Cohabitation - A Biblical, Christian Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson takes a hard look from a biblical perspective at a common practice among Americans, cohabitation. Not only does he find it counter to biblical instruction for Christians, he finds that living together in a sexual relationship reduces the probability of a long lasting marriage later on.

Introduction

“Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women.” And those who live together before they get married are putting their future marriage in danger. Those are some of the conclusions by sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in their study for the National Marriage Project.{1}

In this article we are going to talk about this social phenomenon of cohabitation. It used to be called “living in sin” or “shacking up.” Today, it has been replaced by more neutral terms like “living together” or “cohabitation.” For this article, I will use the term cohabitation since it is the generally accepted term in society and law. Cohabitation has been defined as “two unrelated persons of the opposite sex who share common living arrangements in a sexually intimate relationship without legal or religious sanction.”{2}

Cohabitation, as a lifestyle, is on the rise. Consider the significant growth in cohabitation rates in the last few decades. In 1960 and 1970, about a half million were living together. But by 1980 that number was 1.5 million. By 1990 the number was nearly three million. And by 2000 the number was almost five million.{3}

Researchers estimate that today as many as 50% of Americans cohabit at one time or another prior to marriage.{4} The stereotype of two young, childless people living together is not completely accurate; currently, some 40% of cohabiting relationships involve children.{5}

America also appears to be changing its attitude toward cohabitation. George Barna has reported that 60% of Americans believed that the best way to establish a successful marriage is to cohabit prior to marriage.{6} Another survey found that two thirds (66%) of high school senior boys agreed or mostly agreed with the statement “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along.”{7}

Cohabitation is not the same as marriage. It is not recognized as marriage by the state. And the participants are living together because it is their intent not to be married, at least for the time being.

Although some people will say that a cohabiting couple is “married in the eyes of God,” that is not true. They are not married in God’s eyes because they are living contrary to biblical statements about marriage. And they are not married in their own eyes because they have specifically decided not to marry.

Cohabitation is without a doubt changing the cultural landscape of our society. The proportion of first marriages preceded by cohabitation has increased ten-fold in the last few decades. And the increasing number of cohabiting couples sends a mixed message to our children. On the one hand,
they hear parents and pastors proclaim the value of marriage. But on the other hand, they see a
culture condoning cohabitation.

**Cohabitation and Test-drive Relationships**

“I think we should live together before we get married to see if we are compatible.”

How many times have we heard that line? But many of the current assumptions about living together
are incorrect.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher wrote *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier,*
*Healthier and Better Off Financially.* It not only makes the case for marriage, it also challenges
contemporary assumptions about cohabitation.

The thesis of the book is simple. Back in the 1950s, the rules were clear: first love, next marriage,
and only then the baby carriage. But the social “tsunami” of the 1960s that struck changed
everything. The Pill, the sexual revolution, gay pride, feminism, mothers in the workplace, no-fault
divorce, and the rise of illegitimate births changed our views of marriage and family. The authors
marshal the evidence to show that marriage is a good thing. As the subtitle says, married people are
happier, healthier and better off financially.

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that you should “try before you buy.” In fact, one of the
oft-repeated questions justifying living together is: “You wouldn’t buy a car without a test drive
would you?” The problem with such questions and slogans is they dehumanize the other person. If I
decide not to buy a car (or a pair of shoes or whatever the inanimate object), the car doesn’t feel
rejected. When you test-drive your car, you don’t pack your personal luggage in the trunk. And
rejecting a car model doesn’t bring emotional baggage into the next test-driving experience. The car
doesn’t need psychological counseling so that it can trust the next car buyer. Frankly, test-driving a
relationship is only positive if you are the driver.

Research has shown that those who cohabit tend to view marriage negatively because it involved the
assumption of new responsibilities that contrasted with their former freedoms. On the other hand,
those marrying through the conventional route of dating and courtship did not feel constrained by
marriage, but liberated by marriage.

Consider the contrast. A couple living together has nearly everything marriage has to offer
(including sex) but few commitments or responsibilities. So, cohabiting people feel trapped when
they enter marriage. They must assume huge new responsibilities while getting nothing they didn’t
already have.

Couples entering marriage through dating and courtship experience just the opposite, especially if
they maintain their sexual purity. Marriage is the culmination of their relationship and provides the
full depth of a relationship they have long anticipated.

This is not to say that cohabitation guarantees marital failure nor that marriage through the
conventional route guarantees marital success. There are exceptions to this rule, but a couple who
live together before marriage stack the odds against themselves and their future marriage.

**Cohabitation and Perceptions**

If you live together before you get married, you’re putting your future marriage in danger. That’s the
conclusion of a recent report on cohabitation. America’s five million cohabiting couples live together
to save money, to test-run a marriage, or to stave off loneliness. But the practice can cause significant harm to a marriage.

Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead released their study through the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. Their study confirms earlier studies about the danger of cohabiting, and adds additional detail.

They found that cohabiting appears to be so counterproductive to long-lasting marriage that unmarried couples should avoid living together, especially if it involves children. They argue that living together is “a fragile family form” that poses increased risk to women and children.

Part of the reason for the danger is the difference in perception. Men often enter the relationship with less intention to marry than do women. They may regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment. Women, however, often see the living arrangement as a step toward eventual marriage. So while the women may believe they are headed for marriage, the man has other ideas. Some men actually resent the women they live with and view them as easy. Such a woman is not his idea of a faithful marriage partner.

People who live together in uncommitted relationships may be unwilling to work out problems. Since there is no long-term commitment, often it is easy to leave the current living arrangement and seek less fractious relationships with a new partner.

The ten-fold increase in cohabitation in the last few decades is staggering. The reasons for the growth are many: fewer taboos against premarital sex, earlier sexual maturity, later marriage, adequate income to live apart from their families.

Whatever the reasons for cohabiting, this study documents the dangers. Couples who live together are more likely to divorce than those who don’t. They are less happy and score lower on well-being indices, including sexual satisfaction. And cohabiting couples are often poorer than married couples.

Even if millions are doing it, living together is a bad idea. As we will see later, there are clear biblical prohibitions against premarital sex. But apart from these biblical pronouncements are the ominous sociological predictions of failure when a couple considers cohabitation rather than marriage. The latest research backs up what the Bible has said for millennia. If you want a good marriage, don’t do what society says. Do what the Bible teaches us to do.

**Consequences of Cohabitation**

Contrary to conventional wisdom, cohabitation can be harmful to marriage as well as to the couples and their children. One study based on the National Survey of Families and Households found that marriages which had prior cohabiters were 46% more likely to divorce than marriages of noncohabiters. The authors concluded from this study and from a review of previous studies that the risk of marital disruption following cohabitation “is beginning to take on the status of an empirical generalization.”{10}

Some have tried to argue that the correlation between cohabitation and divorce is artificial since people willing to cohabit are more unconventional and less committed to marriage. In other words, cohabitation doesn’t cause divorce but is merely associated with it because the same type of people are involved in both phenomena. Yet, even when this “selection effect” is carefully controlled statistically, a “cohabitation effect” remains.

Marriages are held together by a common commitment which is absent in most, if not all, cohabiting
relationships. Partners who live together value autonomy over commitment and tend not to be as committed as married couples in their dedication to the continuation of the relationship.\{11\}

One study found that “living with a romantic partner prior to marriage was associated with more negative and less positive problem solving support and behavior during marriage.” The reason is simple. Since there is less certainty of a long-term commitment, “there may be less motivation for cohabiting partners to develop their conflict resolution and support skills.”\{12\}

Couples living together, however, miss out on more than just the benefits of marriage. Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times higher than they are among married couples.\{13\} Those who cohabit are much more likely to be unhappy in marriage and much more likely to think about divorce.\{14\}

Women in cohabiting relationships are more than twice as likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse.\{15\} Another study found that women in cohabiting relationships are nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than are women in marital relationships.\{16\}

Cohabitation is especially harmful to children. First, several studies have found that children currently living with a mother and her unmarried partner have significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children in intact families.\{17\} Second, there is the risk that the couple will break up creating even more social and personal difficulties. Third, many of these children were not born in the present union but in a previous union of one of the adult partners (usually the mother). Living in a house with a mother and an unmarried boyfriend is tenuous at best. Legal claims to child support and other sources of family income are absent.

**Cohabitation and the Bible**

So far, we have been talking about the social and psychological consequences of cohabitation. Let’s turn now to a biblical perspective.

The Bible teaches that the act of sexual intercourse can have a strong bonding effect on two people. When done within the bounds of marriage, the man and the woman become one flesh (Eph. 5:31). But sexual intercourse outside of marriage also has consequences. Writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul said that when a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her (1 Cor. 6:16).

The context of the discussion arose from a problem within the church. A man in the church was having sexual relations with his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5:1-3). Paul calls this relationship sinful. First, it was incestuous, which was condemned by the Old Testament (Lev. 18:8, Deut. 22:30). Second, there was no marital union, but instead an example of cohabitation. Paul’s admonition to us is to flee sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18).

Sexual immorality is condemned in about 25 passages in the New Testament. The Greek word is *porneia*, a word which includes all forms of illicit sexual intercourse. Jesus taught, “For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:21-23).

Paul said, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:3-5).
Marriage is God’s plan. Marriage provides intimate companionship for life (Gen. 2:18). It provides a context for the procreation and nurture of children (Eph. 6:1-2). And finally, marriage provides a godly outlet for sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:2).

In the New Testament, believers are warned against persistent sin, including sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The church is to keep believers accountable for their behavior. Believers are to judge themselves, lest they fall into God’s hands (1 Cor 11:31-32). Sexual sin should not even be named among believers (Eph. 5:3).

Living together outside of marriage not only violates biblical commands but it puts a couple and their future marriage at risk. In this article, I have collected a number of sobering statistics about the impact cohabitation can have on you and your relationship. If you want a good marriage, don’t do what society says, do what the Bible teaches us to do.

Notes

1. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage,” The National Marriage Project, the Next Generation Series, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, January 1999.


5. Ibid., 926.


Abuse and Domestic Violence

Each year the lives of women (and men) are altered or destroyed by someone who abuses them. The resulting emotional scars, physical scars, and destruction are evident in social and crime statistics.

Although abuse is significantly under-reported, current crime statistics at least begin to tell the story. The FBI’s Uniform Crime Report routinely lists domestic violence as the leading cause of injury to women ages 15 to 44 in the United States. These injuries are more than those from car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.

Abuse may be open, flagrant, and in-your-face. But abuse can also be subtle and devious. It may explode on the scene or gradually creep into a relationship. Although women are the primary victims of abuse, men may be victims, also, of abuse.

One of the first steps in dealing with abuse is to identify it. Identifying it is often difficult because it can manifest itself in different forms. Here is a brief survey of the different types of abuse.

- **Emotional abuse** is the use of mental strategies or mind games. This would include such things as anger, aggression, humiliation, intimidation, stalking, fear, power, and control. The goal is to inflict emotional damage on the other person.
- **Physical abuse** would include the use of body parts or weapons to threaten, punish, dominate, restrain, control, or injure another person.
- **Sexual abuse** is the use of forced sexual actions which may dominate, manipulate, threaten, injure, corrupt, or control another person.
- **Social abuse** involves other forms of abuse to dominate, manipulate or control another person’s social relationships.
- **Financial abuse** is the use of money or financially-related matters to dominate,
threaten or control. This may be done to inflict damage on another person or take financial advantage of that person.

- **Spiritual abuse** is the controlling of another person’s religious interests or practices. Spiritual damage may be inflicted by criticizing a person’s religious convictions or misstating them for religious purposes.

Although abuse may take various forms, there are often common elements. For example, there often is the tendency to blame the victim of abuse. A woman may be told to “submit” or “pray harder for her marriage” by a pastor or church members. And often women go back into abusive relationships, leaving many to wonder.

In this article, we will try to provide some answers and perspective on this important issue. (And I might note that we already have articles on the Probe Web site dealing with such issues as verbal abuse and spiritual abuse.)

**Types of Abusers**

Although abuse and domestic violence are one of the most pressing social problems of our time, most of society (including churches) still view the crisis as a private matter. Abused women are often advised by pastors and members of a congregation to “pray harder” or “try to become a better wife.”

Abuse has not only been ignored by the church but often by the medical profession. In their study of abuse, Evan Stark and Ann Flitcraft found that out of one million women who sought medical treatment for injuries sustained by husbands and boyfriends, doctors correctly identified the injuries as a result of battering only four percent of the time.\(^1\)

Frequently child abuse and domestic violence go hand in hand. Men who abuse their wives will often also abuse their children. Research shows that in homes where domestic violence occurs, children are abused at a rate 1500 percent higher than the normal average.\(^2\)

Often this abuse begins even before a child is born. One study of 1200 white, Latino, and African-American pregnant women, found that one in six reported physical abuse during pregnancy.\(^3\)

Researchers now conclude that there are two types of abusers. Neil Jacobson and John Gottman document this in their book, *When Men Batter Women*.\(^4\) Their study of more than 200 couples in dangerous relationships helped shatter myths and shed new light on abusive relationships.

They describe two types of batterers: Cobras and Pit Bulls. The Cobras are more severely violent of the two. They strike swiftly and ferociously, always remaining in control and feeling entitled to whatever they want.

Pit Bulls are violent because they are insecure. They are more likely to lose control, letting their emotions burn slowly until they explode in anger.

Jacobson and Gottman intensively studied about 60 of the 200 couples by watching videotapes of non-violent arguments of severe batterers and their spouses. To eliminate some of the subjectivity, they also monitored the vital signs (heart rate, sweat flow) of the couples.

They found that Cobras resemble the snake for which they are named. They become still and focused just before striking their victim. They become internally calm during abuse. While the heart rates of Pit Bulls increase during abuse, the Cobras’ heart rates actually decrease.
Pit Bulls are driven by deep insecurity and often have an unhealthy dependence on the mates they abuse. They are afraid of losing their wives and therefore try to control them through physical and emotional abuse. Cobras have often been physically or sexually abused themselves (frequently in childhood) and tend to see violence as an unavoidable part of life.

**Boundaries**

Often victims of abuse feel they deserve the abuse they receive. They have been convinced (by their partner or perhaps by society in general) that the abuse is their fault. It is not. To reinforce this claim, here are eight things that no one deserves:

1. No one deserves to be pushed, slapped, bruised, or kicked. No excuse makes such actions justifiable, whether drugs, alcohol, financial problems or family problems.
2. No one deserves to be verbally abused. No one should be called names or yelled at for no apparent reason.
3. No one deserves to have possessions damaged (dishes thrown, clothes torn) or gifts destroyed. These things don't automatically become “his” just because he paid for them from a joint checking account.
4. No one deserves to be interfered with in coming and going. You do not need to be told when you can or cannot leave the house, go shopping, or go to school.
5. No one deserves to be followed, harassed, or spied upon. As an adult, you have the right to go where you want, and spend time the way you choose.
6. No one deserves to be ridiculed, put down, made fun of, or belittled. This applies both at home and in public.
7. No one deserves to be emotionally starved. Everyone has emotional needs: to love, to be loved, to care and be cared for, to need others and to be needed by others. This involves more than just one person who is demanding your time and attention.
8. No one deserves to be isolated. You deserve to have a community of people around you rather than just a spouse who dominates your life.

Each person has rights that should be asserted to prevent abuse from taking place. Here is a short list of those rights:

1. You have the right to be treated with respect. All are created in the image of God (Gen. 2:26-27) and have value and dignity. You deserve respect regardless of your economic status, race, religion, or sex.
2. You have the right to be heard. You have ideas and opinions and should be free to express them.
3. You have the right to have a support system. You shouldn’t have to depend on one person in your life to provide all your emotional needs and who cuts you off from the rest of society.
4. You have the right to come and go as you please. You should be able to make choices about what you do with your free time.
5. You have the right to have privacy and space of your own. You don’t give up those rights when you get married or when you begin to have children.
• You have the right to maintain a separate identity.

Each of these rights are important in establishing boundaries in a relationship. These are key components in preventing abuse.

**Myths of Abuse**

Let’s turn now to some of the myths of abuse.{6}

One myth is that victims of abuse come from lower-income families with little education. In reality, victims of domestic violence come from all walks of life. Race, religion, socio-economic background are no predictor of abuse. Victims of abuse may be well-educated or uneducated, professionals or common laborers.

A second myth is that victims stay in abusive relationships because they like being abused. That is simply not true. Many have been conditioned to accept beatings because they are blamed by their abusers, but they do not like being beaten. Many victims actually “accept abuse as common in relationships.”{7}

So, why don’t victims leave? The answer to that is often quite complex. Many women believe they cannot leave because “He can’t live without me.” They may fear he will have a nervous breakdown, commit suicide, or lose his job.

She may believe that the children need a father, rationalizing that an abusive father is better than no father at all. And she may think she cannot make it alone in the job market.

Many women fear they will be killed if they leave an abusive relationship. And that fear may be justified. Studies show that battered women are more likely to be killed after leaving an abusive relationship.{8}

Abuse victims also convince themselves that things are going to get better. Hope springs eternal, and there is always the hope that with the right changes and hard work, abuse will go away. Sadly, it does not.

A third myth is that violence happens mostly between strangers. Contrary to popular belief, a woman’s greatest risk of assault is from an intimate partner. Statistics from the Department of Justice indicate that women are attacked seven times more often by offenders with whom they have an intimate relationship than are male victims of violence.{9}

A fourth myth is that abuse is not a major problem. Domestic violence is one of the most serious health problems today. As we have mentioned, it affects every socioeconomic segment of society. “Federal officials estimate that domestic violence costs U.S. firms $4 billion a year in lower productivity, staff turnover, absenteeism, and excessive use of medical benefits.”{10}

**What the Church Can Do**

Domestic violence is pervasive in our society and crosses all socioeconomic levels, religious belief, and cultural backgrounds. Abuse affects our lives, our homes, and our society. Is there anything the church can do to deal with this important issue? Here are a few suggestions.{11}

First, pastors and church members should be aware of the extent of the problem. I have provided some social statistics to demonstrate how pervasive abuse is within our society. It isn’t a problem to be ignored or addressed through simple clichés.
Second, pastors and counselors need to help abuse victims set boundaries in their lives. Battered women often find it difficult to make choices because someone else has been making decisions for them. Many women who live in violent homes went from their father’s house straight to their abuser’s house. They never have had much experience in making their own personal choices.

If you are seeking to help an abuse victim, you should encourage her to make her own decisions. Resist the temptation to rescue and take over her life. She needs to feel empowered not helpless. At the same time, you can provide suggestions about finding a family counselor or a domestic violence agency.

Third, if you are a pastor, a counselor, or just a caring friend, you can provide counsel and comfort. She needs to hear from you that she doesn’t deserve to be abused. Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, and don’t let her convince herself that the abuse will go away.

Fourth, be prepared for crisis intervention. Quick action may be necessary to protect her and her children. Ask her to describe the circumstances of the last two or three beatings. What preceded his attack (drugs, alcohol, argument)? Where is her relationship right now?

A pastor or counselor who receives a crisis call only has a few moments to discern the extent of the threat and appropriate actions that should be taken. Can she find her way to a safe place immediately? Do you have a place for her to go, if necessary?

Sometimes the crisis arrives at your office or home. A pastor, counselor, or caring friend may need to arrange for medical attention and a safe place away from the abuser.

If the couple is separated, she may be stalked by her abuser. She needs to know who can protect her and how to contact legal services.

Fifth, the church should address this important issue of domestic abuse. By speaking to this issue, we break the silence surrounding abuse and confront it with biblical principles. The church should hold batterers responsible for their actions. Intervention, confrontation, and tough love should be tools used to fight abuse in our communities.

If the batterer is a member of the church, then Matthew 18 provides a model for confronting “offenders” within the church. Galatians 5:22-25 talks about the fruit of the Spirit with includes kindness, gentleness, and self-control. These and many other verses provide a model for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Christians have an important role in dealing with abuse within our society.

Notes

5. A more detailed list can be found in Mary Marecek, Breaking Free from Partner Abuse (Buena Park, Calif: Morning Glory Press, 1999).
7. Eve Buzawa and Carl Buzawa, Domestic Violence: The Criminal Justice Response (Thousand Oaks,
Trash Your Marriage in Eight Easy Steps - A Christian Perspective

Sue Bohlin helps us take a biblical perspective on eight activities and attitudes that will tear down our marriage. Fortunately, she also provides us eight Christian alternatives that will help build up our marriages.

The divorce rate is at an all-time high, and marriages are falling apart everywhere you look. Marriages of church-going people are crashing and burning especially fast. There are forces in our culture that contribute to marriage stresses such as pornography, the prevalence of drivenness, two-career families, and the dynamics of the blended family. But people also make foolish choices to destroy their marriages from within.

Talking about the family, Proverbs 14:1 says, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.” Ephesians 5:28 exhorts husbands to love their wives as their own bodies, nourishing and cherishing them. God’s plan is that we treasure and cultivate our marriages, but it’s very easy to trash them instead. Let’s take a tongue-in-cheek look at eight ways that people trash their marriages.

Be Selfish

The first step is to be selfish. My pastor once said that the AIDS of marriage is justified self-centeredness. Everything needs to revolve around you because, let’s face it, you are at the center of
the universe, right? If you find something you like to do that ignores your spouses’ feelings and interests, go ahead and do it! Too bad if they don’t like it! You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get!

Always insist on having things your own way. If you don’t get your own way, throw a tantrum. Or freeze your spouse out. Get your kids involved in this game by saying things like, “Would you please ask your father to pass the salt?” Don’t be afraid to withhold sex if your spouse isn’t letting you have things your own way. There’s a lot of power in that, so don’t waste it!

If there’s only enough money in your budget for what one of you wants, make sure you get what you want. Especially if you’re the wage earner, or if you make more than the other. Money is power, and don’t be afraid to use it against your spouse!

Make demands instead of requests. Wives, let your husband know that he will do things your way, or you’ll make his life miserable. Husbands, when you want your wife to do something, just tell her to do it. “Please” and “thank you” are for the kids. This is your spouse you’re talking about—they don’t need it. Save all your courtesy for strangers; don’t waste it on the person you said you’d spend the rest of your life with.

What we really mean to say:

Selfishness is guaranteed to hurt marriages, so ask for God’s help in putting your husband or wife ahead of yourself so you don’t trash your marriage.

**Pick at Each Other**

The second step is to pick at each other. If you know that something you do annoys your spouse, be sure to do it often. And intentionally. When she complains about it, tell her to buzz off, it’s not as annoying as the stupid things she does to bug you. The more childish the annoying habit, the better.

Be critical of the smallest thing the other one says and does. Don’t let your spouse get away with anything! Stay vigilant for every little offense. Be sure to address these small details with an air of superiority . . . unless it works better for you to act like a martyr, as if you deserve the Nobel Prize for putting up with someone who doesn’t squeeze the toothpaste from the end.

Always get the last word when you’re arguing. Dr. Phil McGraw has said that the most accurate predictor of divorce is when people don’t allow their partners to retreat with dignity. So make your spouse feel whipped and defeated at the end of a fight. As long as you win, that’s what matters.

**Let The Kids Be More Important**

A third step to trashing your marriage is to let the kids become more important than your spouse. Moms, make your husband feel left out of the intimate, secret relationship between you and your baby. As the baby grows, continue to draw the line where it’s you and your child on one side, your husband on the other. Keep your Mommy hat on all day and all night. Your kids don’t care if your hair is brushed and if you put on perfume and a little makeup before Daddy comes home, so why should he?

Dads, invest all your energies into making your child succeed at what he’s good at, or what you want him to be good at. Squeeze out Mom so that you will be your kid’s favorite parent. Work so hard on homework and school projects that there’s no time for family time.

Let the kids and your other priorities crowd out your “alone together” time. Date nights are for
unmarried people! In order to be fulfilled as a person, it is essential to invest all your energies in parenting, career, housework, church commitments and hobbies, so don’t worry if there isn’t enough time left over for the two of you. It’s no big deal. There’s always tomorrow. Or next year.

What we really mean to say:

Hey! If you find yourself doing these things, stop! You don’t have to trash your marriage!

**Show Disrespect**

Show disrespect for your spouse, especially in public. One of the best ways to disrespect your partner is ugly name-calling, especially about things he or she can’t change. However, the old standbys of “stupid,” “fat,” “ugly,” “weak,” and “loser” are always effective, too.

Complain about your spouse to your friends. It’s even more powerful if you do it in front of your spouse. Then, if he objects, punch him in the arm and say, “I’m just kidding! You take everything so seriously!”

There are a number of ways to show disrespect with nonverbal communication. Roll your eyes, cluck your tongue, narrow your eyes in contempt. The heavy sigh is a real winner, too.

Wives: Straighten out your husband when he makes a mistake, especially in front of others. Lecture him. Ridicule him: his feelings, his behavior, his dreams, his thoughts. Do everything you can to emasculate your husband. Husbands: Let your wife know you think your opinion is better than hers. Interrupt her when she’s speaking.

**Refuse to Meet Emotional Needs**

Another easy way to trash your marriage is to refuse to meet your spouse’s emotional needs. Men and women need different things from their life partners. Dr. Willard Harley discovered and examined a pattern in his excellent book *His Needs, Her Needs*. Husbands’ top needs, it turns out, are: first of all sexual fulfillment; second, recreational companionship; third, an attractive spouse; fourth, domestic support; and fifth, admiration. Wives, if you want to trash your marriage, ignore his need for sex and that you be there for him in leisure time. Blow off his desire that you look your best and he can be proud that you’re his wife. Make your home as stressful and chaotic as you can, and never, ever tell him what you admire about him.

Wives’ top needs are: first of all affection; second conversations; third, honesty and openness; fourth, financial commitment; and fifth, family commitment. So guys, if you want to trash your marriage, don’t show your wife you love and appreciate her. Don’t talk to her. Close off your heart to her. Make her constantly worry about finances. Don’t be a faithful husband and father.

Dr. Harley’s got a Web site, MarriageBuilders.com, that has a lot of good, practical information for
building strong marriages, so you’d better stay away from there if you’re not interested in being intentional and constructive!

Remember, we’re being tongue-in-cheek here. We want you to build your marriage, not trash it!

**Treat Your Friends Better than Your Spouse**

The sixth easy step to trashing your marriage is to treat your friends better than your spouse. Since a lot of men unfortunately don’t even have friends, this is something women tend to do more. Women know how to treat their girlfriends. They call them up just to encourage them. They drop off flowers for no reason. They send them cards, and they listen intently to whatever’s going on in their lives. They are emotionally invested in their friends. They are quick to mention when someone looks nice or does something well because women are usually good at affirming each other. If you want to trash your marriage, don’t do any of these thoughtful kindesses for your husband. If your girlfriend is having a bad day, go out of your way to take her a wonderful casserole and fresh salad and dessert . . . but serve your husband Spaghetti-O’s.

But husbands, if your wife needs you for something at home, and your buddy scores some tickets to a game, tell your wife “too bad, so sad.” After all, she’ll be around forever but tonight’s hockey game won’t. If someone at church or in the neighborhood needs something fixed, drop everything to take care of it, even if it means that the broken things around your house will continue to go unfixed.

**Be a Pansy**

Step number seven for trashing your marriage has two parts. Husbands, be a pansy. Retreat into the safety of passivity. Refuse to take initiative or responsibility in making plans or suggestions. That way, when things go wrong, you can say, “Don’t blame me! It’s not my fault!” These are great ways to trash your marriage.

**Be His Mother**

Wives, be a mother to your husband. When people ask how many children you have, say things like, “Two–three, if you count my husband.” Tell him to wear a coat when it’s cold and take an umbrella when it’s raining, because he can’t figure it out on his own. Be sure to say “I told you so” as often as possible. If he is passive or irresponsible, jump in and rescue him so he won’t have to deal with the consequences of his own choices. Make sure he feels three years old. Tell him how to live his life, down to the smallest detail.

What we really mean to say:

Please, if you find yourself doing these things, ask for God’s help in being constructive instead of destructive. We want to help you build your marriage, not trash it.

**When You’re Angry, Blow Up**

Let’s talk about one final way to trash your marriage. Yell and scream, or quietly say hurtful words; it doesn’t matter. Inflicting pain is the important thing. Call each other names in the heat of your emotion. Dredge up the past and bring up old hurts. You can hit or slap with words as well as with hands, and they each leave a different kind of lasting damage to your spouse and to your marriage. Losing control when you’re angry is a powerful way to hurt your spouse.
Build Your Marriage in Eight *Harder* Steps

Well, enough of ways to trash your marriage—how about eight steps to build it? All we have to do is look at the opposite of this article’s negative, destructive steps.

To build your marriage, fight selfishness by developing a servant’s heart. Commit yourself to acting in your spouse’s best interests. Do at least one unselfish deed for your husband or wife every day.

Second, instead of picking at each other, choose to let things go. Be grace-givers. Remember that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8).

Third, be intentional in keeping your marriage at the center of your family. Have regular date nights, and schedule times away to invest in the intimacy of your relationship. Go to a FamilyLife Marriage Conference (www.familylife.com).

Fourth, commit to actively be respectful to your spouse by never saying anything negative to other people. Be kind in your words and actions. Treat each other as courteously and with the kind of honor you would bestow on a stranger or a dear friend.

Fifth, talk about your spouse’s particular emotional needs. Read Willard Harley’s excellent book *His Needs, Her Needs*. Find out which ones are most important to your partner, and do everything in your power to meet them.

Sixth, treat your husband or wife at least as well as you treat your friends. Be as thoughtful and encouraging and affirming as you can possibly be.

Seventh: Ladies, resign as your husband’s mother. You married an adult; treat him with the respect an adult deserves. Men: Your wife needs a servant-leader—someone who refuses either passivity or tyranny—to love her as Christ loves the church.

And last, when you’re angry, express it wisely and constructively. Use words like “I’m angry about this” instead of yelling or hurtful silence. If you’re too mad to speak with self-control, wait till you cool down. And don’t go to bed without dealing with the situation (Eph. 4:26).

You don’t have to trash your marriage. You can treasure it instead.

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Laugh a Little: It’s Good For Your Health

Had a good laugh recently? Need one?

Stressful days can invite comic relief. Doctors realize that laughter can enhance physical and mental health. Now it seems even looking forward to laughter can be good for you.

WebMD reports that Lee Berk, MD, a University of California Irvine medical professor, and his associates have for years investigated how moods affect immune systems and illness. They’ve found laughter has a role in fighting viruses, bacteria, cancer and heart disease.
Stress can hamper your immune system; a good chuckle can help. Berk found earlier that watching a one-hour humorous video reduced stress hormone secretion and helped the immune system counter viruses and bacteria.

But there’s more: Berk now says the mere anticipation of laughing can help. He studied ten men, measured their stress signs, and told them that in about three days they would see a humorous video. In each man, spirits lifted before viewing the video.

Two days before the viewing, depression was down 51 percent, confusion 36 percent, anger 19 percent, fatigue 15 percent and tension 9 percent. Right after the viewing, depression and anger were both down 98 percent, fatigue 87 percent, confusion 75 percent and tension 61 percent.

Berk feels anticipating humor brightens life and affects health. He calls this influence the “biology of hope.” Berk says, “Positive anticipation of humor starts the ball rolling in a sense, in which moods begin to change in ways that help the body fight illness. We believe this shows that even anticipation can be used to help patients recover from a wide range of disorders.”

Moral: Planning humor can benefit your health. Watch a funny movie, spend time with humorous people. Tell your boss, professor, clergy or club chairperson to liven up their speeches a bit if they want healthy employees, students, or members. Put laugh-breaks on your calendar, since anticipation is part of the therapy.

A Jewish proverb observes, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” Paul, a first-Century follower of Jesus, emphasized hope: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope. . .” Those biblical writers have some good advice now and then, practical stuff for everyday life.

The other day, a friend sent what he claimed were comments from federal employee performance evaluations. Maybe because I’ve encountered a groundswell of administrivia-creating bureaucrats recently, some of the remarks left me roaring. . .and feeling much better. With apologies to the many capable federal workers, know anyone like this?

“Since my last report, this employee has reached rock bottom and has started to dig.”

“I would not allow this employee to breed.”

“This young lady has delusions of adequacy.”

“He sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them.”

“Got a full 6-pack, but lacks the plastic thing to hold it all together.”

Those biblical writers would probably tell me to pray for those who hassle me, advice I should heed. But this laughter-break lifted my spirits and got me going again.

So, laugh more. You’ll like it. And say, have you heard the one about. . .?

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Romantic Hyperbole: A Humorous Look at Honesty in Love

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

It would be a great way to express my enduring affection for my wife. I would find seven romantic birthday cards and give one to Meg each day for a week, starting on her birthday. It would continue a sweet tradition begun before we married.

Each card would have a simple picture that would tenderly convey our feelings for one another. Inside would be an endearing slogan or affirmation to which I would add a personal expression of my love for her.

I didn’t foresee that Day Three would bring an ethical dilemma.

I carefully selected the cards and arranged them in an appropriate sequence. Day One showed a cute puppy with a pink rose. Inside: “You’re the one I love.”

Day Two featured a picture of a little boy and girl in a meadow with their arms over each other’s shoulders. The slogan: “Happy Birthday to my favorite playmate.”

Day Three depicted a beautiful tropical sunset: bluish pink sky, vast ocean, silhouetted palm trees. You could almost feel the balmy breeze. Inside: “Paradise is anywhere with you”, to which I added personal mention of places holding special memories for us: an island vacation spot, a North Carolina hotel, our home.

I completed the remaining cards, dated the envelopes, and planned to bestow one card each morning of her birth week. Then reality happened.

You see, I had agreed to go camping with her for Days One and Two. Camping is something Meg thrives on—outdoor living, clean air, hiking, camp fires. It’s in her blood. Camping is something I did in Boy Scouts—dust, mosquitoes, noisy campers, smelly latrines. It ranks just below root canals on my list of favorites.

We camped at a state park only fifteen minutes from our home. On her birthday morning, she liked the fluffy puppy. Day Two, the cute kids made her smile. So far, so good.

Meanwhile, I was tolerating camping, doing my best to keep my attitude positive. The food was OK; the bugs were scarce. After two days, I was ready to go home as planned. Meg wanted to stay an extra day. We each got our wish.

Once home and alone, I pulled out Meg’s card for “Day Three,” the one with the tropical sunset and the “paradise is anywhere with you” slogan.

Should I give her the card? I had chosen to leave the campground. “But,” I reasoned with myself, “the slogan was true lots of the time.”

I settled on a compromise, a post-it note on the envelope explaining, “You may find that this card contains just a bit of romantic hyperbole.”
Might giving it a clever-sounding label defuse my hypocrisy?

The echoes of her laughter still reverberate through our home. I got off easy.

“Speak the truth to each other,” wrote a Jewish sage. “Speak... the truth in love,” advocated a first-century biblical writer. Wise advice for just about any relationship.

“Romantic hyperbole” has become a humorous gauge of truthfulness in our relationship, a test for honesty. Neither of us enjoys every location on earth. She feels some sporting events are a waste of time. I can get bored at shopping malls. But as long as we are honest with each other about our feelings, the bond seems to grow stronger.

That’s no hyperbole.

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Love Myths

Soul Mates

In this article we are going to focus on a few of the myths surrounding love and romance that can have a negative effect on dating and marriage. Some of these ideas have become so pervasive in our society that it may seem heretical to label them as myths. But as we will see, they can have a devastating impact if they are accepted uncritically.

The first myth is the belief that you will know when you meet “the one.” Of course, this assumes that there is only one person who is right for you–a soul mate you must find and marry. Garry Friesen in his book Decision Making & the Will of God (along with many other Christian writers) question whether there is only one right person for you to marry. But I will set aside this theological question to focus on some relevant practical issues.

First, is the problem of a false positive. We have all heard stories about couples who met and immediately one or both of them knew they were going to marry the other person. Often we call this “love at first sight.” But we don’t hear as much about the many other people who met, thought they had met “the one,” but later decided not to get married or ended up getting married and then divorced.

Certain people come into our lives and we immediately “click” with them. Why? We carry around in our minds a template of what that certain ideal person may be. It is influenced by our family background, our own expectations, books, movies, and personal experiences. When that template comes into our lives sparks fly. We may not even know much about that person’s social, family, and religious background, but we are immediately attracted to him or her. We may feel that he or she is “the one,” but over time our relationship may surface concerns that might be detrimental to a successful marriage. Unfortunately, many people can be blinded by a belief that they have met “the one” and thus ignore important warning signs.

Second is the problem of the false negative. We also no doubt have heard stories of couples who
weren't attracted to each other when they first met. Many didn't even like the other person. Only over time did they get to know each other and began to see admirable qualities in what became their marriage partner.

Pepper Schwartz in her book *Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong* (New York: Pedigree, 2000) says we are a romance-addicted society. We love movies with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, but life is more complicated than what is portrayed in movies with skillfully written plots, blended music, beautiful actors, and exotic locations.

Choosing a marriage partner requires more than romance and emotion. For every story someone tells of finding “the one” and experiencing “love at first sight,” there are many more where those initial emotions turned out to be wrong.

**Two Peas in a Pod**

The second love myth is the belief that you should be similar to your partner. This myth is quite pervasive in part because there is some truth to it. Obviously, there should be some common basis of belief within a marriage. The Bible warns Christians not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” (2 Cor. 6:14) And there should be some common areas of social and cultural similarity.

But I believe we should question the prevailing belief that your life partner should be the same age, height, and race while having the same interests, gifts, and abilities. As some marriage counselors have said, “If your mate is exactly like you, then one of you is redundant.” Strong marriages celebrate the differences and work to have each person’s gifts and abilities complement the other. One partner may be good with the finances. The other partner may be good in the kitchen. One partner may be good at details. The other partner may be able to look at the bigger picture and plan for the future. Each partner’s gifts complement the other partner’s gifts.

In many cases, having a similar partner can actually be a source of conflict. Kevin Leman has found that two “first-borns” bring their perfectionist tendencies into a marriage. They will often “pick” at each other leading to increased marital conflict. Does that mean that two first-born children should never marry? Of course not. But they might want to reconsider whether they want to marry someone who is so similar to them.

What about differences in age? Couples should obviously consider the implications of vast differences in age in terms of energy level, hobbies, activities, and friendships. But there is also good reason to begin to rethink the prevailing assumption that compatibility must be based upon similar ages. Once again different ages and life experiences might be a significant way to bring complementarity into a marriage.

The same could be said about difference in ethnicity. Not so long ago, society frowned upon so-called mixed marriages. Today, more and more marriage partners come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. While we still tend to marry people who come from the same social and cultural background, this trend seems to be changing.

The key point is this: you don’t have to be similar to your partner to have a good marriage. In fact, your differences might actually help you to complement each other in marriage.

**Annoying Habits**

Now I would like to focus on the question of whether little annoying habits are unimportant in a long-term relationship.
When we are in love, little things like bad manners or chronic lateness may seem insignificant. Besides, we reason, we can always change our partner later on so that this is no longer a problem. We may even convince ourselves that these little annoying habits are kind of cute.

Well, they may seem cute in the courtship phase of a relationship, but they usually don’t stay cute once you are married and have to deal with them every day. In fact, small habits often grow into bigger habits once they are indulged.

The book *Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong* describes a study done by Professor Diane Femly at the University of California-Davis. The researcher asked people why they married and then why they divorced. The reasons for both were often quite similar. The only difference is that what was once sweet had now turned sour.

For example, a person might say: “I married him for his incredible sense of humor.” When asked why they broke up, she might say: “He was always silly, he was a lightweight.” Another person might cite her partner’s creativity and spontaneity as a big attraction, but later said of her spouse that he was “a dreamer” who “couldn’t stick with any one thing, couldn’t plan anything ahead of time.”

So it wasn’t that these people didn’t know who they married. Their spouse hadn’t changed, but their tolerance of their habits had changed. What was a minor annoyance before they married, became a major reason for their breakup later on.

Frankly, I believe one of the real tests in a marriage are the minor annoyances of everyday life because they accumulate day after day. A quirky habit might be even attractive when you first encounter it, but with daily repetition can become annoying and irksome.

A related issue is the iceberg problem. Most of the mass of an iceberg is below the surface. Likewise, most of the really difficult problems a person may have will stay below the surface during the dating and courtship phase of a relationship. Many couples, in fact, awake on their honeymoons to an entirely different person than the one they thought they married.

Here are a few issues to consider:

- **Cleanliness:** what might at first seem like an admirable lack of vanity may indicate a general lack of personal hygiene.

- **Neatness:** although keeping things in order may seem like a small thing, it can develop into a major problem in marriage reminiscent of scenes from “The Odd Couple.”

The bottom line is this: consider the long-term impact these little annoying habits will have in your marriage, before you get married.

**Living Together**

Next I would like to look at the question of living together before marriage.

In our society today, cohabitation has become an extension of dating and courtship. Couples see living together as an audition for marriage, reasoning that you want to get to know someone intimately before you marry them. Although the logic seems sound, it not only goes against biblical injunctions but against sound sociological research.
A 1999 study by sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead released through the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University confirms earlier studies about the danger of cohabiting and added additional detail. They found that cohabiting appears to be so counterproductive to long-lasting marriage that unmarried couples should avoid living together, especially if it involves children. Whitehead says that living together is “a fragile family form that poses increased risk to women and children.”

Part of the reason for the danger is the difference in perception. “Women tend to see [living together] as a step toward eventual marriage, while men regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment.” And people who live together in uncommitted relationships may be unwilling to work out problems, and instead will seek less fractious relationships with a new partner.

The National Institute for Healthcare Research has found that couples who live together and then marry report less satisfaction in their marriages than other couples. Scott Stanley at the University of Denver has found that cohabiting couples who get married have a significantly higher rate of divorce than those who did not live together. (A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage. Josey-Bass, 1998)

Couples argue that living together will provide important information about how a partner will behave and interact once married. But a cohabiting person may be quite different from a person within marriage. Marriage is a commitment for life, while cohabitation is usually a commitment for a season. That makes a big difference in a relationship. It’s like the difference between being in a play and auditioning for the play. In the first example, you are in the stage production and working to make the play the best it can be. In the second example, you are trying out for the play and have much less invested.

Couples may also argue that they can live together and eventually get married when they are ready for children. But will that day ever come? The living together arrangement actually erodes a foundation of commitment rather than strengthening it. And if the woman becomes pregnant during cohabitation rather than marriage, it is less likely that the children will have a legal (and committed) father.

Living together before marriage may sound like a good idea, until you look at the facts.

**Got Problems? Have Kids**

Finally I would like to conclude by focusing on the idea that children bring a couple closer.

To begin, let’s acknowledge that Psalm 127:3 says that children are a gift from the Lord. Children are wonderful. A Christian family with children is delightful.

The issue here is the prevailing belief that bringing a child into a relationship that has problems will improve the situation. There is good evidence to believe that is not the case. If anything, a child can increase the tensions that are already present. Pepper Schwartz in her book Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong believes this may be the most damaging myth of the 25 myths she addresses in her book.

The fantasy that children will increase love and intimacy needs to be balanced by the reality that child-rearing also involves time and energy that can increase stress, fatigue, and worry. It will also decrease privacy and communication between partners. Unfortunately, many young couples may underestimate the impact of children on their marriage and be unprepared for the constant daily
attention necessary to be a successful parent.

While having a child may be one of the most intimate things a man and a woman can do, the erosion of intimacy after the child arrives often surprises many couples. Even before the child arrives, a pregnant mother often begins to feel fat and unattractive. Once the baby arrives, she must give most of her time and attention to the child. On the positive side, she is madly in love with the child but may tend to squeeze her husband out of the picture. On the negative side, she may be so exhausted from caring for a child all day that she has little energy left for her husband.

Even good marriages must work hard not to allow their marriage to be pulled into two parallel worlds. It is natural to begin to divide tasks and focus on those, but couples need to schedule “date nights” and “talk times” to make sure their two worlds intersect. Isolation is a natural drift in any marriage. Children and children’s activities can increase isolation if marriage partners don’t attempt to counter-program against the pressures that naturally will push a couple apart.

Couples should also plan ahead for a time when children are not a constant focus of the marriage. In my article on The Second Half of Marriage, I talk about the time when children begin to leave the nest. No longer does the marriage have to be child-focused. It should return to a partner-focused marriage. Even while a couple is traveling through “the valley of the diapers,” they should keep a clear focus on the need to invest time, energy, and emotions in their partner.

Children are a gift from the Lord, but couples should understand their impact on a marriage. If a marriage has problems, having children will not bring that couple closer.

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Boys Are From Mars, Girls Are From Venus: Raising Gender-Healthy Children

*Sue Bohlin begins with the concepts from John Gray’s best-seller and applies them to understanding and supporting our child’s gender to develop a healthy self understanding. Recognizing the wide variation among children, she is still able to apply biblical truth from a Christian perspective to give sound advice on this important topic.*

**Gender Differences**

John Gray’s best-seller *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*{1} woke up millions of people to the truth that men and women are different, and different is good. The politically correct lie that gender is a culturally bound social construct was shown to be just that, a lie, because life doesn’t work that way.

In this article I look at gender differences in boys and girls, examining the importance of supporting our children’s gender to encourage a healthy self-concept as a possible means of preventing the development of homosexuality. (While I by no means wish to oversimplify this very complex subject, there are nonetheless patterns that show up in many people who experience same-sex attraction.{2})
(Disclaimer: I do realize I am painting these gender differences in broad strokes. Not every boy and not every girl will follow along these lines. However, these generalizations are true for the vast majority of children, as well as adults.)

Boys get their sense of self from achievement. They’re wired to be self-reliant. One of my son’s first whole sentences was, “Me do it!” They think they get extra brownie points for doing things on their own. For boys, asking for help means admitting defeat, and being offered help means being disrespected. When I used to say, “Let Mommy help you” to my two sons, they would be offended and I never knew why. If I could do it over again, I would tell them, “Let’s see if you can do it on your own. If it doesn’t work, I’ll be glad to help.”

Girls, on the other hand, get their sense of self from relationships. Most everything is about people, and asking for help is a way to build a bridge to other people. When a girl is offered help, she often feels loved and valued. So when a Daddy from Mars lets his little girl struggle on her own, because that’s what a boy would appreciate, she can feel hurt and abandoned.

Boys are very linear in their thinking; they focus on one thing at a time. Girls are usually multi-taskers, able to juggle several things at once. Both of these are strengths. I finally learned to show respect for my boys’ one-thing-at-a-time kind of thinking by giving them my full attention when they were talking to me. Although I knew that I could focus on them even if my hands were busy, they didn’t think I was really listening. It’s also important for men to realize that girls can do more than one thing at a time without being disrespectful, like simultaneously embroider and truly listen to someone talk.

Boys, being linear, tend to focus on a goal, whereas girls can enjoy the process as well. I frustrated my kids so many times when they’d be dressed and ready for a soccer game and I’d think, “We’ve got 10 minutes before we have to leave! Let’s get the living room vacuumed!” They would be focused on the goal of playing soccer and I’d drive them crazy with my emphasis on the process of running a household.

Boys tend to be competitive and girls cooperative. That makes sense since boys get their sense of self from achieving, and girls get their sense of self from relationships. There has been a definite anti-male bias in many of our schools over the past several years where competition is seen as evil and hurtful, so it’s been removed whenever possible. This means educational policy has been directed against boys’ very nature. They often achieve more through competition, even friendly competition, and that includes building relationships. Boys (and men) bond best with other guys shoulder-to-shoulder, engaged in a competition or a common task. Girls (and women) bond best face-to-face. We need to support these differences for each gender to be who God made them to be.

Boys are action-oriented. Many little boys naturally throw themselves into a chair rather than sit in it. They are naturally active, which frustrates both parents and teachers, but the solution is not to drug them or try to turn them into girls. We need to change our expectations of what makes for acceptable levels of activity in boys, and provide safe channels for all that energy.

Where boys are primarily action-oriented, girls are primarily verbal. This verbal nature of females is not a design flaw; God, who defines Himself as “the Word” in the Bible, imparted that part of His own nature to girls and women. Girls’ very wordiness is what allows them to connect with other people, to be the relational beings that God intended.

These differences really show up when kids get hostile. Boys will often get physical when they’re mad or frustrated. The testosterone that flows through boys’ bodies is part of their physical hostility, and it needs to be respected. This very same tendency to hit or kick when angered is usually
channeled into the glory of adult masculinity where a man will fight to protect his family or his country.

When girls get hostile, they use their tongues. It’s not true that “sticks and stones can hurt my bones but names will never hurt me.” Unfortunately, more long-term damage can be inflicted with hurtful words than by hitting or kicking. That’s why it’s so important to teach girls what Proverbs teaches about the destructive power of the tongue,\(^4\) and to work at using their verbal skills to uplift and encourage and nurture.

**Follow God’s Rules for Marriage and Family**

Although there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for why homosexuality develops, many who struggle with same-gender attraction can identify unhealthy patterns of relating in their families as they were growing up.

One of the ways that the development of a homosexual identity can be prevented is by following God’s rules for marriage and the family.\(^5\)

**First, Both husband and wife have clearly defined roles.** Children need to see that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable, and there are distinct roles that men and women fulfill. They need to know that a man shows his masculinity by protecting and providing for his family, using his strength to serve them and not hurt them. They need to see the beauty of femininity expressed in their mother’s nurturing and intuitive capabilities.

**Second, The father is an involved leader, and is warm and affectionate toward his children.** All children, but most especially boys, long for their dads’ acceptance, praise and physical affection. When boys don’t get it, it creates an emotional void of a sense of intimate connection with a man, and a boy can grow up not comfortable with being male.

**Third, The mother loves and nurtures her family without being controlling.** Girls need their mothers to show them that being a female is a good and lovely gift from God, and boys need their mothers to love and respect them without smothering.

**Fourth, The father loves the mother.** In showing love for his wife, the father creates the climate in which a little girl can believe it is safe and good to be a woman, and men can be trusted. When a boy sees his father loving his mother, cherishing and protecting her, he sees a man going beyond himself, the glory of masculine strength. He sees that being a man is a good and wonderful gift from God.

**Fifth, The mother shows respect for the father.** For the daughter, her mother’s esteem for her father again shows that men are to be trusted, that women can enjoy and celebrate men. The mother’s view of the father can become her view of him—and her view of men in general. Many lesbians deeply believe that men are idiots or brutes, worthless and repulsive, and something desperately sad shaped that belief.

If a boy’s mother treats his father with love and respect, it says being a man is a good thing. But a weak father who accepts contempt, or a mean father who fights back, can both lead the boy to choose to identify with his mother and against his father. This just confuses his developing gender identity.

Following God’s command to love wisely and well usually produces emotionally healthy kids.
Affirm Children’s Gender

A wise person once said that it’s easier to build a healthy child than repair an adult. The best way to build emotionally healthy children who accept and enjoy their gender is for us as parents (and grandparents and teachers) to affirm boys in their masculinity and girls in their femininity.

Boys and girls are definitely created differently from conception, and we should support those God-ordained differences. Boys who are typically active boy need to hear words of affirmation and acceptance for what makes them boys. A friend of mine recently took her little boy for a walk down to the lake. Along the way she said, “Parker, let’s look for frogs and toads. Mommy is so glad God made you a little boy so you could like yucky things like frogs and toads.” When they got back to the house, his grandmother asked, “So how was your walk?” and Parker said, “Mommy’s glad that I’m a boy because I like yucky things like frogs and toads!”

Boys who are NOT typically boy, those who prefer quieter pursuits like reading and music and the performing arts, especially need to be supported in their masculinity. These boys can grow up to be the King Davids in our world, and we need them! I should also point out that these sensitive, quieter types, when cherished in their masculinity, grow up to be the best kind of husbands, and men with a shepherd’s heart. All boys need to hear their parents affirm their existence with comments like “I’m so glad God made you a boy” and “You’re going to make a fine man when you grow up.” They need to hear that a boy can be a good strong male whether or not they play sports and like rough stuff.

Feminine little girls need to be admired and cherished for their girlishness. A little girl in a new dress can be praised by her mother and friends all day long, but she won’t really believe she’s beautiful until her daddy tells her she is. And girls need to hear the “b” word—they they are beautiful. It’s a part of the feminine heart. Not every girl or woman is beauty-pageant material, but there are many kinds of beauty, and we all need to hear that we are beautiful. Girls who aren’t typically girly, the tomboys and “jockettes,” especially need to be appreciated for their particular expression of femininity by praising and encouraging them. They need to know that one can be a soft, feminine lady AND a strong leader or a great athlete.

Every child’s heart longs to hear “I’m so glad you’re you, and I love you just the way you are.”

Understanding Gender Differences

I think it’s crucial for us as adults to understand gender differences in children and support them with a sense of humor, not condemnation.

One of my friends tells of an elaborate classroom Christmas craft where the kids were to fill socks with rice, tie them off and decorate them to be snowmen—a craft created by mothers of girls. The boys filled the socks with rice, tied them off and gleefully announced, “Look! A snow worm!”

I remember hearing another friend informing her young boys, “We don’t roughhouse. We play quietly and gently.” She didn’t mean to, but she was trying to teach her boys to be girls. NOT a good plan!

Those who experience same-gender attraction, especially men, are usually uncomfortable and insecure in their masculinity or femininity. Homosexuality isn’t primarily a sexual issue, but an emotional one, and it often starts with not being comfortable or confident in the gender God chose for us. So it’s important to be on the lookout for signs that children might be struggling with their gender identity and may be vulnerable to developing a homosexual identity later:
• Kids who don’t fit in.
• Kids who lack a close relationship with their father, especially boys.
• Kids who wear clothes and play with toys associated with the other gender.
• Boys who are TOO good, everyone seeing them as “the good little boy.”
• Poor peer relationships, not bonding with other children their same sex, often lonely.
• Kids who are bullied and shamed by other kids.

In closing, let me give three suggestions for raising emotionally healthy children with a strong sense of gender:

• Cultivate warm, affectionate, respectful relationships—between husband and wife, and between parents and children. A hurtful relationship with the same-sex parent, whether real or just perceived, is the number one contributor to the later development of homosexuality. {6} Both boys and girls, but especially boys, need a daddy’s approval, acceptance and affection. Girls develop problems with gender identity from not being protected and cherished. They need to be encouraged toward feminine things with a close and loving relationship with Mom.

• Cherish and support your child’s gender. Understand the God-designed differences and tell them how special it is to be a boy or a girl.

• When you see patterns of inappropriate gender behavior, lovingly correct it. For instance, boys don’t wear girls’ clothes or makeup or jewelry. And boys don’t play with Barbies the way girls do. However, it’s OK to play with Barbies the way BOYS would! That would include physical aggression and sound effects as well as nurturing behavior.

God knew what He was doing when he chose each child’s gender, and we would be wise to support His choice.

Notes

2. For example, see Portraits of Freedom, Bob Davies [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 9-10. Also, I highly recommend Don Schmierer’s excellent book An Ounce of Prevention: Preventing the Homosexual Condition in Today’s Youth [Word, 1998].

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The Second Half of Marriage

Introduction

When children begin leaving the nest, marriages change and often couples are unprepared for those changes. In this article we are going to be looking at the book The Second Half of Marriage (Zondervan, 1998) by David and Claudia Arp. Suddenly marriages that were child-centered once again become couple-centered. Many marriages do not survive the transition. According to the National Center of Health Statistics, while divorce generally declined, divorces among couples married thirty years or more increased significantly.

In their book, the Arps describe eight themes within a second-half marriage. One is the need to transition from a child-focused marriage to a more partner-centered marriage. Without children as buffers, couples face the challenge of redefining their marriage. Either it becomes more intimate or it slowly disintegrates. A husband married for nineteen years said, “I’m fearful that when our children leave home, we will go our separate ways, because our priorities and interests are so different.”

Couples must learn how to communicate and effectively deal with conflict and anger. Couples often lose the ability to communicate in marriage because there is such an urgent focus on the kids and their needs and problems. One wife said, “The greatest stress in my marriage is lack of communication–just being able to converse at the end of the day. I always feel as if I’m competing with the computer, the newspaper, or CNN news.”

Couples in the second half of marriage must also learn to adjust to changing roles with aging parents and adult children. Your parents may have placed certain expectations on you and your marriage that you are still feeling in midlife. A wife married thirty-one years said, “Whatever I do for my parents, I can never meet all of their expectations. Yet I keep trying. I’d have to say unmet expectations are the hardest to deal with. I need to add that my expectations are the hardest to deal with.”

Reconnecting with your adult children is also a challenge. As children leave the nest, they leave behind certain requirements and expectations. Our relationship with them changes, and couples in the second half of marriage must reconnect with children who are now adults on a different level. Often we must learn to resist giving advice unless it is requested. And even when we give advice, we should mentally prepare ourselves for the possibility that our grown children may not act on it.

Here we will be looking at these eight themes of second half marriages and discuss the challenges of each of them. We will view them from the kaleidoscope of over five hundred survey responses used by the Arps in writing their book. We pray that this look at second half marriages will help strengthen your marriage no matter how long you have been married.

Expectations and Companionship

The first challenge is to learn to let go of past marital disappointment, forgive each other, and commit to making the rest of your marriage the best. All of us go into marriage with certain dreams and expectations. Some of these will never be realized. Are you willing to let go of unmet expectations and unrealistic dreams? You may never build your dream house or go on that exotic vacation. Are you willing to let it go? Can you accept those extra pounds or that gray hair or even no hair at all? Giving up lost dreams and dealing with each other’s imperfections is a positive step
toward forgiving past hurts and moving on in your marriage.

A wife married for twenty-five years said, “After twenty years of marriage, I finally realized my husband will never be home at 5 p.m. While this is disappointing to me, I simply had to let that expectation go.” Another wife said, “During times of testing and disappointment, we kept working on our relationship. We learned how to forgive each other and how to work things out. We are committed to our marriage and we never give up. That’s our secret.”

The second challenge is to create a marriage that is partner-focused rather than child-focused. When children leave the nest, couples often move from a child-focused marriage to an activity-focused marriage. Community or church activities may now take up the time and energy formerly devoted to children. As valuable as these activities might be, they still serve as buffers to a mutual, partnership marriage. In the second half of marriage, couples need to redefine their roles and functions. What previously worked may no longer be relevant. Marriage can be more personal and more fulfilling as you focus on the couple’s relationship rather than the children.

A wife married for thirty-three years said, “It’s important to build a good relationship with your spouse so that when the children leave, you have the underlying joy of focusing on each other and not on your adult children.”

Key to this is to develop what is called a “companionship marriage.” This has been defined as a socially registered commitment between a man and a woman where they seek to know themselves and each other as far as they are capable of being known. It also involves mutual affection and affirmation where they help each other grow and change in order to become the loving and creative persons they are capable of becoming.

These then are the first two of eight challenges in the second half of marriage. Next we will look at two more challenges.

**Communication and Conflict**

The third challenge is to maintain an effective communication system that allows you to express your deepest feelings, joys, and concerns. Communication is the lifeblood of a good marriage. But what do you do when the communication patterns that seemed to work in the first half of marriage seem inadequate for the second half? When children are gone, there are more spaces of silence, and there is often less to say to each other. Couples may wonder how they made it this far only to end up as quiet strangers in front of each other. Couples in the second half of marriage need to develop intimate and honest communication that focuses on their needs, wants, and dreams at midlife.

A wife married for eighteen years said, “My greatest fear is that when the kids are gone, we won’t communicate or have anything in common. I’m afraid of being left alone with someone who never speaks, pays attention, or ever touches me.” Another wife said, “The greatest frustration for me in my marriage is simply not being understood.”

The fourth challenge is to use anger and conflict in a creative way to build your relationship. Anger and conflict are part of any marriage. Mature couples need to learn how to process anger. Marriage must become a safe place to express your concerns in the context of a loving relationship. This challenge is critical because often the real problem isn’t the facts but the strong negative feelings we harbor. Once those feelings are dealt with, it’s easier to move on and resolve the conflict.

A wife of eighteen years said, “We had the divorce papers ready to sign a couple of times a number of years ago, but both times we looked at each other and said, ‘But I haven’t stopped loving you.’
Even when we couldn’t agree on virtually anything else, we have always agreed on that. Nothing we’ve been through was bad enough to kill the love we have for each other.”

Often the key to dealing with anger is to objectively state the problem and then begin to set forward the solutions. In the process, the couple can also identify what is at stake and what each partner has invested. Finding a solution to the problem is easier when both partners are committed to each other and committed to a mutually satisfying solution. Sometimes this will involve compromise and in other cases, it will involve showing love to your partner by accepting his or her perspective.

These then are the first four of eight challenges in the second half of marriage. In the next section we will look at two more challenges.

Friendship and Romance

The fifth challenge is to build a deeper friendship and enjoy your spouse. In the second half of marriage, we can deepen our friendship and become close companions. When we are in a long-term marriage, we become more familiar and comfortable with each other. When we acknowledge that we aren’t perfect, we can relax and enjoy each other. What are you doing to build your friendship with your spouse? Are you working to expand your boundaries and prevent boredom? Are you trying to put more fun back into your marriage? Fun and friendship are two key ingredients in the second half of marriage.

One wife married for twenty years said, “This year has been a time of growth for us as a couple. It started with lots of stress-overcommitment and relationship problems—but God helped us through it. We just celebrated our twentieth anniversary with a romantic getaway. We’ve become best friends again. Hope can be restored!”

In their book, the Arps provide some concrete tips for making the second half more enjoyable. First, take care of yourself. Sometimes our back muscles can give us a midlife wake-up call, so exercise and physical therapy should become a way of life. Second, pace yourself. Third, build relationships and maintain them. This is the time of life to beef up your friendships and develop a support system. Fourth, stretch your boundaries. Fifth, stay involved with life. Sixth, hang in there. When you are discouraged, don’t throw your life away.

The sixth challenge is to renew romance and restore a pleasurable, sexual relationship. Contrary to popular belief, interest in sex does not have to diminish as we grow older. Actually the research done by the Arps tends to indicate that sexual satisfaction increases rather than decreases with the number of years married. Couples in the second half of marriage need to do three things: protect privacy, cherish the love relationship, and renew romance. These are important priorities.

The Arps list six secrets to rekindle romance. These are: be affectionate, be a listener, be adventuresome, be playful, be in shape, and be a little wacky. As we grow older, the pace of life changes and there is a greater need to stay in shape by eating well, working out, and watching our weight. This is not only good for your marriage. It is good for your health.

These then are the first six of eight challenges in the second half of marriage. Let’s look at the last two challenges.

Adapted Relationships and Spiritual Growth

The seventh challenge is to adjust to changing roles with aging parents and adult children. As children leave the nest, we release them into adulthood. But it is also important to reconnect with
them on an adult level. At the same time, you need to balance relationships with your own parents. This will be difficult, especially if your parents did not successfully meet this challenge in their marriage. Whatever your situation, your relationship with your adult children and your elderly parents will affect your marriage. Accepting the circumstances can be key in building a strong second half of marriage. You can’t go back and change your family history, but you can make wise choices for the future based upon past circumstances.

The drain of family commitments can take its toll on a second half marriage. One wife of twenty-eight years said, “For me, the emotional drain of trying to be everything to everybody is affecting my relationship with my husband. There is no energy left at the end of the day for me to invest in our marriage.”

The challenge of rearing children and sending them into a world also affects one of the other challenges we have discussed: the challenge of communication. One husband of thirty years said, “We don’t have an empty nest yet, although two out of three are gone. We’ve tried to push our children out of the nest but leave the lines of communication open to advise and assist when needed.”

The final challenge is to evaluate where you are on your spiritual pilgrimage, grow closer to each other and to God, and together serve others. Our faith in God should make a difference in our marriage. The relationship of a husband and wife to God provides the foundation for a good marriage that will be tested by the changing circumstances of the second half of marriage. Couples should evaluate their spiritual pilgrimage and seek to grow closer spiritually to each other and to God.

A husband married for thirty-two years said, “The best aspects of our marriage are companionship, our faith in God, and our love for each other. We try to add to the other’s happiness by surprising each other with little gifts, a hug, a kiss, or giving a compliment—or just being thoughtful.”

We trust that this has been helpful to you as you seek to strengthen your marriage and grow closer to God. We believe you will grow closer to each other as you grow closer to God. May God bless you.

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“It’s Not Your Fault!”

There’s a great scene in the fantasy movie “Disney’s The Kid” where a middle-aged man, played by Bruce Willis, meets up with his little boy self. The two of them go to their childhood home where the boy learns the horrific news that his mother will die soon, and his father blames him. The grown-up version of the boy knows that he carried the terrible burden of guilt and shame about his mother’s death for years. He kneels down, looks his little-boy self full in the face, and assures him, “It’s not your fault,” lifting the burden from the little boy before he ever has to carry it. These four words, “It’s not your fault,” are truly one of the most powerful gifts an adult can give a child. This is a powerful truth that children need to hear and they can’t tell themselves; only an adult can give them this “special revelation.”

Children are naturally self-centered and they think everything that happens to them is connected to
them and their choices or their character. Of course that’s not true. Stuff just happens, but a child can’t know that. A little girl’s parents divorce and her world falls apart. She thinks, if I had obeyed more, if I were prettier or more talented, my daddy would still be here. She needs for both parents to say, “This is about us. It’s not your fault.”

A beloved grandparent dies. Or a pet dies, and a child blames himself. He needs to be told that it’s not his fault, and no matter what he thought—like not wanting to visit with his grandpa one afternoon—or what he did—like forgetting to feed the cat—he doesn’t have the power to make those kinds of things happen, and it’s not his fault.

My friend’s son has Tourette’s syndrome, and we were talking one day about how to help him handle it. I suggested she make sure he knew he wasn’t responsible for it, and she assured me, “Oh, he already knows that.” But that night, as she was tucking him into bed, she said, “You know this isn’t your fault, don’t you?” His eyes got big and it was like a huge weight rolled off his shoulders. With great relief in his voice, he asked, “It ISN’T???” My friend had thought he already understood, but we can’t ever assume kids own that truth until we give it to them.

And if children don’t know that bad things are not their fault, they can take on guilt that weighs heavily on them for years. Others react by wrapping themselves in shame. For example, when a girl is sexually abused, she feels dirty and broken, like damaged goods. She needs to be told, “It’s not your fault.” Even when those broken little girls are grown-ups, the little girl inside still needs for someone to tell her, “It’s not your fault.”

Has a bad thing—or something a child perceives as bad—happened to a child you know? Give them the gift they can’t give themselves, the truth that will set them free. Tell them it’s not their fault.

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**Marriage Test**

*Is your marriage in the danger zone? How would you know? This article provides a marriage test to help you evaluate your marriage and see if you might need to obtain information or counsel about improving your marriage.*

A few years ago I addressed the issue in an article titled, “Why Marriages Fail.” The material came from PREP, which stands for the “Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program” developed at the University of Denver. The material was originally published in a book entitled *Fighting for Your Marriage*, and has been featured on numerous TV newsmagazine programs like 20/20. There is also a Christian version of this material found in a book written by Scott Stanley entitled *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*.

**Marriage Test**

I want to extend that discussion by providing a test you can apply to your marriage. It is loosely based on a questionnaire developed by Howard Markman at the Center for Marital and Family Studies. There are fifteen questions you answer by giving your marriage points. At the end you total the points to see how your marriage is doing. If your total is positive, you are doing well. If it is
negative, then you may need to do some work and perhaps seek counseling.

The first three questions have to do with your background. Many of us come into a marriage without considering our previous family and marital backgrounds. The truth is that we are not blank slates when we get married. Our background does have an influence on our marriage.

The first question is about cohabitation. Living together before marriage could signal a lack of commitment. In fact, numerous studies show that living together can have a detrimental effect on a marriage. Often poor communication patterns are developed in such a living arrangement that carry over into marriage. Here’s how you score the first question. If you moved in before the wedding give your marriage a 1. If you waited until after marriage, give your marriage a +1.

The second question involves your parents’ marriage. Poor communication and conflict-management skills can be inherited from parents. If your parents had a poor marriage, give your marriage a 1. If they had a strong marriage, give your marriage a +1.

The third question involves a previous marriage that ended in divorce. It turns out that one of the best predictors for divorce is a previous divorce. Divorcing once could mean a willingness to divorce again. If you had a previous marriage, give your marriage a 1. If this is your first marriage, give it a +1.

**Religion and Finances**

The fourth question involves religion which can be the source of strength or strain in a marriage. Religion provides support for marriage and usually discourages divorce. But practicing separate ones can add strain. If you don’t practice religion, give yourself a 2. If you practice different religions, give yourself a 1. If you both attend church regularly, give yourselves a +2.

Question five concerns finances. Money is the number one cause of fights in a marriage. Frequently these differences can lead to marital disharmony or disruption. If you and your spouse fight about money, give your marriage a 1. If you generally agree about spending, give your marriage a +1.

The sixth question also involves finances. In particular it deals with income. Some men aren’t comfortable when the wife is the family breadwinner. If the wife earns more in your marriage, give yourself a 1. If the husband earns more, give yourself a +1.

The seventh question is about your current age. Simply put, older couples are less likely to divorce. If your current age is under 30, give yourself a 1. If you are over 40, then give yourself a +1. If you are over 60, give yourself a +2.

The eighth question is about the length of your marriage. The longer you are married, the less likely you are to split. If you are married less than five years, give yourself a 1. If you have been married five to ten years, give yourself a +1. If have been married more than ten years, give yourself a +2.

Well, that’s the first eight questions. As you can see these questions focus on all sorts of issues that engaged couples rarely consider, but can be significant indicators of marital success. Keep track of your score and see how your marriage is doing. Although this is not an exhaustive questionnaire, the answers to these questions give you a quick look at how your marriage is doing.

**Support and Family**

The ninth question concerns support for your marriage. A lack of support from family or friends for your marriage creates tension and can cause a couple to question their relationship. Was your family
supportive of this marriage? Did your friends support your choice in a marriage partner or were they concerned about your choice? If family and friends disapproved, give your marriage a 1. If family and friends approved, give your marriage a +1.

The tenth question revolves around changes in the family. Family additions or changes can impact a marriage. Having a baby, adjusting to an empty nest, or moving Grandma in adds stress. If you have had a recent family change, give your marriage 1. If there have been no big changes, then give your marriage a +1.

The eleventh question deals with conflicting attitudes. Opposing views on key issues in a marriage can cause division. Differences about commitment, beliefs, or expectations are just a few issues that can affect a marriage. If you mostly disagree with each other, give yourself a 2. If you are split about half-and-half, give yourself a 0. If you mostly agree, give yourself a +2.

The twelfth question concerns confidence. Feeling assured that relationships will survive anything can help couples through. If you are doubtful the marriage will last, give your marriage a 2. If you are pretty confident, give your marriage a 0. If you think your marriage will never fail, give yourself a +2.

**Marital Communication**

The thirteenth question involves marital communication. It’s best if a couple can talk openly about problems without fighting or withdrawing. If you always fight rather than talk about problems, then give yourself a 2. If you sometimes fight, give yourself a 0. If you mostly talk rather than fight, give yourself a +2.

The fourteenth question deals with happiness. Feeling fulfilled in marriage is critical. If you are unhappy in the relationship, give yourself a 3. If you are not consistently happy, give yourself a 0. If you are happy in a relationship, give yourself a +3.

The fifteenth question deals with sex. Being unsatisfied with frequency or quality can create tension in a marriage. If you are unsatisfied with your sex life, give your marriage a 1. If you are satisfied, give yourself a +1.

Well, that’s the test. If you have kept track of your answers to these questions, you should have a score. If your score is positive, especially if it is +5 or higher then your marriage is doing well. If your score is negative, then you may want to work on your marriage. That might mean reading a book on marriage, attending a marriage conference, or seek out counseling. That might be helpful even if you had a positive score, but it would be essential if you did not have a positive score.

As I mentioned previously in the article on “Why Marriages Fail,” you should not be discouraged by a negative score. The research does show which marriages might have trouble, but that does not suggest that there is nothing we can do about it. As the book of James reminds us, it is not enough to just believe something, we must act upon it (James 1:25, 2:15-18, 3:13). So let’s talk about what we can do.

**Steps to Change**

We have been talking about marriage and helped you to evaluate your marriage by taking a marriage test. The first few questions dealt with our marital background. Specifically the questions focused on cohabitation, your parents’ marriage, and previous divorce. We do not come into a marriage as a blank slate. Our previous experiences do influence the way we interact with our
spouse. Obviously, we can change our behavior but we have to make a concerted effort to do so or else we will fall back into patterns that may adversely affect our marriage.

Many of our other questions dealt with the current status of your marriage. This included such issues as religious background, finances, age, the length of your marriage, support for your marriage, changes in your family, conflicting attitudes, confidence, marital communication, happiness, and sexual satisfaction. Again, many of these factors can be changed with a desire and plan to do so. But if we do not change our behavior then we will fall back into patterns that could be detrimental to our marriage.

I hope you will take the time to act on the results of this test. Most of us go through life and go through our marriages on auto-pilot. We set the controls and then fall back into a pattern that is the result of our background and current circumstances. Perhaps this marriage test will encourage you to work on your marriage. Perhaps this test will show your spouse that there are some issues you need to address.

The sad social statistics about divorce show that many marriages fall apart for lack of adequate attention. Every year a million couples end up in divorce court. Yet if you asked them if that would be how their marriage would end, very few would have predicted it on their wedding day.

Most people get married because they want their marriage to work. Unfortunately, many of those marriages fail. Some fail because of poor marital communication. If you identify that as a problem, then I encourage you to read my article on “Why Marriages Fail.” If you want to identify other potential problems, I encourage you to take this test with your spouse and then talk about the results. I pray that you will use this test to alert you and your spouse to any danger signs and then begin to change your habits and actions so that your marriage will be successful.

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