

## Strengthening the Couple Relationship

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Keeping a couple’s relationship strong and healthy through trust and responsibility is the subject of this NebGuide.

After several years of marriage, a couple may find a lack of individual artistry and creativity in their relationship. Each becomes involved in a routine of relating to the other in a certain way. Patterns develop because of living in the same household and becoming used to the way the other behaves. Couples develop certain habitual patterns around home, work, and community. The same ways of relating and behaving may persist, unchallenged and unchanged, for years. Newlyweds, as well as couples married for a number of years, must nurture their marriage to avoid boredom and marriage conflict.

In principle, each couple has the possibility of recreating their marriage at every moment of their waking life. The couple is like a sculptor in the construction and shaping of their marriage. Given the limitations of one’s imagination, courage and skills, the sculptor has many degrees of freedom to create the form of the marriage, but may create several forms before finding one that “works.”

The couple can likewise recreate, reframe, or renew a relationship, but it is difficult. The sculpting is compounded in marriage because there are two persons with two different perceptions of the relationship. There are two sets of needs to be considered and two sets of expectations which are involved. It is possible for two people of good will to discuss their future possibilities together, and to reconcile differences that arise. It is also possible for a couple to realize a greater amount of their marriage potential. What seems to hold back potential for growth are:

1. lack of creativity of either partner in his or her development;
2. fear of criticism from others;
3. fear of change in oneself or partner; and
4. the fear of conflict itself.

We make great demands on our marriages today. When a couple joins together in the mutual adventure through life, both individuals and the marriage are subjected to numerous strains; yet, in most cases, they give marriage only “left-over time.”

When we wake up and are fresh, we go to work at our job or at home. At the end of the day when we are exhausted and every bit of usefulness has been tapped, we rush to make our way home. Then we must fix meals, chauffeur children to their activities, and handle other family responsibilities. Late in the evening, at the low point of our energy, we try to focus on our marriage.

When most of us just take from our marriage — very few of us feed it so we shouldn’t be surprised at the 50 percent divorce rate for first marriages. A marriage that is not fed, dies of malnutrition. Yet, most couples obviously can do better in the most personal of all relationships — marriage. Marriage ought to foster the growth of love, and evolve as a mixture of greater humanness between the partners (also called friendship) and a meaningful sexual relationship, based on mutual respect, trust and compassion. This deep and meaningful love enhances the welfare of each other.

Marital love means “caring for” rather than “taking care of” or “taking from.” Mutual understanding and consideration nourishes the marriage, and makes it possible for the marriage to be sustained even in times of high stress and/or low energy.

### Tools of a Healthy Relationship

What can married couples *do* to keep their marriage healthy for both partners? How can they strengthen the bond between them? What necessary tools provide a maintenance guide for couples who want to keep their marriages alive?

1. **TRUST:** Understanding trust helps couples be trustworthy and learn to trust each other. Honesty, keeping promises, and being loyal are all essential elements of trustworthiness.
  - Be honest and straightforward. Don’t deceive, mislead or withhold important information.
  - Keep your word and be reliable. Follow through on what you say you will do.
  - Loyalty is protecting and encouraging the interest of your partner who trusts you. Be careful with whom you share private information and don’t talk disrespectfully about your partner to others.

2. **COMMITMENT:** Commitment is the willingness to work on a relationship over a period of time. It is the glue that holds the relationship together in good and bad times.

- Take time to develop the relationship.
- Make a positive effort to develop a mutually satisfying relationship.
- Be unselfish and able to put your partner's interests ahead of your own.
- Forgive each other and move forward.
- Be responsible for your own behaviors within the relationship.

3. **SKILLS:** Marriage is a lifetime process. Both partners need to:

- Understand others, express needs, listen to each other, make decisions, negotiate and manage conflict and have meaningful communication.
- Manage finances.
- Be a competent and responsible parent.
- Understand the differences in the way each individual thinks, communicates and acts. Remember your partner does not necessarily have to think or act as you do or agree with you in all situations.

4. **CARING:** Nurturant love exists when meeting the needs of your partner is just as important as having your own needs met. Caring is being supportive of each individual's growth and personal interests as well as caring for the relationship.

- Enjoy doing things together and have fun.
- Appreciate one another and let each other know it.
- Show physical affection often.
- Laugh together.
- Keep commitments.
- Make your partner feel special.
- Have a healthy sexual relationship.

5. **RESPECT AND APPRECIATION:** "Do unto others as you would have them to unto you." This means giving positive rewards and "strokes" to each other. It means avoiding experiences which may hurt your partner and have a detrimental effect on your relationship.

- Respect the roles each has in the relationship.
- Compromise, with neither partner being right or wrong.
- Have reasonable expectations of each other and the relationship.

6. **EFFORT:** Effort is needed to make these tools work. Effort means taking time to work on your marriage.

- Participate in marital growth experiences.
- Control words and actions and exercise self-restraint.
- Make decisions, solve problems, and resolve conflict together.
- Be willing to learn from mistakes.
- Strive to do your personal best.

### Plan for Building a Strong Relationship

Enriching and strengthening your marriage involves learning to share with each other at deeper levels. The idea is to become more intimate through mutual self-disclosure and acceptance. The process is risky and takes time.

One reason for marital dissatisfaction is that couples expect a great deal from marriage. Wives and husbands often have unrealistic expectations about what marriage should provide them. Most people expect their spouses to be sources of emotional support, companionship, sexual satisfaction, and economic support or assistance. To make this work, agree together to become involved in strengthening your relationship by spending time in communication with each other. A commitment from both of you to try a program together may keep you going when you get busy or feel a little afraid and are tempted to quit.

The following are some hints to help you, as a couple, structure a sharing time each day:

- Set aside a certain time each day — a time which will be relatively free of distraction. But make it "prime time," not "left-over time."
- Share positive thoughts and feelings. This is *not* a time to complain or debate.
- Emphasize the sharing of feelings (joy, hurt, irritation, pleasure). This is not a time to blame each other or make judgments.
- Speak for yourself. Say "I feel"; "I would like..."; "I think..."; "I like...". Don't say "you..." or "people..."
- Use language that expresses appreciation ("I appreciate it when you..."). Provide positive feedback and avoid "constructive" criticism.
- Have a "time-out" rule. Whenever either partner feels like she/he does not want to continue the discussion, she/he may say "time-out." You each agree to take a break or change the subject without asking why the other does not wish to continue. Knowing that this option is available will keep you from feeling trapped. You are more likely to share if you can decide when and how quickly to share. Soon after the "time-out," partners need to readdress the issue.
- Learn to listen! Try to understand what your partner is saying — what she/he means. Put your understanding of what you heard in your own words and say it back to your partner to see if you accurately received the message sent. Remember, "when in doubt, check it out!"

## A Final Word

A word of caution: Building a strong marriage is not the same as marriage counseling. It is the process of “making a good marriage better.” Should you find your marriage in trouble, you are advised to seek marital counseling to get the foundation of your marriage restored.

Marriage is not an answer, it is a search. It is a relationship within which change is generated by relating and living together. It can produce growth, identity and a sense of togetherness. Nurture and strengthen your relationship for lifetime commitment.

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