

CHRISTIAN VOL. 22 NO. 2  
**counseling**  
TODAY

**A Loveless Marriage:  
When the Fire Burns Out**

Dan Seaborn

**Working with High Conflict Couples:  
Assessing for Abusive Elements**

Leslie Vernick

**Do No Harm:  
Parenting through Divorce**

Jay and Tammy Daughtry

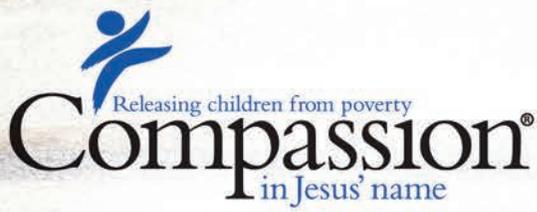
# COUPLES in CRISIS

**Chaotic Connection:  
When Mental Illness Strikes in Marriage**

Gregory Jantz

**Betrayal in Marriage:  
A Five-step Recovery Model**

Dave Carder



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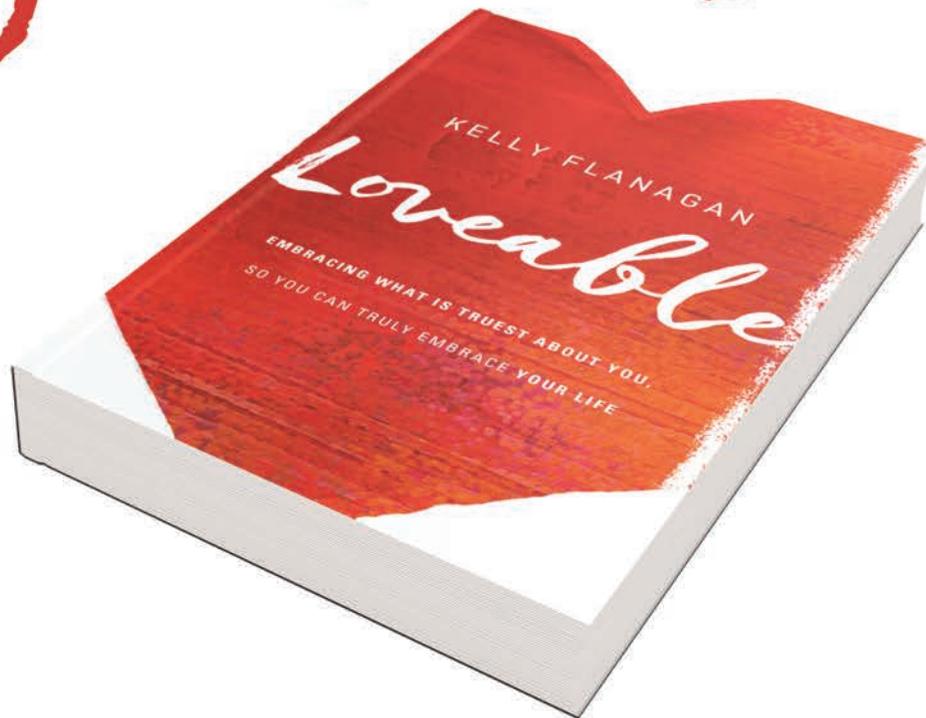
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# Worthiness is not a group project



Why do so many Christians feel unworthy of love and live lives that often seem empty? In *Loveable*, clinical psychologist Kelly Flanagan answers the “why” encouraging readers to truly embrace their truest, worthiest self, and to remember the name they were given before all other names: Loveable.

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## Gethsemane Moments: When a Marriage is Under Fire



Let's pull the curtain back for a minute and go to the beginning of the story. Genesis opens with a palette of unlimited splendor, a breathtaking expression of the Creator and His nature. Much like an artist, God takes perspective—His passion and glory emerging on a canvas that was once empty and void. There are words of light and life spoken before the darkness. The design is *good*. The joy is *definitive*. This is followed by a crowning achievement... God's image bearer formed out of the very dust of the earth and, behold, it is *very good*. He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Then a determination is made that something is *not good*—man is alone and has no expression for the beauty and intimacy found in the Trinity. The truth is that we were designed in

such a manner that we also require human relationship along with the divine. God was not done yet. Woman was fashioned out of Adam, "... male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). Marriage is acknowledged as part of the heavenly blueprint, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (2:24). The stain of sin has yet to mar the finished work, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (2:25).

One flesh—the physical union between a man and a woman—is symbolic of our capacity for the *koinonia* demonstrated between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is a sacred intimacy at every level—full of unabashed pleasure and joyful celebration, total commitment, mutual sacrifice, and devoid of all guilt, shame,

self-centeredness, malice, jealousy, and unrighteousness. Here, within the sanctity of marriage, we can now see the image bearers expressing the covenantal *agape* that originates in and through the Image Giver. The relationship is to be held in honor and the marriage bed undefiled (Hebrews 13:4).

The intimacy of marital relationships is profound... and holy from a Christian context. It can be viewed as the bringing together of all the attributes of God once again, and into a place of perfect unity and love. No wonder Satan hates this imagery and will do anything he can to destroy the beauty of God's design. We live in a fallen and broken world and there are many crises—human, natural, biological, economical, spiritual—that can test the strength and sanctity of any marital union. Every marriage, especially those that honor the Lord—as well as every union between a believer and the Savior—are visible reminders that God is One.

An oft quoted verse of Scripture related to marriage is, "The two shall become one" (Ephesians 5:31). Unfortunately for too many couples, once the marriage ceremony is over, the adventure begins when a husband and wife start debating "which one?" Outside of an individual's decision to follow Christ, marriage is one of the most significant relational investments anyone will ever make. With a divorce rate that has sadly increased nearly every decade in this country since 1890, the commitment to a balanced, healthy, and lifelong covenant between two people is confronted by numerous challenges that can sometimes plumb the very depths of a person's character

and resolve. Marriages may be blessed in heaven, but they are forged in day-to-day living here on this side of eternity.

In this issue of *CCT*, we are addressing how couples navigate various crises they may face, many of which become “Gethsemane” moments in their marital lives. One way to describe these experiences is when a person (or couple), much like Jesus did, is feeling utterly alone in his or her distress, desperately seeking God for answers, says, “O Lord, not this! Is there any other way? Is there any other plan? Please remove this from me!”

In taking a wide perspective on the topic, Dan Seaborn explores how to restore a loveless marriage, while John Trent and Deborah Gorton examine the nature of having a spiritually unequally yoked relationship. Leslie Vernick addresses high conflict couples

where abuse and violence can be present, and Dave Carder looks at the ultimate betrayal of infidelity and how to best chart a path toward restoration. Psychologist and AACC Vice President, Jared Pingleton, provides an excellent overview on the general field of marriage therapy, including innovative trends, best practices, and clinical challenges. On the parenting front, Jay and Tammy Daughtry discuss how parents can help their children navigate the emotional trauma and effects of a divorce, while apologetic expert, Alex McFarland, tackles wayward and lost children in an increasingly anti-faith culture. Finally, Gregory Jantz helps us understand the impact of mental illness in a marriage, and Eric Scalise speaks to the various grief and loss issues that touch many couples.

King Solomon once said, “Two are better than one because they have a

good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12). To mountain climbers, this image is particularly meaningful. In some ways, whenever we envision a man and a woman “tying the knot,” or “roping up” as it’s referred to, they can then take on the mountain together with the Lord as that third strand. Standing at the top, especially when overcoming major obstacles, gives every couple the opportunity to acknowledge their marriage as a trophy of His grace. As counselors and caregivers, we have the privilege and honor of being with them on their journeys. ✨



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# A LOVELESS MARRIAGE: WHEN THE FIRE BURNS OUT

For people who enjoy camping, sitting around a fire at night is the ultimate way to close out the day. Building a campfire that will last requires a good foundation of kindling and firewood. At a safe distance, a fire can be mesmerizing, as well as warm and toasty on a cool evening. When it is time to call it a night, campers will extinguish the fire. As soon as the flames start to die, an immediate chill fills the air.

The same is true for married couples. When they first meet and are attracted to each other, a fire is ignited. If the fire is built on a good foundation of affirmation, affection, listening, and other gestures of love, the flames will continue to burn. However, if the fuel is removed, the flames start to die and an immediate chill fills the relationship.

Unlike a campfire, most marriages do not burn out overnight if the fire is being fed. The cause of a burnout is usually a series of decisions, actions, or lack of actions that occur over a long period of time until the foundation begins to crumble and can no longer support the fire.

## Rebuilding the Foundation

The best way to start rebuilding is to go back to the basics. I have pastored many wedding ceremonies where Christian couples get married in the church and vow that a cord of three strands is not easily broken. I believe, on that day, these couples have every intention of incorporating God into their marriages, but then they start down life's path together and leave God at the altar. They visit Him when they attend church, but they are not living by God's instructions for marriage. Written

instructions from the manufacturer are critical when someone purchases a product, and it is no different for husbands and wives. We need to go to the Creator and read His Word to understand how it is supposed to work.

The best place to begin is Ephesians 5:21-33, because these are God's instructions for marriage. The word *submission* often gets people all riled up. For some reason, in Christian circles, we tend to focus only on wives submitting to their husbands, but the very first verse of God's instructions, verse 21, says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." *Submit*, by definition, means to accept or yield to a superior force or the authority or will of another person. In marriage, we are to accept or yield to each other, first and foremost, out of respect for the Lord.

In verses 22-23, Paul says, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." Of course, that does not mean women are to lie down and let their husbands walk all over them. God intended for husbands to be spiritual leaders in their families, just as Christ is the spiritual leader over the Church. The problem is, many men are not adhering to that command, so wives are being forced to step into that leadership role, but God did not intend for wives to serve first; He called the man to that role. When we do not function in the roles God intended for us, His will cannot be done. Just like that product will not work when we don't follow the instructions given to us by the manufacturer, a marriage will not work either if couples ignore the instructions and do it their own way.

God's Word instructs husbands in verse 25, "... love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." Christ loved

DAN SEABORN



us so much that He died for us. What woman would not want to be loved like that? A man is to cherish and adore his wife and give himself up for her. That means to think of her first in all that he does... to bless her with Scripture and not stain or blemish her. That is how he is to submit to her.

In Francis and Lisa Chan's book, *You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity*, they write about the concept that marriage should reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When people look at the marriage of a Christian couple, it should draw them to God. Our marriage relationship should be a mirror of our relationship to Christ. Couples need to get that right first or nothing else they do will make a difference long-term. When they understand marriage is meant for something bigger than their individual needs, then they can begin to work on the mechanics of the relationship. The goal should not be working on fixing a marriage in order to be happy again, but working on a marriage so that it reflects the identity of Christ.

### **Preventative Strategies to Maintain a Good Foundation**

Once a couple understands their marital foundation must be rooted in Christ, it does not necessarily mean the relationship is going to magically be great again. As humans, we are limited by our fleshly desires. I am talking about those desires that cause our feelings to get hurt, initiate arguments, and make us feel jealous and experience

discontent. We will never be able to completely eliminate struggles in our marriages, but we can minimize and manage them to our benefit.

The most important preventative strategy I recommend is for couples to pray for, and with, each other every day. What does that look like? It means committing to a time of day where a couple comes together and prays for each other's needs. That's it. The prayer can be short or long. Maybe one spouse needs wisdom for an upcoming meeting or the other needs prayer to stop comparing him or herself to another person. It can be a time to pray for Jesus to be a part of the marriage. Why is praying together a good idea? Extending grace to one's spouse is much easier if you have just prayed for him or her. It is a way to remind a couple that God is part of their union. Although it is impossible for a spouse to meet all of our needs, God can. Couples need to come together regularly and ask Him for help. Having couples pray for each other will change their relationships in a way that nothing else can. The intimacy created will be far greater than any physical intimacy.

Spouses should also regularly create opportunities to build trust with each other... always telling the truth without holding back important details, doing what they told their spouses they would do, and showing up when expected. By building trust in the small things on a daily basis, spouses can establish patterns of trustworthiness in their marriages.

Another preventative strategy is to make sure couples

have minimal exposure to people and situations that would tempt them to stray. Couples need to learn how to create healthy boundaries in their relationships with members of the opposite sex. They need boundaries to help keep them from crossing inappropriate lines in their everyday conversations and interactions. Also, impress upon couples the importance of being encouragers to one another, taking a few moments every day to notice something spectacular and offering a genuine compliment.

Being honest in the little things is also an important preventative strategy. Pretending does not help anyone. Often, when couples are facing tough times in their relationships, they gloss over the real issues instead of facing reality. They will argue about money when trust is the real problem. They will focus on schedules when selfishness is truly the issue. They will yell about parenting even though they should be figuring out their priorities. Honesty is always the best policy.

The last strategy is for couples to stop comparing their marriages and spouses to others. God created us all as unique individuals, so our marriages will also be unique. No two marriages are alike, yet we have a tendency to believe the “grass is greener” on the other side of the fence.

### Reignited

In marriage, it can be easy for couples to get stuck in the negatives, only paying attention to the flaws and failures in their own backyard. They can nitpick and criticize all day long and, in time, will begin to wonder if they would be better off on their neighbor’s property.

The most important task for couples rebuilding their foundation is to avoid fanning the flames of arguments that have been extinguished and, instead, fan the flames of love and respect. In order to accomplish this, couples must learn to lay down their pride and stand up for their marriages. It means not always having to be right. It requires holding on to forgiveness instead of grudges. It is about moving forward and reigniting the fire that was there at one time... and believing it can be there again. ✕



DAN SEABORN, M.A., is the founder of *Winning At Home, Inc.*, an organization that produces media resources and hosts special events to develop marriages and families. He is a featured speaker at various churches and large-scale events, such as *Promise Keepers weekends*, *American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) conferences*, and *university assemblies*. Dan has authored 12 books and established himself as a media personality on *West Michigan television and national radio*. He and his wife, Jane, have four children and live in *West Michigan*.

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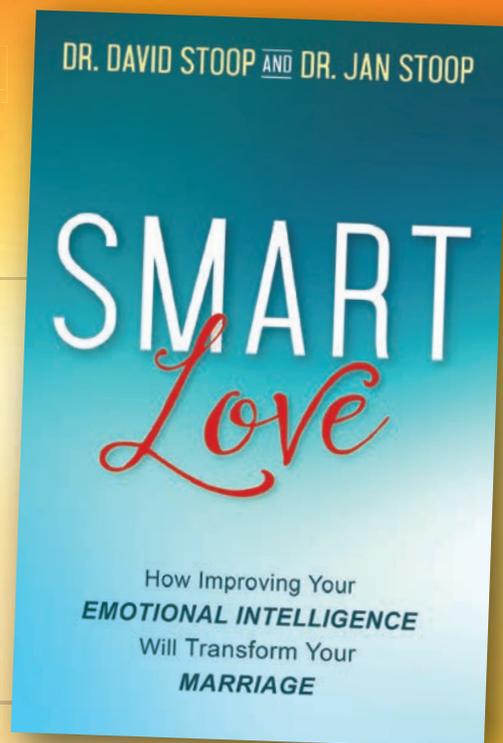
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\*Understanding Counselor Liability Risk, NSO and CNA, March 2014.  
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# WORKING WITH HIGH CONFLICT COUPLES

## ASSESSING FOR ABUSIVE ELEMENTS

**W**orking with high conflict couples presents unique challenges that frustrate and confuse even experienced counselors. We can work for months, even years, without seeing improvement. And, we can miss some crucial diagnostic components if we are not mindful of what to look for.

High conflict couples experience frequent fighting that may threaten their connection and happiness. In a destructive/abusive marriage, fighting threatens the sanity and safety of the people within the marriage.

### What's Going On?

Our diagnosis shapes our treatment plan. For example, when working with a high conflict couple, if we diagnose the primary problem as an attachment issue, then that's where treatment will begin. Attachment issues may be part of a couple's overall diagnostic picture, just as a person having a heart attack may also have a sprained ankle or arthritis. However, when working with a high conflict couple, safety always comes first. We must assess for the possibility of domestic abuse and subsequent safety concerns because, if present, marital counseling is contraindicated.

### Make a Proper Assessment

For obvious reasons, fear of one's partner and/or abusive behavior is rarely voluntarily disclosed during a joint session. Therefore, early in the assessment stage, let the couple know that for at least one session you would like to see each person individually. In this individual session, you want to get an overall picture of a person's relationship history, personal strengths, coping strategies, and family of origin issues. To assess for safety concerns, ask these closed questions.

1. Have you ever been threatened or physically hurt in this relationship?
2. Have you ever been an unwilling participant in a sexual act?
3. Do you ever feel fearful around your partner?
4. Are there times you don't trust your partner?
5. Do you have the freedom to make decisions, give your input, and say no to things?
6. Can you respectfully challenge and confront the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors of your partner? If not, what happens when you try?

If the answer is yes to any of the first four questions or no to the last two questions, you need to dig deeper. The first four questions give you insight into physical or emotional abuse, as well as problems with deceit. Questions three, five, and six reveal coercive control in the marriage. An imbalance of power and control is one of the primary diagnostic indicators for an abusive relationship.

A healthy marriage is one where both people in the relationship give and receive. There is a safe and open exchange of ideas, feelings, and thoughts, and all perspectives are considered and valued. There is also the freedom to respectfully disagree, challenge, confront, and strengthen one another.

LESLIE VERNICK

Once you have completed the individual interview and find there is a pattern of abuse that is present and escalating, your next steps are to determine the risk for harm and help develop a safety plan.

### Dig Deeper

Lenore Walker, the author of *Survivor Therapy*, suggests four additional queries to examine during the individual assessment session that will help you determine if abusive patterns are present in the marriage.

1. Describe the first time this happened (or you felt this way).
2. Describe the last time this happened (or you felt this way).
3. Describe the worst time this happened (or you felt this way).
4. Describe what a typical time is like.

For example, a much clearer marital picture emerges when a woman who has been married for 20 years tells you the first time she felt scared was on her honeymoon. Her husband screamed at her because she felt shy and told her something was wrong with her because she was frigid. The last time she felt scared was last week when, during an argument, he threw a can of beer at her in front of the children and it hit her in the chest. The worst time was when she was pregnant with their first child and he slapped her and threw her against a wall... and a typical time is on weekends when he drinks too much and becomes verbally demeaning and cruel.

In a different case, you find the first time there was physical abuse was last week when he pushed her during an argument. His behavior scared them both and that's why they made an appointment for counseling. In taking a careful history of the marriage, you are looking for patterns of healthy behaviors, as well as patterns of controlling and abusive behavior often escalating in frequency, intensity, duration, and variability.

Don't minimize the second example because the client admitted the abuse. In both cases, safety should be our primary treatment goal... if clients do not have safety, they cannot do effective therapy. One person cannot speak honestly about what is going on at home if disclosing in a couple's setting is not safe.

### Safety Comes First

Once you have completed the individual interview and find there is a pattern of abuse that is present and escalating, your next steps are to determine the risk for harm and help develop a safety plan. The Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-SAFE) can give some guidance, as well as resources provided at the end of this article.

If there is no history of physical abuse, but you observe patterns of emotional and verbal abuse, or mild coercive control, the first therapeutic goal is to create greater safety so you can assess whether marital work can be accomplished.

These safety goals help high conflict couples learn to:

- Honor timeouts
- Respect stated boundaries
- Identify personal triggers
- Give their partners the freedom to say no without retaliation
- Tolerate personal negative emotions or those of a spouse without resorting to abusive or controlling behavior

If either the husband or wife is unwilling or unsuccessful at implementing these goals at home, marital counseling is contraindicated. Instead, suggest individual therapy so clients can be safe before executing joint work.

### Watch Out for This Critical Mistake

A common mistake counselors and church leaders make in working with high conflict couples is seeing both individuals as mutually abusive. The Apostle Paul addresses this pattern when he writes, “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Galatians 5:15). These kinds of couples consistently attack one another instead of mutually attacking their problem(s).

However, there is a subtle difference we must watch for called reactive abuse. Reactive abuse can be seen when one person in the marriage resists his or her partner’s coercive control. For example, Bill believes that as the head of his home he is entitled to make the rules for his wife, Teresa, to live by. Bill told Teresa that she was not allowed to talk on her cell phone when he is home. He reasoned that she has plenty of time to talk during the day. When he is home, he desires it to be their time.

Initially, trying to be a godly, submissive, Christian wife, Teresa acquiesced to Bill’s encroaching rules. Nevertheless, his control over her life escalated. Bill wanted to decide how much time she should spend visiting her family, what friends she should have, what groceries she could buy, and what books she was allowed read. Teresa felt like a child instead of an adult woman. Talking to Bill about her feelings did not help, and Teresa began reacting negatively to Bill’s control. She would not always tell him where she went or would openly defy him in disrespectful tones. One time, when he firmly grabbed her arm to keep her from leaving the house, she slapped him.

To the untrained eye, Teresa would get labeled as the abusive one. Bill may even tell you during your individual assessment that he is “scared” of her. However, if we look at Teresa’s behavior as abusive without seeing how Bill’s conduct is fueling her resistance, we have failed to address Bill’s coercive control that is present in the relationship. Teresa’s behavior is sinful and she needs help to set better boundaries and learn how to be assertive, but if Bill does not see the abusive nature of his control, their marriage will not get better.





The following are some factors to watch for if you are currently working with high conflict couples that reveal abusive elements:

- Imbalance of power and control in the relationship
- Consistent lack of mutuality (the sharing of a feeling, action, or relationship)
- A pattern of dismissive and invalidating responses
- Attacking a person rather than solving a problem
- Lack of freedom to speak up, have an opinion that is different, disagree, or make choices on his/her own
- Blame-shifting, minimizing, and lack of responsibility for wrongs committed in the marriage
- Consistent indifference to his/her partner's needs, feelings, desires, and thoughts

### Be Sure You Have Two Willing Clients

Last, when doing marital counseling with any couple, especially a high conflict couple, make sure you have two willing clients.

For example, when I asked Teresa what she wanted to work on, she said, "I know I've been horrible to Bill lately. I need to show him more respect and communicate without calling him names. But I don't know how to talk to him in a way he will hear me." When I asked Bill that same question, he said, "I want Teresa to respect me as the leader of our home."

When I asked Bill if there was anything he needed to change, he drew a blank. He said, "If Teresa just submitted, things would be fine." In his mind, the problem was Teresa. Bill was not in therapy to work on himself, but to make sure Teresa got the help she needed.

Attempting marital counseling by working with only one willing client is a mistake. It sends the wrong message. First, it reinforces Bill's belief that Teresa is the problem. Second, it reinforces his belief that the therapist agrees there is nothing wrong either with him or the way he functions as the head of his home. Third, it leads Teresa to believe the therapist agrees with Bill that she is the problem and needs to change to make their marriage better.

Instead, tell Bill that he is free to leave if he has nothing to work on for himself. That way, you can help Teresa learn to stand up to Bill's control in a healthier manner without reinforcing that she is the sole problem or he does not have one.

While working with high conflict couples is challenging, it is also rewarding when each person is willing to make the necessary effort needed to make real changes. Be sure to begin with an actual assessment, remembering that effective therapy is not possible until each individual feels safe in the relationship. ✦



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*Destructive Relationship*, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*, and her most recent, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*. Contact Leslie at [www.leslievernick.com](http://www.leslievernick.com).

## RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING A SAFETY PLAN

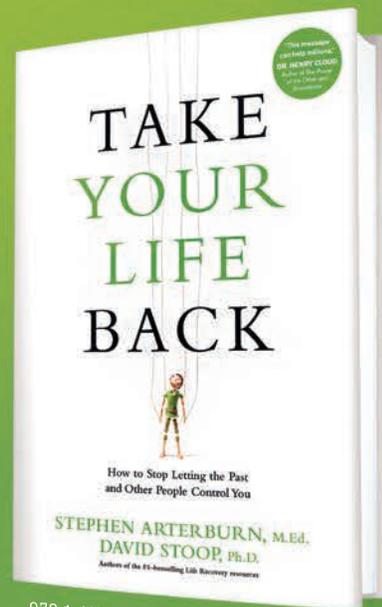
Focus Ministries: <http://www.focusministries1.org/help/safety-plan>

The Rave Project: [www.theraveproject.com/index.php/resources/resource\\_content/personalized\\_safety\\_plan](http://www.theraveproject.com/index.php/resources/resource_content/personalized_safety_plan)

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“THIS MESSAGE CAN HELP MILLIONS.” —DR. HENRY CLOUD



The phone call on a Sunday morning between church services was a bit unusual, but I could hear the distress in my friend's voice. "Can you please come to the funeral home right away? We need to talk with you." I rushed out of the church and began driving... my mind was racing as I tried to decipher his words, wondering what had happened. After pulling into the parking lot, I walked quickly into a small chapel and saw the couple sitting in the front pew. They were clutching each other, shoulders hunched in despondency, their eyes red with tears. My face begged the question... and the reply was heartwrenching. Katie, their precious newborn daughter, had just died of SIDS. It was Mother's Day.

# FROM MOURNING TO MORNING: Surviving Grief and Loss in a Marriage

A wife who loses a husband is called a *widow*. A husband who loses a wife is called a *widower*. A child who loses his/her parents is called an *orphan*. However, there is no word for a parent who loses a child—it speaks to the very essence of grief work... there is usually an utter loss of words. This kind of tragedy can severely test any marriage and increase the risk for emotional distancing and even divorce.<sup>1</sup> Grief and loss issues transcend every culture, every people group, every educational and socioeconomic level, and every belief system. There are tens of thousands of articles in the research literature, hundreds of books, and an abundance of resources. Why? Because grief is so universal and prevalent.

Grief can only be experienced when there has been the loss of an intimate relationship with a person or some other object of concern and/or affection. It is an “active, intentional decision to face the pain of the loss.”<sup>2</sup> Grief is also a normal response that includes feelings of intense sorrow, anger, loneliness, and depression. It can take enormous courage and resolve to work “through,” rather than merely attempting to work “out of,” the process. Rarely are there easy answers to events that seem so inherently tragic and untimely for a couple. A failed pregnancy, suicide, abduction, sexual assault, children with cancer, bankruptcy, a mastectomy, natural disasters... the list is endless—the pain is often crushing, sleep becomes fitful, and questions constantly intrude into one’s waking moments.

ERIC SCALISE



The most human of all questions is simply, “Why?” Why us? Why this? Why now? Unfortunately, it is difficult to find answers to these questions, much less answers that offer a measure of satisfaction or relief. Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that Jesus Himself, while in great pain at Golgotha, pleaded with His Father to answer a why question only to be met with apparent silence: “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, *why* have you forsaken Me?’” (Matthew 27:46). Scripture describes our suffering Messiah as a man of sorrows and One who is acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

The reality is that grief almost never waits for an invitation; it merely arrives, usually unannounced. There are no timetables for grief’s duration... no rules, no boundaries, no absolute protocols. Grief and loss create detours in one’s life and can change focus, direction, and a sense of meaning or purpose for any couple.<sup>3</sup> Here, the heart usually leads the brain, and since grief is unique to the individual, so are the ways in which a spouse will cope with the loss.

Many of us have our own testimonies demonstrating God’s faithfulness through these times and His ability to resurrect life out of tragedy and heartbreak. In the early years of marriage, my wife and I grappled with the painful aftermath of four successive miscarriages. Three times she went into labor only to deliver a dead baby. When a Christian mindset suggests we should “be fruitful and multiply because children are a heritage of the Lord,” the silent struggle of infertility can be difficult to accept. Yet, God showed up... He always does, despite an abiding sense of failure that left us on an emotional roller coaster. After a series of incredible events, we were able to adopt identical twin boys at birth, and the words of Jeremiah became our new heritage: “... For I will turn their mourning into joy and will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow” (31:13). For us, the marriage emerged even stronger.

One of the best moderators of grief and loss is a couple’s capacity for resilience. Sometimes this is referred to as buoyancy or the ability to “bounce back.” Resiliency can also be defined as an emotional and/or psychological elasticity, and it is important to think of this quality as essential before, during, and after a traumatic event as part of a Resilience Life Cycle.<sup>4</sup> How a couple faces and works through trauma may, in some cases, produce greater suffering than the original event. Resilience building factors, such as the presence of caring and supportive relationships, the ability to set reasonable goals and objectives, and a commitment to self-care, time management and a balanced life, all act like a protective shield.

In most marriages that experience a loss, husbands and wives may or may not be at the same place (emotionally, mentally, spiritually, etc.) on

any given day. Factors impacting how they handle an event include *Frequency* (How often are grief responses occurring?), *Intensity* (How strong are the emotions or how intrusive the unwanted thoughts?), *Duration* (How long do these effects last?), and *Variability* (How many different ways do they manifest?). It is helpful when spouses are able to respect each other's grieving style, which also depends on personality, culture, previous experiences, one's faith orientation, etc. When couples perceive they have some level of congruence in their grief styles and process, marital satisfaction is usually higher. Additionally, because of the stress factors often involved, both positive and negative traits in a spouse can be heightened, with overall marital quality and couple interdependence being the primary difference makers.<sup>5</sup>

The following are some strategies couples can incorporate when trying to navigate through the emotional, relational, and spiritual aftermath:

- Resolve to go through the loss together—understand that exhaustion and loss of energy (emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually) does not automatically mean a loss of love and affection.
- Accept grieving as a process and that what you are feeling is not necessarily abnormal or a lack of faith—however, lingering losses (bankruptcy, rape, an assault, death, accidents, etc.) involving legal and court-related realities can keep the wounds raw and open.
- Avoid isolation by communicating regularly and spending time with other couples who have experienced grief—men generally receive less support than women during times of loss.
- Give each other enough emotional and physical space—even the most loving couples may need to pull away and grieve in private from time-to-time.
- Work through any needed forgiveness of yourself, others, and toward God.
- Get involved with worthwhile endeavors and direct the emotional energy into healthy outlets.
- Give yourself permission to engage in memorials, grieving rituals, and other symbolic activities—they can help bring closure, comfort, and support as powerful healing agents.
- Avoid making major decisions right away if unnecessary (e.g., moving, selling a home, leaving a workplace, etc.)—do develop an action plan to help regain some sense of control.
- Pursue counseling and/or grief support groups when needed.

As counselors and caregivers, we are frequently trained in matters pertaining to trauma, anxiety and depression, loss, complicated grief, stress and pain management, and similar presenting problems. Our education and experience may tempt us to suggest sound clinical advice, but we must be careful that these efforts at wise counsel are not simply filtered and received as well-intentioned, but hollow, sound bites that fail to stem the emotional bleeding. Occasionally the simple power of one's presence through listening to a client's story is more

When couples perceive they have some level of congruence in their grief styles and process, marital satisfaction is usually higher.

relevant, and sometimes it means allowing the God of all comfort to function in this important role through His Word and the agency of His Holy Spirit.

We grieve because we love. “The fact remains that sometimes love hurts. So we have to resign ourselves to being capable of love that hurts. To do otherwise would be to withdraw from life, to exist in a sort of emotional exile, not benefiting from or feeling all the joys of the human experience. Our love may be especially hurtful, but the reality of that love is a gift.”<sup>6</sup> For people of faith—Christians—who acknowledge an omnipotent and compassionate God, there must, likewise, be recognition of His divine sovereignty and the mystery of His ways. The words of the psalmist bring comfort to many who, likewise, have proclaimed that even though “weeping may endure for a night, joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). ✦



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### Endnotes

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How do you see your spouse?

As a husband or as a hero?

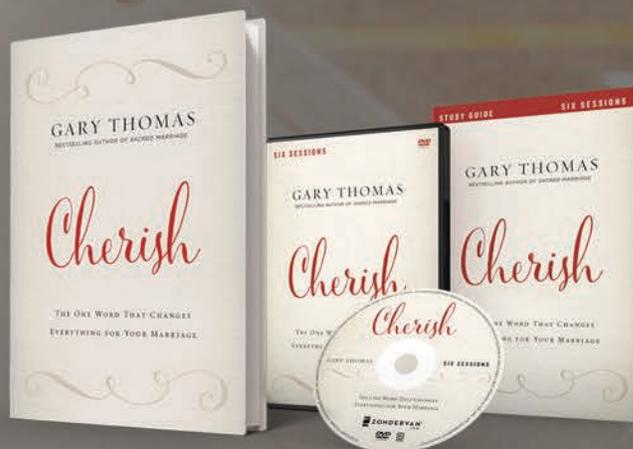
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# Marriage Counseling:

INNOVATIVE TRENDS, BEST PRACTICES,  
AND CLINICAL CHALLENGES



The field of marriage therapy continues to enjoy a high degree of prominence as one of the leading schools of thought in mental and relational healthcare. Yet, perhaps like no other, this field exists despite the inescapable and ubiquitous irony that, almost without exception, every participant in marriage counseling comes with an identical agenda: the abiding wish that his or her spouse will change and, if so, they will both live happily ever after! Nonetheless, and perhaps despite that satirical observation, the field has been recently changing as it attempts to adapt to the ever evolving landscape of the culture, address the differing needs of contemporary marriages and families and, of course, discover new and effective ways to be reimbursed for professional services in an increasingly managed care climate and intrusively controlling third-party payer system.

A brief historical overview of the field of marriage therapy reminds us that this approach to working with couples in a formalized, direct way originated in Germany in the 1920s, with the first institutes to study and teach marital therapy in the United States beginning in the 1930s. By the 1950s, the field adapted to contextualize couples work within the rubric of family therapy, which popularized it enormously into the mainstream of psychotherapeutic theory, research, and practice. Conceptually and procedurally, marriage counseling emphasized focusing on the interpersonal interaction patterns of the couple's unique relational system rather than on a predominate analysis of the dynamics and personality of the individual. Clinicians were taught and trained to attend to and teach their client couples to improve communication patterns, conflict issues, and listening skills in an effort to solve problems, reduce destructive relational habits, and enhance intimacy. In general, the field of marriage therapy has been more open to creative and innovative ideas for advancing new theories and interventions and methodology than has the field of more traditional individual therapy.

Within the last generation or so, a number of groundbreaking approaches to marital counseling have advanced new ideas, concepts, and procedures into the field in an effort to help couples work through their issues more strategically and effectively. Eminently pragmatic, Solutions Focused approaches tend to be very directive and decidedly atheoretical in their efforts to affect specifically targeted, practical change by focusing more on the strengths

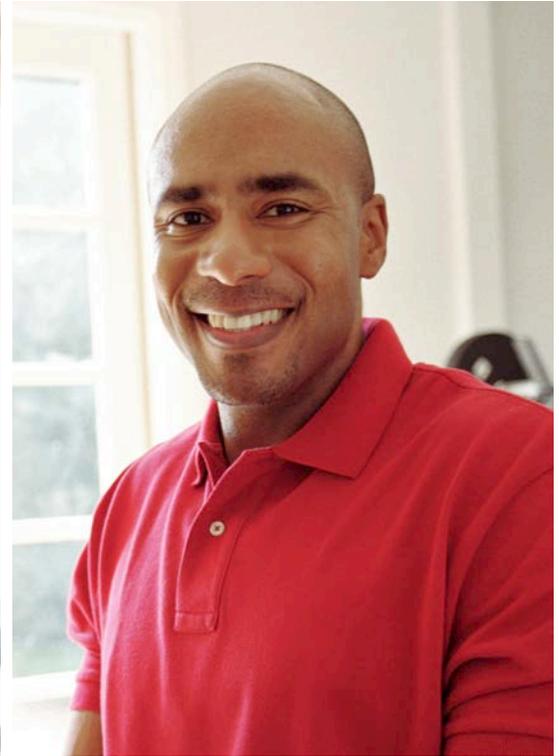
of the couple than on their pathology or dysfunctionality. Toward that end, techniques such as the "miracle question," "scaling questions," and "exception question" are crafted and customized by the therapist in order to stimulate each couple's unique marriage system to change.

Narrative Therapy, as its name implies, encourages couples to find solutions to their own struggles by means of articulating and, in essence, rewriting their own story, believing that they—not the therapist—are most expertly cognizant of (and therefore capable of changing) their own relational constructs. Highly compatible with the cultural and philosophical values of post-modernistic thought, the emerging field of positive psychology, and deconstructionism, Narrative Therapy has been widely embraced.

In terms of research, the contemporary approach and most frequently studied is Behavioral Couples Therapy. Primarily spurred on by the influence of managed care's strong emphasis on measurable, evidenced-based outcome efficacy, it has accordingly yielded impressive outcome measures with long-term follow-up reporting high levels of fairly enduring improvement. It is a characteristically brief therapy approach that primarily emphasizes changes in specific behaviors toward one's spouse.

Speaking of research, the person who has contributed more in the past 30 years to statistically-valid, predictive outcomes of marriage systems is John Gottman. He and his wife, Julie, have famously developed direct observational methodology in their "Love Lab" at the University of

REV. JARED PINGLETON



Washington to predict the success or failure rate of marriages with a high degree of certainty. Based on his popular conceptualization of what he calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling), John attempts to help couples become self-aware of their negative interaction patterns in order to improve the tone, tenor, and temperature of their marriages. By means of two surprisingly simple behaviors (treating one another like good friends and handling their conflicts in gentle and positive ways), he postulates from his research findings that such couples exhibit happiness and relational stability, while drastically reducing their potential for divorce. Thousands of clinicians worldwide have been trained through The Gottman Institute.

Another increasingly popular and broadly utilized approach to working with couples is grounded in attachment theory, and attempts to help couples understand and short-circuit their conflictual, repetitious, and often vicious negatively reinforcing interactive cycles. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), systematized by Susan Johnson and Lee Greenberg, is a hybridized psychodynamically-informed, experientially-based, systems-oriented approach to helping couples identify their own deep emotional reactions to their spouses’

attitudes and actions and insightfully connect those to their own, deep emotional needs. Focusing on establishing a deep sense of safety, the overarching goal of EFT is to foster a progressively deepening emotional bond which facilitates security, trust, co-regulation, and intimacy. EFT has enjoyed widespread acceptance and utilization by clinicians and clients alike due to its common sense, straightforward set of theoretical constructs; namely, that we all marry in order to create and maintain deep emotional attachments at the most intimate levels of one’s being.

Meanwhile, from a Christian perspective, we have learned in the last several years that not only do men and women come from differing planets (John Gray), but they are also much like waffles and spaghetti (Bill and Pam Farrel), that sex begins in the kitchen (Kevin Leman), that men and women need both love and respect—but with different emphases (Emerson Eggerichs), that there are different love languages to be learned (Gary Chapman), that marriage was designed to be intrinsically sacred and not to generate happiness per se (Gary Thomas), that sex was created and intended for pleasure (Ed and Gaye Wheat), that communication is the key to successful marriage (H. Norman Wright), that his and her needs are, indeed, different (Willard Harley), and that love is to be for a lifetime (James Dobson). Hundreds of books, audio and video resources, marriage mentoring activities, retreats, seminars, curricula, groups, ministry programs, Web sites, study programs, and enrichment efforts have been developed from a biblical perspective in order to serve the needs of couples in their marital journeys. Taken collectively, these innovative efforts to minister to marriages have had an enormous impact to educate, equip, and empower couples to enjoy healthier, happier, and more harmonious relationships.

Perhaps the most revolutionary paradigm shift in the field of delivering marital therapy services has been the increasingly widespread adoption of

the concept of intensive clinical marriage work. Rather than stereotypically meeting once per week and merely rehashing last week's arguments (in effect, treating the symptoms), this "outside the box" method of clinical intervention meets for elongated times (several hours per day for a few days to a week) in order to scrutinize the nature and process of the couple's interaction patterns and relational mechanisms. In focusing on core issues, these psycho-educational/in vivo clinical approaches are somewhat akin to teaching couples "how to fish" rather than proverbially "giving them a fish" every week. Preliminary research strongly indicates this novel approach can derive positive results in much less time and with greater efficiency as compared to the traditional one session per week model. Many such programs tout that they can accomplish six months to one year's worth of clinical success in a few days, saving couples a great deal of expense financially and relationally. Such programs market their services as advantageous for couples in severe crisis, who are stuck in chronic conflict, and who require in-depth counseling for other reasons.

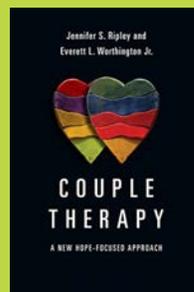
A variety of theoretical and structural configurations utilize this intensive concept to get at, and address, underlying root causes of marital discord and dysfunction. Many such programs incorporate a small group format with three to five couples and generally employ co-therapists in order to more broadly and deeply capture and facilitate the multiple levels and layers of interaction in the therapy room. In addition, several intensives are conducted in an intimacy-enhancing and romance-inducing retreat or resort-like setting. These nontraditional outpatient counseling features and accoutrements all contribute to the reported success of this style of marital intervention.

While certainly encouraging, much work remains to be done to help couples both in chronic conflict and those who are not overtly combatable, contentious, or combustible. Multigenerational dysfunction, unresolved family of origin entanglements, mutual transference dynamics, triangulation patterns, previous relationship and/or multiple marriage histories, as well as individual pathological issues all present themselves normatively and naturally within the marital dyad. Adultery, abuse, abandonment, and addictions all adversely affect marriages and families. Blended family and stepparenting issues present ongoing emotional and relational challenges. Consequently, the divorce rates are still very high. Cohabitation is at an all-time high. To wit, there is no such thing as a perfect marriage, thus we all have abundant ministry to conduct for hurting couples. It is a high and holy calling to be sure. Let us strive with all our might and the Holy Spirit's anointing to do it well. ✝



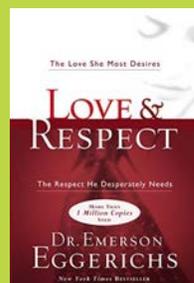
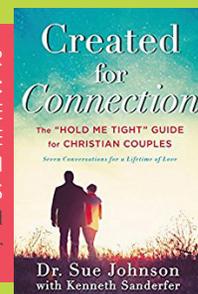
JARED PINGLETON, PSY.D., serves as Vice President of Professional Development for the American Association of Christian Counselors. As a clinical psychologist and credentialed minister, Jared is dually trained in both psychology and theology and specializes in the theoretical and clinical integration of the two disciplines. In professional practice since 1977, Jared is the author or coauthor of six books, including *Making Magnificent Marriages*, and numerous journal articles. He has served on the staff of two large churches, founded and directed two Christian counseling centers, and taught at several Christian colleges and seminaries.

# TOP 5 RESOURCES:



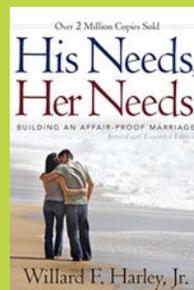
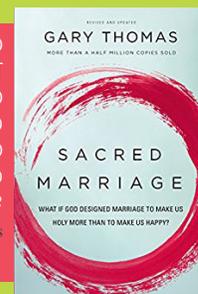
**COUPLE THERAPY: A NEW HOPE-FOCUSED APPROACH**  
Everett L. Worthington, Jr. and Jennifer S. Ripley

**CREATED FOR CONNECTION: THE "HOLD ME TIGHT" GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN COUPLES**  
Sue Johnson and Kenneth Sanderfer



**LOVE AND RESPECT: THE LOVE SHE MOST DESIRES; THE RESPECT HE DESPERATELY NEEDS**  
Emerson Eggerichs

**SACRED MARRIAGE: WHAT IF GOD DESIGNED MARRIAGE TO MAKE US HOLD MORE THAN TO MAKE US HAPPY?**  
Gary Thomas



**HIS NEEDS, HER NEEDS: BUILDING AN AFFAIR-PROOF MARRIAGE**  
Willard F. Harley, Jr.



# DO NO HARM: PARENTING THROUGH DIVORCE

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Susan was too young when her parents divorced to have any recollection of them ever being together. Nevertheless, she was sure that her parents being together was a bad idea. Every time they were in the same building, let alone the same room, it became an opportunity to attack one another and embarrass her. It was so confusing, because her dad never seemed to be the monster her mom insisted he was. Susan loved her daddy just as much as she loved her mom, but she could only be with him every other weekend and two weeks each summer. That didn't really seem fair, but that's all she had ever known. Even so, it just felt so wrong to have a bedroom at mom's house and a guest room at dad's.

So, just what is it with which the court system needs to take notice? How can divorcing couples engage in protective parenting to minimize emotional and relational turmoil for their children? Can such principles become present in our family courts through policy implementation? Is there not only a different way, but also a better way, to engage in the divorce process?

First, *what we know* is Susan is now 30-something, on her third marriage, and sitting in our office trying come to terms with the homeostatic gravity that has kept her in this orbit of perpetual marriage failure. We know, that her parents' inability to get along put her in the center of their conflict, constantly challenging her loyalties and leading her into a destructive habit of cutting to relieve the pressure she was feeling. We also know her lack of access to, and meaningful time with, her father drove her to seek connection and approval in unhealthy relationships with multiple surrogates. Her mother's relentless tirades left them both emotionally scarred as the personal and financial instability kept them moving regularly and taught her how to recognize and respond to everyone's needs except her own. In addition, we know the infrequent and volatile communication between Susan's parents forced her to become the parent and carry the weight of adult issues, have conversations, and engage in roles in which any child would feel ill-equipped. In short, Susan's life was touched by every major risk factor known to lead to negative outcomes for children of divorce, many of which were initiated, exacerbated, and perpetuated by the nature of the litigious process of divorce. And we know it did not have to be that way.

Protective parenting starts by recognizing the reality that co-parenting begins well before the divorce process. Here are some co-parenting principles to share with clients that will help protect the hearts of these vulnerable children and preserve post-divorce family function.

- **What Do We Tell the Kids?:** Do not let this conversation become a battleground for your child's loyalty and affection. Decide beforehand exactly what will be shared during your disclosure. Make sure it is a consistent message from both parents and account for developmental and age differences. Focus on how daily life will look as you divide into two homes. The details of your marital discord and failure are *adult information* children do not need to know.
- **Shared Parenting:** Research shows that children benefit from having equal and quality time with both parents. Establish this as a common goal to help ensure your child's long-term healthy adjustment. Do not force your child to decide between parents; more often than not, both are equally loved.
- **Get Stable:** Each parent can benefit from individual counseling related to divorce. Healthier parents are proactive and committed to helping their children adjust.
- **Communication:** Never discuss co-parenting business in front of the children. Do not use them as messengers or mediators.

Instead, schedule co-parenting meetings by phone or in person to talk about parenting-related decisions, finances, schedules, etc. Be intentional about compartmentalizing communication; it will protect your children and co-parenting relationship. This will allow you to attend school events and extra-curricular activities without significant stress. During co-parenting meetings, keep divorce issues separate from parenting issues, and be mindful of tone of voice and body language. Stay objective and on topic.

- **Handoffs:** Handle the exchange with a positive attitude, encourage children to enjoy their time at the other household, and never burden children with emotional good-byes.
- **Filtering Out Negative Voices:** Each parent is the "first filter" to his or her child's heart. Implement good boundaries with extended family members and other adults. Protect children from derogatory comments about either parent.

Early research, reflecting the prejudice of cultural role expectations, informed the legal system with a matriarchal bias favoring the role and function of mothers. Those role expectations have shifted greatly in society today, but are still very present in our family courts. Despite the relevant research that points very clearly to the emotional benefits for children having equal time and access to both parents, many states have been slow to implement policies that reflect these findings.

There are two trends that are slowly changing the way divorce happens in America. Both are the result of considering the *child's best interest* and the health of the post-divorce family. Family Therapy is trickling into family court thanks to the hard work and cooperative efforts of those who bridge the gap between these two worlds. In 2014, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) published the recommendations

JAY AND TAMMY DAUGHTRY

## Every time they were all together—for birthdays, basketball games, or piano recitals—it became an opportunity to celebrate and enjoy each other.

of 32 family law experts.<sup>1</sup> The group concluded, “Children’s best interests are furthered by parenting plans that provide for continuing and shared parenting relationships that are safe, secure, and developmentally responsive and that also avoid a template calling for a specific division of time imposed on all families.” It also stated, “Parents who choose these arrangements [shared parenting] have reported that their children are better adjusted across multiple measures than their sole-custody or step-family peers.” This is one example of the current body of research that is informing state policies being reflected in family law.

The other “trend” has been developing since the mid-80s and has become known as Collaborative Divorce. The International Academy of Collaborative Professionals (IACP) defines itself as “an international community of legal, mental health, and financial professionals working in concert to create client-centered processes for resolving conflict.”<sup>2</sup> They, and others, are providing training and establishing standards of certification for professionals who want to “provide a safe and dignified environment to reduce the conflict and minimize its impact” on clients, their children, their families and their lives. Imagine a process that starts with the mutual commitment to avoiding litigation in which the parties:

- Sign a collaborative participation agreement describing the nature and scope of the matter
- Voluntarily disclose all information which is relevant and material to the matter that must be decided
- Agree to use good faith efforts in their negotiations to reach a mutually acceptable settlement
- Must be represented by a lawyer whose representation terminates upon the undertaking of any contested court proceeding
- May engage mental health and financial professionals, as well as other experts, as needed

This is *the* alternative to traditional divorce, one that puts the best interests of all involved at the forefront of every decision to provide an equitable, satisfactory, and healthy outcome to a painful and challenging transition. Thankfully, those overseeing the process have started to understand that though a divorce ends a marriage, it does not end a family. In fact, we can all be about the business of preserving the family despite the imminent, painful reality of divorce.

Unlike Susan, Angela remembers when her parents divorced. She could not stand the thought of them never being together again. Nevertheless, she was sure her parents would be alright, as well as her and her brothers. Every time they were all together—for birthdays, basketball games, or piano recitals—it became an opportunity to celebrate and

enjoy each other. Sometimes it was confusing, because her dad and mom never seemed to be upset with each other. She loves her daddy just as much as she loves her mom... and although she would love to see them more, she never really feels like she’s missing out. Besides, it is kind of neat having an extra mom and dad. She feels loved, fulfilled, and happy. That’s all she has ever known. It may be unique, but somehow she doesn’t mind her one heart having two homes. ✕



JAY S. DAUGHTRY, M.MFT, is a pastor, author, and national speaker. He serves as the co-founder of The Counseling Center for Modern Family Dynamics, CEO of Co-parenting International, and is co-author of the digital curriculum, *One Heart, Two Homes: Co-parenting Children of Divorce to a Positive Future*. Together with his wife, Tammy, Jay is raising a blended family of four in Nashville, Tennessee.



TAMMY G. DAUGHTRY, M.MFT, is an author, speaker and founder of Co-parenting International, an organization launched in 2003 to help divorced and remarried parents raise healthy kids. She is author of *Co-parenting Works! Helping Your Children Thrive after Divorce*, co-author of the digital curriculum, *One Heart, Two Homes: Co-parenting Children of Divorce to a Positive Future*, and Co-founder of The Counseling Center for Modern Family Dynamics. She and Jay lead seminars, marriage retreats, therapist trainings, and events across the country for faith-based and mainstream audiences.

### Resources

*Co-parenting Works! Helping Your Children Thrive after Divorce* by Tammy Daughtry. Zondervan/HarperCollins, 2011.

*One Heart, Two Homes: Co-parenting Children of Divorce to a Positive Future* by Jay and Tammy Daughtry; *6 Risks for Children after Divorce*, class 5, lessons 15, 16, and 17, pages 42-47 (a multimedia curriculum including 33 guests, an interactive workbook, and a comprehensive study on the topic of co-parenting. Published by Co-parenting International, 2014, Nashville, TN).

National Parents Organization, P.O. Box 270760, Boston, MA 02127.

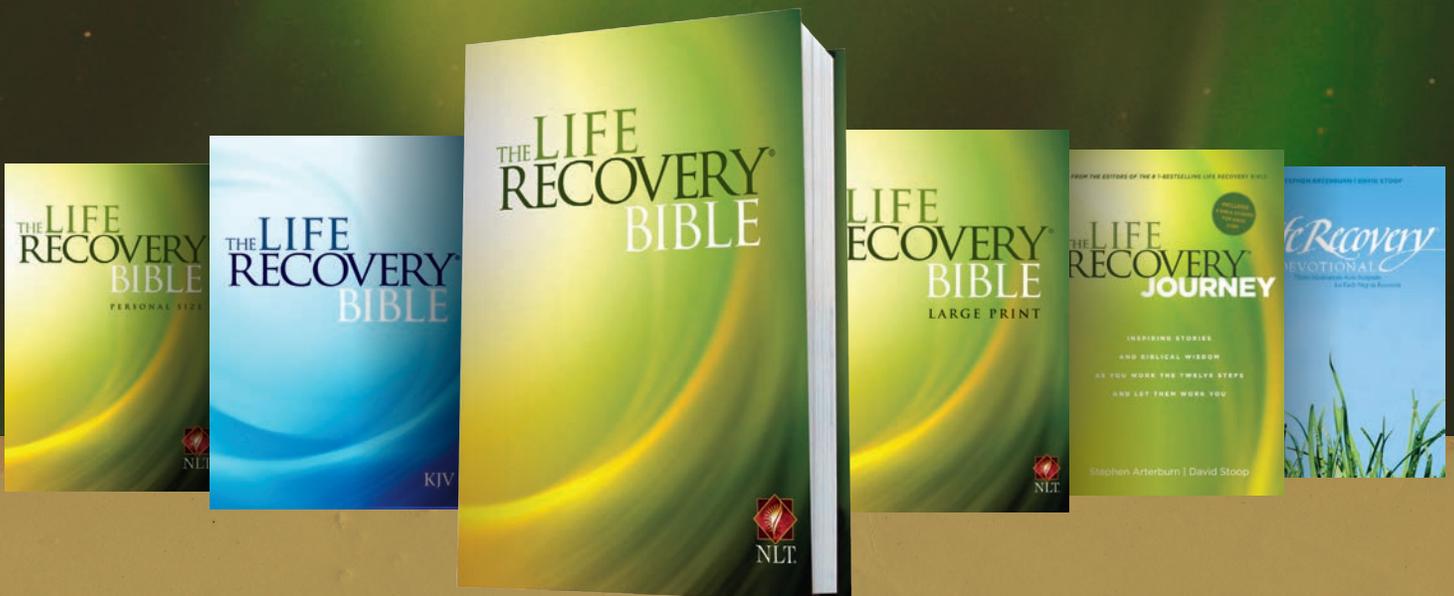
NationalParentsOrganization.org, Parents@NationalParentsOrganization.org, 617.542.9300.

### Endnotes

- 1 Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC): <http://www.afccnet.org>.
- 2 International Academy of Collaborative Professionals (IACP), 4201 N. 24th Street, Ste. 240, Phoenix, AZ 85016, [collaborativepractice.com](http://collaborativepractice.com), 480.696.6075.



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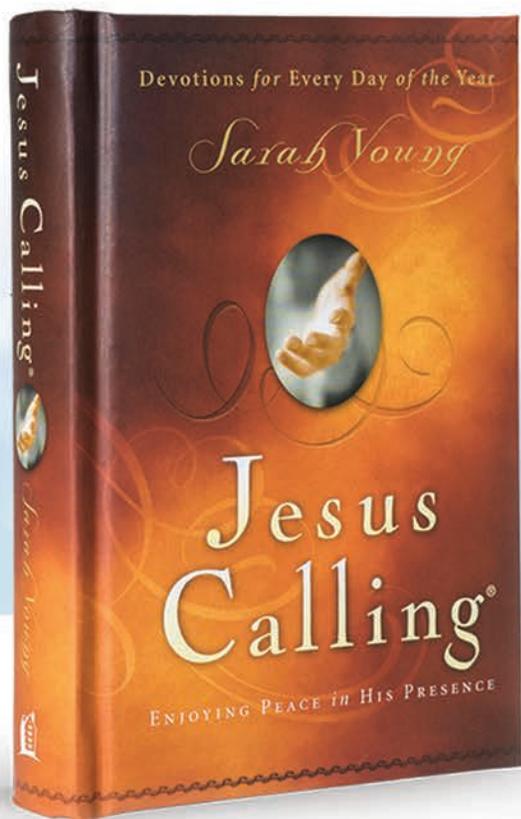
For I know the plans I have for you, “declares the Lord.”  
Plans to prosper you and not to harm you,  
plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jeremiah 29:11

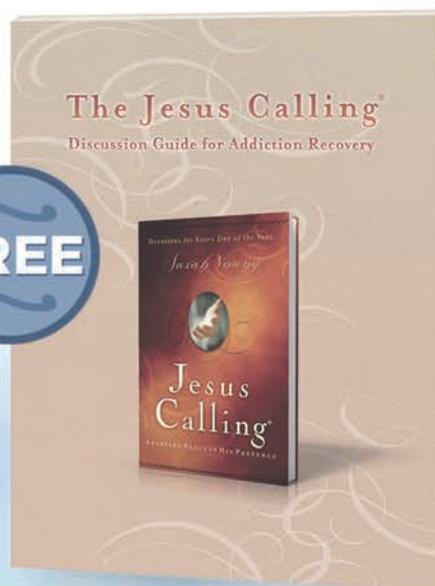
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# “MY ONCE DEVOUT CHILD NO LONGER BELIEVES IN GOD... WHAT DO I DO?”

For 20 years, and in all types of communities throughout the United States, I have heard the stories. Long ago, I was struck by the similarities of these accounts.

The conversation has been raised many times, but it still hits me like a dagger in the heart. It is the story of a Christian parent’s worst nightmare—a child who was lovingly raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and now claims to be atheist/agnostic/neo-pagan (or fill in the blank with a heresy of choice). Numbed and hurting, parents grapple with the gnawing question: “What did we do wrong?”

## Spiritual Landscape of the “20-somethings”

The Pew Research Center notes that millennials are the least *overtly* religious American generation. They have documented, “One in four is unaffiliated with any religion, far more than the share of older adults when they were ages 18 to 29.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the Pew Research Center’s “Millennials in Adulthood” survey, (millennials are) “less likely than older generations to be affiliated with any religion; they are also less likely to say they believe in God.” Of youth raised in homes that were, to some degree, “Christian” (church attendance two to three times per month, professed belief in basic Christian beliefs), roughly three-fourths will jettison that faith after high school (just under half of this number will return to some level of church involvement in their late 20s to early 30s).<sup>2</sup>

Why is this so? Are there any markers or clues to look for when a child is younger that may indicate future problems? Our most recent research (which includes dozens of interviews with teens, 20-somethings, professed ex-Christians, and religion and culture experts) points to factors like these:

- **The mindset of “digital natives” is very much separate from other generations.** Millennials are eclectic on all fronts (economically, spiritually, and artistically). There is little or no “brand loyalty” in most areas of life.
- **The breakdown of the family.** It has been long recognized that people’s experience with their *earthly* father deeply informs their perspective about the *Heavenly* Father. In *How the West Really Lost God*, sociologists Wilcox and Eberstadt correctly asserted, “The fortunes of religion rise or fall with the state of the family.”<sup>3</sup>
- **Militant secularism.** Embraced by media and enforced in schools, secular education approaches learning through the lens of “methodological naturalism.” It is presupposed that all faith claims are merely expressions of subjective preference. The only “true” truths are claims that: (a) are divorced from *any* supernatural context; and (b) impose *no* moral obligations on human behavior. People today are subjected to an *enforced* secularism. Think about it.
- **The lack of spiritual authenticity among adults.** Many youth have had no—or very limited—exposure to adult role models who know what they believe, why they believe it, and who are committed to consistently living out their faith.
- **The Church’s cultural influence diminished.** The little neighborhood church is often assumed to be irrelevant, and there is no cultural guilt anymore for those who abandon involvement.

ALEX MCFARLAND

- **The pervasive cultural abandonment of morality.** The idea of objective moral truth (ethical norms that really are binding on all people) is unknown to most, and is rejected by the rest.
- **Intellectual skepticism.** College students are encouraged to accept platitudes such as, “life is about asking questions, not about dogmatic answers.” So, is that the answer? That there are no answers? Claiming to have answers is viewed as “impolite.” On life’s ultimate questions, it is much more socially acceptable to “suspend judgment.”
- **The rise of a fad called “atheism.”** Full of self-congratulatory swagger and blasphemous bravado, pop-level atheists, such as the late religious and social critic, Christopher Hitchens (whom I interviewed twice), made it cool to be a non-believer. Many millennials (though mostly 20-something, Caucasian males) are enamored by books and blogs run by God-hating “thinkers.”
- **Our new God, tolerance be thy name.** “Tolerance” today essentially means, “Because my truth is, well, *my truth*, no one may ever question any behavior or belief I hold.” This “standard” has become so ingrained that it is now impossible to rationally critique any belief or behavior without a backlash of criticism.
- **The commonly defiant posture of young adulthood.** As we are leaving adolescence and morphing into young adulthood, we all can be susceptible to an inflated sense of our own intelligence and giftedness. The cultural trend toward rejection of God (and other loci of authority) resonates strongly with the desire for autonomy felt in young adulthood.

### Mounting Casualties in a War of Worldviews

It is, in a way, understandable why many would defect from what passes as Christianity today. The norms for Christian adults of yesteryear were pious, selfless, and zealous, seeing their lives as belonging to God and not themselves. Life was *all* about worship of a Holy God who, in love, rescued us from a lost eternity. For the Christians of past epochs, each day was an opportunity to lay down one’s life for a noble cause.

It is little wonder that kids raised in the churches of 21st century America are not often stirred to lifelong commitment. Some churches would not dream of risking their “brand” by speaking tough-as-nails-truth. For alums of many evangelical youth groups, commitment to Jesus lasts about as long as the time it takes to wash the stains out of t-shirts worn at the senior year paintball retreat.

It is true that our culture has grown visibly antithetical

to God and Christian commitment. However, in addressing the spiritual attrition rate of young America, it must be admitted that prayerless, powerless church peddling versions of “Christianity lite” share in the blame.

### How Might Parents and Christian Leaders Face these Challenges?

In spite of the statistics and personal stories recounting numbers of young sheep who have strayed away, the spiritual landscape of 2017 is rife with opportunity. Millennials are very open to spiritual discussions when communication is respectful, honest, and devoid of jargon and stereotypes. They can be led to Christ (or led *back* to Christ), and one does not have to earn degrees in postmodernism or theology to do it. There are 20-somethings all around us who are spiritual seekers and hungry for a true faith based on a relationship rather than a religion.

To the parent of a prodigal, let me emphasize, *stay encouraged*. As much as you love your wayward child, the Lord loves him or her even more.

To the parent of a prodigal, let me emphasize, *stay encouraged*. As much as you love your wayward child, the Lord loves him or her even more. The seeds you have sown and intercessions you are now praying are definitely known to God. The stories I have collected of prodigals returning to God (and to the local church) after years of spiritually “wandering” are countless.

Know that the keys to ministry today center on relationship building by investing time and personal commitment. I know firsthand that credibility, prayer, and patience will enable you to be heard above the incessant white noise of culture. These are keys to ministry that may be cultivated by all, and which make a difference in any context or generation. ✨



ALEX MCFARLAND, D.DIV., is Director of the Center for Apologetics and Christian Worldview at North Greenville University, located in South Carolina. He is the author of the new book, *Abandoned Faith: Why Millennials are Walking Away and How You Can Lead them Home* (Tyndale/Focus on the Family, 2017). Visit him at [alexmcfarland.com](http://alexmcfarland.com).

### Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/millennials>.
- 2 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood>.
- 3 Eberstadt, M. (2014). *How the west really lost God: A new theory of secularization*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.



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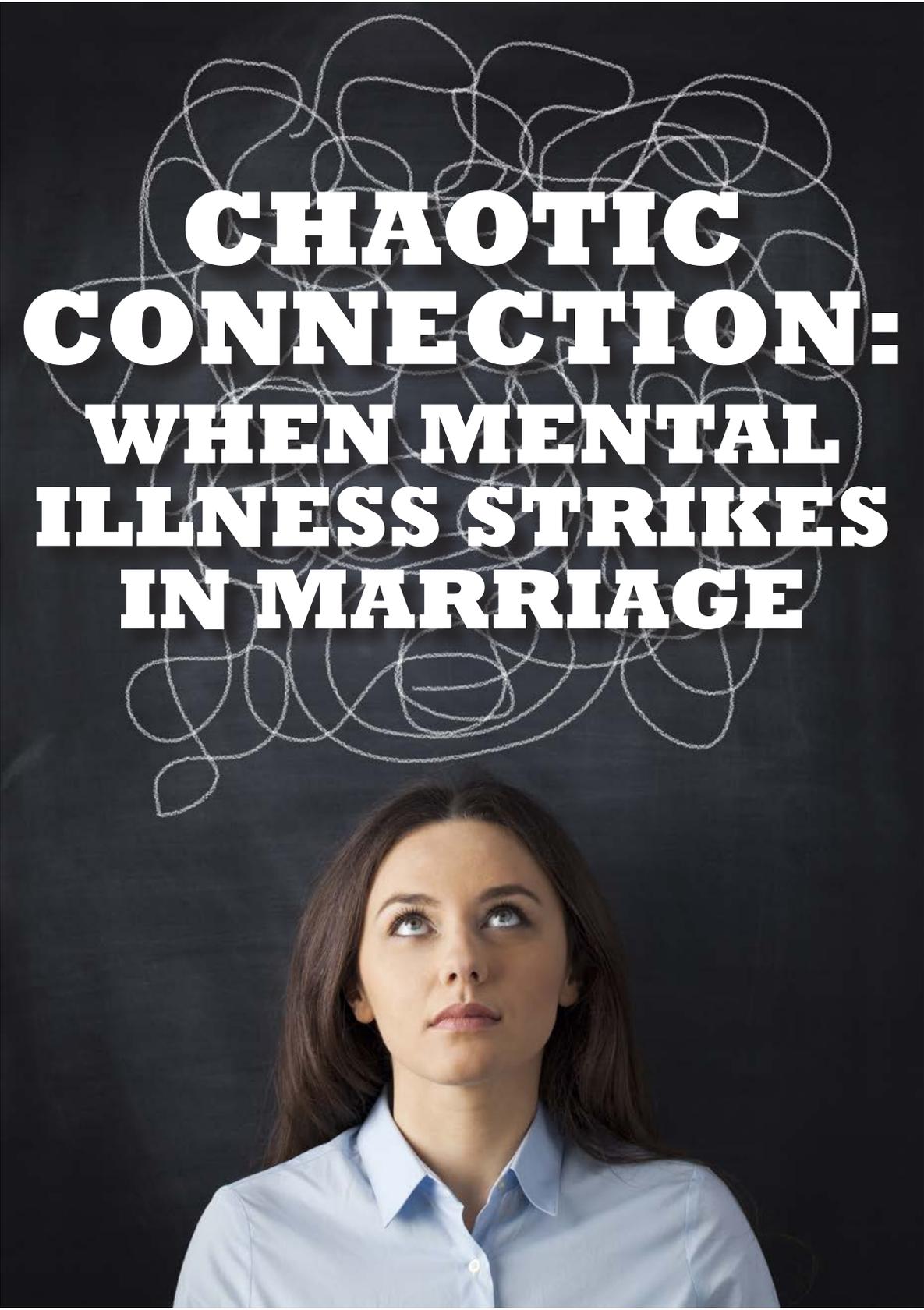
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**CHAOTIC  
CONNECTION:  
WHEN MENTAL  
ILLNESS STRIKES  
IN MARRIAGE**

Let's take a look at two different scenarios: 1) You're at dinner with your spouse who gets a strange look on her face and indicates something is wrong. Concerned, you ask questions... but her situation becomes worse with labored breathing and pain. You know what to do; call 9-1-1. You keep your spouse reassured until medical professionals arrive. The only decision is whether to ride in the ambulance or drive separately; 2) You're at home with your spouse who starts to frown and mentions things are not right. Concerned, you ask questions... but the answers do not make sense. His condition intensifies and he suddenly bolts out the front door. What do you do? Call 9-1-1? What should you say when you are not even sure what's wrong? Do you go after him... do you wait until he returns? If so, how long? You're not sure what to do.

For many of us, when we vowed “for better or worse” and “in sickness and in health,” we were not thinking about mental illness. We thought of disease, not disorder. Yet, mental illness can have a devastating effect on marriage. A 2011 multinational study of marriage and divorce found that mental disorders increased the rate of divorce from 20-80%.<sup>1</sup> “In separate survival models, all 18 mental disorders are significantly associated with divorce after adjustment for sex, age, country, years since marriage, months dating prior to marriage, and educational attainment” (p. 481).

The mental disorders in this study represented a spectrum of anxiety disorders (such as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder), mood disorders (such as major depression, dysthymia, and bipolar disorder), impulse disorders (such as oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and intermittent explosive disorder), and alcohol/drug abuse and dependence. “Notably, about half of the societal impact of mental disorders on divorce is attributed to two disorders: major depression and alcohol abuse” (p. 484).

### Reading the Signs

Mental illness encompasses a vast array of behaviors depending upon the individual and/or co-occurring disorders... so what is a spouse to look for? Spouses may not be trained in mental illness, but they have learned what appears to be “normal” for their loved ones. I have found there are three keys to help a spouse identify the signs of mental illness and know when to get help:

1. **Severity.** How severe are the behaviors? Do they significantly and negatively impact relationships, work, and preferred activities? Are the behaviors getting better or worse? The more progressive, severe, and disruptive the behaviors, the more indicative they are of a mental illness.
2. **Frequency.** How often do these behaviors occur? Are they repeated after remorse and regret? Are they repeated after protestations they won't happen again? When negative consequences are insufficient to produce a change in behavior, the higher the potential for a mental illness.

3. **Duration.** How long have the behaviors been occurring? A week, a month, a year, multiple years? The more entrenched the behaviors, the greater the probability of a mental illness.

### Hierarchy of Care

When one spouse suffers from a mental illness, the other spouse often becomes a caregiver, with significant emotional, relational, physical and spiritual demands. A 2009 study by the National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP, titled, “Caregiving in the U.S. 2009,” found negative caregiver consequences involving physical health, emotional health, financial resources, and employment, with an added impact to those caring for someone with mental illness issues.<sup>2</sup> “Caregivers whose recipients have emotional or mental health problems are more likely than others to report a decline in their own health as a result of caregiving” (p. 48).

When the caregiving demands are due to mental illness, a spouse may be reluctant to ask others for help. In my practice, as we talk with families of those seeking treatment, we find a percentage of these caregivers overwhelmed and at their own breaking points. When their personal reserves are so depleted, their ability to contribute to the recovery of their loved ones becomes critically compromised. Some admit relief, not only in treatment for their loved one, but also in respite for themselves, resulting in guilt and shame.

GREGORY L. JANTZ

In cases where a caregiving spouse denies the very real need for self-care, I have used an oxygen mask analogy. Self-care is the oxygen mask they put on first, so they can better help their loved one second. The caregiver must be alert to when he or she is “running out of air” and know where to find the oxygen mask—be it with family, friends, a faith community, or community resources.

### When the “Worse” Happens

There may come a time when the caregiving spouse must reach out for support due to safety concerns, either for self or the loved one. States have different guidelines for responding to psychiatric emergencies, so the caregiving spouse needs to be familiar with what to do in the “worse-case.”

In the state of Washington, a person who is a danger to self or others can be

brought to a medical facility, such as a hospital emergency room, for evaluation by a designated mental health professional. If the person refuses to go to such a facility voluntarily, a police officer can take the person into emergency custody for evaluation.<sup>3</sup> Should that person be considered to be in immediate danger, the hold time is 72 hours, which may or may not mirror other states.

Solomon in Ecclesiastes says that “two are better than one,”<sup>4</sup> and this is certainly true in marriage. If one spouse falls due to mental illness, the other is there to support, but not without cost—and, hopefully, not without reward. ✕



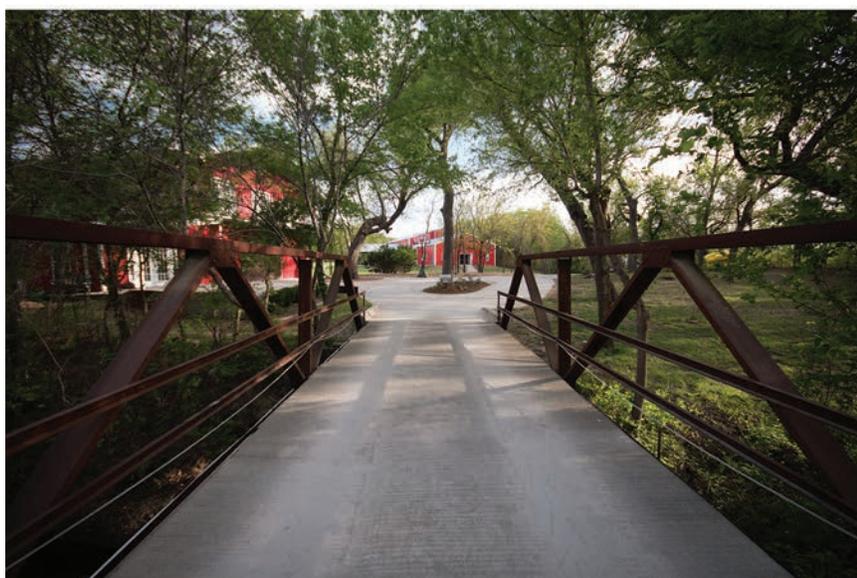
GREGORY L. JANTZ, PH.D., is the founder of *The Center for Counseling and Health Resources, Inc.*, a leading healthcare facility in Edmonds, Washington ([aplaceofhope.com](http://aplaceofhope.com)). He is a licensed mental health counselor, a chemical dependency professional, and a certified eating disorder specialist through IAEDP, as well as a popular speaker and author of multiple books. Visit him at [drgregoryjantz.com](http://drgregoryjantz.com).

### Endnotes

- 1 Breslau, J., Miller, E., Jin, R., Sampson, N.A., et al. (2011). A multinational study of mental disorders, marriage, and divorce. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 124:474-486. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0447.2011.01712.
- 2 [http://www.caregiving.org/data/Caregiving\\_in\\_the\\_US\\_2009\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.caregiving.org/data/Caregiving_in_the_US_2009_full_report.pdf).
- 3 <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=71.05.153>.
- 4 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NIV.



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# BETRAYAL in MARRIAGE

## A FIVE-STEP RECOVERY MODEL

Betrayal is one of the most painful of human emotions; and when it occurs after marital vows have been said, it is doubly so. It undermines the very personhood of the one betrayed. Can an individual recover and, if so, how is this best accomplished?



Historically, a spouse either got a divorce or “swept it under the rug” in order to stay married. Even today, sexual betrayal is still the most common factor listed in divorce filings in America. Counseling efforts for this healing process are just 30-years-old, and while evidence-based treatment is scanty, most practitioners in the field identify five treatment components that must be addressed:

1. The *history* leading up to, and presently at, the betrayal. This would include the individual’s personal history, family of origin deficits and influences, the marital satisfaction levels in both spouses across the history of the marriage, and the interactive patterns the couple has developed. Though initially this appears to be an overwhelming task, the information is really not that difficult to collect if the therapist is experienced and prepared to assist the couple in uncovering some of these contributing factors.

2. The *communication and conflict management skills* must be refined to accommodate the intense interactions couples will face as they work through this destructive experience. The focus of retraining will be on the long-term practices of the couple, not the recent interactions that just took place last week.

3. At the core is the *forgiveness process*. This activity is two tiered: *First*, the injuries within a couple’s marriage, many of which occur in all marriages, have gone unaddressed. These injuries usually take three forms:

- Behaviors, words, and practices that should *not* have occurred in the marriage
- Behaviors, words, and practices that *should* have occurred in the marriage, but did not
- Accidental experiences that were unintentional but, nevertheless, injurious to the marriage because they consumed so much energy and effort that nothing was left to enrich the relationship (e.g., grandma with Alzheimer’s moves in, a teenager severely acts out, job loss, a chronically-ill child, etc.)

The *second* tier is focused on the actual betrayal content: things said, money spent, lies spoken, injuries to the children, threats to the family,

DAVE CARDER



Rare is the couple who has ever talked about this matter, but its impact on daily interactions lasts for a lifetime.

humiliation to the spouse, gifts, pregnancy, legal issues, STDs—in other words, full disclosure. This content often runs to 30 or more individual items and can never adequately be addressed by either spouse if it is not teased out, separated, and confessed independently of the whole.

Prior to engaging in any of the forgiveness process, spouses must identify what each is looking for in this activity and what each is going to provide the other. Forgiveness practices come from three sources: one's personal experiences, the models practiced in the family of origin, and one's religious training. Rare is the couple who has ever talked about this matter, but its impact on daily interactions lasts for a lifetime.

4. *Reattachment* involves *rebuilding* both the reliability in the spoken word of the betrayer and the intuition of the betrayed spouse, the *restoration* of respect and trust, and the *review* of the positive, shared history the couple had prior to the betrayal.

I have found that most couples seeking help in restoring their marriages will have had a number of good years together prior to this betrayal. They often slide into trouble because they stopped doing what they did best—focusing on each other's needs and having fun together. Remember, most spouses liked each other and were mutually attracted when they decided to marry!

One of the very best series of reattachment exercises for an injured couple is a repetition of the process that occurred when they first bonded, namely non-sexual touching, hand holding, arm around the shoulder or waist, looking each other in the eyes, talking about personal stories, sitting next to one another, and head resting on the other's shoulder or in his or her lap. These behaviors have

often disappeared from the couple's interactions. I assign couples in recovery a 30-day series of Sensate Focus (non-sexual) exercises that involve a non-threatening, light, slow stroking of the spouse's forearm, head, and calf. No erotic touch is allowed during these times. This kind of touch soothes anger, calms anxiety, and tranquilizes both spouses, while keeping them in close proximity to each other. It changes breathing patterns, brain waves, and lowers blood pressure and heart rate.

5. *Resolution* is the final stage of recovery. Some couples come to the conclusion that the betrayal was so severe they cannot stay together due to ongoing, complicated consequences dealing with addictions and/or abuse, length of time, involvement with multiple partners, etc. However, after going through this recovery process, there might be some restoration of trust and respect, which would allow couples to co-parent their children and grandchildren. They will be able to practice the old adage, "Don't make your children pay for your pain!"

Other couples who choose to stay together will need to develop similar perceptions of their shared story. This affair is now a part of their marital history and each spouse needs to look back on it in a *similar* vein. This similarity will include the various contributions from each spouse's *family of origin*, an understanding of how their interactions across the *history of the marriage* contributed to each spouse's vulnerability, the *circumstances* that triggered the affair, and the *insight and changes* each has made going forward.

There will still be difficult conversations ahead, as well as times of sadness coupled with the feeling, "Will we ever get through this?" But they will! And though the two might hate what brought them in for this intensive work, they will love what they walk out with when the process is complete. Second chances, forgiveness, and grace are what the Gospel is all about! ✕



DAVE CARDER, M.A., currently serves as Pastor of Counseling Ministries at the First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, California, where he oversees a large peer counseling program and sexual healing recovery groups for both males and females. He has conducted worldwide trainings in adultery recovery and prevention for more than 30 years.



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# LIVING TOGETHER WORLDS



One of the best “faith-based” movies in years is the new PureFlix release, “The Case for Christ.” It is the story of Lee Strobel, an award-winning, investigative journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*. He was also an unashamed, unapologetic atheist. Yet, it was his legal and journalistic “I’m going to get a front page story!” tenacity that led him on a search to disprove the resurrection of Jesus.

The movie is based on his best-selling book of the same title. However, as powerful as his story is of coming to faith, it is also a jarring picture of how this same issue of “faith” came close to destroying his marriage! That’s because Leslie, his wife, was also a comfortable atheist, but after a dramatic (and unnamed... you’ll have to watch the movie) event, her life changed. It’s like watching a stone break loose, start rolling, and launch an avalanche... in this case, one where Leslie’s life is swept into a saving, life-changing faith in Christ.

## (and kingdoms) **APART**

JOHN TRENT AND  
DEBORAH GORTON

These are deep waters for any person or couple to navigate. ALWAYS keep in mind that “fear of loss” is far more powerful than “desire for gain.”

You now see two people under the same roof, yet worlds (and kingdoms) apart. While angels in heaven are rejoicing and Leslie is filled with a newfound joy and life, Lee works even harder to disprove and destroy this “Jesus” character who, to him, is ruining their family!

The storyline portrays a powerful picture of being “unequally yoked.” They BOTH realize that EVERYTHING most important to them has changed! The actors provide a brilliant, and terribly realistic, portrayal of how Leslie’s joy in coming to Christ brings out Lee’s simmering, smoldering, and then erupting anger and fear at what is happening. He is losing his wife! Her baptism ceremony is a celebration as the audience watches Leslie being forever linked to another man... named Jesus!

Watch this movie for its powerful “C.S. Lewis-like” change of heart from a skeptic to a believer, but also for what gets played out in many homes. Counselors know the family is a system. When one person changes—especially so dramatically—it doesn’t matter that he or she is gaining a love for the Savior and eternal life. The other person often experiences it as a significant loss. Their “norms” have changed! One has gained a “future and a hope,” while the other can view that same gift as unwanted and robbing their expected future!

Here, then, are two things that we, as counselors ourselves, often see in couples who are “unequally yoked,” and two things a believing spouse can do to be resilient and understanding—in the midst of what can be a challenging, confusing, yet hopeful, situation.

### Two Things You Can Expect to See When Couples Live Kingdoms Apart

**1. Expectations are changed everywhere.** Dewey Wilson, President of StrongMarriages.com in Dallas, Texas, is finishing his doctoral work in “cognitive learning,” which means he dives deeply into how each of us thinks and acts. He recently shared how the average person experiences more than 12,000 “thoughts” per day (and deep thinkers like Lee Strobel have even more)! Yet, with MOST of these thoughts comes an “expectation.” We put the key in the lock... the door should open. We press the garage door opener... we should see it going up. Consider how many “expectations” a couple like Lee and Leslie Strobel would have set up BEFORE Leslie came to Christ. Sunday used to mean sleeping in... now it means getting the family up and going to church. Rising earlier also means getting coffee and reading the paper... and now it includes starting the day with a “quiet time” in God’s Word. Unmet expectations can bring emotions and life’s fears to the surface.

In short, the most wonderful change in all of life, made possible by the greatest sacrifice and act of love ever made at the cross, can bring two very different reactions. This reality is captured in 2 Corinthians 2:16, “. . . to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?” “Who is adequate” indeed! These are deep waters for any person or couple to navigate. ALWAYS keep in mind that “fear of loss” is far more powerful than “desire for gain.” Sure, one spouse may be more focused on loving Jesus and others, even more peaceful and centered (all awesome “gains”), but there is also the loss of what he or she used to do and be! This is because fearful people (pictured so powerfully in the Strobel movie) often act afraid!

**2. Purposeful indifference can erupt into active ridicule.** Fear triggers our “fight/flight” emotions. For Lee, that fear turned into withdrawal (flight) and ridicule (fight) of his wife’s faith. The same scenario also plays out in many homes. For the Strobels, a turning point came for them (that drove Leslie deeper to prayer and God’s Word) when the commitment to her faith was challenged by Lee’s ultimatum, “Choose ‘me’ or this God who has taken over your life.” Expect to see both (fight/flight) in couples living marriages that are “kingdoms apart.”

That may seem like a hopeless situation, but that’s not “the rest of the story.” Here are two things a believing husband or wife can do to stay strong in faith, yet also understanding of his or her spouse.

### Two Things as You Pray for Different Kingdoms to Unite

**1. Expecting the lamp across the room to come give you a hug.** Linked with unmet “expectations,” which can generate so much frustration and anger, here is something a counselor shared with me (John) years ago when I was struggling with my father’s lack of love and faith. “John, do you see that lamp across the room?” he asked. It was a tall, standing lamp. “Okay, I’m going to go fill up my coffee cup. While I’m gone, I want you to sit here and “expect” that lamp to come over and give you a hug... to speak words of blessing to you... to share your faith. I’ll be right back.” He came back with a full cup. I felt empty... shattered. Staring and seeing that a lamp simply did not have the capacity to do what I was hoping and wishing it would do. I have never forgotten that day. I changed how I looked at, and acted toward, my father. I was “expecting” a capacity he did not have to generate ACTIONS that matched or met my expectations. At that time, he didn’t have a “heart of flesh” that only God could give him. So, too, in a marriage.

**2. Radical acceptance over the life-cycle.** Dr. Gorton, who leads the Clinical Mental Health graduate program at Moody Theological Seminary, often shares with her students (and counselees) an incredibly powerful picture called “radical acceptance.” The Chicago River runs throughout the city... imagine getting pushed



into that river. Sputtering, you come up in the middle of the river... and in the middle of a “life or death” choice. You can get angry and become fearful of what’s in the river (it’s Chicago after all) or pretend you’re not in the river at all. There are so many choices you can make, many of which lead to one thing—drowning.

“Radical acceptance” is really, truly, deeply, prayerfully, tangibly making the choice to accept reality. You are in the middle of the river. You need to get your arms and legs moving and head to shore. For a believer, the shore can be choosing to stay committed (1 Corinthians 7:13-14), choosing to move to “solid ground” (Psalm 15), or standing with your Lord, your church, and your loving friends. “Radically” accepting, “What is... is.” It’s messy. Imperfect. Not what you might have wanted or planned. However, focusing on “what can you do” to live and love well in the present reality of your marriage kingdoms apart... and letting the King of Kings change you first and then, Lord willing, in His timing, the other person (1 Peter 3:1-6).

Normally, we would say that life is not like watching a movie. However, in this case, “The Case for Christ,” it is a good picture to follow. ✦



JOHN TRENT, PH.D., is the Gary Chapman Chair of Marriage and Family Ministry and Therapy at Moody Theological Seminary, and President of StrongFamilies.com and the Center for StrongFamilies, as well as a coach and team builder for many different corporate organizations. In addition, he is an award-winning author of more than 25 marriage and family books.



DEBORAH GORTON, PH.D., is the Program Director for the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program at Moody Theological Seminary. She is a licensed and practicing clinical psychologist and the founding president of SIV Consultation, an organization that helps individuals, small businesses, and emerging leaders establish their place in the world. Drs. Trent and Gorton will be presenting a workshop on “Radical Acceptance Over the Life-cycle” at the AACC “Break Every Chain” World Conference in Nashville, Tennessee in September.



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and do not submit to a yoke of slavery." Galatians 5:1 ESV*

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## Mr. & Mrs. Right Now

A few years ago, Mark Gungor, Senior Pastor at Celebration Church in Wisconsin and author of *Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage*, produced a most humorous recorded seminar. In this series, he introduced a Scripture not commonly used when discussing marriage. Proverbs 14:4 (NLT), “Without oxen a stable stays clean, but you need a strong ox for a large harvest.”

How does this passage relate to marriage? Marriage is the most wonderful institution where loving human interaction created by God can be experienced. Marriage produces great strength. It is intended to bring true fellowship and is an answer to God’s first statement concerning humanity: “It is not good for man to be alone.” Marriage has the capacity to bring spiritual, emotional, and physical fulfillment. Together, a husband and wife can find great strength... the kind of strength to journey throughout life’s adventures and storms. However, marriage is also guaranteed to bring two loving people an occasional dirty stable.

Crisis is not a possibility in marriage; it is a given. If you want to avoid the storms of the sea, then you are better off never setting sail. This is a viable option; however, if you choose to remain in the safety of the harbor, you will never know the joy and adventure of sailing. When a couple enters the holy bonds of marriage and then later end that marriage because of crisis, they forfeit the very thing that brings God’s children the greatest strength. It is, indeed, the crisis that produces a greater capacity of strength and joy, not to mention a deeper love. Knowing crisis is going to come is warning enough to build your

relationship on a strong foundation. Matthew 7:24 says, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

I remember being on a very beautiful island. The ocean breeze, mountainside, and gorgeous vegetation were overwhelming. Every few miles, this glorious landscape was interrupted by white signs that bore a unique message. They read: “If you wait until a tsunami arrives to prepare, it is too late.” Like those islands, the marriage relationship is beautiful, but there are signs that remind us we need to prepare now. Couples cannot afford to be Mr. and Mrs. Yesterday or Mr. and Mrs. Tomorrow; they need to be Mr. and Mrs. Right Now. Today is the day to build the framework and infrastructure to weather life’s storms and the myriad of issues that may collide with your marriage. Crises will come, but we cannot wait for them to arrive and then find the strength to endure.

It is good and proper to pursue our purpose and seek to know our destiny; however, we cannot escape the truth that our purpose and destiny needs to shape our current reality. In other words, what we do today is reflective of the destiny we are to fulfill.

*“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like*

*a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”*

– Matthew 7:24-27

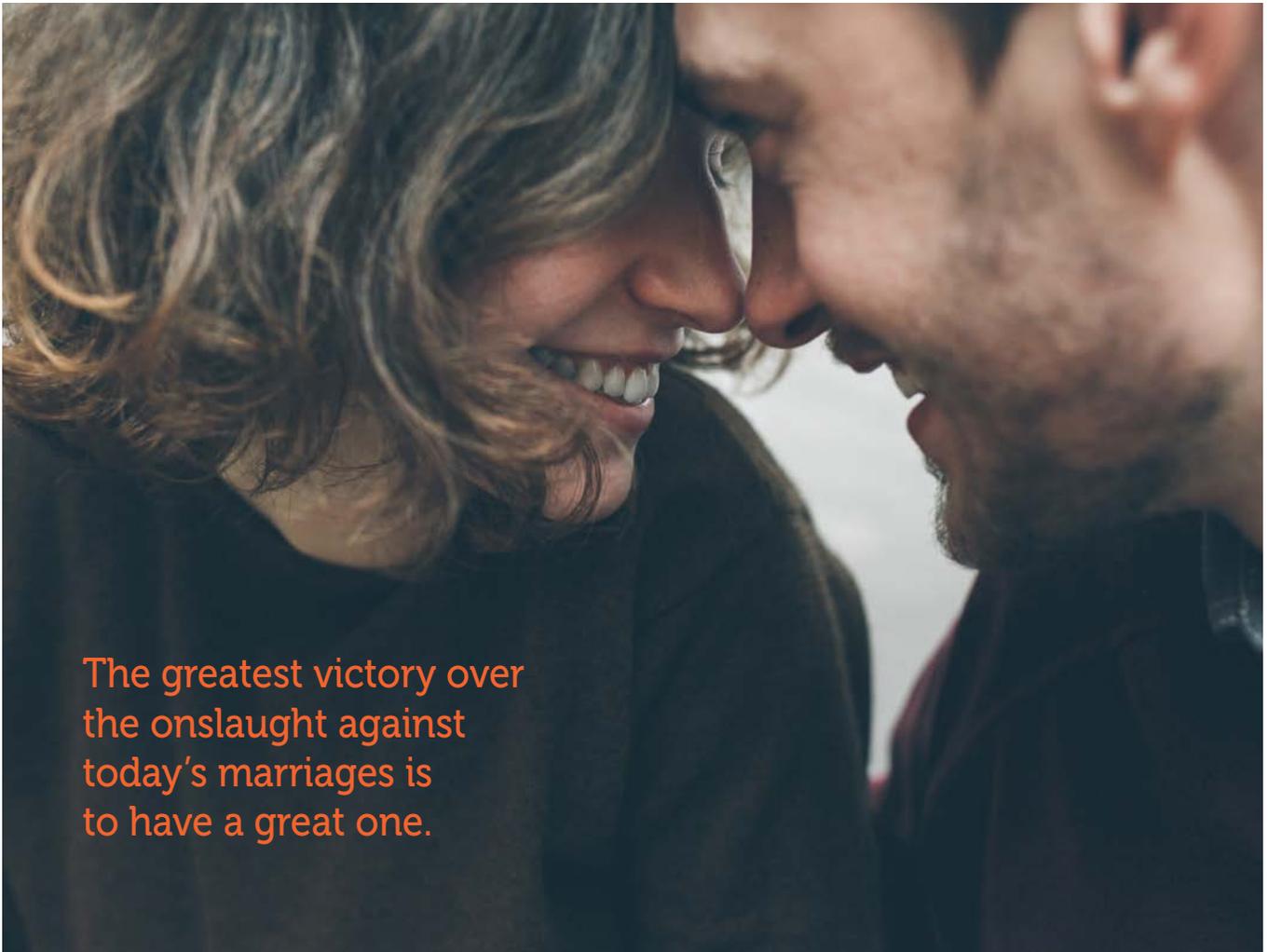
Like a tsunami, you cannot predict when a crisis will come, but preparation is something everyone can do. Preparation is a sure way of living in the now. Here are some things you can do today to prepare.

First, you can hear now. God’s Word says, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!” (Matthew 11:15). Listening to God’s voice on a daily basis ensures that you will be able to discern what He says in a crisis. As you journey through life together in marriage, it is vital that you and your spouse fix your ears on the voice of the Master. This can only occur if you make a habit of listening to God now.

Second, you have God’s Word now. Too many people read God’s Word as a pharmacy. They wait until a problem has developed, then turn to the Word of God for a prescription. Instead, it is better to begin a positive habit of reading the Word now to draw close to God daily, so as to be able to navigate life during a storm.

Third, you can begin new practices now. Most athletes understand the importance of muscle memory in reacting to any given game day circumstance. Practices that are mastered when the waters are calm ensure the proper reaction when the waves arrive... and they will come.

Finally, you can build now. Today is the day for the wise. It is this moment to position your marriage on the rock and build something that honors God, yourself, and your spouse.



The greatest victory over the onslaught against today's marriages is to have a great one.

This is not a structure that is planned, built, and completed. Marriage is a structure that you must keep building every day. As you continue to build, remodel, and adjust, you will be able to handle the crisis on the horizon.

*“For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.”*

– Psalm 27:5

Here are some relationship reflections that may help you and your spouse be a better Mr. and Mrs. Right Now.

- Our relationship with each other can never rise above our relationship with our Creator.
- The most important time to

work on our relationship is now.

- We must invest in our relationship today, or we will not have one that will be here tomorrow.
- If I have, or will have, a loving, caring relationship in the future, I can begin to work on the most complicated part of that relationship today... ME!

The greatest victory over the onslaught against today's marriages is to have a great one. We cannot wait for this type of marriage to magically appear; we need to invest in making it wonderful right now. We will never be able to avoid every crisis, but a marriage that consistently builds on the rock will see the other side of all life's challenges. ✝



**REV. SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ, M.ED.,** is serving as a special guest columnist in this issue of CCT. He is President of the National Hispanic Christian

Leadership Conference (NHCLC)/CONEL, the world's largest Hispanic Christian organization serving as a representative voice for the more than 100 million Hispanic Evangelicals assembled in over 40,000 U.S. churches and 450,000 churches spread throughout the Spanish-speaking diaspora. He is also the author of *Be Light: Shining God's Beauty, Truth, and Hope in a Darkened World*, which made it to #1 on the *Los Angeles Times* best-seller's list, *The Lamb's Agenda*, and *Path of Miracles*.

## Three-legged Race



You *each* need to  
put out an arm  
toward the other.  
It needs to stay  
there holding on  
for the *entire* race.

**D**id you ever participate in a three-legged race? They usually occur in elementary school or at a kid's party. The left leg of one partner is tied to the right leg of the other and they put their arms around each other's waists. The object is for the partners to run without falling over. It seems easy, but it takes practice to make two legs from different bodies work as one... sounds a little bit like marriage to me.

I find it interesting that when we write about or discuss marriage, we most often do so by talking about the two separate parts (husband and wife) and focus on what each ought to be doing. Husbands should be this way; wives should be that way. And there is often a veiled threat lurking

in the background that if you are not the kind of spouse being described, your marriage may be somehow compromised. We do not seem to speak often about the "us."

Think about the three-legged race. If you do not support one another with your arms, you will not be able to work together as one because your bodies will be pulling in different directions and hinder your race. You *each* need to put out an arm toward the other. It needs to stay there holding on for the *entire* race. One alone will not work nearly so well.

You also need to be facing the same direction. Can you imagine trying such a race with one facing backwards and the other forward? You would not have a shared goal in sight. One would be going one way and the other a different

way... or both would be going the same way but the one facing backwards would not be operating effectively.

Your legs are tied together. Each contributes a different leg—one is left, the other right. So differences are joined together for a single purpose. The legs are different, the feet are most likely different sizes, and agility, strength, and speed may not be equal. There are a lot of potential differences being tied together! The coordination required by both means studying each other and mutually making adaptations so the two become one for the purpose of running well and reaching the goal without falling down. It will demand practice and involve frustration, energy, focus, and lots of laughter. The "we" is the central point.

I suspect attitude matters, too. How would you like to compete in a three-legged race with a partner who does nothing but tell you what you are doing wrong? You know those statements that go, “If you... then we.” Or how about running the race with someone who keeps dropping his or her arm so the unity was utterly dependent on you alone? One partner cannot do all the holding. Or what about a partner whose eyes keep straying from the goal, wandering off, not seeing you, and tending toward another instead of the one to whom he or she is joined?

Clearly the focus has to be on the fact that there are two individuals with different capacities and skills and each of them must work with the other so those capacities strengthen the union itself. Anything solely self-centered will hinder the race. One cannot do anything that will not affect the other.

The goal is to finish the race as one without falling down.

You see, if we think about it, we might suggest that we are in a three-legged race with Jesus. We are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones (Ephesians 5:30). We are tied together and called to run with Him—united, joined, and running for the one goal that matters. We are to run with endurance the race set before us, with Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:1). Christ began the race; He finished the race; and now with Him, we press toward the goal. We are united to Him as one—running together, joined, and flesh of His flesh. His arm is around us and He longs for ours to be around Him. He has not told *me* to run the race; He says *we* will run the race. Run with Me, He says. I will never leave you or forsake you. When you fall, I will lift you up. Face

the same direction I do. Pursue the same goal with Me and when we cross the finish line, you will enter into glory with a crown on your head.

Oh that our marriages would be enough like the three-legged race that they might, in some measure, reflect to the world the race we are running with our Lord. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). ✠



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## Couples in Crisis: Is it Time for a Will Alignment?

I was with a film crew in a dying vineyard. Most of the members were in their 20s or 30s and, on any religious scale, would be more likely to register as a “none” (atheistic, disenchanted, anti-organized religion, or undecided) rather than a “nun.” We were trying to simulate a vineyard in the Holy Land, which would be where the rest of the filming would be done. However, it was too early in spring in Israel for there to be grapes and, unfortunately, it was late fall in California. It all had to be done quickly, while spraying brown leaves green and taping fake grapes to branches.

The theme of this segment of the project was living in union with God—like grapes on branches and branches on a vine. The speaker made an important point about union and the human will and then referred to his own marriage. “I remember the day, right before I was asked to say, ‘I do.’ The minister had just announced that, ‘the two of you will become one.’ I was very excited about that, but then I felt a reservation as I thought to myself, ‘The two shall be one; yes, but which one? I want it to be me. I want to be the one!’”

Such honest words!

Jesus came to earth with a number one teaching point, convincing those listening that the kingdom of God is here and it is a most blessed thing. Then He showed the way to step inside; it was a journey away from ego, back to the paradise of union with the will of God.

Yet, what is a kingdom? According to the individual I quote too much, a person’s kingdom is the realm of his or her effective will.<sup>1</sup> It is the place where what the individual wants done gets done. Your kingdom can be conflict free. It can be your car—if you are driving by yourself and no one drives his or her kingdom into your lane. It can

be your office—if you are the boss. It can be your kitchen—so long as no one insists on five-minute baklava.

We have a kingdom, the range of our will, but it is constantly bumping into the kingdoms of others. And marriage seems to be the God-ordained training program for making sure we know how to get periodic will-alignments.

Imagine a plate and two saucers. The plate represents God’s kingdom, where what God wants done is done. Now imagine the Fall, back in Eden. Poof, a saucer appears. It looks a lot like the plate, but has its own boundaries and exists separately from the plate. Poof. Another saucer. Now there are three spheres, each with the possibility of having a separate and autonomous will, separated kingdoms, each on the same table. And that place setting represents most Christian marriages. There is God’s will. There is the wife’s will. And there is the husband’s will. What happens when the wills of the saucers are not aligned with each other or with the will of God? There could be a lot of broken pieces to pick up.

If you flip through the pages of Scripture you will find a dominant theme that plays out over and over again, from Genesis to Revelation. The theme is “willingness” vs. “willfulness.” These are kingdom words. They are *the* kingdom words.

Even prior to the first stain of ink on papyrus to form the words, “In the beginning,” Satan had already fallen from grace because he chose willfulness—he attempted to seize power, to be as God—instead of living in continuous surrender to the will of his Creator. Father Adam and Mother Eve had to make a similar choice between eating from the Tree of Life and eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of

Good and Evil. The two trees represent the most fundamental choice a spiritual being can make: willfulness vs. willingness.

One of the greatest insults one person can give to another is to say, “I don’t trust you.” Imagine those words in the mouth of your spouse, child, or parent. This is exactly what Adam and Eve said to God. “I don’t trust You to know what is best for me; I must become independent and take matters into my own hands.” The “original sin” was a fear-driven incapacity to trust, and resulted in the loss of the willingness to live in a submissive relationship to the alluring mystery and community that is God.

Conversely, the Tree of Life, I believe, symbolizes the willingness to live life connected to God. Being *willful* sets us apart from God, the fundamental essence of life, by attempting to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate our existence. Willfulness says, “I want to be God.” It leads away from relationship and to the hell of isolation from the community of being, meaning, and love... from community with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Over and over again throughout Scripture, we see people standing at the crossroad of willfulness vs. willingness, and we see the results when either path is taken. Willfulness: The sin of Cain, the Tower of Babel, the lie of Abraham about Sarah, Moses killing the Egyptian, 40 years in the wilderness, David’s visit with Bathsheba, Peter striking a Roman soldier with his sword, Paul killing Christians, and the list could go on.

But, *willingness* means learning to embrace a state of continuous surrender to the will of God. The gateway to deeper levels of communion with God, willingness is foundational to the Christian journey. In willingness, we

## The road of willingness results in our stepping back inside the kingdom, the realm of surrender and obedience.



surrender our separateness from God and resolve to continue on the road that ultimately leads home. Willingness means saying yes to God over the loud protests of body and ego.

The road of willingness results in our stepping back inside the kingdom, the realm of surrender and obedience. Abraham became the father of a great nation in the exact moment he stood over his own son, knife drawn, and became willing to say to God, “Your will and not mine be done.”

Moses eventually threw down his rod (the symbol of his ability to protect himself) in the very presence of an enemy, Pharaoh, and came to realize that his self-sufficiency really was a snake all along.

A young Jewish girl, after being told by an angel that she would conceive a baby as a virgin, says, “I am the Lord’s servant... may it happen to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Willingness made Mary God’s first communion chalice.

Jesus often taught using sheep as a model of willingness and goats as an example of willfulness. He contrasted

the sheep’s gentle, compliant character with that of the willful, bottom-butting behavior of goats.

However, here is where it gets interesting and relevant to couples in a crisis of the wills. Even Jesus had to take the time to keep His will aligned with the heart of His father. Even Jesus needed to spend time in solitary places for will alignment—the desert wilderness; after His first public healing service; and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even Jesus needed to reconnect with His Father and His Father’s desire for Him to live a life of willingness and surrender.

Dallas Willard observed: “Life... is the ability to contact and selectively take in from the surroundings whatever supports its own survival, extension and enhancement.” When it comes to human beings, that need and capacity for interaction with what lies beyond us is not just physical. We have a need for food, and for water, and for sleep, yes. But we also have a need for meaning; a need to love and a need to be loved. And we have a need for a flourishing life lived in union with God. Without this connection to Divine Life, our

spirits shrivel up and die like a vine with no water. Without willingness and union, we think that our kingdom is to be imposed on others instead of being brought back into the realm where what God wants done is done.

Go ahead, step away from the conflict of wills. Make the first move. Pick up your “saucer” and put it on the larger plate. Perhaps someone will see this and follow suit. And two shall live as one, but only in the ONE. ✝



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### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> See Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy*, most any page (1998, Harper Collins).

## “Pearls” of Medication Wisdom

The practice of clinical medicine involves the combination of sound medical science and the art of delivering the science to patients. This “art” often involves the utilization of practical nuggets of truth—“pearls of wisdom” that address patient concerns about their treatment plan and increase compliance. The following are selected examples of “pearls of wisdom:”

- **“The medication leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”** This is often seen in, but not limited to, medications that are designed to dissolve in the mouth or under the tongue. Taking a teaspoon of peanut or almond butter about 15 minutes after swallowing the medication may decrease this particular side effect.
- **“The medication makes my mouth very dry.”** This can be a matter of oral nuisance or a risk factor for developing dental disease. Chewing a vitamin C tablet and swishing it around the mouth can be helpful, or chewing sugarless gum is another alternative.
- **“It is difficult to cut my medication in half, even with a pill cutter.”** Place the bottle of medication in the freezer for one to two hours and then cut the pills in half. This will crystallize the moisture in the pills (like ice) and limit powdering when they are cut.
- **“My skin itches after removing skin patches.”** Apply plain antihistamine spray (not creams or lotions) to the area where the patch will be placed and let it dry before applying the patch.



- **“The oral medication makes me itch.”** Some medications have brightly colored dyes with which patients can be allergic. Use a wet paper towel and test if the color will wipe off. It is possible that the underlying medication may not cause itching or a rash if the dye is removed. One can then inquire about an undyed alternative.
- **“The medication gives me a sedated hangover in the morning.”** Always check whether medications taken at bedtime can produce a combined sedative effect. In this case, a dosage reduction may be in order for one or more medications. Otherwise, note how long it takes to feel alert in the morning. If it takes two hours, for example, take the bedtime medications two hours earlier.
- **“I forget to take my medication.”** Get a 90-day supply of your medications and split it between three bottles. Keep one securely at work or in your car, if this is where you typically remember that you did not take your morning medication. Set your phone/calendar alarm to remind you when your next dosage is due. Associate taking your medication with another activity that you always perform, such as brushing

teeth, applying makeup, picking up car keys, etc. Getting one to two hours more sleep and taking supplements like omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D3 or B vitamin complexes may help your memory.

- **“I have excessive amounts of medication that I do not use at home.”** This is a safety risk in the event of impulsive suicidal ideation and a diversion risk with children or houseguests. You can take the medication to your doctor’s office or pharmacy for disposal. If the medication is disposed at home, it must NEVER enter the water supply—no flushing down toilets or pouring down sink drains. Pour the pills in with solid garbage, preferably leftover food debris. Before

disposing of pill bottles, mark out all identifying data.

- **“I can’t sleep and feel nervous on the medication.”** Taper off all sources of caffeine, including coffee, sodas, teas, energy drinks, and exercise supplements. These can increase stimulating side effects of medications and cause tremors, insomnia, anxiety, and irritability.
- **“I am more heat sensitive on the medication.”** Many medications can facilitate overheating, dehydrating, or sun burning more quickly, especially in hot weather. Wear a significant sunscreen and drink copious amounts of water to avoid thirst, which is a sign that dehydration has already started. If your urine is a deep

color of yellow, you are probably not drinking enough water.

Many of the potential complications and/or side-effects described above are fairly common for individuals who must take one or more medications on a daily basis. Increasing your general awareness and being able to take some simple and practical steps will help lower levels of frustration and anxiety. Finally, always consult with your doctor if you are having difficulties with your medications—safety and effective care are important to any treatment plan. ✖



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## Counseling Couples in Crisis



Counseling couples in crisis necessitates consideration of a number of important legal and ethical issues for professional Christian counselors. The American Association of Christian Counselors 2014 Code of Ethics (the “Code”) includes helpful guidance for counselors who seek to serve clients with a Christian counseling standard of care. It is recommended that Christian counselors take proactive steps to limit potential liability risk relating to key issues in crisis counseling for couples by clearly articulating important terms of the counseling relationship through the informed consent process.

**Protecting Client Choice.** Christian counselors at all levels compassionately care for counselees, in part, by protecting client autonomy and not imposing their values. It is common for people to seek Christian counseling because they desire mental healthcare from a faith-based perspective. Section

ES1-330 of the Code includes important guidelines for obtaining client consent for biblical and spiritual practices in counseling. The Code section, in part, states: “Christian counselors do not presume that all clients want or will be receptive to explicit, spiritual Judeo-Christian interventions in counseling and, therefore, obtain consent that honors client choice, receptivity to these practices, and the timing and manner in which these elements are introduced. This includes, but is not limited to, the following: 1) prayer for and with clients; 2) Bible reading and reference; 3) spiritual meditation; 4) the use of biblical and religious imagery or music; 5) assistance with spiritual formation and discipline; 6) incorporation of fasting in the treatment plan as a spiritual discipline; and 7) other common spiritual practices.”

**First, Do No Harm.** By clearly memorializing client choice for biblical and spiritual practices in counseling,

Christian counselors and other caregivers may be able to most effectively guard against condoning, advocating or assisting in what the Code describes in ES1-120 as, “harmful actions of clients.” ES1-120-a through ES1-120-g specifically set forth a Christian counseling standard of care for a number of ethical issues that may be relevant to counseling couples in a variety of crisis situations, such as: 1) deadly and threatening behavior; 2) substance abuse and other addictive behavior; 3) abortion; 4) separation and divorce; 5) premarital and extramarital sexual behavior; 6) homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered behavior; and 7) euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Christian counselors are encouraged to prepare for the potential presenting problem of domestic abuse when counseling couples in crisis. ES1-120-a, “Applicability to Deadly and Threatening Behavior,” sets forth an affirmative ethical duty on the part of the counselor to “prudently intervene

for the sake of protecting life” in situations, in part, involving “assaultive/abusive harm.” Christian counselors must comply with any relevant jurisdictional legal requirement for the reporting of domestic abuse. In addition, safety for a victim of domestic abuse is a priority concern. According to researchers Steven J. Sandage and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., “The therapist has the dual ethical duty first to ensure that the client comes to no harm and second to attempt to promote beneficence.... Rather than assume the abusive behavior can be eliminated through promoting better communication, conflict resolution or intimacy, the therapist must deal directly with the physical threat. Then and only then should marriage therapy seek to improve the relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

**Case Management in Couples Counseling.** ES1-630, “Working with Couples, Families and Groups,” discusses case management procedures for counseling couples. This Code section provides, in part, that “counselors should identify a primary client—the group as a unit or the individual members—and discuss how differing roles, counseling goals, confidentiality, and consent issues are affected by these dynamics.” In addition, ES1-630-b articulates the importance of clarifying confidentiality parameters for couples counseling: “Christian counselors... do not share confidences by one family or group member to others without permission or prior agreement, unless maintaining the secret will likely lead to grave and serious harm to a family member or someone else.” Discussing and documenting these issues are an important part of the informed consent process.

It is recommended that Christian counselors consider a “no secrets” policy for couples counseling. Such a policy allows a counselor the freedom to exercise his or her judgment in sharing with both counsees information

disclosed to the counselor in a counseling session in which only one of the individual counsees is present. A “no secrets” policy may help a counselor avoid being placed in some problematic ethical situations (e.g., the counselor becoming informed (during a private counseling session with one spouse) of an affair that the husband or wife has not disclosed to the other spouse).

**Attorney Consultation.** Christian counselors are encouraged to seek legal counsel when developing appropriate informed consent forms and procedures for counseling couples in crisis. An attorney can provide helpful guidance regarding relevant jurisdictional law pertaining to privileged communication for couple counseling. In addition, an attorney can prepare appropriate terms for a written informed consent form and otherwise help the counselor take prudent courses of action to protect against

liability risk when counseling couples in crisis. ✦

*The information is current as of the date it is written. This article is provided solely for general educational purposes and does not constitute legal advice between an attorney and a client. The law varies in different jurisdictions. Consultation with an attorney is recommended if you desire legal advice.*



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#### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Sandage, S.J., & Worthington, Jr., E.L. (1997). Ethics in marital therapy & premarital counseling. In R.K. Sanders (Ed.), *Christian Counseling Ethics* (pp. 119-138). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

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## Leading Couples Who Need Help: Challenges and Pitfalls



Understanding some of the issues surrounding what many couples within our spheres of influence are experiencing will help us lead them to get assistance more effectively.

**A**s any veteran clinician knows full well, research on marriage therapy outcomes suggests it traditionally possesses among the lowest “success” rates of any counseling specialization. Yet, ironically, difficulties with intimate relationships are among the most common presenting problems in the entire field of out-patient psychotherapy. Leaders at all levels (pastors, caregivers, life coaches, counselors, etc.) need to be aware of some of the key challenges couples face, as well as how to obtain needed help. Understanding some of the issues surrounding what many couples within our spheres of influence are experiencing will help us lead them to get assistance more effectively. However, as we shall see, like many other things in

life, that is often easier said than done.

Below are outlined some of the inherent challenges to the crucial and unique intervention modality known as marital therapy. For example, why is marriage counseling generally not more effective? What are some of the factors that make it so difficult to conduct? Why do some approaches seem to merely treat the symptoms, and why do many typical conflicts among couples seem to be so recurrent, deeply entrenched, and even self-perpetuating that they create other (even multiple) failed relationships? Furthermore, why is it that many times couples report that marriage therapy harmed their relationships more than it helped?

For starters, we know that unresolved conflict patterns, painful

betrayals, complex triangulated interactions, contentious power struggles, unmet emotional and sexual needs, disappointed expectations, unresolved family of origin issues, dysfunctional systemic dynamics, recurrent argumentative themes, selfish and entitled attitudes, and other relationship problems continue to be central to many of the presenting issues clients bring to marriage therapy offices. Perhaps nothing so poignantly and painfully breaks the hearts, crushes the spirits, and grieves the souls of so many people like marital distress.

Consequently, no wonder so few professional psychotherapists want to embrace these behemoth problems. Along with very serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, more and

more mental health professionals are choosing not to specialize in couples work. To put these issues into a clinical perspective, here are some of the many pragmatic challenges leaders should be informed about that are intrinsically embedded within the framework of marital therapy:

- Since there are no universal criteria for certification/specialization or standardized training in marital therapy, virtually any clinician can hang out a shingle marketing him/herself as offering marriage counseling services (though most states now specifically license Marriage and Family Therapists), regardless of academic preparation or training. Thus, concerns such as uniformly recognized credentials, quality control, and competency issues may arise.
- Most third party payers/insurance companies rarely reimburse for marital therapy, making it financially stressful for most couples to pay out of pocket (although, one might somewhat sardonically observe that people seem to always pay their divorce attorneys much more than a successful course of marriage counseling costs... and lawyers rarely employ a sliding scale). And for the few insurance companies that do offer coverage, managed care utilization reviews can be cumbersome and time consuming... and, at times, even oppressive and/or adversarial. Thus, reimbursements are often at lower levels than for individual counseling.
- There is a pervasive and historical dearth of clear, cohesive, systematized, theoretical paradigms when it comes to interpersonal health and mature relational functioning.

Only social exchange theory and attachment theory attempt to explain and describe what constitutes healthy *interpersonal* dynamics—all other personality theory constructs and approaches describe *intrapersonal* functioning. Consequently, specific techniques for effective marital interventions have not been historically linked to evidence-based practices validated by strong empirical research evidence.

In addition to these generalized challenges endemic to the nature, theory, and practice of marriage therapy, there are many specific, unique issues which typically present themselves in the course of couples counseling that make the process more complicated than individual counseling. Leaders should be aware of, and attuned to, the following idiosyncratic features and potential pitfalls implicitly embedded within marital therapy:

- **Secrets** (due to fear of retribution, lack of trust, shame, and/or guilt, many spouses choose not to disclose various issues which seriously and functionally impact the marriage, such as affairs, addictions, spending habits unknown to their mates, etc.)
- **Triangulations** (common examples of power and/or emotional misalignments which subvert and diminish the bond and energy of the marital dyad include unhealthy alliances with parents, other family of origin members, children, friends, and co-workers)
- **Transferences** (inescapably both spouses project unconscious, emotionally-charged reactions to painful relationships and/or events of the past, which are evoked by current

relational and attachment dynamics)

- **Responsibility** (husbands and wives often blame the other for how they react to, and interact with, their partners rather than growing into a mature acceptance of how they personally live out the parameters of their own unconditional commitments to their spouses)
- **Unfairness** (it is a fundamental axiom of marriage that both partners, in essence, “reap” what everyone else “sowed” in their spouses’ lives before they met [since all people are an amalgamation of all their past experiences]; e.g., a spouse’s sexual inhibition/dysfunction stemming from childhood sexual trauma, which affects his/her [innocent] mate, who accordingly feels cheated, ripped off, deceived, etc.)
- **Motivation** (generally one partner—most often the “pursuer”—is more desirous of change than the other [“distancer”] and is, thus, more likely to seek therapy and/or work more diligently than the other; therefore, the clinician must be sensitized to, and aware of, these typical dynamics, especially in order to engage the less invested spouse)
- **Compatibility** (relational suitability vis-à-vis individual differences in personality, values, worldview [think “unequally yoked”], social standards, life goals, hobbies, etc. can all present built-in challenges for both spouses to subconsciously try to change the other)
- **Exes** (old hurts, betrayals, losses of commitment, and promiscuity-casual sexual behavior/cohabitation all inevitably lead to comparisons to

others, flickering old flames, etc., and resultant insecurities/fears/anxieties in both partners)

- **Blending** (typically deferential attachments/commitments/loyalties to children, etc. in a remarriage situation create inevitable stress, relational prioritization, and parenting disparities)
- **Intensity** (marriage counseling often becomes heated and emotionally volatile, resembling a proverbial three-ring circus given all there is for the therapist to attend to within the dysfunctionality and complexity of the system)
- **Procrastination** (couples typically wait too long to seek help; research suggests the average couple waits several years after

they first begin experiencing significant problems before seeking help... often marriage therapy is a “last resort” before couples sign separation or divorce papers already drawn up at the attorneys’ offices)

- **Ethicality** (when desires/needs/goals/behaviors of the two individuals conflict or collide, the therapist is presented with moral and/or ethical dilemmas)

While this may not be an exhaustive list of issues relative to working with couples, the vicissitudes of, and variables within, marital counseling can be drastic, draining, and daunting. However, it is equally true that marriage therapy done well can be extremely rewarding, reconciling, and redemptive not only to the couple, but to their children, extended family,

church, and community. In this way, we can more effectively encourage the hurting couples with whom we lead, work with, and minister. ✦



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## Couples in Crisis

### How Couples Experience and Cope with Job Loss

Schalk, K.J. (2016). Job loss and the couple experience of coping. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 50 (2), 124-144.

Kyle Schalk conducted a small, qualitative study of seven heterosexual couples in which one spouse had experienced job loss. Using an existential-phenomenological approach, Schalk asked each spouse individually and as a couple about psychological challenges, relationship barriers, and communication challenges, as well as coping strategies. The driving research question was, “What is the experience of coping with involuntary job loss from the perspectives of both members in a marital relationship?” (p. 127).

Participants were recruited through the Web, newspapers, community centers, counseling agencies, and related venues. One partner had to have gone through job loss for a minimum of three months, but also now be employed by the time he or she participated in the study.

Most of the spouses who had lost a job were male (five of seven) and reported an average age of 37 (ranging from 25 to 58-years-old). On average, the interviews took place about six months after job loss (range of four to 13 months) with an average length of unemployment of more than four months (ranging from three to seven months). Length of marriage ranged from nine months to 29 years (M=10 years). Both spouses were interviewed individually, and they were also interviewed together as a couple.

The main themes that came out of the interviews were: 1) *Stress and Depression Symptoms* (e.g., “I was quite sad about it; I mean, upset and very

concerned,” p. 131); 2) *Increased Marital Conflict and Erosion of the Marital Friendship* (e.g., “It’s like when you go to bed you might as well put up a concrete wall between us. When you come home, when you’re both home together there... it would be nitpicking or bickering or fighting...” p. 131); 3) *Evaluating the Relationship* (e.g., “When you go through a lot of hardships, like losing jobs, you make the choice at that time... okay, am I just going to pack up and leave, or are we going to stick this out?” p. 132); 4) *Difficulty Communicating* (e.g., “... so I didn’t really want to talk to my wife about it because it’s embarrassing. I’d really rather just fix the problem,” p. 132); and 5) *Balance of Support and Motivation* (e.g., one spouse shared, “I’d be thinking, how can I motivate without being nasty? You know you don’t want to be the bad person, but you know that you sometimes need to kick them in the butt to keep them going...” p. 132).

Another major theme had to do with *couple coping*, and the subthemes here were related to *practical support and employment, relationship resiliency* (e.g., “We just stick together... don’t pull apart... through thick and thin,” p. 134), and *hope and looking to the future*. The final major theme was *after effects*, which had subthemes of *vulnerability, new appreciation* (“for what they had and for each other,” p. 136), and *strength through struggle* (“increased relationship strength,” p. 136).

Christian counselors will often work with couples who are dealing with unemployment and the relationship challenges that go along with such a major life disruption. It may be helpful to review what some couples have identified as common experiences, common relationship themes, and then consider how best to provide support to them

through the counseling relationship. In particular, the authors noted the benefits of validating emotional responses to job loss and consider the importance of communication, which was often a topic that tied into many of the identified themes.

### Couple-based Intimacy and Breast Cancer

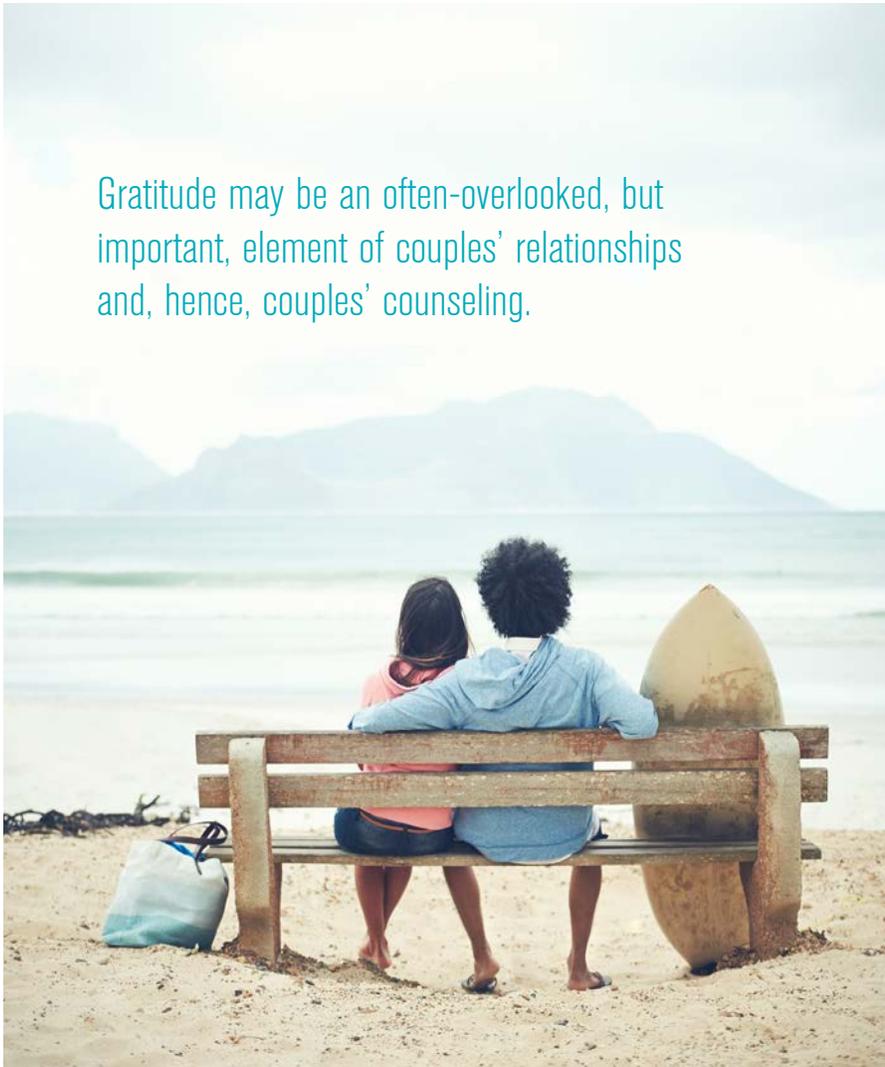
Reese, J.B., Porter, L.S., Casale, K.E., Bantug, E.T., Bober, S.L., Schwartz, S.C., & Smith, K.C. (2016). Adapting a couple-based intimacy enhancement intervention to breast cancer: A developmental study. *Health Psychology*, 35 (10), 1086-1096.

Jennifer Reese and her colleagues conducted a study that looked at enhancing sexual intimacy among couples who had been navigating breast cancer. The study drew upon previous research by adapting an intimacy enhancement intervention used with couples navigating colorectal cancer to the experiences of couples facing breast cancer.

What the researchers did was run and collect data from three focus groups for partnered cancer survivors (n=15) who reported concerns about sexual intimacy. The focus group data was subsequently coded. Additional information was gleaned from four cognitive interviews and expert review.

Eight themes emerged from the focus groups. First, *perceptions of sexual intimacy change after treatment* (e.g., “I have had a lot of issues since starting this whole thing. Number one is no sex drive...,” p. 1088). Second, *reacting to sexual intimacy changes* (e.g., “You are scared and you are wondering, is it going to be like this forever?,” p. 1088). Third, *perceptions of their partners’ experiences and reactions to sexual changes* (e.g., “He doesn’t want to hurt me either

Gratitude may be an often-overlooked, but important, element of couples' relationships and, hence, couples' counseling.



and the other thing is it's hard for him and now when we do it sometimes he can't [have an erection] because he is so worried about me," p. 1089). Fourth, *communication* (e.g., "And he will say to me, 'You are beautiful, your body is fine.' But... he can tell me 10 times a day and I am still not going to feel comfortable with it [body image changes]," p. 1090). Fifth, *adaptations and innovations* (e.g., I find myself often in the act of having sex with my husband trying to meditate to get all of those thoughts out of my mind so that maybe I can orgasm, maybe I can get pleasure," p. 1091). Sixth, *age, stage, and history* (e.g., "I would have to say the first year was, I don't give a crap. I don't care. I don't feel like it... when you lose your hair, when my hair started coming

back, I started to feel more myself," p. 1091). Seventh, *discussions in the clinic* (e.g., "Not once in front of my husband did anybody say sexuality is going to be a difficulty through this whole process," p. 1092). Eighth, *addressing sexual concerns* (e.g., I think it is like a family disease and counseling or support should be provided for the spouse as to the outcomes and what to look for," p. 1093).

This is one of those important, step-wise progressions in research. It took an existing, helpful protocol and adapted it for the perceived needs of women facing breast cancer. As the authors noted, there is tremendous need for an evidence-based protocol for this population, and what they have done is provided a "promising, potentially

disenable approach to addressing breast cancer-related sexual concerns" (p. 1095).

### Gratitude in Couple Relationships

Algoe, S.B., Kurtz, L.E., & Hilaire, N.M. (2016). Putting the "you" in "thank you:" Examining other-praising behavior as the active relational ingredient in expressed gratitude. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7 (7), 658-666.

Sara Algoe and her colleagues present a project with two studies of gratitude, which was conceptualized as an "other-praising" emotion (p. 658). Other-praising behavior was positively related to how partners viewed one another in terms of responsiveness, general good feelings, and love.

Study 1 consisted of 131 individuals from couples who had been part of a recent event on gratitude, and whose conversations in that context were recorded, transcribed, and coded. About half of these couples were dating (55%), while nearly 45% were either engaged, cohabiting, or married. Length of time together ranged considerably, from seven months to 35 years.

Study 2 was a conceptual replication that utilized the same procedure for recording and rating gratitude, but with only one member of the couple expressing gratitude. Two hundred fifty-seven couples attended, most of whom were dating exclusively (68%), while 31% were formally committed to one another.

The results of the two studies suggest that "other-praising behavior is the relationally active ingredient in expressions of gratitude" (p. 663). That is to say, "When expressers used other-praising behavior, targets perceived them as more responsive, felt better in general, and more loving in particular" (pp. 663-664). The researchers see these qualities as beneficial to the growth of the individual who received gratitude from his or her partner (other-praising behavior), as well as growth for the couple.

Gratitude may be an often-overlooked, but important, element of couples' relationships and, hence, couples' counseling. It is a concept with rich Christian roots and one that can be further studied and incorporated into Christian couples counseling.

### Imago Relationship Therapy and Empathy

Schmidt, C.D., & Gelbert, N.C. (2017). Couple therapy and empathy: An evaluation of the impact of Imago Relationship Therapy on partner empathy levels. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 25 (1), 23-30.

This is a study by Christopher Schmidt and Nathan Gelbert of Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) on how 12 sessions of IRT would impact empathy levels among distressed couples. Couples were solicited through professional and

community LISTSERVs.™ They could follow a link to a description of the study, the inclusion criteria, and the screening process.

The treatment groups included 14 couples and the control groups included 16 couples. Most (64%) of the couples were between ages 30 and 50 (M=45 years) and 81% identified as Caucasian, 17% African-American, and 2% Asian-American. IRT draws on psychodynamic therapy, transactional analysis, and cognitive-behavioral therapy. It considers how “unconscious factors play a significant role in the selection of a partner” and that these unconscious factors create “an opportunity to heal connections that were lost in childhood by increasing empathy, understanding, and communication” (p. 24). A number of empathy-enhancing interventions are already a part of IRT with couples.

This is a study that looked at the

impact of IRT on empathy levels among 60 individuals, and the results indicated that “a course of 12 sessions of IRT with a highly trained imago therapist has the potential to make a statistically significant and positive impact on an individual’s empathy” (p. 27), with incremental increases in empathy among those in the treatment groups at each of the assessment points. ✦



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**“My Once Devout Child No Longer Believes in God...”**

– Alex McFarland

1. Militant Secularism in education teaches that “true” truths
- a. are divorced from any supernatural context
  - b. are culturally relevant for today
  - c. impose no moral obligations on human behavior
  - d. both a and c

**Working with High Conflict Couples... – Leslie Vernick**

2. In the example of Bill and Teresa, Teresa...
- a. is the abusive one in this marriage
  - b. is totally innocent in her actions
  - c. is showing reactive abuse
  - d. all of the above

**Marriage Counseling: Innovative Trends... – Jared Pingleton**

3. A revolutionary paradigm shift in marital therapy delivery
- a. emotionally focused therapy
  - b. intensive clinical marriage work
  - c. narrative therapy
  - d. solution focused counseling

**A Loveless Marriage: When the Fire Burns Out**

– Dan Seaborn

4. Seaborn says the goal of marriage should be
- a. to work together to meet needs
  - b. to foster a happy and loving relationship
  - c. to reflect the identity of Christ
  - d. to give a Christian example of love to the world

**Betrayal in Marriage: A Five-step Recovery Model**

– Dave Carder

5. Carder uses which of the following to foster reattachment
- a. 30-day Sensate Focus exercises
  - b. erotic touching exercises
  - c. a two-week romantic cruise
  - d. changing location and/or job

**Do No Harm: Parenting through Divorce**

– Jay and Tammy Daughtry

6. Collaborative divorce teaches that divorce ends a marriage
- a. and it is best if mothers have primary custody
  - b. but it does not end a family
  - c. and contact with the ex-spouse should be avoided
  - d. but new stepfamilies replace the losses

**Chaotic Connection: When Mental Illness... – Gregory L. Jantz**

7. The three keys to help identify mental illness in a spouse
- a. severity, frequency, and duration
  - b. intensity, unmanageability, and isolation
  - c. isolation, severity, and duration
  - d. severity, abnormality, and duration

**From Mourning to Morning: Surviving Grief... – Eric Scalise**

8. Marital satisfaction in loss is higher in couples who
- a. give each other individual space to grieve
  - b. express their frustration and anger
  - c. avoid bringing up the loss unnecessarily
  - d. have a level of congruence in grief styles

**Counseling Couples in Crisis – John Sandy**

9. Regarding deadly or threatening behavior
- a. Christian counselors should remain neutral
  - b. Christian counselors should intervene and report
  - c. Christian counselors are exempt from reporting
  - d. Christian counselors seek first to promote beneficence

**Mr. & Mrs. Right Now – Samuel Rodriguez**

10. “\_\_\_\_\_ is a sure way of living in the now”
- a. community
  - b. awareness
  - c. preparation
  - d. mindfulness

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Participants will:

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2. Be able to articulate a more comprehensive understanding of this issue’s core theme.
3. Be able to integrate spirituality and faith-based constructs into the delivery of care.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_ The articles in this issue are comprehensive and well written.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend this home-study program to other professionals.

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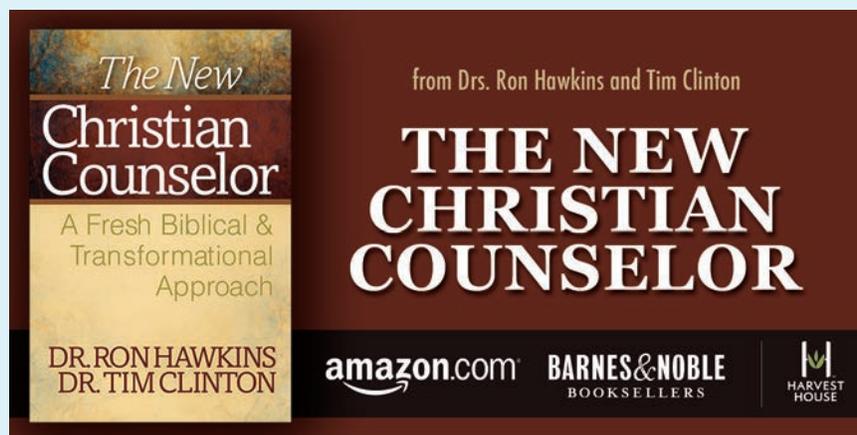
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## When Love Hurts

There is nothing more wonderful than being in a relationship with someone you love who truly loves you back. God made it that way. However, there is nothing more painful than being in a relationship with someone you love who doesn't truly love you in return.

All marriages take work, and most will have periods of disaffection and conflict. Sometimes we make decisions that hurt the other person unintentionally. Sometimes life is just raw and difficult where the challenges of day-to-day living escalate and the pace, pain, and pressures take over and go unchecked or unresolved. Even couples who love each other deeply can find themselves in a spin and get significantly off track.

“Disaffection” in a relationship is often triggered by external stressors faced by one or both partners. Spouses can get caught up in their own lives and issues and, little by little, neglect to give their partners the time, attention, or affection that is crucial in a relationship. Once affections grow cold, an urge to give up and leave the marriage can grow stronger than the love between the two, which can compromise each other's commitment and devour the relationship. Left unchecked, it can lead to an emotional cutoff and isolate each spouse from the other, leaving intense hurt, resentment, bitterness, and cold actions.

Few things are worse than being on the receiving end of someone's frustration and anger, especially if that person is supposed to love you. I have learned through the years that the level of intimacy will never rise above the fear or anger experienced in the relationship. Often, both partners will come in for counseling feeling like they

have shown love to a spouse who has not reciprocated. I call it the “dilemma of two rights.” The resulting frustration, shaming, and stonewalling can muddy even the most seasoned counselor's clarity and work. Emphasizing the hurt without accusation to calm the storm is a delicate dance, especially with the negative communication cycle consuming their loveless relationship.

Once couples have sunk into the chaos of disaffection, oftentimes they cannot “power their way through” by forcing actions that are recommended to healthy couples. Here are a few lessons I have learned in the therapist chair to help reframe and redeem the spin and pain:

**1. Identify stressors and the way couples can lose at love in their relationships.** Most couples have developed an airtight case against one another, yet are unaware of what has damaged their love. Help them step back and consider the bigger picture and identify their stressors—whether they are circumstantial, related to past abuse, or stemming from current sin and selfishness. You cannot change or treat what you don't see and understand. In today's culture, busyness, work demands, taking care of kids and extended family members, financial stress, and more can leave most couples with little or no time for each other. Have couples make a list of



## Through the gift of forgiveness, one partner can bring change to a relationship. Forgiveness does not condone a person's actions, but it signifies a willingness to move past the hurt and start anew.

things in their everyday lives that are tearing at their love.

**2. Back off the forced love exercises.** Have you ever been on a date night with someone you don't like? I think you know what I mean. So often we give out pat or idealistic direction to couples and expect it to help. Yes, I have done some of that myself. If a couple is deep into disaffection, standard "action item" homework—like establishing "date night"—can be well-intended, but also disastrous. Once a couple is caught up in negative communication patterns, this kind of "trying" often only makes things worse. And in the pain, couples start to guilt and shame each other with statements like, "We should have never gotten married" or "The problem is you never show me you love me."

**3. Safety: the hallmark of a healthy relationship.** When couples are in trouble, hurtful words and actions consume the relationship. That's because negative interactions are far more powerful and predictive than positive ones. Feeling safe is a prerequisite for love to flourish and accept influence from a spouse. When all you do is fight, one or both spouses feel very vulnerable and do not want to risk even random acts of kindness because, inevitably, they get hurt again. Both physical and emotional safety must be assessed, and may take the form of abuse, addiction, depression, or other problems. In order to start breaking down the walls and rebuilding love, there must be the assurance of safety. If any threats exist, those issues need to be dealt with first.

**4. Introduce soft love exercises.** As couples begin to see how exhausted their relationships have been, and you begin to build safety and trust back, then simple acts of love and kindness

begin to make sense. Often, I ask couples to write down how they give and receive love, and what it would take for them to feel loved by their partners. This, along with other marital awareness and enrichment exercises, is helpful. Connecting, communicating, and working on basic problem-solving skills can rekindle their relationships.

**5. Be big on forgiveness and grace.** Healthy relationships require deep forgiveness and grace. Through the gift of forgiveness, one partner can bring change to a relationship. Forgiveness does not condone a person's actions, but it signifies a willingness to move past the hurt and start anew. Reconciliation, however, takes work and two people working toward a new life *together*. Without forgiveness, wounds remain open and will continue to fester, weakening the foundations of the marriage. It is also impossible to feel safe and trust in order to begin the reconciliation process without forgiveness. The grace of God gives us what we need to let things go.

**6. Press in with God.** As we begin to heal, the beauty begins to form a protective wall around us. Ecclesiastes 4:9 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor." However, as Psalm 127:1 declares, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it..." That echoes the truth in Ecclesiastes 4:12 which says, "... a threefold cord is not easily broken." As we embrace God, we strengthen our love and build on a sure foundation. Keeping our hearts and minds centered on the One who will never fail us gives us strength for the journey. No man or woman will ever be able to fulfill the deepest longings of the human soul—only Christ can do that. Through His

love and strength, you can overcome disappointments and better express your love for one another.

If you feel called to help those struggling with disaffection in marriage, I would love for you to familiarize yourself with our *Turn Your Love Around 2.0* video series. My colleague and friend, Dr. Eric Scalise, joined me in putting together this three-part video lecture course. In *Turn Your Love Around 2.0*, we provide couples with a biblical road map and compass to help navigate disaffection, common communication issues, and marital conflict.

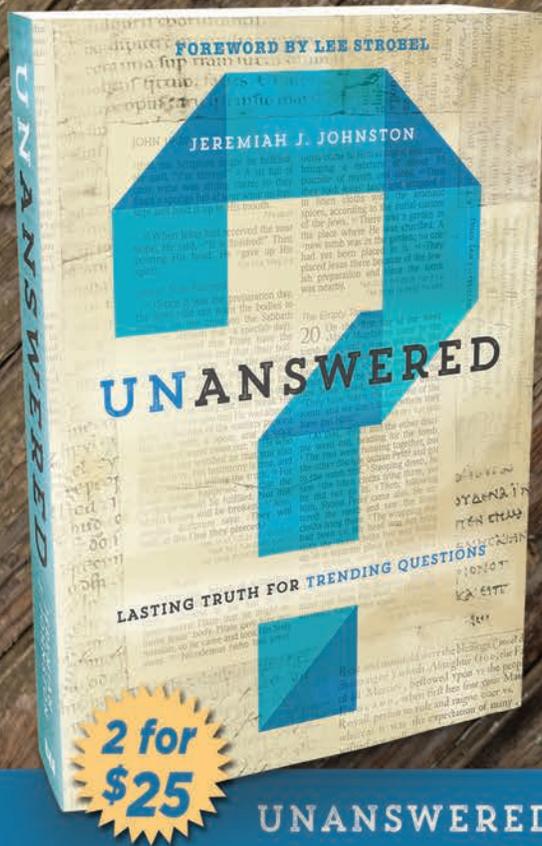
God created marriage as a beautiful blessing. Anything with that much potential for beauty has an equal capacity for pain and brokenness. I believe all hell is against our love in marriage because it is the bedrock of healthy families. And, yet, no attack is stronger than what God has given to us—the strength to overcome even the most painful relationship struggles. Some of the most broken relationships I have seen have been beautifully turned around by God's power. To love and be loved truly is the essence of life. ✕



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