



**BODY & MIND**  
**CONSULTING**

## **5 WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR MARRIAGE**



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Marriage demands work. A happy marriage exacts the very best of us. We can choose to respond to our spouse with love and charity—or to respond to our spouse in an unkind, out-of-control way. It is infinitely easier to look for what is “wrong” than what is “right” in our spouse. Above all, maintaining a successful marriage is a choice. While there are many more steps and details beyond those detailed here that can strengthen your marriage this can give a good starting point.

## 1. Have a clear goal in mind.

If you do not know what you want your marriage to “look like” you cannot strive to “get there” because you don’t know where “there” is. Visualize what you want your family and home life to be. Whenever challenges are encountered—with children, work, extended family- remember that the goal of building a strong marriage is the most important, meaningful part of life together on this earth.

## 2. Don't forget the fertilizer.

Your marriage is a living, growing entity. Little problems in marriage can grow to become destructive wedges if we do not keep them in perspective. The less time we spend together, the more those petty annoyances—little thorns in the garden of marriage—take on unrealistic importance. It is better to concentrate on the roses: the beauties around us in our day-to-day life. **REMEMBER:** It is far easier to see everything **WRONG** than it is to work to see what is **RIGHT** in your marriage.



One former client shared one way that they were able to nurture and grow their marriage: “My husband and I have found that when we have slacked off on having dates or spending one-on-one time together it is easier to focus on things that are irritating us. Sharing time together, particularly on dates, enhances our ability to overcome those little annoyances. But with the demands family, employment, Church obligations, kid’s extracurricular activities and a multitude of other obligations it is all too easy to let date time get crowded out if we don’t stay vigilant in emphasizing its priority. Finding little ways to spend time together make the difference. My husband and I are still each other’s favorite companions after 20 years of marriage, having a special needs child and enduring a host of other life issues. But that didn’t just happen. It requires thought,

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determination, and work to make time for each other on a regular basis.” This thought, determination and work to make time are the fertilizer for the growth of your union.

## 3. Choose how you will respond to your spouse.

Presumably when you met and got married you considered each other close—if not best – friends. If this truly is the case, then would your spouse ever intentionally hurt you? When you come to a rough and tough moment in life remind yourself: “He/She would not purposely do anything to hurt me.” This empowers us to be in control of our thoughts and responses, and it takes control from external circumstances. If there is even a sliver of concern that this is *not* the case then remedying it is essential to establish and foster trust in your spouse.

One client expressed how responding made a difference to his marriage: “When I worried about petty things, I was usually thinking of me rather than others. I really dug deep and had to realize I was comparing myself to others or worrying about what they were thinking of me or our family. But when I focused more on caring about others—especially my wife—life was more relaxed and pleasant for me and everyone around me. More important, my marriage started to grow again because a significant number of disagreements between me and my wife simply did not happen anymore. When I started to think differently about my wife, and realize I must change me before our marriage can change then our home life became so much better and I found I wanted to be home rather than at work.”

### -Pay attention to your beliefs and reactions

Problems in marriage don’t happen suddenly. Instead, infidelity is a subtle process. It does not begin with adultery; it begins with thoughts and attitudes. Each step to adultery is short, and each is easily taken; but once the process starts, it is difficult to stop. There are warning signs that can be seen in your reactions to situations with your spouse.

One couple I saw for marital counseling is an example of such a reaction. One lady, whom we will call Jane, came for counsel because she was frightened of her own feelings, which were inclining to an interest in other men. Jane and her husband seemed to have a “good” marriage, but she complained that over time she had gradually become bored with it. It lacked excitement; their personal relationship was unsatisfying, their conversations were guarded and sterile, and Steve didn’t seem to be interested in her anymore. What particularly frightened her was the realization that she flirted with men at her office and even playfully kissed one once. This forced her to realize her marriage was in danger.

Jane was suffering from the myth that “Once we are married the marriage will take care of itself.” But it won’t. Marriage is a dynamic interaction between two growing, changing people, and it requires constant focus on the quality of that interaction if the marriage is to be close and meaningful.

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Another myth I see played out in marriages is the belief “If the marriage is not successful, I should start over.” But success is not an instant achievement. By definition, marriage is a process, not a stage. Consequently, it will be more successful at some points than at others. Many people want or expect instant success in all dimensions of marriage; if any aspect seems less than perfect, one desponds and thinks, “I married the wrong person.” This attitude frequently turns one’s attention toward someone other than their marriage partner.

Finally, another belief I see is the naive thought that “Loving my spouse does not preclude the possibility of becoming involved with anyone else.” The task for every married person is to maintain loyalty and fidelity with one person: the spouse. It is inappropriate to feel and express to others the same love feelings one expresses to a spouse.

Many situations in work, in society, bring men and women together. Each of these occasions is also a time when emotional involvement with other people may ensue. Both men and women must be very clear about their marital commitments and must be committed to the process of maintaining fidelity within marriage.



Fidelity, like infidelity, is a process. Fidelity, the positive quality, is measured by the degree of loyalty, allegiance, and commitment between husband and wife. Infidelity, the negative quality, results from insufficient feelings of loyalty and allegiance. Any action that fosters inappropriate relationships with another person erodes fidelity.

This couple’s story—representative of several true stories—illustrates a growing problem creeping into some marriages today. A marriage can be placed in a precarious situation when one spouse forms a relationship with someone outside the marriage and begins to choose the company of that person or frequently shares personal information with that person rather than with a spouse. Furthermore, the problem can occur with either husband or wife. “Jane” could just as easily be “John.”

Fidelity includes refraining from physical contact—but that is not all. Fidelity also means complete commitment, trust, and respect between husband and wife. Inappropriate interactions with another person can erode fidelity.

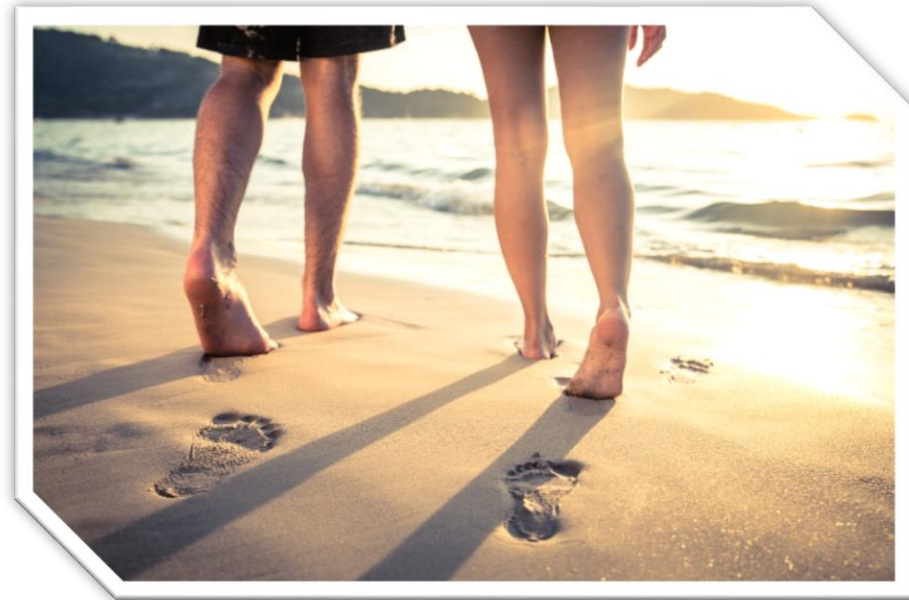
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## 4. Communication is essential

Dwelling on negative thoughts about a spouse or about wrongs inflicted fosters unhappiness, damages friendship, and can eventually lead to divorce. Each spouse must feel safe and free to openly and honestly express thoughts and feelings. The sooner concerns are expressed to one another, the sooner harmony can be restored to the marriage.

### -Don't "air your laundry"

Marital difficulties are best kept between the partners for resolution. It seems to be an almost natural tendency to avoid marital conflict directly while gaining a feeling of support through the counterfeit relief of unloading emotional burdens on friends or family. It is tempting to run to family, parents, friends and others who love us to get some opinions, feedback or just to vent about a situation. This is absolutely destructive to a healthy marriage.



One client expressed one step to her restoration of positive communication: “Early in our marriage, I noticed that as my friends got together, conversation easily slipped into husband bashing. Then these conversations were shared with other spouses. Although the “venting” was meant to be in the context of girlfriends conversation I realized that these conversations were taking a life of their own. I began to question almost everything in me and my spouse’s communication. That is what brought me to your office--- I

thought that divorce was imminent. I made a commitment never to criticize my husband behind his back. I had to ask myself, “How would I feel? Would I want my husband to complain about my weaknesses to others?” Hurt, betrayal, and mistrust are all consequences of this verbal disloyalty.

### -Leave the luggage at the curb

Over the years I have seen even the best marriages crumble under the festering of past wrongs and circumstances. This “baggage” becomes heavy—when we carry this “bag of poop” around waiting for the precise moment to hit our spouse over the head with all these wrongs, complaints, imperfections—the basic infrastructure of your marriage can be rocked.

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It takes courage to bring issues directly to our spouse. Our confidence in our marriage grows when we approach the situation with the humility and a willingness to see our own imperfections, not just the “wrongs” or “flaws” of our partner. When we discuss—rather than fester—issues it allows us to avoid verbal disloyalty and hurt feelings and pave the way toward lasting resolutions.

## **-Accept the reality that differences of opinion occur, even in the best marriages.**

True partnership between two imperfect people builds marital unity. Respecting the opinion of one’s spouse honors and builds that individual. When two spouses “strive to complement” each other. Complement, spelled with an e, not an i, means to complete, **not** to be exactly alike. Two people who are not exactly alike in thought can still build a harmonious, enduring marriage. It is **more important to be loving than to be right.**

## **5. Remember that we are growing to be one.**

Being one does not mean we lose our individuality. In fact, being one in this way enhances us as individuals. It means that we share the same purposes, the same desires, the same goals, but we work to accomplish them using our individual talents and personalities.

One client shared an example of this when she gave birth after a particularly long and painful labor and delivery of their daughter:

“This was our third child and the beginning of labor brought excitement with each pain. I was so certain it would go quickly since this was our third-- But as hour after hour ticked by into the night, the continuing contractions chipped away at my excitement and optimism. Nurses found a bed where my husband could rest, but in a few hours the pains intensified and I needed him. Just as I sent a nurse to find him, he walked into my room, awake and already aware of my needs. That awareness continued as 14, 15, 16 hours crawled by. Unable to carry on a conversation, I would think a thought and my husband seemed to know how to respond. When I needed ice chips, he was there to spoon them into my mouth. When I ached, he was there to massage my shoulders. When I didn’t know if I could go on, he was there to pray for me. And then, after 17 hours, when our daughter was delivered and placed in my arms, these words came to my mind a moment before my husband whispered the same ones into my ear: “We did it!” So many of the needs that my husband met without my asking were physical, but I think I could not have endured the physical experience without the spiritual oneness we shared that night. This oneness is just one of the things my husband and I are learning as we share this life together. Just as spiritual oneness helped bring the miracle of life to me and my husband on the day of our daughter’s birth, oneness in our marriage will help bring the blessings of being together forever.”

One-ness means we share each other’s joys and pains. It means that before we think of our own needs, we think of our spouse’s. If as individuals we try to meet our spouse’s needs consistently, our spouse will be more likely to try and meet our needs. It is contagious.