

12 Hours to a Great Marriage: A Step-by-Step Guide for Making Love Last

Introduction: Stepping Up to the Plate No suggested excerpts to Read

Summary

One of the deepest longings of people everywhere is to have a great relationship, especially in the form of a great marriage. No matter what their background, age, or circumstances, most adults on the planet yearn for the love, fun, acceptance, and deep connection that can come from happy, lifelong relationship.

This book was written to help bring your dream closer. In it, we've considered everything we've learned from our 25 years of marital research and experience into a 12-hour program that will help you develop and protect a loving relationship.

Four Hallmarks of a Great Marriage

Research has shown that the happiest, most deeply connected couples have four things in common, though they demonstrate them in different ways:

1. They share friendship and love in many ways.
2. They treat each other with kindness and respect.
3. Both partners do their own part.
4. They're committed to staying together, even when it's no bed of roses.

- Regularly do things that will please your partner. It can be as simple as rubbing her back after a long day at her desk, if that's something she enjoys. Or it can be surprising him with tickets-for both of you-to see his favorite team's next home game.
- Let negative or annoying comments roll off of you. If something needs to be dealt with, do it when both of you are calm and you can discuss it in a constructive way.
- Be the best person you can be. Take responsibility for your own issues, personal growth, appearance, and health. Make the effort to take good care of yourself and improve yourself for your own sake and the same of your marriage.



3
**Important Ways
To Do Your Part:**

The Benefits of a Lasting Marriage:

1. Children, on average, do best when they're raised by two loving parents but divorce can have lasting negative effects on children.
2. People who remain happily married tend to be happier in life and live longer than other people.
3. Long-term married couples are the most likely to be financially secure.

The Structure of this Book:

Part **one** focuses on managing conflict. Here you'll learn that, although many couples think that differences and disagreements cause the big problems in their relationships, it's really how they handle those differences that's important. We will provide specific techniques you can use right away to stop negative behavior patterns and talk without fighting.

In part **two**, you'll learn how important fun and sex are to the health and happiness of your marriage. If you've lost that loving feeling or want to make it even stronger, the chapters in this section will give you ways to rediscover and deepen it.

Part **three** deals with two issues that are key to a long-term happy marriage: expectations and forgiveness.

Part **four** focuses on keeping your marriage strong and secure for the long term through friendship and commitment.

Part 1

Taking a Positive Attitude

Suggested Excerpts to Read

pp. 38-41 How men and women deal with conflict differently

Summary

Often in relationships, some risks can't be changed and other risks can be changed.

Risks that often can't be changed:

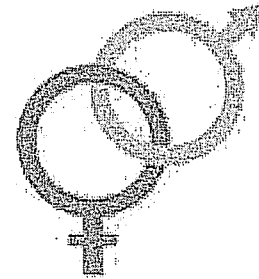
- Having a personality that reacts defensively to problems and disappointments
- Having divorced parents
- Living together before getting married
- Having been divorced
- Having children from an earlier marriage
- Having different religious backgrounds
- Getting married at a very young age
- Knowing each other for only a short time before getting married
- Having serious money problems
- Experiencing racism often

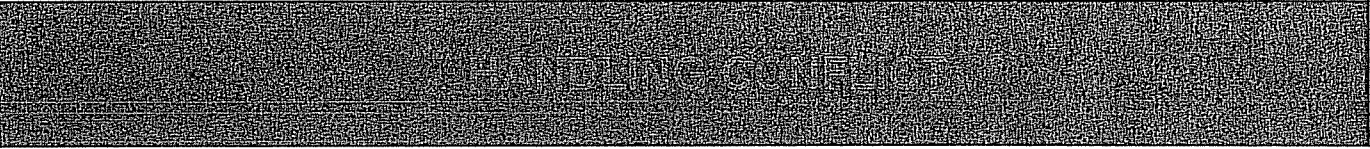
Although studies show that couples who have one or more of these risks are more likely to divorce, many couples who live with such risks have developed wonderful marriages. Still, if some of these risks are part of your life, it's best to admit they exist and learn how they might affect your relationship.

Risks that can be changed:

- Negative talking and arguing (for example, putting each other down, refusing to talk, or yelling)
- Having a hard time communicating, especially when you disagree
- Not being able to handle disagreements as a team
- Unrealistic beliefs about marriage
- Having different ideas about important things

Not being completely committed to each other for the long term





Start out right. The way in which a couple starts talking about an issue determines how the talk will go. If you start out angry, the whole talk is likely to be angry. If you start calmly and positively, the conversation is likely to continue that way.

Four Patterns to Prevent or Change when Handling Conflict:

Escalation

Sometimes when couples talk about an issue, they start out talking pretty calmly. One person says something and the other answers. Then one of them says something nasty and the other one reacts by saying something even nastier. Pretty soon the talk is full of anger and hurtful comments about each other. Voices get louder and emotions get more intense. The calm discussion has become a harmful fight.

Partners can say incredibly horrible things to each other during an escalating argument, things they really don't mean or feel. But once the cruel words are said, they are very hard to forget. They may eventually be forgiven, but it is better not to say them in the first place.

To keep a conversation from getting out of hand, you and your partner should do one or more of these three things:

- Soften your tone of voice: Change the way you're speaking from angry and harsh to calm and kind.
- Hear and acknowledge your partner's point of view.
- Give up the need to win. If you can, take a break and come back to the issue later.

See pages 25, 27, & 28 for examples.

Invalidation

Invalidation is a fancy word for showing disrespect. One partner says that the other's personality, thoughts, or feelings are bad or unimportant. That really hurts and can greatly harm the couple's relationship because the person who gets put down might start to feel it's too risky to say what he or she really thinks.

If disrespect and invalidating arguments are part of your life, you can do two things to change that right away:

- Treat your partner with the same respect you'd like everyone to show you.
- Really listen to and acknowledge your partner's words and point of view.

When you show respect and hear what your partner is saying, you're telling your partner several things. First, you're saying that your partner has the right to have his or her own thoughts and feelings even if they're not the same as yours. You're also saying that you respect your partner as a person, someone with character and worth, someone you love.

See pages 28, 28, 30, & 31 for examples.

Negative Interpretations

When people take others' words or actions negatively, they're starting off with the belief that those words or actions were meant to hurt them. Some people believe the worst instead of the best because they see the world as a bad place and want to prove to themselves that they're right. Rather than look for the positive, they make negative judgments about other people's thoughts and actions.

If you get into the habit of thinking the worst, another negative pattern sets in. You start to believe that your negative viewpoint is correct and that this gives you the right to hurt your partner. Because you think he or she is hurting you on purpose, you take revenge whenever you think you have been slighted.

Seeing everything negatively can destroy a marriage, but if you and your partner learn to think the best rather than the worst, you can keep this pattern going by giving each other love, support, and respect.

You can do three things to control the way you interpret your partner's words or behavior:

- Ask yourself if you might be seeing some of your partner's actions in too much of a negative light.
- Make yourself look for evidence that goes against negative interpretations.
- Be optimistic about your relationship.

Withdrawal

Withdrawing from your partner can happen in two ways: pulling back and avoidance. Both show that the withdrawing person doesn't want to be part of an important conversation.

People withdraw from conversations for four main reasons:

- They are not interested in intimacy
- They don't want to change in some way
- They want to show control
- They don't want to get into a fight

If withdrawal is taking place, it's likely to get worse. That's because the person who wants to talk about the issue generally gets more frustrated and angry each time the withdrawer pulls away.

Here are some ways to get and keep a conversation going constructively:

- Remember that you and your partner are a team—you're talking to find a solution that's best for both of you, not to win.
 - Remember that your action will cause a reaction.
 - Start an important conversation gently and talk calmly; raising your voice doesn't help, it hurts.
- If your partner starts to withdraw, don't push the issue. Set a new time to continue the conversation. People often withdraw less when their partners push less.

How Men and Women Deal Differently with Conflict



In general, men are more likely than women to avoid or withdraw from a discussion that could become difficult. Men just don't seem to handle conflict in marriage as well as women do, so they shut down. They think that not talking keeps conflict from starting. These tendencies lead men and women to complain about different things in their marriage. Many women are unhappy that their husbands won't open up to them, and think they don't care. Many men complain that their wives get upset too often.

While we can't change the way men and women tend to handle conflict, we can change the way we deal with the difference. Here are some ways to stop the battle of the sexes:

- Accept the differences between men and women in the way they handle conflict, but remember that both partners usually want the same things from their relationship: to be loved and to have a friend for life.
- Show respect for your partner; protecting your love means handling it with care. If you get angry easily, work on calming yourself so that you and your partner can talk about and solve the issues beneath the anger.

See additional methods on page 40.

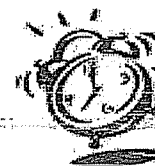
Exercises: # 3 or 5, pp. 41-42



Hour 2: Simple Techniques for Talking Safely and Clearly

Suggested Excerpts to Read

pp. 52-56 Using the Speaker-Listener Technique



Summary

Time Outs

A Time Out is something that both partners agree to do when a discussion starts escalating into a hurtful fight. Before you start a discussion, decide with your partner which words you'll use to call for a Time Out. You can simply say "Time Out," "Stop," or something else that sends the message, "I need to take a break."

Here are some pointers for taking Time Outs:

- Either you or your partner can call a Time Out at any time.
- Both you and your partner agree to respect each other's need for a Time Out.
- After a Time Out is called, drop the issue for the time being and come back to it later, when you have both calmed down.

Communication Filters

Have you ever made what you thought was a simple remark to your spouse only to have him or her get upset with you? Misunderstandings like this can be caused by filters that come from past experiences or present distractions. A speaker's filters can lead the speaker to use particular words or tones of voice when talking to the listener. A listener's filters can lead the listener hear something different than what the speaker actually said.

Five kinds of filters can affect the way people communicate:

- **Distractions:** Noises around you, like those from the TV, the CD player, the kids, or the dog, may keep your partner from clearly hearing what you say. One of you might be tired or doing something that keeps you from giving your partner all of your attention. Hearing or speech problems also can make clear communication difficult.
- **Emotions:** Your emotional state can have a big effect on what you hear and say. For example, being in a good mood tends to make you give a person the benefit of the doubt but a bad mood leads you to see and hear things negatively.
- **Beliefs:** Some filters come from the way you think and what you expect. People tend to behave the way we expect them to behave. That's because our thoughts influence our behavior, which then influences their behavior. If you expect the worst, you may get the worst. If you put a negative spin on something, you're likely to get a defensive answer in return.
- **Differences in communication style:** Every person has a unique way of communicating. Things like gender, culture, family background, and personality affect communication style. You may be more emotional and outgoing than your partner, or you may be more quiet and reserved. No one style is the right one, but if you and your partner have very different styles, you may have trouble understanding each other.
- **Self-protection:** If you think that you might get hurt if you say what you really think or feel, you may try to protect yourself by not communicating clearly and honestly. Covering up your feelings, though, can make you physically or emotionally sick, and it can keep your partner from knowing what you really want, what you really need, and who you really are.

Memories also play an important part in communication. Partners may have conflict about past events and conversations because they can't remember them clearly. To keep differences in memories from keeping you apart, you can do two things:

- Don't believe that your memory is perfect. The human brain is not an audio or video recorder and many influences can change memories. So there's a good chance your memories aren't as correct as you think they are.
- Don't keep arguing about something that was said in the past, even if it was said just five minutes ago. Shift to the present, where you can say what you're feeling and thinking now.

Here are some tips for getting around filters:

- Make sure that you have your partner's complete attention before you say anything important, and that you're giving your partner your full attention.
- Don't assume that your spouse is ready to talk at the same time as you are. Ask first if it's a good time. If the answer is "Not right now," agree on a time when you'll both be willing and able to have a good conversation.
- Stay away from "mind reading": thinking that you and your partner should "just know" what each other thinks and feels even without talking about it.
- Try hard not to jump to negative conclusions about things your partner says. Don't assume the worst.

See page 50 for more tips.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment

Couples especially have trouble communicating well when they disagree about something and when they talk about sensitive issues. The conversation often doesn't go well because one or both of the partners is afraid that the talk won't go well, that the talk will make them frustrated, or that they'll be rejected because of something they say. Neither partner feels safe. So they may have a frustrating talk, end up in a fight, or not talk at all.

Spouses absolutely have to be able to communicate without fear if they're going to have a great marriage. The strongest friendships and deepest intimacy develop when partners feel safe enough to say anything and everything to each other.

Using the Speaker-Listener Technique

Here are the guidelines for using the technique:

Rules for the Speaker

- Speak only for yourself. Express your thoughts, feelings, and concerns, not what you think are the Listener's concerns.
- Use "I statements" to express yourself. For example, say, "I felt sad when you didn't show up for lunch," not "You didn't care enough about me to write down our lunch appointment."
- Don't talk on and on. Say what you need to say in short, understandable statements that stay focused on the issue you're discussing.
- Stop after each statement so the Listener can paraphrase, or sum up and repeat back to you, what you just said. If the paraphrase isn't quite right, calmly make your statement again in a way that helps your partner understand.

Rules for the Listener

- Paraphrase what the Speaker said each time he or she stops. This means briefly repeating what you heard, in the Speaker's words or your own. If you don't understand something, ask the Speaker to explain it.
- Don't argue with the Speaker about the things that he or she said or give your opinion about them. Only listen carefully and repeat what you heard the Speaker say to you. Wait until it's your turn to be the Speaker to make your response. When it's your turn, speak calmly and respectfully.

Rules for Both the Speaker and Listener

- When the Speaker is talking, the Listener cannot talk or interrupt. To remind both of you that the Speaker has the floor, you may want to hold something that represents that concept, such as a piece of carpet or linoleum. Other objects will work as well.
- The Speaker and the Listener should take turns speaking and listening. The Speaker goes first, with the Listener listening. After the Speaker makes about two or three statements and the Listener correctly paraphrases them, the two switch roles, passing off whatever is used to symbolize the floor, and the Listener becomes the Speaker.
- Both that Speaker and Listener can call for a Pause at any time (see page 45 for more detail). A Pause is especially helpful if the Listener starts answering back or if the Speaker says too much for the Listener to understand all at once. Pausing also lets you get out of a negative pattern and clear the air.
- Focus on having a good, safe discussion, not on solving a particular problem. If you're thinking about a solution, you're less likely to hear what your partner really feels about the issue.

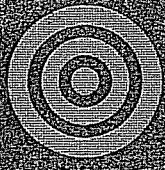
It is important that you both listen carefully and show respect for each other, even when you strongly disagree with each other. Besides waiting for your turn to speak, this also means not making a face, rolling your eyes, shaking your head, or muttering under your breath.

See pages 56-57 for an example of a Speaker-Listener Discussion.

How the Speaker-Listener Technique Fights the Four Negative Patterns of Communication:

- ***Prevents escalation:*** Stopping to paraphrase each statement helps to keep the conversation from getting out of control.
- ***Decreases invalidation:*** Paraphrasing also helps prevent disrespect. By repeating what the Speaker said, the Listener shows right away that the Speaker's point was understood, even if the Listener doesn't agree with it.
- ***Stops negative interpretations:*** If the Listener's paraphrase includes something that the Speaker didn't mean to say, the Speaker can make the point in another way that the Listener will understand.
- ***Discourages withdrawal:*** This technique helps both the withdrawer and the pursuer. The withdrawer will be less likely to pull back because the structure keeps the talk safe. The pursuer is certain to be heard and won't feel driven to pressure the withdrawer.

Exercise: Couple Exercise on pp. 60-61



Hour 3: Handling Your Issues

Suggested Excerpts to Read

pp. 71-77 Three Ways to Talk
Understanding Hidden Issues
Recognizing Hidden Issues

Summary

What do most couples fight about? The top two hot topics are usually money and children. Other big issues have to do with sex, communication, in-laws, free time, alcohol and other drugs, religion, careers, and housework.

Issues alone don't always cause fights, but they can erupt into arguments when they're set off by events. Events are the everyday happenings that we all experience, such as going to work or watching a movie. Events that have to do with difficult issues, though, can spark those issues into explosive fires.

Dealing with Issues Before They Get Worse

If you know that you and your partner have a particular issue that you need to solve, try to talk about it when things are calm and crisis free. Setting aside regular times to talk can ensure quiet, constructive conversations. Even when things are going well, the two of you need to deal with important issues before they become continuing concerns.

See page 64 for an example.

Here are some ways to handle issues before they explode into fights:

- Set aside regular times to work on them.
- Talk when things are calm and you won't be interrupted.
- Use the Speaker-Listener Technique when you talk.
- Face your issues as a team, with respect, love, and humility.

Controlling Negative Emotions

Managing issues involves managing negative emotions. This means that you work on keeping anger, sadness, hostility, anxiety, or other upset feelings from becoming your automatic reactions to conflict. By controlling your negative emotions, you can hear what your partner is really saying and respond constructively and lovingly.

Men have a harder time managing their negative emotions when their wives are upset than when they themselves are upset. The most helpful thing men can do is to help their wives calm down. Then, they can hear what their wives are saying. On the other hand, women need to remember that their husbands are more likely to listen to what they're saying if they can express their concerns clearly and calmly.

Here are some ways to control your anger during a discussion:

- Find to soothe yourself when you start to get upset. Try taking a few deep breaths, a Time Out, or a Pause (see pages 44 and 45).
- Remind yourself that withdrawing or letting your negative emotions rule will not solve the problem.

See more ways to control your anger on page 67.

Keeping Events from Starting a Fight

Let annoying events bounce off you

You don't have to let events provoke you. You can decide, together or by yourself, that whatever has happened isn't important enough to start a fight. Try to remember that you and your partner are in this life together and that you don't want a word or action to put your future together in danger.

Choose another time to talk about the issue

You can say, "I know this issue is a problem, but this isn't a good time to deal with it. Let's decide on a time to talk about it later."

See examples on preventing fights on pages 69-71.

Understanding Hidden Issues

Hidden issues are expectations, needs, feelings, and fears that a person has never told to anyone. They often cause the most frustrating and destructive arguments that couples have. Because they're buried so far down, their strength can be frightening when they do break through the surface. Hidden issues usually have to do with six relationship areas: power and control, caring, recognition, integrity, commitment, and acceptance.

Power and control

Power issues can develop when the two of you need to make decisions. The decisions can be big or small, but when your partner doesn't respect your status or level of control, a power struggle can result. If it seems like one partner's needs are always more important than the other's, power and control issues may be affecting your relationship.

Caring

Hidden issues about caring have to do with feeling cared for and loved by a partner. If one partner feels the other isn't meeting his or her emotional needs, hidden issues about caring can surface.

Recognition

Issues about recognition stem from feeling valued. If you think your partner doesn't appreciate the things you do or what you've accomplished, you may feel undervalued or even ignored. Partners who feel unappreciated may push hard to get the recognition they need. This drive for appreciation can cause many arguments.

Integrity

Integrity issues have to do with partners' motives, values, and standards. If your partner questions your integrity, you may feel judged, insulted, and disrespected. You can feel as though your character has been attacked. This can make you feel defensive and set off negative interpretations of your own. Then both you and your partner may end up feeling hurt and invalidated.

Commitment

When you're certain that your love will last, you feel safe and trusting. If you worry that your partner might leave, it can affect the way you relate to each other in many situations.

Acceptance

Everyone wants to be accepted, so most people try to find acceptance and avoid rejection wherever they can. The need for acceptance also drives all the other issues. Hidden underneath those issues is the worry that your partner doesn't accept who you are.

Recognizing Hidden Issues

Four signs can help you identify hidden issues so that you can keep them from hurting your relationship:

- *Wheel spinning*: No matter how often you talk about the problem, you never get anywhere. That's because the problem you're talking about is not the real issue; the real issue is hidden. When you keep discussing a problem that never gets solved, you can end up feeling hopeless and helpless.
- *Small events triggering big arguments*: When an action that seems unimportant sets off a huge fight, you can be pretty sure a hidden issue is at work.
- *Scorekeeping*: If you're feeling neglected or hurt, you might start keeping track of the times when you think you're being mistreated. Scorekeeping generally means that a hidden issue is at work, often a recognition or control issue.

Working on Hidden Issues

If you've found that one or more hidden issues are affecting your relationship, there's a lot you can do to prevent them from damaging your love:

- As soon as you recognize that an issue exists, agree to talk about it, either at that moment or at a specific time later.
- When you're ready to talk, use the Speaker-Listener Technique to create an open, positive, caring conversation.
- Respect your partner and consider his or her feelings. By accepting and acknowledging what your partner says, you'll be building intimacy and creating trust.

See more methods on page 78.

See a positive example of the Speaker-Listener technique on page 79.

Exercises: Couple Exercises on pp. 80-81

Hour 4: Solving Your Problems

Suggested Excerpts to Read

p. 84 Four Points About Problem Solving
pp. 91-97 The Prep Steps to Problem Solving

Summary

Couples seem to reach better solutions if they first discuss their issue respectfully and understand each other's point of view, even if they don't agree.

All Couples Have Problems

Problems occur even in the happiest of marriages. Different couples may have different problems, but no relationship is problem free. Problems can change as the partners move through life, but some problems may stay the same throughout a couple's partnership. Couples tend to argue about certain things depending on where they are in the development of their relationship. Engaged couples often have problems with jealousy and future in-laws. During the first year of marriage, many couples report having difficulties with communication and sexual issues. Later, more issues are about money and child rearing.

Who wants to solve the problems?

Wives often want their husbands to listen to them, not necessarily to fix their problems. Many women find it helpful just to talk over issues openly. Most men, though, would rather do something active than talk. They tend to want to solve problems quickly and simply, and feel helpless and even withdraw when they can't think of something to do. Instead of plunging into a solution, both men and women should first listen to each other's concerns calmly and constructively.

Teams solve problems best

In many marriages, partners approach problems as contests that only one of them can win. They get locked into a cycle of fighting each other instead of the problem. See pages 86-87 for an example of teamwork.

Quick Fixes Don't Last

All too often, we rush to solve a problem. When a problem is "fixed" too quickly, the two of you can miss other issues that are also involved. Those important issues can come back again and again, usually by setting off more problems and more conflict.

Often, couples rush to find solutions because of time pressure and the desire to avoid conflict.

Time Pressure

Thinking you have to solve a problem quickly can push you into making a poor decision. Taking the time to understand all the issues will help you make a good, long-term choice.

Avoiding Conflict

Often couples rush to solve their problems because the thought of arguing over them is just too scary. An issue comes up and they decide quickly on a solution. Most people don't like arguing, but by trying to avoid a fight, you can miss an opportunity to discover the real problem. If you don't know what the problem is, there's no way you can solve it for good.

Not Every Problem Can Be Solved

Many people don't want to believe that some problems can't be solved. This can affect couples' feelings about their marriage: If their problems can't be solved, there must be something wrong with them or with the marriage.

Thinking this way is not helpful, because believing that something is seriously wrong can make you think you should divorce. To protect your happiness, you want to do the best you can to solve your problems, but it's very important to understand that you may not be able to solve every problem that comes your way and that even the happiest couples have issues they've lived with for their entire marriage.

Some things can't be changed. Some problems won't be solved. You can handle that if you accept, understand, and have compassion for each other, and keep your priorities straight. You *can* live with differences. Nobody is perfect. Devotion, respect, and commitment are the things that count.

The PREP Steps To Solving Problems

Before we get into the steps, we want you and your partner to agree to do the following things:

1. Be willing to work together to solve your issues.
2. Be creative, flexible, and willing to experiment with change.
3. Practice all the steps, even if you don't like their general structure.

Discuss the problem

It's much easier to solve a problem if you and your partner do it in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance. To create that atmosphere, it's best to talk about the issue for a while before trying to solve it. By talking first, you lay the foundation for finding a solution.

Whether the problem is big or small, set aside a specific time to talk about it. Then, keep talking until you both understand it. Be sure that both of you feel that your partner understands you, even if you disagree. A good way to reach understanding is to use the Speaker-Listener technique.

Be clear about your concern.

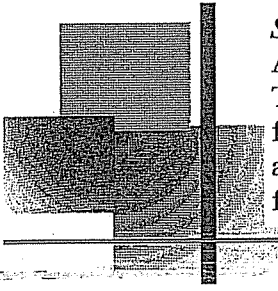
As you talk, be sure to give your partner clear, specific information. The two of you can miss the real issue if you don't say exactly what you mean. A great way to help you make your points clearly is to use an X-Y-Z statement. It goes like this:

“When you do X in Y situation, I feel Z.”

Here's an example: “When you track mud into the kitchen (X) after working in the yard (Y), I feel really annoyed (Z).”

When you're trying to solve a problem, it's easy to start blaming each other. It's also easy to make statements that are too general and don't really say what you mean, like “You're always messing up my kitchen floor.” This can be frustrating and make the discussion escalate. Although no one really likes to hear complaints, X-Y-Z statements let you identify a problem and tell your partner how you feel about it, clearly and calmly.

X-Y-Z statements are so successful because of the Z. When you focus on talking about your feelings instead of blaming your partner for the problem, your partner can relax and listen better.



Solve the problem.

After a really excellent discussion, you may discover that you no longer have a problem to solve. Talking about the problem helps both of you to learn what's been happening and get your feelings out in the open. It may turn out that you don't need a solution as much as you needed to air the issue. For those times when a solution to a problem is still needed, follow these steps to find an answer:

1. Set an agenda

The first step is to set an agenda. This means making the exact problem you're trying to solve very clear. It also means putting the parts of the problem in order and deciding when you'll work on each part. If a problem seems too much to solve, don't worry. Just break it into parts and take it one small part at a time. By doing your best and being patient, the chances are very good that you'll find a workable, satisfying solution.

2. Brainstorm

To come up with a great solution, it helps to have lots of possible answers. Brainstorming can provide you with plenty of suggestions and stretch your mind to think in new ways. As you brainstorm, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Write down each idea that either of you have.
- Accept and consider every idea, even if it sounds completely crazy.
- Try to make all solutions positive. Problem solving is about what you can do, not about what you can't or won't do.
- Don't criticize or make comments about each other's suggestions.
- Be creative; say whatever comes to mind.
- Have fun with the process; a sense of humor will help.
- Keep going until you have as many suggestions as possible.

Loosening up and letting the ideas flow will give you a good supply of choices for possible solutions. Remember that brainstorming can take time. If you jump at the first idea that sounds good, you may miss out on a better idea that one of you could have later.

Keep the list that you make in case the first solution you try doesn't work well. You'll be able to choose another one from your list.

3. Agree on a solution

Now is the time to go over all the ideas that you had and choose the best one. The goal here is to decide on a specific solution you both agree to try.

To decide on a solution, both of you may need to give up something you want. This is compromise, but compromising doesn't mean losing. Even though you give up something, you actually win. That's because you put the needs of your relationship above your own, and that helps you protect your love and keep your marriage strong. It's more likely you'll have a great marriage if you don't always insist on getting your own way.

As you discuss each possible solution, look at both the pros and cons. Keep in mind that the best solution is something that's realistic and agreeable to you both. When you make your choice, describe the solution so you both understand it. You may even want to write it down.

3. Agree on a solution

Now is the time to go over all the ideas that you had and choose the best one. The goal here is to decide on a specific solution you both agree to try.

To decide on a solution, both of you may need to give up something you want. This is compromise, but compromising doesn't mean losing. Even though you give up something, you actually win. That's because you put the needs of your relationship above your own, and that helps you protect your love and keep your marriage strong. It's more likely you'll have a great marriage if you don't always insist on getting your own way.

As you discuss each possible solution, look at both the pros and cons. Keep in mind that the best solution is something that's realistic and agreeable to you both. When you make your choice, describe the solution so you both understand it. You may even want to write it down.

4. Follow Up

It is important to follow up to see if your solution is working. If you don't follow up, you may not know if the two of you chose the best answer. If you didn't choose a good answer, a problem can return, sometimes worse than before.

When you choose a solution, plan a specific time when you'll check to see how well it's working. A week is usually about right, but two or three weeks may be better for some issues. If you find that the solution took care of your problem, there's nothing else you need to do but be happy. If the problem is still there, you may want to fine-tune the solution to see if that works. If it still doesn't do the trick, go back to your brainstorming list and choose something else.

Following up may not seem important when you've agreed on a solution, but knowing that you'll follow up will encourage you to give the solution your best try.

Please see page 97-104 for a problem solving example and problem solving tips.

Exercises: Individual and Couple Exercise on pages 104-105



Summary

Another great way to manage the conflict in your life is to agree to a set of ground rules. The six ground rules for marriage that we have discussed will help you handle big issues in your marriage as well as the everyday, smaller ones. They'll set guidelines to help you handle disagreements fairly, respectfully, and calmly and keep both you and your partner on safe ground. Because you agree to the rules ahead of time, they're already in place when conflicts happen. By sticking to them, you'll be able to keep your discussions from getting out of control and to express yourselves without fear.

Ground Rule 1: When conflict escalates, we'll call a Time Out or a Pause. Then we'll try talking again with the Speaker-Listener Technique, either right then or at a specific later time. (See pages 108-109 for a review on Time Outs and Pauses.)

Managing your behavior and emotions

Calming your emotions and relaxing your body will help you go back to talking with respect, humility, and an open mind. Try these suggestions to relax your body and control your emotions:

- Take several long, deep breaths.
- Lie down with your eyes closed and think positive thoughts.
- Do something relaxing: go for a walk, read, play with your pet or your kids-whatever you enjoy. Do it for at least 20 minutes.

See page 110 for more ideas on how to manage your behavior and emotions

Ground Rule 2: When we begin to have trouble communicating, we'll start to use the Speaker-Listener Technique.

When the going gets tough, it's important to have a structured, safe way to talk. The Speaker-Listener Technique will let you talk safely and really hear what each other has to say.

Ground Rule 3: We will separate discussing problems from solving problems.

Couples can't solve problem permanently and well until both partners understand both the issue and their partner's ideas about it. Separating problem discussion from problem solving keeps couples from rushing into solutions without thinking them through. Whenever you work on an issue, think about it thoroughly.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I really want to understand my partner's point of view?
- Do I really think my partner understands my point of view?

If either of you answers no to either of these questions, you're not yet ready to move on to problem solving. Talk some more until both of you feel comfortable going to the next step.

Ground Rule 4: Either partner can bring up an issue at any time. But if one partner doesn't want to talk about it, he or she can say, "This is not a good time." That partner then takes responsibility for setting a time to talk in the near future.

Whoever postpones a discussion is responsible for setting a new time to talk. You may want to agree on some times that are never good for bringing up important issues.

Ground Rule 5: We will hold weekly couple meetings.

If you and your partner have very busy lives, you probably find it hard to set aside time to deal with problems or other things that are important to you. Holding weekly meetings is a great way to show that taking care of your marriage means a lot to you. It also means that you can count on having time to talk about your relationship. Just 30 minutes of couple time each week can do great things for your partnership.

Ground Rule 6: We will make time for the great things in marriage: fun, friendship, and sensuality. We agree to protect these things from conflict and from discussions of difficult issues.

Set aside as much time as works for you for the fun things in your marriage that brought you together in the first place. It's extremely important to spend time together that's not devoted to your issues. Set aside at least some time each week to do nothing but have fun; just the two of you. If an issue comes up during this time, call a Pause or a Time Out. Then agree to postpone the talk until your next couple meeting.

Gripping Constructively

Gripping constructively is a way to let out your strong feelings without anger or disrespect.

Negative ways of expressing concerns

- **Mind reading:** You may not be a magician, but you may be sure that you know what your partner is thinking or what's behind his or her behavior. The person doing the mind reading, though, assumes things that may not be true, which can hurt or anger both the other person and the mind reader. Mind reading also involves making negative interpretations, which is particularly damaging.
- **Character assassination:** Character assassination states forcefully that your partner is a bad person and is not likely to change. It causes anger and hurt because it's a negative interpretation that doesn't give the attacked partner any way to change it.

Catastrophic interpretations: "You always have to have the last word," "You never want me to have a good time." Statements like these that use "always" or "never" make generalized accusations that are seldom entirely true. They usually lead to escalation.

Positive ways to express concerns

- **Treat your partner with respect:** By showing respect and consideration, your discussion is much more likely to be positive and the outcome constructive.
- **Be specific:** Try to say exactly what you think and feel instead of making generalizations. You may know a lot about your partner, but you can't know what he or she is thinking at the moment.
- **Use X-Y-Z statements.** The X-Y-Z statement is excellent because it does a number of positive things:
 - It focuses on a specific problem rather than a boatload of problems.
 - It emphasizes what the speaker sees and feels rather than blaming the partner.

See page 120 for more benefits of using the X-Y-Z statement.

Exercises: Couple Exercise p. 121



Hour 6: Having Fun

Suggested Excerpts to Read

pp. 131-136 Keeping Fun Alive

Summary

Having fun is enormously important to marital health and happiness. For many couples, having fun together is very important to their commitment to each other, their sense of friendship, and their satisfaction with their marriage.

Why Don't We Have Fun?

Early in our relationships, most of us seem to have lots of time for fun. We put a high priority on getting to know each other, and we do that by talking, going out to dinner, and doing activities together that we like.

Then, after marriage, things change. Instead of spending much of our time playing and laughing, we find ourselves working: on our marriage, our careers, our children, our home, and all the other serious parts of our lives. If we stop to think about it, we may discover that we're just not having fun like we used to. That lack of enjoyment may be putting stress on our marriage by taking away from our marital satisfaction.

When fun starts taking a back seat, it's often because of one of three things: we've gotten too busy, we think we're too grown up for fun, or conflict is taking up most of our time.

We're too busy to have fun

Many couples let the necessities of their busy lives crowd out the fun and playfulness they used to share. Few couples make time to have "dates" with each other like they did before they got married. If you're snowed under by "life," it's a sign that you aren't sharing enough fun. When fun is off the agenda, happiness can follow.

Fun is for kids (or just for having with kids)

Fun is not just for kids. We believe that fun continues to play an important role throughout our lives. For adults, play encourages and strengthens bonds between people. It allows us to connect in deep and significant ways because, when we're having fun, we're usually more relaxed and more ourselves. Those are the conditions that allow us to fall in love.

When you have children, you may feel as though you always need to act grown-up. Maybe you're happy to play with your kids, but you think it's not right or necessary to play with your partner. Much of the time you do need to be the grownup, and it's definitely a good thing to play with your children. Have fun and relax with your spouse as well. Playing is great for building adult bonds and keeping joy in your marriage. That's not only great for you, it's also one of the best things you can do for your children.

Conflict gets in the way

When conflict isn't handled well, it can chip away at the good things the two of you share. When it chips away at your fun, it can lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. If conflict erupts during times meant for fun, call a Time Out and talk about the problem later. Fun times need to be exactly that. Never let conflict interrupt them.