



STARVED
for
AFFECTION

DR. RANDY CARLSON



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SECTION

ONE

Chapter 1

AN
UNTOUCHED BANQUET

“All I really want from Nathan is to *feel* loved by him! I deserve to be loved!” Julie said, trying to hold back the tears.

Her husband, Nathan, quickly responded, “I love my wife very much, it’s Julie who doesn’t see all the things I do for her.” Julie’s next words have been repeated over and over in my years of dealing with couples in marital trouble: “I see the stuff he does and I appreciate it, but I don’t *feel* any love between us.” Sadly, Nathan is oblivious to Julie’s core needs and admits that he doesn’t want to be bothered with finding out what they are and how he can meet them. Investing himself into the *feeling side* of love is too much to ask. So the wall between them grows higher.

When I witness marriages like Nathan and Julie’s collapsing under the weight of reality, one of the key elements missing is always an adequate dose of affection. It’s a fact: When we *feel loved* by another person, the world and its pressures are more tolerable and manageable, because we know that someone actually cares about us and is willing to go out of his or her way to help us *feel loved*.

As Nathan and Julie sat in my office for counseling, Julie described her marriage. “On a scale of one to ten, our marriage is definitely down at one. My husband is not naturally an affectionate person, and we don’t have any affection in our

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marriage. I think of romance when I think of affection—not necessarily sexual, but touching, caring, saying I love you,” she said, letting the tears flow.

Down deep Julie knows that Nathan thinks he’s loving her by all of the things he does for the family, but as his wife and lover she doesn’t *feel loved* by him. Nathan has fallen prey to the trap of *mistaking routine for satisfaction*, and it’s draining their marriage of its vitality.

The truth is evident: Julie and Nathan’s marriage is *starved for affection*.

LOOKING FOR CONNECTION

Nathan and Julie’s story is not unique. Many couples today live what Henry David Thoreau described so poignantly in his book *Walden* as “lives of quiet desperation” in their marriages. God made all of us with needs (that I like to call *biblically appropriate* needs), that should be met in a *biblically appropriate* marriage, which is one where both spouses try to live as God describes in the Bible. But for many married people, these needs are not being met in their marriages.

Each day they rise from bed, hit the floor, and go about their daily lives, everything seemingly normal—yet deep inside they are longing, almost frantically, to *connect* with the one person they care for the most . . . their spouse.

I see this nearly every day in my work with couples and families. And it’s a problem that doesn’t seem to be going away. I’ve been a marriage counselor for more than twenty years, and I hear of a longing for affection over and over.

Here are just some of the statements I hear regularly from callers on my radio show, *Parent Talk OnCall*, that support this idea of quiet desperation:

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- ☞ “I’m famished for love in my marriage.”
- ☞ “I need to be touched by my spouse in a way that he has never touched me before.”
- ☞ “We live in the same house, we’re raising the same kids, we’re spending the same money—but we’re just not connected. I don’t even feel like I know her.”
- ☞ “He tries, but my spouse doesn’t know how to show me the kind of affection that I need.”
- ☞ “I feel so all alone in our relationship.”

Perhaps one of these statements echoes the cry of your heart. There you are, with the one to whom you’ve dedicated the rest of your life—living in the same house, eating the same food, breathing the same air . . . and yet you’re desperate to *know* that person. To have *him* know *you*.

A good marriage is like sitting hungrily at a vast and sumptuous banquet table loaded with beautifully presented, scrumptious dishes. Not only does every morsel taste delicious, but also each item was specially prepared to nourish and strengthen your body. Best of all, there is an endless supply of food in the kitchen. This table will never be bare. God designed all of your relationships—particularly your marriage—to be a banquet table containing a feast for you and your spouse to enjoy as much as you want.

But maybe your marriage is anything but bountiful, and the banquet table is going to waste, untouched. The tasty appetizer of tender words is missing. The delectable side dishes of emotional closeness and spiritual satisfaction are absent. The rich dessert of sexual passion and fulfillment are lacking. The all-important main course of intimacy and trust is gone. It’s a marriage supper long forgotten, eroded away by the responsibilities

of children and career and by the subversive influence of negligence and indifference.

In short, you're *starved for affection*.

People who are starved for affection have already slipped past marital boredom and mediocrity and are beginning to disappear from the relationship into themselves—or into the arms of someone else. A marriage that is starved for affection is on the brink, poised to either take an abrupt dive or slowly shrivel up and die.

If you find yourself in this frightening place, you're not alone. Today there are so many marriages that are starved for affection in this country. Based on the number of people I counsel who express this complaint, I believe we're actually in the midst of a dire famine—and this is true even among Christian couples who genuinely desire to enjoy every good gift from God.

The starved person can be either male or female. Denise told me her story during our first session.

"Greg used to make me feel special and important. Now I feel like he doesn't even care about me." She went on to explain that in the initial stages of their relationship Greg talked to her, spent time with her, and actually listened to her. Now, as Denise put it, "Greg only cares about Greg. And he only cares about me when there's something in it for him, like sex."

When they married, Denise handed her heart over to Greg for safekeeping, but he didn't care for it as he should have. It wasn't that Greg had intentionally set out to hurt Denise, but that was exactly what he ended up doing. During the eleven years of their marriage, their relationship had slowly slipped from loving to lousy. Like most unaffectionate couples, it took time for these two to experience enough pain to do something about the state of their union. By then, each had replaced affec-

tionate feelings toward each other with something else. This is common, for when loving feelings disappear, our human nature demands that we fill up that empty spot. Any feeling is better than no feeling at all.

Greg and Denise had wholly different ways of looking at feelings, founded, in part, by their personalities. Greg, an engineer, loved numbers, logic, and predictability. Denise loved experiences, people, and change. She was something of a free spirit who enjoyed being social and active. But when Denise wanted to go out and have fun, Greg wanted to stay home. Worse, when she wanted to talk about feelings and life, he didn't.

Greg thought it was a waste of time to talk much about things that seemed, to him, unimportant—things he flippantly referred to as “that touchy-feely stuff.” He went so far as to tell Denise that she should find someone else to talk to—so she took him up on his suggestion and met a guy on the Web who seemed to care. Denise felt safe with this arrangement because they only talked through e-mail and, after all, Greg had given it his approval.

The distance between Denise and Greg grew, and as it did, so did Denise's cry for affection. At first she nagged Greg, but later nagging changed to frustration, then anger, and ultimately, resignation—and an unhealthy preoccupation with her male Internet friend.

All this time, Greg was Mr. Oblivious. He thought things were just fine. He figured as long as food was on the table, a roof was over their head, and Denise slept in the bed next to him every night, things were okay. Because Greg wanted nothing to do with how Denise was truly feeling, he fell prey to the idea that this structured relationship routine translated into satisfaction for Denise, which was the furthest thing from the truth.

When Greg discovered Denise's online relationship, he was upset. “When I told her to talk to someone else about her feel-

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ings, I expected it to be a family member or a girlfriend—not some guy on the Web,” Greg said. “She was an ocean of needs I could never fill.” Denise, like so many others, had chosen to retreat from Greg behind a self-made artificial barrier. These walls can be made of a variety of behaviors—busyness, silence, anger, alcohol, drugs, pornography—each leaving the wounded person still hurting, but with a new set of problems to overcome, compounding an already difficult situation.

Denise was so consumed by her need to feel that she couldn’t peer beyond her self-protective wall to see Greg as he really was—a man about to drown in her unfulfilled expectations for affection.

Greg and Denise loved each other to a certain level, but it wasn’t enough. Without affection and an understanding of how each other *felt*, their marriage had slipped to a dangerous place. *Love* is a Biblical mandate that is foundational to a successful marriage. You choose to love someone else. It’s a commitment of your will. *Affection* goes a step beyond love. Affection takes the loving relationship between a man and woman in marriage into the deeper realm of tender expressions that result in feelings of closeness, passion, and security.

EVALUATING THE SYMPTOMS

Many people I talk to show signs of being starved for affection. Some are acutely aware of just how empty their marriages have become. They’re hungry, and they know it. Still others realize something is not right with their relationship, but just can’t put their finger on it until I suggest they are affection starved.

What about you? Do you resonate with the symptoms of affection starvation? Is tenderness, emotional closeness, sexual passion, or a combination of those absent from your marriage?

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How you answer the following questions will give you a good idea:

- ☒ Do you feel close to or distant from your spouse?
- ☒ Do you feel passionate or mechanical?
- ☒ Is your behavior toward your spouse spontaneous or routine?
- ☒ Are you emotionally full or empty?
- ☒ Do you feel loved as you were meant to be loved, or is there something missing?
- ☒ Do you feel inspired or expired by your spouse's touch?
- ☒ Do you feel adored or indifferent?
- ☒ Do you feel understood or disregarded when you talk with your spouse?

If several of your answers indicate a lack of satisfaction with the current state of your marriage relationship, you may be starved for affection. You may feel lonely, angry, and bitter about the lack of affection in your marriage. And these feelings are perfectly understandable. But what should you do if you find yourself in this condition? How can you get the emotional sustenance you need from your spouse?

If you're starved for affection, you really only have three choices:

1. Leave your spouse and find someone else.
2. Leave things as they are and struggle along.
3. Tackle the problems without attacking your spouse.

If your choice is anything but that last option, there isn't much I can offer you. But if your desire is to take on the prob-

lems and solve them, I want to assure you that *there is hope* for renewed tenderness, closeness, and passion in your marriage. You *can* return to enjoying the banquet God planned for you and your spouse.

We'll talk later about those situations where one spouse has tried absolutely everything and nothing works. There are times—whether due to mental illness, addiction, or abuse—where even the steps suggested in this book aren't effective. But for most couples, one person can make changes that will impact his marriage in significant and positive ways, changes that will end the starvation and provide needed nourishment.

That's what happened when Nathan decided to apply this principle to his marriage. Nathan said, "I was miserable, so I decided to take responsibility for my marriage. Many times my wife will withdraw and she doesn't come out until I cross the bridge or build a bridge to her. So I take it upon myself to build that bridge, watch what I say and do, and purposely try to create a good relationship. If I want more intimacy or affection, I think, *I can create this if I'm willing to put some effort into it.*

"Once I became aware of who I am in Christ and who Christ is, I knew I had to change. The Bible says, 'Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church' (Ephesians 5:25, NIV). So I have become more sensitive and caring toward her. I work at building intimacy with her by the words I speak and the actions I do. I don't wait for her to come into my world—I get into hers. And the dividends are really big. She's more caring, more sexually aggressive, more open to what I would like to do. We have a very good relationship at this point, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. Today our marriage is pretty close to a ten. We have problems in our family, as all families do, but we talk about things and stand together. We didn't always do that."

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In this book, we will talk about specific ways you can impact your marriage for the better, whether or not your spouse wants to embark with you on the exciting road back to the banquet. Nathan took action by himself. While it took work and perseverance, Nathan and Julie are much happier today, and Julie is no longer starved for affection.

I want to assure you that there is, indeed, hope for your marriage too. In the first half of this book, we'll talk about what an affectionate marriage looks like, the causes of affection starvation, and roadblocks to achieving the rich marriage God intended for you. In the second half we'll identify specific areas of affection starvation and give some practical solutions to help you and your spouse get the affection you need in your marriage.