Chapter 1: Have You Ever Been Hurt?

The authors believe that most married couples have been hurt in their relationship. Do you agree? Why or why not? If it’s true, why don’t more couples admit it?

Look at the stories of Gideon and Keisha, Laura and Dave, JoAnne and Randy, and Jack and Lynda. How would you describe the hurt in each marriage—in three words or less? What do you think will determine whether these hurts will be healed?

How do the following statements not reflect what the authors say in this chapter? How would you correct each statement?

• When it comes to marital conflict, it’s best to let sleeping dogs lie.
• Emotional divorce is nothing compared to legal divorce.
• When spouses stop talking about their problems, it’s usually a healthy sign.
• Time heals all wounds.

According to the authors, what three things need to happen for a couple to avoid emotional divorce? Which of these sounds hardest to you? Which sounds most urgent?

Using the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24) as a model, work with a partner to come up with a tale called “The Prodigal Spouse.” Include three points: the Open Loop of Conflict, the Fork in the Road, and the Closed Loop of Healing. If time allows, tell your story to the rest of the group.

Chapter 2: Blindsided by an Offense
If you ran the world, what would be the penalty for each of the following offenses? What penalties do spouses tend to impose on each other for infractions like these?

- forgetting your wedding anniversary
- getting home an hour later than you promised
- accidentally breaking your spouse’s family heirloom
- criticizing your spouse in front of the kids
- rebuffing your spouse’s sexual interest
- refusing to talk about a problem

What differences led to conflicts between Ron and Ann, and between Molly and Tom? What could they have done before their marriage to minimize these conflicts? What could they do now to resolve them?

Do you think differences between men and women are inevitable, exaggerated, imaginary, or beyond understanding? Does it matter whether differences between a husband and wife are due to gender, upbringing, personality, or other factors? Why or why not?

If you spent one day trying to see the world through your spouse’s eyes, which of the following might result? Are you willing to try such an experiment? Why or why not?

- frustration
- understanding
- insanity
- harmony
- other ________________________________

Chapter 3: The Chain Reaction of Hurt and Anger

What are the “rewards” of not closing the loop when you’ve hurt your spouse? What are the “benefits” of not closing the loop when you’ve been hurt?
If couples had to pay a $50 fine for each day they failed to close the loop after an offense, how might it affect relationships? What if the fine were $500 a day?

Let’s say a reality TV show crew follows you and your spouse around for a week. At the end of that time, which of these statements would the crew be most likely to make? Why?

- “It’s the baked-potato syndrome, all right.”
- “They’re a couple of loose cannons.”
- “Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt.”
- Other ________________________

What might be the result if the following dealt with conflict as you do in your marriage?

- the United Nations
- the British Parliament
- the military
- your local school board
- the leaders of your church

Chapter 4: Where Did You Learn to Resolve Conflict?

What lessons about conflict resolution might an alien learn by watching the following TV reruns?

- The Simpsons
- The People’s Court
- One Life to Live
- Friends
- 24
- The Jerry Springer Show
- Survivor

Which of the following would you trust most for good advice on resolving conflict in your marriage? Rank them from most to least, and explain.

- a non-Christian therapist
- your pastor
- a divorced uncle
• your non-Christian neighbors who’ve been married for sixty years
• a Christian therapist
• your mother
• your unusually bright twelve-year-old son
• the leader of this group

If you told the authors how your family dealt with conflict, would they be likely to say you came from a good family, a religious family, a wounded family, or a biblical family? Do you think they’d be right? Why or why not?

Which of the following describes a change you’d like to make in the way you deal with conflict? How could Psalm 78:5-7 encourage you in your efforts?
• more honesty
• less yelling
• less “stuffing”
• more forgiveness
• less running away
• other _____________________________

Chapter 5: What Is Your Conflict-Resolution Style?

Look at the five scenes described toward the beginning of the chapter—involving the paint store, going out, the credit card, slippers, and being “in the mood.” What is the “fork in the road” in each of these cases? What options would husband and wife have in each situation?

Complete the conflict-resolution style exercise—with your spouse in mind, then with yourself in mind. What are the results? Do you think they’re accurate? Why or why not?
If conflict resolution is such a serious issue in marriage, why do the authors (and many others) find Everybody Loves Raymond funny? If all the characters were like Debra, how entertaining would the show be?

How many forks in the road do you think you encountered last week? Which of the following would be a good way to remind yourself to watch for them this week?
- carrying a plastic fork in your pocket
- frequently telling yourself, I always have a choice
- counting to ten before making decisions
- other ________________________________

Chapter 6: Red Lights on the Road to Healing

What is the “green light” opposite of each of these “red lights”?
- pride
- guilt
- laziness
- shame
- fear
- control

Do you think more couples are stopped by the red light of pride, guilt, laziness, or shame? Why? What happens to a couple that gets stuck at a fork in the road?

What fear (of failure, success, rejection, or emotional intimacy) is probably affecting each spouse in the following situations? How might each spouse apply 2 Timothy 1:7?
- For the umpteenth time, Spouse A discovers Spouse B downloading Internet pornography—but says nothing.
  - Spouse A flirts with a stranger in an Internet chat room, even though Spouse B is upset about it.
  - Spouse A nags Spouse B to ask for a raise at work, but it never happens.
What happens when an “active controller” marries a “passive controller”? What do the authors suggest for controllers of both types? Why might a controlling spouse also need to deal with other “red light” issues mentioned in this chapter?

Chapter 7: Nonnegotiables for Closing the Loop

What percentage of adults in your country do you think would have seen the following as nonnegotiables fifty years ago? What percentage do you think would see them that way today?

- Divorce is not an option.
- My spouse is not my enemy.
- God’s way is always best.

How is a no-divorce commitment like a safety net? How would you reply to someone who said the following about such a commitment?

- “Better to get divorced than stay together and be unhappy.”
- “If we can’t divorce, she’ll think she can get away with anything.”
- “Even the Bible allows divorce when there’s adultery.”
- “If he abuses me, I’m out of here.”

Why do so many spouses come to see each other as enemies? Which of the following would help you and your spouse see each other as being on the same team? What ideas can you add?

- wearing matching jerseys
- finding more common goals
- praying together
- reminding yourselves of what you’ve been through

How do the stories of Jack and Charlene, and Dean and Nancy show that God’s way is best? How might the stories have turned out if these couples didn’t first believe that His way is best? What can you learn from their experiences?
Chapter 8: Prepare Your Heart

If you could go anywhere for your “personal time-out,” where would it be? Why? How much time would you spend on each of the following? How would you know when you were done?

- listening to God
- confessing your sin
- talking to God in prayer
- determining to be a peacemaker

Think of a conflict you and your spouse faced during the last year. How much strife might you have avoided if you’d asked yourself these questions? What does that tell you about how to handle your next conflict?

- How have our family backgrounds shaped the way we resolve conflict?
- What part of my past may have contributed to this disagreement?
- Am I blocking resolution of the conflict by being bitter or resentful?
- Am I gaining something by keeping the conflict alive?

Let’s say you’re running for president of the United States. In the middle of a debate, the moderator says, “You’ve claimed that your marriage is your top priority. Isn’t the role of president more important? How would you give sufficient attention to both?” What would be your response?

To whom are you accountable for each of the following? How would being accountable to others for your marriage relationship be like—and unlike—these arrangements?

- obeying the speed limit
- your job performance
- paying taxes
- changing the oil in your car
- exercising and eating right

Chapter 9: Diffuse Your Anger
Look at the stories of Brad and Meg, Ellie, and Joel and LuAnn that open the chapter. Which of these guidelines did Brad, Ellie, and Joel fail to follow? What could they have done instead?

- Deal with anger in a timely way.
- Cool down before speaking up.
- Control your tongue.
- Watch your self-talk.
- Give up your right to revenge.

How can you tell when you’re getting angry? How can you tell when your spouse is getting angry? How could you use this knowledge to keep anger from turning to aggression?

When it comes to anger, which of the following do couples tend to pay the most attention to? What might happen if they gave equal attention to all of them?

- triggering event
- self-talk
- emotional response
- behavioral response

What would it take to motivate you to do the following? If you aren’t motivated, what will you do instead?

- Take a close look inside yourself to see if you have offended your spouse.
- Agree on some kind of signal from your spouse that will remind you to keep your tongue under control.
- Challenge your self-talk to see if it is rational.
- Stop the cycle of revenge and give a blessing instead.

Chapter 10: Communicate Your Concerns

When was the last time you checked your relational temperature? How did you do it?
What was one of the most awkward conversations you and your spouse ever had? Why was it awkward? How would you change it now if you could? Share your answers with another group member if you feel comfortable doing so.

Form pairs. The two of you will play the roles of spouses having a conversation. Every thirty seconds or so, the group leader should call out one of the following; you should adjust your communication accordingly. When you’ve followed all the instructions, discuss the results as a group.

- Share a thought.
- Share a feeling.
- Share a need.
- Show that you’re really listening to the other person.
- Say something your partner needs to hear.
- Identify an underlying issue in what your partner is saying.

Which of the following would you most like to hear from your spouse? What would happen if you shared this need with him or her?

- “Let’s talk.”
- “I’m sorry.”
- “I love you.”
- “Here’s $100.”
- Other __________________

Chapter 11: Confront Your Conflicts

Why is it helpful to pray together before confronting a conflict?

- It takes all the fun out of it.
- It reminds you that Jesus is there.
- It forces you to lower your voice.
- It gets you to agree on at least one thing.
- Other __________________________

If you had to put a price on each of the following insights, showing how valuable it is to you right now, what would the price be? You have a total of $500 to spend.
• Take one issue at a time.
• “That pillow represents our problem. You are not the problem, and I am not the problem. You are not my enemy; we are on the same team. That pillow is the problem. Let’s work together to resolve it.”
• Avoid exaggerations like always and never.
• Use I-statements instead of you-statements.
• “What do you need from me: sympathy or a solution?”

“What does the Bible say about this situation? Is there a clear admonition we need to obey?” Can you recall a time when you sought biblical input on a conflict in your marriage? If not, why not? If so, what happened?

How would your spouse react if you said, “Honey, your idea is just as good as mine, if not better. Why don’t we try doing it your way”? Do you have any chronic conflicts that might be resolved with this approach? If so, are you willing to try?

Chapter 12: Forgive Your Spouse

How do you think the authors of the following books might react to this chapter? Why? Do you think most people would prefer the approach of this chapter or these books? Why?

• Don’t Get Mad—Get Even: The Fine Art of Revengeanship
• Get Even: The Complete Book of Dirty Tricks
• The Revenge Encyclopedia
• The Big Book of Revenge: 200 Dirty Tricks for Those Who Are Serious about Getting Even

Look at the chapter-opening story about Kate and Walker. Then, working with a partner, write a letter of forgiveness from Kate that reflects God’s recommended approach (acknowledging the hurt, releasing the offense and the offender, relinquishing resentment, and constituting an act of grace).
Which of the six forgiveness myths in this chapter have made it difficult for you to forgive someone? What barriers still stand in the way?

Think of an offense that has caused conflict in your marriage. If the following steps reflect the process of requesting and receiving forgiveness, where are you and your spouse in that process? If you’re stuck, what needs to change before you can make progress?
   1. I was wrong.
   2. I’m sorry.
   3. I don’t ever want to hurt you like this again.
   4. Will you forgive me?
   5. I forgive you and close the loop on this issue.
   6. I forgive you for . . .

Chapter 13: Rebuild Your Trust

How might each of the following erode trust in a marriage? Which might cause the most damage if it happened to you?
   • Your spouse accidentally leaves your baby in a hot car at the mall, returning just in time to revive the child and avert a tragedy.
   • Your spouse cheats on your jointly filed taxes, incurring a $2,000 penalty.
   • Your spouse refers to you as a “control freak” when talking to your teenage son, who tells you about it later when he’s arguing with you.
   • Your spouse repeatedly e-mails an old boyfriend or girlfriend, then denies it when you bring it up.

Choose one of the four scenarios just described. If you and your spouse faced that situation, what would you do and say to carry out each of the following steps the authors suggest?
   1. Weep and seek God.
   2. Pray.
   3. Communicate needs honestly.
   4. Commit to the journey.
   5. Evaluate the damage.
   6. Formulate a plan.
   7. Begin the work.
   8. Trust God through the inevitable resistance.
9. Work toward completion.

Read Romans 5:1-5. How could working together to close a loop lead to more than resolving a conflict in your marriage?

Which of the following rewards of “loop-closing” would mean the most to you? Why?
- developing endurance
- building character
- being able to say, “We have a good marriage that’s growing into a great marriage”
- knowing that your kids don’t have to worry about you getting a divorce
- growing closer to your spouse