

HANDLE WITH CARE

Emotions, Finance, Sexuality

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
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Essentials of Marriage: Handle with Care
Participant's Guide

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QUICK START GUIDE FOR COUPLES

Whether you're studying in a group, as a couple, or individually, this book is for you. It's packed with discussion questions, advice, biblical input, and application activities.

But maybe all you'd like to do right now is watch the accompanying DVD and talk about it with your spouse. If so, go directly to the "Catching the Vision" section of each chapter. There you'll find the discussion questions you're looking for.

When you have more time, we encourage you to explore the other features in this book. We think you'll find them . . . essential!

For even more help with your relationship, go to
focusonthefamily.com/marriage.

WELCOME!

If there's anything you don't need, it's one more thing to do.

Unless, of course, that one thing might make the *other* things a whole lot easier.

We can't guarantee that this course will take all the challenge out of your marriage. It won't keep you from forgetting your anniversary, thaw all the icy silences, or make your spouse alphabetize the shoes in your closet.

But it *will* help you understand why you're married, how to stay that way, and how to enjoy it to the fullest. That's because you'll learn the essentials—what's vital to a healthy relationship, keys to working out your differences, and what God considers most important in “holy matrimony.”

In other words, you'll discover how to be the husband or wife you really want to be.

That takes effort, but it doesn't take boredom or busy work. So we've designed this course to be provocative and practical. At its heart is an entertaining, down-to-earth video series featuring many of today's most popular marriage experts. And in your hands is the book that's going to make it all personal for you—the Participant's Guide.

In each chapter of this book, you'll find the following sections:

Finding Yourself. Take this survey to figure out where you stand on the subject at hand.

Catching the Vision. Use this section as you watch and think about the DVD.

Digging Deeper. This Bible study includes Scripture passages and thought-provoking questions.

Making It Work. Practice makes perfect, so here's your chance to begin applying principles from the DVD to your own marriage.

Bringing It Home. To wrap up, a licensed counselor affiliated with Focus on the Family offers encouraging advice you can use this week.

Whether you're using this book as part of a group or on your own, taking a few minutes to read and complete each chapter will bring the messages of the DVD home.

And isn't that exactly where you and your spouse need it most?

Note: Many issues addressed in this series are difficult ones. Some couples may need to address them in greater detail and depth. The DVD presentations and this guide are intended as general advice only, and not to replace clinical counseling, medical treatment, legal counsel, or financial guidance.

Focus on the Family maintains a referral network of Christian counselors. For information, call 1-800-A-FAMILY and ask for the counseling department. You can also download free, printable brochures offering help for couples at <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/articles/brochures.aspx>.



Chapter 1

ONE STEP AT A TIME

When you got engaged, you probably thought you were marrying the person of your dreams. After the wedding day, though, you realized your spouse had some annoying habits.

Suddenly the person who could do no wrong was in need of a makeover.

Maybe you started a reforming program, only to discover that you don't have enough resources or power to change your spouse. Now your refrain sounds something like this:

"Cathy is always late for everything. Last week I decided to go on to church without her, and then for some reason she gets mad at me!"

"Bob thinks it's funny to start burping contests at the table with our boys. It is *very* embarrassing."

Chances are that you married your spouse not just because you had similarities, but also for the differences. You may have been attracted to these differences because of your need to feel completed by another person. These traits may be endearing before marriage, but can disrupt the relationship afterward.

Do you have to live with these habits? Should loving this person be enough to enable you to overlook them? And if you can't, should you feel guilty?

—Sheryl DeWitt
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist¹

FINDING YOURSELF

Identifying Your Needs

Here's a questionnaire to get you thinking about how you relate to the subject of improving your marriage.

1. Before you were married, which of the following did you agree with?

Which do you agree with now?

- "You can't change your spouse."
- "Once we're married, he [or she] will change."
- "I'll get used to him [or her]."
- "I wouldn't change a thing."
- "If things don't change, I'll go crazy."

2. When it comes to changing your spouse's behavior, which of the following have you tried? What were the results?

- nagging
- prayer
- an extreme makeover
- counseling
- brain surgery
- recommending a book
- setting a good example
- bribery
- other _____

3. Let's say your spouse has a habit of leaving dirty clothes on the floor.

Which of the following describes your most likely response?

- resentful silence
- yelling, "Why don't you stop leaving dirty clothes on the floor?"

- ___ picking up the clothes and being thankful that he or she isn't dead or having an affair
- ___ starting small by asking him or her to pick up just the socks
- ___ declaring a zero tolerance policy on all dirty laundry
- ___ other _____

4. Would you rather lose one pound a week for six months, or a pound a day for a month? Why? _____

5. Would you rather try to quadruple your savings account in 40 days or 40 years? Why? _____

6. What might the two previous questions have to do with the process of improving your marriage? _____

CATCHING THE VISION

Watching and Discussing the DVD

In this DVD segment, Drs. John Trent and Greg Smalley present a little idea that gets big results: improving your marriage a step at a time instead of trying to leap the Grand Canyon in a single bound.

Small changes are doable—and they work. In fact, it's the little things that often make the difference between couples who do well and those who struggle. Making minor, frequent course corrections on your marital journey prevents panicky, wrenching attempts at change later. And when it comes to changing your spouse, keep your expectations small, too.

After viewing the DVD, use questions like these to help you think through what you saw and heard.

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1. Do small changes or big ones work best when you're trying to do the following? Why?
 - turn up the volume on a car radio
 - color your hair
 - add salt to soup
 - be more honest with your spouse

2. How was Dr. John Trent's near-accident like some people's approach to married life? How might one or both spouses be "asleep at the wheel"? What kinds of things wake them up?

3. In each of the following cases, what small course corrections might help? What overcorrections might be too much?
 - You want your spouse to help more with household chores.
 - Your spouse thinks you spend too much time with your parents.
 - You read in a book that husbands and wives should pray together daily, and you've never done it once.
 - Your spouse says he or she would like "more physical affection."

4. How did John Trent solve his "pointing problem"? Would you use his pay-a-fine strategy in the following situations? If not, why not? If so, what would the fine be?
 - You keep forgetting to empty the cat litter box, leaving your spouse to take care of it.
 - Your spouse wants you to talk more.
 - Your spouse wants you to talk less.
 - You're usually late getting ready when you're supposed to go out for the evening.

5. Why did John Trent and his wife pay a babysitter and go to the food court once a week? Would that be a 2-degree change for you, a 45-degree change, or a 180-degree change? What might make a change like that worth it?

6. How is trying to get your spouse to change like pushing a rope? Which of the following do you think John Trent means when he suggests walking in the right direction while holding on to the rope?
 - being a good example to your spouse and encouraging any progress
 - telling your spouse where to go and controlling him or her
 - staying in step together and keeping your spouse close
 - other _____

7. Have you ever tried to make a change that was “too big”? If so, what happened? Why might one small change lead to another?

8. How would you answer someone who says, “My marriage needs big changes, not small ones”?

DIGGING DEEPER

Bible Study

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. . . .

David said to Saul, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.”

Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and

fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth.”

But David said to Saul . . . “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you.”

Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine. . . .

As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.

So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. (1 Samuel 17:4, 32-34, 37-40, 48-50)

1. How did small things make a big difference in this story?
2. What did Saul assume about the best way to change the situation? How might that attitude lead to discouragement?
3. What was the real reason for David’s success?
4. How could this story serve as a pattern for changing things in a marriage?

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. (Mark 6:34-44)

5. How did small things make a big difference in this story?
6. What did the disciples assume about the best way to change the situation?
7. What was the real reason why Jesus’ approach worked?
8. How could this story serve as a pattern for changing things in a marriage?

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Matthew 13:31-33)

9. Why do you suppose God seems to like using small things in big ways?
10. What’s one small thing you think He’s used to improve your marriage?

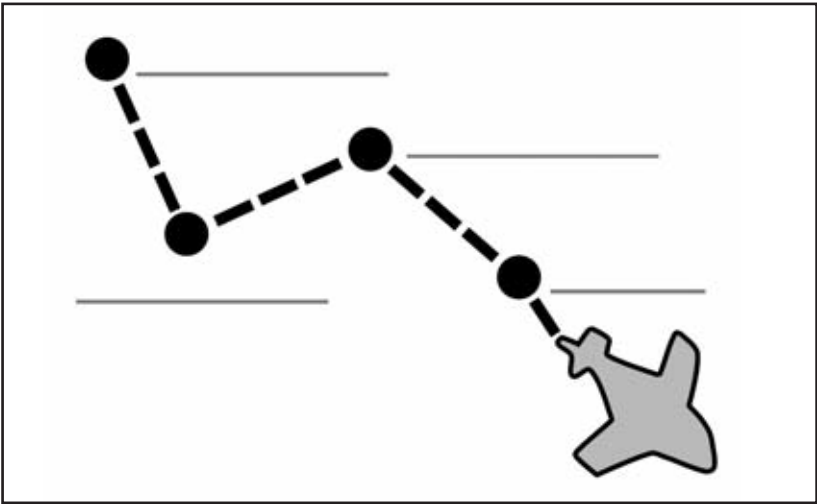


Applying the Principles

It’s time to come up with your marital “flight plan” for this week. Here are three destinations; choose one. With your spouse if possible, pick from the corresponding list up to four “course corrections” that you’re willing to make during the next six days. Write those corrections in the blanks next to the dots on your flight plan—in the order in which you’ll make them.

To keep your plan specific, write an “estimated time of arrival” next to each course correction. For example, “Tuesday after dinner” might belong next to “Talk about feelings for five minutes.” If the course correction is something you’re pledging *not* to do (like “Avoid comparing my spouse to others, real or imagined”), write “as needed” next to it.

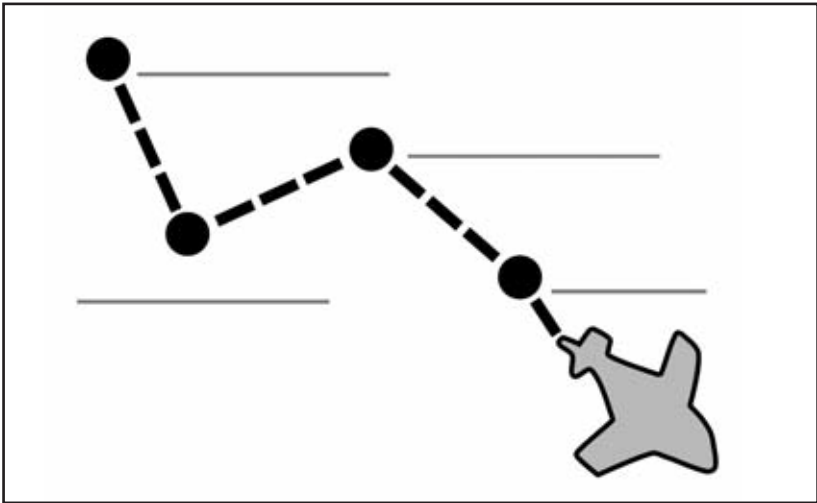
When you’ve determined your flight plan, ask God for help in carrying it out.



Destination: Better Communication

Possible course corrections:

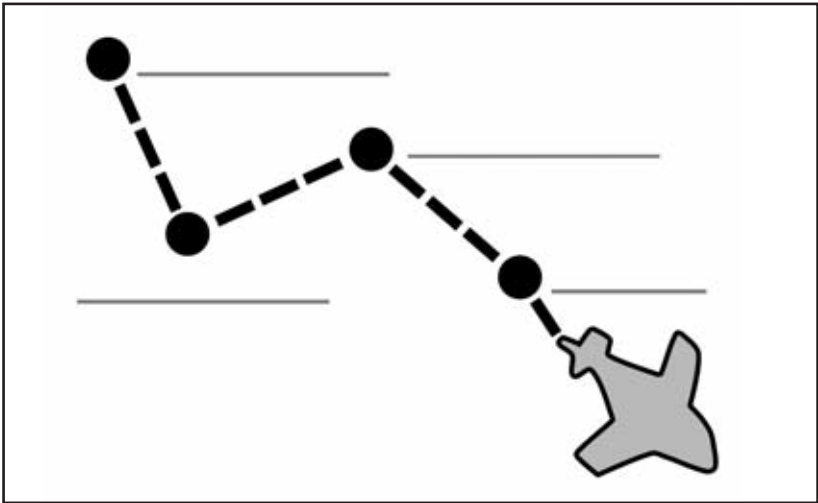
- Make more eye contact during conversations.
- Find a quiet place to talk.
- Talk about feelings for five minutes.
- Go out to dinner and reminisce about our wedding.
- Send my spouse an e-mail or text message once a day.
- Don't use the phrases "You always" or "You never."
- Ask my spouse's opinion on a political issue and follow up with one or two clarifying questions.
- Share two personal prayer requests with my spouse.
- Ask my spouse to tell me when I'm talking too loudly or too softly.
- Avoid folding my arms, frowning, or looking distracted when we talk.



Destination: More Help from My Spouse with Household Chores

Possible course corrections:

- Thank my spouse for doing a chore in the past.
- Avoid criticizing my spouse for not doing a task in the way I would have done it.
- Ask my spouse to do a specific chore just once, at a specific time.
- Offer to do a task my spouse usually does.
- Avoid comparing my spouse to others, real or imagined.
- Reach agreement on which chores are necessary.
- Reach agreement on how often each chore needs to be performed.
- Offer to show my spouse how I perform a particular chore.
- Praise my spouse in front of another person for helping in the past.
- Reward my spouse for helping by taking him or her out for dessert.



Destination: More Physical Affection Between Us

Possible course corrections:

- Hold hands while taking a walk or watching TV.
- Give or receive a back rub.
- Kiss before leaving for work.
- Hug when coming home from work.
- Tell my spouse about one of his or her most attractive physical features.
- Put on a different cologne or perfume each day.
- Go to bed an hour early one evening, and at the same time.
- Take a bath or shower together.
- Light scented candles in the bedroom.
- Talk about my spouse's favorite subject for at least 10 minutes.



Encouragement from a Counselor

Ask yourself why you want change. Is it for your own good only? Might the change make you feel better, but cause your mate to feel imprisoned? Or is the change to help eliminate behaviors that keep your spouse from growing emotionally and spiritually? In other words, are you helping to set your partner free or just restricting his or her freedom?

If changing the habit would truly benefit both of you, change may be worth trying. But keep these guidelines in mind:

1. *Address the problem honestly.* “Honey, it bothers me when you burp at the table. It teaches the children a bad habit, and it’s rude and offensive to guests.”

2. *Explain the benefit of change.* “Eating at the table will be more pleasant for all of us. The boys will also respect your table manners and you’ll be a good testimony to our guests.”

3. *Don’t command change.* “You’re such a slob at the table. Stop being so messy.” Instead, *request* change. Your spouse will respond more favorably.

4. *Don’t attack your mate.* “You are a horrible listener. It’s no wonder no one talks to you.” When you attack your spouse, you crush his or her spirit—and don’t get much cooperation. Confront the problem; don’t attack the person.

5. *Discuss ways to bring about change.* Change is hard. Let your spouse know that you’re on his or her side. Help him or her find ways to change those habit patterns. If the problem is overeating, for instance, go with your spouse to the gym, cook healthy meals, and go out to eat less often. Be your mate’s advocate.

6. *Encourage your spouse’s growth.* “You’re doing a great job. I’m really proud of the effort I see. Thank you for your dedication to making this change.”

7. *Recognize that change takes time.* Be patient with your spouse. Praise little steps that you see. Everyone wants to feel successful. So don't discourage your mate with comments like, "This is taking forever. How many more times do we have to deal with this?" Discouragement stunts growth, but encouragement goes a long way in motivating change. Let your spouse know you're in this together for the long haul.

8. *Pray for your spouse.* God is ultimately the one who makes change possible in any of us. So pray for your mate's efforts. And since some behaviors may never change, ask God to give you grace to accept the differences between you and your spouse.

9. *Seek to change the habit, not the person.* It's possible to help your spouse drop an irritating habit—as long as it's the habit you're trying to change. If you're trying to alter your spouse's personality or temperament, you'll be fighting a losing battle that will end in frustration for both of you.

Take Susan and Lee, for example. Susan, an extremely social person, loves to stay after church to talk, is the last to leave a party, and likes to be the center of attention. In contrast, her husband Lee is reserved, prefers to be in the background, and is exhausted by socializing. Lee has learned to go to parties with Susan out of love for her. But she can't expect him to become a fan of social gatherings. She needs to appreciate his willingness to go with her and not try to make him the extrovert she is.

If you follow the aforementioned guidelines and don't meet with success, it's time to ask yourself whether the battle is worth it. Some habits are so engrained that if they don't involve moral issues or character flaws, it may be best to live with them. Bringing them up repeatedly may lead only to more bitterness and conflict.

Keep praying for your spouse. And when you think of him or her, focus on his or her positive traits—instead of that irritating habit.

—Sheryl DeWitt

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist²

NOTES

1. Adapted from Sheryl DeWitt, “What Can I Do About My Spouse’s Irritating Habits?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), p. 34.
2. Ibid, pp. 34-36.
3. Adapted from Rob Jackson, “What If We Don’t Like the Same Things?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 161.
4. Ibid, pp. 161-163.
5. Adapted from Sandra Lundberg, “Are We Doing It Right?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 164.
6. Ibid, pp. 165-167.
7. Adapted from Romie Hurley, “What If an Argument Gets Out of Control?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 260.
8. Ibid, pp. 260-262.
9. Adapted from Phillip J. Swihart, “What If My Spouse Needs Psychological Help?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, pp. 407-408.
10. Ibid, pp. 408-409.
11. Adapted from Sandra Lundberg, “How Much Should We Spend?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 114.
12. Items 1-7 adapted from Daniel Huerta, “How Can We Cut Our Expenses?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 134.
13. Adapted from Sandra Lundberg, “How Much Should We Spend?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, pp. 114-116.