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Men's Relational Toolbox

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The names and some of the details in the illustrations used in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the people who shared their stories with us.

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Introduction



Something We're Good At

If you've been paying attention to my messages on love and relationships these past thirty years, you know one thing for sure—I don't have it all together. In fact, I've made my living reporting not just my failures as a husband and father but also the ways God helped me use those failures to restore the relationships between my family and me.

So why do you want to hear from a rusty old nail like me?

Because it warms your heart to know that if I can blunder my way through love and survive, so can you. The process has been riddled with laughter and tears, but the reward has always been gaining understanding about relationships.

Like any dad, I've tried to pass on what I know to my adult sons—Greg and Michael. And like any dad, I've done more than pass on the good stuff. That's right: God has a sense of humor, and Greg and Michael are just like me—two more rusty nails in the Smalley toolbox. Here's the proof:

- ✗ Not long after Greg and Erin got married, they were one argument away from splitting up.
- ✗ Michael wasn't speaking to his new bride eighteen hours after the wedding ceremony. He and Amy spent their first six months together camped on the rocks of discontent.

But there's good news too. Even though we are a trio of rusty nails, we're willing to do whatever we can to get our relationships right. And that's what this book is about—helping you develop your own relational

toolbox that will help you make all your relationships exciting and successful.

My sons and I may be rusty nails, but when we realize we need to add the right relational tools, we're willing to do whatever we can to get the ones we need.

So you see, the beat goes on. And the message I bring you about building your relationships is now made three times stronger by the efforts of my sons. Yes, we still bumble our way through conversations with our wives every now and then. But we've learned something about relational tools, and it's this: With the right tools, we can build stronger, better relationships than we had before.

That's what we want to share with you in the pages of this book.

The information here will not answer all of your questions or solve all of your problems, but it will equip you with the tools to truly love and understand the people who are most important to you.

Now let us tell you a little bit about how this book came to be.

It happened one weekend when we three Smalley guys were together. Instead of swapping boasts about who had the better jump shot or the sweeter swing on the golf course, we were brainstorming.

We had been asked to write a relationship book for guys. Our conversation went something like this:

"I don't know if I can do it," Greg said as he stretched out his legs. "I'm tired of men-bashing books."

"Yeah, I'm tired of being portrayed as the 1940s inept relational guy. Things have changed. Men aren't bumbling idiots when it comes to relationships. We're just different from women," Michael said. "Can't we write a book about guys and relationships without coming off like a bunch of well-meaning, bumbling idiots?"

"Can't we write a book about our good points?" Greg suggested. "The reasons we excel as providers, protectors—that kind of thing?"

We started to catch Greg's passion. "You mean, take a look at our strengths, at why we're good at certain things?" I asked.

Greg was on his feet. "Exactly!" he said. "Why are we good at providing, for instance?"

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"Because we have the tools for it," I said. "God-given tools."

"You're right," Greg said and pointed at me. "The take-charge tool, the fact-finding tool, the competitive-drive tool, the problem-solving tool."

"There it is!" Michael said. "Of course, our tools don't work in a relationship. We need other tools for that."

"When you build or repair something," I said, "what's the first thing you ask yourself?"

Greg grinned. "Do I have the right tools?"

"Yes!" I answered. "See, we're good at using the right tools for a lot of really important jobs. But maybe not the tools we need for relationships."

"And if you don't have the right tools . . . ?" Greg began.

"You get them!" Michael interrupted.

"Right!" I said. "We already have a fantastic, God-given internal toolbox. For most of us it's just a matter of adding a few more tools. The patient-listening tool, the tender-touch tool, the open-sharing tool. Things that'll help us relate better."

"But where does a guy find these new tools?" Michael asked.

And then it happened.

In a moment that seemed frozen in time, the three of us looked at each other and said in the same breath, "The Bible!"

"With our relationship book as a kind of instruction manual," I added.

And in that instant, the idea for this book was born.

The three of us agree on all the material in this book. It's what we're using today at the Smalley Relationship Center. In fact, it's the core of who we are as a team of relationship counselors. For that reason, we'll talk in this book in terms of *we* and *us*. We'll offer things we've seen, things we've picked up, research we've conducted—that kind of thing. All three of us have been counseling men about their relationships for years.

But until that conversation, it didn't hit us what we've really been doing.

We've been giving men tools. Relational tools.

You may already have some of these tools. Others you may need to add to your relational toolbox. If that's the case, consider the following pages your one-stop-shopping place when it comes to matters of relating. This book features tools you may never have considered, and it tells you how—through God's grace—you can own them free and clear.

GUY FACT

A man's self-esteem
is career related.

If your relational toolbox has rusty hinges, you may need a full-scale shopping spree. Even the best of us struggle in one or two areas of relating

to those we love. But we've found that those areas are often weaknesses that—with the proper tools—can become strengths.

Ever tried to use a pair of pliers to drive a nail into a stud? Once when Greg's hammer was missing, that's exactly what he did. The results? A crooked nail, a bruised thumb, and a heavy dose of frustration.

Why? Because he didn't use the right tool.

The same is true with relating. Without the right relational tools, we're going to struggle when it comes to building relationships. It's that simple.

So grab your toolbox and follow us. You're about to embark on a tool-gathering trip that will help you build or repair any relationship. Along the way, we've tried to make the journey a bit more fun by including stories, warnings, and tool tips. For those of you who like facts (Greg loves this sort of thing), we've included "guy facts" in the margins—fun, zany facts about . . . well, just about anything.

But before we go shopping, let's take a look at the tools you're already familiar with, the tools most of you have and use well.

After all, the last thing we want is another men-bashing book.



Rummaging through the Toolbox

It all centers on the toolbox.

After thousands of hours researching relationships and thousands more counseling others about them, we've stumbled onto a truth we believe can help any man build or repair his relationships. The truth is this: We build and repair our relationships much the same way we build and repair anything else—by using the right tools.

That's right. Our ability to effectively build or repair our relationships depends on the quality and number of items in what we call our "relational toolbox."

If you want to build or repair a deck around your house, you need a box full of the right kind of tools. The same is true if you want to build or repair a relationship. However, the problem with many of us guys is that we lack the right relational tools for the job. That doesn't make us the dimmest lights in the harbor. It makes us different.

For every relational tool we guys might lack, we possess a different internal tool—usually a factual and practical tool that makes us in-

dependent and skilled at providing and protecting, the two things most of us are best at.

Throughout the first half of this book we'll be discussing the internal tools that make us good providers and protectors. Then we'll take a look at those much-needed relational tools and take you on the ultimate shopping trip—the one that will equip you with the tools that will make you a better relationship builder and repairer.

But before we do that, let's take a look at the other toolbox—the one sitting on the shelf in your garage.

GUY FACT

A man's sense of self is defined through his ability to achieve results, through success and accomplishment.

A GUY'S NEED FOR TOOLS

Robert is a teacher, a guy whose most dangerous work tool is a pencil. He spends his hours instructing students about the wily ways of the English language. But like most guys, Robert has a

toolbox on the garage shelf at home.

One day Robert's wife took the car on a carefree trip to the supermarket with their three toddlers buckled in the backseat. Unfortunately, she forgot to close the garage door when she left. When she and Robert met up at home at the end of the day, Robert announced that something tragic had happened.

His toolbox had been stolen.

To hear Robert's wife talk about his reaction, you'd have thought the house had burned down.

Robert stood in the garage, pacing in small circles, a vacant look in his eyes. "My tools," he said over and over. "Someone took my tools."

Robert's wife felt bad about the incident, but she was still able—with very little effort—to put the matter out of her mind long enough to help the kids safely into the house, unload the groceries, and start dinner.

"She told me I could get *new* tools," Robert explained later. "Can

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you believe that? *New tools?* As if that would somehow replace the tools I'd lost."

Robert eventually became excited at the prospect of getting new tools, but he wasn't thinking about that in the minutes after he found out about the burglary. Standing there staring at the empty garage shelf where his toolbox once sat, he thought, *What if I need to fix something? What if something's loose or something squeaks or something falls off?*

We believe Robert speaks for most of us guys when he said to us, "Guys, I felt naked."

We men often feel this same sense of inadequacy when we try to build or fix important relationships. We often don't have the necessary relational tools, and that leaves us feeling as helpless as Robert felt without his toolbox.

We may not be builders or mechanics or carpenters, but we feel secure knowing our toolbox is out there in the garage. It's reassuring, giving a sense of completeness. And we believe you can have that same feeling once you get to the second half of this book and stock your internal toolbox with the right relational tools.

If you checked inside the toolbox belonging to the average guy, you'd probably find some basic tools, including the following:

Hammer—used to pound or deliver repeated blows, especially when driving nails into wood

Wrench—usually operated by hand, used for tightening bolts and nuts

Screwdriver—used for turning screws with slotted heads

Pliers—used for holding and gripping small articles or bending and cutting wire

Tape measure—used for measuring

Saw—used for cutting solid materials to prescribed lengths or shapes

GUY FACT

Two out of five husbands daily tell their wives that they love them.

Lots of guys we know never build things and rarely even repair them. But almost every guy has a toolbox with at least these tools. Most of us aren't sure when we actually acquired our toolboxes, but we have them all the same. It's almost as though we woke up one morning and there in the garage was a toolbox with the basic tools that go along with being a man.

Why is this?

Because there are some things most guys are good at, and one of them is using tools to build and repair things. Our guess is that whether you are an accountant or a truck driver, a doctor or a delivery guy, you have a toolbox stocked with tools that you know how to use to accomplish some basic tasks.

Here's a list of the things most guys can do with the basic tools in their toolboxes:

- ✗ Hang a picture
- ✗ Install basic shelving
- ✗ Tighten and loosen things (like door hinges)
- ✗ Install a screen door
- ✗ Replace a faucet
- ✗ Change furnace filters
- ✗ Install a new light fixture
- ✗ Fix a broken toy
- ✗ Repair a leak
- ✗ Measure the size of a room or window
- ✗ Trim or cut a piece of wood
- ✗ Grip or hold something steady as it is being repaired

Now granted, you might be the kind of man who has traded in his toolbox for a tool chest, the man who has enough tools to allow you to assemble a 747 in your garage. But even if you can't tell the difference between a ratchet and a crescent wrench, you can usually handle the tasks listed above.

Certainly some guys don't own toolboxes—though we'd venture to say that they are for the most part, very young or very old guys. And

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we're equally certain some women have toolboxes like the one described above. But for the purposes of this book, we'll generalize a bit and say this: Toolboxes are primarily a guy thing.

There's a reason for this: Men and women are different.

This is probably not earth-shattering information to most people. In fact, you are probably nodding in agreement as you read this, not dropping the book in astonishment.

Sadly, when most people talk about the differences between men and women, it's usually in negative terms. We see women as having an "inborn relationship manual," while we see men as stumbling about looking for ways to get along in their relationships.

Or, as Greg said, we men-bash.

We aren't going to do that in this book. Instead, we will take a look at what we're trying to build. This book is a manual for building relationships, mostly relationships with women—girlfriends, wives, mothers, daughters, coworkers, bosses, committee members. Of course, guys need relational tools to relate with other men, but generally guys are already equipped with the tools necessary to do that. The relational tools that work between guys will not always work when a man tries to relate to a woman. In fact, that kind of relationship usually requires a different set of tools altogether.

With that in mind, let's look at our internal makeup and at what types of tools we guys have in our internal toolbox.

That's right—our internal toolbox.

THE INTERNAL TOOLBOX

Men are born with an internal toolbox. Internal tools are as important to us men as our toolbox out in the garage.

They are so important that if we woke up one day and didn't have these tools, we'd be lost, just as lost as Robert was when he discovered his toolbox had been stolen.

Just like a man who once lost his tool pouch. The story played out this way.

A female friend of ours had an appointment at the local middle

school. She was waiting at the office counter when a man dressed in a suit and tie rushed in. He was breathless, and sweat was dripping off his forehead. In his hand was something large and cumbersome—about the size of a grocery bag. At first our friend couldn't quite make out what it was.

“Here you go,” he said as he held it up.

His tone was similar to the one a man uses when he's bagged a five-point buck. But our friend could see that this man wasn't carrying a deer. He held in his hands a large tool pouch overflowing with wrenches, drills, pliers, and other assorted tools. Our friend noted that none of the tools looked even close to new. “The contents were worn out and dirty, like leftover clutter from a garage sale,” she said later.

We know what most of you guys are thinking. *Tools? Like leftover clutter from a garage sale? Hardly!*

The businessman held up the tool pouch for the women behind the counter to see. “I found this in front of your school. It was just *lying* there on the sidewalk,” he said incredulously, shaking his head.

The women in the school office glanced from the man to the tool pouch and back again, their faces utterly blank. They were probably thinking what our friend was thinking—that whoever left the pouch had obviously done so on purpose. Maybe it had gotten too heavy to carry another few blocks down the road to the Goodwill truck.

Finally, one of the women stepped forward. “Okay. What should we do with it?” she asked.

Now the blank stare belonged to the man. “These are *tools!*” he said.

His tone suggested that losing tools might be only slightly less tragic than losing a child, but definitely

worse than, say, losing a wedding ring or a thousand dollars cash.

The woman at the counter was not seeing that.

“Well,” the other woman said as she peered into the tool pouch, her nose slightly wrinkled, “okay.”

GUY FACT

In 1838 the city of Los Angeles passed an ordinance requiring that a man obtain a license before serenading a woman.

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Now the man huffed, “Look, I’m late for the biggest appointment of my life, lady. But I had to stop. Somewhere there’s a guy *missing* these tools.” He said the word *missing* with a level of emotion usually reserved for weddings and funerals. “I couldn’t drive another foot without stopping,” he said and motioned back to where his car was parked. “I ran all the way up here.”

The woman used her toe to point to a spot on the floor. “Put them there, I guess,” she said. “Maybe someone will claim them.”

“*Maybe* someone will—” the man stopped himself. “Never mind. I’m late for work.”

He turned and ran out of the school, hair disheveled, coat tails flapping in the wind. But he had a heroic look on his face, as if he’d done a deed that made him worthy of calling himself a man.

After he left, the woman behind the counter turned to her office coworker and said, “Is it just me, or was that man a little over-the-top about tools?”

The fact is, most of us guys are a little over-the-top about the tools in our toolboxes. It’s the same way when it comes to our internal tools.

The good news is we excel at something. In fact, in some settings we’re downright amazing. That’s because our internal toolbox contains certain tools that make us naturals in those settings.

Let’s take a look at some of the internal tools you probably already have.

GUY FACT

In general, men are more interested in objects and things than people and feelings.

Study Guide



Discuss the following questions with other guys in a discussion group, or use them just for your own growth. See them as accessories to help you take some steps toward putting the relational tools to use.

1. Which of the internal tools do you most relate to? Why?

Fact-giving tool

Fact-finding tool

Take-charge tool

Task-oriented tool

Problem-solving tool

Competitive-drive tool

2. Give examples of times when these tools have helped you.
3. What are you good at?
4. Which of the internal tools help make you good at that?
5. Which of these internal tools make you independent, putting stress on your relationships?
6. How does that independence influence your significant relationships?
7. Think about your relationships. List three relationships that need to be built up or repaired:

8. Why haven't those relationships been successful in the past?
9. Which internal tools have you been using in these relationships? Give an example.
10. In your own words, describe the relational toolbox. Why is it important that men have relational tools?

11. Why don't these relational tools come naturally to men?
12. Which relational tools deal with communicating?
13. Give an example of how you can use the open-sharing tool to build better foundations in your relationships.
14. Give an example of how you can use the patient-listening tool to build better foundations in your relationships.
15. Which relational tools deal with behavior?
16. Give an example of how you can use the win-win tool to build better relationships.
17. Give an example of how you can use the selfless-honor tool to build better relationships.
18. Give an example of how you can use the tender-touch tool to build better relationships.
19. Give an example of how you can use the time-and-energy tool to build better relationships.
20. Which loved ones do you need to forgive? Which ones do you need to seek forgiveness from? Explain how you might do this using the relational tools.