

## **Five Essential Tasks for an Effective Marriage**

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As various couples come into my office seeking help in order to make their relationship more satisfying and to resolve their difficult problems, I am struck by how unique each couple is. No two couples are alike and the way that even familiar problems are presented differ from one couple to another.

Yet despite the uniqueness of each couple, I believe there are some basic elements that each couple needs to build into their marriage if they are to have a satisfying relationship. These common “marital tasks” are foundational, and if they are not present in the marriage, significant relational deficits will be present. Conversely if a couple is able to accomplish these marital tasks, the level of satisfaction will be enhanced. Let’s examine what these crucial marital tasks are.

### Building a Friendship Foundation

Perhaps the most basic task in working toward a satisfying marriage is to create and maintain a foundation of friendship. Some couples have never experienced this in their relation while other couples seem to have lost this along the way. But without a sense of husband and wife also being “good friends”, growing distance within the marriage seems inevitable. John Gottman, noted marital researcher, has stated that “happy marriages are based on deep friendships,” and goes on to say that this friendship reflects a mutual respect for and enjoyment of one another’s company.

So what does this friendship look like and how do we attain it? Think of the other friendships in your life. How do these relationships feel and how did you become friends? Friendships start with something two people have in common that draws them together. Perhaps they are in the same area at work and discover a shared interest in following Nebraska football. Or while on a committee together for school they find that they’ve had a similar perspective on many of the issues that arise. They then build upon this initial common interest as they make time in their schedules for one another and plan to do certain activities together that both enjoy doing. Along the way, as they spend increasing time together, they gradually open up to each other more and more in sharing their lives and their hearts. A friendship has developed, and the more that these two people make a priority of spending time together and looking for different enjoyable activities and experiences to share with each other, the friendship deepens.

A marital friendship is like this too. As the couple makes a priority to spend time together, and finds interests and activities that they both enjoy, the friendship grows. Sometimes these common interests occur naturally—similar taste in music or movies, a shared desire for travel, or a shared passion for tennis. When these common interests are not present, it’s important that the couple work at creating new interests that they can share together. This may involve trying something that you never considered before or being willing to invest your energies in an activity that would not be your first choice. Yet as you make time to engage in these experiences together, that shared participation

creates a greater sense of closeness. This shared experience creates opportunities for more verbal self-disclosure. This leads us to the important task of communication.

### Taking Time to Talk and Listen

Communication is one of the most frequently mentioned concerns that couples identify as problematic when they come to counseling. But communication covers a wide range of issues, from “we only talk about surface issues” to “every time we try to talk it ends up in an argument.” Virtually every couple needs to improve some aspect of their communication.

The second key task for couples is to make sure that they are making time in their busy lives to really talk and listen to one another. Over-busyness is one of the great hindrances to closer marital relationships in today’s world. One result of being too busy and distracted by too many different things is that couples don’t take enough time, on a regular basis, to sit down together to share about their day. Intimacy as a couple requires that we know what’s going on with each other and how we are affected by the events of our day. When we feel truly listened to by our spouse, that sense of being understood draws us to them in a way nothing else can do.

I frequently recommend to couples, caught up in over-busyness and distance, that they set aside time at least twice a week to truly catch up with each other in an undistracted setting. During this time of 20-30 minutes, they are each to be sharing about what is going on in their lives but not to get into discussions of problems. Typical questions to discuss might include the following:

- “What has been the best thing that’s happened to me recently?”
- “What has been the hardest thing I’ve had to deal with?”
- “What feelings have I had lately?”
- “What kind of things have I been thinking about?”

While this kind of conversation may initially be difficult for some to have, it does get easier with practice. When couples engage in this regularly, they find that they get to know each other more fully.

One more word about listening: Listening is hard work! Rather than just being a time to catch our breath before it’s our turn to speak again, listening requires full attention to hear not only the words the other is saying but also the attitude and emotions behind these words. We can’t do this kind of listening if we are distracted or not working at it. Seek to be an active listener with your spouse.

### Keeping Romance Alive

Romance is frequently misunderstood in our society, often confused with sex. Yet it is important to understand and appreciate the role that romance plays in marriage. Each of us desires to know that we are valued and appreciated by others, especially by our spouse. To know that our mate recognizes our strengths, and values who we are and what we do, creates a greater sense of security in the relationship. Yet this is often a task neglected and overlooked in the busyness of life.

The essence of romance in a relationship is conveying to the other how special they are to us. When you let your spouse know how much he or she is valued on a day-to-day basis, you keep romance alive in your marriage. Expressing fondness, stating and showing affection, giving compliments and expressing appreciation for the things the other does are all ways that we convey a sense of valuing to the other. As you take these steps, your spouse feels more cherished and is more apt to respond in a similar way to you, drawing the two of you closer together.

Perhaps the secret of conveying these positive messages is not to rely upon feelings to prompt those expressions of valuing. I don't need to wait for a special kind of warm feeling in order to tell my wife how important she is to me and how glad I am to be married to her. She is important to me whether or not I feel it right at this very moment. I need to tell her this frequently. When I remind myself of my wife's positive qualities (rather than dwell on irritations or disappointments), I am more apt to have encouraging messages in mind to share with her. Making a priority to daily give one or more positive messages to our spouse would be an excellent goal toward keeping romance alive in your marriage.

#### Dealing Effectively with Differences

All couples have differences. Whether it is our different personalities, a difference in how our respective families handled anger, or the fact that we each prefer a different kind of movie, our differences impact how we relate to one another and may often result in different kinds of misunderstandings. And for the most part, these differences are not apt to change. So how do we deal with these differences so that they do not lead to greater conflict and hurt feelings? We deal effectively with our differences when we accept and appreciate these differences, and accommodate ourselves to each other.

**ACCEPTANCE.** We take a significant step when we accept that our spouse will be different from us in many ways. Whether it is our differing personalities, our varied family backgrounds or the differences that come from my being a man and her being a woman, differences are inevitable. And our differences do not reflect deficits. Just because my wife doesn't approach solving a problem in the same way that I do doesn't make her wrong and me right (or visa versa). The differences that we experience are seldom right vs. wrong but rather just a difference. If we can accept this fact, we have taken a huge step in dealing effectively with our differences.

**APPRECIATION.** A step beyond mere acceptance and tolerance of our differences is to appreciate the fact that we have this difference. Differences may frequently irritate or frustrate us. Yet we become a better, more complete person if we recognize that we benefit because our partner approaches life differently than us. So rather than complain that life would be much easier if he would communicate the way that she does, she could even thank God that he brings a different perspective to her life.

**ACCOMMODATION.** Beyond acceptance and appreciation is the recognition that some change is possible and helpful. While I, as an introvert, may not suddenly become Mr. Social, it doesn't mean that I can't work at becoming a bit more outgoing. The final step

in dealing effectively with differences is being willing to make some changes in the direction of your partner. You may never become just like they are in whatever area of difference that you are addressing but that doesn't mean that you can't become a bit more like them. And as you do, this smoothes the way for greater understanding between you.

### Ensuring a Relationship of Safety

The only way that I can truly be open in any relationship is if I feel safe. Otherwise I put up my walls of self-protection around me to keep from getting hurt. These walls also keep me from being able to fully emotionally connect with my spouse. So if increased intimacy is one of our relational goals, we need to find a way to ensure that the relationship is safe, physically and emotionally.

The first step toward ensuring that safety exists within the relationship is to identify those factors that threaten this safety, and eliminate them. Clearly any form of physical violence must not be tolerated. But beyond the physical, many other forms of emotional abuse or intimidation may threaten the sense of safety within the marriage. Negative messages such as put-downs, name-calling, sarcasm and threats make a relationship feel very unsafe. Explosive anger outbursts may intimidate the other. Even nonverbal messages can convey an attitude of disdain or contempt. As long as these messages are allowed to exist within the marriage, the marriage is unsafe. So even though it may be difficult to have this conversation, each couple needs to talk about the factors which threaten their sense of emotional safety with the relationship. Once you have learned what behaviors lead your spouse to feel unsafe, make it a top priority to eliminate these.

In addition to reducing the threatening behaviors in the marriage, safety is also enhanced when one feels more understood by one's spouse. The more understood and accepted that we feel, the more secure we are. Even in the midst of an argument, if we can make a priority to understand our spouse, we reduce the likelihood of the conflict becoming destructive.

### Taking the Next Step

These five essential tasks for an effective marriage relationship are key areas of needed growth for any couple. None of us will be perfect in all of these five areas, and as we move into different life stages as a couple we often have to rework some of these areas in which we may previously have felt that we were doing well. I would encourage you to pick one of these tasks that you believe needs further attention in your marriage. Commit yourselves to working at this on a regular basis. As you see growth taking place in this particular task, I believe that you will find a greater level of intimacy experienced as a couple.