7

Secrets To Saving Your Marriage:

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Even If You're the Only One Who Wants It!

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Introduction

When I was a child, I had a vivid image of my mom and dad as being a single parental unit. I saw them as a united "parental mind", if you will. I never thought of them as having lives apart from each other before they were married. They were "always married" as far as my seven-year old mind could conceive.

That being the case, they naturally (or so I thought) viewed everything the same way - from what to eat for supper to how to discipline my brothers and I.

So when on one Sunday Dad didn't go to church with us, and Mom drove a slightly different route than he did to get there, I was concerned. Very concerned. Just what was going on here? Could it be that this single parental unit really consisted of two unique individuals working together to create one household?

As I grew older, I observed my parents' differences on several other matters. This always fascinated me. My young mind couldn't grasp that they were, indeed, two individual personalities working toward one common goal: the maintenance of our family.

The Core of a Marriage

Here at a young age, I recognized and identified the fundamental underlying purpose of a marriage: establishment and cultivation of a household. (I was a cleverly insightful child, now wasn't I?).

When one of the spouses in the relationship isn't working toward this common goal, discord and dissatisfaction can't be far behind.

Unfortunately for far too many couples, one or both partners are focused more on their career, their own needs, or any number of issues other than family and the household.

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Now, pursuing a career or individual needs isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is absolutely necessary to keep a marriage healthy.

A spouse who is career oriented, for example, is probably contributing substantially to the financial stability and long-term good of his or her family. It's when the focus of the career is so intense and overriding that the spouse ignores the needs of the rest of the family members, that problems surface.

Talk About "MIA!"

Consider the case of a married couple John Guttmann, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and a marriage expert, met through his research. The husband was a doctor who founded his own small pediatric hospital.

He poured his heart and soul into this endeavor, to the exclusion of all else. He spent a minimum of 20 nights a month staying all night at the hospital. (That just about equates to every weekday of the month!).

But that's not all, the man became disconnected from his family. So much so, that he couldn't tell researchers where the back door of his house was. And even worse, he didn't even know the name of the family dog.

Granted this is an extreme example of a spouse "missing in action," but it is indicative of a growing trend in the United States. More marriages than ever before are between husbands and wives who both work outside of the home. This makes creating a successful marriage more difficult than in the past -- but not impossible.

"Easy Come, Easy Go"
Increasing Divorce Rates

It's not surprising then that the nationwide divorce rate is steadily climbing. Current odds, sadly, are stacked against a marriage's longevity. The chance that a first marriage ends in divorce before it reaches its 40th anniversary is 67 percent.

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You've no doubt heard of the "Seven-year itch" in marriages? It's more than just an urban legend. Half of all first marriages end in divorce by the time they hit the seven-year anniversary.

The truly sad aspect of this is that nothing is apparently learned from the first marriage to the second. You may expect the divorce rates for second marriages to fall. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead the rate of divorce for second marriages is actually 10 percent higher than for first time marriages.

Of course, the stress of two income households and the ease with which couples seem to "grow apart" are only two reasons for the climb in statistics.

Society has knocked down many barriers to divorce in recent decades. It's no longer considered the stigma it once was. Today, "no-fault" divorces can be obtained in nearly all parts of the country. This means that only one of the partners needs to desire the divorce for it to occur.

Of course, this is an important advance -- and quite necessary -- for any individual who is caught in an abusive marriage.

Marriage:
The Vanishing Institution

But it also means that many individuals find it far too easy to just walk away from a relationship that may have potential for saving.

But that's not the only harbinger of change on the American landscape regarding relationships. It seems more people than ever before are sidestepping the need for a divorce. How? By avoiding the Number One cause of divorce in the first place: marriage!

Perhaps this sounds silly, but it's very true. Years ago, 95 percent of Americans got married. Predictions are that only 85 percent of us will enter into a marriage these days.

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Choosing Marriage Over Divorce

Perhaps you're in the midst of a less than happy, fulfilling relationship right now. You certainly can choose divorce. After all, it's the easiest choice in many ways. But you'd rather stay married (yes, to the person with whom you're currently married to, in fact) rather than suffer the ultimate heartbreak of divorce.

This book will help you do exactly that. It offers you seven of the most effective secrets that not merely avoid divorce, but create a loving lasting relationship in the process.

Hopefully by the time you've implemented some or all of the seven secrets, you won't be signing those divorce papers, you'll be renewing your vows in a recommitment wedding ceremony!

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Chapter 1

How Did We Get Here?
On the Brink of Divorce

The relationship between health and a happy marriage.
The four core strategies couples use that move them closer to the cliff of divorce.

"It's a long way down."
"Yeah. It is."
"Why don't you jump first?"
"Me? Do you think I'm that crazy?"

John and Melinda stared down again. They were standing at the edge of a cliff; the wind whipping around them. The rain pelted down on them, causing their bodies to shiver violently.

A long period of silence followed as they both surveyed the depths of the canyon below. Finally, John spoke. "Maybe we should rethink this whole divorce thing."

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Melinda immediately replied, "You might be right. Maybe we should. Why don't we go back to the house, make some hot chocolate, start a fire in the fireplace and try to work this out?"

The couple turned around, instinctively held hands, and returned home.

wouldn't it be wonderful if making the commitment for a divorce came with a scene similar to that? Imagine how many couples would think twice before they slammed the door on their marriage forever.

All too often divorce proceedings are started in the heat of a battle -- and it doesn't have to be a battle over any large issue. In these instances, that's a shame. The couples may never realize just how close they were to saving their marriage.

You'd be amazed at how many couples simply take their marriage for granted, like a flower planted in a garden but never nourished, watered or weeded. Instead of it growing strong, it withers or gets choked out by other surrounding more aggressive needs. Both partners are left wondering what went wrong.

Then again, maybe you wouldn't be amazed. Does this sound like the route your marriage took?

Marriage and Health: The Little-Known Connection

A good marriage, by the way, is more than just the creation of a happy home. It appears that it's also the cornerstone of good health - at least that's what recent research is telling us.

If you're involved in a less than satisfying marriage it can actually increase your odds of falling ill by approximately 35 percent. Not only that, but it also has the potential to shorten your life span by as many as four years!

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This is just a portion of the results revealed in a series of studies conducted by Lois Verbrugge and James House of the University of Michigan. On the other side of the coin, a happy, satisfying marriage, not only creates more fulfilling lives for the two involved, but it creates longer lives as well.

Why? Scientists can't prove any one reason over another, but they do present some convincing commonsense arguments based on our current knowledge of the functioning of our bodies.

If you're currently experiencing a rocky marriage -- standing on the precipice of divorce -- then you already know how stressful a life this can be. And we now know that emotional stress can easily manifest itself as physical stress.

This, in turn, can increase your risk for any number of physical ailments, including high blood pressure, and heart disease, to name just two of the more obvious ones.

But stress can also translate itself as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and, in some cases, various forms of violence.

Happier Marriages Translate Into Healthier Spouses

It isn't surprising to learn, then, that couples who are happily married experience a lower rate of all these health ailments. But that's not all. They are also more health conscious in general.

Researchers believe this may be due to the fact that loving partners ensure the other receives regular medical checkups, take their medicine and vitamins, and eat nutritiously -- among other important health reminders and concerns.

In fact, recent research indicates that the benefits may go one giant step farther. A good marriage may actually boost your natural immune system, which keeps your defenses against illness in top-notch fighting form.

But We Are Looking At Divorce

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You say even with all the health benefits to staying married, divorce is staring you and your spouse in the eye every day. Just how did this happen, you ask?

You got to the edge of that cliff by practicing destructive behavior. They could be any types of behavior, depending on the chemistry between you and your spouse. But, for the most part these actions fall under four, large umbrella categories, according to researchers. They are:

- Raising the stakes of your specific argument with your spouse.
- Discrediting your partner's feelings.
- Withdrawing from arguments and avoiding problems and issues.
- Interpreting comments in the worst possible light.

Let's dig a little deeper into each of these strategies to see how many of these you and your spouse have unwittingly practiced.

War of the Words: Raising The Stakes

You've probably performed this destructive behavior without even realizing it. Most of us have at some point in our marriages. Raising the stakes of an argument occurs as the partners respond to one another's negative comments.

It's difficult to say whether it's done intentionally or just as a reflex action. But why it's done really doesn't matter. The fact remains that once the words are spoken they're impossible to take back.

And soon you'll see a small argument -- as small as the issue of the proverbial cap on the toothpaste -- being raised to an issue of packing your bags and leaving forever.

The pair continually ups the ante as if their marriage were some poker game spiraling wildly out of control. Each of you flings the negative comments fiercely at each other.

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One partner will criticize some action, the next thing you know the other is saying, "If you're not happy here, why not just leave." This brings the inevitable, "Well, maybe I just will."

And you can imagine the response to that! (And usually it isn't good!)

Moving From Hurtful To Destructive

These actions just don't increase the intensity of the argument. It transforms simple anger into hurtful, often destructive comments.

In these heated moments, spouses say things -- sometimes lots of things -- that are extremely damaging to the other. While all couples have disagreements, it's when you allow the small arguments to escalate into larger, more hurtful exchanges that very often damage your relationship.

The damage goes deep enough at times to mortally wound your marriage. We all know that reckless driving can get you a traffic ticket -- at the very minimum. It's a shame someone can't stop to ticket us as we escalate toward "reckless arguing."

Another Approach To Raising The Stakes

Very often one spouse has learned about a fear or concern burned deep into the other's psyche. He or she then uses this issue as an instrument to hurt him in the heat of the argument. This too falls under the category of "reckless arguing."

Escalation can be derailed, though. Many couples that find their arguments getting out of control simply apologize for the

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situation. In the long run, it's better to enjoy a sound loving union than to be proven right on one small, non-consequential issue.

A Splash of Humor

Don't think that you're showing weakness by being the person who stamps out the fuse on the stick of dynamite between the two of you. In the long term, it's the best move you can make.

I know one couple that has been married for more than 60 years. He's 94. She's 87. During my visits with them, I've witnessed more than my share of arguments between them. But each one usually ends the same way -- with humor.

Just when I think the disagreement is about to end in some explosive fury, one or another says something funny concerning the incident. The other laughs, then they both allow the tension to pass and the argument dies a natural, non-damaging death.

It's a wonderful tool they have developed over the years. It certainly appears to work for them.

Put Downs: Discrediting The Feelings of Your Spouse

No one likes to be told that his feelings or opinions are worthless. Very often though, married couples do just that when they argue.

At times, it's done on purpose, with a contempt that's meant to wound the partner. However, far too often, this behavior is performed almost unconsciously. Sometimes one partner fails to realize the importance of his spouse's reaction to any given situation.

"I think you're taking this (fill in the blank) more seriously than you should." In that instant, the spouse's feelings have been invalidated.

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Unfortunately, this hurts. It may even create a damaging rift in the union. You need to acknowledge your spouse's feelings as valid. You don't have to agree with them, but you do need to try to understand that's how he or she is feeling at the moment.

Once you do this, then you can move on to dealing with them. But by simply dismissing them you're dismissing a vital concern to your partner.

"You Can't Catch Me!" Withdrawal and Avoidance

I know one couple whose arguments always end with the husband running out of the house. He heads for his car and drives around for several hours. Or he visits a buddy and returns in the middle of the night. This is an extreme example of withdrawal.

Very often a spouse simply leaves the room in the midst of an argument. Sometimes, though, withdrawal can display itself with one of the participants pronouncing the end of the conversation with an authoritative, "Discussion closed" or "I don't wish to discuss this anymore." And there's no budging him into talking again.

The person who withdraws usually gets quiet during the argument. In some cases he or she may even agree hastily to a suggestion for resolution -- any suggestion, in fact, -- in order to put the conversation to rest. Usually he has no intention of actually following through with the suggestion.

The Accompanying Technique: Avoidance

The technique of avoidance -- which goes hand-in-hand with this -- is a way of dealing with reluctance to continue the discussion. For the most part, the individual practicing this doesn't want to start the conversation in the first place. If he can't avoid the discussion, then he or she may resort to the withdrawal practice.

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This behavior is actually fairly common in couples that are struggling with different issues. One of the spouses pursues the issue, and the other tries to avoid or withdraw from it.

Is this something you and your mate are experiencing? It's something that really shouldn't be ignored. As you might imagine, the more the "pursuer" pushes to discuss the topic, the more the other tries to avoid and then withdraw.

It eventually becomes a "tug of war" escalating as the pursuer responds -- pulling that proverbial rope ever harder. The other then pulls back, trying to reel him in. And we all know what happens in a tug of war. One side eventually falls -- and hard!

Interpretation Gone Wild

Negative interpretations occur when one of the spouses is convinced that the motives of the other are less than positive. This can be an extremely dangerous pattern to develop. It makes any disagreement more difficult to handle.

If a person believes in his negative interpretation strongly enough, then there's no convincing him or her of anything different.

As the relationship disintegrates, this particular practice tends to escalate. What this does, it only adds to the feelings of hopelessness and demoralization.

The biggest problem with this technique is the difficulty in detecting it. If it's difficult to discover, it's hard to counteract or repair. Such views become -- almost seamlessly -- part of the fabric of the union itself.

Why? It's due to the human nature's tendency to accept "confirmation bias." All this means is that we have a habit of searching out evidence that agrees with what we already think about a particular situation or person. (You see this being carried out every day in the political arena!)

A Habit

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Not Easy To Change

This means that it's not easy to change an already-formed negative bias. But that's really only part of the problem. As you might imagine, when one partner clings to these negative thoughts, the other is more likely to respond with hostility.

You can think of negative interpretation as mind reading gone wild. One partner truly believes that he or she knows what the other is thinking or knows the ulterior motives behind his actions and behaviors. Now, you're treading some seriously dangerous ground here!

Of course, some individuals like to read the other's mind in a positive light. Obviously, this causes no harm to the relationship and in the long term, probably even benefits it.

If you or your mate are playing mind reader gone berserk that happens to include a negative viewpoint, your marriage maybe slowly sliding towards trouble.

As you become accustomed to routinely thinking the worst of your spouse's motives and words, you may also discover yourself slipping into another less-than-healthy habit. You'll find it much easier to justify wounding him or her emotionally. You may even discover you want to seek revenge.

It may seem as if revenge is a harsh word to use -- and an extreme reaction to take. And in reality, it really is. But this is exactly what happens in many marriages as they slide toward the brink of divorce.

Help I Want To Get Off!
Stopping The Negative Cycle

Ahh! Once the circle of negativity starts, it can be a difficult habit to break. "Negative interpretations are like weeds with really long roots," according to Howard J. Markman, in his book, “Fighting for your Marriage”.

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"You have to get a good hold of the roots and yank away to rid your relationship of such perceptions," he says.

It's difficult, Markman elaborates, because changing your view requires you to look within yourself and do some personal digging -- soul searching if you will. You need to confront the way you're thinking.

The First Step May Be The Most Difficult

The first step in overcoming this habit is, at the very least, being open to the possibility that your less-than-ideal take on the situation may, in fact, be wrong.

Then you need to search for evidence that contradicts your negative perceptions. This isn't easy. No one likes to prove themself wrong.

Let's say you're convinced, for example, your spouse is uncaring. You need, then, to look for instances and occasions when he or she displayed a caring attitude toward you. Not only that, but you need to reconsider other people's opinions as well.

Perhaps someone has commented about the nice things your spouse has done for you in the past. Instead of dismissing this comment, place it in your growing file of evidence of positive actions. I told you this isn't that easy to do.

But you'll discover soon enough that it is worth it.

Now What Do We Do?

Now that you have some idea of how your marriage may have gotten to the point of teetering on divorce, it's time to take a look at how to start moving it back to solid ground. More often than not, the couple really wants to repair the damage.

But they stand completely still guessing what their next move should be. Some couples are lucky enough to find it. Others

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end up divorcing simply because they can't move on to their next productive step.

The following chapter gives you a few clues on how to start implementing the seven secrets of saving your marriage. You'll be surprised at how easy it is to start.

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Chapter

2

Making the 7 Secrets Work For You

This chapter presents four workable ways to start implementing the seven secrets in your relationship.

"Where do I begin?" Melinda whispered. "It all seems so hopeless." Her friend, Joan, studied the young woman. Clearly sadness was written all over her face.

Melinda continued. "I can't get John to cooperate with anything that might even remotely save our marriage." A long silence followed. Finally, Joan spoke.

"I don't usually offer advice. But let me just tell you what I did when Mark and I were on the brink of breaking up. He didn't want anything to do with working toward repairing our marriage. So I just worked around him . . ."

Sad to say that in many instances, one or another of the spouses refuses to agree to get help. This leaves the other believing that all hope for reconciliation is lost. But, in reality, that's far from the truth.

What many partners don't realize is the amount of change you can affect by working independently towards a more loving union.

This chapter offers four strategies to help you implement the seven secrets of getting you on the road to a healthier, happier marriage -- even if it feels as if you're working at it alone!

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Success Approach #1:
Don't be afraid to start without the aid of your spouse!

What? You ask. How could you possibly start saving a marriage without the cooperation of your partner? I realize this suggestion may seem counterintuitive to everything you're trying to accomplish.

Some of the secrets offered in this book are of a passive nature. That means you can implement them without your mate knowing what you're doing.

And no, this isn't a dirty or a subversive approach. It's just a unilateral attempt to develop a better relationship. I see the puzzled look on your face. Think back for a moment to the last chapter in which we discussed putting a negative spin on everything your spouse says.

Why Not A Positive Spin?

Do you do that? Maybe he does. Do either of you need the other to create such thoughts? No. This approach is very similar to the "negative spin" method of thinking. Only it works toward building the relationship stronger, not destroying it.

Let's just say for the sake of an example, you tend to see the negative in everything he says. Start to repair your marriage with your next argument (now there's an oxymoron!). Simply refuse to view his words in the negative light you've held them previously. After all, you are really the only person in control of your thoughts.

Instead of reflexively reaching for the worst possible meaning hidden between the lines, refuse to look at them that way. In fact, why not go one step further? Try to view them in a positive light.

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Then after that, sit down to make a list of all the instances in which he talked positively about you or commented in a positive manner. It doesn't matter how large or small the issue was. Go ahead. Write it down.

Yes, this does take time, effort, work, determination and will power -- especially if you plan on doing this consistently. But your marriage is well worth it.

Where to Start?

There are several secrets listed in the following chapters that don't require your spouse's participation. These you can start working on anytime. No one but you really needs to know.

If he or she has been stubbornly refusing any help working issues out, implement these secrets first. You may consider, initially, a few of them to be simplistic approaches to a complex problem, but they all can work if you take your approach seriously. And your spouse needn't know what you're doing.

Very often it only takes one person to change his or her behavior. Before you realize it, the other is responding in kind. Commit yourself to practicing one of the secrets every day. It doesn't matter which one. The important thing is that you continue to work -- from your end -- on your marriage.

Success Approach #2:
Practice These Secrets Daily!

You can't expect any type of results by pursuing a better relationship only occasionally. I'm not going to kid you. Repairing a marriage takes some time. It also requires consistency on your part.

Think back to how long you've been married. The issues currently plaguing your relationship didn't start overnight. Don't expect them to be resolved in one swift motion. It takes, without a doubt, some dedication and time.

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There will be times, no doubt, that you'll be tempted to quit. But don't. Instead of giving in to the feeling of hopelessness, gather your strength. Take stock of any positive feedback you've discovered. List all the ways your marriage is getting better.

I'd like to share this bit of research with you. It comes from noted marriage researcher John M. Gottman, Ph.D. His research indicates that the most successful couples are not necessarily those who quickly overhaul their marriage.

He did follow-up studies with couples that had been through his counseling sessions. He specifically wanted to know what made one union last and the other didn't. His results came as quite a surprise to him.

Those couples whose marriage improved spent only an average of five hours a week on the topic. Less than one hour everyday, seven days a week. Imagine that!

What were they doing? For the most part, all these couples shared several concerted actions.

The Morning Goodbye Ritual

And the first one is what I call the "Morning Good-bye Ritual." Before either of them left for work that day, they deliberately took the time to discover at least one event in the other's day. A big meeting with the boss? A doctor's appointment? Or something as simple as a shared cappuccino with an old friend.

One couple I know deliberately rises a little earlier in the morning to be able to talk while the children are still in bed. Neither is concerned with the kids running around at this time of the morning. It keeps them connected.

They use this time not only to discover what's going on in the other's "world", but they also discussed all the world's political and economic problems during this time. It made them feel more like adults and less like only parents!

The Evening Wrap Up

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Similarly, these couples came home at night -- or talked in some form -- and exchanged views about their day. It became a tremendous method of reducing any stress that had accumulated on them throughout the day.

The beauty of this is that this can be done whether the two of you have a conventional marriage, in which you are both in the same physical house together or a marriage in which one spouse travels quite a bit.

This Works Even When One Spouse Is Out of Town

Even when your partner is traveling for work, you can start your day by telephoning him before he leaves his hotel room. Discover what events confront him today.

And some time toward the end of the day, do the same. Reconnect by phone. Find out how his day actually did go. Does he or she need to vent some? Allow them this luxury. By the same token, keep the traveling partner up to date on what's going on at home.

This is extremely important if you have children. Be sure to tell the spouse who's away how the children are doing in school. Talk about any upcoming plans.

And be sure to ask his or her opinion on any decisions you're considering with the children. This allows the spouse to feel more connected and still a part of the family, even though he or she may be hundreds of miles away.

Mutual Admiration -- And Appreciation -- Club

Another technique each of these successful couples employed is simple admiration and appreciation. Each of these couples took the time -- on a daily basis -- to express both appreciation and admiration of their mate. What a wonderful habit to develop!

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And the last ritual these successful couples shared was a weekly date. Each week they would go out together -- no kids! -- and just talk about their lives. Sometimes the conversation may seem mundane to outsiders. "Are you still planning on redecorating the bedroom?" "Has your boss lightened up on you at all?"

Some couples, though, used this time to work constructively on issues in their marriage. However you use this date night, make sure it works at keeping the lines of communication open between the two of you.

If you have even a couple good moments together, then the possibility exists that you can have more. And remember it doesn't necessarily take a full-fledge daily assault on the problems to be able to say you're honestly making progress. This research is proof of that!

Success Approach #3:
Don't Worry About the Occasional Setback!

You're bound to have a setback or two along the road to restoring your union. Whatever you do, don't take these incidents as a signal that all is lost. Sometimes even the greatest of generals need to withdraw for a moment to gather strength.

Just move on and try something else, however small it may appear to you at the moment. Sometimes even the smallest of steps may eventually yield the greatest of benefits.

The less attention, thought, worry, fear and energy you give these small slips, the less they really do affect you and the quality of your relationship.

At first this is not going to be easy to do. But you'll soon learn that it's the best. In fact, it really is the only approach to take if you're determined to fix your marriage.

Success Approach #4:
Keep An Open Mind

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The best way to approach these seven secrets is with an open mind. You also need to go into the repair of your marriage with a good attitude -- one of thinking that repair actually is possible.

If you think that you have the power to effect change in your relationship, then you do. But if you've already shut your mind to the possibility that your marriage can be saved, then it probably can't. Yes, believe it or not, attitude may not be EVERYTHING, but it truly is a very powerful indicator of your future!

It's time to move on to explore the seven secrets of a successful marriage. The first one requires only your willingness to make it happen!

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Chapter

3

Secret #1:
Change Your View,
Change Your Marriage

How a change in your approach to your spouse can change their reaction: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

"Honest, it worked for me," Joan said as she and Melinda continued to discuss Melinda's perception that her marriage was falling apart.

"It sounds so, well . . . Pollyannish," Melinda said. "Something that simple just doesn't work."

"Oh, don't let the simplistic sound of it fool you," Joan warned her. "It's not really that simple. The idea may sound crazy, but you still have to do quite a bit of work. It's not easy. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Don't blow it off, at least give it some consideration."

Melinda took another sip of her coffee thinking about what her friend had said. Finally, she commented, "Well, what do I have to lose?"

Secret #1 can also be called "expect the best." In many ways, that's exactly what it asks you to do. Expect the best possible relationship you're capable of imagining.

In many ways, it's taking the negative interpretation approach that so many couples play and turning it on its head. While some

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people may say you're setting yourself up for disappointment and failure when you do this, others aren't so sure.

I'm not talking about expecting specific details in your marriage to go perfectly smoothly all the time. Let's face it, not one of us remembers to take the garbage out every day. And not one of us can be expected to put the cap on the toothpaste every time we use it.

So, those really aren't the types of expectations we're talking about here. Instead I'm asking you to see your partner in general terms as a loving partner -- to view your relationship as running smoothly.

And maybe even play some "mind movies" in your head of how you'd like to see an ideal day between the two of you play out. (Later in this chapter I give more specifics on how to go about doing this.)

High Expectations Create A Fulfilling Marriage

Now this may seem like idle daydreaming, but recent research shows that those individuals who have high expectations of their marriage often do, indeed, experience the most satisfying, loving relationships.

Independent research, conducted by John Gottman, confirms the flip side of the coin as well. He discovered that those individuals who adjusted to dealing with high levels of negativity -- including irritability or emotional distance -- in their union actually were less satisfied years down the road.

Those who refused to tolerate the negative behavior and gently confronted each other when such actions crept into their habits, ended up happy and satisfied as the years continued.

Similarly, spouses who monitor their marriages to ensure that quality stays high, are often more satisfied in the long run. Just like the couples we talked about in the last chapter, who spent a mere five hours a week mindfully keeping in touch with each other's lives, a regular "expectation" check-up is healthy.

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Don't allow your view of your marriage to slide using some worn out cliché like, "That's bound to happen when you've been married as long as we have." That's just an excuse to accept a less than loving, happy relationship.

Change your view. Change your marriage. The research implies that those individuals who started out expecting a certain level of satisfaction received it and kept monitoring it to ensure it was always part of their marriage. It's really never too late to change your view.

Have you always tolerated negativity in your marriage? Well, then change your view. Then be the person to take the first step in turning the corner towards a more positive outlook.

Do your arguments end up in shouting matches because neither of you wants to back down? What if you decided that that particular argument really wasn't worth a possible larger crack in your union and you took the first step toward peaceful negotiations or a spoken "I'm sorry"?

The Marital Poop Detector

John Gottman has a term for this process. He calls it "The Marital Poop Detector." And there's good reason for this. It's a good method, he says, "to sniff out trouble" in a marriage and change the direction of the relationship before things really get derailed.

More often than not, he notes, it's the wife who becomes "the sniffer." She points out the problem before it becomes overwhelming. For example, if her husband has been overly irritable for an extended period, she'll question him about it. In this way, she has an understanding of what's happening in his life.

Actually detecting potential trouble is far easier than combating it once it's escalated to monster proportions. Don't know what kind of "poop" you're actually looking for? Here's a quick list of some things you should be asking yourself -- and checking with

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your spouse. Gottman suggests such checkups become a weekly ritual. In this way nothing really gets out of control.

- Have I been acting irritable and out of sorts lately?
- Have I been feeling emotionally distant from my spouse?
- Have you discovered that you really want to be somewhere else?
- Have you been feeling lonely?
- Have you been angry? And why?
- Do you feel out of touch with your spouse?
- Would you like to feel closer to your spouse at this moment?
- Have you been feeling tension between the two of you?

Do you believe your spouse is emotionally unavailable to you

What If I'm Working Alone At Changing Our Marriage?

Many individuals ask that. You can still change the view of your marriage -- even without the help of your spouse -- and potentially change the entire course of your relationship.

You just need to visualize your spouse as the loving partner they used to be or you know they can be. Visualization is the act of seeing what you want as if it already existed. This technique has been used for decades in a host of situations.

When you visualize a healthy, happy relationship, you're sending your subconscious mind a picture of what you desire. As you keep picturing this image, you mind begins to treat it as part of your new reality. Eventually, it does become your reality. You'll notice you start attracting circumstances, events and other situations based on this fact.

While this sounds easy enough, it can be difficult to sustain these thoughts over time. This is especially true if you're always expecting the worst.

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Of course, you can't expect to turn your spouse into a completely different person using this method. But if you remember a time when the two of you had a loving relationship, use this as the basis for your visualization.

This process works best when you use past events and experiences as well as your memories to recreate a time when your marriage was satisfying. This is where the "mind movies" I talked about earlier come in.

Play mind movies of how your marriage was at the beginning. Of how loving the two of you were. Believe that this behavior is now the reality of your marriage right here, right now.

Now, take this concept one step farther. After you've been playing these optimistic movies in your mind, take the first step in initiating actions that promote this.

Act "As If"

That's right! Your next step is to act as if your spouse is the loving, caring person you're visualizing in your movies. Don't worry right now that he or she is still grouchy. Gently ask them why instead of chastising them for it. Make them a special meal. Tell them you've noticed they've been out of sorts lately and you thought a nice treat was in order to help them feel better.

If your wife has been less than kind, take her out for dinner. Hire a babysitter to help with the stress. Even treat her to a massage. Any step toward making the marriage a little better helps. It doesn't have to be a big step.

Even refusal to jump in the fray and argue can go a long way to changing the course of your marriage. Failing to get caught up in a long involved argument over the state of the toothpaste cap or the status of the toilet seat is helpful. Notice that the seat is up and you really like it down? How hard is it to put it down?

One wife I know used to nag her husband at dinner time. She would make the dinner and then serve it dish by dish to her husband and her daughter. The kitchen was small and it was just less confusion if she served her family.

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There was only one problem with this approach. By the time she got her food on the table, her husband was more than half done. He would finish his meal and leave the table. This left her eating all alone.

Even though she complained she hated it, he didn't change his pattern. Then one day, she decided that the situation wasn't that important. So, she just stopped complaining and accepted the situation. Instead, she became thankful that he no longer had a job in which he traveled. Now, he was actually home for supper every night.

The Surprising Change

Soon after that she noticed a change in his behavior. He delayed eating his meal until she was ready to begin. Not only that, but he requested that their daughter do the same as well.

All this occurred because she began to change her view of what the meal should be like.

Try this yourself on a small scale. Are you nagging your husband about throwing his dirty clothes in the hamper? Why not just changing your view -- your expectation? Of course, you would love that he would, but for now he isn't. So, do it and be glad and then recount all the aspects of your marriage that are satisfying. Be thankful for all of that.

Even if he doesn't eventually throw his clothes in the hamper, you'll feel a little less stressed and more thankful for what you do have.

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Chapter

4

Secret #2:
Look Backward to Move Forward

Review the emotions you felt when you dated; how in love you were. How you cared about the other's welfare to spark the romance, caring and love.

Melinda bubbled over with enthusiasm when she met Joan for coffee.

"I've at least got John talking a little," she said. "I really do believe part of it were my expectations of him. And I did try to visualize us having conversations."

Joan smiled. "It takes time to rebuild a marriage."

"We're still not out of the woods."

Joan sipped her coffee, then spoke. "Let me tell you about one of the best conversations Mark and I ever had. I believe it actually helped turned the corner of our relationship."

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Melinda listened intently. "You were right before," she said. "Again, I have nothing to lose by trying it."

Arguing. Negativity. Contempt for each other. These characterize many marriages. When you look at a couple with relationship problems displaying all of these traits or more, you wonder what brought them together in the first place.

Remember the pediatrician we met earlier in the book -- the one who didn't know the name of the family dog? On the surface, you'd guess there would be no hope for this marriage.

Surprisingly, though, the couple was able to turn their problems around. Today, they could be the poster couple for a happy, loving relationship.

The turning point of their relationship was a conversation they started while in marriage counseling. The exchange of words had nothing to do with their current problems or his job. Rather the pair began to talk about how they felt toward each other while they dated.

First, the wife told about how she anticipated each date, the traits that most attracted her to her future husband and the love that grew from that.

Subtle Changes In A Spouse

The husband, the counselor noted, smiled as his wife expressed her memories . . . relived the feelings . . . and admired the man she had dated then. He had evidentially not been aware of the extent and depth of her feelings during that period.

The pediatrician then opened up. He, too, recounted fond, loving memories of the dates. He had a few confessions of his own he had never shared with his wife.

The biggest one was his extended plan to win her heart. It seems he was so taken with his new sweetheart that he was

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determined to make her his wife. And he didn't care how long it took!

By the end of this particular session, the couple was actually holding hands. The loving embers were beginning to smolder once more.

You and I may consider this amazing, but apparently it's a phenomenon many marriage counselors encounter.

The memories this couple recounted were more than just pleasant stories. They represented an underlying fondness and admiration for each other that had not been extinguished despite the years of turmoil.

Lying below all of their problems was a core belief that the other was still worthy of admiration, respect and love.

If a couple can still look back and talk fondly about how they met and dated, marriage researcher John Gottman explains, then the union has a chance of surviving -- actually a very good chance.

His research indicates that overwhelmingly (94 percent of the time), couples that talk positively about when they first met are likely to reconcile their differences. Their marriage not only survives, but thrives!

How Do You View Your Past?

How do you and your spouse view the early days of your relationship? Can you recall each other in a more positive light?

Give it a try. Begin by reminiscing about your dating days; if you can recreate the excitement, anticipation and love of those early days in your relationship, that's encouraging.

Actually, it's more than encouraging. It's therapeutic as well as the springboard to restoring your marriage.

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Having this fundamentally positive view of your past is a powerful buffer, Gottman explains, when tough times hit. It's like having a reserve of feelings to fall back on during marital stress.

Many couples don't realize the fragility of these early feelings. After continued arguments, feelings of contempt and mistrust and negative comments about each other, it's all too easy to lose touch with the spark that started it all.

And that's exactly where the "looking backward" part of this secret comes in. As in the example we talked about earlier in this chapter, you can begin simply enough.

Positive feelings can always be recounted and remembered, regardless of the length of time they've been tucked away.

Don't be afraid to talk about the early days of your relationship with your spouse. The exchange will do you both good.

Don't know where to start? Here are some suggestions for helping you go down memory lane together.

1. Discuss how you and your spouse first met. What did you find special about them that attracted you?

2. What was your first impression of your mate?

3. What is it that you remember about your first several dates?

4. How did you spend your time together before you were married?

5. How did you decide to get married?

6. How long did you know each other before you were married?

7. Why did you choose this person to marry? Was it difficult to decide?

8. What do you remember about your wedding day? Talk about your feelings that day.

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9. Talk about your first year of being a married couple.

10. How did you handle the transition to becoming parents? Talk about this some.

11. Discuss the happiest times of your marriage.

12. It's not unusual for marriages to have good times and bad times. Talk about events of your union that are indicative of both.

13. Why do you think the two of you have stayed married?

14. Are there any activities you enjoyed, but don't do anymore?

15. What makes some marriages work when others don't?

16. Of the couples you know, who do you think has the best marriages? Who has less than happy ones? What do you think makes the difference? Where does your marriage fall into the spectrum?

17. Recall your parents' marriages. Were they successful? Why or why not? How do they differ from yours?

It's Still No Guarantee Of An Easy Fix

Completing this short set of questions recharges most marriages, counselors say. The discourse, more often than not, reminds both the husband and wife of the love they once felt. It also brings back all the old expectations they once held for their new life together.

In many instances, the loving thoughts reignited hope and fueled their drive to save their marriage. Don't expect the conversations sparked by these questions to be a quick fix. Couples still had to work at repairing the problems in their marriage.

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Now For The Good News

But the good news is that after having these discussions, both the husband and wife were in agreement that the marriage was definitely worth saving. And that meant that they redoubled their efforts to work things out.

If this conversation could save a marriage where one partner was gone just about every weeknight and never home long enough to learn the name of the family dog, think what it could do for your marriage!

Put Secret #2 to work for you today. Take that walk down Memory Lane together. You may find that by looking back, you'll be able to move forward towards a happy, stable marriage.

Chapter 5 contains the next secret for saving your marriage. This one secret may very well be the fundamental underlying secret power that helps to keep all marriages going strong year after year!

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Chapter 5

Secret #3: Friends First, Spouses Second

How the best marriage partners start out as best friends first.
How to become best friends.

"Without a doubt, I believe this single aspect of our relationship ultimately saved my marriage," Joan said on her and Melinda's now weekly coffee shop visits.

Melinda, once wary of Joan's suggestions, had discovered them to all be spot on. The young woman now eagerly listened.

"I'd love to know what that was," Melinda asked.

Joan smiled, sipped her coffee and then explained . . .

It seems like a simple enough concept, but it's one aspect of a marriage that gets stamped out first. Whether this is due to neglect or it's done purposely, probably depends on the individual couples.

But how it happens ultimately doesn't matter. The fact that it does happen is the truly sad thing.

What am I talking about? Friendship. Research on marital relations indicates that for the vast majority of couples, the most important goal is to ensure that their spouse is their friend -- and that he or she in return, is a friend to the mate.

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This makes sense. Moms since the beginning of time have been telling their daughters this. "All else, good looks . . . sexual attraction . . . matter little if you and your husbands aren't friends first."

Not surprisingly, then, when marriages are young and relationships are healthy, most spouses acknowledge this friendship factor. In fact, it may surprise some women to learn that men actually describe their wives as their best friend more often than women do.

If you can nourish -- or rekindle -- that friendship, then there's little doubt your marriage can, indeed, still be saved.

What's This Friendship Stuff All About Anyway?

In order to be a friend, though, you really need to know what a friend is. If you were to ask a dozen random individuals exactly what a friend is, you'd receive a dozen different answers.

But generally speaking, a friend is a person with whom you can relax, talk to about your feelings and dreams, and a person who's there when times get tough.

Friends are important for you -- not only emotionally but physically as well. Research reveals that your friends can actually provide you with that much needed buffer during some of life's roughest moments. Those individuals who have at least one good friend do better in almost every conceivable way -- including their mental and physical health.

The most powerful aspect of friendship, studies reveal, is the feeling of intimacy and connection with the other person. Men and women approach this aspect differently.

And this approach can sometimes lead to misunderstanding. Women share with friends during face-to-face communications. They put all activity aside while they discuss issues.

Men, on the other hand, tend to talk about and share their feelings as they do something else.

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In a marriage, friendship is hearing your partner's heart in the ways he or she is most able to share it. And that can take any number of forms. That means creating those bonds of friendship is unique to your marriage.

Your job is to learn to listen carefully for what is in your partner's heart and soul. Then you can share what's in yours. Sounds easy enough, now doesn't it? So what could possibly go wrong? Plenty in today's high speed world.

First, let's take the issue of time. Far too often the maintenance of your friendship with your spouse takes a backseat to such events as work, the needs of your children, meetings and a host of any other number of things.

Sometimes the friendship slips because of a skewed view of it. Listen to this shift in attitude. Eighty percent of engaged and newlywed couples say that their partner is their best friend. Theoretically, you'd expect those bonds to tighten as the years pass.

However, those couples that have been married for a while view themselves as "just married." They no longer identify themselves as friends first -- or friends at all, for that matter!

Those marriages, though, in which the spouses recognize and nurture the initial friendship, are among the strongest and longest lasting.

When The Talking Stops

One reason this view ensues is that as time passes, marriage partners simply stop talking to each other as friends. They seem to put their "friendship talk" on hold and only discuss the problems or issues of their marriage. You're cheating yourselves of the intimacy you used to so readily share.

Let's go one step further with this idea. Many individuals in a marriage eventually build a wall around them. And you can easily understand it -- even if it's a damaging action.

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It's difficult, after all, to share your hopes and dreams with a personal you're currently mad at or experiencing a major disagreement with. We've talked earlier about the habit some partners have of interpreting everything you say in a negative light. Who's going to bare their soul just to have someone stick a knife in it in an argument they experience next week? Why give your spouse any more ammunition?

If the two of you have a continuing argument ensuing over an issue, chances of sitting down for a heart-to-heart on other topics is extremely low.

Consider, for example, this potential situation. You're involved in a great friendship talk with your spouse when the topic somehow turns to a household problem, ending in an argument.

Chances of starting another round of friendly conversation have probably declined. You're now fearful that the conversation can turn sour at any time with little to no advance warning. And I can't say your fear is baseless in this instance.

Now, How Do I Preserve My Friendship?

Great friends question each other. Great friends get together to talk to each other. Great friends stay in touch.

Some parts of this answer may appear hopelessly simplistic. Some of these suggestions are easy enough to offer them quickly. But realize they may be far more difficult to implement.

If time to talk is an issue for you -- then make the time. I know one couple who talk early in the morning, first cups of coffee in their hands. And they sit there chattering away about just about anything that pops into their heads.

This habit started simply enough for them. For a period of time, the husband needed to get up at 4:30 a.m. to leave for work at 5:30 a.m. The wife obviously didn't need to rise that early. But she did because it was the only time they could find without the interference of children to talk to each other.

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This marriage at this point easily could have begun to fall apart. Instead, it grew stronger as they enjoyed their special time together.

Without even knowing it, this couple was protecting and preserving their friendship. Research now indicates the importance of this action. Creating time for the nurturing of your friendship is one of the key investments you can make in your marriage.

It's that important. Search for time. Create special times to do just this. Whether you rise earlier, stay up later talking, or create a date night for that type of conversation, it's well worth the effort.

You need to take one more step though. And in some marriages this may be a giant leap. Some couples find friendship talks always ending up as "conflict disagreements" over household issues. Don't let that happen.

If you have to set up "game rules" so to speak to avoid this, then by all means do so.

Friendship Talks Deepen and Strengthen Your Marriage

By doing this, you'll realize your friendship talks are deepening and strengthening your marriage. This way you're providing the necessary infrastructure to survive the conflict talks that are bound to emerge.

If you wake up early in the morning to renew your friendship, don't mar this time by bringing up potential conflict issues.

Don't consider this avoidance; think of it as prudent planning. Your relationship will be all the stronger for this.

Sadly, some couples are so removed from this idea that they have no clue where to begin this "friendship talk" stuff. If this describes your marriage, don't abandon the idea. It may take a little work, but it can definitely happen.

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Here are some clues about how to initiate these very important conversations. Of course, these are just starting points. Once the two of you begin to talk, you'll find a host of other topics to talk about again too!

1. Share good news.

Whether it's something small at work that has happened or a major event in the life of one of your children, share the excitement with your partner.

2. Share an interest of yours.

Are you reading a good book? Talk about it. Knitting a cool piece of clothing? Mention it! As you talk, it's very possible your spouse will catch your excitement about what you're doing. And that can only make your friendship stronger.

3. Discuss your personal dreams and goals.

Sure, you still have personal dreams. You still have goals you'd like to accomplish. Not only will your marriage be stronger if you share these, but you may be recruiting an ally in your quest. How can your spouse help you achieve all of this, if he or she doesn't even know you desire it?

4. Talk about current events.

Of course, don't end up in a conflict over something political neither of you have the power to change. But discussing current event is especially interesting when you share similar world views and political values. And as parents of younger children, it sure beats talking about diapers or cartoon characters all day long!

These are just a few starting points. Once you're back into the habit of talking with your partner again, the conversation just flows, I promise you. In the meantime, don't give up.

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In the following chapter, our friends Joan and Melinda discuss another fundamental aspect of any good marriage -- and one of the very vital secrets to keeping your marriage strong.

If your marriage is lacking in this area, don't try to overlook it and say it really doesn't matter -- because it does. If you can add spark and zing in this area, your relationship will be all the stronger and healthier for it.

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Chapter 6

Secret #4: Yes, Romance and a Healthy Sex Life Are Important!

Don't fool yourself, simple ways to reignite the romance.

Joan was already seated and enjoying her coffee when Melinda entered the coffee shop.

"I'm sorry I'm late," the younger woman said. "But John called from work just to say hi. We chatted for a few minutes."

Melinda paused. "Our marriage is feeling more and more like it did when we were newlyweds."

Joan nodded. She knew exactly what Melinda meant.

Then the young woman added, "Except for one area. But it's normal, from what I understand for this aspect to fade as the years go by."

Even without Melinda explicitly saying it, Joan knew what area she was talking about. "Just because it happens in many marriages doesn't make it normal or desirable. And it doesn't mean it has to occur in yours."

"Oh," Melinda said thoughtfully.

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Our friend Joan is right. One of the major issues challenging existing marriages in ever-increasing numbers is a waning interest in sex.

Married couples in the United States are actually less sexually active compared to those couples in other Western countries. Surprised? Most people are quite shocked to learn this.

What a Difference 10 Years Makes

The problem only worsens as you age, by the way. Those married and in their 30s report that they make love approximately twice a week. This dwindles down to only once a week for partners who are in their 40s.

Of course, you can use any number of factors to explain the decline. Generally speaking, though, research indicates three reasons for the phenomenon:

1. Partners' failure to distinguish between sensuality and sexuality.

2. The couple's inability to make this sensual-sexual aspect of their marriage a priority.

3. Allowing the romance to die off.

Think about the next question before you answer. Do you know the difference between the sensual and the sexual delights? If you have a difficult time putting it in words, perhaps the differences aren't well established in your mind.

And don't be ashamed to say you really don't know. Many individuals are at a real loss when it comes to this area.

What are the first thoughts that come into your mind when you hear the word sexuality? For most people, they include sexual intercourse, orgasms and all those highly pleasurable actions that occur both before and after that climatic moment.

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Now, consider your first thoughts when you hear the word sensual. This may be a bit more difficult for many. Do you conjure up images of gentle touching, the fragrance you've associated with your spouse, the feel of your partner's stubble of a beard, the pleasure of walking along a beach hand in hand? Perhaps it's recalling the feelings that go with getting a soft and caring massage with essential oils?

As you can see from these brief descriptions, sensuality isn't necessarily associated with the actual action of love making. In fact, sensual feelings sometimes do lead to sexual acts. But that isn't at all necessary for the enjoyment of those moments. Sensuality carries rewards and pleasures all on its own.

Sensuality encompasses all of those lingering memories of all of the above -- and perhaps even more! Sensuality can be almost any memory that gives you sensual arousal and pleasure. In other words, it's as individual as you are!

In The Beginning, It Needs No Encouraging!

Early in most relationships, couples know instinctively to touch each other frequently. They hold each other's hand readily; they hug, kiss and provide each other with all types of sensual touches.

They also talk affectionately to each other, cuddle, and even provide non-sexual massages.

As the relationship continues, very often these couples tend to ignore the sensual aspect and jump right into the sexual. When this happens the emphasis naturally turns to performance and away from pleasure.

The only sad part of this is that the sensual encounters are the parts that really kept the spouses from feeling like they were growing apart.

Not only that, but research now reveals that even when sensual and romantic talk doesn't lead to immediate sexual performance,

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it does contribute to eventually a stronger sexual connection in the long term.

The Bottom Line: Romance

As you can probably guess from this discussion, research on relationships reveals that every marriage needs to have a blend of both sensual and sexual activities.

And that leads us to the concept of romance. Ask four couples to define what romance means to them and you'll receive four separate definitions.

Being romantic is, in fact, a state that each couple develops especially for themselves. There's no golden formula you can follow, no step-by-step program you can take to ensure your success.

But, there are some common aspects. The first and best approach is to just be thoughtful. Sounds pretty simplistic, now doesn't it? But it works. Think of your spouse's needs, his or her desires and dreams. Be willing to help him or her fulfill them.

And we're not necessarily talking about sexual needs. Let's say, for example, that's it's your spouse's job in the household to take out the garbage, but he's been working late. He's under a great deal of pressure at work to finish a project on a drop-dead deadline.

A Form of Anticipating His or Her Needs

Instead of waiting for him to do it or nagging him because he's not doing it, why not just take it out yourself? This gives him some breathing time when he gets home. And it also alleviates one more detail he has to concern himself with.

Of course, there are other times romance may include a surprise weekend get away without the children or some other delightful surprise. But the bottom line here is to be thoughtful of what

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your partner's current needs are and how you can make life a little easier and more enjoyable for them.

Soon you'll discover that your marriage has its own special definition of romance. But, be patient. Don't expect this to fall into place immediately. Sometimes it requires a bit of serious communications. This ensures that both of you know what's actually happening during these often subtle moments.

What Does Love Have To Do With It?

Falling out of love is probably the most common reason for divorce. So just what does love have to do with your relationship?

Seems like a no brainer of a question. Why, it has everything to do with it. And everything we've talked about in this chapter so far contributes to a working definition of love.

Robert Steinberg, of Yale University, describes love using a recipe-like approach: "one part intimacy, fun and friendship; one part passion and romance, and one part commitment.

Think about that before you "blame" falling out of love as the reason for your considering a divorce. No, you can't force yourself to fall back into love, but you may be able to improve certain aspects of your relationship to contribute to a rekindling of love.

Contributors to Poor Sensual and Sexual Relations

We've already touched on part of the problem for many couples. They bypass the sensual side of their relationship and head straight for the sexual aspects after several years together. That means that the issue of sex becomes dominated by performance rather than enjoyment and feelings.

When this happens, many individuals say they feel distant during their love making. This, according to the marriage experts, can

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lead to sexual boredom, closely followed by a host of performance-based complaints.

Think about the old 1970s pop song, "Piña Colada." Okay, so it wasn't a great piece of music. It is however a wonderful illustration of the difference between sensual and sexual. More specifically, it talks about boredom.

"I was tired of my lady, we'd been together too long . . .me and my old lady had fallen into the same old dull routine." And he searches the personal ads. He finds someone looking not so much for sexual pleasure, but the sensual side of relationship. When he discovers the ad had been placed by his wife, the song continues:

> *"I never knew. . ."*
>
> *"That you liked Piña Coladas, and getting caught in the rain.*
> *And the feel of the ocean, and the taste of champagne.*
> *If you like making love at midnight, in the dunes of the cape.*
> *You're the love that I've looked for, come with me, and escape."*

For many couples on the brink of divorce the problem is, figuratively speaking, they can't feel the ocean or taste the champagne any longer.

The driving focus on sexual performance actually interferes with arousal. The concentration on performing detracts individuals from really enjoying the sensations of pleasure at the moment as well as the pleasure derived from sharing these feelings.

Conflict Can Block Romance

Conflict between the two of you can also be an impediment to romance. After all, who wants to have an intimate relationship with someone you're arguing with?

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Tension, obviously, isn't compatible with love making. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that no part of your marriage is more vulnerable to continuing conflict then your sexual relationship.

And that's sad. Making love -- even touching sensuously -- can be one of the fundamental ways to connect with your partner. Just like how we suggested that conflict shouldn't creep into your friendship conversations, conflict should be kept out of the bedroom as well. Yes, it's much easier said than done. But with cooperation and effort, it's not impossible.

"But I'm Just Not Interested"

This phrase is becoming common among many married partners. Does it describe you?

Surprisingly, sexual problems are increasing - with both men and women. 43 percent of women and 31 percent of men reported some type of sexual issue, according to research conducted by Edward Laumann at the University of Chicago.

Curiously, only 5 percent of men reported their problems as low sexual desire. A total of 22 percent of the women said this was the issue. Another 14 percent of the women explained they had the desire, but had a difficult time being sexually aroused.

Research shows that a host of reasons may be at the root cause of the loss of desire. They include (but are not limited to):

- Side effects of medications (including antidepressants)
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Excessive use of alcohol
- Sleep problems
- Chronic illnesses
- Stress

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- Boredom
- Hormonal problems

If you notice, most of the items deal with your overall health and energy level. And that's really not surprising. When you're stressed, tired, feeling run down or just feeling sick, it's difficult to get interested in sex.

Of course, there's really no need to remind you that it doesn't necessarily have to be like that. In fact, in the long term, feeling close to your spouse should be -- and can be -- an amazing source of emotional and psychological strength.

This strength can keep the rest of your life running smoothly. Don't underestimate the role sex plays in maintaining a healthy relationship.

Your first step to restoring sexual desire is to get any potential physical causes checked out. Don't be afraid to tell your health care physician the reason for your physical.

Once you can rule out physical reasons as the cause of your disinterest, then the two of you need to search together to discover possible causes.

You Know Me So Well . . .

That may be the case between you and your spouse: you may, indeed, know each other very well. You may know each other so well, in fact, that you can read each other's thoughts, at times. Just don't assume, however, that this "telepathy" can be extended into the bedroom.

And whatever you do, don't assume your spouse likes what you like when it comes to sensuality and sexuality. Don't be afraid to discuss your preferences. Ask what gives him or her most pleasure. And be prepared to talk about what works for you.

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Research shows that the couples enjoying the best sexual relationships have developed their own methods of telling each other what they like. And this includes both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Another piece of advice many marriage counselors give to couples: create time for sensual experiences that don't necessarily lead to sex.

You Have Nothing to Lose

Perhaps there's no other aspect of your marriage that feels as vulnerable as your sexual relations. Even couples that have been married for years feel wary and nervous about taking emotional risk when talking about their sexual preferences.

But doing so is an essential first step towards creating a better partnership -- and by "better partnership" I don't mean only in the bedroom. This strengthens your entire marriage.

By exploring not only the sexual side of your relationship, but the sensual aspect as well, you're creating an epoxy that can hold your marriage together for years to come.

There's another secret to ensure that the glue that keeps you, your partner and even your children together as a family stays firm. Merely by making several small adjustments in your daily pattern, you can form a strong family that's capable of weathering just about any storm.

Interested? It's all laid out for you in the next chapter!

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Chapter 7

Secret #5: Create Family Traditions

Marriage experts have verified, the more rituals and traditions your relationship -- and your family – has, the stronger the fabric of your marriage.

"Our life together is so wonderful, now." Melinda nearly exploded with excitement when she saw Joan. "I don't know how I can possibly thank you."

"No need to. I'm just happy I can help." Joan took a short sip on her coffee.

"This is the first time I've heard you refer to your marriage as 'our life together'."

Melinda smiled. "Because it finally feels as if we're creating one life together out of our two."

Joan nodded. She knew exactly what Melinda meant. "Let me share with you my little secret that helps make sure that my husband and I have a life together. Because of this, there's less chance that we drift apart."

T**hink** back to your childhood. Did your family have certain habits or customs that all of you experienced on a regular basis?

I remember Sunday meals. It was the only consistent day we ate in the dining room. During the week we ate at the kitchen table. We ate every Sunday meal at about the

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same time and very often it was the same meal every week. Even after my brothers and I moved out of the house and had families of our own, we all met at Mom and Dad's for Sunday dinner together. No one forced us to. We enjoyed every minute of it.

Then we had a special Christmas Eve ritual as well. In addition to this we had other little habits and small customs that we shared and enjoyed. These events -- both large and small -- in a very real sense defined our family.

My mom, additionally, created some rituals just for her and Dad. He worked in a steel mill. She always woke up at 5:30 a.m. They had morning coffee together. Then she'd pack his lunch and off to work he'd go. She didn't need to get up that early, but it was their small way of keeping in touch.

What Every Marriage Needs . . .

Every marriage needs these rituals, customs, habits and a little more. Perhaps your marriage is lacking a deeper sense of shared meaning. You can create this simply by startomg certain traditions within your relationship.

Not only that, but you can also infuse it with a spiritual dimension that helps you create a family culture together. Your family culture can be rich in ideas and rituals and help sustain you in rough times.

In this way, you'll gain a greater appreciation for the roles you play in your household as well as your partner's.

Don't let the term “culture” confuse you. Certainly we use it to refer to traditions and rituals of various countries. But there's no reason why the word can't be used to describe a much smaller group of people (even a "group" of two!) and the habits and ideas that hold them together.

In essence, as the two of you form your own household, you'll be creating your own family traditions. It's from

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these that you create for yourselves -- and your children -- habit that will carry on for generations.

Establishing Core Values

In a very real sense, by doing this you're establishing a set of beliefs or core values by which your family lives. And this may very well include spiritual beliefs and values as well.

Now at this point you may be asking how does this help save your marriage? A marital union with a strong sense of traditions and history as will offer a safe haven from the turbulence that might otherwise tear a weaker, less stable union apart. In effect, you're creating a safety net -- or an insurance policy -- guarding against eventual divorce.

Marital researcher and relationship expert, John Gottman, calls this structure a "shared meaning." And the more items you can add to your shared meaning, the more rewarding your relationships will ultimately become.

Creating Family Rituals

Did you know that less than one third of the families in the United State sit down to eat dinner together on a regular basis? And when they do, it's almost a sure bet they're eating in front of the television set. Many public officials mourn the loss of an established family dinner time at a real table where conversation can flow.

But not for the reasons you may first think. Their concern is for the ultimate survival of these families. They know all too well the families without rituals and the marriages with the fewest traditions, are most susceptible to divorce.

It goes without saying that some of these traditions develop naturally along with a new relationship and a growing family. You'll also discover that as you encounter certain events, religious holidays, even birthdays of individual family members, you'll be establishing actions that may soon define who your family is.

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We're not talking necessarily about any major shared events. Many times it's the smallest of situations that provide the best opportunities. Here are just a few examples of what some couples have created.

- A weekly date -- without the children
- Approaches to celebrating the successes in your lives
- Methods of dealing with the setbacks of life
- Ways of treating others, caring for your community at large

Multiple Relationships: The Roles You Play At Home and Away

Each of us plays various roles in life. By that I mean that you may be -- all at one time -- a mother to your children, a daughter to your own mom, a sister, a wife, an employee, an aunt . . . well, you get the idea.

Viewed from the perspective of your marriage, your roles, and those of your partner's, can either contribute a deeper sense of meaning to your relationship or increase the tension and stress.

The more the two of you are in alignment with your marital expectations, the more your marriage will feel fulfilling and satisfying.

These expectations include how the major decisions are made, views on parenting, as well as the type of interaction you have with your extended families -- your parents, his parents, as well as any siblings the two of you have and even your aunts and uncles.

I know one couple who just seemed to be able to do this automatically. The husband had a simple, but quite descriptive term for it. He said he and his spouse were presenting a "united front." Whatever you choose to call it, marriage experts now agree, it's one of the most

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effective methods of bolstering and solidifying a relationship.

What About My Personal Goals?

Creating a meaningful life together certainly doesn't mean you need to sacrifice your personal goals for "the greater good." Quite the contrary. The culture you make within your home will automatically support your individual goals -- both yours and your spouse's.

The greater meaning you derive from your marriage, the more respect each of you will ultimately have for the other's deepest personal goals. These goals and dreams could be anything from career plans to spiritual views of the world.

Symbolic Values

Another way of sharing meaning in a family is to surround yourself with things that represent your core values and beliefs. These things could be literal or figurative. Most couples and families have a combination of both.

When I was growing up, I noticed the overwhelming (too me!) amount of religious symbols in my grandmother's house. Pictures of Jesus, the crucifix, various types of rosary beads, as well as religious candles were in every room of her home.

Looking back on it, she was creating a culture for her family. I had no doubt similar items were to be found in the house when my mom was growing up there.

But it doesn't have to be religious. I know one couple whose symbol was their dining room table. Seriously. They had saved for years for this very special custom-

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made table. It represented the "beauty and stability" of their own marriage, they acknowledged.

Abstract symbols can be just as significant and quite effective in creating this shared meaning and a family culture. Family stories are an important way of connecting with the past. In this way, you feel as if you're not only whole, but you're actually part of a family with roots that go far deeper.

It's even more meaningful when you can gather these stories -- that usually speak to your core values -- from both sides of your families to pass them down to your children.

If you've been married for some time and haven't created a common culture, be patient. It won't happen overnight. But now that you know the vital role it can play in keeping your marriage healthy, you may want to discover some ways of doing so.

It won't happen overnight. But with attention, intention and diligence, it can occur.

Don't expect to agree on every new event or activity becoming a fundamental part of your new family culture. It just isn't going to happen. But you will find some common ground.

And these are the areas you nurture, nourish and cultivate. The more often you recognize and celebrate the traditions, rituals and symbols of your family, the stronger your marriage will be. And the more resilient it becomes.

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Chapter

8

Secret #6:
Talking, Not Fighting

How to talk issues out, not fight about them.
It's a fine art and can be learned.

"I just hate to admit it," Joan said to Melinda their now weekly coffee shop meetings.

"Admit what?" Joan's remarks stirred Melinda's curiosity.

"There were times -- okay there still are times -- when I'm responsible for causing a discussion to escalate out of control into an argument."

"That's very open of you to see and admit it," Melinda said.

"It seems many wives are, without our even knowing it."

"Wow! If I didn't know you better I would say that sounded like a sexist remark. But I'm sure you have some logical explanation to prove that statement."

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Our friend Joan not only has a logical explanation for that statement, she also has research to back her up. If you're the female partner in your union, you may be tempted to pretend you never saw this secret. On the surface, there's no doubt about it, it does sound sexist.

But once I reveal the secret and some expert opinions surrounding this specific situation, you'll be more understanding of it. And you'll be able to make a few adjustments in how you relate to your husband.

Not only will your husband be grateful, but you'll find that the two of you will be able to talk more and fight less when it comes to resolving issues.

To Dream The Impossible Dream!

In a phrase, it's called "Talk, Don't Fight." I can hear you now! *Well, if we could do that, we'd have no problems. But what you're asking us to do -- talk, don't fight -- is nearly impossible.*

No, it's not impossible -- not once you learn a few basic tricks and tips in how to approach your spouse with a problem. And even more importantly, you learn how to keep the lines of communications flowing free of negative interpretation, bitterness, and accusations.

But, let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. First we'll examine the problem -- and then I'll explain how each partner in the relationship can -- and should -- be held accountable for the progress of the discussion.

Respecting Each Other

A couple's best chance of resolving conflicts that are bound to crop up in their relationship is through acknowledged mutual respect and an open, honest discussion. If you ask couples, in fact, if they are sincere about solving their

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occasional problems concerning money or housework, you'll receive a resounding yes.

It's unfortunate, then, that far too many well-intended conversations about issues end up in shouting matches. Sound familiar?

It doesn't have to be this way. It's not too late to learn how to approach the daily solvable problems of life so you are . . . well . . . solving things instead of allowing them to escalate into major battles.

5 Easy Steps To A Meaningful Discussion

The beauty of these five easy steps is that they really are "easy." Implementing these doesn't require long hours in marriage counseling or learning some new technique. Believe it or not, you already have all the skills you need right now to talk civilly to your partner in order to solve your issues.

In a very real sense, in fact, it all comes down to practicing the same manners with your spouse that you'd use with anyone else. That's all there is to it, basically!

Are you ready to start? Here's Step Number 1, probably the most important of them all.

Step #1: Approach the Subject Gently

Of course this step is targeted to either spouse who brings up an issue for discussion. Researchers have found, however, that most problems are broached by the wife.

It's really not a sexist statement, researchers tell us. It's a cultural phenomenon. Women are more likely to seek a resolution to an issue. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to distance themselves from the concerns that appear more difficult to face.

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Believe it or not, there's a physiological reason for this. Gottman explains that men tend to experience something called “flooding”.

Flooding is a term that describes the overwhelming feeling you get when you experience your spouse's negative opinion. The negativity may be in the form of criticism, contempt or even defensiveness. The effect on your body is so suddenly overwhelmingly uncomfortable, Gottman, says, it leaves a person feeling "shell-shocked."

You feel defenseless. And because of this you would do just about anything to avoid a repeat performance of that experience.

The reaction only grows with increasing exposure to the negativity. The more you feel flooded by your spouse's criticism, the more defensive you become. You look all the more diligently for clues that your spouse is about to criticize you again.

Eventually, for many individuals, the concern is so all-encompassing that all you can really think about is protecting yourself from your spouse's perceived attacks. Many people do this through emotionally disengaging themselves from the relationship.

Where Does the Discussion Begin, Then?

So just how do you begin a meaningful discussion concerning a pressing marital or household issue?

By approaching the subject gently, in a non-accusatory fashion. A gentle approach is free from criticism and contempt.

Instead of "accusing" your spouse of never throwing his dirty clothes in the hamper, for example, you can mention that you have recently observed it's not getting done.

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Take a moment to notice the difference between the two approaches presented below:

"I noticed that your dirty clothes are lying on the bedroom floor and the hamper is empty."

"You seem to continually refuse to throw your clothes in the hamper. It's such a simple thing to do. Do you expect me to keep doing it for you?

The first -- and gentler -- approach begins with the word "I." The second, more accusatory start uses the word "you." In effect, you're blaming your spouse right out of the box instead of just neutrally observing a situation and waiting for his explanation of it.

If you sound as if you're blaming your partner from the very beginning, then he or she is put on the defensive at the start of the discussion. And from here, the conversation is bound to escalate into a shouting match.

On the other hand, if you observe, he has an opportunity to save face, saying something like:

"Oops. You're right. We did make an agreement about that. My bad. I'll try to do better in the future."

This method of talking about the problem is far more crucial than you may think. Discussions overwhelmingly end on the same tone they begin, according to Gottman. If you start out with accusations and placing your partner on the defensive, you'll end the discussion in that same tone.

That means it's very important that you start out gently. If you can do this, then your discussion is far more likely to be productive. And this may just be the turning point in your relationship.

I'd love to try this, you say, but I'm not quite sure I can carry it off. Well, of course you can! Here are just a few ideas to keep in mind while you try the gentle approach.

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1) You can complain about a situation, but don't blame your spouse.

If you follow this suggestion, you're not attacking your spouse's character or personality. You're much closer to playing the role of observer.

2) Start off with the word "I" instead of "you."

We've already spoken about this briefly. When you use the word "I", it puts the issue in a more objective light. If you insist on accusing your spouse, it sounds as if you've already judged him -- and found him guilty. And he has little recourse but to get defensive.

3) Be specific in discussing the changes you'd like occur.

In this way, he knows exactly what you have in mind. And he has a chance to respond and give his opinion about the issue at hand as well.

4) Be polite.

Why yes, it's important! Of course you should use words like "please," "I'd appreciate it," and "thank you." You would talk this way with everyone else wouldn't you?

So why not talk that way to the person you're closest to? If want your spouse to pick up his clothes and place them in the hamper, ask him nicely!

5) Don't hold your dissatisfaction in for so long you're ready to explode.

This is a common occurrence. For some reason, it's human nature to believe that things will eventually get better all on their own. We, therefore, tend to put things off until we can't tolerate it anymore.

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We act a lot a lot like the old cartoon character, Popeye The Sailor Man. He took all he could of a situation until he finally exploded, saying, "That's it! That's all I can stands; I can't stands it no more." Then we all knew Bluto was in big trouble.

It's extremely difficult to act gently when you're feeling like this. Don't wait too long before talking about the topic or else you're just setting the both of you up for failure

Step #2:
Repairing the Situation

Don't fool yourself. Using the first step doesn't mean you'll glide to the end of the discussion successfully 100 percent of the time. Far from it.

That's why Step 2 is learning how to put the brakes on a discussion that's sliding out of control.

Despite your best attempts, you may find the conversation didn't begin as well as you had hoped. Or perhaps in the midst of the conversation things took an ugly turn for the worse. Don't give up hope. Yes, you can prevent a full-blown disaster if you know how to respond appropriately to the situation.

Repairing the conversation works best when your spouse recognizes what you're doing. He realizes you're trying to either steer the conversation towards a more positive approach or end it for the moment.

In good solid marriages, couples seem to know instinctively when the other is attempting to repair the direction of the discussion. And he or she then responds in kind.

In less stable relationships, this is more difficult to do. Sometimes the air has been charged with negativity for so long that any attempt at repair is met with cynicism or sarcasm.

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Very often the attempt is ignored even though it may be a straightforward request for an intermission. In these cases, it's very often the delivery of the requests that derails the attempt. If it's delivered with the same hostility as the conversation contains, it's far too easy to ignore it.

The key to making the attempts work, therefore, is to have a prepared line or two that you can use. When you hear these particular phrases, regardless of the tone in which they are delivered, it's time to take a break.

Whatever phrase you choose, from, "Let's stop for a while," to "Can we take a break," be sure it's recognized. In this way, you won't be dragged into saying things you'll later regret.

Step 3:
Calm Yourself;
Calm Your Partner

When you or your spouse discovers that your bodies are tensing up over the topic, you need to take a break from talking -- or arguing.

You can't be receptive and open in a discussion if you're stressed, tense and waiting to get clobbered verbally. Believe it or not, it's more difficult for a man's body to calm itself following an argument than a woman's body.

Once you've stopped the discussion, take specific actions that will relax your body. Listen to music or exercise. If you are familiar with meditation techniques, this would be the perfect opportunity to use them. If you're not, you may want to learn more about this practice.

Research bears this out. Gottman has interrupted couples in his workshops whose discussions on their issues are

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escalating out of control. Of course, he doesn't tell them the real reason why he's stopping the discussion. He uses the excuse that his staff needed to adjust equipment.

During this "repair" time, he requested the couple not to talk about the issue at hand. They were to read magazines for half an hour while the equipment is being worked on.

When they began their discussion once again, their heart rates were much lower and their discussion once again became more productive.

Generally speaking, Gottman says, if your heart rate is greater than 100 beats a minute, you'll be unable to listen to your spouse. That's the time to take your break!

Don't be bashful during this time in working together to soothe each other. Gottman suggests you give each other a massage. You may also try guiding each other through a meditation.

Step #4:
Compromise

Ouch! That's a word many individuals don't particularly want to hear. But it's a big part of staying happily married. Let's face it -- all healthy relationships involve the art of compromise. For this to work, however, you need first and foremost to respect your partner's opinions and desires. In effect you need to be honest in considering his or her position.

If you have a difficult time compromising, don't be afraid to ask your partner questions about his feelings and point of view. The more you know, the better you can become at the art of compromising. And you never know, it might not hurt as much as you think!

Step #5:
Accept Your Partner's Flaws

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One of the major keys to success in resolving any conflict in a relationship is to recognize you must start from where you are -- and where your partner is as well.

By this, I mean it does you no good to wish your partner were perfect. He isn't. And neither are you! (I'm sure this last fact surprises you!)

Until you accept the compromise, the resolution of the problem will be difficult. You'll be spending your time trying to change your partner instead of searching for an effective compromise.

Resolving your problem doesn't mean you're trying to change the other person. It means you're searching for common ground. You are, in effect, negotiating ways to discover common good between the two of you. You're looking for an answer that satisfied both of you -- and this keeps your relationship humming smoothly.

Good Luck!

Chapter 9

Secret #7: The Incredible Power of Forgiveness

This chapter deals with the importance of forgiveness in keeping your marriage intact. You'd be amazed at how this simple act can be so beneficial

Melinda beamed when she saw Joan that day.

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"I can't believe it. I feel like a newlywed again. How can I ever thank you?"

"No need," Joan replied. "But I do want to offer you one word to think about as your marriage is renewing itself."

"Oh?" Joan's advice had been so remarkably helpful, Melinda was eager to hear what this could possibly be.

"It's very effective, but it's also very difficult to pull off. But it's made all the difference in my marriage."

Now, Melinda was on pins and needles, wondering what it could be.

W**hat** was the single word that Joan offered her friend? **Forgive.** That's right. If partners are strong enough . . . flexible enough . . . and open-minded enough to forgive transgressions of all kinds, their relationship has "forever potential."

Oh, yes, no one said that it was going to be easy. Forgiving a person is difficult if the incident that hurt you is relatively small. The ability to forgive someone for larger mistakes -- even being unfaithful -- can be nearly impossible.

No wonder the adage remains with us to this day: "To err is human; to forgive divine." Sometimes it seems as if it would take a saint to forgive the actions of your partner.

It's ironic, isn't it? What you need most for a marriage is a "safe harbor." This is a place where you not only feel as if you can be yourself, but you are buffeted from the damaging winds of pain and hurt.

Indeed, a marriage is that. But it also is a relationship in which you risk the most. You are the most vulnerable to pain and injury in this relationship than any other you may have.

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If you've been married for a while, you already know what I mean. No doubt, you've already been hurt in some way. You understand that feeling of vulnerability.

In fact, any number of actions in such a close relationship like a marriage can cause you -- or your partner -- pain. Sometimes you may even unwittingly hurt the other.

Researchers now believe that those individuals who have the natural desire to forgive stand the best chance at experiencing a long and loving relationship. That "desire to forgive," by the way, stems from a deep abiding feeling of being fully accepted.

Forgiveness: It's a Decision

That may come as a surprise to some. But read that subhead again. Forgiveness is really a decision on your part. It's a self conscious choice you make to relinquish a perceived right to get even or hold in debt someone who you believed has wronged you.

Think of forgiveness as a canceled debt. But more than that you need to pare this word down to its simplest form: forgive. And in this form, it's a verb -- an action verb at that.

When either person in the relationship can't or won't forgive, it impairs your functioning as a team. The unforgiven partner is kept down, so to speak, by continually being indebted to the other.

Who do you really hurt when you can't forgive your partner? Yes, you do hurt your partner. But, believe it or not, you're also hurting yourself as well.

The Effects of Not Forgiving!

Your unwillingness or inability to release the resentment and bitterness places you at a greater risk for a variety of psychological and physical ailments, the least of which are depression, high blood pressure, ulcers and more.

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And that's not even mentioning that an unforgiving attitude only increases your chances of divorce.

Now before we go any further, we have to clear up one more item. It has to do with another cliché that's always bandied about. And that's the statement: Forgive and forget.

Don't believe for a moment that because you have forgiven your partner, you'll be able to forget the incident. Our minds just don't work this way.

Many people have it engrained in their minds that this is just how it should occur. Consequently, they feel that since they can't forget the incident, they haven't forgiven their partner. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Even when you forgive, remembering the incident may still inflict pain on you. Experts on relationships call this "pain grief". And it's really not such a surprising term to use.

Your pain -- or grief -- over the situation reflects your reaction to an irreplaceable loss. This is a natural reaction and in no way means you haven't forgiven your partner or cannot forgive him or her.

What About Responsibility?

Many individuals equate forgiveness with the art of absolving their partner of responsibility for his or her actions. No, that is far from the truth. Your ability to forgive your partner has no bearing on his or her assuming responsibility for the transgression.

Quite the contrary. Once the person actually takes full responsibility for the act, you'll discover that forgiving him is much easier than you thought. And then your relationship can move forward.

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Before we go any further in this discussion, let's clarify one thing. Taking responsibility for your actions is not the same thing as explaining your actions.
May individuals attempt to merely explain their actions away. "I did it because . . ." This type of behavior merely attempts to rationalize their transgression. That indeed may be why you did it, but that neither excuses the act nor does it make it right. It's far better to just suck it up as they say and admit the mistake.

It's important in the discussion to separate the act of punishment from the consequences of the act (This forgiveness stuff gets a bit complicated, so bear with me!) You can forgive your partner and not seek to either punish nor hurt him. But he still accepts the consequences of his actions. The consequences are never going to leave.

But let's say you hurt your partner and he's forgiven you. Perhaps you forgot a special day in his life. Even though he's forgiven you, you can actually take responsibility for your behavior by making amends.

How? By making a romantic candlelight dinner for two . . . surprising her with her favorite flowers . . treating your mate to a special night out.

This may sound easy on paper, but making amends actually requires humility on your part. If you perform the action sincerely, then it shows you've accepted responsibility. It's much easier said than done. But it is so worth the act of putting your ego aside.

But My Spouse Isn't Taking Responsibility!

Restoration of the relationship on some level usually follows the act of forgiveness. It may take time, but it eventually occurs. But that's predicated on the fact that your partner is owning up to his or her responsibility.

Ah! We're talking about a perfect world, you're probably thinking right now. You haven't met my spouse. What happens if he or

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she doesn't own up to that responsibility? Do I allow our relationship to continue as if nothing was wrong?

Excellent question. And one many couples face on a daily basis. Generally speaking, when this happens you're encountering one of two situations.

It could be that your spouse's intention was never to hurt you, but you were hurt anyway. In this scenario you're facing a sincere difference in interpretation of events -- as well as a difference in why they occurred.

In some cases negative interpretations of the transgression may be powerfully overwhelming as to erect a permanent barrier to restoring your relationship. To put it in plain English, you aren't buying into the possibility that the act was just an honest mistake.

But it's possible to forgive and forge ahead with your relationship whether or not you agree on the nature or severity of the infraction. The person committing the act may view it as a small mistake -- washing an expensive jacket instead of taking it to the dry cleaners for example and ruining the piece of clothing.

But the spouse has placed such a negative spin, with self-created ulterior motives for the action, that she refuses to understand his sincere intention. She also refuses to forgive him.

If it's your jacket that was ruined, you need to move past that negative spin and forgive. That, of course, doesn't mean you're not going to grieve for its loss. Of course, you will. But for the sake of your marriage, it's far better to forgive.

The second type of situation you may encounter is more difficult to navigate. Clearly, your spouse committed a rather large transgression. He's refusing to admit responsibility for it. For the future of the relationship he must admit responsibility.

In this case, you have a large decision to make. Will you forgive him anyway? How will it affect the future of your relationship? Can you even have a relationship with this? Don't let anyone tell you differently. This is a difficult and agonizing decision.

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Once That Trust Is Broken . . .

Forgiving is really only the starting point of rebuilding a solid relationship -- albeit a vital first step. The second issue that must be dealt with is trust. Let's say your spouse had an affair. You've forgiven him or her and you want to try to make the marriage work. But you have nagging doubts. Can you trust your partner?

You can, but admittedly it's not easy. It will require some time and effort. In addition, you'll need to keep some key points in mind during the "rebuilding" process.

Rebuilding trust does, indeed, take time. Trust only is re-established as you believe your spouse really is there for you, so to speak. And the more he is "there" as time goes by, the deeper the trust grows.

Some individuals are just naturally more trusting than others. The length of time it actually takes to reach a level of trust again depends on the attitude and personalities of the individual partners.

If you're the spouse who is trying to win back the trust, then the ball is in your court, as they say. You'll need to do everything within your power to show your sincerity and dedication to your partner. The good news is that you have a lot of control over the situation. And that includes not making the same mistake twice.

The chances of restoring trust are far greater when the transgressor -- the person who committed the mistake -- steps up to take full responsibility for his or her actions.

We've already talked about the very important role taking responsibility has in all of this. Your partner will be able to detect your sincerity and your desire to continue the relationship.

Don't Hang The Mistake Over Your Spouse's Head

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In Nathanial Hawthorne's book, “The Scarlet Letter”, a young woman who committed adultery must wear a scarlet "A" on all her clothing. This is her punishment. It also reminds the community -- as well as herself -- of her transgressions. With such a wardrobe, it's difficult to let go of the act, so forgiving the act becomes even harder.

In many marriages one spouse makes the other wear his mistake. Of course, not literally but figuratively. How? By bringing up the subject every time they argue. If the topic of his affair or any other transgression is flung in his or her face each time they argue, it's difficult to heal!

Always remember that trust is ultimately a choice we make. It's true! You make a conscious decision following a betrayal to trust your spouse. In effect, you're taking a leap of faith.

The truth of the matter is that trust -- in any relationship -- is a decision. In a union that hasn't been scarred or damaged by pain, though, trust seems much like a decision and more like a given fact. It's just a part of the expectations of relationships.

Prescription For A Healthy Marriage: A Daily Dose of Forgiveness

Think about it. Forgiveness really does need to be a daily part of your relationship. And it very well could be without your even realizing it.

In a partnership as intimate as a marriage, infractions are bound to happen on a regular basis -- if not daily. Life happens, tempers erupt, and mistakes are made as you try your best to get through the day.

The couples, though, that create a climate of trust over an extended period of time are those who are willing to forgive each other. Sometimes it's a conscious decision. At other times, the forgiveness just flows naturally from the moment.

This Forgiveness Talk

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Is Great, But . . .

Let's be realistic. Sometimes we all need a little help forgiving. You just don't wave a magic wand over your spouse, spout out the magic word, *Abracadabra*, and feel instant forgiveness.

But there are steps you can take to guide you along the path to forgiveness. Some couples find it helpful to have a more structured approach to forgiving.

Below are a series of steps you might attempt in order to achieve this state. Don't expect to glide through these steps though in a quick 20-minute session. And you may discover you have to double back as you go through these steps. Take your time. This process is that important.

The first step involves setting aside a specific time to discuss the issue. Choose a time in which you'll not be distracted. Be prepared to talk openly and honestly about it.

Create An Agenda

You'll need to set an agenda for your discussion. The top order of business is to clearly identify the problem. You both need to agree that you're ready to actually discuss it -- and to discuss it at this moment. If not, it's better to wait to talk about the issue at a later time.

In the third step of the process, you need to examine the pain and concerns around the problem.

This involves an open validating discussion about exactly what occurred. Don't continue to this step unless you're willing to not only listen to your partner's viewpoint, but respect it as well. Remember you're doing very important work. You're laying the foundation for forgiveness.

A validating discussion helps tremendously in bringing couples together following a painful vent.

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After this, the offender asks for forgiveness. Not only is it the right and appropriate action to take at this time, but it's very healing as well. In addition to asking for forgiveness, apologizing at the same time (sincerely, of course) is a powerful step to take.

These two actions are big steps toward taking responsibility for how you've hurt your spouse.

If all goes well, the person is granted forgiveness. For small transgressions, this step may not even be necessary. But it's essential for large, significant actions. Making the intent explicit -- saying it out loud -- and speaking it to the person is of utmost importance.

This helps you both to put the past behind you. By stating your forgiveness out loud, you're also implicitly saying it won't crop up in arguments again!

This commitment step is really just the start of the process. It'll take time for the pain of this to fade. But the important point here is that you're working toward restoring your relationship.

If necessary, the individual partner who committed the offense offers to change the patterns or attitudes that gave rise to the incident in the first place.

If the nature of the mistake can be viewed as part of a pattern, then the person needs to work at changing the pattern. This is something that the two you will need to decide together.

In addition, the person who is responsible for the offense may want to make amends through positive acts -- giving flowers, a night out, or a special romantic meal.

Making Amends

But for this to work, the person who is making amends must do it with the proper attitude. You don't make this peace offering because you owe your partner anything. You make amends as a gesture of good will.

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As you go through these steps remember that all of this takes times. The steps we've reviewed will help your move towards a restoration of your relationship. But they aren't the final words in the process.

Each person heals in his or her own way and over a time period of his own creation. The steps presented won't guarantee a restoration of your relationship, but they provide you with the necessary framework within which you can work.

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Conclusion

The seven secrets to saving your marriage presented here provide you with a comprehensive guideline to steer you toward a more stable, happier and healthier relationship.

If you find yourself at odds with your partner or spouse more often than not, then you owe it to yourself -- and your partner -- to do everything within your power before deciding the union isn't worth saving.

Putting these secrets into action aren't going to be easy. But, the effort you put into these steps will be well worth it. Whatever you do, don't try to hurry through these secrets. And don't think you necessarily have to use them in order.

You'll know -- by the specific events in your relationship -- when to use the appropriate secret. It may very well be that the first time around a secret will not work for you. That's when you drop it, and circle round to something else. You may decide at some point to return to that specific secret and find it works.

Take your time. Your union with your spouse is far too important to just toss aside at the first sign of trouble. Your marriage is definitely worth fighting for.

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