

## Marriage Essentials

### **Q. Most important task of marriage?**

#### A. Becoming a couple

- Connection is the necessary ingredient, goal, and nutrient for the best marriages.
- Secure attachment between spouses is marked by a sense of trust, emotional availability, and sensitive responsiveness. There is a sense of security, protection, and comfort as each experience the other as accessible, responsive, and emotionally engaged.
- Adult attachment is similar to attachment in childhood. Just like children, adults, in the context of relationship, need to feel safe and cared for. Adults count on their spouses to be trustworthy, emotionally available, and sensitively responsive.
- Connection is perceived emotionally—even when emotions are not perceived clearly enough to put into words or conscious thoughts.
- Each spouse is to be a source of security, protection, and comfort.
- Being intimate is bringing your spouse in on what you are feeling and struggling with in the moment. It does not require a certain feeling.
- Great marriages are built by everyday (small) steps and interchanges, that nourish connection everyday, which is the key. How do we part and reunite? Is there daily expression of affection, admiration, and appreciation? Is there at least weekly extended time to talk eye-to-eye and heart to heart?
- Secure attachment results in the marriage becoming a safe haven, in which you do not need to prove yourself.

### **Q. Most important Bible verse about marriage?**

#### A. Genesis 2:18 “It is not good . . .”

- The importance of attachment/connection.

### **Q. Most important relationship process in marriage?**

#### A. Heart to heart conversation

- AKA Hold me tight conversations (Sue Johnson, 2008, *Hold Me Tight*. Little, Brown & Co.)
  - A.R.E.
    - Accessibility: Can I reach you?
    - Responsiveness: Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally?
    - Engagement: Do I know you will value me and stay close?
  - A deep level of emotional engagement (“Naked without shame.”)
  - What am I most afraid of? - Requires exploring below the surface emotions. Three levels of emotions: Surface or instrumental, secondary (about the primary), and primary (the deepest). Example: Anger, sadness, and shame; or, Sadness, anger, and guilt.
  - What do I need most from you? – being able to openly and coherently speak your needs, inviting your spouse into a new dialogue marked by A, R, & E.
  - “Love is improvisation.” But we prefer clear rules and guidelines. The best guide is each other’s emotions.

## Q. Why is this hard?

A. There are many reasons. Two important reasons are:

- Spouses find it difficult to access deeper feelings to include them in the relationship

Instrumental/Obvious Feelings Do we talk off the top of our hearts? Or do

Secondary/Covered Feeling

we drill down into the feelings and include

Primary/Buried Feeling

these things for a fuller heart to heart conversation?

- Couples get stuck in an ineffective or even destructive pattern of conversation
  - Attachment theory proposes that when accessibility, responsiveness, and emotional engagement are reduced, attachment becomes insecure. Spouses respond to the insecure attachment with protest, clinging, depression, despair, and detachment. These counter-productive behaviors are an effort by insecurely attached partners to provoke some kind of response, hoping it will be toward better connection. Usually, couples get stuck in rigid patterns or negative interaction cycles until the underlying need for secure attachment is addressed.
  - Spouse's basic question is, "Are you there for me?" Not aware of the feelings that signal that the question is in play, spouses continue in negative patterns that appear to answer the question negatively to each other.
  - Insecure Attachment generates protest, attack or withdrawal, weakening attachment.
  - The repetitive, negative patterns erode the connection we feel with each other. The content of disagreements is not important, as the process of the disagreement is destructive to the emotional connection in the relationship regardless of how large or small the item discussed is. The longer spouses feel disconnected, the more negative their interactions become.
  - "The real problem is not the fighting, but the emotional disconnection" (SH, p. 93). Rigid interaction patterns create and reflect absorbing emotional states. The negative patterns can take over the relationship. This fits well with Gottman's research that it is not *negative* emotional engagement that predicts divorce, but rather a *lack of* emotional engagement.
  - The interactions of distressed couples are characterized by negative cycles where, for example, one partner pursues while the other withdraws. The therapist helps the couples go to the underlying emotions that keep them stuck in those rigid positions and negative interaction cycles.
  - "The way couples cope with their differences and conflicts—this interactional dance—is more important than the specific issues they fight about. It is the patterns of fighting they get stuck in while arguing that disintegrates the shelter of their home" (SHM, p. 93). The "music" that motivates the dance consists of the emotions of the spouses. Anger, fear, hurt, shame, guilt, and sadness, direct the steps toward or away from the other. The steps of the partner further fuel the emotions. The emotions of the other are the best guide for a spouse to know how to love the other. However, most often, we are seeing clearly only the steps of the dance, and not hearing the music of each other's emotions.

## Q. Where do we begin?

A. Decide together to work to stop the old pattern and replace it with one that builds connection.

- What to do with feelings that make us uneasy
- KEY-To be able to talk to your spouse about these feelings
- To be able to have a relationship about your relationship
- To be able to have a relationship about the changes you are experiencing together.
- Fear and uncertainty activate our need for connection.
- Our response at such times tends to be either anxiety or avoidance—going into overdrive or shutting down.
- In overdrive, tend to turn the uneasy feeling into something our spouse is doing wrong, turning him/her into an enemy
- In shutting down, turn her/him into a stranger

## **A Theory of Relationships**

(Based on the work of Daniel Wile.)

**GOAL**-With balanced hearts, turning our spouses into allies, by letting them in on our uneasy feelings, by letting them in on our wholehearted experience, we grow

Being intimate is bringing your spouse in on what you are feeling and struggling with in the moment. It does not require a certain feeling.

Intimacy is just a sentence away—but it is hard to come up with that sentence. It is hard because I am not very aware of my own internal states—and mostly I am fighting off my shame.

**Crossroads moment:** At any moment in your relationship with your partner, you can take one of three paths:

**Path 1. ATTACK** or defend: You express some element of what you are experiencing, but in the form of a complaint that has the effect of coercing, criticizing, or retaliating rather than of illuminating.

*“How come you always have so much to say to your friends and so little to say to me?”*

**Path 2. AVOID**, ignore, or downplay: You keep what you are experiencing to yourself and talk about something else.

*“Anything good on TV tonight?”*

**Path 3. CONFIDE** or listen: You bring your partner in on what you are experiencing; you take in what your partner is trying to tell you.

*“I’m jealous of how much fun you were having talking to Gail over the phone just now.”*

Turns your partner into an enemy.

**Triggers an adversarial cycle.**

Which is self-reinforcing. Each partner stings in response to feeling stung. Each feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding.

You can always come up with a rebuttal.

Turns your partner into a bit of stranger.

**Triggers a withdrawn cycle.**

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner’s carefulness, politeness, or walking on eggshells stimulates the same in the other much as whispering stimulates whispering.

Turns your partner into an ally.

**Triggers an empathic (collaborative) cycle.**

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner’s confiding, admitting, reaching out, and considering the other’s viewpoint makes the other automatically do the same.