

## Helping Individuals Transform Their Marriages

“Can I do marriage enrichment by myself?” a friend queried wistfully, after hearing me tell about an event my husband and I attended. I assured her that a number of therapists and authors share strategies for **helping one person change the dynamics of a relationship, even without the conscious cooperation of the other**. Michelle Weiner Davis uses the image of a mobile to illustrate how nudging one part causes movement in others. Harriet Lerner compares a relationship to a dance, noting that when one partner changes his or her steps, the other may automatically adjust. When we are frustrated by someone else’s actions or inaction, we usually just intensify whatever we have been doing all along – nag, pout, attack, or withdraw. Michelle repeatedly advises, “If what you are doing isn’t working, do something different.” Marriage partners CAN influence each other, especially if they learn to control their reactivity and break out of negative behavior patterns. **Please note that NONE of this applies to anyone in an abusive relationship, in which case creating safety is the most urgent concern.** (See “Shedding Light on Domestic Violence,” posted under Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition in the Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources section at [www.marriagelovepower.net](http://www.marriagelovepower.net) - or search by title at [www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).)

Through preaching and teaching, relationship education and marriage preparation, pastors and other church leaders can teach members of their congregations to let go of the unreasonable expectations that marriage will solve all of one’s problems; that a marriage partner should be able to read one’s mind; or that a spouse will not change over time. Such assumptions hinder couples from discovering the real joy two people can find when they commit to learning from each other and allow themselves to be fully known. In *Constructing The Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1991) Dr. David Schnarch, Ph.D, describes his work with couples who say they have fallen out of love and feel caught in a stalemate, which he calls “gridlock.” He teaches such couples to **differentiate, to accept the fact that they are two different persons, and to create a safe space between them** in which they both can flourish and grow. Healthy marriage partners validate themselves, instead of depending on that from the other person; take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and actions; and still choose to nurture an intimate connection with each other.

Quite frequently, one partner in a relationship feels discontent and longs for something different, something more, even while the other denies that anything is lacking and insists the relationship is just fine. I usually affirm the unhappy one’s desire for something better as a calling and encourage him or her to seek a counselor, preferably one who teaches skills and who is committed to saving relationships. A wise counselor, even if working with just one of the partners, can often discern patterns, help the individual clarify the changes she or he wants, and provide guidance for developing new strategies to improve the marriage relationship. If efforts to transform your relationship do not produce the hoped-for results, at least you will know that you have tried to practice Christ-like love. This does not mean being a doormat or denying your own needs. **In marriage, we are called to teach each other how to love, not only by our own example, but by being real and vulnerable with each other.** Aesop’s fable of the wind and the sun illustrates that warmth is more effective than cold in getting the traveler

to remove his coat, to give up his protection. Reactivity, unfortunately, can cause us to lash out at those closest to us, causing them to withdraw from us, if we do not learn to calm ourselves down and think through what we want to communicate.

Some years ago I led a study group for women, in which we learned about factors influencing our attitudes and behavior (birth order and other childhood experiences); practiced effective communication skills (“I messages” and Active Listening); and planned “experiments” to conduct at home (different ways of initiating interactions or responding to our husbands). Later, in another local church, I led a class for individuals using Marshall Rosenberg’s *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. **We learned to tune into our feelings and needs, instead of judging others, and to make requests – instead of demands – in ways that increase the likelihood of our receiving what we want.** The participants, having promised to honor confidentiality, shared situations that challenged them, role-played different approaches, and collaborated on plans for applying Rosenberg’s teachings and other learnings at home. Among the strategies they tried, often with amazing results, were the following:

1. Think of a pattern that recurs frequently in your relationship. Decide on a **different way to act next time** it happens.
2. When triggered, **ask yourself what you are feeling and what you need.** Walk away, calm yourself, and think through how to **express your feelings without attacking or blaming.**
3. **Clarify the response you need** before sharing feelings (“I just need to vent,” “I need to know you understand,” “I need your feedback and ideas about this,” or “I need some affirmation.”)
4. **Never assume** that the other person can read your mind or even fully understand what you have said. Ask “Would you be willing to tell me what you heard me say?”
5. **Be positive.** Act as if you can count on the other person’s cooperation, instead of assuming a negative outcome.
6. **Listen carefully to fully understand** your spouse’s feelings and needs. Don’t assume you know. Feed back what you think you heard.
7. **Offer empathy** even when you don’t agree (“That must be frustrating” or “you must have felt proud.”)
8. **Propose something** you are willing to do differently.

By recommending some of the following books for individual or group study and by offering opportunities to study and reflect on them, you can empower individuals to transform their relationships. Other relevant articles are posted at the websites noted at the end of the first paragraph above. See especially “Six Steps for Holding a Courageous Conversation with Your Spouse.”

## Reading List for Helping Individuals Transform Their Marriages

***Divorce Busting: A Step-by-Step Approach to Making Your Marriage Loving Again***, by Michele Weiner-Davis (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). The practical problem-solving approach in this book demonstrates how behavior change, even by just one partner, can improve the dynamics of a marriage relationship. The author's emphasis on finding solutions rather than exploring problems is based on a simple formula: "do more of what works and less of what doesn't." (page 17)

***Dr. Stephanie's Relationship Repair for Couples: A Customer Service Approach to Minimizing Conflict and Creating Lasting Love in Your Relationships***, by Dr. Stephanie Welland Knarr (Omaha, NE: Heartland East Publishing, 2015). The author urges couples to develop good relationship maintenance and repair practices so that both partners know they will be heard and their dissatisfactions resolved. Making complaints may sound like a negative behavior, but doing so, in fact, demonstrates commitment to the relationship and a desire to make it work. Dr. Stephanie gives clear directions for expressing a complaint in a way less likely to trigger defensiveness and for responding positively to complaints as well.

***How One of You Can Bring the Two of You Together: Breakthrough Strategies to Resolve Your Conflicts and Reignite Your Love***, by Susan Page (NY: Broadway Books, 1997). The author's insights and suggestions will help both those who feel stuck and frustrated with their relationships and those who, although generally happy, feel some disillusionment or lack of connection. She presents a series of "experiments" one person can use, based on 8 specific principles: 1) Act on your own. 2) Do the opposite of what you have been doing. 3) Reframe a power struggle by looking for solutions that meet both persons' needs. 4) Enlist your partner's help. 5) Express empathy for your partner's position. 6) Gracefully accept what you can't change. 7) Ask for what you want. 8) Men: tune in; Women: stop coaching. Detailed analysis and examples make this approach clearly understandable.

***If We're So in Love, Why Aren't We Happy? Using Spiritual Principles to Solve Real Problems and Restore Your Passion***, by Susan Page (New York: Harmony Books, 2002). The author encourages individuals and couples to treat their relationships as spiritual disciplines, practicing acceptance, compassion, restraint, and kindness. By focusing on loving each other, in a spirit of good will, couples can build a true spiritual partnership. The author's insights and "experiments" can be utilized by both or by just one party in the relationship.

***Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs***, by Emerson Eggerichs, (Colorado Springs: Integrity Publishers, 2004). Writing from a Christian perspective and frequently quoting Scripture, the author makes a clear case for the importance of honoring the primary needs of women and men. He identifies the "Crazy Cycle" (she reacts to a perceived lack of love and he reacts to a perceived lack of

respect) and recommends clear steps to move toward closeness and a mutually satisfying relationship.

***Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life, (previously A Language of Compassion)***, by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 1999). This clear and straight-forward text shows how to break through patterns of thinking that lead to arguments and anger and how to communicate with mutual respect and understanding. The skills (separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically) can enhance any relationship. A Companion Workbook available at [www.nonviolentcommunication.com](http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com) provides discussion questions and exercises for individual or group study.

***Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*** by Gary Thomas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000). The author invites readers to view marriage as a spiritual discipline through which persons can come to know God more fully and intimately. Marriage teaches us to love and to respect others, exposes our sin, and encourages us to develop perseverance, forgiveness, and the ability to embrace differences.

***Surrendering to Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and Other Imperfections***, by Iris Krasnow (New York: Hyperion, 2001). The author cuts through the mythology and unrealistic expectations surrounding marriage to show readers that: “The best we can do for our children, and for ourselves, is to make our own marriages go the distance, weathering waves of sadness, even rage, because we know that our grit and perseverance are going to pay off hugely in the end.” She shares testimony from senior citizens who express gratitude for the deep love they have fostered together over time.

***Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage***, by David Augsberger (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1988). The author outlines four stages of marriage: The Dream, The Disillusionment, The Discovery, and The Depth, describing how to successfully negotiate these challenging transitions. Especially dangerous, of course, is the Disillusionment Stage, when the excitement of new love wears off and couples face who they really are and how they really relate. Not only is this stage inevitable, but it can also provide a doorway to deeper discovery and love.

***The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*** by Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph.D. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1997). “Close relationships are akin to circular dances, in which the behavior of each partner provokes and maintains the behavior of the other.” (p. 12) This book helps the reader clarify her feelings, learn to communicate them effectively, and interrupt negative patterns in relationships, not only with her husband, but also with children, parents, and others.

***The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts***, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010). The author identifies five languages of love: Quality Time,

Words of Affirmation, Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch. By learning to speak and understand these unique languages, persons can more effectively communicate love and feel more truly loved as well.

***The Five Secrets of Marriage from the Heart***, by Jack Rosenblum and Corinne Dugas (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, LLC, 2006) Through the engaging story of a couple whose marriage is in crisis, the authors explain and illustrate five keys to strengthening and/or healing a relationship. (Hear and understand me; Even if you disagree, please don't make me wrong; Acknowledge the greatness within me; Remember to look for my loving intentions; Tell me the truth with compassion.) This easy-to-read, well-grounded book would be an excellent gift for couples or a resource for a study group.

***The Surprising Way to a Stronger Marriage: How the Power of One Changes Everything***, by Michael and Amy Smalley (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010). The authors describe how one spouse, strengthened by God and Biblical principles, can bring about positive change and growth in a marriage. The authors emphasize the importance of taking responsibility for your own emotions and reactions, focusing on what you want to have happen, and repairing hurts by asking your spouse what he/she needs in order to heal. A Study Guide in the back of the book provides scripture and discussion questions for each of the eighteen chapters.

***Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last***, by John Gottman, Ph.D. with Nan Silver (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). The author presents four strategies for breaking cycles of negativity and maintaining a lasting, healthy marriage: calming yourself so that you are not overwhelmed by flooding emotions; speaking and listening nondefensively; validating each other as well as your relationship; and overlearning these principles so that you can use these new skills under stress.

***Why Mars and Venus Collide: Improving Relationships by Understanding How Men and Women Cope Differently With Stress***, by John Gray, Ph.D. (New York: Harper, 2008). The author expands on male/female differences, drawing on brain scan research to clarify how men and women react differently to stress and often misunderstand each other. He offers clear, concrete steps to prevent and heal misunderstandings and conflicts.

***Why Talking is Not Enough: Eight Loving Actions that Will Transform Your Marriage*** by Susan Page (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A. Wiley Imprint, 2006). The author encourages individuals and couples to treat their relationships as spiritual disciplines, practicing acceptance, compassion, restraint, and kindness. By focusing on loving each other, in a spirit of good will, couples can build a true spiritual partnership. The author's insights and "experiments" can be utilized by both or by just one party in the relationship.

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