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INTRODUCTION

We are thrilled that you have decided to take part in Embrace. This is the first step that will eventually lead the two of you to a deeper more passionate understanding of how to love each other better.

We know that some of you are deeply entrenched in hurt feelings, frustration, and potentially hopelessness. But it does not have to be like that! You can experience healing, the choice is yours.

At the same time, some of you are very satisfied with your marriage. So keep up the good work. The reason you are happy is probably because you take part in classes or small groups like this one!

One Question That Can Change Your Relationship with Your Spouse

You're probably wondering how one question can change your relationship with your spouse? It's difficult to believe that something so important could be so simple. You may be feeling angry, confused, hurt or perhaps even alone; but yes, this question can improve or even save your relationship with your spouse.

As problems develop in relationships, families might spend money on counseling, family conferences, books and videos. These are important tools for gaining insight, yet most couples don't realize that they have the world's greatest relational instructors living right under their own roofs. We believe that each person has a natural insight into what they need to build a strong relationship. It's like we're born with built-in marriage manuals.

If asked, most couples could create a list of the things that they need from each other to have a good relationship. For example, a wife might say that respect, honor, quality time, sharing housework, and going to church are her needs from her family. The key is that each person has different needs and desires which help make a strong relationship. Therefore, the different members of the family are all gold mines of relational skills. All they have to do is learn to tap into their built-in relationship manuals.

The next question is the crucial one. In fact, in some ways it doesn't matter how the other questions were answered. Potentially, this question can flip open the pages to each other's built-in marriage manuals. The question that can improve or even save a marriage is: As you consider our relationship, what are some specific things we can do over the next week that would move us closer?

As this question is being answered, listen for the exact things your spouse is communicating. The power of this question is that the focus of the relationship is changed. Instead of feeling overwhelmed because the focus is on the problems, listing the ways to improve the relationship turns the attention towards solutions. Being in the middle of a conflict can feel like you're stuck in quicksand. The more you dwell on the problem and who's to blame, the faster and deeper one sinks. However, solutions are like a rope tied to a tree. They provide the means to change, therefore freeing the relationship from sinking hopelessly in the quicksand.

As you begin to answer this question of each other, remember you may be reluctant at first. Your spouse may fear that feelings might get hurt. It's crucial to patiently give each other the time to talk. Consistently reassure each other about the security of your relationship. If you all feel secure in your love, almost without exception you'll be able to provide many helpful specifics which can strengthen the family God has given you.

We are convinced that answering this type of question on a weekly basis could reduce long standing marital problems. The key is remembering that love is a decision and not merely a feeling. Many times we do not feel like loving our mate, but that can all change. We can, however, make the decision to love them by doing the things that strengthen the relationship. Questions like the one mentioned here can help as you make the decision to love each other.

We want you to take a moment and rank your marriage on a scale from 1 to 10. One is the most miserable you could possibly feel in the marriage. The kind of misery that says to your spouse, "You'd better sleep with one eye open tonight... dear." Ten would be the most happy you've ever felt in your marriage.

My marriage is a _____ out of 10.

Do not panic at what your spouse put down for his or her number. It is not where your marriage will be, but rather what your marriage is currently. It is not a death sentence nor is it divorce papers. Hopefully, it is an honest assessment of where your marriage is today.

Remember, the point of this study is to help the two of you experience a better more passionate filled marriage.

Now, what do you want your marriage to be on a scale from 1 to 10?

I want my marriage at a _____ out of 10.

This is an important question to ask yourselves. What do you want your marriage to be? If you do not know where you are headed, how will you ever get there? It is vitally important that you see each other's score on this question. Because it is followed up with another question...

How can I help increase our marriage to a ____ (put the number your spouse wrote down) out of 10?

This is the purpose of Embrace, to discover a new way to increase the level of your marital satisfaction. It is an in-depth study of how you can improve your marriage and love each other "till death do you part."

You want to know how to reach the number you've chosen? Then pay close attention to the following sessions. Each session will bring you closer together, but only if you apply the principles contained in each talk and exercises.

You will get out of this study exactly what you put into it. We can not make your marriage better, only you can accomplish that. What we can do is show you what it takes to be happy and passionate, but you still have to walk the road and apply the principles for yourselves.

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT TO SPECIFICALLY LIST YOUR GOALS FOR THIS STUDY...

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

SESSION 1

Why Marriages are Miserable

Why don't you just give up!

As one of our New Yorker friends might say, "Forget about it!" Don't hassle with an unsatisfying marriage. If you are not happy move on to a better life and a better spouse. You've tried everything possible. You simply married the wrong person. You are probably feeling, "I love you, but I'm not 'in love' with you." The passion has died. The romance is long gone. Don't waste another minute in a depressing and doomed to fail marriage. Give up!

Sometimes we want to say these very things to couples who come to us for help. Couples pleading for a better life. Couples desperate to turn a hurting marriage into a healing marriage. But you want to know something ridiculous? Once we try to give them advice we get dismissed with comments like: "Oh, we've tried that." "That won't work for us." "It's more complicated than that." "You're asking a lot." "He will never respond." "She will never stop." "It's too late for us." "We've just fallen out of love." (which is my most hated comment of all.)

So we'll say it once more, why don't you just give up! Throw in the towel. Kick the bucket. Bon voyage. Hasta la vista baby.

We want to give you permission to leave a bad marriage. Because if you refuse to admit you want out, then there is no place for you to begin healing. Sometimes we need to be honest about our current state of feelings. If we try to deny that we want out, then we will never be able to truly face the real reasons our marriage is hurting. So just go ahead and say it to yourself (do not say any of this to your spouse), "I want out."

Now that we've got that out of the way, let the healing begin!

Because there are 3 reasons you don't want to abandon your marriage:

1. Research shows that if you can simply wait it out, your marriage will take a turn for the better. There was a study done out of Chicago years ago that simply followed several hundred couples. It tested their marital happiness and their satisfaction with life. At least half of the marriages were stressed out and dissatisfied with their marriage and their life. Five years later they tested the same couples again and found out something quite amazing. For the couples who stayed together, they reported being substantially happier with their marriage, more satisfied with their life and half of them had no counseling or intervention. Sometimes it pays to have a little patience when it comes to marital difficulty.
2. Your children are a huge reason to stay together and resolve your conflict. Research is very clear that children of divorce have a harder time resisting peer pressure, succeeding in school, and succeeding in their future relationships. There was a time when therapists and psychiatrists felt couples should divorce despite the children because it was worse to stay together. Well that time has passed.
3. If you don't resolve the difficulties in your current marriage, they will simply haunt you in your second marriage. This is the most depressing news of all to couples who divorce, especially if they have children together. Because what they realize, often very quickly, is that the same negative patterns that destroyed their first marriage are creeping into their second. Why? Because divorce doesn't solve anything. It only makes everything more complicated and hard. This is why divorce rates are so much higher for second marriages. The real tragedy is they eventually have to learn to get along and repair the damage. Then they find themselves smacking their heads saying, "Why didn't we figure this out when we were married?"

As coach Jimmy Valvano, who was dying of cancer at the time he made this famous statement, would say, "Never give up!" It is not worth the pain of divorce. You can get help. There are therapists and relationship coaches who know what it takes to turn your marriage around. It will take effort. It will take time. But it is worth the energy because God will truly bless those who never quit.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION ONE

What you don't know will _____ your marriage!

Ps 32:3 "When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long."

Couples are not miserable because of _____,
_____, or _____.

The reason couples become miserable is _____.

Genesis 3:9-10

9 The LORD God called to Adam, F6 "Where are you?" 10 He replied, "I heard you, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

Everyone has a _____ like...

There are about _____ major relational fears.

You discover your fear by asking yourself, "_____
_____?" and "What messages are being sent about me?"

You will never _____ of your core
relational fear, but you can _____ to it

_____.

Revelation 22:3

"No longer will anything be cursed. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him."

You respond by...

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What statements from your mate hurt you the most? Can you give 2 or 3 examples?

What messages did you hear about yourself through the examples?

Take a look at the following Common Core Fears. Which ones do you identify with when your mate hurts you (please circle all that apply)?

Common Core Fears:

I get upset and sense fear when I feel....

1. Helpless, powerless, impotent, or controlled
2. Rejected; as if people are closing me out of their life
3. Abandoned or left behind, as in divorce
4. Disconnected from others or alone
5. Like a failure
6. Unlovable; as if no one could love me
7. Defective; as if something is wrong with me; as if I'm the problem
8. Inadequate; as if I just don't measure up to others like I should
9. Pained both emotionally and physically
10. Hypocritical or like a phony
11. Inferior; as if I'm being placed below everyone else in value (belittled)
12. Cheated, ripped off or taken advantage of
13. Invalidated; as if my words and actions are being ignored or devalued
14. Unfulfilled; as if what is happening to me will lead to a dissatisfied life
15. Humiliated; as if I have no dignity or self-respect
16. Manipulated; as if others are deceiving me
17. Isolated; as if others are planning to ignore me

Write down your core fear or fears in the blanks below.

Most women have a core fear related to disconnection (separation), which is the fear of not being heard, not being valued, losing the love of another, or being alone.

Most men have a core fear of helplessness (losing power), feeling controlled, fear of failure, or getting stepped on or misused.

Do these general descriptions of men and women fit for you? YES / NO
(General descriptions are just that, general. So don't be afraid to explore what is unique for your relationship.)

List the issues, people or problems you tend to blame when you get stuck in your marriage.

Is your mate both the cause and the solution for your hurt? (i.e. Are you sad because of how your mate treats you or because you choose to be sad?)

How do you respond when your mate "pushes your fear buttons?" List some specific responses...

Have these responses helped or hurt your marriage?

What are you wanting from your mate when you get hurt?

How effective have you been in the past at changing your spouse?

Good success ___ No success ___

Explain your answer:

In your own words, but from your mate's perspective, how would he or she say you react or cope after having your cores fears being pushed? (i.e. escalate, withdraw, pause and think, take a time-out, etc.)?

What reactions do you want to work on throughout this retreat?

SESSION 2 HEALING YOUR WOUNDED HEART

We recently heard about a lawyer who's pastor had been doing a series on forgiveness. The lawyer was so impacted by his pastor's understanding and thoughtful messages that he decided to forgive the debt of all his clients who were overdue at least six months.

The lawyer sat down and wrote an official debt cancellation letter to 17 clients that still owed him money. He even went as far as to send the letter via certified mail. As the week passed by the lawyer started receiving the letters back. A few of them came in at first, so he thought their addresses must have changed. But then 16 out of the 17 letters he sent via certified mail were all returned to his office. Each of them unopened and unsigned for.

You see, the clients were so nervous about their debt they assumed the lawyer was suing them for the money, so they never opened the letter. They never discovered their debts had been cancelled.

You see, when it comes to wounded hearts, Christ is constantly knocking on the door of your soul, desperate to get inside and do what he came here to do. But too many times we allow our pain and bitterness to prevent us to receive the healing that is literally at our front door. All we need to do is ask, but instead, we keep the door tightly shut and locked, hoping we don't get hurt again.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION TWO

Acknowledge your _____ and prepare for _____

"Wake up, wake up, O Zion! Clothe yourselves with strength. Put on your beautiful clothes, O holy city of Jerusalem, for unclean and godless people will no longer enter your gates. Rise from the dust, O Jerusalem. Remove the slave bands from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion." Isaiah 52:1-2

Go against your _____ and look for

opportunities for _____!

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, sir?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! The men with Saul stood speechless with surprise, for they heard the sound of someone's voice, but they saw no one! Acts 9:4-7

What are the _____ you've been convinced of about yourself? Remember, people have not

_____ you like they were _____ to!

"Yes," the man told him, "but they are no longer here. I heard your brothers say they were going to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers to Dothan and found them there. When Joseph's brothers saw him coming, they recognized him in the distance and made plans to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they exclaimed. "Come on, let's kill him and throw him into a deep pit. We can tell our father that a wild animal has eaten him. Then we'll see what becomes of all his dreams!" Genesis 37:17-20

Take a look at what God thinks about you:

1. We are made in _____
2. We are _____ and _____ made
3. We are _____ of the throne
4. We were worth _____ His only _____ to die for us!

Start writing these messages on your heart through

_____ and _____ for Christ has come to...

Now that you've listed your wounds, write down how this makes you feel. (i.e. Do you feel sad, relieved, confused, hurt, angry, etc.?)

How can you apply what you just learned in the Wounded Heart session to your specific wounds?

Who are some people you can trust to help with the healing process? (i.e. A pastor, friend, counselor, small group leader, etc.)

Write down a specific prayer you can start praying weekly that would "open" your soul's door to let Christ in to start the healing.

The following is a prayer we have used with ourselves and other people, "Lord, thank you for revealing my wounds. I hate that they are there, but I know you can bring healing. I just want to open the door. You've said that you're waiting, so I'm confessing to you now that I've kept my door locked and refused to let you in. That is all changing today, Lord. My heart is open to receive your healing and your guidance. Thank you for loving me. Amen."

Do you find it difficult to pray this prayer? If so, why:

If not, why:

Now we want you to talk with each other, and ask one another what you can do to help with the healing process of your spouse's wounds. (Do not judge, criticize, invalidate, or belittle each other's wounds. This is very serious, and if you can not support your spouse right now, then pray for the patience and the willingness to help.)

What can your husband do to help with the healing process?

What can your wife do to help with the healing process?

In the session we listed some positive things that God thinks about you. It was by no means an exhaustive list, so please list some more positive things about yourself:

I am...

I am...

I am...

I am...

I am...

This is not an easy session or discussion section. But it is necessary in terms of beginning the process of healing your wounded heart.

What have you learned about yourself in this session?

What have you learned about your mate in this session?

What have you learned about your marriage in this session?

SESSION 3

The Power of One Spouse to Change the Marriage

The problem is rarely the problem.
The problem is never about a list of issues.
It's never just about the other person.

Why Can't You Fix Me!

The task seemed simple enough. All the clerk wanted was for me to pay the bill. There was one problem however, I didn't have my wallet. Somewhere between my insatiable hunger for pizza and the lack of will power to take my time getting there, I forgot my wallet. So there I was, standing in line at the pizza place with no money, and a history of forgetting my wallet. But the embarrassment of not having any money was the least of my problems; the worst was yet to come. My wife Amy, of just a year, was standing at my side also waiting for me to pay.

I could have just announced that I forgot my wallet, but it was not that simple. Because of my bad memory, Amy had grown a tad intolerant of my forgetfulness. Somehow my forgetting to pay bills, leaving the trash out for days, and losing important receipts had caused some frustration between us. Then it happened, like a strike of lightning. "You forgot your wallet, didn't you!" Amy said, smoke rising from her brow.

This moment is exactly why taking responsibility for yourself is so important. No matter what the circumstances, we are in charge of how we feel and how we react. People, places, or things do not run our emotional lives, we do! I wish I could say I handled myself correctly in the above situation. I can not. Instead of admitting my mistake, and taking full responsibility for my actions, I reacted out of embarrassment. "You shouldn't get so upset about this! Come to think of it, it's really your fault!" I shot back which only escalated the argument further. When we start to blame, we start to shift responsibility from ourselves to another person or situation. As Christians we are capable of being responsible. The Christian philosopher, Michael Keeling, wrote, "We are responsible for our actions in the dynamic sense that we can overcome both the external pressures of society and environment and the internal pressures of genetics and psychology and begin to act, by the power of God in us, as people who have nothing to fear and nothing to lose." We, by the power of God within us, can take ownership of our feelings and reactions.

Ownership or responsibility is vital because, like M. Scott Peck wrote in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, "many, so many, seek to avoid the pain of their problems by saying to themselves: 'This problem was caused me by other people, or by social circumstances beyond my control, and therefore it is up to other people or society to solve this problem for me.'"

We can not solve our marital problems by ignoring them or blaming external things. If we do not take full responsibility for ourselves, we are choosing to make our marriage less than God intended. So when we take responsibility and ownership for ourselves we become entirely responsible for one's life, not only for one's actions but for one's failures to act.

Why become a person who assumes full responsibility for his actions and feelings? Because, it is the only way to live a fulfilling life! Dr. Frank Pittman, in his book "Grow Up!", writes, "Without responsibility there can be no happiness." Think of not taking responsibility as being like a glob of goo. You have no control of where you're going, and no one wants to be near you. What kind of life is that? Human responsibility is what makes us human. God has given us the freedom to be in control of our lives. God has allowed us to make right and wrong decisions. With this freedom, comes an awesome sense of responsibility to do the right thing. Life is about choices. If we choose to make healthy, God-centered choices, then our job will be easier and easier with every right turn. However, the opposite is true as well. If we choose to make poor decisions, lacking in responsibility, it will become easier and easier to make the wrong decisions.

It's like the wife who angrily approached her husband saying, "I took the 'Are you a good husband?' test in this magazine, answered the questions the way you'd answer them, and you failed! What do you have to say for yourself?" Taking ownership of our own emotions and behaviors is not always the easiest task. We are in relationships, and these relationships can make the task more difficult. However, they don't make it impossible!

IT'S NOT A 7 STEP PROGRAM

There is no easy remedy to becoming a responsible adult. Invariably, steps are involved in the process of becoming responsible, but there is a deeper more intense idealism we must reach before we can take responsibility for ourselves. That idealism is believing and recognizing the need to be responsible. If we can't see the importance of being responsible, then what reason do we give ourselves to be responsible? We must recognize the need, and then simply decide to live a more responsible life.

Though somehow, it's never this simple. Why do we stumble at the task of being responsible? The answer might lie in one word, selfishness. The act of taking ownership requires us to put our friends, family, mate, and others ahead of our own personal desires. It's caring more about the feelings and needs of others than those of our own. So when I was in the pizza line, all I had to say was something like, "It sounds like my forgetfulness is really frustrating to you, and I'm sorry". End of argument. But instead I was more concerned about my own image, and what others might think about me, and I paid for that attitude with a three hour argument with my wife. And I definitely didn't get to enjoy the pizza!

Of course some of the readers might be thinking, "Yea, right!" Taking ownership might not immediately end an argument with your mate, but it sure won't fuel the fire. Imagine an argument being like a fire. Attitudes like blaming, yelling, and name calling all pour gasoline on the argument fire. Taking responsibility is like a huge fire extinguisher wiping out the potential to a marital forest fire. Your mate might not respond immediately to your responsibility, but I can promise over time you will see a positive difference in your marriage and in the way you communicate with each other when you take responsibility for yourself.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION THREE

Three reasons why we love to blame our spouse

1. It makes us _____ about ourselves.
2. It takes the _____ off our own sinfulness.
3. It comes quite _____ to us.

The only thing we need to worry about is our own _____.

1 Kings 8:46

for there is no one who does not sin

Ecclesiastes 7:20

There is certainly no righteous man on the earth
who does good and never sins.

Psalms

51:5

Indeed, I was guilty [when I] was born;
I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

James 3:16

"For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil."

Instead of blaming we need to _____

_____ because ...

_____ can't change your spouse.

_____ is the only one who can change your spouse.

2 Timothy 2:25 (NLT)

They should gently teach those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will believe the truth.

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be **changed** from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." Romans 12:2 (MSG)

Take Control of Yourself

_____ for all of your own emotions and happiness.

_____ unconditionally no matter how they treat you.

Matthew 7:12

"Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get.

_____, not others or your external circumstances.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Circle the thoughts or words that best describe your frustrations in your marriage:

"You don't see it do you? You're too negative and it's driving me away!"

"You say you're sorry, but you keep doing the same things over and over. You'll never change!"

"It's your fault that he talks to me like that, you're a great example!"

"Forget it then. Go out with your friends, see if I care! Stay out all night, you like them better than me anyway."

"I'm not talking about that any more, it's too hurtful."

"I'll just leave the house if you continue talking about this. End of discussion; it's over."

"That subject is not open for discussion."

Take a look at Matthew 7:1-5.

1"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

3"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. What word does Jesus use in verse 5 to describe a person who keeps the focus on someone else's faults?

What are we opening ourselves up to when we judge?

Now read James 4:11-12.

11Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?

Who is the only one with the right to judge?

In what ways do you find yourself to be the most judgmental? (Is it the way your spouse drives? Is it a bad habit? Is it the way your adult children discipline their children?) List some here:

When in conflict do you sometimes nag or wait for your mate to break down until he or she finally gives into your way of thinking?

As you reflect on your marriage, in what areas of your life/thoughts/behaviors would you like to work on being more personally responsible?

What decisions will you make in stopping the blame game? (Will you go to your mate and ask for forgiveness? Will you identify your role in the problem?) List yours here:

Look at the mandate Jesus gives us in Luke 17:3-4.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Even if you've been a blamer for years, you can start afresh and be forgiven. What do you need to forgive your spouse of and what do you need to seek forgiveness for?

How would you ask your mate who is pushing your buttons to help you during your maturity journey?

At the start of this discussion section you were asked to circle some words or statements that best described your frustrations in your marriage. Now that your focus is on you, how do those words or statements change?

SESSION 4

Creating Safety in Chaos

We were locked in what felt like mortal combat. Neither of us was willing to give in to the other's wish. To make matters worse, both of us had legitimate needs and feelings that we were not willing to give up. This is where our true struggle began.

It was the fall of our third year of marriage. We'd already survived several major arguments, and actually came out closer as friends and lovers. But this one was different. Before, when we argued, the resolution seemed to always make sense. Like the time we survived the big "Money Management Fight". I (Michael) finally understood that it wasn't "smart" financing not to tell my wife when and how much money I withdrew from that wonderful invention, the ATM machine. Therefore our checkbook never matched the bank statement that would arrive once a month. The checkbook not matching up to the bank statement did not bother me because my philosophy for a balanced checking account was to switch banks when things got "confused"! However, Amy had a different opinion than mine. The resolution to this problem was fairly obvious, KEEP THE RECEIPTS! Though the argument we were locked in now had no possible Win/Win solution, or at least it didn't seem to have one in the beginning.

It all started one night as I returned home from my work as a marriage and family intern therapist. I immediately sensed the mood in the room. There was a familiar aura about it, then it struck me. Before Amy could say anything, I knew she was pregnant. We were going to have our second OOPS. You might think that after our first unplanned pregnancy we would have learned how to prevent a second, but alas, we were slow learners.

Both of us immediately panicked. Actually, Amy had already spent the better part of the day panicked. How could we finish school with two children? I had one more year in my masters program, but Amy had just started her two-year program. That meant that Amy would be pregnant during her first year, and we would have two children during her second year in the program.

We wouldn't be able to afford to have both children in daycare, and were not truly willing to put an infant in daycare. This meant that either Amy had to drop out of Wheaton College and attend a school closer to family in Missouri so we could both pursue our dreams, or I could take a year off from my work to stay at home full time so Amy could finish at Wheaton College.

As marriage and family therapists, we were able to recognize that both of us had legitimate needs and feelings. I had just spent three grueling years obtaining my education and I had an intense need to use that education. Amy had a legitimate need to finish her education at an elite program in which she had already developed many lasting friendships. We were stuck.

I felt that she was being selfish in not wanting to move to Missouri, where we could both pursue our dreams while family and friends helped with the children. She felt that I was being selfish in not wanting to stay at home for one year so she could finish her degree at Wheaton College.

Then one day, after two solid weeks of arguing, we reached the breaking point. In a small bagel shop in Wheaton, Illinois, Amy and I exploded, only as therapists can explode. There we were quietly bombarding each other with hurtful words and false accusations, making sure no one could hear us. I finally stood up and announced, "Well fine! I have to go now and counsel couples!" I stormed out of the restaurant and headed for the counseling clinic, where I was supposed to help couples get along better!

What happened next was nothing short of a miracle. Before I entered the counseling room, I met with my supervisor. I stepped into her office, definitely not in the mood to discuss anything close to therapy or helping people. She never looked at me, but simply said, "I think we need to just meet in silence." So there I sat, sprawled on her couch, eyes closed, and head leaned back. It was then the miracle occurred.

Lying there on her couch, an image entered my head so clear that I nearly reached out to touch it. It was Christ gently laying down his left hand to be nailed to the cross. Next came his right hand, in the same fashion he gently laid down to be hammered to his wooden cross. It was such a powerful image that I immediately began to weep.

This was the answer to our struggle. This was the answer to any couple's struggle. Laying down your life for the needs and feelings of your mate. Christ literally went through Hell so we might have life and have it more abundantly. I wasn't willing to give up one year of work to spend valuable time with my children and to help my wife finish her degree at a school she loved.

If we want to have a satisfying marriage, one where the passion and excitement never end, we must be willing to sacrifice our own needs for the needs of our mate. In other words, we need to be selfless.

When couples, much like us, are entrenched in conflict, there is one major theme pervading the problem. Neither side is willing to give up their position. How can we have harmony when we are not willing to accept the feelings of our mate? In order to successfully solve our marriage conflicts, we must be able to take on the perspective of our mate. We must be focused toward enhancing the welfare of our mate.

When we are selfless, it is like a beautiful dance, where both partners glide around the room of marriage with utter ease and confidence. But the key is that it is a couple's dance. There's no room for stylish single's dancing. This is meant to be a Waltz, not a Mosh Pit! If only one spouse is concentrating on being selfless, the strategy will fail. It takes two to tango, and two to make selflessness work in marriage.

By becoming selfless, we open the possibilities to truly experience the joy and satisfaction in our marriage God intended. When God said, "and the two shall become one", what do you think God meant? Our feeling is the only way we can experience the full benefit of marriage is when we give of ourselves for the good of our mate. This is the ultimate oneness!

So how did we resolve our dilemma? After my clear image of what Christ did for me, it was simple. I told Amy I would do whatever it took to help her finish school at Wheaton College. Amy was overcome with gladness, and amazingly, so was I.

I had no idea at the time how valuable my year would be as a stay-at-home father. One of the most amazing lessons learned from our experience was that of reciprocation. Because I was willing to put Amy's needs ahead of mine, she in turn was willing to do the same for me. When couples act for the complete good of their mate, guess what, their mate wants to do the same. It's like the most infectious disease ever discovered.

God does a funny thing when we are truly selfless; God rewards us. I know it would have been a different outcome if I was simply "giving in" to Amy just so God would reward me later. It does not work this way. Only when selflessness comes from a complete desire for the good of our mate, and not our own, will we reap the rewards for ourselves as well as the marriage. The reward will be the true intimacy and passion that God intended for marriage.

If you can learn how to truly serve and put the needs of your spouse ahead of your own needs, then you are ready to create a safe environment.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION FOUR

4 Steps to a Safe Environment

1. Respect people's _____
If we don't allow people to take down their own walls they will reinforce them from the inside.
2. Suspend _____ with _____ and

...because we are imperfect, therefore we make bad judges.

"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults--unless, of course, you want the same treatment. ²That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. ³It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. ⁴Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? ⁵It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor." Matthew 7:1-5 (MSG)

...because we don't know all the facts.

"No one can really know what anyone else is thinking or what he is really like, except that person himself." ¹ Corinthians 2:11 (LB)

"But sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. ³We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all." 1 Corinthians 8:2, 3 (MSG)

3. Value your mate's _____

1 John 4:21

"And God himself has commanded that we must love not only him but our Christian brothers and sisters, too."

When two people are in conflict, they often point to their differences as the problem.

If a relationship is to feel like a safe place, it must make room for all of both people.

4. _____ is earned and not simply given.

Psalms 125:1

A song for the ascent to Jerusalem. Those who trust in the LORD are as secure as Mount Zion; they will not be defeated but will endure forever.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When you trust your mate, you set up your marriage to last forever. So ask yourself, what needs to happen for trust to increase? (This is the million dollar question!)

Read the following passages and identify reasons why we should honor or create safety for others.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." Psalm 139:14-16 (NIV)

What are some ways you can express honor to your mate? (words can you use, actions, special moments, gifts, etc.)

Read the following passage, then in your own words describe the approach we should take in the Body of Christ when it comes to valuing differences.

"Each of us is a part of the one Body of Christ... The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' And some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary! ... So God put the body together in such a way that extra honor and care are given to those parts that might otherwise seem less important." 1 Corinthians 12; 13, 21-22, 24b (LB)

List some words or statements that have been used against you to bring you harm or damage.

What are some creative things you could do the next time you want to judge your mate's behavior? (i.e. take a time-out, count to 10, etc.)

What kind of person is your mate? (i.e. friendly, caring, loving, sensitive, fun, etc.)

List 5 specific qualities that you appreciate in your mate:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The next time you want to be critical of your mate, dwell on the above qualities and work on suspending judgment.

Have you created an unsafe marriage? If so, how have you been unsafe?

What steps will you take towards creating more safety in your marriage?

SESSION 5

Resolving the Impossible Conflicts

A wise old owl sat on an oak,
The more he saw the less he spoke;
The less he spoke the more he heard;
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?

Amy and I realized we were heading for disaster one day during the later part of our first year when a huge argument broke out over...the dry-cleaners. We were heading out for our date night, and earlier that day I had dropped off a pair of pants to be dry-cleaned. Branson is a small town, so consequently on our way to the big city, Springfield, you can see our dry-cleaners. Amy noticed they were having a special, three pants for only six dollars. She asked me how many pants I dropped off at the cleaners earlier and I replied quite innocently, "one". It was simple enough, I only had one pair of pants that needed to be cleaned, so logically I only dropped off two pair of pants. Simple, right? Wrong! When your marriage is stressed out and you have no rules about conflict, things go very, very bad.

Amy immediately asked why I didn't drop off three pants to be cleaned because that would have been cheaper than just dropping off two pair. I sarcastically replied, "Because I only HAD two pair". Amy did not like this response and felt that I was being fiscally irresponsible. When I responded that she was being irrational. You can see where this was going! We did not make it three miles out of town before I stopped the car and announced, "This fun time is over!"

We literally turned the car around and returned home, giving the babysitter some excuse why we were coming home early from our date.

It was in my sulking that night I realized Amy and I were not getting along like we wanted. There was something missing in our marriage, and it was LUV. LUV is the key to resolving any conflict that can arise in your marriage. LUV is the answer, and only LUV can give you the chance to actually reach a Win/Win solution to all your future conflicts. I say "to all your future conflicts" because there will be conflict in your marriage. This is important to understand. When I was engaged I felt like conflict would never happen in a healthy, loving relationship. What I learned might shock you! Conflict, in fact, is the key to deeper intimacy. Think about it for a second. Why might conflict actually lead you to deeper intimacy?

If you saw a complete stranger walking down the street wearing an obnoxious hat, would you express you feelings or opinions to him? "I can't believe you wore that hat this morning, I mean, what were you thinking!" or "I am so embarrassed you wore that hat today." I hope the answer is no. Why? Because expressing deep feelings or opinions to a complete stranger is inappropriate. We typically only get into conflict with those people who are closest to us, because we care about their feelings and opinions.

Conflict is a doorway to intimacy because you are expressing your most intimate feelings, opinions, or needs! This is the essence of an intimate relationship, one where you are sharing and meeting each other's feelings and needs. However, most couples never reach this level of intimacy. Conflict, for these couples, is a negative experience.

Amy and I were no different at the beginning of our marriage with negative conflict. Our dry-cleaning incident is proof that we were not allowing conflict to drive us deeper in our intimacy, but rather allowing conflict to tear us apart. A year into our marriage we were stuck, until we learned a skill so powerful it completely revolutionized our marriage, and still does to this day!

How would you like to completely eliminate all of the reasons couples divorce with one simple skill? Think it's impossible? Well, it's not! Researchers have discovered four main reasons why couples divorce. We like to call these factors the four divorce germs, because they infect marriages, and those couples who don't get the vaccination will divorce. The vaccination is the skill of communication.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION 5

Beyond Words to Feelings

True communication usually does not occur until each partner understands the _____ that underlie the _____

_____.

3 Expectations for EFFECTIVE communication

Expect _____ and _____.

"Post a guard at my mouth, God, set a watch at the door of my lips." Psalm 141:3 (MSG)

Expect that you'll need a lot of _____.

"Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone." Proverbs 25:15

Expect a lot of _____ and _____.

"Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding." Proverbs 4:7

"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way." Romans 14:13

"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." Romans 14:19

Start with being a great employee

1. _____ to the words the speaker is saying.

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..." James 1:19

2. _____ _____ to the speaker what you think they are saying.

"Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Proverbs 16:24

3. When you value a person, _____ their _____

and _____ just as much.

"Reckless words pierce like a sword,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing." Proverbs 12:18

Now you need to be a great Customer

1. Keep it _____ and _____

2. Only share your own _____ and _____

3. Do not _____ the employee through

_____ or _____

Finding Win/Win Solutions

1. _____ for all possible solutions

2. You want to discuss _____ rather than

3. There is no such thing as a _____ /
_____ scenario

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following is an example of us using the communication skill to solve a financial argument...

Michael - I feel that the circumstances under which I would forget to give you the receipts or lose them was usually on a work-related thing. I feel I was under immense peer pressure to withdraw money from the cash machine. I would do that and then lose the receipts. I feel that it should not be that big of a deal to cause a major conflict over forgetting to give you a couple of receipts, as long as we can figure it out and it's not that ...

Amy - So what you're saying is that you feel it is not a big deal if you forget the receipt.

Michael - No, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is I feel it shouldn't be such a big deal, like such a fight or argument that it would hurt my feelings or that I'd feel like I'm being yelled at over forgetting to hand you a few receipts.

Relationship Coach - OK, before he says anything else...You're feelings are being hurt that she's making something big that you don't feel is big.

Michael - Well, as big as it's being made out to be.

Relationship Coach - OK, but you're being caught, and therefore you're feeling

Michael - Well, it's not that I don't mean to not give it to her, it's that I forget. Caught implies that I'm stealing.

Relationship Coach - But you're feeling hurt that she's really upset by it.

Michael - Yeah, really upset by it.

Amy - So you're saying that you feel very hurt when I get upset at you for forgetting the receipts knowing that you don't mean to do that.

Michael - Yes.

Relationship Coach - So he keeps going until he feels he's made known his feelings and needs. Now Amy is going to tell how she feels.

Amy - I feel like that if I am going to have the financial responsibilities of our family that I need to have everything in my hand - to have all the information in my hand. I feel that if you have receipts and other things that you not only don't tell me about them but you don't give them to me so I can write them down in our checkbook then it's of no use for you to even have the receipts to begin with.

Relationship Coach - As the coach, so what she did is use the word "you" several times. So, this is why it's not as easy as it appears. So, we're going to go back over on that. Make it shorter so he can repeat it, but just use your feelings. How does it make you feel when he doesn't remember and doesn't give you the receipts?

Amy - I feel we are neglecting our finances if we don't try to keep them in order every month.

Michael - I feel she's still using "you" but in a plural sense. I think what I hear you trying to say is you feel frustrated because you don't have all the tools to keep the finances up to exactly what they should be. You don't have the resources to know exactly what is in the bank.

Amy - That's right.

Relationship Coach - One feeling is frustration. What other feelings do you have?

Amy - That's about it.

Relationship Coach - Do you feel hurt, afraid, intimidated, irresponsible?

Amy - Yes, sometimes I do feel like I can't be responsible with our finances if I can't get everything.

Michael - What I hear you saying is that you feel irresponsible because you're not getting the right numbers. But it's not because of you, it's because you don't have these receipts.

Amy - I also, I know that it might be a big deal to most people, but I really would like to be able...it gives me great pleasure at the end of every month to be able to look at the bank statement and be able to figure it out and know that what I figured out at the end of the month is exactly what the bank had. That's real important to me.

Michael - I hear you saying that your whole identity as a person...no I'm kidding. I hear what you're saying is that it is very important for you to get your balance up with the bank's balance so you know you did the job right and not wrong. Kind of a competition, let's say.

Amy - Not necessarily a competition. I feel like when I get the bank statement and what I have and what the bank have if they don't match up pretty much, then I feel like I've failed at keeping the checkbook.

Michael - I hear you saying that you feel like you've failed if you numbers don't match up the bank's numbers.

Amy - Yes. That's right.

Michael - Do you think that I understand what you're saying?

Amy - Yes. I think he understands what I'm saying.

Relationship Coach - So you don't need to add anymore?

Amy - No.

Relationship Coach - OK, they don't need to add anymore. They both feel now that they understand each other. So to summarize this, she feels frustrated, irresponsible, like a failure. Those are deep emotions. Michael feels hurt that he didn't follow through on something to him that is not that big a deal.

Michael - I never said it wasn't a big deal. What I said was it was maybe too harsh towards me. Like too harsh of a sentence like I got caught stealing a cookie, but I got my head cut off. Something like that, literally.

Relationship Coach - could you rephrase the consequence. Like you feel you like you were stealing a cookie, but in real life what would it be you felt, because it wouldn't be your head cut off, would it? You felt like you actually got killed. Bit on your ear and hurt it?

Michael - No, again you're putting it in your own words. I feel it's pretty traumatic, close to a death sentence. I do.

Relationship Coach - That's the real thing? You've helped him feel this. Can you repeat that.

Amy - So you feel like I bite your head off.

Michael - No, I don't feel like you literally bite my head off. I feel though that I get a death sentence, like I'm doing a petty crime and I'm getting a major sentence for it. Not getting a just sentence. I'm being convicted for a felony, but it's just a little misdemeanor, a little traffic ticket.

Relationship Coach - OK, do you both feel like you understand each other? They both feel like they understand each other. What we will do is we're going to toss helium-filled balloons up to the ceiling. Each balloon is going to represent a creative idea that is not going to be evaluated. The idea isn't going to be evaluated. It's not right or wrong. Then when we get all the balloons up in the ceiling, they will pick one of those balloons that they feel is the best solution. So, as you go we'll throw them up. Any idea, the wilder the better and so on.

Michael - I think one good solution would be to maybe in a nice way when I come back from a trip or from school, where I would have been alone and gotten some money, that I would be nicely asked for a receipt. To say, "Hey, do you have any receipts from the ATM?"

Amy - Another one would be for him to do the finances for a month.

Michael - How about if I get a receipt pouch big enough to carry in my pocket or something, that I can carry the receipts in.

Amy - After you use the ATM, right after you get the receipt you give it to me. You could not use the ATM card, but just use your MasterCard or Visa.

Relationship Coach - They both understand each other. They've been giving ideas. Now we're going to look up at the ceiling and pull one of those out that they think is the best one. Which one is the best solution?

Michael - I would say if we're together, well if we're together we don't have a problem. It's only when I'm by myself. I just have to try to remember to give them to her, or for her to ask me nicely about the receipts.

Amy - I agree with those solutions.

Michael - We'll try to establish me giving them to you automatically. And then the other as a safety net.

Relationship Coach - What's the motivation for that solution? What that solution does is it's softer on him, and it helps you to recognize to gently remind him. It's a two-way thing. It's you reminding him. Because you would like to have him remember on his own.

Hopefully you can now begin to understand what resolving your conflicts looks like. When you are communicating effectively, you are patient, kind, and willing to listen.

Read the following rules for couples conflict and make sure you keep the list handy for times when conflict seems to be getting out-of-control. Make sure you look up the verses at the end of each rule to help build a stronger understanding.

THE TOP 28 RULES FOR CONFLICT:

1. Clearly define the problem. Clarify what the actual conflict is first. Then, see if there is any other reason this conflict is here: tired, low sugar level, etc. (Proverbs 13:10; 18:13; 22:3)
2. Quickly acknowledged the problem soon after the mistake and try to resolve it. Don't hope the problem will just go away. (Proverbs 27:23)
3. Encourage the person to explain and respond. Use active listening (parrot talking). Repeat to the other person what you heard them say. Get their agreement about what you heard them say before responding (vice-versa). Learn to listen! (Proverbs 14:33; 24:3-4)
4. Discuss only one thing at a time and stay in the present. Don't dredge up past hurts or problems, whether real or perceived. Avoiding score keeping. "You are late for dinner. I feel angry. I wanted everything to be warm and tasty." Rather than "You are late for dinner as usual. I remember when...", etc. (Proverbs 19:10; 103:12)
5. Don't argue about details, e.g. "You were 20 min. late," "No, I was only 13 min. late."

6. Avoid power statements and actions. For example: "I quit!" "You're killing me.", etc. (Proverbs 17:27; 26:21; 28:16,25; II Tim. 2:7)
7. Avoid judgment. Stay with self-responsible "I" messages. (Matthew 7:1)
8. Be honest in your statements and questions. Honesty needs to be accurate, rather than agreement or perfection. (Eph. 4:15; Proverbs 12:19)
9. Don't confront when you're angry or stressed out (cool your jets). Learn to identify your body's own natural signs when you're getting angry, stressed out, overloaded, or about to shut down. Then help your children to identify their own bodily signs.(Proverbs 10:12; 14:17,29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:19; 22:24; 29:11,22; 30:33; Eph. 6:4)
10. Never walk out without agreeing to take a break. It is okay to temporarily stop when a solution is unclear. However, agree to resume the discussion when your emotions have cooled off. (Eph. 4:26; Proverbs 11:14)
11. Don't use the silent treatment. Nothing gets solved this way. (Proverbs 3:27; 16:13,21,24)
12. Never threaten to withdraw love. (Proverbs 28:25; 29:23)
13. Control your hands and tongue. Never use sarcasm or physical violence. (Proverbs 15:4; 12:18; 29:2-3; 16:13)
14. Don't use "hysterical" statements or exaggerations at the time of conflict. (Proverbs 29:11; 16:21,24)
15. Select an appropriate time and place. Don't make a scene. Never deliberately embarrass each other or others by arguing in public. Keep your arguments in private. Perhaps even away from siblings if necessary.(Proverbs 15:23; Proverbs 25:11)
16. Don't drag in outsiders unless each member agrees that this person can help find a solution or help referee. The person needs to be someone who can maintain unbiased opinion and someone who everyone respects and feels safe with. (Proverbs 1:5; 12:15; 19:20; 20:18; 27:9)
17. Surround criticism with encouragement (praise bombardment). Focus on your desired expectations or positive changes rather than on faults. (Proverbs 15:1; Proverbs 15:13)
18. Speak directly and personally to your mate. Avoid lecturing and stay with concrete specific behavioral detail(s). (Proverbs 18:23)
19. Initiate some type of loving behavior toward your mate during the conflict (i.e., holding hands, take a walk, etc.) (I John 4:18)
20. Put yourself in the other person's shoes.
21. Be aware of each others differences and accept them. (Proverbs 22:6)
22. Give value and consideration to the interests, goals, and desires of each person. (Proverbs 29:7)
23. When you're wrong admit it. Identify your own contribution to the problem. (Proverbs 28:13; 29:23)
24. Find a solution only after both parties feel understood.
25. Resolve your conflicts with "Win-Win" solutions. Both agree with the solution or outcome of the argument.
26. Forgive and do not hold resentment. End a fight with an act of love. (Col. 3:12-13; I Peter 3:8-9)
27. Above all, strive to reflect HONOR in all of your words or actions during a conflict. (Romans 12:10; 2:3)

28. Make conflict resolution a regular habit. (Proverbs 13:24)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When listening, do you find yourself asking questions to gain deeper insight? Or is your focus on you, thinking about the next point you can make?

Describe your typical body language when you're in a conversation that you want to get out of with your spouse.

Describe your body language when you're enjoying the conversation.

What will your spouse need to see and hear in you to know that you are listening, understanding, valuing and resolving? (actually try asking your spouse this question)

When we find ourselves disagreeing with our mate, what steps can we take to become better listeners?

Try saying statements like, "Let me see if I'm hearing you right" or "So what I hear you saying is..." or "What do you feel about the issue?"

When your mate is sharing with you, how do you respond to let her know you're getting what she is saying?

What areas in your marriage need greater understanding instead of more problem solving attempts?

When you find yourself in an argument, what is your goal? Is your goal to win, or be right? Or is your goal unity and harmony?

Describe your emotions when you feel as though you have lost an argument?

Would you say that you work hard to see the issue from both sides?

SESSION 6

HOW HOT IS YOUR SEX LIFE?

Now that we have your attention let us get down to business. Too many couples suffer from a lack of sexual fulfillment because they never get to the fantasy of sex. That's right... we said fantasy and sex in a Christian study! But why not? We believe Christians spend so much time avoiding sex during their dating years that once they get married they can not turn off their inhibitions as easily as they hoped.

Good Christian people go from no, no, no, no, no... to YES in literally the time it takes to say, "I do." But the transition from no to yes is often more difficult than the couple realized. The fears of sex, the inhibitions, the "sinful" attitude while single, can all make sex during marriage a chore and incredibly difficult to talk about.

Here is the simple truth. Are you ready for it? GREAT SEX is only possible when a husband and wife define specifically what GREAT SEX looks like. If you are in the dark when it comes to what really turns your mate on, then your sex life will suffer. If you do not fully understand what turns your mate off, then your sex life will suffer. It's really not that complicated. But many times couples are too embarrassed to talk about sex because they spent a quarter of their life avoiding the topic.

If you want to discover your sexual fantasies, we mean the behaviors and attitudes that will turn your mate into a raging bull of sexual desire, then try the following 3 steps:

1. BE ENCOURAGING
If you are critical about your mate's physical or emotional traits, don't expect to ever discover his or her fantasies. When someone feels belittled or criticized the natural action is to become distant and protective. Which basically means they become totally closed to you relationally and would never share anything as intimate as a sexual fantasy. So go overboard when it comes to complimenting, encouraging, and validating your mate. The results will speak for themselves!
2. BE BOLD
Somebody in the marriage is going to have to take the first step in sharing a sexual desires. It is scary and even potentially embarrassing, but it is necessary for a healthy sex life. Put aside time to discuss sex in an environment that is safe from distractions and interruptions. I do want to give you one caution, though, when it comes to sharing your sexual fantasies. Healthy sexual fantasies will never include third party elements like pornography, sex toys, or the obvious one, other people. Keep your fantasies about the two of you.
3. BE SPECIFIC
Once you start sharing your desires, get beyond the feelings of embarrassment and move quickly into specifics. You need to let your mate know exactly what you like, where you like to be touched, and what you would like to try. There is nothing a good Christian couple needs to keep from themselves when it comes to sex. Your sex life is a blank slate where you get to color in the uniqueness of your sexual desires and fantasies. Resist the temptation, especially guys, to compare your sex life with another couple's sex life. Always keep in mind that your first goal in sharing your desires should be the well-being of your mate. This means you would never force your mate to do anything he or she is uncomfortable with. You will kill your sexual relationship by forcing your mate to do something he or she is not comfortable doing. If you tend to find a lot of road blocks when it comes to your sexual intimacy together, then be patient and kind. Help your mate discover why he or she struggles with sexual intimacy. There may be things you have done in the past to hinder this relationship, so you need to seek forgiveness and repair the damage. There might even be a history of sexual abuse that you are unaware of. If this is the case, then allow your mate the space and time to seek healing from a professional counselor.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION 6

_____ sex is an outcome of a _____ relationship

Why is it so difficult to talk?

We worry about being _____, _____,

_____ or _____ when we reveal ourselves.

Personal _____ are a major reason we can't talk about sex.

Our own _____ of sex can be a hindrance.

Let's talk about sex!

You can't have _____ if you don't know _____!

Proverbs 11:1

The LORD hates cheating, but he delights in honesty.

Be _____ about your sexual desires.

2 Corinthians 3:12

Since this new covenant gives us such confidence, we can be very bold.

Be _____ about what you like sexually.

Great sex starts with your _____.

Create _____ about your time together.

Romance not _____

1Corinthians 7:3

The husband should not deprive his wife of sexual intimacy, which is her right as a married woman, nor should the wife deprive her husband.

How _____ are you?

Romans 15:5

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other--each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other.

Song of Songs 2:1-3; 4:1; 7:1-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Too many couples suffer in their sexual relationship with each other because they never ask the right questions. The following discussion questions are specifically designed to take you and your mate deeper in your sexual understanding of each other. Your needs, desires, and hang-ups when it comes to sex.

If at any time you do not feel like this exercise is building intimacy, simply take a break and reconnect on an emotional level before moving on in the discussion questions.

On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied) where would you rate your sexual life as a couple? (circle one)

WIFE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

HUSBAND 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do not worry about where you circled on the above scale. Because all it measures is where you are currently. Now we want both of you to give some ways your spouse could improve the overall ranking.

HOW CAN WIVES IMPROVE SEXUAL INTIMACY? (Ask your husband what you can do. I.e. be more aggressive, assertive, creative, etc.)

HOW CAN HUSBANDS IMPROVE SEXUAL INTIMACY? (Ask your wife what you can do. I.e. be more emotionally available, cuddle more, etc.)

Read the following passage and write down how you can translate the verses into your own marriage.

Song of Songs - Chapter 7:1-10

How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of a craftsman's hands. Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies. Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses. How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine. May the wine go straight to my lover, flowing gently over lips and teeth. I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me.

What things could you say about your spouse that might equal the intensity of the above verses?

What are your biggest turn-offs? (be nice and word your comments humbly and thoughtfully)

Wife's turn-offs:

Husband's turn-offs:

(Please try and be as honest and kind as possible. You do not have to panic nor feel embarrassed if your spouse puts something down that you were unaware of, that is the point of the questioning. We want you to be fully aware of what is pleasurable and what is not. If you have been doing something for your spouse with the best of intentions, and it turns up on the "turn-off" list, all you have to do is validate the "turn-off" and stop doing it.)

What are your biggest turn-ons sexually?

Wife's turn-ons:

Husband's turn-ons:

Are you willing to try new things in the bedroom?

Wife: Yes / No Husband: Yes / No

If no, please state why...

If yes, please state a why...

SESSION 7

Loving you by loving me

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

By Dr. Greg Smalley

The Lord said to Moses, "Look, I'm going to rain down food from heaven for you. The people can go out each day and pick up as much food as they need for that day." Exodus 16:4

I (Michael) had just finished a session at one of our seminars taught around the country. I'm definitely not one of those speakers who likes to disappear during breaks to the green room for snacks and quiet time. I love to stay out front with the crowd of listeners, who technically I'm working for, and answer any questions they may have.

The questions are typically harmless. Usually a couple or individual just wants further clarification on what I just taught. But this one particular seminar I had one of the heaviest and most intense questions ever asked me during a break at a seminar.

The couple seemed normal enough as they approached the front, in fact, they were even holding hands and smiling as they said hello to me. Their demeanor could not have prepared me for what transpired next. In a very calm voice the husband asked, "I'm having difficulty forgiving my wife of an affair. What am I doing wrong?"

This is definitely a normal question when it comes to dealing with a spouse whose cheated on you. I started giving my standard answer, which soon became almost pointless. Because I first asked when he found out about the affair. He told me that it had been around two weeks since his wife confessed.

It's not abnormal for the "victim" of an affair to want healing and restoration to occur soon after finding out. So like a wise sage, I charged down the road of time and healing and that he just needs to give it some time and allow counseling, small groups, and his personal prayer life to help with the process of healing.

And that is when he hit me with the biggest surprise, "I also found out that the affair occurred 15 years ago." I didn't think this really mattered in terms of his healing, so I basically ignored him and trampled ahead. He then grabbed my arm as if to say, "could you stop with the normal stuff, I really need to tell you the whole story!" I took the hint without a word being said and finally shut my mouth.

"My daughter is also 15 years old, to the date of the affair. I just found out that she's not my biological daughter." Whoa! This bit of information changed everything for me. It made the normal intense feelings of betrayal from an affair seem like nothing compared to this! He then began to cry as I tried to pull myself together and actually provide something helpful to this wounded man.

What do you do when life smacks you in the face and you're not sure if you can get back up? It is not easy, but the only thing you can do is learn how to take care of yourself. The man I just told you about was wanting to deny his feelings, ignore the pain, and just go to the happy ending. But it does not happen like that. If you are going to experience all the love God wants for you, then you are going to have to face the reality of hurt in your life.

You already know this from the second session in this series. But now we are going to ask you to take it one step further..

My brother, Dr. Greg Smalley, wrote in his excellent marriage book, *The Marriage You've Always Dreamed Of*, "Only those who take good care of themselves remain able to take better care of others. Doctors who make it known that they don't get enough sleep, neglect to eat right, and scorn the assistance of others do not attract a long waiting list of patients. Pilots who drink too much, party too hard, and try to do everything on their own soon find themselves without an employer. Why? Because only those who take good care of themselves are in a position to take the best care of others."

How does the man I talked about at the beginning of this session take good care of himself? First, he acknowledges what happened and lets his wife know exactly how that makes him feel. Greg goes on to write:

God taught his people good self-care in the wilderness. He taught them how to care for their needs. He provided manna from heaven, but they had to gather it up and prepare it in nutritious and flavorful ways. He gave them streams and pools of water,

but they had to draw the water out and devise ways to store it for the long journey. He gave them instructions for living, but they had to carefully carry them out. God wanted his people to learn how to take good care of themselves. To accomplish this, he provided all the resources they needed to remain healthy and strong. But if they neglected his instruction or thought they could devise a better way, they suffered the consequences – and if they suffered, so did their children.

S. I. McMillen many years ago wrote a classic book titled *None of these Diseases*. In it he describes how God's dietary and worship instructions actually prevented Israel from succumbing to the terrible diseases suffered by the pagan nations around them. God wanted his people to take good care of themselves! He wants the same thing today.

The work of healing from great pain is not going to happen without great effort from you. Listen to this session carefully and truly understand how valuable you are and why you deserve a loving marriage.

INSERT AUDIO AND PLAY SESSION 7

Jesus on loving yourself...

Matthew 22:34-40

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees with his reply, they thought up a fresh question of their own to ask him. 35 One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" 37 Jesus replied, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' F123 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: **'Love your neighbor as yourself.'** 40 All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

In Matthew 22:37-39 there are _____ and
one _____.

You can not _____ if you do not first
_____.

Is loving yourself selfish?

Loving yourself _____ because we are
_____ in God's IMAGE.

"By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work."
Genesis 2:2

Loving yourself recognizes that you are _____.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Two Components of Loving Yourself

_____ To stay healthy, you have to receive from others.

_____ Good self-care means that you must learn to attend to your own legitimate needs.

Get plenty of _____.

Take care of your _____.

Listen to your _____.

The ultimate goal of loving yourself is to _____ that
_____ to others.

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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

List and discuss for a few moments the many ways others could love you in the following categories:

Spiritually
Mentally
Emotionally
Physically
Relationally

On a scale of 1-10, how charged are your batteries (1 being not at all and 10 being very charged):

Spiritually _____

Mentally _____

Emotionally _____

Physically _____

Relationally _____

For any battery lower than a 10, what can you do to "recharge?"

Why is it natural to think that our mate should take care of us?

Is your emotional battery drained? How about your relational battery or your physical battery? What are your emotions telling you about your pace of life at this moment?

Is your relationship with yourself healthy? Do you value yourself as God does? Write down three ways in which you can choose to honor God by honoring yourself.

Do you take enough time out for yourself? If not, list 2 or 3 activities you can cut out to free up some time. What roadblocks might you encounter in freeing up this time? How will you handle them?

Why does loving and taking care of ourselves sound selfish?

What words would you use to describe your physical health right now? (i.e. tired, exhausted, chipper)

In 2-3 sentences, write one goal you have to “recharge” your batteries.

APPENDIX A

Creating Relational Security Through an Anti-Divorce Contract by Dr. Greg Smalley

"Even if marriages are made in heaven, man has to be responsible for the maintenance."
—Kroehler News

"... 'til death do us part." I can still remember saying those words to my wife on our wedding day. However, I don't know if I'd thought about the exact way to keep that commitment. With so many books, videos, marriage conferences and counselors, there's plenty of help available. But, important as these things are, marital researchers are finding that emotional security is essential for preserving a relationship. One woman realized this as she complained to a marriage counselor. "When my husband won a trip for two to Hawaii, he went twice!" Sadly, this wife is probably not secure that her marriage will last forever. As the divorce rate continues to climb, how can we provide relational peace of mind?

I recently saw video of a family placing sandbags and boarding up their house that illustrates what we can do to provide emotional security. The family's home was situated on the Florida coast. Although the forecast called for mild rain, the family was not taking any chances. I'm sure neighbors called them paranoid or laughed at them for worrying about a simple monsoon shower. Later that night, however, the town was hit by a massive hurricane-like storm. Pictures the next morning revealed mass destruction. Interesting was the news footage of that family's house. Although badly damaged, their home was saved because they'd taken the necessary precautions.

In many ways, marriage can be like a storm. Most of the time, couples experience small rain showers. But sometimes, marital problems can feel like a hurricane. When this happens, unless the appropriate precautions have been made, thoughts of divorce might surface. In other words, when we're deeply offended, the last thing on our mind is finding the right help to resolve the problem. Therefore, having specific steps in place before the storm hits can make the difference between broken windows and losing your home. So how can we take measures to protect our marriages from the destructive storms of life? One way is to create an anti-divorce contract.

Developing An Anti-Divorce Contract

The goal when creating this contract is to establish several mutually agreed upon steps to undertake before seeking a divorce. For example, agree on the minimum number of marital sessions, which friends could serve as a support and prayer group, which marriage books or videos need to be read, a commitment not to be romantically involved with anyone during this period, the specific number of months to wait before a divorce, whether to get a legal separation first, voiding the contract for physical abuse, and so forth. These are a few possible questions to consider. The key is to brainstorm every possible step to take before seeking a divorce. You might even have several other couples who would be willing to make the same commitment to brainstorm with you. Several heads are better than one!

The final point is to determine the consequences if the contract is not honored. Usually, financial ramifications work the best. I encourage you to get your pastor, friend, or lawyer's signature on the finished document.

You may be thinking, "Divorce ... that will never happen to us!" I know how you feel. My wife and I made a commitment that divorce will never be an option. However, feelings change. There will be times that you will not feel "in love" with your mate. For whatever reason, you may even consider separation or divorce. Therefore, as Christian couples, we need to do everything within our power to guard against making decisions based on fluctuating emotions. Having a written contract can help you make the right choices to strengthen your relationship and to keep your promise "till death do us part."

APPENDIX B

The Marriage Test (by Drs. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley)

In order to gain a realistic picture of your relationship, please answer each of the following questions in terms of your relationship with your mate.

Use the following three point scale to rate how often you and your mate experience the following:

1 = almost never; 2 = once in a while; 3 = frequently

Once you have filled in each response, add up the total amount and then you will have your total score.

___ Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or brining up past hurts.

___ My mate criticizes or belittle my opinions, feelings, or desires.

___ My mate seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be.

___ When we have a problem to solve, it is like we are on opposite teams.

___ I hold back from telling my partner what I really think and feel.

___ I think seriously about what it would be like to date or marry someone else.

___ I feel lonely in this relationship.

___ When we argue, one of us withdraws, that is, doesn't want to talk about it anymore; or leaves the scene.

___ YOUR TOTAL SCORE

So how did you score?

No matter where you fall in the interpretations, you need to make sure and take our "antibiotic" to insure that your relationships last forever. We now know the four germs that infect any relationship that lead to divorce, separation, estrangement, and many other volatile relationship difficulties!

Interpreting the Relationship Dynamics Scale

Dr. Howard Markman & Dr. Scott Stanley devised these questions based on 15 years of research at the University of Denver on the kinds of communication and conflict management patterns that predict if a relationship is headed for trouble.

They have recently completed a nationwide, random phone survey using these questions. The average score was 11 on this scale, and higher scores mean your relationship may be in greater danger.

8 to 12 "Green Light"

Now, if you scored in the 8-12 range, your relationship is probably in good or even great shape AT THIS TIME, but we emphasize, "AT THIS TIME" because relationships don't stand still. In the next 12 months, you'll either have a stronger, happier relationship, or you could head the other direction. To think about it in another way, it's like you are traveling along and have come to a green light. There is no need to stop, but it is probably a great time to work on making your relationship all it can be.

13 to 17 "Yellow Light"

If you scored in the 13-17 range, it's like you are coming to a "yellow light". You need to be cautious. While you may be happy now in your relationship, your score reveals warning signs of patterns you don't want to let get worse. You'll want to be taking

action to protect and improve what you have. Spending time to strengthen your relationship now could be the best thing you could do for your future together.

18 to 24 "Red Light"

Finally, if you scored in the 18-24 range, it's like approaching a red light. Stop and think about where the two of you are headed. Your score indicates the presence of "germs" that could put your relationship at significant risk. You may be heading for trouble or already be there.

But there is GOOD NEWS. No matter how you scored on the quiz, you can stop and learn ways to improve your relationship now! We encourage you to make a commitment to discover the "antibiotic" to deepen the relationship with your mate by using the skills in this study guide!

If you scored in the yellow or red light, please understand that your marriage doesn't have to end in divorce. You can make a difference and you can start today.