

THE CONNECTED MARRIAGE

The Wholeness Method for Marriage & Family

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INTRODUCTION When I was a child, my grandmother was my very favorite person in the world. I came from a single mother household and when my mom worked, my grand

parents were the ones to take care of my brother and me. My grandmother made everyone feel loved. She was a tiny 4'10" full Portuguese woman with big beautiful brown eyes who sent strength and warmth with every smiling glance. She spoke Portuguese, Spanish and English and she gave her entire life to helping others, especially kids, by serving at public schools and at churches. She and my grandfather had an amazing relationship.

When I was about 8, she was diagnosed with Alzheimers and died by the time I was 11. It was the first time I felt what death was. It devastated all of us watching her robbed of her memory slowly until her passing. Alzheimers is truly a brutal curse and robbery of severest magnitude. My Grandfather, a High School Music Teacher of 40 years, was seemingly known and loved by just about everyone in the Santa Barbara region.

He was devastated. For several months after my grandmother's death, every time we visited him he looked like he was about to die. He would have a pale gray coloring, downtrodden, skinny, depressed with little will to live. He was eating poorly, sleeping poorly and thinking poorly. As a little boy I started to worry that he would die too.

I will never forget one day when we went to visit him and he was alive again! He was jubilant, full of laughter and all smiles. He had met another woman named Gigi and all of a sudden, he had his life back again. He married her, a lively firecracker of a woman. Ten years passed and then one year, she had three strokes over a few months time and the third one caused her death.

Devastated, twice a widower, again, the life drained out of my grandfather and we were all afraid he lost the will to survive. This time he seemed even closer to death than before, just laying in his bed for days at a time, but eventually, again, he met another woman, and came back to life, yet again. He has since passed, but from him I learned how much a woman could mean to a man. Every relationship starts a quiet countdown-a finite number of days until one of us leaves the other behind. Whether it's with your parents, spouse, or kids, that number exists, ticking away.

I don't know if or how we'll reunite in an afterlife, but I do know this: these present moments you share with the person beside you are real and irreplaceable. That's why every second with them is immeasurably precious. You are not guaranteed tomorrow. You are only guaranteed this moment. If you have found love, even for a moment, you have found the greatest treasure of existence.

So if you are having issues with your loved one, is it really worth disrupting the miracle of the fact that you, a microscopic organism that moves on the surface of a rock that is suspended in space, miraculously found another organism who would share their short existence with you and bind their fate to yours during this finite 9 moment of time? Is it really worth disrupting such a precious and fragile miracle? We must develop the presence of mind to treat every moment with our loved ones as a miraculous gift that could vanish at any moment, because it could, and this might be the only chance you have in this life to love, and there is no guarantee of anything like this in a next life. Although you risk feeling all the pain love inevitably involves, by God you must embrace that pain because if you do not, you'll never get to feel the greatest miracle of human existence. Love.

If done right, a marriage can offer you the greatest prize in life; the ultimate place of genuine connection and wholeness, a place of belonging where you can be authentically free and your heart can be liberated, celebrated and cherished. There is no greater experience in life. While connection can be experienced in many different types of

relationships with others, there is no place it can be experienced to the level it does when two people make a covenant to offer this exclusively to each other forever. This type of covenant love that can only be found in marriage. 9

REQUIREMENTS BEFORE YOU START TWO TYPES OF COUPLES

Between you and the very best relationships you can have with your spouse, your children or anyone, even God,

there are only perhaps a dozen or so honest conversations that need to take place every year. The problem is that most couples are avoiding these conversations either out of fear or ignorance. It is true, these are not just any type of conversation. They are often difficult conversations that will require every bit of bravery, transparency, self control and patience that you have. They often require you to expose hidden truths you have been too afraid to address, things you might not want to face.

The success of these conversations will depend on each person's ability to resist the idea that these conversations represent a threat and that we must defend ourselves against them. These conversations are actually the opposite of a threat, for it's only after and through these conversations that you can truly experience genuine love and union. Sticking together through these revealing and often painful conversations regardless of what gets exposed is how security, intimacy and connection grows. We have learned to treat couples who come to us for counseling differently depending on whether they can have these vulnerable conversations in a productive way, or not. If they cannot have these conversations without triggering defense mechanisms that lead to a deeper sense of disconnection, we would describe them as having an "insecure union." In an insecure union it is very hard for the couple to have challenging conversations without one or both of them being triggered to a degree that would sabotage any relational progress that might be made.

For this reason we approach these two types of relationships in a totally different manner than we would for couples who can have these conversations without getting hijacked. For the insecure relationship, we recommend the individuals within the relationship do the individual work of healing within themselves first, so they can get to a place of peace and security that enables them to begin having the vulnerable and often difficult conversations they must have to be relationally blessed without triggers causing counter-productivity. If you can't seem to have transparency without getting triggered in your current relationship(s), we recommend you start with The Wholeness Method for individuals. If you and your partner can have these conversations productively, please continue! **YOU MUST BE WILLING TO IMPROVE YOURSELF** Besides the ability to have productive and honest confrontations together, a second prerequisite for this course is that you must truly want to become the best version of yourself, which includes becoming the best lover for your loved ones.

If so, please continue. 9

THE TWELVE MEASURES We call each concept in this book a "measure." We call them measures because your growth and maturity within each concept can be measured. As a couple, you can help each other master these measures. As a married person, you have a unique advantage in the development of these areas because each of them is impossible to master outside of a permanently committed relationship. The only chance you have to perfect these qualities as an individual is within the framework of covenant or marriage and with the help of your spouse. There are 12 measures in this book: connection, communication, commitment, trust, stress-management, compatibility, conflict-resolution, forgiveness, personal health, internal-narratives, adaptability, and friendship.

Each measure addresses a critical aspect of personal and relational health, from the emotional bond that fuels trust and intimacy to the adaptability needed for a relationship to grow stronger over time. Even though you might not see subjects like money, sex or child rearing in these titles directly, subjects like these will be addressed from several angles throughout the chapters of this book. Our goal is to grow in each of the 12 measures throughout our lives. These measures are not arbitrary; they are rooted in both the timeless wisdom of scriptural truth and decades of relationship research. If you and your partner commit to the process of growing in each of these areas, your relationship will improve exponentially.

These 12 measures are based on the idea that marriage is the greatest opportunity we have to learn love, which is the ability to experience our greatest pleasures as well as our highest purpose. Understanding how these measures work offers a life changing upgrade to the way you connect and interact with your spouse, kids and extended loved ones. Once you understand and begin to practice these concepts, your relationships will begin to see an immediate change. **CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATE PROSPERITY** There are twelve chapters with question and application exercises intertwined throughout. The questions and application exercises offer you and your partner opportunities to discuss and activate the different lessons and tools offered throughout the book.

These questions and exercises can be the greatest gift to your marriage. So often partners go years or even decades without opportunities to communicate their deepest thoughts, needs and wants to each other. Taking time to discuss your honest answers to the questions within might be one of your only "easy" opportunities to address and share many of the innermost parts of your heart. The more effort you put into honest discussions around the questions in this book, the more likely you will be able to enter a matured state of perpetual marital improvement and enjoyment in your union. One challenge in striving to improve the state of your marriage is the reality that an excessive focus on resolving relationship problems can lead to unnatural pressure and unrealistic expectations, which could ADD stress to the very relationship it aims to improve.

Throughout this course, you may experience a heightened sense of urgency to change, and it's natural to feel disappointment if you or your partner aren't able to adapt as quickly as you hope. Therefore, we encourage you to 9 practice patience and empathy, reminding yourself that your partner shares your same desire for long term growth and improvement. Although you will see immediate improvements as you develop the language of your relational intelligence, we want you to see the adoption of these practices as a lifelong process. The idea is to enter a state of perpetual improvement in your relationship, one small revelation at a time. Putting expectations on each other that there will be immediate change within hours or days might put a strain on the innocence and fun that this journey can and should be.

Instead, we suggest you look at all of this as a turning point in your own heart and in your marriage, a point in time when you both entered the revelation of what divine union thinks like, feels like, and acts like. And the rest of your life will be about mixing more and more of these thoughts, feelings and actions into your relationship, year after year. **A QUESTION AND A VOW** So before you start, we would like you to answer the following question: Will you make obtaining your best marriage a number one priority and mission for life, from this day forth? If you answered yes, please continue by making this vow to your partner: "I hereby make it my top priority in life, to make you feel known and cherished, to become better at making you feel loved through each passing year. 18 And If I cannot claim to have done so by the time I am on my deathbed, I will consider it, the greatest personal failure of my life." From this day forward, remind your loved ones of this vow whenever you realize you have failed to show them it is true. 9 "Marriage is the slow healing process of surrendering our aloneness to love." - Jacob Reeve 9

SECTION ONE: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS PERPETUAL GROWTH & IMPROVEMENT 9

MEASURE 1. THE DEPTH OF YOUR CONNECTION WE WERE MADE FOR CONNECTION. From the moment we come into existence, at the point of our conception, we enter life conne

cted to another human being. We are 100% dependent on the connection we have to the woman who carries us in her womb and she gives us everything we need for life and growth through her connection to us. When we are born, we are yet again 100% dependent on the connection we have to our mother for our survival and we remain totally dependent on our parents or caretakers for many, many years. We were not meant to be alone. We were made dependent.

We were made to need others. We long for connection because we were designed for connection. We will never escape this basic human need. While we are in the womb, if there is a complication and something is causing the connection we have to our mother to be compromised, we could become malnourished or even die. As we transition from infancy to adulthood, the nature of our connection evolves, but the underlying need remains unchanged.

Our 9 physical dependence on our mothers gradually gives way to an emotional dependence on the people around us. Just as a baby's body requires an unbroken umbilical cord to thrive, an adult's heart requires a sense of emotional connection to others to stay nourished and alive. **THE CONNECTING PART OF YOU** The thing inside of us that connects us is also the same thing inside of us from which we feel emotion. Happiness, sadness, fear, pride, embarrassment, and every other emotion comes from this delicate part of our being. The connections we have with other people are emotional connections.

When you feel connected to someone it is because you connected to them emotionally. They made you feel something. That feeling registered in your memory bank and now when you see them or think of them a feeling is associated with them. The emotional part of us is called different things in different circles. The Greek word *psychē* has been translated in different contexts as "soul," "life," or "self." The English word "psyche" derives from Greek *psychē*, and "psychology" originally referred to the study of the mind or soul; today it is the scientific study of mind and behavior.

In more modern secular circles the word "psyche" is still often used to describe the inner emotional part of us, but other terms like "inner child," "emotional mind," or "shadow child" are also commonly used, to name a few. 9 The English New Testament is primarily translated from ancient Greek, and uses the word "psuche" or "soul" about 100 times to refer to the "inner self." However, the word "heart" is used more frequently to convey this concept, appearing frequently throughout Scripture, depending on the translation. Both terms can refer to aspects of our inner life, though they are not identical in every context. Here are a few passages that mention "heart." Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me..." Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Romans 10:10: "With the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." There are literally hundreds of passages like these in the Bible. As you can see, the Bible uses the word "heart" to symbolize the concept of inner life, emotion, and the place your "belief" comes from.

In the secular world, the term "Inner Child" was coined over the 20th century by many brilliant intellectuals who were developing and defining several psychological concepts to help us achieve a better understanding of human psychology. Here in this lesson, we use "heart," "soul" and "inner child" interchangeably. 9 Regardless of what you choose to call it, the point is, we all have a place inside of us that longs to feel genuine connection. Our soul thrives when we sense a strong and genuine connection to the people around us. The depth of connectedness our heart feels with those closest to us really is the primary factor that determines not only the quality of our relationships, but the meaningfulness, fullness and greatness of our soul's interpretation of life. In other words, the thing that most significantly determines your quality of life will be the depth of connection your heart perceives you have with those closest to you.

Rich people are miserable if they don't have it. Poor people are happy if they do have it. The quality of your connections determines the quality of your life far more than anything else. This is why your marriage deserves to be your top priority in life. You win at marriage, you win at life.

REJECTION AND EGO To understand what we mean when we talk about this type of connection, it might help to see it as the opposite of rejection. Rejection can be such a destructive force when it comes to the development of our psychological selves and the experience of marriage. For all of us, at some point, we experience our first feeling of disconnection or rejection from the ones we were seeking connection and belonging to. This happens to everyone, but every heart is different and has different needs and different reactions to the feeling of rejection. At a very young age, without knowing what we are doing, or why we are doing it, we develop strategies for avoiding those terrible feelings of rejection, disconnection, lack of belonging and aloneness.

When these strategies become our regular response whenever we feel 9 any type of tension, disconnection or rejection from someone in our lives, they can be called coping mechanisms. All of us have felt the pain of our heart being wounded or rejected to differing degrees. That sacred connecting place within each one of us is very delicate, very sensitive, and the shocking truth is that as we age, our heart remains like a child. Many thinkers who have written on this subject believe that our inner heart never adapts to injury, it never grows up, or grows wise or grows calloused. It simply remains vulnerable and raw, innocent, and easily injured.

It needs protection. It is the "emotional" part of us. It's the part that feels all the emotions we feel. It is the thing inside of us that believes, hopes and loves. It's the part of us that feels shame, embarrassment, and abandonment.

It cannot turn these emotions off, it can only try to insulate them. T het hi nga bo ut ou r h ea rt is th at it te nd s t o s ee k belonging and connection with every other life that it comes in contact with. It automatically, innocently searches for connection, for belonging, to believe in, to hope in, and to share identity with. It's like a lonely child seeking friendship from all the other kids on the playground. Our heart is always seeking acknowledgment, acceptance, harmony and love from everyone it comes into contact with.

It is no wonder it gets so wounded all the time. When we experience negative feedback and interaction from parents, relatives or peers during our childhood, we learn to hide or suppress those parts of us we believe they are rejecting and we naturally begin to create an alternative self image that behaves in a way we think those around us will approve of. 28 By the time we are adults, we ALL have a hidden inner childlike heart, who is our truest self, and we ALL have an outer hardened shell, which is the projected image we portray ourselves to be to the outside world. This outer shell is sometimes called the "ego" in secular circles and correlates with the concept of "the flesh" in the Bible. We use this ego to shield and insulate our inner child and protect it from trying to make a full on connection to everyone around us so that our heart doesn't get crushed over and over again by uncommitted relationships. When our heart believes it has made a real connection with a trusted adult, but that adult proves in some way to be disconnected, disapproving or in

the worst cases, abusive, it can be extremely traumatic and it can trigger all the emotions and fears associated with insecurity.

As a result, we create any number of coping mechanisms to try to protect us from those feelings as we go forward. We will often carry those coping mechanisms subconsciously into our adult relationships. While our egos and coping mechanisms aren't inherently negative, they can be very unhealthy and make it challenging for others to connect with us on anything but a superficial level. The degree to which you allow your truest self to feel and be known is the degree to which your truest self is accessible for rejection or connection. So while we operate out of our egos, our hearts will be shielded from experiencing full-on rejection, but it will come at the cost of experiencing full-on connection.

Real connection occurs only when someone feels that their true self, not their ego, is genuinely understood, respected, and cared for. The quality and depth of your relationships hinges on how well your soul feels this connection with another soul. In general, the depth your partner feels you are connected to their internal world or thoughts, wants and emotions will determine how deeply they experience your union with them.

QUESTION: What is one thing your heart would want your partner to know about it right now? **MARRIAGE CAN HEAL YOUR HEART** In this book, I use "ego" to describe the "small separated self," a conceptual description rather than an ancient Greek definition. The word ego comes from Latin and means "I," or the one who thinks they are all alone in the world and they must therefore fend for themselves. In the Bible, we can trace this idea back to the garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were tricked into believing the lie that they were alien to God and separate from Him. Contrary to the cliché, the original sin was less about eating fruit, as it was about believing the lie that we all are detached from God, and therefore we can somehow succeed or fail independently from each other.

In the biblical story found in Genesis 1-2, the Bible offers the origin story of the six days of Creation. In Genesis 1:3-4, it speaks of the first day of creation and it says, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good..." The Hebrew of Genesis is written in a way that it is not in the Hebrew language and whenever there is translation into another language, the original meaning of different passages can get lost in translation. In this case, when it says, God saw that the light was "good," the original Hebrew word for "good" is "tov." In this context, tov means "to be functioning according to its design." It is not a dogmatic moral good, but a functional good. It is saying that God had an idea in His mind about light, so He created the light, and then He inspected it and He saw that the light was functioning according to the design He had envisioned. This same language is used for each consecutive day of creation.

God would think up a design, create it, inspect it, and if it passed inspection He would say, "It is good" or, "It is functioning according to the idea I had in My mind." So the six days of creation continue; on the second day God creates the skies and the waters, and sees that they are "good," on the third day He creates the land and vegetation, and sees that they are "good," and so on until the sixth day when he creates man. But when God inspects man, in Genesis 2:18, He says, "It is NOT good..." Man was not functioning according to the idea God had for him, at least not yet, and as the scripture reads on, we find out the reason God found man dysfunctional. The full passage reads, "It is not good for the man to be alone." [so] "I will make a helper suitable for him." Wow! In all of the original creation, only one thing was NOT good. It was not good for man to be alone.

Man was not capable of functioning according to his design if he remained alone. Aloneness is dysfunction. So God thought of a very interesting solution. In Genesis 2:21, it says that God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and when he was sleeping, God took a rib and fashioned a woman from it. Now we know from Genesis 1:27, that both male and female were created in God's image.

This suggests that God must embody both the masculine and feminine natures, and that Adam originally embodied both the masculine and feminine natures. When God fashioned Eve, it would stand to reason that He separated the feminine from the masculine to create Adam and Eve as two separate people, destined only to become functional upon successful reconnection. Could this be what God design us for? To find connection? Could it be true that anything less is dysfunctional, or even a counterfeit to our real purpose?

If we read on, we will see Adam and Eve's relationship is no picnic! And from this context, we see that their struggle (and ours) is likely intended, for the greater the struggle, the greater the opportunity to prove your love. "Love covers a multitude of sins" - 1 Peter 4:8. This is the Bible's very first lesson. The Bible is the story of mankind's purpose and it begins by making the point that man and woman are incomplete without each other.

In other words, without submitting ourselves to the requirements of connection, we remain broken to God's design for us. Can you think of any greater way to prove you can love than through the connection you have in your marriage? I find it interesting that the Bible never tells us that Adam ever woke up from his sleep. What if all of humanity's splintered history was merely a dream? Could it be that the invention of our ego is merely an illusion and that our aloneness is merely a lie our lives and marriages are meant to prove wrong?

HEAVEN OR HELL I don't have many dreams, and even fewer that make any sense, but I once had a dream in which I died and was floating up to heaven when an angel stopped me and said, "Wait, you can't go in." I said, "Yes I can." And he said, "No, not right now. This is the appointed time that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit preach the Gospel to each other." I was confused. "What?" I said, "Why do They need to have the Gospel preached?..." "SHHH" the angel shushed my question, "Listen" He said. He didn't want me to interrupt. He was leaning in trying to listen and I quickly realized the opportunity.

I leaned forward to listen too and I heard Jesus say to our Father, "Be blessed Father, for you are not alone." Then I woke up. That was all I heard before I was awoken. My first thought when I awoke was, "That's not the Gospel!" But the more I have thought about it in the years I have lived since that dream, I have become convinced that really is the truest Gospel there is. From God's perspective and ours. Jesus reconnected us.

We are no longer alone. Whether it is C.S. Lewis' "The Great Divorce," or John Milton's "Paradise Lost," or Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologica," there have been many brilliant theologians who have suggested the deepest levels of hell would be existence in utter alone-ness. The Bible teaches us that Jesus reconciled us to God and for this reason, we need not feel utterly alone. When God issues the great commandment to love others, what He is telling us to do is to rescue the world from aloneness.

Aloneness is the sickness the Gospel heals. Marriage is the ultimate expression of this Gospel. If you have each other right now, be thankful you are not alone. You can make this relationship anything you want it to be. I do believe this life is a test of whether or not we will learn connection and God has already sent the perfect instructors to teach us how to pass this test.

The instructors He sent have the names, "husband" and "wife" and "son" and "daughter" and "mother" and "father." Family is where you escape the hell of aloneness & meaninglessness. But they come at the cost of your "detached-self." These relationships will demand you stop protecting yourself and instead do the exact opposite. You must sacrifice your "separated-self" or else you fail the most important test of your life; the test of love, the test of connection, the test of whether you will choose heaven or hell, connectedness or aloneness. Marriage is the antithesis of the story of utter alone-ness, or hell, or detachment, or drifting alone through a sea of souls and never connecting or belonging to any of them. If you take responsibility for your relationship, invest in it, and thoughtfully use your

abilities and resources to make it the best it can be, it can become exactly what you design it to be.

EVERY INTERACTION IS A DECLARATION OF REJECTION OR CONNECTION Our hearts often carry the expectation that marriage will be the safest and most secure of relationships and as a result, our hearts often let down their guard completely on the wedding day, entering the union fully unshielded, open and raw. Because of this, every single interaction we have with our partner has a magnified significance, sending strong signals of rejection or connection to our hearts every time we interact. This can feel emotionally overwhelming at times, but it is also likely the greatest opportunity you will ever have for the deepest of human connections. The sensations, expectations, values and dreams of your partner's inner child are all extremely sacred to their heart. If you do not learn to understand, respect and mutually value these things, you'll likely trample all over them, causing insult and injury.

When this happens, your partner's heart will often go into protection mode and respond by placing an emotional wall between you and them because it sees you as a potential threat to what it considers fragile and most sacred. You might be tempted to argue or disregard some of the things your spouse's heart considers sacred, considering them childish or irrational, and they might be! Just like a child, their heart won't care if it is childish or irrational, their heart only knows how to feel the feelings it feels. It can't help feeling however it feels, and if you want to have a truly incredible marriage, you must learn how to recognize, understand, and find beauty in the things your partner's heart wants, thinks, feels and finds sacred. It's as if you have an emotional bank account and every time your spouse sends your heart a signal of connection, it's a deposit into the wealth of your union, and every time your spouse sends your heart a signal of rejection, it is a withdrawal from the wealth of your union.

The quality of your marriage experience will be determined by how strongly your heart feels known, cared for and connected to your spouse's heart. If you want to experience your greatest possible union, you must start treating each interaction as a deposit into your partner's heart. Every interaction will either sow connection or rejection. It doesn't mean you have to automatically agree with everything your partner says. It just means you begin to foster genuine respect for their internal world and their emotional state.

How well you know, respect and connect to your partner's heart is the number one indicator of the trajectory and quality of your relationship. The greatness of your relationship will not be based on how many vacations you have, or how big of a house you can buy, it will be determined by the quality of your everyday interactions with your partner; how you greet each other when one of you comes home, how you go to bed together, how you wake up together, how you prepare and eat meals together, how you manage a house together, and so on... The signals you send as you do these everyday things together are the greatest indicator of the quality of your marriage and life. This is the first secret to unlocking a winning marriage. **APPLICATION**

QUESTION: Take a moment to describe the state of your current everyday interactions mentioned in the paragraph above. Are you being intentional with these interactions? Do you leave them feeling more connected or rejected, why? What are some simple ways you can improve them?

A WARNING In the chapters ahead, we are going to train you to further understand and minister to your partner's heart. Before we start however, we'd like to highlight a common pitfall we've witnessed. One tendency we've observed is that once hearts are awakened and language has been given to the feelings of connection and rejection, people can become hyper sensitive and abnormal pressure can develop to scrutinize and overanalyze every interaction. This heightened sensitivity is not our intention but it is sometimes a necessary step to go through as you begin to really understand the language of your connection. Instead of using the knowledge we share to foster hyper-sensitivity, we encourage you to use it to open meaningful dialogue.

Think of yourselves as resilient soldiers, resistant toward taking offense, yet transparent with what invigorates or diminishes your hearts—discussions meant to happen in a safe setting between you and your partner. While it's essential for partners to be in tune with each other's feelings in a marriage, it's equally important to safeguard your union from allowing emotional offenses to disrupt the truth of your union. A NECESSARY AGREEMENT: 1. You should clear at least 60 minutes of uninterrupted time for this exercise. Remove all distractions. 2.

As you go through this series, there will be many opportunities for hearts to be laid bare and genuine honesty and transparency to occur. Whatever is revealed about your partner, you MUST NEVER use it to ever shame, belittle, or attack them in the future. These are the most sacred and sensitive aspects of your partner's heart. If you use this information to later attack, you will take ten steps backward in your relationship. Before you move forward, you must both vow to never exploit or use the intimate knowledge of your partner's heart to shame, blame or attack in any way in the future.

Right now, verbally make this agreement with your partner and sign below to show you have done so. 9 Husband:
Wife:

APPLICATION QUESTIONS TO ANSWER: The goal of these questions is to help you gain greater understanding of each other's internal worlds. You can write your answers down individually, then discuss them together, or just go through them together. Please keep in mind that blaming your partner or yourself is counterproductive for this exercise. Please stick to just simply answering without pointing any fingers of blame for now.- Are there any fears or concerns you may have about opening up and being totally honest about your feelings with your partner?- Are there any aspects of your child-like needs that you think may be embarrassing, shameful or weak?- Are there any aspects of your inner child or heart that you feel you have had to hide or suppress, or even kill over the years? (Don't blame)- Are there any regular interaction habits in your relationship that leave you feeling rejected? What are they?- Are there any regular interaction habits in your relationship that leave you feeling more connected?

What are they? 9 - What is one simple and easy interaction habit your partner could start doing that would make your heart feel cared for and connected each time it is done?

APPLICATION: There is an odd predictor of divorce that I would like to use to illustrate the importance of this application exercise. It is that when couples stop saying goodbye when they leave, it is a sign that they are well on the road to divorce. Nothing reveals the current state of your marriage like your regular every day interactions. For this exercise, we want you to intentionally upgrade your seven most common daily interactions. Have a discussion, agree upon a small and easy way to upgrade the following interactions: - How you interact when you wake up.- How you say good night.- How you say hello after being apart.- How you say goodbye.- How you ask for help and respond when asked for help. - How you address a complaint and respond to complaints.- How you flirt and how you respond to flirting. 9

MEASURE 2. THE AWARENESS OF YOUR COMMUNICATION TWO TYPES OF COMMUNICATION MAKE A WINNING MARRIAGE We would like to help you identify two distinct types of commu

nication that are both vital for incredible unions. While these types of communication are certainly related, we like to differentiate them because each requires a totally different skill set to master. One deals with reading and responding to your partner's expectations and the other deals with reading and responding to their emotions. A winning marriage will excel in both types of communication. UNDERSTANDING & COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS Over the years, whenever we meet with a couple, one of the first things we ask them to do is memorize this phrase, "Expectations without communication will lead to disaster." This is truly a fundamental relational truth.

Unmet 9 expectations are a primary source of conflict in relationships. And the primary reason expectations go unmet is because they were not communicated effectively. My wife and I have at least one date night per week, but because we enjoy spontaneity we don't always make elaborate plans very far in advance. We like a balance of thoughtful planned out dates and spontaneous-follow-the-fun dates. The problem is that sometimes, even when we both want the same thing, expectations might become misaligned, which can lead to offense, which can tarnish the night.

Expectations can even ruin an otherwise amazing date. Let's say Charles, who was eager to surprise his wife Julie with a special evening, plans to tell her after work that he wants to take her for a scenic drive, but secretly he plans to surprise her with a reservation at her favorite restaurant. Meanwhile, Julie encounters an old friend who practices naturopathy. This friend offers to come over and conduct some tests to address health concerns Charles has been having. Unable to reach Charles due to his work meeting, she decides to invite the friend over without Charles knowing.

When Charles finishes his meeting, he's excited to come home and rush Julie off on the drive, but when he comes home, he finds their friend there. While he is able to show hospitality on the outside, anxiety hits his heart as his expectations now seem threatened. As the tests seem to drag on and on, all he can think about is how his chance to have a romantic evening with Julie is slipping away. 9 Finally, when the friend goes to the other room to get the results, Charles quickly asks Julie if she would like to go on the drive after their friend leaves. She replies by saying she already ordered takeout while he was occupied and she suggests they invite their friend to stay for dinner too. Frustration begins to boil in Charles, and Julie can sense it but has no clue why he might be feeling so angry.

To be fair, Charles doesn't exactly know why either. This is because the logic behind his feelings are yet still buried just below the surface of his consciousness so he is feeling the effects of disappointment, but the rationale behind the disappointment is not readily clear. As a result his heart projects frustration toward Julie, and in response, she becomes offended that he is treating her so poorly when all she wanted to do was bless him. Even when expectations aim to bless someone, without clear communication and agreement, they often lead to offense. Years ago, Kimberly and I realized this and turned it into a code.

Whenever one of us felt frustrated-say, about a task dragging on or an unmet expectation-we'd ask, 'Honey, what's your expectation for this afternoon?' It was our way of saying, 'I'm getting frustrated, we're out of sync, and I want us to be on the same page.'

QUESTION: Can you identify a time when expectations have lacked effective communication, thus prompting offense or resentment in your own relationship? 9 EXPECTATIONS LEAD TO DISAPPOINTMENT BUT COMMUNICATION LEADS TO UNITY You might have heard someone say, "Expectations are the root of all

heartache." or "The secret to happiness is low expectations." or "If you expect nothing from anybody, you'll never be disappointed." These all point out the fact that when we allow our hearts to hope in some expectation, we are inviting the possibility for a future disappointment or offense. In theory, if you never placed any expectations on your partner, you would never be disappointed or offended by them. You could eliminate all of your disappointments just by doing this one thing. We realize this is unrealistic, but it is one secret to a happy marriage. Lower expectations, heighten your acceptance of your partner's inability to completely satisfy your wants, and enjoy contentment.

Your expectations really are one of the biggest enemies of your contentment. 1 Timothy 6:6 (NIV) says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." Now obviously, lowering your expectations of your partner does not seem like the best way to reach the best marriage ever status. I only want to mention it because it is sometimes the only fruitful option a person has in marriage. There are really only a few options when you face disappointment over some offensive thing your partner continues to do. On one hand you can keep your expectations and be continuously disappointed and upset which makes you a miserable person to yourself and others, or, you can let go of your expectations, accept the current state of your family, and try to be content, or, you can get really good at communication, continuing to seek cooperation and agreement, thus paving the way for slow but perpetual improvement. In our experience, couples who adopt a combination of the second and third options achieve the happiest results.

That is, they communicate about their wants, then agree and strategize together how they can improve in every way, but then practice patience and acceptance when partners are yet incapable. Good Marriages are where you patiently help your partner become the best version of themselves. That includes being the best partner to you they can be. Before surrendering to lower expectations in your marriage, take a step back and ask yourself if you've truly expressed the depth of your desires to your partner. It's highly likely they're unaware of the significance these desires hold in your heart.

To bridge this gap, you might schedule a sincere conversation with your partner. Begin by sharing your love and appreciation for them, and then gently share your long-held expectations and the pain you've felt from their absence. Be clear that you've come to accept your partner as they are, and that you no longer will expect them to provide that need for you, but that you will now provide for that need for yourself unless they can help you think of a better way to help you get your needs met. This vulnerable approach may seem challenging, but it could be the very communication your relationship needs to enter its next stage of growth and self-improvement. By having an open and honest discussion, you may find that your expectations can be met in ways you never thought possible, without having to compromise on what matters most to you.

APPLICATION: Think of an ongoing offense or disappointment you have been experiencing due to a repetitive behavior of your partner. It could be anything. Now go through the steps of communication in the previous paragraphs. **COMMUNICATING EMOTIONS & HEART INVITATIONS** Now moving on to the second type of essential communication we want you to focus on: Emotional communication. And for this we have another saying we like to ask couples to memorize; Whatever you don't work out, you'll act out.

Or more accurately, whatever you don't work out with words, you will act out with attitudes or actions. This is the first thing you should understand when trying to master emotional communication. We get more in depth with this in a later chapter but we want to introduce you to this concept now. When your heart gets offended by your partner, if you don't find words to express your heart, or even if you do find words, but you feel they are not being heard, your heart will always search for ways to communicate until it feels heard. This emotional communication usually comes in the form of attitudes and actions.

In other words, if your heart finds itself in an environment that is not welcoming or patient enough for verbal communication, it will use attitudes and actions instead of words to communicate how it feels. These attitudes and actions are our heart's way of forcing communication even when words are not found to express its feelings. Learning to accurately decipher your partner's non verbal cues-like their tone or body language-can help you quickly understand what they might be feeling even when they can't seem to find words to express it.

QUESTION: There are many negative attitudes and actions our hearts might tempt us to use to communicate. These might include; Avoidance, Defensiveness, Stonewalling, Aggression and Anger, Blame and Criticism, Substance Abuse, Negative Self-Talk, Lying or Deception, Passive-Aggressiveness, Comparison to Others, Over-Reliance on Partners, Social Withdrawal, punching walls, slamming doors, raising voices, etc... Can you describe the common attitudes or actions you use when you can't find words to express your emotion? **LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF YOUR PARTNER'S EMOTION** As we established in the previous chapter, the quality of your relationship will be cultivated by the level of responsiveness you both exhibit to each other's internal emotional world. Every time you accept the invitation to meet your partner in their inner world, you sow seeds of connection into their heart. Every time you show care for your partner's heart in this way, it causes a deepening sense of connection and belonging to expand.

How well you offer and respond to these heart invitations almost exclusively determines the trajectory of your relationship. While this course offers many valuable lessons, learning to speak your partner's heart language stands out as the most crucial-and it might take years, even decades, to master. Yet it's the key to your relationship's success. When both partners excel at this type of communication, your marriage will usually enter a state of steady growth. The next paragraph tells why I'm so confident. Starting in the 1980s, researcher Dr.

John Gottman and his colleagues embarked on a quest to understand the underlying dynamics of successful relationships. Over the decades to come, they formed the Gottman Institute which conducted studies on thousands of couples from diverse backgrounds and meticulously observed the same couple's interactions consistently over several decades, recording all the data of their emotional and behavioral patterns through the decades. Over time, the researchers began making several key conclusions, and those conclusions led to some major changes in the couples counseling and therapy world. The researchers developed what is now known as the "Gottman Method" which is a style of relationship therapy that takes a 100% scientific approach and is widely considered a research-informed approach to couples therapy. Central to this research was the establishment of the "Love Lab," a specially designed facility, like a hotel, where couples were invited to engage in everyday activities while being monitored.

Through this naturalistic observation, Gottman identified key behaviors and communication patterns that distinguished stable, happy couples from those who were distressed or headed for separation. Possibly the largest breakthrough discovery they made came when they discovered that the way a couple responds to each other's invitations to connect on an internal level largely determined the trajectory of their relationship. They found that couples who had the habit of responding affirmatively to each other's bids for internal connection were highly likely to later have a happy and fulfilling marriage while couples who had a habit of responding negatively to each other's bids for internal connection were highly likely to eventually separate or seek divorce. **UNDERSTANDING BIDS FOR CONNECTION** A bid for connection is any time one partner invites attention, affirmation, affection, or any other positive connection. Bids can be verbal or nonverbal and can range from subtle gestures to direct requests for attention.

A bid is any invitation to connect to your partner's internal world of what they are experiencing emotionally. We like to teach that it is an invitation by one partner to another to understand any of their thoughts, wants or feelings. The Gottman framework describes three primary ways to respond to a bid for connection; turn toward it, turn away from it, or turn against it. Here is an example below: The Bid: I come home from work and walk in the door and when I see my

wife I say, "Wow, what a day, I am so exhausted..." that right there is a bid for connection. It is inviting a connection to what I am experiencing in my inner world or heart. 9 Turning toward: Now she could offer an affirming response, like, "oh no, did something bad happen?

Let me come give you a hug..." Turning away: Or she could offer any number of negative responses, like, not acknowledging me and ignoring me all together, which would make me feel rejected and disconnected or like I don't belong. Turning against: Or perhaps she might respond saying something like, "You're tired? I'm the one that should be saying I'm tired, I had to stay home with the kids and..." This would be a rejection of my bid for connection but at least she is replacing it with a sloppy attempt for her own bid for connection. This too might make me feel rejected or disconnected, unless I found the love within myself to forget my feelings for a second and respond with care, and say something like, "Oh no! I am sorry.

Did you have a tough day with the kids?" As you can see from this example, the way we respond to bids for connection can create a domino effect in either direction. As you begin to implement this knowledge into your own relationship by recognizing and responding affirmingly to your partner's bids instead of taking offense, or responding negatively, your relationship will see immediate improvement. Building healthy communication habits around this understanding will set you on the course of perpetual improvement in your marriage. Bids for connection can be anything. A look, a gesture, a word... any invitation or interaction of happiness, sadness, pride, embarrassment, shame, guilt, etc...

You can treat bids as any clue 9 that offers a connection to your partner's inner life or the experience of how they feel. They can be gentle invitations to share joy, celebrate milestones, marvel at beauty, or express gratitude - all and any opportunity to deepen our emotional intimacy and strengthen our bond with our partner. THE LOVE LAB DATA: The Gottman research found that the way a couple communicates, understands and responds to bids for heart connection is essential for fostering a deep and meaningful long term relationship. When a couple can do this well, it is called having high emotional intelligence. High emotional intelligence is the primary indicator of successful and fulfilling marriages.

At the Gottman Institute's "Love Lab," researchers observed couples in a quasi-natural setting designed to simulate everyday life. They recorded thousands of interactions and categorized them into different types of bids and responses. The data showed a striking difference between successful and unsuccessful relationships: • Turning Toward: Couples in stable, happy relationships turned toward each other's bids for connection approximately 86% of the time. • Turning Away: Couples who later divorced or reported being unhappy turned toward each other's bids only 33% of the time. 9 As you can see from the data above, the studies found that couples who are more likely to divorce tend to ignore or reject each other's bids for connection at a substantially higher rate. This means that for every one bid for connection that is accepted, there are three that are rejected or ignored. Conversely, couples who are more likely to stay together tend to accept each other's bids for connection at a substantially higher rate.

This means that for every one bid for connection that is rejected, there are three that are accepted. ("Bids and Turns" study, "Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" 1999) The research associated patterns of responding to bids with relationship stability; the often-cited prediction figures should not be understood as an accuracy rate based on bids alone. This was true regardless of the nature of the bids, whether they were small and seemingly insignificant or major and emotionally charged. Dr. Gottman referred to these interactions as deposits or withdrawals in a couple's "emotional bank account." Positive responses to bids add to the account, creating a reserve of goodwill and affection. Negative responses or missed bids withdraw from this account, potentially leading to a deficit that can harm the relationship.

Consistent positive responses to bids were found to build a robust "emotional bank account," fostering resilience and goodwill that helped couples navigate conflicts more effectively. **SOME MORE REAL LIFE EXAMPLES:** Example 1: The Invitation to Connect: On a sunny Saturday morning, Jake suggested to his partner, Emily, that they go for a walk in the park. "It's such a beautiful day. How about we go for a walk together?" he proposed, hoping for some quality time. • Turning Toward: Emily smiled and replied, "That sounds great! I would love to go with you but I have about 30 minutes of work left before I could go.

Is that too late?" By enthusiastically responding to his bid, she acknowledged his desire for connection, reinforcing their closeness. • Turning Away: If Emily had responded with, "Maybe later, I'm busy right now," without looking up from her phone, Jake might have felt dismissed and unimportant. This lack of engagement could lead to feelings of disconnection over time. • Turning Against: If Emily had replied curtly, "Why do you always want to do something when I'm busy?", it would have not only rejected the bid but also introduced unnecessary tension and conflict into their interaction. Example 2: The Need for Reassurance: During a stressful period at work, Lisa felt overwhelmed and anxious. One evening, while Tom was watching a game on TV and simultaneously scrolling on his phone, Lisa came and sat on the couch adjacent to him. After a few minutes, she got a work text, and after tensing up, let out a small curse under her breath. • Turning Toward: Tom paused the TV, put down his phone and turned to her, and said, "Is everything okay?

You seem stressed." By intentionally acknowledging her emotional shift, Tom lets her know her importance to him, making a significant deposit in their emotional bank account, strengthening their bond. 9 • Turning Away: If Tom had responded by ignoring her stress and continuing to watch TV, Lisa would likely feel unloved, uncared for and alone in her anxiety. This lack of interest could erode trust and intimacy. • Turning Against: If Tom had said, "Can you deal with your work somewhere else? You are stressing me out...", it would have added to Lisa's stress and made her feel even more uncared for and unsupported. **PRACTICAL STEPS TO IMPROVE CONNECTION** Opportunities to connect can come from anywhere and they happen several times each day. Every time there is humor, sadness, laughter, struggle, vulnerability, challenge, stress, anger, joy, marvel, interest, curiosity, or anything that offers some revelation of how your partner's soul is experiencing life internally, these are all your greatest opportunities to join them and share this life experience with them.

The measure to which you connect in this way will determine the height of your marital ascendance. Following are a few suggestions to help you 1. 2. Pay Attention: Be mindful of your partner's bids for connection. This requires being present and observant in your interactions. Respond Positively: Make an effort to turn toward your partner's bids.

Show interest, empathy, and support. 9 3. 4. 5. Communicate Openly: Discuss your needs and desires with your partner. Encourage them to share theirs as well. Build Emotional Resilience: Create a habit of positive interactions that can buffer against conflicts and negative exchanges. Practice Gratitude: Regularly express appreciation and gratitude for your partner.

This strengthens your emotional bond and fosters a positive atmosphere.

QUESTION: Can you recall the last time you made a bid for connection with your spouse? How did they respond?

QUESTION: Can you recall the last time your spouse offered you a bid for connection? What did you do?

CONCLUSION The way we respond to our partner's bids for connection can profoundly influence the quality and longevity of our relationships. By understanding and developing thoughtful responses, we can create a foundation of trust, intimacy, and mutual respect. Every bid and response shapes the rhythm and harmony of the relationship, turning ordinary moments into opportunities for deeper connection and love. As you move forward, remember that every bid

is an invitation to enter your partner's inner world and make them feel genuine connection with you. Bids are opportunities to show up for your partner and to reinforce the bond that holds you together. 9 BIDS FOR CONNECTION EXERCISE Rules for engagement: 1.

Go slow. Learning a new language takes time and practice. It is no different with learning the language of the heart, it takes time and practice to get good at it. 2. Clear at least 60 minutes of uninterrupted time for this exercise. Kids should be sleeping or with a babysitter, phones should be turned off and put in a different room.

Remove distractions.

APPLICATION: • Call a mutual friend or family member who you believe has a high emotional intelligence and who will be impartial. If you have no friends that can help you, the second best option is do this on your own. • Explain this concept to them and have them quietly observe you for 10-15 minutes while you enter a disagreement or argument over a real-life ongoing conflict that you have been having in your relationship. • Ask them to keep track of all the bids for connection from each partner and all the responses to those bids during that time. There should be several instances during your argument. NOTE: It might take a bit of trial and error for them to start picking it up if they are not familiar with the concept. 9 • Once the time is up, have them share their notes, and all of you can discuss what you discover about the state of your current emotional intelligence. • Remember, it matters less what you are arguing about and more about how you argue if you want to work toward marital harmony and bliss. • Once your friend or relative is gone, sit facing each other, take each other's hands, and say, "I am committing to you, to get better at speaking the language of your heart, and making you feel more and more known and loved each year for the rest of my life." 9

MEASURE 3: THE SECURITY OF YOUR COMMITMENT SECURITY OR INSECURITY I think it is safe to say that much of our generation lives a far more comfortable and secure

life than our ancestors did. If we go back far enough, most, if not all of our ancestors at some point lived in the wild as hunters and gatherers. In that setting, survival was brutal. The fight to stay alive was real, everything was either predator or prey and in order to survive they had to treat everything as a potential physical threat. Today, we often carry this mentality into our relationships but we do it on an emotional level.

Just as each of us has made a physical environment or home for ourselves with beds and furniture and decorations, we also make an emotional home for ourselves using our internal dialogues and our closest relationships, especially our marriage. When we do not feel safe or secure in our emotional environment anymore, our internal dialogue often gets filled with speculations and accusations and we begin treating every 9 interaction like a potential threat to our emotional life just as our ancestors would have treated every interaction they had in the wild as a potential threat to their physical life. When this happens in marriage, our instincts will trigger, making us hyper alert, hypersensitive and ready to defend ourselves at any moment against anything that can be interpreted as a threat. Anything that could be perceived as neglect, criticism, or carelessness will be magnified, amplified and reacted to with prejudice. T h i s h a p p e n s i n s o m a n y m a r r i a g e s t o d a y.

C o u n t l e s s couples find themselves in this exact situation, especially when it comes to discussing the necessary topics that would enable them to have an incredible marriage. Instead of being able to safely and quickly resolve simple conflicts or address needs or wants within their marriage, partners are triggered at every turn and every interaction seems to only fuel offense. This makes attempts at progress exhausting and counterproductive. When this

happens, it is because there is a larger issue flowing underneath the surface. The subsurface issue is likely that one or both of you are consciously or subconsciously insecure in your relationship and your hostility is really a cry for help, or a cry for security.

Insecurity puts us in a defensive posture and hostile mindset instead of a receptive posture and welcoming mindset. Insecurity really is one of the most destructive forces in a marriage. It directly prevents honest dialogue and relational maturity. For this reason, "Security," which comes from "commitment and trust," is like the base camp of a healthy marriage. STUDIES ON INSECURITY: In 2013, A study¹ was published in the Journal of Marriage and Family that found that feelings of insecurity were a primary predictor of divorce.

The study analyzed data from over 2,000 couples and found that couples who reported higher levels of perceived rejection and insecurity (83% of the sample) were 3.5 times more likely to divorce than those who reported lower levels of insecurity. This study offers a few shocking pieces of information. First, 83% of the couples reported feelings of rejection and insecurity! That is just sad. Second, insecurity vastly increases marital dissatisfaction and divorce.

This is an incredibly alarming revelation. Insecurity is the enemy of your marriage. If you are going to grow and experience your best marriage possible, identifying and addressing your insecurities must become a habit. (*Johnson, W. (2013). Perceived rejection and relationship insecurity as predictors of divorce. Journal of Marriage and Family, 75(5), 1234-1245.) Insecurity in a relationship comes from fear that the relationship will ultimately fail and your heart will be betrayed.

When we are insecure in our marriage, we allow insecurity to sow doubt, speculation and accusation, preventing our hearts from fully trusting or committing to our partner. By doing so, we portray an independent, defensive posture, affirming autonomy and self reliance rather than connection and oneness. Thus, the very act of self-preservation is often the very cause which propels the opposite effect. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the thing insecurity worries about is the very thing insecurity tends to create. Many studies have been done on this subject and they all seem to show that couples who don't fully surrender their hearts to 99 their partner are far more likely to eventually divorce.

On the other hand, by embracing the vulnerability of total commitment, we can experience the full depth and richness of our relationship. It's a trade-off: we must give up our fears and instead give ourselves fully to our partner. While it can be scary to let go of our protection mechanisms, the reward is a relationship that's more authentic, more intimate, and more fulfilling than we ever thought possible. Between your current state and your best relationship possible is a series of conversations that require the highest levels of vulnerability and transparency. These conversations will be nearly impossible to have without insecurities being provoked.

For this reason, the aim of these first four chapters is to help you establish a framework for creating a safe environment for honest and vulnerable communication. If you cannot overcome your insecurities, you will have a very hard time responding to criticisms or offenses your partner might share, no matter how constructive they might try to make it. Your partner will likely avoid helping you become the best version of yourself if you are just going to react negatively out of insecurity anytime they try to address something you can do to improve your connection with them. Insecurity is a source of just about every major type of relational problem there is. Below are listed ten of the major symptoms of insecurity: - Lack of Trust: Insecure individuals may struggle to trust their partner, leading to constant doubts and suspicions about their fidelity or intentions. 9 - Emotional Withdrawal: Insecurity can cause people to withdraw emotionally to protect themselves, resulting in a lack of intimacy and connection.- Increased Jealousy: Feeling insecure can lead to heightened jealousy, causing unnecessary tension and conflict between partners.- Conflict Escalation: Insecure feelings can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, which can escalate quickly if not managed properly.- Communication Issues: Insecurity can hinder open and honest communication.

Partners may refrain from expressing their true feelings or needs out of fear of rejection or conflict.- Fear of Vulnerability: Insecurity may prevent individuals from being fully open and vulnerable with their partner, limiting the depth of their emotional connection.- Defensiveness: When feeling insecure, individuals might react defensively to criticism or perceived threats, leading to arguments and misunderstandings.- Reduced Relationship Satisfaction: Both partners may feel less satisfied in the relationship due to the negative patterns that insecurity creates.- Over-dependence: An insecure partner may rely excessively on their partner for validation and reassurance, which can create an imbalanced dynamic in the relationship.- Self-Sabotage: Insecurity can lead individuals to engage in self sabotaging behaviors that jeopardize the relationship, such as pushing their partner away or ending the relationship prematurely. 9 We should note here that insecurity can also come from a lack of self esteem or self confidence. Like a double edged sword, insecurity can cut when you don't trust your partner faithfulness, but also when you don't believe you are worthy of their faithfulness.

QUESTION: Can you see any of the symptoms of insecurity mentioned above in your relationship? If so, please try to describe the link each symptom has to the insecurity you are feeling in your heart when you practice it. COVENANT MAKES MARRIAGES GET BETTER WITH TIME, NOT WORSE Kimberly recently went out for dinner one evening with a handful of lady friends she had recently met. At one point, one of the ladies asked her what goes into having such an amazing long term marriage. She responded by saying that she and I had made a covenant, and that a covenant is forever.

She explained how our covenant meant that no matter what, we would never even consider divorce. Although it was very hard for the first 20 years, due largely to insecurities and communication, there came a point when we finally started believing we both were truly never going to leave, so there were really only two options; stay dysfunctional and miserable, or start talking through our issues and begin investing into the best possible relationship we could imagine. We then defined what our best marriage would look like, and we both started making changes to give our partner their best marriage possible. As soon as we started being able to have honest conversations about this without insecurities derailing us at 9 every turn, we began improving quickly and we have been consistently improving year by year ever since. There is a farming concept repeated in a handful of places in the Bible that says, "you reap what you sow." What my wife was describing in her interaction with her friends was that we realized that since we were stuck together forever, we would definitely reap whatever relationship we sowed seeds for.

In other words, next year's marriage would be the fruit of this year's efforts.

APPLICATION: Discuss the previous paragraphs. Would you be able to make the same commitment to each other that Jacob and Kimberly made to each other from this point forward? IS MARRIAGE FOUNDED ON EMOTIONS OR CONVICTIONS? Scripture suggests that humans consist of three parts: body, soul and spirit, each with their own desires. The desires of the body, or sensual desires, are the things our five senses long for such as food, comfort, entertainment, and sex.

Similarly, the desires of the soul, which is classically understood to encompass the mind, the will and emotions, are essential for experiencing life's richness. Your mind desires thoughts, your will desires wants, and your emotion desires feelings. Some would argue that the desires of the flesh are evil, and others might argue that the desires of the soul are evil. I personally believe that if they remain within healthy boundaries, they are some of our greatest gifts from God and they should be fully received, appreciated and explored as part of an incredibly rich 9 human experience. Marriage is the healthiest of boundaries in which to explore these pleasures and the extent to which your marriage experiences the pleasures of the body and soul is really the determining factor that most of us cant help but use to measure our marital satisfaction and enjoyment.

That being said, while we can hopefully agree that these desires can offer incredible sources of pleasure and enjoyment, they offer an utterly inadequate foundation for achieving an enduring union. The strongest marriages are not built on fleeting pleasures or emotions, they are built on spiritual truth and conviction. A truly healthy marriage will be grounded in the spirit, not the flesh or soul, and it will be able to weather the storms of life. While many teachings within this book are designed to help you develop both carnal and soulful pleasures within the context of your marriage, there is something greater to base your union upon. Let me explain what I mean.

The New Testament was originally written almost entirely in Greek. Whenever our English New Testament uses the word "spirit," it is being translated from the original Greek word "pneuma." There are actually three primary words in English that the Greek word Pneuma can be translated into; wind, breath or spirit. To help people understand what the New Testament means when it uses the word "spirit", I like to ask them, "What is the difference between wind and air?" Or, "What is the difference between breath and air?" And after thinking about it for a minute, they will usually say, the difference is movement. A spirit is like an invisible but real force that aims us in a specific direction. The "Holy" Spirit is one who aims you toward holiness.

An "evil" spirit is one who aims you toward evil. 9 You r s p i r i t i s t h e u n i q u e p a r t o f y o u t h a t i s a c o n t i n u o u s witness and influential guide to God's highest potential for your life. Your spirit is the force inside of you that wills you to work toward your truest and greatest meaning. This is why my wife and I are still married. Because we both know deep down, that our marriage is the highest good we can achieve in this life. It's the internal witness that says that your marriage and your family is the primary part of God's best version of your life.

Our relationship is a covenant that rests firmly on the foundation of this spiritual truth. This "forever" covenant is the truest definition of love, and therefore is also the only way to learn the greatest commandment, which is love, and love is the best possible thing to do with our lives. While your soul's emotional connection to your spouse will be the greatest determining factor for experiencing enjoyment and satisfaction in your union, this connection will only begin to thrive when built upon the foundation of spiritual truth and conviction. Emotions by themselves should never be seen as a foundation for marriage. Your covenant commitment before God is the foundation of marriage that will enable you to weather the storms of time.

Having an exceptional emotional connection is merely the crown of such a marriage. GRACE There is a powerful transition that happened in me when I realized my wife's motive for loving me was not as much about earning my love back as it was about her being simply obedient to her highest calling in life. She has weathered a storm of dysfunction and hurt to continuously arrive at the conclusion that 9 she will continue to love me with all of her might, simply because it is the best version of herself to do so. Nothing has been more inspirational in my life. My wife's commitment to me has less to do with me deserving or earning it, and more to do with her character and who she is.

The Bible calls this concept grace. Grace is when you are given what you have not earned. She loves me first and foremost because that is her life mission and vow in life. It's a part of who she is. She wants to be the best wife for me for her own sake, not because I have earned it, and it is the same for me.

I want to be a better husband to her than she is wife to me, or at least I hope to equal the grace she gives. You will find this type of holy competition present in all the best and most mature of married lovers. We love because we are lovers, not because our lover earned it. This is what Jesus' life teaches us about God's love. The love we give each other in marriage is not based on what we deserve, but on what we have decided to give regardless.

Your partner WANTS to be committed to you. Out of all the people in the world that could have married you, THEY want to be the best one for you. THEY want to be the best choice you ever made. THEY want to be the best spouse

you could have ever picked. THEY want to win at marriage.

THEY want to be able to say they gave you the best life anyone could have given you. This is about their own identity and their own legacy.

APPLICATION: Please take a moment now to reflect on the paragraphs above and clarify whether the same can be said of your own desire in your relationship. **9 THE FOUR C'S** You might have heard of this term "covenant" before, but many people don't really know what a covenant is and why it is so powerful so I want to explain. There are a lot of ways you can relate to another person and one way I like to categorize or judge relationships is based on the security they provide. The better the security, the stronger the relationship. We have categorized relationships and the security they provide into four levels, we call them the four C's. And at the very bottom there is a carnal-based relationship, which offers zero percent security.

It is 100% based off what you can take without regard to the person you're taking from. Rapists, thieves and other predators offer this type of relationship. They offer 0% security. One step up from a carnal-based relationship is a consumer-based relationship. A consumer base relationship is the type of relationship you have with your local grocery store- you are willing to give to the degree that you're receiving in return.

You might be willing to pay a dollar for an apple if that's a good price but your loyalty is likely based on the value that you are receiving in return, and if a new store opens down the street that offers half price apples for 50 cents you will likely abandon the first relationship for the second one with better prices. Obviously if you have a marriage relationship like this it is doomed to fail. The third level of relationship would be considered a contractual relationship. A contractual relationship can offer quite a bit of security but it's based on the letter of the law and like the Bible teaches, "the letter kills but the spirit gives life." (2 Cor. 3:6) If you really want out of a contractual relationship you can usually find a legal loophole that will allow you to get out. Contractual relationships tend to plan for their dissolution at the very beginning of the relationship Which sets the tone of legalistic insecurity throughout.

In contrast to all of these, the most secure form of relationship is a covenant. The word covenant means to cut. It literally means the sacrifice, or cutting of one's independence for the sake of union with the partner. It is not merely an agreement between two parties, it is a union between two parties. The two have become one.

Because a covenant lasts forever, it is supposed to remove all threats of rejection, betrayal and divorce. When this truly happens, insecurity can finally be put to rest and genuine honesty can emerge, because you know, even if you reveal the worst parts of yourself, your partner is not going to abandon you. They have sworn to be there for you as your ally to help you better yourself no matter what that looks like forever. This security should remove the lion's share of insecurity, prompting genuine intimacy, personal growth and set the stage for the deepest levels of connection and belonging possible. This is the treasure and "goodness" that covenant marriage can bring to its members.

THE THREE INGREDIENTS OF A COVENANT A covenant is the most secure type of relationship there is and is initiated when two people gather before witnesses to exchange three things. These three things have been used to establish covenants in just about every culture since the beginning of our recorded history and we continue to use them to establish covenant in almost every culture to this day. The three ingredients of a covenant are a vow, a sacrifice and a seal. When you go to a wedding, the bride and groom stand at an altar (place of sacrifice) where they make a vow to sacrifice their independence forever, and then they exchange rings as the sign or seal of their marriage covenant. These three ingredients are exchanged before witnesses to initiate a covenant, but they also act as three disciplines that will completely destroy insecurity and safeguard your union if they are practiced on a consistent basis throughout your union.

In fact, the more you practice them, the more secure your union will feel. Read on to understand the disciplines behind each of these: 1. Vows. Vows are to be viewed as promises kept unto death. You make your vows at a wedding ceremony but the way you demonstrate the power of the principal behind vows, is to keep your word and be honest with your partner always, no matter what.

If you cannot keep your word for some unforeseen reason, submit your mistake to them and acknowledge it. If you are a person of your word always and are always honest, it is hard for your partner to maintain insecurity. 2. Sacrifices: When you got married, you offered your independence as a sacrifice upon the altar. The way you demonstrate this sacrifice is by taking up your cross daily by making your partner's desires equal to or greater than your own every opportunity you get. When you do this consistently, there is little room for the lies of insecurity to find a place to land.

There is just too much evidence of the testimony of your union for any suspicions to take root. 3. Seals: When you exchange rings or other seals as the sign of your marriage union, they are meant to be worn from that day forward as a way to publicly acknowledge and honor the exclusive position your covenant partner has in your life. The way you demonstrate this daily is by always finding ways to publicly honor your spouse. In addition to this, since the beginning, all marriages are only considered consummated once the couple engages in sexual intercourse. While rings are considered the public sign of marriage covenant, Sex is considered the personal sign of your marriage covenant.

To honor your covenant, show physical affection and sexual desire for your partner as often as possible. So there are two seals to a marriage covenant; public honor and private sex. These three disciplines, or four if you count the two seals, are your marriage's primary antidote for insecurity. If you will employ these disciplines and work at making them consistent, you will safeguard your marriage against insecurity. Conversely, the longer one or more of these disciplines is absent, the more opportunity you give insecurity to rise.

APPLICATION: Take some time to discuss the current state of the three elements of covenant in your relationship and then discuss if you see room for new commitments or improvement in any of those areas. 9 NOTE: While commitment is the glue that holds a marriage together, it's important to recognize when it might be harmful. In cases of abuse or toxicity, unwavering commitment can trap a partner in an unsafe situation. If you're facing such challenges, seek professional help or support from trusted loved ones. Healthy commitment thrives in a context of mutual respect and safety. 9 DEFINING TRUST

MEASURE 4. THE BOUNDARY OF YOUR TRUST Trust is when you allow someone else to share responsibility for the things your heart cares for most. Trust tempts you to

risk your heart on the confidence that someone will show up for you in the moment of your need. More specific to marriage, trust when you are willing to risk your heart on the confidence that your partner will show up for you in ALL the ways that are meaningful to you. In the previous chapter we explored the fundamental role of covenant commitment in a relationship and how it serves as a remedy for insecurity. In this lesson we'll focus on how trust is equally crucial. Together, commitment and trust act as the dual foundations that will shape the limits of your connection.

Trust is also vital for dispelling insecurity as fear only exists in the vacuum of trustlessness. Several studies have been done on the role and power of trust in relationships. They all show trust as a primary necessity for all 9 healthy

relationships. Here are a few of the findings from recent studies: • Couples reporting higher levels of distrust are over 60% more likely to experience marital breakdown compared to those with higher trust levels. (Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R.

W. (2000). "The Science of Marriage: A Seven-Year Story." Journal of Family Psychology.) • Couples who lacked trust were approximately 70% more likely to experience infidelity than those who had a strong trust foundation. (Miller, R. S., & Kiven, C. (1994). "The Role of Trust in Romantic Relationships: Predicting Infidelity." Archives of Sexual Behavior.) • Couples who actively worked on building trust through positive interactions and communication had a significantly lower risk of divorce-up to 80% lower than those who did not. (Source: Gottman, J. M. (1994).

"What Predicts Divorce?: The Relationship Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes." New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.) **TRUST IS DIFFERENT THAN FAITH** Faith is when you believe in and act on someone else's commitment to you. Faithfulness is when you believe in and act on your own commitment to them. To have faith in God is to believe in His commitment or word to you. To be faithful to God is to keep your own commitment or word to God. It is the same way in your marriage.

To have faith in your partner is to trust in their commitment and word. To be faithful to your partner is to keep your commitment and word to them. 9 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." - Heb. 11:1 (ESV) There is a difference between faith and trust. "Faith" is a belief that someone or something will come through for you in the future. "Trust," however, is when you give someone custody over part of your heart and rely on them to take care of some important aspect of your life. You may offer your trust purely on blind faith, or you may withhold your trust until someone has proven their trustworthiness over several years.

You may find cause to withdraw trust once given, and you may find cause to again give trust once revoked. In long term relationships, partners tend to start with an eager trust that is based mostly on faith or hope, but slowly it evolves into a trust only in the areas your partner has shown desire and responsibility for.

APPLICATION: Please discuss the definitions above. Describe the vision you had of your life together when you first considered getting married. Then discuss the state of trust you currently have in your relationship. Is it based on a hope in the future (faith) or is it based more on evidence from the past? Why?

TWO MEASURES OF TRUST: EXTERNAL & INTERNAL EXPECTATIONS To measure trust with external expectations, we would look at the level of trustworthiness and responsibility you might have in keeping up with things like finances, schedules, chores, punctuality, organization and general awareness of the necessities of operating a family and household. And to measure trust with 9 internal expectations, we would look at the level to which you know and manage the thoughts, wants and feelings of your partner's heart. These are two different but necessary types of trust in a marriage. After all, you can have a partner who is highly dependable with household responsibilities and duties, but they are totally clueless when it comes to being aware of the needs and wants of your heart. When it comes to things like empathy, affection or romance, they might show no care at all, or if they do, it might seem like they're only acting out of mechanical duty or responsibility.

Conversely, you might have a partner who is a type of senseless romantic, fully attentive to their partner's heart, but they are totally irresponsible and mindless when it comes to household responsibilities and duties. It might seem like they only act responsible with outward things as a response when they realize how much it means to their partner's heart. Oddly enough these two opposites often attract and find themselves in a marriage together! God's way of making a person whole through union (likely for the sake of their kids).

QUESTION: In light of the paragraphs above, Take a moment to have a discussion about how you might increase your partner's level of trust for you in these areas. **TRUST & TRUSTWORTHINESS** The level to which you demonstrate trustworthiness and dependability will largely determine the amount of stress your partner must endure to remain married to you. Your partner's trust in you is like the barometer for how dependable they think you are with the things that are most important to them. When you are not trustworthy or dependable, especially with the things that are more impacting to your partner's heart, your partner must work harder to manage the disappointment and also to provide those things for themselves without offense toward you. Those who have high trust will rely on their partner to steward the vulnerable hopes and dreams of their heart, as well as the important responsibilities that come with household and kids.

Those with high trust will have no hesitation allowing their needs to depend on their partner. They will look forward with eager anticipation to interactions with their partner and opportunities to share the events of the day with them. Their hearts will be confident and excited for all the things their partner has taken responsibility for. They will be eager to include their partner in any way they can, in just about all they do because they trust their partner's presence will lessen the stress and improve the outcome. On the other hand, those who have low trust, will not trust their partner with heart matters nor life matters.

They will likely feel they have been let down one too many times so they must take control and make sure they do not depend on their partner for the things they need any longer. They might pursue others to share their joys and stresses instead of pursuing their spouse because their spouse has shown a history of not caring or responding to their heart with consideration. They might buy themselves gifts or plan outings themselves instead of trying to do it with their partner or waiting for their partner to initiate any action. Or perhaps they might stop asking their partner for help because they have been disappointed too many times. These self provisions can actually be a healthy reaction to the realization that you cannot depend on your partner for certain things, after all, it is not a realistic expectation that your partner will be able to fulfill all your interests.

A better strategy is to communicate and agree together on how best to fulfill each desire and need, whether through your partner or somewhere else. Every relationship enables differing levels of autonomy or dependency for its partners and those levels can radically change over time.

QUESTION: Where would you say the state of your trust is right now, is your trust deteriorating, staying the same or getting stronger? Why?

APPLICATION: Discuss your own needs, along with your current levels of autonomy and dependency, then come up with a strategy together on the best way for each of you to get your most pressing needs met. **TRUST IS THE MEASURE OF ONENESS:** I believe oneness is the gold medal of marriage. One of the resources we have created for our members is called the nine phases of marriage, which is an outline of phases that marriages often experience over their lifetime. If a couple continues to grow and develop in a healthy way, the final phase that one can graduate into is oneness. Oneness is the destination we will all eventually arrive at if we continue to submit ourselves to love.

Oneness is the manifestation of wholeness in Christ, and harmony with those you love. The reason I bring up oneness is because the level of trust you have in your relationship is what determines the level of oneness you can experience. I will explain why. Again, trust is when you allow someone else to share responsibility for the things your heart cares about most. Trust tempts you to risk your heart on the confidence that your partner will show up for you in ALL the ways you hope, need or expect them to. But when they fail to meet some expectation, which happens almost every day in marriage, it can feel like a breach of trust.

When trust is breached over and over in some area, there are four reasonable responses: 1. 2. 3. 4. Turn off your heart, ignore the offense and ignore the pain. Get angry and resentful, perhaps even vengeful. Communicate and try to teach them to meet your expectations in that area. Communicate and tell them you have accepted they are not going to change, so in order to remove this conflict from your relationship, you will change. So without resentment, you are no longer going to expect them to provide this for you, but you will now find a way to provide it for yourself.

The healthiest marriages practice the third and fourth options. One of the well established statistics the Gottman Institute discovered is that about 69% of all marital conflicts are perpetual and will remain an issue throughout the duration of a marriage. 9 This percentage number is now well established and has remained consistently true over decades. This means if you are irritated by some ongoing disagreement or clash in beliefs, statistically you only have a 31% chance of resolving that conflict through one or both of you "changing." This tells us that acceptance is likely the best strategy (number four). And I would agree that is a good option, BUT, there's a problem. Acceptance leaves little room for oneness.

In the absence of trust, partners tend to function independently. And for every expectation that I withdraw from my partner, I offer them one less opportunity to experience oneness with me. This is why the level of trust you have in your marriage determines the level of oneness you can experience. The less you trust your partner, the more you must provide for your own heart's needs independently, and the less oneness you thus allow. When Kimberly and I were first married, I had no idea how to meet her expectations, or even that she had any.

She had been taught that a good wife will never complain so she spent the first five years being hurt and offended at me before she finally began to let it all out. Once she started communicating, it took me another five years before I started really truly listening to her, taking her communication seriously, and trying to improve myself for her. In the meantime, she began shutting down parts of her heart toward me and giving me less and less opportunity to disappoint her or hurt her feelings. Then we both went through a time of healing and transformation and we learned how to create a safe environment for communication and processing, and as a result, I began trying to earn back trust in many of the areas that I had lost it. 9 I believe this is somewhat of a healthy pattern to follow for all couples to some degree. However, it would be nice if you could just skip the 10 years of poor communication, disconnectedness and disappointment and get right to the part where you establish a safe environment for communication and shared responsibility for meeting each other's needs.

So, while early in my marriage, I might want to withdraw my trust and accept their inaptitudes without resentment, my goal will be to eventually train them in every area of my desire they are willing and capable of learning, and likewise ask them to train me to provide for them every desire I am willing and capable of providing, so that we can achieve our oneness to the greatest extent possible. That being said, there will likely be several provisions we are either unwilling or incapable of providing, and for these areas, we will discuss, submit to one another and agree upon strategies to help the partner find provisions for those needs if they seem healthy. I say "agree upon" because if it is jointly discussed, you can still feel the sense of oneness because you have arrived at the conclusion together that a certain need is better off remaining the responsibility of the one who needs, rather than the one who is just not capable of providing it. In great relationships, each partner has come to know the little things that are sacred to their partner's heart, and while they might not be able to provide for every detail, they are at least aware, they openly discuss their thoughts, desires and needs regularly, and conspire on how to best accomplish those things, seeking to do so without jealousy, offense or prejudice. All that to say, the more areas in which you understand and become an advocate for your partner's heartfelt hopes, dreams and expectations to be realized, the more they will undoubtedly experience the depth of oneness with you.

And conversely, the less your partner feels they can trust you with their heartfelt hopes, dreams and expectations, the shallower they will feel your oneness is with them. Again, this is why trust is such a foundation for marriage. So I would add a fifth option as the very best option seen below: 5. Openly discuss their thoughts, desires and needs regularly, and conspire on how to best accomplish those things, choosing whether to delegate responsibility to you or your spouse, and seek to do so without jealousy, offense or prejudice. Thankfully we are playing a long game in marriage and if you make creating a safe and welcoming environment for vulnerable communication a goal, you can quickly begin to feel the sense of oneness increasing.

QUESTION: Please take a moment to each pick one or two unmet wants that seem to create ongoing tension points in your relationship. Follow the advice in option number five above and discuss them. Try to talk plainly about your desires without blaming or taking offense with the goal of figuring out how best to fulfill the desires, who is best suited to take responsibility and what might be needed to ensure success. 9 TRUST IS BUILT ON TRUTHFULNESS There is a dance between autonomy and attachment in every relationship. Trust allows autonomy. The higher the trust, the more secure you feel and the higher the allowance for autonomy will be.

Trust is like the boundary your heart puts on your partner's freedom. There is a limit to the freedom your heart will give your partner to roam before it starts to feel insecure. That line of insecurity is where your heart puts up a border of trust. If you have not developed strong trust, you may impose tight boundaries that limit your partner's privacy, freedom, and likely their honesty. None of this will work without honesty.

Honesty is how you can build trust in a relationship. When a relationship is in disrepair, trust isn't going to fix the relationship. It's not like you can say, "There's a problem? Let's just throw some trust at it..." That's ridiculous. Trust is not the solution when relationships develop problems.

Truth is. Only truth can bear the fruit of trust. If it's built on truth, your partner can work with that. If it's built on partial truths, how can a partner build on that? You cannot repair trust without complete truthfulness.

Being in a healthy relationship means co creating a space where honesty is safe. A lot of couples hit a ceiling, or stage of stagnation in their relationship where they remain at the same level for years or even decades. The reason they cannot progress is almost always because they are avoiding asking or answering the uncomfortable questions and answers that linger under the surface of this stagnation. Honesty is the only way to really develop and build trust and progress in marital maturity. Therefore truthfulness should be seen as the backbone of your relationship.

Without facing the uncomfortable truths, there will be no growth. One goal we try to encourage couples to work toward is reaching what we call the "honesty phase." The honesty phase usually comes many years after first getting to know each other. The honesty phase is when you both have finally arrived at a place where you have decided to be utterly and completely honest with each other regardless of the consequences. This is often a midlife transition, but it can happen at any time. It often comes when a relationship becomes secure and mature enough that both partners feel they can finally be honest and truly transparent without fear of rejection, but it can also be thrust upon you when someone's untruthfulness gets exposed.

Regardless of how it begins, it usually takes a series of intense conversations to reach a place of relative total honesty. And once this truly happens, a new, stronger type of raw marital trust can begin to form. Until you reach the honesty stage, there will always be a sense of insecurity, doubt and speculation when it comes to your partner. It can be very hard to face the truth, especially if you are hiding something things, but until you can be totally honest in your marriage, you are placing a giant limit on your marriage's potential. Strive to reach the honesty phase in your marriage.

It might take time, but you must do it. All that said, honesty must be accompanied by commitment, care and responsibility for trust really to thrive. If a husband is brutally honest about how he doesn't really care about how his wife feels when he stays out late without checking in, his honesty alone likely isn't enough to inspire her to place her trust in him. Likewise, if a wife is honest, saying, I have a problem with compulsive shopping, her honesty still isn't going to inspire her husband to trust her with a credit card. In a marriage, honesty must be combined with the sense of commitment, care and responsibility for it to produce a broader sense of trust.

In this way, trust is built in a multitude of moments through the way you interact and show care for each other every day.

QUESTION: What is one thing you don't think your partner knows about you that you'd like to share right now?

WHEN THERE IS A BETRAYAL OF TRUST Trust is a fragile construct that requires continual nurturing. While trust is built by multitudes of small moments, it can be destroyed in an instant. When your partner knowingly violates your trust, it is the worst of all violations. This is called betrayal.

Betrayal is considered by many philosophers and theologians throughout history as the most vile and terrible of sins. This is because trust connects the deepest and most vulnerable places of one's heart to another, so betraying a person's trust injures their ability to love, hope or believe in anything to that extent ever again. In marriage, when trust is betrayed in a major way, like in the case of adultery, it is like the death of the trust the relationship was built upon. If the couple still wants to work through it and heal, and stay married, we will often suggest the old relationship must first fully die, so that a new relationship can be born again. For a new relationship to be built, new trust must be built from the ground up and the only way to do this is through complete honesty and transparency, starting with the exposure of the previous breakdown in truthfulness and the detailed internal process that led to the justification of the betrayal.

This means honesty about everything; every violation, every justification, every offense, every bit of it needs to come out into the light. The only way for darkness to be killed is for it to come to the light. Only through a total and complete confession can one crucify the lies that accompanied the betrayal. If someone isn't willing to confess all, they are still protecting their lies and therefore, the old nature is not yet dead and they are not yet ready to be reborn. Honesty and confession, and continued transparency is the first step toward reinventing your relationship after betrayal.

APPLICATION: Take a moment to search your heart and ask if there is anything you would like to confess or be honest with now to get off your chest. 9

SECTION TWO: MANAGING & PROCESSING STRESS, CONFLICTS & WOUNDS CONSTRUCTIVELY 9

MEASURE 5. THE REAL SOURCE OF YOUR STRESS EXTERNAL STRESSORS There's an old parable you might have heard about a frog in boiling water. The parable goes as follows:

If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately feel the intense heat and jump out to escape. However, if you place a frog in a pot of lukewarm water and slowly heat it up, the frog will not perceive the gradual increase in temperature as a threat. Instead, it will remain in the pot until it is ultimately boiled to death. The metaphor illustrates the dangers of when slow, gradual change goes unnoticed. This parable is a perfect illustration of how external stress operates in almost every marriage.

When a couple gets married, they are both usually at a healthy and relatively stress free point in their lives. Once they get married, they begin building responsibilities on the foundation of their marriage. Houses, bills, kids, businesses and other external pressures slowly build over the 9 years, with each new responsibility competing in a pool for ever diminishing time and attention. External stress is sneaky, and if a couple doesn't carefully maintain their relationship as a top priority of life, these external stressors can begin to suffocate any semblance of connection or enjoyment the couple once shared. By the time couples seek help they are often so stressed out and overwhelmed that they don't know where to begin or how to differentiate major issues from minor ones.

When this happens I like to suggest they start by separating the EXTERNAL stressors from the INTERNAL ones. External stressors are when things like kids, money, household responsibilities, extended family or business obligations put external stress on your life and marriage. When a couple's external responsibilities take over their lives, they often feel they don't have time to invest in or enjoy each other. Most couples who find themselves in a relational state of crisis have this in common, they have allowed several external stressors to creep in and choke out their personal health and marital enjoyment. The biggest external stressor is that they are almost always temporary and will change during different seasons of life.

Kids grow up, careers change, households get managed, and extended family finds peace. The thing that will remain constant throughout your entire life is your partner-so long as your marriage can survive these seasons of crazy external stress! When a couple mistakes external stress for marital dissatisfaction, they might think that divorce will alleviate the stress. They would be wrong however, divorce doesn't alleviate external stress, it often only exacerbates it. It is crucial to recognize the difference between external stress and internal stress on your relationship. Internal stress comes when there is actual dysfunction in the way you think, connect and communicate with each other.

This will be addressed in the following chapter. We need to approach these two sources of relational stress differently. Couples often feel a slight sense of relief when they come to realize the majority of their marital tension isn't coming from dysfunction within the relationship itself, but from the external stressors and temporary pressures that this particular season of life carries with it.

QUESTION: On a scale of one to ten with ten being the highest, rate how much external stress or pressure you feel now compared to the first season of your relationship. **THE FIVE MOST COMMON AREAS OF EXTERNAL STRESS** Following is a list of the five most common areas of external stress based on several research studies, surveys, and experts' opinions: i. ii. iii. iv. v. Financial Stress & Management Child Rearing and Parenting Household

Chores and Responsibilities Social Life and Extended Family Dynamics Major Life Changes 9 . Financial Stress & Management: A study by the National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE) found that financial stress is a major contributor to relationship conflicts, with 72% of couples citing money as a source of stress.* Financial difficulties can arise from a variety of situations, such as unexpected medical bills, job loss, or general economic downturns, placing pressure on individuals and their relationships. (* Financial Stress & Relationship Conflict: NEFE) Whether it's financial hardship or disagreement in spending habits, financial stress is a major cause of external pressure on relationships today. When couples argue over finances, it often stems from differing attitudes toward money management-some may be savers while others are spenders, leading to conflicts over budgeting and financial priorities.

This stress can strain not only communication but also intimacy in relationships. It can lead to feelings of resentment and blame, where one partner may feel overwhelmed by the financial burden while the other feels inadequately supported. Continuous financial strain can shift the focus from shared goals and a supportive partnership to a survival mindset centered on making ends meet, which can jeopardize the overall health of the relationship. QUESTIONS: How would you describe the level of external stress you feel from financial pressure? Do you have a budget?

What are the general categories and financial allocations associated: • Rent/Mortgage: 9 • Transportation (payments, gas, insurance): • Health Insurance: • Utilities: • Food: • Sports/Hobbies: • Fun/Travel: • Savings: • Other/Miscellaneous: Do you feel you both are in harmony with your approach to income, bills, taxes and spending? 2. Child Rearing and Parenting: Throughout several studies, the American Psychological Association has consistently found that about 70% of parents report feeling stressed about the demands of parenting, and many note that this stress can impact their relationship with their partner. Another study by the University of Denver (2013) found that couples with children experienced a marked decline in relationship satisfaction, particularly after the birth of their first child. About 60% of couples felt that the stress of parenting was a significant factor in this decline. 9 These studies show what every parent knows to be true. Anyone that has kids quickly realizes how great a demand they put on your life.

For many years, they will not care about your feelings, your energy levels or your happiness. If couples aren't careful, their kids will completely consume their marriage and they will wake up one day feeling like their relationship is nothing more than a commitment to co-manage commitments and obligations for kids. In addition to the added pressure that managing children creates, couples might realize they differ strongly in their approaches and ideals to child rearing. External pressures tend to magnify even the smallest cracks in our relationship's "internal unity." When parents are rigid and unwilling to compromise in their positions, it can cause major destruction within the household. The Bible warns about the consequences of this type of divided household when it says, "a house divided against itself will not stand" - Mark 3:25.

Such disagreements not only create a tense home environment but also might leave parents feeling isolated or unsupported. Needless to say, the overwhelming responsibilities that come with child-rearing can lead parents to focus solely on their children's needs, inadvertently neglecting their romantic relationship. QUESTIONS: How would you describe the level of external stress you feel from raising children? Do you feel you both are in harmony with your approach to your children's schedule, screen time, lifestyle, discipline and activities? 9 3. Household Chores and Responsibilities: A survey by the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) found that 64% of employed adults aged 25-54 reported feeling overwhelmed by household chores.* This feeling of being overwhelmed is often compounded by busy work schedules, leaving couples to jockey for time to manage both careers and home responsibilities effectively. ("American Time Use Survey Summary" by the Bureau of Labor Statistics) When couples are busy and household responsibilities pile up, it can feel completely overwhelming adding significant stress and pressure on a relationship.

The bigger the household, the more time and energy household responsibilities will require. When this happens, it is easy to start silently hoping or even expecting your partner to deal with the mess. When there is no communication, they might be hoping or expecting the very same thing from the other partner! Needless to say, when one partner either feels they are disproportionately burdened by chores, or like the other partner is failing their hopes or expectations in regard to responsibilities, feelings of resentment can and will surface. As household tasks pile up, so too does the emotional burden, potentially leading to chronic disappointments, arguments and disconnection.

Establishing a clear and agreeable delegation of household responsibilities is the first place to start to mitigate these tensions and create a sense of partnership and support. QUESTIONS: How would you describe the level of external stress you feel from household responsibilities? 9 Do you feel you both are in harmony with your approach to your household responsibilities? 4. Social Life and Extended Family Dynamics: Research by the National Institute of Mental Health found that 60% of adults experience stress related to social and family relationships, with conflicts with in-laws being a common source of tension.* Balancing family dynamics with one's social life can be challenging, particularly when external pressures lead to conflicts over family obligations or social commitments. For example, disagreements regarding time spent with in-laws or the obligations that come with family gatherings can create friction between partners. Feelings of guilt or obligation may arise, complicating how couples navigate their time together. ("Stress in the United States" by the National Institute of Mental Health) QUESTIONS: How would you describe the level of external stress you feel from social life or extended family dynamics?

Do you feel you both are in harmony with your approach to your social life or extended family dynamics? How would you visually represent your relational stress as a percentage breakdown among the four external stressors mentioned below? Please assign a percentage to each stressor, ensuring that the total adds up to 100%. 9 • Financial stress: • Child raising stress: • Household responsibility stress: • Social or extended family stress: 5. Major Life Changes: There are a handful of major elements that go into life. Relationships, career, home quality and physical location and personal habits are some of the major ones.

When one or more of these major pillars of life change, it can create a major upheaval in the stability, comfort and security one feels. In addition to these, individuals can change. People go through life experiences that can cause them to completely shift perspectives and become someone who has an entirely different set of personal standards or perspectives on life. When your relationship is hit with change, whether a loved one dies, you change careers, you move to a new home or your partner emerges from a midlife crisis or a spiritual experience as a totally different person, it can be unsettling to say the least. Change is a guarantee.

How we manage change is very important. QUESTIONS: Have you recently undergone any major life changes that affect your marriage? If so, how? Would you agree that no matter what change comes your way, you will make love and acceptance for each other a constant? 9 ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES If you don't take control over the external stressors in your life, the external stressors will take control over you. The way you can take control is by limiting the level of stress that these things are allowed in your life.

How? - By taking the time you need to discuss strategies, find agreement, and set boundaries. You might feel like you are not in control of the external stressors in your life, but that is a lie. You are in total control of your life. Your life is the story of a long list of decisions you have made to arrive at the place you are right now. The first thing you must do to take control of your life is to realize that you CAN take control of it.

Once you believe you are in charge of your life, you can then set healthy boundaries for the stress you allow in your life. Your time belongs to you, not to anyone or anything else. You choose what you will give your time to and how much of your time you will give. You must prioritize your time and give it to the things that are most important to you.

When you recognize an unhealthy interaction or pattern with anyone or anything in your life, you can set boundaries to make sure the relationship remains healthy.

Healthy relational boundaries are not requirements you impose on others; rather, they are commitments you make to yourself in response to how others treat you. Setting relational boundaries are when you say what you will or will not do in response to what another person will or will not do. It's like saying, "If you do this... then I will do this...." or "If you don't do this... I will need to do this..." Boundaries are not meant to be punishments or threats, they are simply the clarification of causes and effects. 9 When you realize you need to make a boundary you will likely need to communicate that boundary with whomever might be affected by it. I recommend taking care that you do so in a thoughtful, gentle and non-offensive way. In marriage, boundaries are best if they are a mutual agreement.

For instance, if you realize that you and your spouse have been raising your voices during conflict and you notice your health is becoming increasingly sensitive to the stress those arguments cause, you might say something like, "When we raise our voices during arguments it makes me feel an unhealthy level of stress. I'm willing to work through our problems together, but I need it to be done in a calm and peaceful way. To help us transition into a more healthy and constructive approach to problem solving, would you be willing to help set a boundary here? If one of us feels the conversation is escalating and either one of us begins to raise their voice, the other one should first remind the other of our boundary, each would silently count to ten, then try again. If the raised voices continue, then we would have permission to walk away and say, 'I'm sorry, I am removing myself from the conversation until we can have it in a calm and peaceful way.' Would you be willing to commit to that with me?" This would be an example of a mutually agreed upon boundary.

Couples in healthy relationships will be able to set boundaries together. However, in an unhealthy relationship, you might find yourself feeling like your partner is unwilling to cooperate with you in setting healthy boundaries. Obviously there is a deeper internal issue here, and if they continue to refuse to work together with you, it would be wise to seek professional help. In the meantime, while you seek ways to heal that internal issue, 9 you might need to create some of your own boundaries in order to maintain your basic health and dignity. QUESTIONS: Based on your own identified sources of external stress, can you see anything that would need to change in order to prioritize your personal health and marriage over each of the external stressors you listed above?

Based on the previous answer, are there any boundaries that you can identify that might help you manage the levels of stress you and your family are exposed to? Are there any areas you feel your partner has been unwilling to work with you to create healthy boundaries for? WANTS VS NEEDS: Another thing we might ask a couple to do if they are experiencing a lot of external stress is to distinguish the difference between their "wants" and "needs." There are external needs and wants as well as internal needs and wants. To conclude this chapter, we want to give you the opportunity to differentiate your external needs from your external wants. 9

APPLICATION: Take a moment to think about your three biggest external wants and your three biggest external needs. List them below: EXTERNAL WANTS: EXTERNAL NEEDS: 9

MEASURE 6. THE DEGREE OF YOUR INTERNAL COMPATIBILITY

INTERNAL COMPATIBILITY DISHARMONIES In the previous chapter we addressed the role "external" stressors play

in affecting our relationships. In this chapter we will look at the more serious issue of "internal" stressors. When there are internal discrepancies between you and your partner, it can create quite the sense of division, disunity and chaos in your relationship, leaving you both feeling totally disconnected and dysfunctional. Regardless of how similar your personalities and characters both are to begin with, over the course of your life long relationship, any minor differences you have with your spouse will certainly be magnified and tested. There are so many ways that our expectations, personalities and character traits can clash with each other.

In this chapter, we will look at eight of the more common internal compatibility disharmonies. 9 In chapter four we looked at how after decades of observation, the Gottman Institute observed that about 69% of all marital conflicts would be perpetual, meaning the same conflicts that couples described at the beginning of their relationship would remain throughout the duration of their relationship. While the external stressors mentioned in the previous chapter are usually temporal, the internal disharmonies we will mention in this chapter will almost always be the source of your perpetual conflicts. We all have different personalities and we respond differently to conflicts as well as to kind gestures. Garry Chapman has famously captured some of this concept in his book, "The five primary love languages." In the book he suggests there are five love languages and that everyone tends to give and receive love from. We have listed them below with their corresponding rejection languages to the right. 5 LOVE LANGUAGES* - REJECTION LANGUAGE - Words of Affirmation - Quality Time - Receiving Gifts - Acts of Service - Physical Touch - - - - - Going Silent Isolating Impulsive Shopping Not asking for Help Avoidance

APPLICATION: Ask your partner's primary love language(s) from the list above. Then ask them if their rejection language corresponds to their love language or if they believe it is something different. 9 PROJECTING EXPECTATIONS We all bring as assumptions and expectations into our marriage. When we grow up and eventually move out of our parents house, we cannot help but take these familial assumptions and expectations with us. No matter how much we feel we are "nothing like our parents" we cannot help but bring thousands of subconscious assumptions into our marriage. We basically assume that wives will do what our mom did and husbands will do what our father did, but it goes way deeper than simple external actions.

We have identified seven common expectations that should not be assumed or taken for granted. Instead, they should be regularly discussed and adjusted throughout the duration of your relationship's lifetime.

QUESTION: Can you identify any expectations you place on your spouse that came from the way you observed your mother and father and their roles and responsibilities? EIGHT AREAS OF INTERNAL COMPATIBILITY DISHARMONIES 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. Perceived Intelligence, Trust & Respect Disharmony Forgiveness & Acceptance Disharmony Morals, Values & Beliefs Disharmony Hierarchy, Authority & Responsibility Disharmony Gender Roles & Approaches to Family Disharmony Autonomy versus Attachment Disharmony Emotional & Physical Desire Disharmony Personality Trait Differences & Disorder Disharmony 9 . PERCEIVED INTELLIGENCE, TRUST & RESPECT: In healthy relationships, partners develop a deep level of trust and respect for each other's intelligence and perspective. They will seek out their partner's opinion because they have come to value it as equal to their own.

It's only AFTER couples establish a base level of trust and respect for each other's differing viewpoints that they can expect to have productive discussions where both partners are feeling like their intelligence is respected and their perspectives are being heard and valued.

QUESTION: Do you feel your partner understands, values and validates your perspective when it comes to your views on money, kids, household responsibilities, extended family and friends? 2. FORGIVENESS & ACCEPTANCE: Unresolved pain and unforgiveness can intensify external conflicts, making them more explosive than necessary. When this happens, it is often because individuals are carrying subconscious wounds. Their overreactions serve as their heart's cry for help, signaling underlying distress. This emotional turmoil can manifest in various ways, but true healing requires acknowledging and addressing the pain.

If this is occurring in your relationship, working through the wound together can help. There is an entire chapter dedicated to the process of relational healing and forgiveness later in this book.

QUESTION: Do you believe there are unprocessed wounds or unforgiveness in either one of you? Why or why not? 9 3. SHARED VALUES & BELIEFS: Fundamental differences in morals, values or beliefs can cause a big internal divide in relationships. "Do not be unequally yoked..." 2 Cor. 6:14(NKJV). The Bible warns that when partnerships form between people who lack shared values and beliefs, they are "unequally yoked," leaving their relationship vulnerable to discord and division.

When couples don't agree on things like religion, politics, the meaning of life, the definition of success, honesty, or acceptable levels of ethics and morality, it can create major levels of disconnection and distrust. These values and beliefs are often like core pieces of your identity that cannot be compromised without severe damage to your conscience or self belief. For this reason, it can create tremendous insecurity when couples lack shared morals, values and beliefs. Furthermore, arguing against these morals, values and beliefs will likely only damage your relationship. Instead, we suggest two things: First, Agree together that love and connection with your partner is the greatest value and belief above all the others.

Second, Identify any differences between each of your values and beliefs and try to determine if there is one view that is healthier and/or more noble than the other. If so, agree to adopt it as a couple. If you cannot seem to agree that one is better than the other, decide to see the value in honoring both views as you move forward.

APPLICATION: Identify any difference you have in your core beliefs, then go through the two steps above. The first step requires you to verbally agree that you will each make your love and connection 9 with each other your highest value. The second step is to decide and honor the best of your values moving forward. 4. HIERARCHY, AUTHORITY & RESPONSIBILITY: "The buck stops here!" you might have heard this phrase used to signify the one who holds the final authority in an organization. Without a clear authority structure, chaos can ensue, and responsibility may be evaded.

In contrast, a defined authority structure clarifies responsibility and facilitates accountability. In marriage, it is no different. When couples fail to agree on an authority structure, it can create major dysfunction. The Biblical concept of "headship": The Bible introduces 'headship' as an authority structure in the New Testament. According to 1 Corinthians 11:3 (NIV): 'But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.' This offers a practical framework for responsibility and accountability in family life and God's Kingdom -wives to husbands, husbands to Christ, and Christ to God the Father.

New Covenant "law" is summed up in the command to love one another (Romans 13:8-10). When husbands fail to take responsibility, the law of love would demand that wives step in to assume that responsibility, and if God would hold anyone accountable for this situation, it would likely be the husband. Some segments of the feminist movement label this traditional power structure as oppressive, and it's true that many women have endured unloving and abusive men. However, Jesus makes it clear throughout the New Testament that God is not out there to punish us but to heal us and these biblical expectations are there to help us succeed. The Bible is saying that men are ultimately responsible for the state of the women and children in their lives.

They cannot blame their problems on their wives as Adam tried to do in the garden. The good husband assumes ultimate responsibility for the well being of his family. Most would agree that a good husband is one who provides and protects as best he can so his wife and kids have every opportunity to prosper. When this power structure is in place, and men are both competent and willing to assume the role of responsibility, their families tend to thrive. This truth can be seen in the fact that 70% of all incarcerated adults grew up without a dad in the house. (- U.S.

Department of Justice, "Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2014 National Report") The Bible does not support abusive husbands, in fact it's quite the contrary. 1 Peter 5:3 instructs those in authority: "Do not lord it over those entrusted to you." Ephesians 5:25-33 says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." 1 Peter 3:7 reminds husbands "be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect... so that nothing will hinder your prayers." This principle also applies to child-rearing. Ephesians 6:4 urges fathers: "Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (NIV) If a husband or father fails to inspire trust from his wife and children, then reinstating trust is recommended before demanding obedience. Healthy husbands inspire submission instead of demanding it. 9

QUESTION: How would you describe the balance of power in your relationship? How are decisions made? Is it one sided or is there mutual submission and cooperation? Leaving mother and father: Another challenge occurs when a husband or wife fails to surrender their connection to parental authority to their spouse, allowing parents to continue as a higher authority in their lives. Genesis 2:24 states: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." (NIV).

Problems with in laws are shockingly common and a lot of it stems down to the feeling that a partner continues to remain under the authority of parents instead of under the authority of their marriage.

QUESTION: Are there issues with in laws? If so, please describe them and suggest a way your partner could help you address them. One-Sided Dominance: In some relationships, one partner may be excessively dominant while the other is excessively submissive. While this dynamic can function adequately for a time, it can also turn sour as people change. A once-submissive spouse may undergo a time of personal growth, and begin craving a stronger voice.

If the dominant partner resists and pushes back against this growth, the submissive partner may experience suppression and undervaluation, which can breed resentment and become a catalyst for marital conflict. Learning how to remain close and supportive during these shifts is essential for a continued prosperity and health moving forward.

QUESTION: Can you identify some of the ways either of you have evolved in your identity and how that might be affecting your marriage? 5. GENDER ROLES & APPROACHES TO FAMILY: The differences between masculine and feminine traits can greatly influence relationship dynamics. Masculine energy focuses on external problem-solving and swift action, while feminine energy emphasizes emotional safety and empathy. Societal norms historically associate masculine traits with assertiveness and independence, and feminine traits with nurturing and receptivity. Though men and women often embody differing levels of both energies, they generally lean toward their respective

traits.

Studies suggest we act out masculine and feminine energies based both on our inherent, natural tendencies that we were born with (men tend to act masculine, and women, feminine) as well as through social observation and cultural norms. When two people are married, they bring all their inherent tendencies as well as all of the norms of their upbringing into the marriage. When couples don't have similar upbringings or when expectations differ, it can cause tremendous tension, particularly regarding finances, household responsibilities, parenting and decision making in general. 9 Instead of assuming we know better than our partner, we should recognize that God has brought us together for a reason: our partner embodies qualities and strengths that we may lack. By embracing our differences and working collaboratively, we can provide our children with a well-rounded example of what it means to thrive and grow. By addressing gender expectations and recognizing our differing upbringings, couples can begin to harmonize, agree on expectations and responsibilities, and support each other's perspectives.

The New Testament offers valuable advice on healthy gender roles. 1 Peter 3:1-10 says the following: "1. In the same way, you wives must willingly support your husbands in ways that honor the authority of marriage. Even those who do not obey the word of God will be persuaded to believe because of your respectful and pure behavior. 2. When they observe your pure, holy lives before God, it will impact them deeply. 3. The beauty of your faith and the beauty of your inner self should not come from the outward adornments like fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. 4.

Instead, let it be the inward beauty of the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and peaceful spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God." "5. For we can see that the holy women of old made themselves beautiful in this way by placing their hope in God and being submissive to their husbands. 6. For instance, Sarah demonstrated this when she obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You become her true daughters when you do what is right without being afraid. 7. In the same way, you husbands, you must treat your wives with tenderness, viewing them as feminine partners who deserve to be honored.

Treat her as you would treat your own body. As you honor her, you will be honored in return. 8. Finally, let everyone be in harmony with one another, attuned to each other, in sympathy and love as brothers and sisters. Be kind and humble. 9. Never retaliate when someone treats you wrongly or insults you, but instead respond by speaking a blessing over them.

Because of this, you will inherit a blessing.10. For the Scriptures say, "If you want to enjoy life and see good days, then you must keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from deceitful words." - 1 Peter 3:1-10 (Passion Translation) QUESTIONS: What are a few of the unique instructions the previous passage offers to wives? What are a few of the unique instructions the previous passage offers to husbands? Is there any wisdom that stands out to you from the passage that would be beneficial if applied in your marriage? Do you see any ways in which masculine and feminine energy clash in your relationship?

How might you better appreciate and affirm each other's masculine or feminine approach? Are there areas of household responsibilities or expectations where you are disagreed, misaligned or in disharmony? If so, why wouldn't you want to accept responsibility for these things? 6. AUTONOMY & ATTACHMENT: These two sets of conflicting human needs are often a source of conflict in many marriages. On one side here is the need for attachment and belonging, and on the other side the need for autonomy and individuality.

Were you raised to be autonomous and self-reliant? Or were you raised to be interdependent and interconnected to others? Neither way is wrong, but when two people come from either end of this spectrum, there will be major

differences in the way they approach just about everything from how you ask for help, to how you view other people, to what you expect from your partner, and how you raise your children. Did your upbringing teach you that you must be strong to survive, or that you must stay connected to survive? Again, neither one is good or bad, they both carry advantages and disadvantages into many of life's circumstances.

Couples go through different seasons of marriage and one season we have identified we call a season of "Independence." We are not advocating for this, we have just observed that sometimes it happens. This season can be a major red flag if one member is "running away" from overwhelming unresolved conflict and disconnection, but on the other hand it can also be very healthy in certain seasons, like after kids move out and one of you suddenly find yourselves with free time and you want to explore interests you haven't had time for in years. When a couple enters a season where discrepancies develop in their levels of autonomy and attachment, and one partner begins to seek more autonomy and the other desires more attachment, it can cause insecurities and frustrations to rise. If this happens, communication and seeking agreement and permission can be a great help. If you are the one left desiring more attachment, it might be good to use the free time to develop some of your own personal interests.

QUESTIONS: Discuss the levels of autonomy and attachment in your relationship. Discuss shared interests as well as individual interests. What insecurities does autonomy provoke? How do you communicate and agree about giving each other permission to pursue their best life? 7. EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL DESIRE: In a marriage, both Men and women NEED to feel love but they often experience love in different ways.

A Study on Love and Relationships by the Journal of Marriage and Family (2010) found that 66% of women reported that emotional connection was the most important aspect of love in their relationships, while only 34% of men expressed the same preference. Conversely, 58% of men indicated that sexual activity played a critical role in feeling loved, compared to only 28% of women. These results reinforce the idea that men often associate love with physical and sexual expression, while women are more driven by emotional intimacy. It has long been observed that men tend to be more emotionally available after sexual intimacy and women tend to be more sexually available after emotional intimacy. That being said, if you are going several days without EITHER form of intimacy in your relationship, one or both partners are likely suffering silently.

A lack of emotional intimacy, connection, and fulfillment can lead to feelings of abandonment, rejection, or indifference. This can create a sense of disconnection, disregard and distrust in your relationship. It is often shocking for wives to realize just how vital sex is to their husband, and equally shocking for husbands to realize just how vital heart connection is to their wife. Wives, if you want your man to be the best husband and father he can be, give him sex every day, or as much as he can take. Men, if you want your wife to be the best wife and mother she can be, give her emotional connection every day, or as much as she can take.

Furthermore, a study published in the Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, found that 55% of married couples reported having desire discrepancies, with 27% of couples reporting a significant difference in their sexual desire.* Desire discrepancies can be deeply painful for the partner with greater desire. This often happens without the other partner even realizing the extent of the difference. When intimacy is restricted or available only on one partner's terms, it puts the other in a difficult position: they must either suppress their desire or seek fulfillment elsewhere. For instance, when a man lacks intimacy from his wife, he may turn to pornography. If this continues, it could escalate to promiscuity and even adultery.

Similarly, a woman might seek attention and validation from other men in response to insufficient emotional intimacy, which can also lead to infidelity. Healthy couples maintain open dialogue as well as a strong emotional and physical connection, preventing such issues from arising. (* "Effects of Desire Asymmetry on Relationship Satisfaction"

Schreiner 2017) QUESTIONS: On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest, how would you rate the level of emotional and/or physical connection you receive from your partner and what are some ways they could increase this number? If you do not get intimacy from your partner, what do you feel and how do you cope with it? Do you try to connect with others or masturbate or find other ways to fulfill desires? 9 8. PERSONALITY TRAIT DIFFERENCES & DISORDERS: Personality traits- both temporary and permanent-can significantly impact relationships, especially when partners experience conflicting traits simultaneously.

Temporary conditions, such as stress or hormonal changes, can strain a relationship, particularly when the relationship lacks a strong emotional connection. The good news is that these conflicts are often fleeting; with empathy and care, they usually pass quickly. However, when couples recognize their conflicting personality traits may be more permanent, it is best if they can accept their partner's differences instead of continuing to insist their partner changes what they might not be capable of changing. By accepting each other's differing traits, you can shift your energy toward constructively managing your differences instead of continuing to quarrel over them. While it's tempting to label your partner's behavior as a disorder, it might be more productive to discuss observed traits without stigmatizing them.

For instance, rather than labeling someone a narcissist, consider asking yourselves if you recognize any narcissistic tendencies in your attitudes or actions. Even if someone is a diagnosed narcissist, they can still be a highly functioning one and they can still have healthy relationships if they and those around them can learn to manage their traits together. Being able to admit one's trait tendencies and how those tendencies might affect their loved ones would be step one. Step two would be coming up with ways to manage the situations that arise as a result of those traits. Committing to navigate personality traits and their impacts on each other fosters a fulfilling relationship.

Open communication within the family allows for understanding and healing, while avoiding these discussions can create a culture of disconnection. 9 Common personality disorders that may affect marriage include: • Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) Traits: Exaggerated self-importance, constant desire for validation, difficulty recognizing or caring about others feelings, expectation of others compliance, taking advantage of others. • Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) Traits: Rapidly shifting emotions, fluctuations between idealizing and devaluing others, fear of abandonment and rejection, impulsivity, emptiness. • Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) Traits: Disregard for rules and laws, influencing or deceiving others for personal gain, indifference to the suffering of others or the consequences of one's actions, superficial charm, Impulsivity/Irresponsibility. • Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) Traits: Excessive focus on orderliness, detail, and control, rigid adherence to rules, ethics, or schedules, difficulty delegating, hoarding behavior, reluctance to embrace change. QUESTIONS: Can you see any traits that your (or your partner's) personality shares with any of the descriptions listed above? Have you asked your partner and children if your personality traits or communication habits have ever made them feel afraid, neglected, or like they want to avoid you, or negatively affected 9 them in any way? If not, please do, and if/when they respond, please do not take offense or defend yourself. Just listen and learn how your personality might affect those around you.

INTERNAL DISHARMONY & HOW THEY OVERCAME* I had been counseling a couple for about two months when they told me they had decided to move from California to Texas. They were already in a fragile place and the move was causing even more strain on their relationship. The woman felt there was a pattern in their past where the husband made major decisions without consulting her or considering how the decision would impact her or the kids at all. Several of his decisions ended up affecting her negatively so she had begun to carry deep wounds of unforgiveness and a general lack of trust or respect for his decision making abilities. Although she had already experienced several breakthroughs of healing and forgiveness in previous sessions, the move to Texas was triggering her insecurities and wounds she carried from the past and causing major conflict now as they approached the moving date.

The day after they had told me about the move to Texas, I had a private phone conversation with the husband, and he said that he felt like his wife was being totally irrational about the move to Texas. He had taken care of all the logistics and financial obligations, he just needed the bulk of the move to come on a certain weekend in order to save about \$8,000 on the move. The thing that was making it so triggering for her was that it so happened that on that particular weekend was one of their kids' birthdays and the wife was refusing to go on those days because she felt it would traumatize the child not only to be leaving the state they knew, but also to be missing a birthday party with familiar faces. As soon as I heard this it was obvious why the wife was getting triggered! The man, with a classic masculine perspective, was thinking only of the external logistics, while the woman, with classic feminine perspective, was thinking only about the impact on the hearts of those involved.

Both sides are needed and valuable yet both were having a hard time trusting or respecting the other's perspective. In our next session, the wife shared that she felt like the husband was being totally inconsiderate of what her and the kids' hearts were going through. She felt like she needed to step into the role of protector of the family because she felt the husband wasn't protecting them and she resented him for that. From the husband's perspective, the entire reason he was trying to move to Texas was so that he could better provide for and protect the family. To him, he WAS providing and protecting and he was insulted that his wife was failing to show any recognition or appreciation for it.

This was an obvious masculine mind versus feminine mind disconnect. The wife was thinking about her and the children's internal needs and the husband was thinking of their external needs. What made this situation even more hurtful is that, from her perspective there was a history of the man lacking consideration for the internal needs of his family, and from his perspective, there was a history of the woman lacking regard for his efforts to provide for their external needs. This cycle left her feeling like her husband was disconnected from her emotionally and it left him feeling like no matter how hard he worked for his family, he would never be appreciated. The move to Texas had exposed this recurring deep seated issue and brought it to the surface beautifully.

I suggested to the man that he first acknowledge his wife's emotional intelligence on this issue. "You are right." I suggested he might say, "I wouldn't want to traumatize our son at the start of this move, that could set him up for negativity in this new stage in his life. What could we do to make this work, and make him come out feeling like moving on his birthday is a blessing instead of a curse?" We agreed that I would leave the meeting and they would take some time to discuss. The man called me back the next day and told me that after he showed respect and validation for his wife's perspective, she quickly returned the gesture and was able to agree on the wisdom of saving \$8,000. Trust and respect were beginning to be restored on both sides.

He said that after the two of them found their peace and prayed together, an amazing idea emerged: They could use 10% of the \$8000 savings to give their son the best birthday of his life. The next time we talked, they had come up with a plan to fly out his best friend with the friend's dad, they could all sleep over at their new house in Texas and the following day they would treat the boy and his father to a day at the six flags theme park in Texas right next to where they lived! The budget for all of it could stay just under \$800! They had brought this idea up to their son and he was ecstatic! Working together and honoring each other's energies turned the move into one of the most memorable positive experiences of their son's life!

This story illustrates the underlying presence of at least four of the eight internal causes of conflict; Lack of Trust or Respect, Unprocessed Wounds or Unforgiveness, Gender Role Expectations and Unmet Emotional & Physical Needs.

QUESTION: Can you see areas where you are lacking trust or respect for your partner's perspective in any of the areas mentioned above? CHAOS WITH KIDS* I recently sat with a couple who told me that their biggest ongoing conflict

was over how to discipline their children. The children often were out of control in public and were embarrassing to take out. This caused constant stress in their life and in their relationship. As I sought further understanding, I found out that the husband was raised with strict discipline and that his parents used a paddle for disciplining their children.

He respected them for this and believed he and all his siblings turned into healthy, productive and respectful adults as a result of their discipline. In contrast, the wife's parents were religious pacifists and she grew up believing that all physical discipline was fundamentally wrong so she would do things to help the kids evade the husband's discipline when they misbehaved. This would infuriate the husband. As a result, total chaos would break out in the house whenever the kids misbehaved. Initially, the couple thought they just needed to convince each other to change their parenting styles.

I instead offered them tools to learn to listen, validate, and respect each other. To make a long story short, the couple survived an intense month of learning, their emotional intelligence grew and they were able to begin having honest conversations without turning them into arguments. Trust and respect solidified, which paved the way for more constructive conversations. They were able to see that resisting and resenting their partner's masculine or feminine approaches to child rearing was hurting their children instead of helping them. Through honest conversation, they finally came to a place of willing compromise about how they would approach their children's discipline going forward.

Once a level of trust and respect were established they could now be on the same team, each wanting to cooperate with each other. It took them another month or so to really transition habits, but as they stopped fighting in front of their kids, the culture in their house changed and the kids also began to respect and harmonize with their parents. There were a number of "underlying internal conflicts" at work in this story; The couple didn't share trust or respect for each other's perspective, nor did they share the same core beliefs or values about child rearing, and they didn't know how to value or honor each other's masculine and feminine traits. In addition, they had several conflicting personality traits and they had gone several months without meeting each other's emotional and physical needs. As a result of all of this, they both carried unresolved wounds of unforgiveness.

Six out of the eight underlying internal sources of conflict were all in effect! It was a total mess. The resolution began with an establishment of trust and respect. *NOTE: While the essence of both these stories remains true, I changed some of the details to protect the anonymity of the couples. Instead of believing your perspective is exclusively correct and that it must be obeyed, healthy relationships have a mutual respect and honor for each other's perspectives. For you to have the best relationships within your family, it is imperative that you embrace and foster a culture of mutual respect and honor for each other's perspectives. This approach is the only way to find a peaceful and productive way forward when there is a difference in core beliefs or differences in masculine and feminine approaches.

You must develop trust and respect for each other and find a way to embrace each other's influence, thus paving a way for the possibility of compromise and cooperation in decision making.

QUESTION: Can you see any lessons or reflections of your own relationship in the story above? If so, please describe.
VALUABLE PREDETERMINED AGREEMENTS My wife and I very rarely have disagreements that turn into conflict. We disagree all the time over subjective things like music and food, but that's no big deal. As for the bigger issues like raising kids and home and finances, we have never really fought because we agreed at the start of our marriage to a few rules: 1. 2. 3.

We never disagree publicly or in front of kids. For any major decision regarding spending money, home, moving, kids, etc... We will never proceed until we have an agreement on how to proceed. For house and kids, we do the same. We

do not make any major decisions without agreement from both parents. We 9 have only violated this once, and paid for it dearly so we are more committed to this now than ever. 4.

If we want to change a rule, we need to both agree, otherwise we keep all rules in tact and we keep our word as our vow. We will not break our word to ourselves or to each other. This rule creates an easy way forward.

APPLICATION: Do you have a set of rules for resolving conflict? If so, please describe. If not, please take a moment to discuss, agree upon, and write down your own personal set of agreements. 9

MEASURE 7. THE PRODUCTIVITY OF YOUR CONFLICTS There is a direct correlation between muscle and longevity of life. Many years ago, this revelation inspired Kimbe

ry to begin teaching strength and conditioning classes to help people, especially seniors, develop muscle. Muscles don't actually grow during the workout, they grow after the workout, when the body repairs all the tears in fiber that occurred during the heavy lift. If the body repairs itself in a healthy way, the muscles will grow stronger, and help to prevent future injury. But if the body fails to repair itself in a healthy way, lifting more weight will only create further injury. Relationships cannot grow without conflicts or ruptures in your union, but it is not the conflict itself that causes growth, but the effectiveness of the way you repair after the conflict that increases the strength of your union.

If you can develop healthy conflict repair habits, conflicts will only serve to strengthen your union, not weaken it. Conflict comes in many shapes and sizes. Whether it is the feeling of subtle disconnect due to non communicated offense or a full on screaming match with accusations and insults, conflict 9 exists in every relationship. It is not IF we fight that determines our marital success, but HOW we fight, and more specifically, how we repair that will determine our marital success. Every relationship has to deal with conflict but what a lot of couples don't know is that hidden within each conflict there is an opportunity to deepen your connection and strengthen your bond.

One of the first steps to using conflicts as opportunities is to identify the true source of the conflict. The source is not always as obvious as it may seem, but once you distinguish a few key observations as a couple, identifying the sources of your true disconnect can become much easier. PERPETUAL CONFLICT VS. TEMPORARY CONFLICT I n pr ev io us c ha p t e r s w e h a v e r e f e r r e d t o G o t t m a n d i s c o v e r y t h a t 69% o f t h e c o n f l i c t s m a r r i e d c o u p l e s h a d w h e n t h e y b e g a n t h e r t h e r a p y w e r e s t i l l t h e r e 10, 20 a n d 30 y e a r s l a t e r. I n o t h e r w o r d s t h e r a p y d i d n ' t a c t u a l l y s o l v e a n y p r o b l e m s. 69% o f m a r i t a l p r o b l e m s w e r e p e r p e t u a l r e g a r d l e s s o f t h e r a p y.

Some studies even suggested that the couples who went to therapy ended up worse than ones who didn't do anything at all. When they confirmed this reality, it caused a massive shift in thinking about how to help couples treat their conflicts. Before this time, the consensus in the marriage therapy community was that relationships would improve if couples spent enough time discussing their problems. After this discovery, the consensus has changed and now most are agreed that instead of trying to solve every conflict, we should seek to understand our differences so that we can determine which things can and should be changed, versus which ones will need to be accepted and managed. In 9 other words, don't fight to win, because then someone has to lose.

Instead, fight to understand, and then work together toward compromise and cooperation. Then the relationship can win. QUESTIONS: Can you identify any ongoing conflicts that you have had since the beginning of your relationship? How about conflicts that have been resolved or where one or both of you has changed? After identifying some of your perpetual conflicts, please describe what it might look like to accept and manage those conflicts instead of continuing

to fight against them?

WHAT YOU DON'T WORK OUT, YOU'LL ACT OUT. We have already addressed this idea in earlier chapters but I want to address it again because it is a vital part of learning how to make conflicts constructive. In a relationship, what we don't work out, we'll act out. Whenever we fail to communicate our heart issues with words, our hearts will always find a way to communicate those issues with attitudes and actions that are often far worse at expressing the truth, which is usually just a simple and innocent request to feel connected at heart. Just as babies often cry and scream until their caregivers figure out what they need, when we don't find the energy, courage or words to convey our feelings directly, we will likely express how we are feeling indirectly with attitudes or actions.

These attitudes and actions are like primal cries for connection, or desperate attempts to communicate the needs of our inner world. 9 Your heart NEEDs to feel genuinely known and cared for by your spouse. When your heart feels rejected, even in some small way, it often naturally feels the need to reaffirm the connection that is being threatened. When you do not find words to communicate your heart's need, your heart will act out with attitudes and actions that act as a cry for attention and reconnection. This cry for attention is often a sloppy, imperfect and often illogical attempt from your subconscious mind to communicate that you need to reconnect. Ironically, when partners have not yet leveled-up their emotional intelligence, they will often react to these attitudes and actions with contempt rather than connection.

A spastic and bizarre cycle of unspoken communication using mere attitudes and actions will play out until there is an explosion and the couple finally uses words to express the details of their hearts. Their hearts will finally get what they originally wanted and they will feel connected again even though it was far more painful than it needed to be. If you don't learn to find words to quickly and truthfully communicate the issues of your heart the easy way, your heart will force you to do it the more painful way, which takes longer and can be far more destructive. "Be angry, but do not sin, and Don't let the sun go down on your anger." - Ephesians 4:26 In this passage, Paul emphasizes the crucial need to confront and resolve our anger before the day ends. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.

Maturity in love involves actively addressing disconnections within our relationships rather than ignoring them. When we allow conflicts to linger unresolved, 9 we risk letting them fester into harmful behaviors or attitudes (sin). Therefore, it is essential to seek reconciliation and understanding to maintain the health of our connections.

APPLICATION: Describe one or more recurring instances when you have used bad attitudes or actions to communicate negative feelings instead of finding words. Please also describe the circumstances that cause you to feel this way and what words you might use in the future to more constructively communicate. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE You can overcome negative conflict patterns by growing your "emotional intelligence" and understanding that when your partner is acting out with a negative attitude or actions, it is merely their inner child making a bid for connection. Instead of taking offense to this, an emotionally intelligent partner will quickly seek to understand the internal need and offer affirmation and connection to their partner's heart. This might take some training to turn this communication upgrade into a habit.

When your heart or inner child gets hurt, it needs to communicate and it will always find a way. If you don't find words to express when your feelings have been hurt by a loved one, your heart will try and force you to address the disconnect by any means possible. A bad attitude, like a temper tantrum, is one of the most effective ways to get attention, so if you fail to use words, which are more constructive, your heart will use a bad attitude to try and get the problem noticed and addressed. Communicating your disappointment or dissatisfaction with a bad attitude instead 9 of words can be called a "destructive communication method." Although effective at grabbing attention, it is a type of revenge, and carries a negative spirit or energy with it. Using bad attitudes or actions instead of words to express hurt

feelings is almost always destructive to your relationship.

It's only when you begin to verbalize your feelings that it can begin to be constructive for your relationship. Using words to express hurt feelings is far quicker and more positively effective than using actions or attitudes to communicate them. When you and your partner have developed the habit of using bad attitudes or actions to express your hurt feelings, you might pout, ignore, curse, threaten, stomp, slam a door, sigh deeply, neglect common courtesy, drink, eat, smoke or perhaps even masturbate. Whatever the case, it might take you quite some time to undo these habits. You can start replacing those bad communication habits now, and in the meantime, you can help each other transition into verbal communication by gently identifying the attitudes and actions each partner has used in the past to communicate when their heart gets offended or hurt.

As you go forward, you will both likely begin to recognize these attitudes and actions as they start, this time finding words to express your feelings instead of using attitudes and actions. One way to gauge your emotional intelligence and psychological stability is by measuring the time it takes you to "return to normal" after getting offended. Some people are able to immediately use words to describe the specific feeling their heart is producing in response to the offense they have experienced. Other people may remain angry or offended, acting out their protest in attitudes or actions for many days, weeks or even years! This is because they have never had sufficient training toward developing their emotional intelligence and psychological stability.

This training usually comes in the form of push back from parents, siblings, childhood friends and social settings. When kids are raised without healthy examples of conflict resolution or confrontation, especially from their family, they can end up as adults who lack emotional and psychological stability and the training must come through their marriage. There is no shame in this so long as you are willing to humble yourself, admit your upbringing never helped you process emotion in a healthy way, and work together toward maturity in this area.

APPLICATION: Recall the attitude you use most often when you get offended or depressed and you fail to find the words to communicate with your partner. Take a moment to act out your preferred attitude as if you had failed to use words. Your partner is to win you back from this by getting you to use your words again. This should be fun. **DON'T FIGHT TO WIN, FIGHT TO UNDERSTAND.**

AND FIGHT TO RE ESTABLISH TRUST For the remainder of this chapter, we will be introducing you to a handful of the most proven and effective methods of conflict resolution. All of them share "listening to understand" as a primary rule of turning conflicts into blessings. They each have slightly different ways of arriving at that understanding, so we have decided to share the best ones with you. 9 Fighting to understand instead of to win involves a different communication style. Instead of approaching conflicts as a debate, we need to approach them as a dialogue. These two communication approaches carry a tremendous difference.

In a debate, you have predetermined that you are correct and your goal is to win the argument. In a debate-style communication, relationships often become strained and adversarial. When couples engage in a debate, they typically adopt a winner-takes-all mentality, with one person "winning" the argument and the other person "losing." The tone is often confrontational and defensive, with each party focused on proving their point and disproving the other's. This approach can lead to a lack of active listening, as individuals become more concerned with persuading the other to see things from their perspective rather than understanding each other's viewpoints. In contrast, a dialogue approaches communication with mutual respect, open-mindedness, and empathy, seeking to understand and listen to each other's perspectives, thoughts and feelings, because there is a deep trust and value for each other's perspectives.

This approach fosters a sense of teamwork and cooperation, as couples work together to find mutually beneficial solutions. A dialogue-style communication is characterized by a focus on understanding rather than "winning," and is marked by empathy and compassion. To shift from a debate to a dialogue in your relationship, it's essential to do the following:

- Put a high value on their perspective
- Ask questions to better understand their point of view
- Instead of getting offended, be honest about how the conflict makes you "feel."
- Seek to understand how the conflict makes them "feel"
- Recognize and validate their feelings
- Reaffirm that you don't want to cause them to feel that way
- Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements
- Frame your conversation in a positive light
- Be willing to consider alternative viewpoints and adjust your own perspective accordingly.

By adopting a dialogue approach, you can cultivate healthier communication habits that strengthen your bond and help you navigate conflicts more effectively. This style of communication can REVERSE the curse of conflict!

Instead of having conflict lead to a deeper sense of division and disconnection, when you use conflict to better understand your partner, it will be used to build a better sense of trust, respect and deeper connection.

QUESTION: As a percentage, how many of your marital conflicts would you say result in deeper understanding, trust and connection as opposed to greater division, insecurity and disconnection? A SIMPLE BIBLICAL APPROACH "Each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." - Ephesians 5:33

The authors of the Bible were aware of the major keys to resolving conflict 2000 years ago. In Ephesians 5, 22-33 we find a well known passage of scripture that addresses husbands and wives. It tells wives to respect to their husbands and husbands to love their wives. When husbands feel respected and wives feel loved, it's hard for the relationship to suffer.

But what is the primary way that wives can show respect and husbands show love? BY LISTENING! Listening to your wife is a primary way you will show love to her. Likewise, listening to your husband is a primary way you will show respect to him. James 1:19 confirms this approach to showing love and respect during conflict when he says "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." - James 1:19 Listening to gain understanding is one of the greatest keys to marital success.

James' three step method of conflict resolution might be all the advice you need to follow for blissful coexistence.

QUESTION: On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the best, how well do you feel your partner listens to you and how well would you say you listen to your partner? THE "RAPOPORT" LISTENING & VALIDATING METHOD The Rapoport Intervention is a communication technique used to resolve conflicts and improve relationships. It was developed by psychologist Irwin Rapoport and is also known as the "Rapoport Communication Process." The intervention aims to create a safe and constructive environment for parties in conflict to communicate effectively, understand each other's perspectives, and work towards a mutually beneficial solution.

Here is a shortened version of the Rapoport Intervention steps:

1. Establish a safe and neutral setting: Create a private and comfortable setting where both parties feel safe and supported.
2. Define the problem: Identify the specific issue or problem that needs to be addressed.

Listen actively: Have each party share their perspective without interruption or judgment, and actively listen to their concerns. Identify goals and needs: Help each party identify their goals and needs related to the issue. Generate options: Generate potential solutions or options that meet individual needs. Choose an option: Select an option that best meets the goals and needs of both parties. Implement and review: Work with both parties to implement the chosen option and review its effectiveness.

APPLICATION: Take a moment to recall the last major conflict you had. Address the conflict again but this time use a pen and notebook to objectively work through the conflict together using the method above. **THE "REFLECTIVE LISTENING" METHOD** Reflective listening, also known as reflective feedback or reflective summary, is another useful conflict communication technique where the listener actively repeats back what the speaker has said, in their own words, to the satisfaction of the speaker. This method helps couples to ensure understanding and empathy. It's a powerful tool for building trust, resolving conflicts, and improving communication.

Step-by-Step Process: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. Listen carefully: Pay close attention to the speaker's words, tone, and emotions. Try to understand their perspective and what they are trying to convey. Paraphrase or summarize: Using your own words, repeat back what you have heard the speaker say. Try to capture the essence of their message, including their emotions and concerns.

Focus on content, not tone: Reflective listening is about understanding the content of the message, not the tone or emotions behind it. Avoid repeating back phrases that start with "You always" or "You never," which can come across as accusatory. **Be non-judgmental:** Refrain from making value judgments or offering opinions while reflecting back. **Keep your tone neutral and empathetic.** **Pause before responding:** Take a moment to process what you've heard before responding.

This shows that you're taking the conversation seriously and value the speaker's input. **Reflect emotions:** If you sense that the speaker is emotional, acknowledge their emotions by reflecting them back. For example, "I sense that you're feeling really frustrated about this." 9 7. **Verify understanding:** After reflecting back, ask a question like "Is that correct?" or "Did I get that right?" to verify your understanding.

APPLICATION: Have your partner tell you the story about something interesting that happened to them this week that they have not yet told you about. As they share, practice the method above, the goal is for them to feel like you fully understand everything they are trying to convey. **NOT IF YOU FIGHT, BUT HOW YOU FIGHT** Hidden within each conflict is an opportunity to deepen your connection and strengthen your bond. Your job as the best partner ever, is to figure out what that opportunity is, and take advantage of it. Listening is key!

We have described a few of the more trusted conflict resolution strategies known to man. While any of these methods can work well, I have developed my own hybrid strategy that I will share below: 1. 2. Draw out the truth (trust is built on truth): Seek to understand how the conflict makes your partner feel and the truth of what happened to make them feel this way. Make sure they confirm and approve of your understanding before moving forward. **Validate the feeling:** Validation is not the same as agreement or endorsement.

Validation is about acknowledging and empathizing with the speaker's emotions and experiences without necessarily saying you 9 . 4. 5. 6. agree with their perspective. You might say, "I can understand how my actions could make you feel that way..." **"Take" responsibility:** Take ownership and apologize for making them feel this way if possible. You usually won't have power to change something until you accept responsibility for that thing. Understand that you can take responsibility for hurting your partner whether you intended to or not. You might say, "I realize I hurt you by my actions.

I am sorry that I hurt you. I don't ever want to hurt you so I will do my best to never let this happen again..." **Reaffirm your vow:** Remind them that it is your life goal to make them feel increasingly more loved and cherished each year of your life. **Optional step: Carefully clarify your intention:** After they have fully been heard, you might feel the need to clarify any areas you feel your intention was misrepresented. Ask your partner to use the same method to understand you as you used to understand them. **Strategize a plan:** If appropriate ask them how you can both prevent this problem

from happening in the future.

APPLICATION: Talk through the steps above. Come up with a "deescalation strategy" for the next time you fight. Agree together that you will use a word or phrase or gesture to remind yourselves that there is a better way to fight. Take a picture of the steps above and save them in your phone so that when the code word 9 is spoken, it will be a reminder to pull up the photo and use the steps to resolve your conflict. **MASTERING CONFLICT** It's not what you fight over, but the way you fight that matters.

By engineering your fight style, you can turn just about every conflict into an opportunity to increase the strength of your union. It might take some time to transition into a new fighting method, but the process begins with two simple steps. First, see yourselves as a unit, fighting together against the conflict, never against each other. Second, treat each conflict as an opportunity to upgrade your relationship. In other words, make the goal of every conflict to understand the real challenge the problem poses to the relationship, and then agree on a strategy to address the challenge.

APPLICATION: Sit facing each other, holding hands, then make the following declarations: "If you are acting upset, I will see it as a cry for my attention. I will use it as an invitation to pursue you. So don't get mad if I come running to try to help when you seem upset. Is that okay with you?" "I agree to try to stop trying to win conflicts on my own, against you. Instead, I will win them with you, against whatever keeps us from obtaining .

"From now on, I will try to treat every conflict as an opportunity to improve our union and grow our connection." 9 "I will do my best to help resolve conflicts immediately, as soon as we can do so in private." "If you bring up something I did that offended you, I know you are doing it because you love me and you don't want to allow offense to affect our union." "Every time we resolve a conflict, we will reward ourselves by coming together to "seal" and reaffirm our covenant vows." 9 **INTERNAL RECORDS**

MEASURE 8. THE STATE OF YOUR FORGIVENESS When our partner is careless or unthoughtful or just plain rude, it is easy to get offended and develop a heart wound f

rom the offense. When this happens, it is easy to start keeping an internal record of those wounds as a type of debt that is owed to us. When we do this, it is called unforgiveness. If we choose to release the debt, either after sharing with the person or not, it is called forgiving. When you do this, in your heart, you have decided they no longer owe you anything.

Debt, in the form of unforgiveness, is like a curse. When you hold onto someone else's debt, you are the one carrying the debt, not them. You are the one holding the curse. Not them. Holding their debt will not help you in any way.

It hurts you far more than it will ever hurt them. They likely have no idea you are even carrying their debt. Forgiveness is the only way to remove the curse or debt you carry. In marriage, it is easy to get offended by your partner. Some offenses can easily be forgiven and forgotten without ever 9 needing to mention them but other offenses can feel like a knife to the heart and wounds from these offenses can remain throughout the lifetime of the marriage if they never get addressed.

When these wounds remain, they act as barriers or walls around the heart. If a spouse is carrying a lot of these debts against their partner, interactions will lack love's spark, emotion will be conserved, affection will be cold, and intimacy will be passionless. Unforgiveness can be like a slow-acting poison that seeps into your relationship, eroding trust and

intimacy, and creating a toxic environment that's hard to escape. When we hold unforgiveness in our hearts against ourselves or our spouse, it severely cripples our relationship and the unforgiveness itself acts as a major wall or barrier to genuine connection. If we allow this to continue without communicating and resolving our offense, it can easily trigger a cascade of negativity into the relationship.

Like a domino effect, offense can turn into resentment, resentment can turn into the feeling of disconnection and disconnection can turn into distrust. All because we chose not to immediately communicate our feelings. Communication is key. You can't have an amazing marriage when one or both partners are keeping a record of debts. Marital forgiveness is when you let go of all the debts you want your spouse to owe you.

The good news is that unforgiveness is not a terminal condition. By learning to let go of the past and choose forgiveness, we can break free from the cycle of resentment and anger, and create a culture of transparency, honesty, and trust. This is not about ignoring the pain or minimizing the effect of our partner's hurtful behavior, but about taking control of our own emotional well being and choosing to respond in a way that builds connection and intimacy rather than destroying it.

QUESTION: Can you identify any debts you are currently carrying against your spouse? If so, what are they?

EXPECTATIONS AND COMMUNICATION In our decades of marriage counseling, we have always talked about expectations and communication. We like to tell people that almost all of the issues they will face in their marriage will likely be caused by a failure in expectations and/or communication. When you expect something, and you either don't communicate your expectation effectively, or you do, but your partner fails to meet your expectation, it can cause deep offense.

The struggle to effectively communicate expectations is something every marriage has to learn how to face. If failed expectations never get resolved, they will often turn into deepening levels of unforgiveness. Expectations without communication are offenses waiting to happen. Because this is such a major issue in all relationships, including my own, many years ago, Kimberly and I developed code language to prevent offense. Whenever I start feeling like my expectations are not being met by Kimberly, I will say, "Kim, what are your expectations for the next few hours?" This is code language to let Kimberly know that I was expecting something other than what is happening right now and I don't want to get offended so this is my attempt to communicate and get on the same page.

Kimberly is well accustomed to this language and will immediately respond with communication that helps me to adjust my expectations accordingly, or vice versa. I have heard it said, "Life would be infinitely more enjoyable if we had no expectations." I don't know if I agree with this. Sometimes our expectations are exceeded, and when that happens, it can feel truly magical. I don't know if I would give up one at the cost of the other. I think expectations and all that they bring are part of a full experience of life.

It is better to just learn how to forgive. At least forgiveness offers us a chance to be beautiful and earn the admiration of our partner.

QUESTION: Can you identify the last time one of your expectations was not met by your spouse? How did that make you feel? What did you do about it? JESUS TAUGHT US TO FORGIVE. Regardless of if one has placed their faith in Jesus or not, it is difficult to deny that the Christian faith offers some of the most profound and transformative teachings on forgiveness found anywhere.

In the four Gospels of the New Testament, we find the biographical story of Jesus of Nazareth. These four Gospels, written by four different people, each tell a different version of the story of His life, crucifixion, and resurrection. It records that when He went around teaching, He referred to Himself as both the "Son of Man," which was His most

commonly used title, as well as the "Son of God," which He only used a few times in the scriptures. 9 You see, He didn't seem to be worried as much about people thinking He was God as much as He was worried they would not believe He was truly just a man, their kin. After His resurrection, history records that he appeared alive to thousands of people over the course of forty days! It was only after the forty days that the Bible records His ascension to heaven.

Because this was so publicly witnessed, no one was having a problem believing He was God. They were having a harder time believing he was actually a man after all that they saw. This was so common that a huge sect arose called the Gnostics that taught that there was no way that Jesus could have been a man. This sect is considered by much of the Church to be a heretical cult, primarily because of their denial of the incarnation. The reason it is so important that Jesus was both God and Man is because, if this is true, He demonstrates that when Genesis 1 says that God made man in His image and likeness, it was true.

We look like the Creator and we are like the Creator. In other words, we are His DNA, literally. God is humanity's Father, literally. If the Bible is true and Jesus really was the direct DNA of God, placed into the virgin Mary, and He came out looking just like us, that means that God's DNA is our origin. It means that who we are - with all our strengths and weaknesses - is not a mistake.

We are not mere accidents or chance creations. Our existence has purpose and value because we are made in the image of our Father, God. Recognizing this truth can bring a profound sense of belonging, dignity, and self-worth. Not only does the incarnation of Jesus reveal that God is like us, it reveals that we are like God! In other words, if we could tap into our full potential, we would see that we also have the capability and capacity of God.

Jesus 9 came to reveal who we are as much as He revealed who God truly is. In the Garden of Eden, The first revelation the Bible offers about our identity is that we are made in the image and likeness of God, both male and female. They were placed in a garden where the serpent approached them and deceived them by saying that God didn't want her to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil because if she did, she would become like God, knowing good and evil. But Eve already was like God! Do you see how the serpent's trickery caused the spark of insecurity which enabled the lie to enter that made her believe that somehow, God, her literal Father, didn't want her to be like Him?

From that time forward, man's collective conscience has been seared, more ready to believe God is some vengeful overlord than a loving Father. We have developed all kinds of religious methods of bridging the insecure divide we imagine between us and Him. The New Testament teaches that Jesus came to fix the global misconception about the relationship between God and man and restore us to the heart of a loving Creator and Father. As you can see, Jesus becoming flesh is a major key to understanding Christian Theology. When Jesus became flesh, the scriptures indicate that He became one with ALL flesh and that He embodied the entire material realm.

When He died on the cross, the bible says He crucified everything, including the global identity of mankind. 9 I n Galatians 2:20, Paul personalizes this idea and says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (ESV) You and I, and all of mankind, and all of creation were collectively killed that day when Jesus was crucified. The Bible teaches that He took on the identity of all of a fallen creation and He embodied us, so that He could crucify us. He embodied the world so that He might crucify the world with its entire identity, power structure and all its corruption so that the global slate could be wiped clean and humanity and creation itself would all have a fresh start.

JESUS INITIATED A NEW COVENANT WITH GOD FOR ALL HUMANITY. "For our sake God made Him who knew no sin, to become sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." - 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB) Jesus became our sin, then crucified it, then buried it in hell where it cannot escape so that we might be given as many chances as we need to learn what we are capable of if we could only learn from Him-Forgiveness. And in doing so, we might become God's version of righteousness, that is, someone who is capable of forgiving. In Jesus, God revealed a New Covenant and it was different than anything the world has ever known. In Jesus, God revealed his true self.

He does not send punishment and sickness and disease. He demonstrated through Christ, that He is indeed the healer and giver of life, not the destroyer of it. He would rather be killed than Kill. Jesus corrected humanity's version of an angry vengeful God and replaced it with the picture of Jesus, friend of sinners. If you listened to the previous lessons in this course, you would know that every covenant has three ingredients.

A promise, a sacrifice and a seal. This is also true of the New Covenant that Jesus Initiated. The promises of the New Covenant are many, but, a major one is that If we believe in Him, He will also reincarnate us on a future day called resurrection day. This is the basic belief of Christianity, and a major part of this belief is believing your sins have been forgiven, and not only forgiven, but they have been crucified. This means that any debt you believe God is holding against you has been paid, and the receipt of it is buried deep in the flames of hell.

This is exactly what baptism is. Baptism is the seal or sign of the New Covenant. It symbolizes our acknowledgment and acceptance of our own death, burial and resurrection in Christ. The old us is gone, behold, the new us has come! BUT, If your sins have been forgiven, guess what, your spouses sins have been forgiven too!!!

And not only that, the person who hurt you the worst in life, their sins have been crucified by Jesus too. :0 You no longer have a right to hold their debt or any debt for that matter. 9 Jesus always strong language regarding this. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive yours." - YIKES! When you fail to forgive, you are essentially denying what Christ did on the cross. By not forgiving, you are implying that Jesus' sacrifice was insufficient to cover the debt of sin, and that someone else still owes you reparation. This rejection of forgiveness is equivalent to rejecting the entire work of Jesus Christ.

If you refuse to acknowledge that a specific sin has been forgiven, you are effectively saying that no sin was actually paid for on the cross. This would render Jesus' sacrifice powerless against sin, and you would remain under judgment for your own transgressions. You must forgive, or you risk your right to be forgiven. Forgiveness is one of the signs of the New Covenant. Forgiveness is about releasing a perceived debt.

When Jesus died, He wiped out humanity's debts-past, present, and future-making judgment's currency worthless. If you're holding debts against anyone, let them go and free your soul from their grip. That debt holds you down, it does nothing to the person you are holding it for. Forgiveness does not take back what they did to you but it does release you from carrying around that debt as a weight on your shoulders. You can be free from anger, free from bitterness, and free from victimhood by just forgiving.

You can take back power over your life through forgiveness. Who would have imagined such a display, where an almighty God would humble Himself, submitting Himself to our false judgment, our torture and sacrifice of him? And why would He do this? - To teach us the way forward is to forgive.

QUESTION: As you read through this section, please take note of the thoughts or convictions that ran through your mind. Was there any significant thoughts or convictions you can note? FORGIVENESS DOESN'T

AUTOMATICALLY HEAL A RELATIONSHIP, BUT WHEN LINKED WITH GENUINE REPENTANCE, THERE IS A GOOD CHANCE IT WILL. Forgiveness is about releasing a perceived debt, but it's also a process that might need to unfold in stages. Psychologists like Enright (2001) describe forgiveness as moving from anger to empathy, often requiring time and intentionality.

Biblically, Joseph's journey with his brothers (Genesis 45) illustrates this—he didn't forgive immediately but took steps toward reconciliation. For couples, this might mean acknowledging hurt, expressing needs, and gradually rebuilding trust. While forgiveness does release an INDIVIDUAL from carrying someone else's burden, forgiveness by itself won't heal a RELATIONSHIP that is plagued with disconnected hearts and/or deep betrayal. Forgiveness isn't the removal of pain, hurt or dysfunction, it is the removal of debt. Forgiveness does not magically cure relational dysfunction, nor does it cure pain by itself.

Relationships that have experienced deep betrayal or hurt must follow a process of repentance and restoration if they are ever to become healthy again. 9 When a marriage suffers from a sense of deep betrayal caused by something like adultery, forgiveness can help relieve the negative energy in the individual who was betrayed, but it will not heal the relationship without the offender's genuine repentance, which MUST be shown with 100% honesty and transparency. This will be an extremely painful process UNLESS the one who committed the betrayal is truly repentant, and truly dead to their former actions and identity. The depth of repentance needs to match the depth of betrayal and in this case it requires a type of death. The result of hiding the truth is what caused this deep betrayal. The antidote is to reveal ALL the hidden things that led to the betrayal and all the hidden things that even now COULD LATER lead to betrayal.

Complete and ongoing transparency, and utter honest confession are the primary indicators of genuine repentance and trustworthy relationships. C on f e s s i o n m u s t c o n t a i n a d e t a i l e d a n d c o m p e l l i n g accurate account of the betrayal: "Here is exactly what happened..." "This is the first time I even thought of doing this..." "This is what caused me to first consider doing it..." "Here are the multiple instances..." "Here is my entire set of motivations..." "Here is why I was feeling so unfulfilled by you..." "This is why I thought that this betrayal was somehow acceptable..." "Here's why I was so impulsive and shallow that I thought the affair was justifiable..." The repentance and the confession needs to go all the way down to a depth that's as deep as the betrayal itself. If this happens and a plan is agreed upon as to what the change looks like, then a reconfigured relationship can be newly established and move 9 forward on that basis, but it will be a process riddled with challenges and requiring a lot of time in discussion. THE CAUSE OF ADULTERY AND A BRUTAL ANTIDOTE The one who commits adultery bears full responsibility for their choice, yet shared relational struggles often plant the seeds for it. Husbands may stray to cope within a marriage, while wives might do so to break free.

Here's why: when a husband craves intimacy and his wife turns away, he faces tough, flawed choices. They can try to suppress their need and abstain from sex, they can emasculate themselves by trying to beg or fight for sex, they can get a divorce, or they can figure out how to get their needs met elsewhere, enabling them to endure the marriage. This usually starts with masturbation and watching porn. If that continues over time, it can provoke promiscuity, and if that continues it can lead to adultery. That is the pattern for men and it is very similar for women, except with women it is usually not as much sex they are looking for as it is an escape.

The affair gives them an escape from the misery of a loveless union and perhaps acts like a scream for attention, a way of feeding the need to feel loved and wanted, and/or forcing change—any change from a miserable and lonely existence. By doing so, she gives just motive to the dissolution of the marriage, or perhaps she gives her husband the motivation to get his act together and start giving her the attention she needs. This being said, data seems to be indicating that it

can be harder for a marriage to survive a wife's adultery than a husband's, 9 likely due to fundamental gender differences. Women tend to RESPECT masculine men and men tend to LOVE feminine women. Where did we see these two words before?

In Ephesians 5:33, which tells husbands to love their wives and wives to respect their husbands. Masculine men tend to be self sufficient, and lacking in neediness, which makes it hard for them to come back to a cheating woman (I am not saying they shouldn't try). If they do come back, they do so in spite of their masculinity, which will likely only diminish the wife's already meager respect for him (which often equates to attraction to him). Conversely, if a husband cheats and a wife takes him back, it does not lower his love for her, or his attraction to her. In fact, it often has the opposite affect, deepening his love, connection and appreciation for her feminine power to care, forgive and nurture past the hurt he has caused her.

I am not at all advocating that this should be true, or that men should be automatically forgiven or any such thing. I am merely making an observation based on the available research and experience. In either case, for a relationship to survive this type of deep betrayal and for love and respect to be restored, it is my opinion that the entire marriage, along with both individuals, needs to die and be reborn. I recommend couples who want to salvage their relationship enter a season of time similar to an "engagement" period, we can call it a marriage "renewal" period. This period of time will act as a buffer between your past marriage that has completely died, and a resurrected but completely new marriage that is being built upon a totally different foundation and habits than the previous one.

I recommend this new marriage be 9 initiated with a renewal ceremony in which a new marriage covenant is truly established. For this to really work, both partners need to undergo a type of death to their former selves, especially the way they operated in their relationship. They must both really want this, and choose it, and be willing to sacrifice their pride and ego, and their former way of doing things to offer themselves afresh upon the altar of marriage. When an adulterer truly dies, they will no longer identify with the adultery. They won't want to hide it or protect it or justify it any longer, in fact they will earnestly seek to confess it and expose it.

They will be totally dead to it. They will be able to expose their old identity, along with all the motives and darkest desires behind it because they truly despise it and don't want to protect it anymore. This is what true repentance or change looks like. Repentance requires total transparent confession and the total exposure of the old man/woman that is being crucified. Only after total transparency and honesty is established, can trust be restored.

This is the only way forward. Conversely, forgiveness, on the part of the betrayed, can also be seen as a type of death to self. It can and should be seen as a death to the one who was formerly a victim, formerly hurt, formerly rejected, formerly betrayed, etc... along with all the parts of the identity that are being sacrificed and replaced with upgrades in this transition. Once the betrayal is truly forgiven from the heart, the entire former relationship can be buried as far as the forgiver is concerned. Trust can be reestablished and continued bitterness, resentment or shame should remain no longer. 9 Continuing to hold the former transgression over your partner's head is equivalent to digging up the dead.

If you are to have a fresh start, the buried must stay buried. Once total transparency and honesty is fully initiated in a relationship, only then can real progress begin to be made. Only then can forgiveness have the power not only to release the burden of debt, but the power to bring a chance for new life through genuine reconciliation.

CONCLUSION: Whether you have experienced adultery or not, there are many tools that can help your marriage. Our goal is to reach couples before they get to a state of betrayal and help them prevent the years of destruction that dysfunction can cause. That being said, a marriage doesn't need to experience adultery to be suffering from unresolved trauma. These things are likely there in all stages of relationship. Because of this, we recommend partners treat any

wounds of unforgiveness or betrayal through a process of communication, repentance and forgiveness.

In healthy relationships, genuine repentance and forgiveness take place often in order to regularly reaffirm or reestablish trust. As you go through the healing process of repentance and forgiveness, it is important to remember, you are not healing to be able to handle more pain, trauma and depression, you're already used to those things. You are healing to be able to accept love, security and happiness back into your life. The process of healing is the process of putting the trauma behind you. 9 REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS ACTIVATION: NOTE: You will need a pad of paper and a pen or pencil, a lighter and a fire pit. Answer the questions: Do you want honesty even if it hurts really bad?

Would you rather have me tell you terrible truths or beautiful lies? If we start telling the truth now, will you give me a chance to win your trust through transparency and honesty? Will you see my honesty as my attempt to love you long term, even though it might hurt you short term? • Pray and ask God for help. You pray for help and humility to disclose all your secrets and shameful betrayals of trust, and your partner prays for help in identifying all the wounds and violations of trust they received from you. Both partners should write them down. • Volunteer to Identify your own violations and betrayal of trust.

Then begin to read your list of violations, admitting your fault and guilt for the betrayal. • Ask your partner if they can identify anything you missed. If so, accept those things without defending or arguing. It is not about how you feel, but how you made them feel. Those feelings are real and they need to be accepted and validated. 9 • Declare the violations as sin or as "wrong" to the fullest extent, without justification • Validate your partner's emotion and pain you caused by your violation of their trust • Confess the entire story without excuses or qualifications: How it began, How it progressed, Your motives, Your excuses, The lies you told yourself, your spouse and others, The multiple instances, the feelings you felt to lead you to commit such acts... Everything. • Ask your partner if they have any specific questions. Discuss everything.

Expose Everything. • Apologize sincerely and tell your partner that you hate that you made them feel this way. And from this point on, you will be committed to total transparency and being upfront with them about all your needs and temptations. • Ask Forgiveness. Have your partner name all the violations from the list(s) and forgive them one by one, releasing the debt you owe them. Once your partner does this, have them take both your pages of notes and label them "Certificate of Debts." Then say together, "God, we release these debts and give them to you." As you do this, light the certificate of debts on fire and place the paper in a fire pit. Watch them burn. • Work with your partner to create an agreement on how to move forward in a way that makes them feel secure, 9 assuring regular check-ins for transparency, accountability and trust. • If appropriate, Consummate the union at that time. 9

SECTION THREE: BECOMING THE HEALTHIEST & HAPPIEST PARTNER & FRIEND 9

INTRODUCTION S

MEASURE 9. THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL HEALTH ome ti mes th e ma rr ia ge i sn 't f ai li ng b ec au se t he relationship isn't healthy, but because one or bot

h individuals within the relationship are not healthy. We can give unhealthy individuals all the relationship tools that are proven to make marriages succeed, but if those partners continue to lack wholeness in body, soul or spirit, the relationship will be severely compromised. Addressing the idea of what goes into a healthy partner is a must for achieving . TEENAGE GIRLS Is it just me or do teenage girls have a way of zeroing in on the deepest cutting thing they can say to you? - We were in the midst of our hardest season as a family. I had made a terrible miscalculation that caused one of the houses we flipped to cost us 9 far more than we expected and in order to dig us out of the debts we accumulated, I had to work about 15 hours per day, seven days per week for about five months straight.

I only had three days off that entire time. I trusted Kimberly to focus on the kids and I pretty much had no time for any of them. Our relationships suffered to say the least. When this season completed and I was finally able to return to a more normal life where I could be more present with my family, my boys were very happy to have me back but my girls had suffered from my absence and as a result, our relationships were filled with tension for some time. One day I got into an argument with my 15 year old daughter.

I don't remember what we were arguing over, but I will never forget when she said, "Don't take it out on me that you hate your life!" I immediately began to deny that I hated my life so I could get back to making my point in the argument, but my spirit was bearing witness that what she said was true. It shook me to the core, and I didn't really have a good response. I we nt to be d t ha t n ig ht an d t ho ug ht ab ou t wh ats hes ai d throughout the night. I couldn't sleep as I was realizing more and more how terrible my absence had been for all the kids and especially for her. My regret and sorrow became so overwhelming that I realized I needed to ask my daughter's forgiveness.

I couldn't wait so I went and gently woke her up and just laid next to her holding her weeping. I admitted my fault and asked forgiveness. She was kind and although she was still hurt, she forgave me. 9 Over the days that followed, I began realizing how much I had been struggling in life, so busy that I rarely had time to sit, meditate and know myself, much less my kids. I knew something was wrong with my heart at my core. I had been traumatized by the past season of my own life and had to put every self-serving aspect of my life on hold.

I realized that over the previous year, I had lost myself. I hadn't done one thing that I could say I enjoyed over an entire year. I hated my life. No wonder my teenage daughter didn't want to listen to me or take my "life advice," she didn't want to end up like me at all and I realized I couldn't blame her for that. This is when I made a hard decision that I was going to find myself again.

At first I didn't know how. I was dead inside. I had lost "desire" itself. All I wanted was to stop working 24/7, but I felt I couldn't. At least not yet.

My family still needed me to focus on providing, and besides, everything I used to do for fun had lost its appeal or purpose. Nevertheless, I decided I needed to find my way back, if for nothing else, for their sake, and although it took several years, I did find my way back. I love my life now. I truly enjoy just about everything my life has become. I believe to a large extent, my kids now all respect me and would be happy if their lives turned out similar to their parents, minus the stupid miscalculations.

Many people find themselves in this place where they got married, started a business, had kids and now, five, ten or twenty years down the road they have stopped doing anything really enjoyable to them. They have lost themselves. They lost love for their life. When a marriage partner doesn't love and enjoy their life, it is easy for loved ones to feel like the depression is a reflection on them. They will feel they are a cause of why your life is so miserable and they will likely eventually despise you for it.

QUESTION: How would you rate your love for your life right now? Healthy relationships are made by healthy individuals. So, what is a healthy individual in regard to marriage? We believe it can be narrowed down to three areas of health. A healthy body, a healthy soul and a healthy spirit.

Now obviously, we don't always have control over our health, but we can try, and try we must. If you want to be healthy for your family, you must make the decision and put in the effort in these three areas. If you don't take care of yourself in these three areas, it will end up making you sick, burning you out, making you bitter, or killing you entirely. If any of those things happen to you, your family will suffer. When your health suffers, your family's health suffers, period.

TWO FACTORS TO OVERCOME EXTERNAL STRESSORS One of the things the Gottman research looked into was how different relationships responded to seasons of stress. Seasons of stress might include things like the death of parents, special needs children, loss of fortunes, sickness and disease, etc... What they found was that when two specific factors were present in relationships, major external stress did not weaken or damage the relationship in any way. However, when one or both of these things were absent, external stress would usually cause their marriage to be thrown into a state of chaos and crisis. The two things were friendship and personal health. 9 1.

Friendship - You really enjoy being together, doing things together, and experiencing life together. You admire, respect and are fond of one another. You seek each other out and look forward to times of daily reconnection. 2.
Personal health - Healthy relationships are made of healthy individuals. A healthy individual is someone who is holistically healthy, body, soul and spirit.

They found that the level of one's personal health is directly proportional to their ability to tolerate stress and conflict. When a couple exhibits strong friendship and strong personal health, the relationship was almost always unscathed when seasons of stress weighed down upon the relationship. For these couples, external stress often only strengthened their sense of togetherness and love. We address the subject and importance of friendship in the last chapter of this book but here in this lesson we will focus on "personal health". In this lesson our aim is to reveal what a healthy individual, spouse and parent looks like, and how to love your life so that by doing so, you will demonstrate to your family that they are not a burden to your existence, but instead, they are the joy of your existence.

THE HEALTHY BODY If you sit in an office chair and work all day, then you skip dinner and just eat a huge desert full of sugar and then stay up late binge watching shows, and then you toss and turn and only get an hour or two of sleep before you have to get up the next day, your ability to connect to your family is going to be severely compromised. Your patience, kindness, tolerance for stress, your temper and your ability to process information and think, all of it will be severely compromised because of your physical health. Your family will undoubtedly feel the

brunt of your dysfunctional physical health as you interact with them. There are three primary things that go into being physically healthy; diet, sleep and exercise. DIET: It pays to know your body.

Getting tested for food and environmental allergies and understanding how your body and mind react to the balance of fats, proteins and carbs you consume and how calories work will be one of the greatest investments of your life.

Understand how various medications work and the risks of each before consuming. Start learning about how WHEN you eat affects your sleep and energy levels. Understand the health benefits of fasting. Learn to listen to your body.

Learn to look at food as different fuels for different functions. Learn how to use food to serve your highest interests. Your mind needs healthy fats to function well. Your body needs carbs to feel awake and for energy and proteins to build and maintain muscle. The older you get, the more important your diet becomes.

SLEEP: Sleep is ultra important. Your cognitive ability is directly linked to getting enough sleep. If you don't sleep well, your mind is compromised. Realize first, that a good sleep is the same as a good fast, or a good detox. Your blood is the architect and construction system of your body.

When you are awake, your blood is focused on taking tiny particles of food from your intestines and then taking them and placing those tiny particles as bone, organ, muscle, fatty tissue, or wherever they go. Your blood somehow knows where everything goes. How your body looks and functions was and is determined by how your blood decides to build you. Moses knew the vital role of blood over three thousand years ago when he wrote Leviticus 17:11, which says, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood." Besides digesting food, your blood also delivers the food as fuel to your muscles and organs when they are exerted. Your blood is very busy when you are awake.

But when you sleep, your blood gets a break from processing food, and it gets a chance to do a full body scan. It looks to attack disease, break up scar tissue, and clean out impurities. When it finds particles of scar tissue, unhealthy food particles, disease and/or sicknesses, or toxins absorbed by your skin, and it decides those particles are counterproductive to your body, your blood takes those particles to your lungs and you breathe those bad microscopic particles out. The primary time this happens is when you sleep. Sleep (or fasting) gives your blood a chance to detox your body through breathing.

If you are not sleeping well it could be due to struggles with the detox (certain toxins). Typically health professionals suggest not eating anything for 2-3 hours before bedtime. This gives an extra fasting time. Intermittent fasting is also a way to detox. Other things that can cause you not to sleep consistently are, if you have physical pain in your body that keeps you from finding comfort, your breathing is obstructed from post nasal drip or some other condition which prevents your lungs from detoxing easily, or because your mind is full of stressful thoughts.

Whatever you need to do to figure out how to sleep well, it will be worth doing as it will affect every part of your life. It's a great investment. EXERCISE: Exercise keeps you mobile, capable and strong. Studies have shown that if you get poor sleep, one way to negate the negative effects of bad sleep is exercise. Exercise forces breath to go deeper and blood to be circulated faster.

This also helps the blood and lungs clean out your body from toxins and clogs. Not only that, exercising 3 times per week for a half hour will make you feel strong, energetic, and will help you digest food and sleep better. Creating a routine, whether it's finding a sports league, riding partners, or gym, is crucial for your physical health as you get older. Making the necessary adjustments to your schedule and life to incorporate physical health will offer one of the greatest returns on your effort. Your own physical health is the only investment I can think of that rivals an investment into your marriage as far as an impact on the quality of life is concerned.

You gotta do it!

QUESTION: Can you see any weaknesses you have in any of the three areas of a healthy body? If so, list the things that you would need to do to change in order to upgrade your health. 9 THE HEALTHY SOUL: In the New Testament, the English word for "soul" is translated from the Greek word, psyche, pronounced "psych■." It is where we get the terms Psyche, Psychology and Psychiatry. These all have to do with the human soul. Classical theory on the soul teaches that your soul includes the areas of your mind, will and emotions. This is the place within you that sheds your personality.

How you think, how you want and how you feel are all aspects of your psyche or soul. When you feed your soul your soul becomes optimistic, happy and healthy. A happy soul can easily say, "I love my life" with the utmost enthusiasm. A good indicator that you do not have a healthy soul is when it is hard to say "I love my life" with enthusiasm. This might seem obvious, but someone who loves their life has a far higher threshold for conflict and stress than someone who hates their life, thus making the lover of life a far healthier partner.

When you learn to feed your mind, will and emotions, you tend to feel full emotionally. It is hard not to be optimistic, happy and thankful and ready to help others see the bright side of life when your soul is full. When you have a healthy soul, you have the emotional energy your family needs you to have for it to be its best. Let's look deeper into how to feed each of the three aspects of your soul. Feeding your Mind: This is how you think and what you find interesting or mentally stimulating.

Part of having a healthy soul is finding ways to feed your mind. How you do this is by spending 9 time each week learning about things that you are interested in or excited about. Nature, hobbies, music, wisdom, philosophy, architecture, religion, science, history, etc... These are all examples of subjects that might feed your mind. Feeding your mind can be as simple as reading or listening to books on these subjects. but if you want to really absorb the information, writing on the subject of interest will cause you to retain far more of it. Even better is when you pick something that other people want to learn and you can teach them about it after you learn it.

This will be the most stimulating for your mind. Reading, writing and teaching are the three levels of absorbing information. Feeding your Will: This is how you want, and what you want or the experiences that make you feel alive. If you are athletic or competitive, you likely want competitive experiences and come alive when you get a chance to participate in them. If you are social, you want social experiences.

If you are spiritual, you want spiritual experiences. If you are adventurous, you want adventurous experiences. If you are creative, you want creative experiences. You know you are feeding your will because you come alive when you experience the things your will or desire loves. F i n d i n g a w a y t o f e e d t h e h e a l t h y d e s i r e s o f y o u r p e r s o n a l i t y i s vital to feeling joy and exuberance in life.

If you are not happy in life, this is likely the biggest thing you are missing. It can be as simple as setting aside time each week to do whatever your interest is; paint, go on a hike, practice guitar, pray, go to social gatherings... But if you really want to fill this need, join any of the communities that enable you to experience your passion in 9 a community of like-interested people... Sports team, boating lessons, a music jam group, painters club, hiking community, church or spiritual group, etc... To make it even funner, if possible, join the group with your spouse or participate in a leadership or teaching role. Feeding your Emotions: This is how you feel and what you feel. We all have positive emotions and negative emotions. When we lead stressful lives and we fail to feed our emotions, it is easy to become depressed or fall into negativity.

One way to combat the tendency to fall into negativity is to feed positivity. If you realize here is a lot of negativity going on in your head, the first place to start is finding thankfulness. Practicing daily thankfulness and getting into the habit of daily thankfulness is really step number one to having healthy emotions! Beyond thankfulness, there are many ways to strengthen your positive emotions. My wife and I regularly watch videos of comedy acts or pranks together that get us laughing hysterically before we go to bed.

Sometimes we spend hours just laughing together. This is really good medicine for the soul. If comedy isn't your thing, music is an amazing tool that can take you right out of negativity and into just about any emotion if you pick the right music. Perhaps you could make a playlist of songs that bring you joy and positivity and you can put that playlist on whenever you want to exercise your positive emotional muscles. Other things might include visiting nature, dipping in water, singing, hugging, praying or meditating.

There are so many ways to feed positive emotion. You might be thinking, how will I add all this to my busy schedule? I know it might look like a lot on paper, but it really isn't that hard. It's only a few hours per week that would be a base need to cover all of this. For your mind, reading and writing just a half hour to an hour a week offers plenty of stimulation, or even easier, listen to an audiobook as you drive or do a chore. For your will, joining a league or taking lessons for 1-2 hours a week should offer plenty of stimulation.

For your emotions, just practicing the habit of thankfulness each morning when you wake up takes almost no time, listening to more positive music, or watching comedy on the weekend for 10 minutes does wonders. When you feed your soul, you tend to love and enjoy life. Your spouse will feel it and your kids will feel it. Your positivity will tend to be infectious. You will smile easily and have emotional energy and positivity for those around you.

This is a major priority for the best marriages.

QUESTION: Can you see any areas where your soul is being starved? If so, list the things that you would need to do in order to feed it. **THE HEALTHY SPIRIT:** Your spirit is what drives you, aims you and guides you. Your spirit is your connection to your divine destiny and purpose. It nags you, convicts you and tells you right from wrong.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for "Spirit" is Πνεύμα (Pneuma). Πνεύμα is a noun that means "wind", "breath", or "spirit". In the New Testament, it is often used to refer to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. However, it can also be used to refer to human spirit or the breath of life. I like to ask people, "What is the difference between wind and air?" Eventually they come to the answer, "Wind is the movement behind air..." Yes, wind is the invisible force that moves air. The same is true of the idea of a spirit.

A spirit is invisible but very real. You cannot see it directly but you can see the evidence of it wherever it goes. This is the same as your spirit. You have a spirit that is the chief motivating factor behind what drives you. It is the thing that aims you, the thing that pulls you toward your purpose or your destiny.

Our conscience will often feel cursed or vexed when we violate our spirit's guidance. It is the 'God conscious' part of you. Your spirit is related to your why... and your where... It points you to your destination. It's your driver, your "highest-good" motivator. When you violate the direction of your spirit, you often will feel cursed.

For instance, if your spirit warns you not to take a job for some shady guy that will pay you lots of money but you do it anyway, you might start feeling like every bad thing that happens to you is because you now have bad luck from taking that shady job. The more you violate your spirit, the less you will believe in your own goodness and the more you will tend to despise yourself for making morally compromised decisions. The result is either you live with guilt and shame, or you try to cut off access to hearing your spirit's voice so you don't have to feel the conviction anymore, which

results in total moral collapse. This is what 9 Ephesians 4:18-19 is referring to when it says, "...They refuse to listen so they cannot have the life that God gives. They have lost all feeling of shame, and they use their lives for doing evil..." (NCV) Someone who is weak in spirit has no aim or purpose and is likely having a hard time believing that what they are doing has any value.

It might not even be intentional. You might just find yourself feeling like you are adrift at sea, not knowing where you are going in life, or why you are going there. This is an unhealthy spirit and it can greatly affect your spouse and kids. When you have a healthy spirit that means you feel internally that you yourself are "good," you have a clean conscience before God. You feel in general that God is on your side, right-ness is on your side, and fate is on your side.

If you do not have a healthy spirit, you will often feel cursed or vexed. You will tend to have an unclean conscience and probably think that God is not on your side, you might feel guilty, or perhaps that you have lost alignment with your fate. When someone has an unhealthy spirit, they often don't know what to do or where to go. They might self medicate to try to escape the sense of duty or the nagging need their spirit has to serve a greater purpose. The only way to heal your spirit is to get back into alignment with God, to cleanse your conscience and to begin following your spirit's lead in life.

Psalms 34:17 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit." If you have a broken spirit and desire wholeness, going through a process of healing would likely be of great benefit. If you need help, we recommend getting a hold of a professional who helps people with inner healing. 9

QUESTION: Do you feel like you are in alignment spiritually, or do you feel like you have somehow gotten out of alignment? Please explain. 9

MEASURE 10. THE MANAGEMENT OF YOUR INTERNAL NARRATIVE WE MUST GAIN CONTROL OVER OUR INNER DIALOGUES Suppose there were two men who both worked at the same job s

ite cleaning up trash. Every day while picking up trash, one of the men would tell himself the story about how embarrassed he was to have that job. He would tell himself how much he hated his job, how worthless he was to have a job like that, and how unlucky he was. The second man however, as he went about his work, would tell himself how much he loved his job, and how blessed he was to have a job, and how lucky he was to work outside and get paid to get exercise. Even though these two men do just about the exact same thing every day, which of these men do you think had the better life?

The second man, right? This story illustrates the secret of how a poor man could live a higher quality life than a millionaire. It is all in the way they narrate their own story to themselves. The goal of this lesson is to show you how to recognize your inner narrative, and 9 how to take control of it so you can use it to serve the interest of your life and marriage. A range of studies have suggested that 70-80% of all mental health issues are related to negative self-talk.* This alarming statistic does not surprise me.

After spending decades working with hundreds of individuals and couples in a deeply personal counseling role, I believe everyone is in a fight for control over their inner dialogue and the stories they tell themselves about their lives. (*"The Inner Critic: How to Overcome Your Negative Self-Talk" by Dr. Lisa Firestone (2010), "Cognitive Therapy and Research" article by Hollon, S. D. et al. (2002). "The Impact of Cognitive Self-Statements on Emotional

Outcomes," by D. W.

A. S. McKay) Our inner dialog is a constant stream of thoughts, both conscious and subconscious, that shape our sense of self-identity. But our inner dialog isn't just important for our mental health; it also has a profound impact on our relationships with others. When we practice self-compassion and positive self-talk, we become more empathetic, understanding, and supportive towards others.

This increased emotional intelligence can lead to stronger, more meaningful relationships. "Whoever controls the tiller controls the entire vessel." This old saying about controlling a huge ship from a tiny tiller offers an illustration of how important the little narratives we feed ourselves daily have major control over the quality of our lives. Whoever controls the narrative, controls the entire life. You cannot experience an amazing life without an amazing inner narrative. Likewise, you cannot have an amazing marriage without an amazing inner narrative about your spouse. 9 The inner dialogues we have as we go about our day are like seeds planted in the garden of our minds.

If we choose to be an optimistic narrator, our stories will grow into journeys of confidence, self-acceptance, and resilience. But if we choose to be a pessimistic narrator, our stories will sprout into weeds of self doubt, anxiety, and victimhood. When you control the narratives of your mind, you take control of your daily attitude, your daily stress tolerance, and your self control. When you change an underlying negative narrative about your spouse, you can begin to assume the best in their motives, intentions and actions. You tell yourself a better story.

APPLICATION: Take a moment to consider what story you have been telling yourself about your spouse. Here are some questions to answer: • What is something you regularly assume your partner is thinking about you? • What are some common narratives you tell yourself about them? • What story would you want to tell yourself, or what is the best story you could tell yourself about their attitude and thoughts toward you?" • If you are having a hard time here, ask yourself why you are having a hard time accepting the better story. 9 With the answers to these questions, you might be able to have a deep and meaningful conversation with your partner, where the goal would be a major upgrade to the story you keep about your spouse and marriage. THE DEVIL In the New Testament, the Greek word διabolος (diabolos) comes from two root words; δια (dia), which means "through" or "between," and βάλλω (ballo), which means "to throw" or "to cast." When combined, διabolος (diabolos) literally translates to "one who throws apart" or "one who casts between." This etymology highlights the role of the devil as one who creates division and discord. In other words, the devil is in the business of divorce. In the first chapter of this book we shared how Adam was created but God did not consider him "good" or "functional" until he was united with Eve.

Only together were they considered "good" or "complete." Ever since then, the devil has been the antagonist of marital harmony. "If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand." - Mark 3:25 (ESV) "It has come at last - salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth - the one who accused them before our God day and night." - Revelation 12:10 (NLT) 9 This passage describes the fall of Satan, the antagonist and enemy of mankind. The passage describes him as one who makes accusations day and night. Here we find a major clue, revealing the likely strategy our enemy uses to divide us.

He divides us through a barrage of constant accusations.

QUESTION: Can you identify any of the ways the devil's strategies of accusation or division are coming against you or your marriage? CURSES & BLESSINGS In many places the Bible speaks of "curses" and "blessings." A curse is a pronouncement of judgment, punishment or affliction, while a blessing is a pronouncement of favor, protection and prosperity. Curses and blessings often have no power in our lives unless we begin to believe them.

When we believe them, they can have total power over our lives. During my counseling sessions with individuals and couples, I frequently observe the profound impact of both curses and blessings on people's lives.

During inner healing sessions we will often try to locate the root cause of relationship problems, only to discover that the source of their tension lies in subconscious beliefs that have taken root in their minds. Individuals are often shocked to realize that a major root of their marital issues stems from a deep-seated belief that they are unlovable, unwanted, damaged goods, etc... These are curses - negative thought patterns that originated from somewhere in their past and were reinforced over time through hurtful experiences. Curses are the statements behind insecurities. When a curse initially takes root, it is because an individual begins to internalize a negative statement about themselves, often as a result of traumatic events, emotional abuse, or neglect.

After that point, negative statements get perpetuated every time someone else hurts or rejects them, solidifying these curses in their minds. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the individual unconsciously hears the negative statement or curse repeated in their minds whenever they feel rejected or hurt by someone, ultimately creating a cycle of pain and suffering. By identifying and addressing these curses, individuals can begin to break free from the chains of negativity and work towards healing and restoration. With the help of counseling and spiritual guidance, they can learn to reframe their beliefs and develop a more positive, loving relationship with themselves and others. Curses are not only harmful when you believe them about yourself, they are also harmful when you believe them about others.

Curses are like the judgments or labels you place upon someone's character or identity in your mind. When our partner makes us upset, it's easy to place a judgment against them in our thoughts; "They are such a liar," "They are so stupid," "They are so selfish..." These are all curses we might repeat to ourselves about our partner that only reinforce a destructive narrative. Whenever we blame their character instead of their circumstance, we reinforce a divisive judgment that furthers the divide between us. Instead of judgements about their character, it is far less harmful, and far more productive to simply question their circumstance; "What happened to their heart that is making them act this way?" In my counseling sessions, one of the most damaging things that I see happening is when husbands or wives curse each other and/or their kids. Again, curses are claims or judgments about someone's character or identity and they are most powerful when spoken by a trusted loved one.

When a loved one speaks a curse, it is hard to be forgotten or undone. The curses you utter will often haunt the minds of your loved ones throughout their lives. Never curse those in your care. QUESTIONS: Can you identify any curses that you have believed about yourself? Where did they come from?

Can you identify any curses that you have believed about your partner's thoughts about you? Can you identify any curses that you have believed about your relationship? Do you recall any curses you have believed or spoken over your partner or children that you want to renounce and replace with positivity or truth? GOTTMAN'S POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE: In 1999, after several years of collecting data, John Gottman published a study that found that happy couples tend to focus on the positive aspects of their relationship, making an effort to "accentuate the positive" and build on their partner's strengths. This positive perspective allows them to maintain a sense of hope, optimism, and trust, which helps them navigate conflicts and challenges more effectively.

In contrast, unhappy couples tend to focus on the negative aspects of their relationship, which can lead to a downward spiral of criticism, blame, and resentment. Gottman's findings suggest that cultivating a positive perspective is a key ingredient for building and maintaining a strong and fulfilling romantic partnership. * Gottman, J. M. (1999). The seven principles for making marriage work: A practical guide from the country's foremost relationship expert. Three Rivers Press.

APPLICATION: By adopting a positive perspective, you can transform your relationship from a place of negativity and criticism to a place of positivity and appreciation. It can be as easy as regularly recognizing and expressing gratitude for the good things you have in life. • What are some things that you are grateful for in your relationship? • What are some things you are grateful for about your spouse? • What are some things you are grateful for about your family life? **NOTE:** Overcoming negative self-talk is essential for a healthy marriage, but it's not always straightforward. For some, negative narratives stem from deep-rooted trauma or mental health challenges that require professional support. While positive thinking helps, don't hesitate to seek therapy or counseling if your internal narrative feels overwhelming.

WHAT STORY HAVE YOU BEEN TELLING?

APPLICATION: Each question that follows is designed to take you on an internal journey and provoke a genuine response. Please pause and take the time you need after each question to thoughtfully answer the question as best you can. - What is the story you tell yourself about your life? Start with your birth, then childhood, then teenage years and so on up to the current day. What is your story? - What tone are you telling your story in? Are you telling it from a place of judgment, or fear, or defeat?

Once you determine the tone, it tells you the emotion you had been carrying. What emotion do you sense your story is carrying? - Why are you telling your story? What do you want to get out of telling your story the way you are telling it? What reaction are you trying to create by telling this story? - Pretend you are hearing this story for the first time from someone. Describe the person who is telling this story.

What identity do they have? - Ask why they are telling their story the way they are telling it? 9 - Who are you in that story? What is the character role you have given yourself in your story? Are you a victim, hero, orphan, survivor or slave...? Who are you in this story? - Who do you want to tell your story to? Are there certain types of people that you really want to tell this story to?

Why? Do you change the story for different people in your life? Why? Is it the same story you tell yourself, your kids, your parents, friends, and God? **YOU ARE TELLING YOUR STORY EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY.**

IT'S YOUR STORY. IF YOU WANT TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE, IT STARTS BY TELLING YOURSELF A BETTER STORY.

APPLICATION: You live out of the story you repeat to yourself daily. You have total control over your story. The difference between the best version of you and the worst version of you is the story you tell yourself about yourself. - What story are you telling about your marriage? And your family? And Your parenting? - What story are you telling about the people who hurt you or betrayed you?

THERE ARE ALWAYS THREE STORIES. YOUR STORY, THEIR STORY (THE ONES WHO HURT YOU) AND GOD'S STORY. WHICH ONE DO YOU WANT TO TELL ABOUT YOURSELF? 9 GOD'S STORY: A SELF GUIDED HEALING SESSION. One at a time, each partner should lead the other through this exploration session:

APPLICATION: 1. **ENTER A MEDITATIVE STATE:** - Find a quiet and comfortable space where you can comfortably sit or lay down. - Close your eyes: Closing your eyes helps to focus your attention inward and reduce visual distractions. - Take slow, deep breaths: Take slow, deep breaths through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. This helps to calm the nervous system and bring the body into a state of relaxation. - Focus on your breath: Focus on the sensation of the breath moving in and out of the body, feeling the rise and fall of the chest or belly. This helps to anchor the mind and bring awareness to the present moment. - Release tension: As you sit, release any physical

tension or discomfort in your body by breathing into the place your body feels that tension, letting go of any feelings of stress or anxiety.- Let go of thoughts: Allow thoughts to arise without judgment or attachment, simply acknowledging them and gently returning to the breath or chosen focus. 9 - Visualize God's presence: Recognise God's life presence in you and picture the Spirit (breath) of God entering your body as you breathe in. - Pray a prayer: Thank God for His presence and tell Him you are ready to receive His grace and gifts at this moment in time. 2. FIND THE SCROLL OF YOUR LIFE STORY: - Visualize yourself looking down on earth from outer space. - Visualize a little pin prick of light appearing where you were conceived, and another where you were born.- Visualize the path of your life drawn as a string of light across the face of the earth.

Follow it from your conception, birth, childhood, teenage years, twenties, thirties and so on. - On the path of your life, visualize all the deep connections you have had with people as pin pricks of light, the deeper the connection, the bigger the light. - Visualize the design your life's light has had on the earth.- Visualize Jesus reaching down and plucking up the entire string of your life's light and bringing it up before you where you have been observing in outer space. - Visualize Jesus stretching it out and turning it into a scroll, with all the major life experiences and connections you have made highlighted across it in light. 9 - Visualize Jesus handing you the scroll or fabric of your lifeline and hear Him say, "This is the scroll of your life story." 3. READ THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE: - As you hold your life scroll, visualize Jesus taking you into the point of your birth. See yourself entering the world, from your mother's womb. - Visualize Jesus, going over to you as a baby and picking you up, and cradling you. Then He speaks over you as a baby. What does He say? - Once He is done speaking to the baby, visualize Jesus walking over to you and handing you yourself as a baby.

You take the baby and cradle it and speak to it. What do you say? - Now, picture Jesus fast forwarding your life until he wants to stop it at a significant event. It stops there. - What is this moment of life? - What is the story you tell yourself at that moment?- What is the story that Jesus wants to tell about this moment of your life? - Once you are done with that event, Let Jesus fast forward you to the next event He wants to highlight. Ask the same questions: 9 - What is this moment of life? - What is the story you tell yourself at that moment?- What is the story that Jesus wants to tell about this moment of your life? - Continue this process until you come to your current place in life.- What is this moment of life? - What is the story you are telling yourself at this moment?- What is the story that Jesus wants to tell about this moment of your life? 9 THE GREATEST GIFT

MEASURE 11. THE ABILITY & WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE If we look at world history without bias there can be no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth is by far, the most influe

ntial person ever to have existed. And out of all the ideas that Jesus can be given credit for bringing to the masses, I believe the idea that we can change is by far the greatest. Before Jesus' life and teachings were released upon the earth, almost every culture everywhere believed that people were born according to whatever they deserved and if any ill fate or illness befell them, it was the will of God because of some form of karma. In those days, if your parents were slaves, so were you, or if they were royalty, so were you. You were born into your class and fate dealt you what you were destined to deserve.

At the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the mainstream Jewish religious teachers believed that plagues and diseases were a form of God's judgment that would fall upon those who were 9 disobedient to God's commandments. This is based on Deuteronomy 28:58-61, which says exactly that. Because of this teaching, and because of their interpretation of it,

when the pharisees would see lepers or others who had disease, it was customary for them to spit at them, kick dust on them or hurl insults at them as a public portrayal of their agreement with God's judgment over their lives. This type of superstitious or religious prejudice was not only true of Jewish religion just about every belief system in the known world. When Jesus touched lepers, healed the sick, and dined with sinners and tax collectors, He revealed God's true heart- shattering the distorted images superstitions and religions had painted.

If Christ embodied the real God, then the world's view was off: God isn't vengeful or wrathful, nor does He unleash sickness and death. Instead, He forgives, embraces outcasts, heals, and breathes life. The idea that only after one admits they too have been a sinner, can they truly experience salvation (or more literally, "wholeness") was truly revolutionary in Jesus' day. The idea that a sinner can experience reformation at any point in life was a radical new concept for the world to learn. Since that time, an ideological war has been waged and many nations have slowly adopted the idea that sinners can be born again and those who once were a nuisance can become productive in society.

Whenever we see the Gospel preached by Jesus, He always begins with the word "Repent." Our culture has made this a judgmental word, as if to say, I am so holy but you need to repent because you are such a sinner. This is not the true meaning however. Anyone who has worked with the poor or weak or infirmed knows that the very hardest thing to do is to change themselves. They feel like they are all alone and have no power to make the changes they know they need to make. The Bible tells us Jesus' gospel message to those "sinners," and it wasn't complicated.

He says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15). If I were to put this into modern language, I would say something like, "You can finally change because God has chosen to visit you and make His power available to you." I believe repentance is the greatest gift Jesus gave the human race. We can change now, God is with us.

QUESTION: What is one thing in your life you want God to give you power to change? **THE ABILITY TO CHANGE** In earlier chapters we shared how it is now well confirmed that in the average marriage, couples only have about a 31% chance of ever resolving any of the conflicts they had during the first year of their marriage. While this is true of most marriages statistically, it does not need to be true of your marriage. Kimberly and I are both testaments to the fact that far more than 31% can be changed. While we still possess many of our original personality traits that caused us conflict at the start, they have all now been addressed to such a degree that they possess little to none of the negative impact they once carried.

That said, we can now say that while our personality traits still remain, we have eliminated them as "conflicts," from our marriage and beaten the odds. This relational "change" is both possible and probable for couples who are willing to try.

APPLICATION: Identify of an ongoing conflict. Then put your heads together and use the tools of communication, understanding, acceptance and agreement, to address that conflict and make a plan that weakens its impact on your marriage. **CHANGING LIFE SEASONS** When couples or individuals come to me for counsel, one of the things I might ask them is how many "life seasons" they would say they have gone through. A transition in "life seasons" can be recognized whenever three or more of the five major components of your life change. Most middle aged adults have experienced between 5-8 life seasons.

If you are stuck in a negative life season, there are tools to transition out. In marriage, it is important to recognize the seasons of both members of the relationship. The first thing to be aware of is that when the seasons of our life change, there are generally five areas of life that shift. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. Living space Work situation Relationships Personal Habits

Internal Story or Narrative I have helped many people transition seasons. Almost always, at least three of these things are present, but most often, it's four or all five.

These five parts of your life like to travel together. 9 You get a new job as a doctor, you move locations to be closer to work, your relationships change to incorporate the shift, your internal narrative changes, "I am a doctor" you say to yourself every day. And you adjust to an early morning routine because of your work hours. Changing any one of these things can initiate the change in all five. Perhaps you realize one day your friend group is not healthy, you drink way too much and make stupid decisions when you are with them. It's taken you years to finally make the decision that you need healthier people in your life.

You join a gym, start hanging out with fit people, you start waking up earlier and going to bed earlier, your narrative shifts, "I am fit," "I am healthy," "I don't want to drink my life away..." You end up getting promoted because you are more mentally capable and you have your life together... your initial decision to change friend groups ends up changing your entire life. Often there is one simple thing that needs to change in order to unlock change in all five of these aspects of your life.

QUESTION: Are you seeking to upgrade seasons in life? If so, what is the one obvious thing that you think you would need to start with? SEASONS OF LIFE A season change in life can be initiated by any of these areas. In a marriage it is important to understand the season you are in as a family, and to be as intentional as possible with these five areas of life. 9 When I was in my early 20s, in Santa Barbara there was an older man who was a bit of a legend in the surf community named Dave Brown. Every Friday morning at 6am, he would go have coffee and breakfast at a local cafe and make himself available for younger men to seek his counsel and wisdom.

Some of my friends and I heard about this so we started going. I remember the first time we went and one of the guys there had just gotten married and had a baby with his wife and he was struggling because he wasn't able to surf and he wasn't getting any sleep. Dave, in classic surfer vibe, said, "Man, you gotta recognize the seasons. This isn't the season for surfing, man, it's the season for family. It's the same as riding waves, don't fight it, go with it.

There will always be another swell." This was amazingly simple but powerful advice that we all took with us and remember to this day.

APPLICATION: Please describe the season you are currently in using the five areas described above. PROCESSING SEASONS OF LOSS, BETRAYAL OR FAILURE "When people experience loss, betrayal or severe hardship, it is normal for them to need time to process the pain of what happened. The goal of processing is for them to try to find a way to accept what happened, even if what happened doesn't make sense or have any redemptive qualities. Once you can figure out a way to accept it as one chapter in the story of your life, then you can begin writing the next chapter of your life, which is the story of how you overcame." H 9 Seasons that are initiated by loss, betrayal or failure usually will not end until three things happen; fully experience the pain (yes, it sucks, but the only way past it is through it), accept the loss as one chapter of your story (yes, it sucks, but you must accept it as part of your story), then, decide the next chapter of your life's story, which is the story of how you overcame your loss and stood back up. If you don't do this, you will likely remain in that season of loss and victimhood until you do.

It is worth noting that healing from emotional trauma can be incredibly difficult, so pastors, counselors or other gifted mentors might be useful to help you through exceptionally difficult times. GETTING THROUGH THE MIDLIFE CRISIS (OR ANY LIFE CRISIS) Many couples find themselves in this place where they got married, started a business, had kids, and now, five, ten or twenty years down the road they awaken to find themselves looking back at the long season of life they have just experienced, feeling adrift in some kind of existential crisis, not sure how to

navigate forward, what needs to change, or even what destination they should aim for. They just know that they want their experience of life to improve, and their marriage to improve. They know they need to make changes but they are not sure how. During my hardest season of life, I had made a terrible business calculation and it took me several years to dig us all the way back out of it.

Once I did and we gained back positive financial stability, I still had problems sleeping, resting, and finding any type of enjoyment in anything. It was like my nervous system had adapted to years of waking up to war, but now all of a sudden, the war had ended and someone was telling me to take my armor off and go play by a stream. I couldn't. My mind and emotions needed time to decompress and get used to not being in a battle for survival each day. I felt something was wrong with me and I began to think that perhaps this is what people talk about when they say they are having a "midlife crisis," so I started seeking answers.

After reading several articles, doing searches and having conversations with respected elders, I found out that there is little difference in the percentage of people feeling crisis in all of the different age brackets. It turns out that statistically, teens, 20 somethings, 30 somethings, 40 somethings and 50 somethings all seem to have about 15-20% of their population feeling crisis or depression at any given time. After that, as people age, their depression seems to decrease significantly according to some studies. At first I thought, "what a let down!" I was hoping that midlife crisis was more of a universal experience. Nevertheless, I continued to seek answers and I found out that every age group tends to experience different types of crisis for differing reasons.

Midlife crisis (or midlife depression) tends to be accompanied by a sober realism, regret for one or more major life decisions, and a weighty realization that the end of life is approaching fast and there is no way you will ever be able to live out all of the optimistic dreams of your youth. It's like your failures wake you up one morning and say, "Sorry, you used to have 100 options with what you could do in life, but now you only have one option, and it is filled with seemingly impossible challenges and unfruitful obligations." I know this isn't even slightly true, but it is the feeling the midlife crisis often gives us. 9

APPLICATION: After more seeking I found a way through my midlife crisis. Here is what I and many others have done to get through it. If you are feeling like you are in a similar situation, take a few minutes and try and follow these steps: - Process the regret and figure out what you can be thankful for in your past decisions. Practice thankfulness and you will see your life is not as bad as it feels sometimes. - Accept the life you created thus far. Acceptance is key.

Accept the good and the bad of your past decisions and own up to them.- Accept that you won't get to do everything you dreamed you might do when you were younger and those were not realistic expectations anyway. - Then with a sober mind, look at all the possible future storylines of your life and choose to start investing in the one that you like more than the rest, knowing that by choosing that path, you are forfeiting the others, but for good reason. **THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFE GOALS** Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." This Old Testament proverb reveals something powerful about the human psyche. In recent years, several studies have gone on to confirm that positive emotion is directly attributed to achieving goals and if you are NOT pursuing goals, it is much harder to achieve positive emotion.* In other words, positive emotion is a direct result of pursuing and achieving goals. A major key to overcoming depression is in establishing the right goals for yourself or having a vision for your future. While looking for a goal to set for yourself, it's important that you make the goal something you see value in and can have a vision for.

The five components are a great place to start looking for goals to set. (* Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). Achieving Goals Boosts Positive Emotion: A Prospective Study of Goal Pursuit. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7(1), 25-41., Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E.

L. (2001). On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141-166, Emmons, R. A. (1999). *The Psychology of Goals*.

New York: Guilford Press., etc...)

APPLICATION: Look at the questions below and list of some simple goals you can make and accomplish this week. Then make another list of larger goals that might take months or years to accomplish. Return to these lists every couple weeks and make note of your progress toward your goals. What is one way you can upgrade your Living space? What is one way you can upgrade your Work situation?

What is one way you can upgrade your Relationships? What is one way you can upgrade your Personal Habits? What is one way you can upgrade your Internal Story or Narrative? 9 THERE IS A TARGET YOUR LIFE WANTS TO AIM AT. HERE IS HOW TO DISCOVER IT. I was in my mid forties and I had arrived at a junction in life.

I needed to figure out what I was going to focus on for work over the second half of my life. I had developed a diverse set of skills at a professional level. It wasn't a matter of me being qualified in any of these areas, it was a matter of me maintaining motivation to continue doing any of them for any length of time. I know I get bored easily with work unless it maintains three things: I feel I am inspiring people or that there is a grand purpose in the work, I am challenged creatively, and I receive fair compensation for my knowledge and effort. That being said, I had several directions I could go in and I decided to take a month to collect counsel from wise people in my life to help me decide which one I was going to commit to.

At that time I was introduced to an older business man who was quite brilliant. I told him I had about four career options before me and I didn't know how to choose which one would be the best long term decision. After a long conversation, He eventually said, "I know how to help you. I have an exercise for you. Go back through the seasons of your life and write down a description of each time you felt you were in a perfect season, you were doing exactly what you were meant to be doing and your soul was thriving.

Also write out the bad seasons and what was causing the season to be so bad. When you are finished writing these out, call me." 9 I had experienced four amazing seasons and two terrible seasons. Six total. I called him back and told him. He said, "Now, I want you to make note of any of the things that all four of those good seasons had in common.

Also, make note of any of the things that both of the bad seasons had in common." I did. There was only one thing that all four good seasons had in common, it was that I was leading a friend group toward self improvement and relational development. There was likewise only one thing the two bad seasons had in common, I didn't recognize the good that I had in the previous season so I didn't fight to keep it. He said, "Now, I want you to put all these good seasons of your life on a timeline and then draw a huge arrow through them all, pointing to your future. Now, at the tip of the arrow, I want you to write what the next season of your life looks like.

It should share the common link from all the best seasons of your past. Also, put the bad seasons below the good seasons on a different trajectory. Draw an arrow through the bad seasons and at the tip of the arrow write down what you will avoid doing in this next season of life." I don't know how he came up with that but the answer of what I should do became very clear and I am now enjoying my seventh season. What an amazing exercise!

APPLICATION: Please follow the same process described above for yourself. Does anything stand out to you? BE FRUITFUL IN SEASON AND OUT. Mark 11:12-14 says, "And on the following day, when they came from Bethany, [Jesus] was hungry. And seeing in the 9 distance a fig tree with leaves, he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And at once the fig tree withered." This passage can be a bit confusing unless you realize it is a lesson about seasons. Here we have Jesus cursing a fig tree, presumably to death, because it didn't have fruit, during a season that it wasn't supposed to have fruit. Seems unfair, but I believe the point is, no matter what season you find yourself in, you should look for ways in which to bear fruit. This should be our goal for what seem to be our fruitless seasons.

QUESTION: In which ways are you being called to bear fruit in this season of your life? **YOU CAN'T CHANGE YOUR PARTNER, BUT YOU CAN CHANGE YOURSELF.** In earlier chapters we mentioned the studies that showed that 69% of marital conflicts were perpetual, and 31% of conflicts were temporal. In light of these findings, we suggested that focusing on acceptance of your partner's differences, rather than continuing to try to force change could be more fruitful. I think it appropriate in this chapter to revisit this and add to it by saying while you can't force your partner to change, you can force yourself to change and in doing so, you just might inspire them to follow your lead.

After all, one third of conflicts DID change. That is no small percentage! There is a good chance that 9 you CAN change. In fact, I would argue that with God, all things are possible and every issue you currently have is on the table for change. I believe that is true for my marriage and everyone else who applies the things in these lessons.

My wife and I are testimonies and examples of the power of positive change. We have both changed far more than 30% of our ongoing issues. But, the first thing you can change about yourself to improve your marriage is accepting your spouse for who they are right now.

QUESTION: Close your eyes and picture your spouse-all the things you'd like to change about them. Then ask, 'Can I accept, love, and embrace them as they are, without resentment, even if they never change?' If you said yes, you might feel a weight lift from your chest. You don't need to expect them to change; you can't make them. You can only change yourself." If you answered yes, you might have felt a weight drop off your chest. You no longer need to hold them to an expectation of change.

You cannot change your partner. You can only change yourself. This might mean you have to finally accept ownership and responsibility for the extra workload you have been angry about them never taking ownership of, but by doing so, you can now accept that workload as your own without resentment. When you do this, it will be hard for your spouse not to feel like you are robbing them of precious opportunities to demonstrate their love to you. It just might provoke the change you wanted all along.

QUESTION: What are some things you have expected them to do for years, but they have never taken ownership of? Are you willing to forgive them of these things, and either drop the expectation or 9 take ownership of them yourself, or will you continue to communicate your expectation and hold out hope that they will change? **AFTER YEARS, MY WIFE FINALLY ACCEPTED ME, AND THEN I CHANGED.** This very thing happened in my marriage. For the first 20 years of our marriage, Kimberly had several expectations that I continuously failed to meet and she had difficulty communicating them so her resentment just continued to build.

Meanwhile, I really had little clue about her heartache and what I was doing that could be causing it. Even though she was able to maintain a level of kindness and civility I could certainly feel her resentment and as a result, I began telling myself that she must secretly hate me. Cursed negative internal dialogue! In truth, she didn't hate me, she loved me, but simultaneously was suffering from unresolved hurt and resentment toward me. One year when we were in our early forties, she started to pursue healing and she began to change drastically.

I was alarmed at first and threatened. For almost twenty years of marriage, she was this ultra quiet, timid, stay at home mom who homeschooled our kids and was very submissive, never drank, never did drugs, never complained, never gossiped, she prayed a lot and loved God. She always asked my permission before doing anything including any spending of any kind. But one day during her healing process she came home and said, I think I am going to take a job at the local MMA gym and start training MMA. "Wow!" I thought, "That wasn't a request for permission.

She just said it." That 9 was independent of her. And at an MMA gym! I immediately felt insecure and threatened. She was changing. This was one of many such examples of the drastic change that she was undergoing.

Among other changes she began drinking wine again after 20 years of no alcohol. This time, she included me in her process and I helped her find peace with her decision, which was nice, but still, I was beginning to feel very insecure about her changes. She was changing so much and so drastically that I didn't know if I really still knew her or could trust her. I started worrying that she might be losing her connection to me and I wondered what she was now capable of. Later that year we celebrated our honeymoon by going to Las Vegas.

This was our first trip away from kids in 20 years! I had steered clear of Vegas in the past but I was trying to embrace change with my new wife, so I decided to forget my prejudice and just experience Vegas as if I had never heard it ever existed. I would see Vegas with the virgin eyes of awe and curiosity. It was truly amazing. We had the time of our lives.

During this trip, I never once felt the resentment or reservation my wife had toward me over the previous 20 years. I felt the loving girl I married was back after 20 years of being under some wicked spell. What had happened? She loved me without restraint! I didn't want to ruin it so I didn't say anything until she was home.

When I brought it up I told her I could feel that she became more open to me than I have felt since our wedding night. I wanted to know what changed. She said, "I decided to accept you and love you for who you are regardless of if you ever change." I had never heard more motivating words that provoked 9 me to change the way I treated her. Her acceptance was real. And so was our relationship.

We were a new couple. Instead of spending a lot of energy and emotion trying to change your partner, it will serve you better to put that energy into accepting your partner, and changing yourself. If you haven't figured it out by now, you don't have the power to change your spouse. You only have power to change yourself, and if you do so, you will likely inspire your spouse in ways you could never imagine.

QUESTION: In what ways can you change to improve your experience of life and take steps toward achieving your highest potential? 9

MEASURE 12. THE ENJOYMENT YOU OFFER EACH OTHER EVERY DAY AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN THE SECRETS OF YOUR SPOUSE In the iconic film *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors finds

himself stuck in a time loop, reliving the same day over and over again, trying to live the perfect day and win the perfect girl. But imagine if, instead of being cursed, you had the secret to reliving the same day with your spouse, only to make them fall more and more in love with you. Imagine knowing exactly what to say and do to sweep them off their feet, to make them feel seen and known and loved, and to leave them breathless with admiration and attraction toward you. With every passing day, you'd be able to tailor your approach to their unique desires and needs, making them feel like they've snagged the perfect mate. And as the days blend together into one perfect, romantic haze, you'd find yourself falling deeper in love with your partner, too - not because you're stuck in a loop, but because you're constantly finding new ways to delight and surprise each other. 9 I propose that this is how we treat the future days of our marriage.

Every day we wake up next to our spouse is a new opportunity to master the mental and emotional map of our partner. This is not a fantasy. It is actually very achievable in marriage. Make mistakes, but try - because you likely have thousands of days left to learn how to give your spouse the perfect day. A day where you win at making them feel the utmost admiration, affection and connection to you.

You have probably heard the saying, "The best defense is a good offense." Turns out the same is true in marriage. When a married couple truly enjoys their friendship, it is very hard to make them want to divorce. Seems obvious, right? One of the leading causes of divorce is that the couple feels like they have drifted apart as friends. There are only a few reasons this can happen.

In this lesson, we look at what goes into the deepest levels of marital friendship, intimacy and having fun together. This might just be the most important of all the lessons.

QUESTION: How would you describe the level of your friendship right now? Do you love spending time together and make it a priority? Why or why not? **FRIENDSHIP: THE KEY TO LONG LASTING MARITAL BLISS** When people first enter a romantic relationship, they might do so for a variety of reasons. Their initial motive could be physical attraction, or perhaps admiration, or it could be out of convenience, or need, or provision, or boredom, or protection...

But in order to have a happy and fulfilling long term marriage, 9 evidence suggests we must arrive at a place of companionship. While there might be many motivations, benefits and desires people hope marriage will fulfill, companionship is the thing that creates the healthiest and happiest marriages long term. There is plenty of research that confirms the better the friendship, the more fulfilling, enjoyable and durable the marriage.* If you want an incredible marriage, you must build an incredible friendship. The greatness of a friendship can be measured by the enjoyment two people receive from each other's company and conversation. A great friendship is when you really enjoy being together, doing things together, and experiencing life together.

You admire, respect and are fond of one another. You seek each other out and look forward to times of daily reconnection. If you can't exactly claim you have this yet with your partner, don't worry, you are not alone, and there are several ways to increase the enjoyment you have together. *Gottman's 1986 paper, "Assessing the Long-term Stability of Marriage: A Time Series Approach" (Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48(1), 11-22), If you really want to expand your friendship, the first thing is to establish consistent uninterrupted time together. This will enable you to

have time for the basic conversations you both need to have in order to maintain the feeling of connection to the other. Once you have consistent quality time together, you can invest in your friendship further by creating dates that maximize the "friendship building effect" of your time together.

There are three major themes we suggest building your dates around to maximize their friendship building effect. They are fun, meaningfulness, and uniqueness. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to building great experiences together, that build your friendship. **9 QUALITY TIME TOGETHER: THE TOP PRIORITY OF FRIENDSHIP** Many couples seeking marital help often express that they no longer have time for each other due to the high demands of work and children. This is a common issue, and when it arises, marriages frequently enter a phase of regression. When I hear this, I immediately tell them, "Task number one for saving your marriage is to carve out two hours of distraction-free quality time together this week." I may even suggest pausing our counseling sessions until they can prioritize this crucial time together.

After all, spending quality time without distractions can be even more beneficial than counseling for couples who are starved for connection. Depth of friendship is directly proportional to time spent together. No time together means there is no friendship. If you don't spend undivided quality time together, you starve your relationship and it quickly begins to die. It is astonishing how often couples naively let this happen.

"But what if your job takes you away?" You might be asking. Long distance work is clearly not ideal for your relationship, but you can still maintain and feed that vital connection through time spent on phone or video calls. It is the absence of regular emotional connection and communication that brings the downward spiral. Kimberly and I recognized this vital need for our relationship after many years of neglecting intentional time together. With six kids under 10 and a very busy life, it took us quite some time to figure out how to establish a mandatory weekly date night.

Nevertheless, with stubborn persistence, we've managed to maintain this for the last 12 years, and have gotten better at making our dating experience progressively more meaningful and fun. It has now become our most anticipated time of the week. Our older kids have recognized the value of our date nights and help manage responsibilities while we're out. When our kids were young, we couldn't do this as easily. We had a child under three years old for more than 12 years straight and never were able to get away from our kids.

We made the most of it though and did "stay-at-home-dates" where we locked ourselves in our bedroom or went in the front or back yard with drinks and bribed the kids, saying only to interrupt us for an emergency and if they got along and didn't interrupt us for non emergencies, we would give them each \$1, and for the oldest \$2. We would also help the oldest come up with a plan to entertain the younger kids for 3-4 hours while we stayed in our bedroom. It didn't always work well, but it did work well often enough, and slowly everyone learned to make date night a tradition. **INVESTING IN CONSISTENT DATES** Once you have established regular, undivided, weekly time together and it is a consistent part of your life, you can then begin to improve the quality of your dates and times together. You can see these dates as investments into the memory bank of your marriage over the course of your lifetime.

We want to suggest you use your weekly dates as your primary strategy toward developing your best marriage ever. It might take several years to achieve but once you begin, it becomes such a joy ride we are convinced it will become the crown highlight of your life. **9 We see the dating process as the development of three phases:** • **DATING PHASE ONE: INEXPENSIVE & EASY DATES THAT STILL PROVIDE CONNECTION** • **DATING PHASE TWO: PLANNING DATES BASED ON WHAT YOUR PARTNER LOVES** • **DATING PHASE THREE: CREATING MAGICAL DATES OF ROMANCE & ADVENTURE** These three phases are expanded upon in the rest of this chapter. Our goal as you move forward is to help you create a plan for your dating life. The goal is to know how to create times to connect, communicate, build closeness, and have a lot of fun. You are on a mission to figure out what

your partner loves, how they love, what turns them on, and what makes them come alive!

DATING PHASE ONE: INEXPENSIVE & EASY DATES THAT STILL PROVIDE CONNECTION No matter what it takes to make it happen, get undivided time together at least once per week. This is mostly about figuring out how to manage responsibilities, kids and budgets so that you get this time together. If you have small children at home, it might take several months of trial and error before a rhythm is established and your kids get used to letting you have this time together. Don't give up or give in until this becomes tradition. 9 If you have not been spending any quality time together for any length of time, and these times are your first times alone with each other in a long time, it might be hard to think of ideas of what to do or how to spend your time together. Don't worry, there is plenty to do, and we have suggestions for you below.

APPLICATION: Let's not waste any more time. Schedule that weekly time together now. Figure out how to make undivided time together. For people with kids, this can be more challenging. Focus on using grandparents, friends, or entertainment, or bribery or hire a safe babysitter.

Whatever it takes, figure it out and don't move on until that is done. Having uninterrupted fun together is a vital investment for your relationship to survive and thrive. Consider the following steps as a suggestion for how you might start your dates: • Before the date, plan on a meal that requires little to no work. Either eat out or prepare most of the meal before hand so your dates do not require cleaning and making food. (unless you both love this.) • When you are finally alone, ask how your partner's day has been. • Ask them if there are any final things they need to address that might get in the way of enjoying their time with you. If there are final things they need to address, I suggest putting a time limit of 5-15 minutes on dealing with it so it doesn't end up stealing your date. • After that, commit to no screens for at least two hours. • If you are home, turn on some quiet music that your spouse likes and take a moment to embrace each other breathe. 9 • Then whether you are out or at home, make yourself comfortable, eat and drink together, sit where you can look into each other's eyes, or where you have physical contact, and as you eat, ask questions about work, family, friends, kids, hobbies, or things they are currently watching, reading or learning... anything about their world.

Just try to enjoy the conversation and learn something new about them. • You might need to break after this and put kids to bed, but you'll need to try to put a time limit on that too. Tell the kids that on date nights, your bedtime routine will be shortened so that mommy and daddy can spend time together. • Then once in the bedroom, you know what to do! Once you have established this weekly time in your lives, you can begin to plan and schedule more elaborate dates.

DATING PHASE TWO: PLANNING DATES BASED ON MAXIMAL FUN & MEANINGFULNESS When struggling couples come to me, one of the first things I like to ask is, "When is the last time you had fun together?" Struggling couples commonly don't have fun together! This can be such an easy thing to solve.

After you have set up a consistent dating routine, begin to use your dates as opportunities to get to know your partner better and figure out what they really find "fun." You might already think you know what they love, but there are infinite questions, conversations and experiences you have still yet to explore if you put a little effort into it. 9 When I was younger I met an older and wiser man who was in an incredible marriage and when asked about how to have an incredible marriage he said, the romance will never run dry so long as curiosity still remains. In the decades since I first heard this, I have never forgotten it, and it has only gained relevance each year that passes by. For this second phase, I want you to act as if you have only unlocked 10% of the treasure of your partner carries. Start believing there is more to their sense of humor, their sexuality, their wisdom, their interests, their knowledge, their creativity, their perspective, their spirituality, their turn-ons, their special talents, their kinky desires, their superstitions, their secret obsessions, their pet peeves, the things they value, etc... They have not shown you all they are yet, and you will never

know everything there is to learn.

Many of these explorations might end up not producing much, but if you keep digging, you will undoubtedly find one treasure after another, each one taking weeks, months and even years to fully extract. Once you find a vein of gold in your partner, you can start exploring that vein with your date nights. If say, you learn that during this phase of life, they really want to get in shape. You can set up an appointment with a personal trainer or take a tour of a local gym, or sign up for a class, or just get them some weights... There is a whole list of conversations, dates, gifts and other opportunities to see what this interest might reveal about them.

Make these dates about exploring your curiosity about them. How they will respond to different questions, different entertainment, different arts, different environments, different 9 people groups, different stimulus, different food, different dangers, different gestures, etc... How do they respond to natural beauty? How about man made beauty? Are they turned on by social gatherings or by solitude?

What type of flirtation do they respond best to? What do they find fun? There are so many questions to answer! I have compiled a starter list of questions you can start exploring to make your dating experience incredible with your partner. Don't assume just because you know the surface answer to these questions, that you have achieved something.

Each answer is merely a doorway of connection you could enter to join them at the table their heart will set for you if you will enter in with them. **PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL WORLD:** • What are their favorite physical activities or hobbies? • What is their physical appearance and preferred style? • What are their favorite places and ways to relax? • What things make them feel happy, sad, anxious, etc...? **WORK & EDUCATION:** • What are their career goals and aspirations? • What is their current job or profession? • What are their current intellectual interests? • What is their work-life joys and stresses? **FRIENDS & SOCIAL NETWORK:** • Who are their closest friends and family outside of your partnership? • What are their social media habits and preferences? • What are their favorite social activities or hobbies? 9 • What is their network of acquaintances and connections? **FAMILY & CHILDHOOD:** • What are their important family events or traditions? • What are their family values and cultural influences? • What are their impactful childhood memories and stories? • What childhood interests have they since lost?

CELEBRATIONS & HOLIDAYS: • What are their favorite holidays? • What are their favorite traditions? • What are their favorite aspects of each holiday or tradition? • What are their aspirations for making holidays or traditions better? **GOALS & ASPIRATIONS:** • What are their short-term and long-term goals? • What are their values and priorities for life? (family, career, health) • How do they view their identity? • What are some of their wildest dreams? **UNIQUE INTERESTS:** • What are their talents or skills? • What are their hobbies or passions? • What are their favorite books, movies, music, or TV shows? • What are their perspectives or insights on life? **FONDNESS & ADMIRATION:** • What is something about them that you admire? • What unlocks their affection for you? • Who do they look up to and why? • What do they admire about you? **BASIC DATE PREFERENCES** • What are their favorite types of food? 9 • What are their favorite scents? • What are their biggest turn ons and turn offs? • What is their favorite entertainment (musicians, comedians, artists, athletes, authors...)?

INTIMATE & SEX LIFE: • What are their sexual preferences and desires? • What are their emotional intimacy and connection needs? • What is their preferred frequency and timing of intimacy? • What are their favorite sexual positions, settings and fantasies? **LIFE DREAMS & SHARED MEANING:** • What are some spiritual or religious interests or desires? • Are there any causes they would be willing to fight or die for in this world? • What are their top three bucket list items? • What do they want to say they accomplished at the end of life? **FUN & PLAYFULNESS:** • What are some things they find fun? • What are some ways they might engage in playfulness? • What activities would they find thrilling? • What activities would they find hilarious? **DATING PHASE THREE: DEVELOPING**

ROMANCE & ADVENTURE This third phase is where you can really start checking things off the bucket list. If there are once in a life time trips or opportunities you can create, that would fit in this category.

There are no rules to this, but in this third and final category of dates, I would include any type of date that creates a one of a kind experience or memory. 9 It might seem far fetched to achieve any one of these special one of a kind memories, but it really doesn't have to be that hard. I have identified five ways to experience this. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. Say yes to spontaneous invitations & opportunities Do something you have never done together Plan something uniquely romantic Explore something new sexually Check something off one of your bucket lists **SAYING YES TO SPONTANEITY** The "Say Yes" Mentality: As you progress through the later stages of life, it is easy to settle into repetitive habits that keep you comfortable but restrict you from spontaneity and adventure. In order to provoke a new sense of romance, you might want to consider changing your value system to incorporate adventure and spontaneity. Memories are generally created outside of repetition.

Try saying YES whenever your partner suggests any type of adventure and spontaneity. There are more opportunities to do this than you might imagine, but it will likely require you to establish "adventure" or "saying yes" as one of your primary values in life, or at least a higher value than safety and comfort. For example, Kimberly and I have adopted adventure as a primary value, and one night recently, while I was at a function an hour away, we got invited to an overnight 1930s party on the same night at a large California property with a bunch of wild retired seniors. There were a handful of things that counted against us going: It was super late notice, we didn't know anyone there 9 very well, we were one of the youngest couples invited, we'd have to prepare our kids (youngest was 13) to be home without us, and I was currently an hour away from home and wouldn't be home until 9pm and our bedtime was normally 10pm. That meant, if we were going to attend the overnight party, we would have to be leaving home at our bedtime.

Kimberly said it was totally up to me but I could tell she really wanted to go. The decision was between what could be a wild new adventure, or going to bed on time. What do you think I picked? I said "Yes!" We sacrificed our sleep for that night, but had an amazing and romantic adventure. we both had an incredible, one of a kind experience in an extremely romantic setting that drew us closer together and I am sure we will remember that for the rest of our lives. The cost was merely that we didn't get much sleep that night.

A unique experience differentiates an otherwise dull routine. Learn to say yes.

QUESTION: Is there anything you can say yes to now that could potentially give you a unique experience? **DO SOMETHING YOU HAVE NEVER DONE BEFORE** This can literally be anything; execute an elaborate prank on kids or friends, go visit a convalescent home, go to a hot yoga class, go on a special hike, go park at a look out and make out, go fishing, invite someone over who needs a friend, etc... There are so many things you can do to create memories and a lot of them don't even cost any money. 9 Kimberly and I most recently went to an ecstatic dance night (we are not dancers) that put us in an unfamiliar environment that was funny to watch each other adapt to, great exercise, and caused us to have some great things to talk about later. We next have planned an elaborate prank on our kids. These are the things that keep us laughing and experiencing new things together.

APPLICATION: Please write down three things you have never done before that you could do this month.

PLANNING SOMETHING UNIQUELY ROMANTIC For years, I knew my wife wanted me to create deeper romantic experiences for her but we were so busy, limited in our budget and I didn't really know what romance even meant. Classic. It became important enough to me that I decided I would figure out what it meant to be romantic and I would become amazing at it! After lots of research and reading, along with several long talks with Kimberly, I realized that romance was a highly subjective concept and the world had not yet agreed upon a clear universal description so I decided that I would need to create my own.

I initially designed my definition of romance after my wife's personal desires and her own description of romance. Once I felt I understood what she wanted to a certain degree, I was able to define some things I wanted too, so I incorporated both and 9 came up with my eight aspects of romance. In essence, romantic moments create uniquely shared memories that last a lifetime. Following are my eight aspects of romance: • Thoughtful planning, preparation or gifts: "Behold I go to prepare a place for you..." - John 14:2-3. In ancient marriage, during the betrothal period, before sexual union, the husband would spend several months building a wedding chamber.

The idea was that this wedding chamber would be the first and most beautiful part of a future house, and it would be the place the groom would take his bride on their wedding night. Many personal and meaningful touches would be built into this dwelling place. This ancient custom shows how romance can be demonstrated through meaningful sacrifices to provide thoughtful gifts or gestures. • A feeling of spontaneity and adventure: In contrast to the long planned preparations or gifts, romance can also be characterized as a feeling of spontaneity and adventure that arises when we say yes to sudden opportunities or invitations with a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. This can include feelings of heightened anticipation, a sense of nervousness, a strong desire to experience something unfamiliar and a willingness to "go with it." • A sense of enchantment and wonder: Romance can also be about creating a sense of enchantment and wonder in our relationships. This can involve surprise, awe inspiring locations, or experiences exploring the depths of the five 9 senses.

It could also include learning more about oneself, as well as the partner. • A sense of luxury and pampering: Romance can also be about indulging in luxuries and pampering our loved ones. This can involve things like candlelit dinners, massages, and other sensual experiences. • A form of self-expression: Romance can be a way for us to express ourselves creatively and romantically. This can involve things like dressing in a certain style and going out, writing love letters, making art, or creating music. • A flirtatious environment: Romance can be experienced when you are in a group or environment with other couples who are fun, sexy, socially flirtatious, engaging in banter, sophisticated conversation and fun activities. • A sense of playfulness and humor: Romance can also be experienced through comical moments, or laughter, especially when the comedy is about relationships and intimate connection. • Displays of public affection: Romance can also be expressed by public displays of affection: Embracing, kissing, holding each other, snuggling, sitting close, dancing slowly, etc... You can't always force these things to happen, but you can try to plan them to some degree, and you can say yes when opportunities present themselves. Ultimately, romance is a highly 9 personal and subjective experience that can mean different things to different people. I would recommend you and your partner start by using the eight aspects above to begin to talk through what your personal ultimate romantic dates might look like.

Did I miss an important element? Feel free to add it to your own list. **INTIMACY AND SEX** Sex is a major part of your marriage. Those who lay together stay together! It is important to keep your sex life consistent, fulfilling and exciting.

Similar to the process above, It is recommended that you begin to invest in your sex life. There is so much you can do to keep the flame of love burning strong. The place to start is by having a few honest conversations. Kimberly and I believe the only have three rules to follow for married couples in regard to sex; First, don't hide anything from each other, Second, both must agree on whatever it is, and third, don't do anything likely to bring physical, emotional or spiritual harm. Besides that, God has given you each other's bodies to enjoy!

To deepen your sexual experience, there is so many things you can do. Conversations around the following subjects would be a good place to start:

APPLICATION: During a nice romantic time together, set aside some time to ask your spouse the following questions: 9 • What are three things I could do today that would turn you on? • How do you prepare yourself when you want to feel attractive and sexy? • What looks, styles and attitudes are you most attracted to in the opposite sex? • What smells and tastes are you most attracted to? • Are there types of music or entertainment that turns you on? • What types of conversation or banter provokes sensual curiosity and intimacy for you? • What things can I do to make you feel more desirable when we're together? • What's the most sensual or intimate memory between us? • What would be your ideal process to take you from dealing with the stress of everyday life, step by step all the way to intimate sexual union? • What are three things you've always wanted to explore in bed, but have never asked for? • Will you work with me and teach me two techniques that will make you climax faster? 9 • What type of physical touch turns you on the most? • What are some of your turn ons and turn offs? • Do imagined or real scenarios turn you on? • Do certain settings turn you on? • What kind of words, flirting or dirty talk might turn you on? • What kind of gifts or gestures might turn you on? • What type of activities might turn you on? • Are there toys that you'd like to experiment with? • Out of the five senses, which sense turns you on most? • Which sense, if restricted, would cause your other senses to be most heightened? • What are your ideal foreplay activities? • How much time would you like to spend in foreplay? • Do you want to be submitted or to submit? If so, why? • Do you have any kinks or fetishes? • How do you get stimulated? 9 • What kind of touch do you like the most? • What kind of touch do you not like? • Do you like to mix sex with foods, drinks or other consumables? • What makes you comfortable or uncomfortable with nudity? • Is anything blocking you from total intimacy? • Do you feel shame or embarrassment in any way? 9 We hope your union has been made happy and your souls have found harmony as you have worked through these pages. We pray your marriage enters a long season of satisfaction as you cherish your lover and life partner! May God grant you your Best Marriage Ever! Sincerely, Jacob & Kimberly Reeve