

# 101

WAYS TO BUILD  
A STRONGER,  
MORE EXCITING  
MARRIAGE

H. NORMAN WRIGHT



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## **101 WAYS TO BUILD A STRONGER, MORE EXCITING MARRIAGE**

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## Your Marriage Can Be Better Than Ever!

Welcome to a journey—a marriage-enrichment journey. The questions and brief comments are designed to help your relationship grow, improve, and be even more satisfying and fulfilling. And hopefully your partner and you will also grow personally and spiritually as well.

Marriage is the most powerful of all relationships. You and your spouse will either enhance and give the glory to the other or steal the glory of the other. Are you enhancing the glory in your spouse?<sup>1</sup> Can you think of ways to do this? Most of us have never thought about this. Look at your partner. What do you see? Do you see the glory of God residing in him or her? Do you see a unique reflection of God? If not, take a closer look.

As a married couple, you both can encourage and shape the glory of God in the other as no other person can. Enjoy the reflection of God's glory in your spouse. Honor it. Enhance it.<sup>2</sup>

What does this mean? Your marriage relationship comes with a challenge—to take the raw material you each have and work toward revealing more of the glory of God in each other. That's a far cry from what most of us are focused on. But this is what marriage is all about. It's not a time to just kick back and expect to be waited on or catered to. And your marriage isn't just going to “happen” and thrive. For a successful and vibrant marriage, each of you needs to take an attitude of allowing yourself to be stretched.

You are called to *create*, so create. How? By serving, loving, and living out God's Word in ways that build up your spouse. Glorify God by drawing the *best* out of your spouse. Go for the excellent instead of focusing on the not-so-great. Find the rich treasure God

has placed in your partner. There is untapped, undeveloped potential in your spouse that, with your help, can surface and grow even more.

Today we hear way too much about marriages that are in trouble or don't make it. Yet there are many, many couples who have fulfilling and even exceptional marriages. It's no accident that strong marriages are the way they are. Good marriages don't just happen. Couples in exceptional marriage are willing to learn and grow by developing a positive, biblical attitude; discovering how to speak their spouse's personal and love languages; and celebrating their differences as well as their similarities.

Does an "absolute formula" exist that couples today can follow to guarantee achieving the marriages they want? You already know the answer to that question. There isn't. But there are principles that have worked for many. Consider the questions in this book as a personal consultation with the nation's leading authorities on what makes marriages work.

Although this book will help and possibly act in place of going to a marriage seminar or a series of counseling sessions, don't expect numerous stories or clever examples. The information you'll find here is bottom line and straight to the point. Because the questions are designed to help you think, share, and grow, they will require some effort on both your parts. And whatever you learn, you need to apply or it won't do any good. These principles and guidelines have made a positive difference for so many couples, and they can also work for you.

Marriage is a lifelong adventure. Every journey has its highs, lows, and detours. And every love journey is unique. No two couples experience the same road. Many couples experience their marriages without giving them much thought, while others constantly take their marital temperature. Some underrate marriage and choose to see problems that aren't there. Others view marriage with blinders



on and are oblivious to issues that eat away at the core of their union until it's too late. Which of these descriptions do you connect with?

Think of it this way. Your marriage is like a car. Every now and then it needs a tune-up. Often when your car is receiving a tune-up, the mechanic may find the beginning of a problem and take corrective action. This minimizes the damage. However, if you neglect this service, something may break, resulting in the need for a major overhaul. And that's more expensive, time-consuming, and disruptive. It's the same when you assess your marriage. You may discover the slight fraying of some wire insulation that may eventually cause a short circuit and fry the engine that makes your union work. But discovering it early gives you a head start on taking corrective action.

Commit to spending time each day or each week to connect via this book. Make a determination to read, contemplate, and answer each question. You may not like some of the questions or your spouse's answers, but reflect on them rather than react. Discuss your answers openly and sincerely. Remember that the advice in this book comes from many people who are specialists in the relationship field. Be hopeful. You can grow, and so can your spouse. Your marriage can be better than ever. Each day consider these Scriptures:

[The LORD says,] "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3).

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (29:11).

# 1 Safe Haven

Let's consider your marriage in a new way. Do you feel safe? Do you feel valued? Is there a better way to resolve your disagreements? Drs. Archibald Hart and Sharon Hart Morris have provided key insights in their book *Safe Haven Marriage—Building a Relationship You Want to Come Home To*. Let's consider what they wrote:

The image of a safe haven, a place that protects us from the raging seas of life, is a metaphor for what every marriage should become. All couples, when they marry, look forward to seeing their relationship become a haven for their hearts.

Marital partners yearn for their spouse to see them for who they are and to be there for them. Spouses want to be fully understood, accepted, and valued by their mates.<sup>1</sup>

Can you envision a marriage in which you would feel safe enough to say what you feel? In which you were assured that your spouse would respect, or at least attempt to understand, your point of view? Under those circumstances, at the end of an argument you could come back together and reestablish your emotional warmth.<sup>2</sup>

- ❖ In the midst of fighting and arguing that goes on between you and your spouse, what do you each long for?
- ❖ Are you a safe haven for your spouse's heart? Do the things you say and do reflect that?<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Emotional Disconnect

Emotions are a foundation for marriage. They involve the care of a relationship. When we experience emotional wounding, we become cautious and even distant. Consider these insights:

Emotional disconnection doesn't require an emotional earthquake. Just pile on the critical comments, insensitive remarks, and irritating acts, whether intentional or unintentional, and you can break your partner's heart. Not much more than a flat-toned hello from your spouse after you've waited all day to see him, a kiss that did not seem warm, a hand touched then quickly pulled away, unwillingness to stop for a hug, failure to help get the kids up and ready in time for school, the thoughtlessness of not putting the dishes in the sink, clothes left in the hallway, or not having time to listen when a listening ear is desperately needed—all these can do damage, one bit at a time.<sup>4</sup>

Creating and sustaining an emotional connection with your spouse is the most important goal of your marriage. Once that connection is in place, neither the busyness of life, past hurts and disappointments, perceived betrayals, nor differences in family background and lifestyle will have the power to do serious damage to your safe haven.<sup>5</sup>

- ❖ When are the times you feel emotionally connected with your partner?
- ❖ When do you feel emotionally disconnected?

### 3 Winters and Summers

Let's get a bit historical about your marriage. It helps to see where you've been. On a piece of paper, draw a time line of your marital relationship. What were the early years in your marriage like? Over the years of your marriage, when were the good seasons and when were the rough seasons? Place a "W" next to the years that were difficult (your "winters") and an "S" next to the years that were warm and good (your "summers").

- ❖ What events or seasons in your marriage defined your marriage as a safe haven?
- ❖ What events or seasons in your marriage tried to redefine it as an unsafe place for your heart?<sup>6</sup>

## 4 Your Attachment

From early in our lives until the day we die, we ask our loved ones, “Can I trust you to be emotionally available, accessible, and responsive when I need you?” Our parents were our earliest mirrors, reflecting back to us our worth and meaning. Then came other family members and relationships with friends and acquaintances across our life span.

Not having someone who was a good, truthful mirror early in life can severely damage the way we love in later relationships. Everyone comes to marriage with preset beliefs, expectations, values, and feelings pertaining to these crucial issues:

- Expectations of what real intimacy looks like.
  - Ways of responding to hurt, disconnection, and disappointment.
  - A sense of being unlovable or unworthy, questioning whether you are able to obtain easily and comfortably the love you need from others.
  - A sense of the emotional safety or non-safety of others; questioning if others can be trusted to love and take care of your heart.<sup>7</sup>
- 
- ❖ Describe your expectations of intimacy.
  - ❖ Give examples of how you respond to hurt, disconnection, and disappointment.
  - ❖ Give examples of how your spouse responds to hurt, disconnection, and disappointment.

- ❖ Do you feel you get enough of the love you need? Explain.
- ❖ Do you trust others with your heart?
- ❖ Do the following descriptions of a “securely attached couple” fit your relationship? If not, what can you do at this time to improve?

Securely attached couples are able to:

- Hold on to a deep sense that they are loved and valuable
- Know from experience that their spouse is trustworthy and will be loving, supportive, and responsive
- Understand, make sense of, and express their emotions appropriately
- Share their needs and hurts and reach out for others
- Make sense out of fights and get back on track when the fight is over
- Emotionally connect during and after fights<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Arguments

Do you ever argue? Need I even ask the question? Everyone argues at times. It's how arguments are handled and ended that can create problems.

❖ In your relationship, what often triggers arguments?

What turns an innocent conversation, a quiet stroll, a guileless comment, or a team effort in the kitchen into an argument? It seems that a conversation is always one sentence and one emotion away from turning into an argument. It is often the case that arguments start when one spouse is hurt because he feels unseen, misunderstood, and devalued.

There are four events that make a spouse feel his or her partner wasn't there for them.<sup>9</sup>

- First is *criticism*. Critical remarks feel like put-downs. They devalue us.
- Second is a *demand* (or request) that is perceived as unfair and unreasonable. Your spouse asks you to do something that you don't want to do because you feel it doesn't make sense.
- Third, conflicts are also triggered by what are called *cumulative aggravations*. These are annoying, frustrating things that one's spouse does repeatedly and over time.
- A fourth trigger is *rejection*. A partner's failure to

respond in a caring and considerate manner can feel like rejection.<sup>10</sup>

- ❖ What is your experience when you sense the start of an argument?
- ❖ To get a picture of the cycle of your arguments, complete these statements:
  - Our usual arguments start when...
  - I respond by...
  - And then you...
  - I then...
  - And you then...
  - We come together and emotionally connect by...
- ❖ Think back to your last several arguments. What did you hope would be the outcome?<sup>11</sup>



## 6 Losses in Marriage

When you marry, you gain a lot. I'm sure you're aware of that. But you also give up some things. What did you give up? Well, is your marriage everything you wanted it to be? Probably not. There were and are losses we experience when we marry. That's why the glue of marriage is "commitment." It's doubtful that you've talked about the things you "lost" after you married, but they're there. We all have expectations and dreams that are unfulfilled. We become aware of what we don't have rather than what we do have. What are the choices we have when it comes to realizing our marital losses?

- Some people want out of their marriages.
- Some become stuck.
- Some change their expectations.
- Some change the situation.
- Some actively grieve their losses.

Discuss the following questions suggested by Dr. Scott Stanley.

- ❖ Are there significant areas in your marriage where you have a sense of loss? What are they?
- ❖ Talk about your expectations related to areas of sadness, loss, or frustration in your marriage. What is reasonable? What is not reasonable?<sup>12</sup>

What can you do when it comes to losses? Focus on changing your own expectations. Together, read these two passages and discuss what they mean for your marriage.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18).

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye," when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Luke 6:41-42).

Grieve over your losses. Say goodbye to them and let them go. It may help to grieve together. Read and learn as much as you can about grief since you both will experience losses throughout your marital journey.<sup>13</sup>

### **Suggested Reading**

H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004).

H. Norman Wright, *Recovering from the Losses in Life* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1991).

Scott Stanley, PhD, *The Heart of Commitment* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), chapter 4.