourself. Plans that aren't fully implemented are useless. Make sure that what you do internally *and* toward others is in complete integrity. That means you're acting in ways consistent with the person God designed you to be, which will also be respectful and considerate of those you are interacting with.

So that's the three steps in a nutshell, but that's not the end. We call this the *Care Cycle* because it functions as a feedback loop.



We want to leave you with this idea about conflict from my (Greg's) father, Dr. Gary Smalley:

“Conflict is inevitable in relationships. It rears its head in even the healthiest, most deeply intimate of marriages. It is how you handle conflict that will determine how it affects your relationship, for better or for worse. Again, the most important aspect is not how much you love each other or how committed you are to your relationship or the strength of your faith; optimum relationships depend on how adeptly you handle conflict. Every instance of conflict represents two divergent paths: you can use it to either grow together or grow apart. Open the door. Walk through—and you learn more about the delights of marriage than you ever dreamed possible.”^{xvii}

We love that thought: We can use conflict to either grow closer together or further apart. You have the same choice to make. You can use unproductive patterns of dealing with conflict or use the Care Cycle to get into the deepest levels of intimacy and connection, to the place Paul envisioned for our marriage: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32, ESV). The choice is yours!

¹ Gary Smalley, *Secrets to Lasting Love*, p. 94-95.

GODLY SELF-CARE

By Dr. Greg Smalley

We live in a fast-paced, busy culture. We have full plates overflowing with good things: jobs, children, kids' activities, household responsibilities, hobbies, leisure activities, church, community service, outreach projects, small groups fellowship, bible studies, extended family and friends. But we are left breathless—feeling overworked and exhausted.

Plus, we have an Enemy radically devoted to keeping us overwhelmed, and Satan fools us into staying busy doing “good things.”

According to the World Health Organization, the U.S. ranked third for depression and anxiety, just after India and China.^{xviii} All of this busyness is taking a toll on us physically and relationally. We are rushed and have little margin. We're burned out, stressed out, sick, tired, depressed, anxious, grumpy, resentful and angry, and our relationships feel isolated, disconnected and strained.

Think about this past week. Did your schedule feel hectic? Did you feel rushed? Do you remember feeling overcommitted—that your plate was overflowing? Are you tired, exhausted or sleep-deprived? But the real question we need to answer: Is this strategy working?

There is a high cost for the fast pace we're living. Overloaded schedules lead to hectic interactions that lead to exhausted people who are empty. Combining two smaller symbols forms the Chinese symbol for “busyness”. One symbol is for “heart” and the other symbol is for “killing.” Busyness can kill our heart by limiting our connection to God (the source of life) and time with our spouse and family. With an empty and deadened heart, our relationships suffer because empty people have nothing to give. In the end, our spouse and children get relational leftovers, and relationships can't survive long on table scraps. So, what's the answer?

Godly self-care

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg recalls a time he approached his mentor wanting to know how he could deepen his relationship with God. Ortberg's mentor replied, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”^{xix} What great advice. Exhausted, joyless, stressed out, depressed, worn down, overloaded, hurried, bitter, burned out, resentful and empty human beings aren't part of God's plan because those things keep us from living out His greatest commandment and ultimately hinder our marriage.

The marriage you're longing for requires the wholehearted engagement of both individuals. Love requires an open and abundantly full heart. Connection requires endurance. Passion requires energy. Intimacy requires attentiveness. Fun and laughter require reserves. Grace requires persistence. Forgiveness requires strength. All these things are possible in marriage, but they won't happen if your pace is hurried, your body is exhausted and your heart is empty.

Jesus talked about the importance of a wholehearted love when He was asked which of God's commandments was the greatest: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and

with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31, NIV). Simply put, *love* is our mandate. God wants us to love Him and others wholeheartedly—with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Jesus went on to clarify that out of everything that we could do, loving others is the best proof that we are Christ-followers (John 13:35). It stands to reason then that a bunch of empty and exhausted people can’t love as God has instructed. We can’t give what we don’t have. We can’t effectively love when we’re running on empty. The last two words in the Greatest Commandment make this point. Jesus made it clear that we are commanded to do two things: Love God and love others. The last two words “as yourself” do not represent a third command. Jesus isn’t commanding us to love ourselves. Instead, he is implying that we should already be doing that. Unfortunately, many well-meaning people have rewritten the greatest commandment to read, “Love God and love others *instead of yourself*” or “Love God and love other *before yourself*.” The result is empty and exhausted people with nothing left to give.

Loving yourself isn’t intended to condone a narcissistic pursuit of self-interest. Loving yourself isn’t about selfishness. Self-centered love was never God’s intent for our lives. Instead, “as yourself” means Godly self-care. Loving yourself according to the greatest commandment means that you’re taking great care of yourself in order to have something to give to others. Godly self-care is the God-given responsibility to care for yourself so you can love others from a place of abundance.

This is why Satan is so ruthlessly committed to your being empty and exhausted. He wants to steal your time by keeping you busy. He wants to kill your heart by keeping you overwhelmed. He wants to destroy your vital connection with God by keeping you preoccupied doing too many good things.

Jesus wants the exact opposite. It’s why He implores you to understand why He came to this earth. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV). Jesus doesn’t just want to save us; He wants us to have a full and abundant life so that we can love God and others wholeheartedly. The Apostle Paul expressed this same sentiment, “... that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19, NIV). We love how *The Message* author Eugene Peterson describes Christ’s passion around abundance:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message* paraphrase)

Again, the goal is Godly self-care—taking great care of yourself so that you love God and others from a place of abundance. As is always the case, God has a wonderful solution. We think the solution requires that you care for the whole person: emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically.

Caring for the whole person

The first step in Godly self-care is recognizing the genuine worth and value of what has been entrusted to our care. In your case, it's you, your life and all you've been given. This includes your gifts and talents, your energy and your potential to make a positive difference in your spouse's life, family, community, world and the kingdom of God. So, our first stewardship responsibility is to learn to value all that the Lord has entrusted us with. It's vital to understand that before you can truly care for yourself, you must recognize and embrace your value. Otherwise, you won't care for what you don't value. "Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). God created us on purpose for a purpose. God sees your worth, but do you? Reflect on these truths about you from God and allow them to be written on your heart:

- God made you in His image. (Genesis 1:27)
- You are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm 139:14, ESV
- "You are precious and honored in [God's] sight." (Isaiah 43:4 NIV).
- You are His "treasured possession." (Exodus 19:5, ESV)
- You are His "most precious possession" (Zechariah 2:8 NLT).
- You are His "glorious inheritance." Ephesians 1:18, ESV
- "Look at the birds of the air ... and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26).
- You are God's masterpiece. Ephesians 2:10, NLT

God values us to the degree that He sent Jesus to die for us. So we may sacrifice our life for another, as Jesus did, but what makes the sacrifice so amazing is how much our life is worth! Therefore, you have high value as a person—you are God's treasured possession!

Based on your value, intentionally invest in yourself so you can serve others from a place of abundance. It's only when you allow your cup to be filled that you can fill the cup of others. If you have nothing in your cup, you can't give anything away.

Or consider another illustration, familiar to anyone who has done some flying. What do the airlines tell adult passengers traveling with children? In case of an emergency, the adults are first to take care of their own needs—by firmly strapping an oxygen mask over their faces—before attending to the needs of their children. Why? Because the airlines like to encourage selfishness? Because they want squealing kids to suffer oxygen deprivation? No! They give these instructions because they know a living adult can help a child better than a passed-out or dead adult. What if all the adults on a plane blacked out due to a mistaken bias against good self-care?

The work of self-care focuses on four areas. These areas are taken right from the Greatest Commandment: We are to love God, others and ourselves, with all our *heart, soul, mind* and *strength*.

Emotionally (heart): Understanding and identifying your feelings and expressing them appropriately; sharing in healthy, edifying relationships;

journaling; grieving losses; celebrating successes; playing; laughing; allowing yourself to be deeply touched.

Spiritually (soul): Connected to God; worship; Bible study; prayer time; listening to God; small-group fellowship.

Mentally (mind): Positive thoughts; sense of value and worth; growing intellectually; reading; exchanging ideas with others; avoid feeding your mind unhealthy images.

Physically (strength): Eating healthy; cardiovascular exercise; sleep; drinking water; lifting weights; experiencing adventure; stretching.

Throughout the Gospels, we find that Jesus tended to His own needs. When He needed some alone time, He took it.^{xx} He gratefully allowed supporters to meet His physical needs.^{xxi} He made it no secret when He felt hungry or thirsty.^{xxii} He did not allow others to control His agenda.^{xxiii} He didn't shrink from asking His friends to support Him in a dark time of need.^{xxiv} And He didn't hesitate to remove himself from danger before His God-ordained appointment with a Roman cross.^{xxv} In short, Jesus practiced excellent self-care, yet He never allowed it to degenerate into selfishness.

Blessed to be a blessing!

When you keep in mind that God made you for relationships, you stop self-care from degenerating into selfishness. Why? Because you realize that you take care of yourself so that you have something to give to others.

We'll say it as strongly as possible: There's no way that you can *really* take care of yourself without truly giving and serving others. If you're not giving—if you're focused only on receiving and getting full—then you're working against your own best interests.

You are like an cistern. Although in the United States we usually don't rely on cisterns for water, many people in arid countries around the world still get their water from cisterns—large catchment containers that hold water from rainfall or other sources. The cistern is useless if it has no water in it. But the cistern is also unhealthy if the water in it becomes stagnant and stale. That happens when the water just stays in the cistern and never flows out. Only when water flows out can new, fresh water come into the cistern and keep the water healthy.

Your goal must be to get full, get poured out and get full again, in a never-ending cycle of giving and receiving God's love. This is the essence of good self-care. By caring for others, you care for yourself.

Healthy self-care sets you up to give generously. If you take seriously God's direction to "be filled with the Spirit,"^{xxvi} you don't have to worry that God will drive you to give until nothing's left. And you don't have to wait to give until somebody does something for you. If you take responsibility for yourself and attend to your own self-care, you can act from a position of wholeness, not neediness. And that sets you up for marriage success.

*Taking good care of yourself is always in the best interest of all parties involved
because you can't give what you don't have!*

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2016-09-14/the-10-most-depressed-countries>

¹ John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted.

¹ Matthew 14:23; John 6:15

¹ Mark 15:41

¹ Matthew 21:18; John 4:7

¹ John 2:24; 11:6

¹ Matthew 26:36-38

¹ Luke 4:28-30

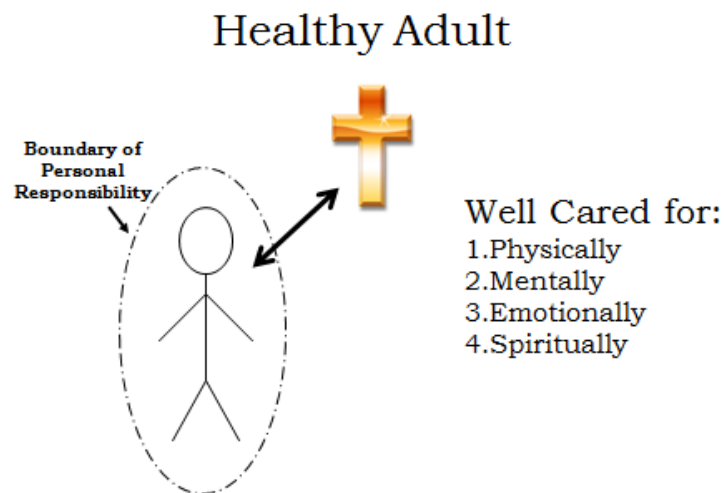
¹ Ephesians 5:18

HEALTHY MARRIAGE MODEL

By Dr. Greg Smalley

If any of us hope to have a healthy marriage, the best starting place is the *healthy adult*. Two “healthy adults” is central to understanding God’s design. But most people have never really thought through what it means to be an adult.

Scripture tells us that the greatest commandment is: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love others as yourself” (paraphrase of Mark 12:30–31). Based on this, we define an *adult* as a person *capable* of fully caring for their whole being (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual), who has also accepted full *responsibility* for the job. True adults are *capable* and *responsible* for themselves first, as represented in this illustration:



How did we arrive at this definition? Here’s our thinking. We all enter the world as helpless infants, utterly dependent on others to provide all we need to survive and thrive. In a perfect world, our parents attend to all our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs. As we grow, we become increasingly able to do things for ourselves. Good, effective parents support this growth and development by encouraging us to be more independent as we become more capable.

Really good fathers and mothers also consistently model what responsible self-care looks like in all four key areas of life. Nothing helps a child learn to be a responsible adult better than watching their parents do it well.

So we learn to become fully functioning adults with excellent modeling, lots of trial and error, and significant practice. The day of graduation to adulthood occurs when we’re fully capable of caring for ourselves and finally declare, “From this day forward, the entire job of caring for me is now mine. Physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, I’m on it!”

Sounds simple, right? We wish it were, but sadly it’s not. Most of us have been cheated. As we look around us and work with struggling couples, we’ve noticed that both this

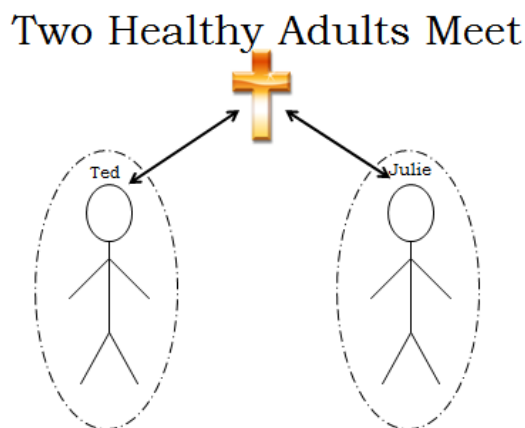
understanding of true adulthood and its modeling are either distorted or largely missing.

The good news about adulthood is that it is fundamentally about two things: *capability* and *responsibility*. If you are *able* to care well for yourself and take on the job, you qualify. Those of us with less-than-ideal modeling may have to work a little harder to figure it out, but it's completely doable. So, in essence, to be a healthy adult, it's OK not to have it fully together yet. You just have to be willing and able.

There is also one more important element to being a fully functioning, healthy adult: recognizing that we are dependent upon God by design. Our very life and breath are maintained as God's hand of sustaining grace remains upon us. He can provide so much of what we need, including what we didn't get growing up. Thus, the job of an effective adult is to balance responsibly caring for ourselves while simultaneously depending on the Lord as our ultimate source of life, strength, wisdom and knowledge.

Two healthy adults meet

Now, let's look at Ted and Julie, the stick figures below. If they started with a sound healthy marriage model, they would see their relationship as beginning like this:



Each individual is within their own relationship circle. That's because both Ted and Julie have a healthy relationship with themselves, where they individually listen to and care for themselves throughout the day. Instead of disappearing into each other, both remain responsible, healthy adults.

We realize the idea of having a relationship with yourself may be a new concept to you. So let's pause and share our basic perspective on it.

Every single one of us has a relationship with ourselves. It could be a healthy one or an unhealthy one. For example, suppose Ted and Julie are each in their own relationship circle and go through every day seeking to understand what's going on inside themselves. When they do, they are developing a healthy relationship with themselves. On the other hand, if they are doubtful and self-critical and they spend each day engaging in negative self-talk, their relationship with themselves is less healthy.

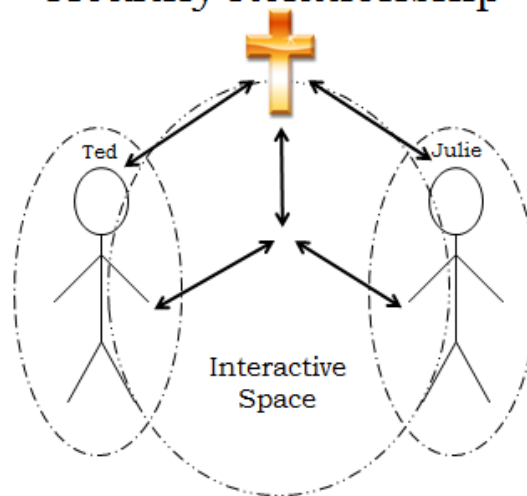
When it comes to spiritual health, the same is true. If Ted and Julie treat themselves well, they will live with a continual awareness that they are more than physical. They are spiritual beings involved in essential, life-giving relationships with God. But if either of them ignores their spiritual health, it's like they're trying to run their lives on their own power instead of staying plugged into God's inexhaustible supply.

This idea is what the picture of two healthy adults seeks to convey. It shows two individuals who are whole and well cared for by themselves, overflowing with an abundance of good and loving engagement with everyone they meet each day.

Two healthy adults build a healthy relationship

Now that Ted and Julie are committed to having a healthy relationship with themselves and Christ, they're ready to add a new circle to the healthy marriage model. It's called the *interactive space* and is where their friendship grows. Here, they enter into a relationship with each other and embark on the beginnings of an intimate journey.

Two Healthy Adults Build a Healthy Relationship



Intimacy is a commonly misunderstood concept. So, to avoid confusion, let's define what we mean. Today, intimacy frequently references sex, but we're referring to a far

richer, deeper and broader meaning. We use the term *intimacy* to connect to the biblical understanding of *knowing*, as in the idea of knowing and being known—*into me see*. This more subtle definition has profound implications when striving to build a solid friendship. And we're convinced that truly great marriages have a good friendship at their base.

When Ted and Julie first met, they started to get to know each other. They entered the interactive space, and their initial and shallow intimate encounter was merely an exchange of names. But notice, an engagement between two previous strangers took place. This is the start of their relationship.

Within this interactive space, the relationship develops as they learn more about each other. Ted and Julie share who they are, what they like and what they want to do in life. If things seem good and they want to go deeper still, they might discuss their dreams, aspirations, passions and sense of life calling. They're on a journey of intimacy. As their friendship grows, they are experiencing a deepening bond and connection, along with a growing feeling of closeness and security.

Anytime they're apart, they temporarily leave this interactive space. They both move in and out of it throughout the day. For example, if Ted calls Julie from work, they enter this space even though they aren't face-to-face. All normal, healthy relationships include this continual movement.

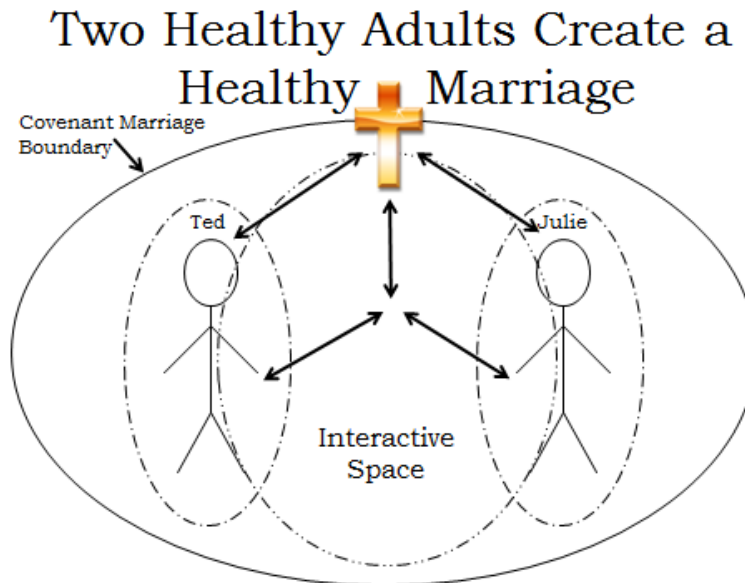
For the relationship to keep growing, and for Ted and Julie to continue enjoying the relationship, this shared space needs constant. If it feels tense or filled with anger, or if Ted and Julie anticipate criticism, hurtful interactions or other unpleasant experiences, they'll likely be apprehensive about entering the interactive space. If, however, the space is warm, cozy, exciting, loving and pleasurable, they'll be far more likely to want to go in.

Over time, this is where many couples encounter trouble. Having initially created a warm and vibrant interactive space, they then neglect it. They assume it will continue to grow on its own. Maybe that's what you and your spouse have done. But a marriage relationship can't grow without care any more than a garden can. Without ongoing attention, the connection can wither and die. This is how couples typically drift apart. They must regularly enter the interactive space together and invest both time and energy into keeping the relationship alive.

When two healthy adults, such as Ted and Julie, experience intimacy by knowing and being known by each other, they also have an opportunity to know God *together* and grow spiritually *together*. Couples can invest in their spiritual intimacy by turning their private times with God into shared times where they interact with God *together*. This can include prayer, devotions, Bible study, church and Sunday school attendance, discussions about God and their faith journey, and many other rich opportunities to deepen their intimate relationship with God.

Two healthy adults create a healthy marriage

Let's take a look at the final addition to our healthy marriage model. See that new solid circle around Ted and Julie's relationship? God designed marriage between a man and a woman to reflect the marriage between Christ (the bridegroom) and His people, the church (His bride). God calls couples to seal this union with a covenant or a vow. The outer circle represents this promise. We call it the covenant marriage boundary.



We have many relationships in life. Some are deep, while some are more superficial. By choosing to get married, couples commit to go deep and to fully know and be known. This circle came into view for Ted and Julie during their wedding ceremony when they looked at each other and said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." This covenant is a promise and a pledge: "I will always care for you. I will never leave you. Our interactive space is a sacred place I will guard and protect against all enemies."

As Ted and Julie go deep in marriage, they reveal their hearts to each other. They share their fears, weaknesses, doubts, deficiencies, spiritual gifts and character traits. But these parts of them that are so valuable are also vulnerable. So Ted and Julie risk being devalued, mistreated and damaged. With so much at stake, the covenant marriage boundary in our model adds another layer of protection for them.

The promise of marriage can create a level of safety and security that enables couples like Ted and Julie to be open and vulnerable enough to know each other and be known deeply, just like the first couple experienced in the Garden. Adam and Eve were "naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25, ESV). So, as couples, we need to be committed to making our interactive space one of the safest places on earth—*naked and unafraid!*

This safe space is the place God designed for sexual intimacy. Sex is a physical expression of the deep and intimate connections spouses already experience in the other areas of their lives. When sexuality is expressed within the safety of the covenant marriage boundary, intimacy can grow to its deepest level.

HEART TALK

By Dr. Greg Smalley

As a quick review, breaking the Reactive Cycle starts with personal responsibility—dealing with yourself first. This idea is based on the passage of Scripture that says we’re hypocrites because we focus on the speck of dust in our spouse’s eye instead of removing the log in our own eye. But notice the next part of Matthew 7:5, NIV: “... then you will see clearly to remove the speck from” the other person’s eye. We are told to get the log out of our own eye *first* so we can *then* respond to our spouse. An important part of personal responsibility is getting your heart open so you can then communicate. After all, a marriage will only be as good as it’s communication.

However, before you attempt to talk after you’ve been in the Reactive Cycle, you need to make absolutely sure that your heart is open. This is why King Solomon wrote, “The heart of the righteous weighs its answers.” (Proverbs 15:28, NIV) and “The heart of the wise man instructs his mouth” (Proverbs 16:23, Berean Study Bible). There is even an old African proverb that says, “Just keep your heart open to them as you speak your truth.” All of this advice points to one truth: Healthy, productive communication requires open hearts.

We love Jesus’ communication advice; it’s exactly what we’re talking about: “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:15). Just like Jesus is suggesting, before we talk to our spouse after unhealthy conflict, our heart needs to be abundantly full of God’s love. And the only way to get our hearts full of love is to open them and allow God to fill every single nook and cranny. That’s why the Care Cycle is so important. This makes us safe to respond to our spouse.

So how can you tell if your heart is open? This really is the litmus test if you’re ready to communicate. As we’ve carefully studied the heart, here are some classic signs that someone’s heart is open and ready to respond:

- *Gentle and tender with words and actions.* A closed heart is calloused and rough.
- *Emotionally connected.* A closed heart is disconnected.
- *Interested, focused and attentive.* A closed heart is self-focused.
- *Unselfish, considerate or thoughtful.* A closed heart is selfish.
- *Sensitive, compassionate and caring.* A closed heart is insensitive and uncaring.
- *Good eye contact.* A person whose heart is closed avoids eye contact.
- *Positive body language.* A person whose heart is closed displays negative body language.
- *Open to touch.* A person whose heart is closed avoids physical contact.

- *A spirit of gratitude and appreciation.* A person whose heart is closed is critical.
- *Awareness of your spouse's tremendous value.* A person whose heart is closed only sees faults.
- *Patience.* A person whose heart is closed is impatient.
- *Kindness.* A person whose heart is closed is mean and cruel.
- *Forgiveness.* A person whose heart is closed holds grudges.
- *Humility and a teachable spirit.* A person whose heart is closed is prideful.
- *Curiosity.* A person whose heart is closed is bored.
- *Seeks first to understand.* A person whose heart is closed wants to be understood first.
- *Hopefulness.* A person whose heart is closed is hopeless.

The real question is how do *you* know if your heart is open? What is the taletale sign? For me (Greg), I know my heart is open when I first seek to understand Erin's perspective. The biggest sign of my closed heart is defensiveness. When I'm trying to explain my actions or get Erin to understand how she has just misperceived or misinterpreted something I did, I know that my heart is shut down. If you can genuinely say that you are open to your spouse, you are ready to respond.

We're frequently asked if *both* hearts need to be open for you to respond. The answer is yes and no. You don't need your spouse's heart to be open to respond, but if their heart is still closed, we suggest that you proceed very carefully. Ideally both hearts are open so you can have good communication all around. There are plenty of times that I've gone back to Erin when her heart is still closed. During these times, I need to make my goal to seek to listen and understand her. If Erin isn't open, I can't have any expectations that she will also listen and seek to understand me.

Likewise, I would encourage you to proceed with extreme caution if your spouse is closed. And here's why: The next verse right after the Matthew passage about getting the log out of your own eye says, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6, NIV). We believe Jesus is saying that we shouldn't give something valuable (like our heart and emotions) to someone who isn't able to take great care of it. Just like you wouldn't give your pearls to pigs or something sacred to dogs, you don't want to share your emotions with your spouse unless their heart is open. Otherwise, they will trample your emotions under their feet and tear your heart to pieces.

This is what we are capable of doing (reactions) when our heart is shut down. Hasn't that been your experience? If you put your heart out to someone who isn't at a place to

take great care of it, you'll likely end up emotionally wounded. Your heart and emotions are of tremendous value, and they're your responsibility. It's no accident that this verse appears right after the personal responsibility passage. Not only is it your job to get your heart open, but you've also been given the job to protect your heart. This is why you don't share your heart with someone whose heart is closed. Too often I've watched people throw their feelings before closed hearts only to walk away with a broken heart. This isn't protecting you or your marriage. You can always listen to your spouse's heart, but you must make sure that they are open if you're going to share your heart.

The more you listen, the greater the odds are that your spouse will start to open to you, as well. This is why King Solomon wrote, "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1, NIV). Here's what we do to make this truth practical: Erin and I have made it a rule that we will never discuss sensitive issues unless *both* of our hearts are open. Before we're willing to talk about the Reactive Cycle, we will literally say something like this, "I'm feeling pretty open and I'm ready to talk. Are you open?" If we both acknowledge open hearts, then we will both share. If Erin says that she's still shut down, then I have to make a choice. Either I say something like, "I'm ready to talk so let me know when you're ready." I can always put the ball in her court, let her be responsible for her and then patiently wait until she is ready. My job then is to keep my heart open and ready to talk when Erin comes back. My other option is to jump into the listener role. I'm not going to put my heart and feelings out there but I can certainly listen and seek to understand Erin. This may even help Erin to open her heart.

The best way to respond and communicate with your spouse is through "Heart Talk." This powerful communication method is designed to take you from unhealthy conflict into deeper levels of intimacy, and it's amazing.

Heart Talk

We long to be deeply known. We want to be seen—thoroughly and completely. The word "intimate" comes from Latin meaning "innermost" and "to make known."^{xxvii} Intimacy is when we make known our innermost being. It's exactly what you get when you slowly say the word "intimacy": *into me see*. It's the same idea behind an African Zulu greeting. One person says, *Sikhona*, which means "I am here to be seen" and the person answers with *Sawubona*, which means "I see you."^{xxviii} The last few words in 1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV, emphasize this deep longing to know and be known: "...then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

The most powerful way to be seen and known is through Heart Talk. There are many versions of this style of communication, and each version has a different name. However, we've been working for years to refine our approach and have created a format that is the simplest and easiest to use that we know of. Whatever you call it, we desperately need it.

The structure and goals of Heart Talk are simple, but the execution proves difficult for some couples due to stubborn, old habits of communication. The primary objective in a Heart Talk is for each person to be able to share how he or she feels about something, and end up feeling really understood, accepted and cared for.

When strong feelings are present, the above outcome can feel elusive at times for a variety of reasons. Both spouses can possess different emotional styles, they have differing views on the value of certain emotions and they are lacking a proven method of communicating about feelings that can set them up to succeed relationally. When they become upset, both are talking and neither is really listening. Heart Talk provides a solution for all those challenges.

The basics of Heart Talk are that one of you talks about something that's on your heart while the other listens and tries to understand. That's it. One person shares, the other tries to empathize and "get" what the first is feeling. Remember, the underlying emotions have to be the key focus for both, so each person ends up feeling heard and cared for. When done well, the couple ends up feeling close and connected. And taking turns is essential so neither spouse is neglected or overshadowed.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But this kind of deep sharing often disappeared long ago in a marriage. People still talk. Most married couples do. But most of the talking couples do isn't Heart Talk. When we're not arguing, most of the time we have work conversations designed to address logistics and get something done.

We'll clarify what we mean by Heart Talk by contrasting it with a couple of other common forms of conversations couples engage in every day.

Heart Talk and Work Talk

Conversation is essential for a successful marriage. We've described conversation as the mortar that holds a marriage together and as the vital lifeblood that flows through a successful relationship. Now let's look at the two types of communication that help build relationships: Heart Talk and Work Talk.

There are many valid types of communication, and each one drives toward a different objective. For instance, "debate" is a powerful communication style that many use, and some people are trained in it and even use it in competitions. Debate typically drives toward the goal of "winning" or "persuading," which — in the right hands — can be used to help accomplish great things. Debate, however, is rarely a key to growing a great marriage.

Another commonly used type of conversation is one we'll call "small talk." We all know this one, but unfortunately some people judge it as meaningless chatter. However, we understand that small talk is really designed to make a connection with someone. Talking about the weather, or any seemingly insignificant topic, can easily help bridge the gap between you and me and make a basic connection happen.

Over the years, though, we've noticed that couples who have thriving marriages skillfully use two very specific styles of communication. One type is what we call "Work Talk," which will be the focus of the next lesson.

Work Talk is designed to get stuff done. For our life to succeed, there is a never-ending array of logistics that need attention. Things like:

“Hey, honey, how are we going to pick up your car from the garage?”

“Hey, honey, do you think you would have any time this weekend to help me clean out the hall closet?”

Additionally problems, differences and numerous other challenges occur regularly. Work Talk is the ideal method to use for overcoming issues and conflict. When done well, it leads to a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

Heart Talk is a whole different animal. Heart Talk is not about logistics, plans or catching up. It's not about resolving conflicts or managing differences. It's about sharing the deepest part of yourself with another person. As previously said, the substance of Heart Talk is feelings. The goal of Heart Talk is closeness and intimacy. When done well, it leads to a profound experience of connection and bonding.

If your goal as a couple is to be great business partners, Heart Talk is optional. However, if your goal is to feel genuinely close and connected, Heart Talk is the most important kind of conversation husbands and wives can have. When everything is smooth and relaxed, Heart Talk commonly happens without much thought. But our experience reveals that when strong feelings enter the scene, we commonly need a little help. Let us show you the basics, so when needed, you have a road map to assure your success.

Rules of the road: sharing, caring and understanding

We encourage couples to remember that safety is job No. 1 when discussing matters of the heart. Don't forget the admonition in Proverbs 4:23 to guard your heart above all else. These conversations can become some of the most meaningful and bonding connections in your marriage, although sharing how you feel about something instantly creates vulnerability. If a spouse gets hurt as a result of opening up, the likelihood of that person returning for more conversation drops dramatically.

That's why our simplified emotional communication model is a three-step process that accounts for that vulnerability. Our process is based on the acronym ICU, which most people connect with an Intensive Care Unit in a hospital, where highly vulnerable patients are given the highest degree of attention and care. Since you will be discussing matters of the heart, we want you to create your own marital “Intensive Care Unit,” with a mutual commitment to make sure you both proceed with tremendous care and respect.

With that in mind, the first step is for one of you to initiate a conversation. This could be because you have feelings you'd love your spouse to understand and care about, or you sense your spouse has feelings you'd like to care about if they're interested in sharing. In the first case it could sound like, “I've got something going on I'd love to talk with you about. Are you open to having a Heart Talk?”

Notice that asking if someone is available is essential for caring for both of you. If your spouse isn't in a place to attend well to your heart, you'd be a careless fool to lay it out

there. Respecting yourself requires being thoughtful and careful about when and with whom you open up.

Additionally, if your spouse is not in a good place to listen, trying to force them to do so isn't respectful to them either. In this scenario, you might sense your spouse has a lot going on emotionally and you want them to know you noticed and that it matters to you. That initiation could sound like this, "Hey honey, I can see you've got some strong feelings going on. If you're interested in talking, I'm completely available for a Heart Talk." For this to remain respectful, you must be prepared for them to say, "no" or "not now." That should then be followed by, "OK, if you change your mind and decide you want to talk, just let me know."

In either case, when you begin a Heart Talk, you want to be clear about who is starting off as the speaker and who will be the listener. Once that's established, you're ready to proceed.

One of the beauties of our model is we've narrowed down the steps to only three, and they are the exact same steps for both speaker and listener, with only one minor difference.

Step 1: Identify the feelings.

Step 2: Care about the feelings.

Step 3: Understand the feelings.

Both do all three. The only difference is the speaker focuses on his or her own feelings and the listener focuses on the speaker's feelings. Once the speaker feels understood and cared for, they switch roles and proceed until both feel heard, understood and cared for. It's really that simple. Now let's put a little more flesh on the bones so you can really make this work.

In the ideal Heart Talk, the first speaker shares something they have feelings about. The speaker can give some context (what happened, what they heard, etc.), but they focus on what they *felt*.

For example, here's how you could start a Heart Talk about the lunch with your good friend: "I feel so happy and grateful that my friend and I had this wonderful time together, but I'm sad that her son is giving her so many problems."

If your spouse starts as the listener, they attempt to summarize what they heard you say, and they focus on what they felt. They should be tentative, letting you determine whether they heard your heart accurately: "What I hear you saying is that you are both happy and sad about your lunch talk. Is that right?"

After getting the green light, the speaker can share more details about their experience and feelings.

You can let them know they understood correctly, offer a clarification or just say yes and add more. We recommend that the speaker share in “bite-sized” segments so as not to overwhelm the listener and make it harder for that spouse to remember the important parts. Either at the agreed upon end time (sometimes people like to decide upfront how long this will last) or when the speaker has said what’s on his or her heart, the two spouses then switch roles and repeat the process.


Don’t respond by putting on your engineer’s hat and trying to solve a problem. Listen to the speaker’s heart. Understand what they’re saying about the woman and her son. That’s your priority here. It’s your only mission. Your job is to feel, not fix. Remember the goal of Heart Talk is to feel close and connected, not fixing or resolving anything. If a solution to something is needed after both feel heard and cared for, you can switch to Work Talk, which we outline in the next chapter. That’s the tool to fix stuff!

Also, things would have gone differently if the wife had started things off on the wrong foot by saying, “I feel you are the biggest idiot in the universe.” Her sentence starts with the two important words, “I feel.” But she’s not talking about her feelings here so much as she’s reciting a persistent complaint or criticism about her husband. She forgot that Heart Talk is her chance to talk about *her own feelings and experiences*, not to gripe about his many alleged misdeeds. When people try these switcheroos in our intensives, we stop them, ask them to start over and instruct them to talk about their feelings.

If the husband has become a champion Heart Talker, he will successfully deflect any efforts to take him away from his one and only mission: understanding her heart. He doesn’t respond by expressing his opinion or offering a judgment. That could shoot the whole Heart Talk down.

“Remember, it’s not about you,” we say to the husband. “It’s about her and her feelings. You want her to know that how she feels matters enough to you that you’re willing to take the time to know her emotionally.”

Here’s a table that summarizes the Heart Talk basics and who does what:

Heart Talk		
<u>Speaker</u>		<u>Listener</u>
I - Identify my feelings	I	I - Identify the emotional message
C - Care about my feelings	C	C - Care about the feelings (compassion and empathy)
U - Seek to be understood, “I feel...”	U	U - Seek to understand by summarizing the emotional message (validation)

This style of communication can feel a little awkward or unnatural at first, but with some practice that really changes. The benefit is that both of you end up feeling heard, understood and cared for. You may have heard the old expression, “People don’t care what you know until they know you care!” Resolving issues is so much easier when neither person is concerned that how they feel won’t matter.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/intimate>

¹ <http://www.healyourlife.com/i-see-you>

TEAMWORK

By Dr. Greg Smalley

Many couples have experienced their share of pitched battles and reluctant compromises. They're hurting and they want to stop hurting each other. Fighting hurts, even when opponents try to fight fair. And the more fights two people engage in, the further apart they can grow.

Many couples have embraced a series of basic ideas about conflict in marriage. We totally love one of their ideas: Because everyone is different and unique, conflict is natural and unavoidable. We agree 100 percent. This truth is self-evident and is confirmed by our daily experience in the world.

But the other ideas about conflict resolution are dangerous lies that are destroying marriages:

- Because conflict is natural, men and women need to “fight” for what they believe in and want in their marriage.
- Since fighting is natural, and we love each other, we need to remember to “fight fair!”
- Because fights produce winners and losers, marriage means each of us will win some, and each of us will lose some. Such compromises are a necessary part of married life because, as the Rolling Stones told us decades ago: “You can’t always get what you want.”
- It’s better for us to fight about important issues than avoid them altogether.
- Because fights can cause emotional distance, we must always make up afterward or we’ll just grow apart.

Embracing the truth

Everyone agrees: Men and women often disagree!

It’s a fact. Conflict in marriage is natural and unavoidable. We are different and our differences will cause disagreements. But that’s not the end of the story. In reality, conflict is one of the Enemy’s favorite playgrounds to mess with couples, and *fighting* is his tool. Here’s why.

The moment you and your spouse square off as adversaries, you’re sunk. The only real adversary of your marriage is Satan himself. He wants you dead, and he wants your marriage and family destroyed. But if he can get you to take your eyes off of him, the true adversary, and instead view your spouse as the enemy, he’s got you! You’ve played right into his hands.

By design, God created marriage in essence as a team sport. Thus, it operates by the same rules as any team. You either win as a team or you lose as a team. There is no such thing as a win-lose outcome in marriage—ever! It’s purely an illusion from the pit of

hell. That's why Scripture so clearly states, "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" (Mark 3:25, ESV).

So "infighting" only destroys the team and keeps it from being successful. It pits teammates against each other when they're supposed to be pulling together toward a common goal. That's why we've totally rejected the idea of "fair fighting." Fighting is fighting, fair or not. Fighting occurs between opponents. When teammates fight, in that moment, they become adversaries.

The lie we've believed in marriage is that sometimes one wins while the other loses, and it all averages out over time. The truth is that if either one loses, they both lose! You win together or you lose together. Satan doesn't want us to realize this, because once we see this simple truth, remember it and operate accordingly, he loses us.

You can't avoid conflict, but you must avoid fighting if you want your marriage to survive and thrive. Fighting is avoidable, and we recommend avoiding it whenever you can. It's a horrible way of settling conflicts that can leave deep, lasting scars and hurts, and it assures that you never really win.

But once couples find a healthy way to address marriage conflicts as teammates and friends, these episodes can actually help their love and intimacy grow. People need a marriage where they make love, not war. Research from Focus on the Family found that healthy conflict management was an essential trait of thriving marriages.

We urge couples who experience continual combat to move beyond fighting and find a better way to address conflicts. That demands nothing less than a paradigm shift that embraces these three essential truths:

1. Conflict is real because differences between partners are real (and good).

These differences are important and cannot be overlooked or swept under the carpet. God makes every one of us unique, and then our varied family upbringing and life experiences teach us different lessons about what's important.

When couples fight, these differences are often at the root of the conflict. But fighting about personal differences seldom helps and often hurts. That's because God intentionally created each of you to be different, and your differences are important to Him. They're meant to be of use and value to your team.

All great teams are comprised of teammates with various strengths and weaknesses. But, as with all human beings, they don't have the exact same strengths and weaknesses. Those differences allow them to thrive in certain roles better than others. Championship teams learn how to play to each member's strengths and cover teammate's weaknesses, enabling them to get the most out of everyone and succeed as a team.

The same is true of your marriage. Remember when you found your partner's differences attractive and intriguing? Underlying that intrigue is the often unseen value of different perspectives, skills and aptitudes you don't personally possess; awareness and sensitivities you don't have but may need; different experiences and knowledge; and

more. All you notice at first is the fascinating uniqueness. Smart teammates, though, are constantly on the lookout for how to fully capitalize on the God-given gifts of those they play with.

2. Good marriage partners aren't combatants. They're members of the same team and must work together as one. Once the team players are assembled, they need to work well together. There will be a common goal to accomplish. When they're clear about the goal and apply themselves in the same direction, they can achieve amazing things. Unity, as we discussed in an earlier chapter, is at the heart of oneness. However, when working at odds with each other, little is accomplished, and we tend to go in circles.

3. Conflicting issues need to be addressed, but not through fighting. We're in no way advocating avoiding the real issues that naturally occur in marriage. They need to be skillfully addressed and managed.

Instead, we're encouraging you to make your marriage a "no-fight zone." This merely means that combat as adversaries will not be an acceptable method used to deal with problems and challenges. As lovers and friends, we commit to operating with love and respect, even when the issues push our buttons and trigger our fears.

Since we want our team to succeed. And if either spouse walks away from any interaction feeling as if he or she lost, the team—everyone—lost. Therefore, with full recognition of our status as teammates, we will commit to protect each other and the team by adopting a "no-losers" policy. Simply stated, that means that we will not settle for either person walking away feeling bad about the way things ended and the solutions we came up with.

The seven steps to win-win

You can spend your married life fighting or compromising, but why should you when there's a much better alternative? We challenge you to aim higher: Seek solutions that you both *feel* really good about. That's what we mean by win-win. By the way, this is the communication method we referred to in the last session as "Work Talk."

Step 1. Adopt the "no-losers" policy. Even though you may in principle have fully bought into the idea that you either both win or both lose, it's worth reiterating to your spouse that in this moment you are on the same team and operating with a commitment to both winning. Try saying, "Before we begin trying to sort this out, I want to make sure you know that I won't accept any solution until we both feel really good about it. I want our team to win, and therefore, how you feel is going to matter every bit as much as how I feel."

Step 2. Heart Talk the issue. Since we've defined a win-win as a solution you both *feel* good about, it's hard to arrive at that unless you take the time to find out how everybody feels. In the previous chapter, we told you that Heart Talk is not meant to be used to solve problems but is designed as a tool for understanding and connecting.

When used in its purest form, that is true. However, in the context of problem-solving, it can pull double duty.

In this use of Heart Talk, you still want to care about the feelings, but you are also mining critical information. If you want to find a solution you both feel great about, you need to clearly know how you feel so you can make sure it's accounted for. But it's every bit as important to really know how your spouse feels. In this case, the more of the emotional data you have, the easier it is to creatively find options you both like.

You're searching for what the "win" is for both people. An easy way to find the win for your spouse is to repeat what he or she has already offered as a solution. Say something like, "Your solution is _____. Why is that so important to you? If we did it your way, what would that accomplish? How would that help you? How would that make you feel? How would that benefit our family?" Keep asking questions to get below the surface and identify what your spouse really wants.

Step 3. Pray for unity. This powerful step serves two important purposes. First, we don't ever want to try to overcome our challenges without the benefit of the Lord's wisdom and guidance. Take your spouse's hand and pray together: "Lord, we're not together on this. We're not on the same page. But we truly desire unity. Please help us find a solution we both feel good about. Thank you for being in the middle of this with us."

But the wonderful added benefit here is that as soon as you pray *together* for God's help, you have already restored unity, even prior to finding a win-win solution. Notice that you weren't together before this: my ideas vs. your ideas, my feelings vs. your feelings. However, now you join together and ask God to help you find a solution you both feel great about. From this point forward, the two of you are working together with God—unity is restored. All you need now is a solution.

Step 4. Brainstorm your options. This is the work step. Use any methods you can think of to find ideas and possibilities you both might feel good about. Talk to people who've dealt with similar issues. Google it. Get creative. Just get out a piece of paper and start writing down each other's ideas. Don't be afraid to suggest "crazy" ideas. If they're truly crazy, you can throw them out later. But often, it's some of the craziest ideas that lead to options that turn out to be brilliant. ("You know, that was crazy, but it got me to thinking about X."). If you have an idea rattling around in your head, get it out and write it on your paper.

Step 5. Evaluate options and choose one you both feel good about. This step is fairly self-explanatory. Just remember you're not looking to settle or compromise, but you're sticking with the process until both of you feel as if you've landed on a win-win.

Step 6. Try it. This step is essential. Just because it *sounded* like a win-win when you were talking about it doesn't mean it will feel like one when you try it.

Step 7. Check in and rework it, if necessary. This process is actually another feedback loop, just like the Care Cycle. So, after trying the idea out, make sure you both

feel good about how it's going. If this solution is not working out for both of you, restart the cycle and reassert your commitment to the "no-losers" policy. Heart Talk what felt good and what didn't. Pray for additional help. Brainstorm new options or tweaks to what you already had. Come with the new win-win, try it and reevaluate. Don't quit until you're both pleased with the result.

One of the things that makes this so powerful for believers is that we serve a God who is committed to unity. He lives in a perfectly unified Triune relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He wants nothing more than to also be in unity with us, and to help us be in unity with each other. It does require a little faith to test this out, but this seven-step process gives us a golden opportunity to watch the Lord demonstrate His commitment to us over and over again. It has been a huge faith-builder for us and countless others who've had the courage to try. We hope and pray for your encouragement and success too!

