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SP487-E-Strengthening Your Marriage

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PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

STRENGTHENING Your Marriage

A bad marriage can make parenting, and life in general, more stressful. This publication is one of a series on parenting and is designed to help parents strengthen their marriages. A strong marriage can help parents be more effective. Of course, single parents can also be effective in their parenting.

Is marriage hard or easy?

When people first marry, they often think they have never been happier. They believe they will always be in love and will always enjoy their partner. Yet within a few years about half will be divorced. Many who remain married will not be enjoying their marriages. Maybe the message of so many divorces is that marriage is hard.

What kind of marriage do you have?

There are many kinds of marriage relationships. Consider what yours is like.

Conflicted. In one kind of marriage relationship there is a lot of conflict: fighting, nagging, arguing, and quarreling. Sometimes people in this kind of relationship fought even before they got married. Much of the relationship may revolve around proving that the partner is wrong or is to blame.

Worn-out. Another kind of marriage is the worn-out relationship. At one time the spouses may have enjoyed each other, but then the excitement died away. The relationship has become lifeless, boring, and empty.



Growing. A third type of marriage is the growing relationship. The partners continue to enjoy each other and to build their relationship. They enjoy being together. They have problems, but they work on them together.

Even if you are very unhappy with the kind of marriage relationship you now have, it is likely that you can improve it. You may have become discouraged in the past with trying to make your marriage better. Even if you haven't been able to make the changes in your marriage that you would like, there are things you can do that will make a difference.

Growing relationships have certain things in common.

Most of us would like our marriages to be growing rather than worn-out or conflicted. There are several things that couples with growing relationships have in common.

Partners in a growing relationship are committed to a strong marriage.

While these couples know that marriage can be hard, they continue to find ways to solve problems and to build their relationship with each other. They keep trying. They may change both their expectations and their behavior as the relationship continues to grow.

Some people believe that marriage should be based on a strong feeling of love. But the feeling that we sometimes call love comes and goes. Some days we love everyone. Some days we hate everyone, including our spouse. A wiser definition of love might be a commitment to continued growth with another person. Even when our feelings are negative we can be true to our commitment.



Partners in a growing relationship enjoy doing things for each other.

She may send him notes. He may do the laundry. But they do things for each other that send the message of love.

One of the difficulties in marriage is that sometimes one partner is trying to send a message of love, but the other one isn't getting it. For instance, if a husband likes to buy little gifts for his wife but she worries about balancing the budget, she may not appreciate the gifts. Or, if he does not help around the house, she may not feel that he loves her no matter what he says.

It doesn't do any good to be angry when your partner doesn't seem to get the message from the things you do for him or her. Rather than be mad, see if you can figure out what language of love works for your partner. Think about the things you've done that your spouse appreciates most. Taking time to listen? Helping out? Writing or telling your love? Giving a foot massage at the end of the day? In order to be more effective in showing love for your partner, you might ask him or her to describe the things that give the message of love. Pick one or two that you can work on. Send a message of love every day in a way that works for your partner.

Partners in a growing relationship continue to grow individually.

Do you make time for your hobbies? Are you continuing to learn? Do you take time to develop your talents? Taking care of yourself gives you more to contribute to a growing relationship. Some research also suggests that taking part in religious activities together can strengthen a marriage.

It's a good idea to list some of the things you love to do. Then consider whether you are making a place in your life for the things you love. Whether your loves include woodworking, cooking, reading, or talking with friends, find time for things you love.

Partners in a growing relationship use conflict to improve the relationship.

When people first date or get married, they often overlook or ignore the things that bother them in each other. After a while they may be more bothered by those things. They may think only about the things that bother them. They may become angry and wonder why the spouse does such awful things. But sometimes the spouse has not changed. The other has just focused on the annoying actions. There will always be differences anytime two people share their lives as much as a husband and wife. But those differences can help us to grow toward a stronger and more balanced relationship if we use the differences wisely. There are several rules to remember if you want to keep your differences from ruining your marriage.

Let some things go.

Some things aren't worth fighting about, and some times are bad times for fighting. Sometimes we let little things bother us until they are all we think about. It may be best to overlook little differences. Sometimes we are bothered because we're tired or sick. Or we may feel very angry. But if we are tired or in an angry mood, we might do better to save the discussion until after a good night's sleep. When we start pouring out our anger, we may just get more angry and damage the relationship.

Talk to find answers rather than to blame or hurt your spouse.

Discussions are for finding answers, not for blaming, punishing, or hurting our partner. It is not very useful to figure out who started the problem. Each partner can blame the other. It is damaging to try to hurt or punish your partner.

The reason to discuss

problems is to find better ways to make the marriage work. Ask your partner questions like "Would it help if I (describe something you can do to improve the relationship)?"

Make small, specific requests.

To say "The way you laugh bothers me" won't change anything for the better. Instead, make specific requests. "Will you help me prepare dinner?" "Will you watch the children while I clean up?" Ask for things your partner can do and will probably be willing to do.

Use your differences in helpful ways.

We're all different from each other. We can let the differences bother us, or we can use the differences. If I am bothered by messes and clutter, maybe we can agree that I'll be in charge of straightening up the house. Our differences can lead to balance—or to conflict.

Allow your partner to be imperfect.

One wise lady said that she decided to allow her husband ten faults. When he did something that bothered her, she said, "Well, there's one of his faults. I can live with it." Allowing our partners to have faults can make life much easier.

Sometimes we also expect our partner to be like one of our parents or heroes. That does not allow our partner to be himself or herself.

Recognize the difference between preferences and principles.

Preferences include our favorite color, our favorite sandwich, the temperature we prefer for the bedroom. Principles involve standards. We don't believe in hurting other people. We believe in being responsible. Sometimes in marriage we confuse principles and preferences. We think our partner is cruel because of disagreements over television programs, use of money, use of free time. Your partner's way is not necessarily better or worse than your way. Try to find the values you have in common to help you make decisions that satisfy both of you.

Take time to understand your partner.

It's common for people to judge the goodness or smartness of what other people do. But a lot of conflict can be avoided by taking time to understand rather than judge. It's hard to do. Most people never get good at it. But the partner who takes time to understand can be a more loving, effective partner.

For example, if your partner is bothered about something, it's not helpful to say, "That's stupid" or "You'll get over it" or "Why can't you grow up?" When a person is hurting, it's more helpful to say, "That sounds very frustrating" or "Did you feel disappointed?" If you're interested in developing the talent of being more understanding, you may want to read Extension SP 488-B in this series, "Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children."



The principles in that publication apply to both parent-child relationships and relationships between marriage partners.

Build many good experiences into your relationship.

Your relationship must be nurtured if it is to grow. And good, shared experiences nurture relationships.

Some couples have a date every week. The dates can be inexpensive, like going to the library or taking a walk. But it's good to find something you enjoy together. Maybe you and your partner can take turns picking the activity.

You can enrich your marriage.

Marriage partners often get so busy with day-to-day struggles that they neglect to share their warm feelings with each other. Discussing together your answers to the following statements can help you understand each other better and feel closer to each other. If one partner is angry, these exercises should not be used as an opportunity to hurt or get even.

The angry partner may need time to relax or get in a better mood.

Relax together and take turns telling your partner how you feel in response to the following statements.

Some things you do that help me feel loved are:

Some things I do to show that I love you are:

Some additional things you could do that would help me feel loved are:

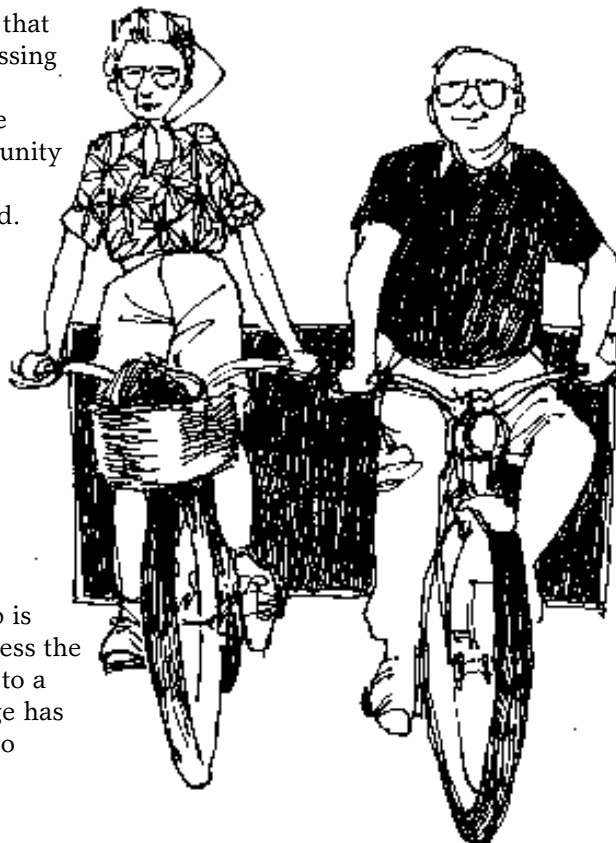
The qualities that first attracted me to you are:

Some of the tender feelings I have that are hard to share are:

Some of our strengths as a couple are:

Some goals we can set to make our relationship stronger are:

Another activity that can strengthen the marriage relationship is taking time to write your partner a love letter in which you express the good feelings you have about your relationship. One of the keys to a successful marriage is to appreciate the strengths. Every marriage has problems. But by using your strengths wisely you can continue to make the marriage stronger.



This publication was originally written by H. Wallace Goddard, Extension Family and Child Development specialist, Auburn University, for the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service. It was adapted for use in Tennessee by Kathleen Rodgers, former Assistant Professor, Family Life.



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Billy G. Hicks, Dean