

DR. GREG & ERIN SMALLEY

TAKE  
THE

# date

NIGHT  
CHALLENGE

52 Creative Ideas to  
Make Your Marriage Fun



FOCUS<sup>®</sup>  
ON THE FAMILY

BOOK SAMPLER



# **Take the Date Night Challenge**

**Dr. Greg Smalley  
and Erin Smalley**

*Take the Date Night Challenge*

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# Why Date After You're Married?



Picture this scene: A young man is driving through city streets. He has cleaned out his car for the first time in months. He dressed to look as much like Ryan Gosling as possible and worries that maybe he should have shaved off his goatee. At a stoplight, he keys in a text and sends it to the girl he'll be meeting in less than ten minutes. He heads toward his destination with a sense of excitement and anticipation—and more than a little nervousness.

Across town, a young woman's cell phone beeps. She reads the text and feels the lump in her stomach tighten. *Just ten more minutes.* She's happy but oh-so-anxious. She shoves three lip-gloss tubes in her purse—she's not sure which color is best. She checks her reflection in the mirror to make sure her jeans look good. As she arranges her bangs for what seems like the thousandth time, her nervousness is tempered by an overriding sense of enthusiasm.

Can you feel the electricity in the air? Obviously, these two love-struck people are getting ready to go on a date. They're looking forward to spending time with each other. They have both invested thought and effort in preparing themselves for the occasion, and they're relishing the opportunity to enjoy one another's company. The man and woman both understand that going on a date will help them get to know one another better and develop a deeper bond. And while forging a relationship is serious business,

especially when that relationship may be headed toward marriage, they also understand that dating, at its core, is *fun*.

Can you remember what that felt like? Do you recall the rush of adrenaline you experienced at the thought of spending a fun evening with a certain attractive someone? Obviously, you and your spouse dated prior to getting married, and you almost certainly enjoyed it. Even if you came from an environment in which dating was frowned upon and courtship was considered the only appropriate precursor to matrimony, there were likely occasions when your relationship deepened and flourished through good conversation over a fun, shared activity.

Think about some of those good times you and your spouse spent together prior to tying the knot. Can you remember the excitement? The sense of discovery? Can you recall what it felt like to learn about his or her favorite childhood memories? To talk about the experiences—both good and bad—that made him or her the person they are? To spend time laughing, talking, praying, and sharing your dreams—only to realize, at the end of the process, that you had fallen in love? What a magnificent experience!

“Yes, but that was then, and this is now,” you might be saying. “We’re married! We don’t need to pursue one another anymore. It’s a done deal. We learned all we needed to learn about each other during the seasons of dating and engagement, and now it’s full-steam ahead. We’re one flesh, baby! And besides, who has time to go gallivanting around town like a couple of college kids? There are more than a few other things competing for our attention at the moment, not the least of which is raising our kids to respect God, and pursuing gainful employment, and . . .”

Without question, your relationship has changed dramatically since the days before you were married. But that change has been gradual. Maybe even after you said “I do,” you enjoyed a few years of post-nuptials dating. In a certain sense, those years prior to having kids were especially exciting. Before marriage, you had to have certain physical and spiritual barriers in place to guard against going too far sexually. But after marriage, those restrictions disappeared—you could experience physical intimacy at the end of your date with God’s blessing.

Eventually, though, all of that wonderful sex resulted in *pregnancy*. That’s a good thing! It’s the beauty of God’s design for physical intimacy between husband and wife. But it can definitely bring challenges and changes to a relationship that, up until that point, had been defined as “just the two of us.” You know what we mean. You’ve cleaned up throw-up from every imaginable surface in the house and in the car. You’ve made frantic trips to the emergency room in the middle of the night with a feverish child. You’ve had plenty of shouting matches with your teen after she missed her curfew *again*. As for romance, the last time you tried to invoke the aura of Song of Solomon in the bedroom you were interrupted by an unmistakable tap, tap, tap on the bedroom door: “Mommy, Daddy, are you in there?” And just as things were getting interesting!

And again, you might be saying, “That’s okay, Greg and Erin. Really. It’s all good. We signed up for this parenting thing, and we don’t expect to be able to return to those romantic days of youthful love. We’re now in a different season of life, and someday we’ll pick up where we left off and be ‘married’ again.”

Unfortunately, that mind-set rarely leads to a happy marriage. And if we're honest, in God's design for marriage, couples are not supposed to take a break from emotional intimacy. You may add new titles to your lives as the years go by—"parent," "manager," "homemaker," and so on. But through it all, you still retain the titles you were given by the pastor when you were first married: husband and wife! You have added additional titles and roles as the years have passed, but you still are, and always will remain, husband and wife.

Perhaps you've had two or three kids by now. You love them more than life itself. You wouldn't trade them for anything. And yet sometimes, you look back on your years of dating, both prior to and after marriage, and you wonder what happened. You miss having "couple time"—the opportunity to relax, connect, and just focus on one another without distraction.

But even as you fondly reminisce about those years of dating, your resistance starts to go up. "C'mon, Greg and Erin!" you might be saying. "Please don't lay a guilt trip on us. We have more than we can handle in our lives as it is. The kids have school and all kinds of extra-curricular activities. My job involves at least a week of travel per month. My parents are getting older and require extra care. I'm serving on four different committees between school and church. We're so tired we can barely see straight—and you're asking us to add a date night to our endless list of responsibilities? Get real!"

Believe us, we know how you feel! Our lives are chaotic, too. Such is the nature of life in the twenty-first century, for better or worse. We've been married since 1992, and in the years since

that time we've added new challenges and responsibilities to our lives on what seems like a daily basis. We have four kids who, as of this writing, range in age from preschool to college, and there hasn't been a day in raising them that we've said, "Hey, this is super easy!" And it isn't just the kids that are a challenge. We have traveled across the country and around the world leading marriage seminars for pastors, professionals, and lay leaders. Greg has pursued a doctorate in psychology as well as a counseling degree, has worked for the Center for Relationship Enrichment at John Brown University, has served as President of the National Institute of Marriage, has written eleven books, and currently serves as executive director of Marriage and Family Formation at Focus on the Family.

This is not to brag. It's only to say that it's hard—*incredibly* hard, sometimes—for us to make the time necessary to invest in our husband/wife relationship, with no distractions. The professional and ministerial work of studying marriage and helping others build stronger marriages does not leave much room to invest quality time in our own! And yet, we make it happen.

In our counseling experiences, we have seen too many couples who try to coast through the childrearing and career years without making time to deepen and nurture their own marriages. It's a recipe for disaster.

Those couples who don't date may achieve financial stability, and they might even successfully raise their kids and navigate them through school. But they reach the empty nest years and realize that they're strangers living under the same roof. By then, it's incredibly difficult to reverse the damage wrought by decades of

essentially ignoring one another and clinging to the false assumption that they can pick up at fifty-five exactly where they left off at twenty-five.

### The Case for Date Night

We're not suggesting that simply cramming a date night into your already overcrowded schedule is going to prevent you from experiencing the nightmare scenario described above. But a commitment to "date nights done right" can definitely play a significant part in an overall plan to be *intentional* about investing in the health of your marriage.

"But how?" you might be asking. "We don't have time, and besides, we're fine."

We'll get to the "how" in the next chapter. But first let's explore some common-sense reasons why committing to a *regular date night* can revolutionize your marriage:

1. *Date nights are critical for the health of your relationship.*

Marriage relationships are dynamic; they are alive and always changing. And just like any relationship, marriages need to be fed and stimulated to stay alive and grow.

2. *Date nights help you get reacquainted.* The notion that you already know all there is to know about your spouse is a myth. There is *always* something new to learn about your spouse, because we all change. Dating is a great way to update and deepen your knowledge of your beloved. It's vital that you keep that curiosity and interest in your mate flourishing.

3. *Date nights are a great investment in the future.* Just like a savings account, the more you invest in your relationship, the more it will grow exponentially over time. Dates also lay the framework for future times together, encouraging you and your spouse to look forward to spending more time together.
4. *Date nights put the focus back on your marriage.* As you well know, day-to-day distractions pull your attention away from your spouse. Dates help you refocus and put that person back at the top of your priority list. When a date night is going the way it should, the only thing the two of you have to concentrate on is one another. (More on this later!)
5. *Date nights help you remember the good times.* A good date will often bring up fond premarriage memories. Recalling these memories can help you and your spouse generate positive feelings and anticipation for your next date.
6. *Date nights send a positive message.* To your friends, family, and especially your kids, marriage needs to be viewed as something valuable, special, and precious. Marriage is something important enough to put ongoing effort into. And date nights communicate to your spouse that he or she is valuable enough not to give all of your prime time to other people or things.
7. *Date nights strengthen the marital bond.* The more time you and your spouse spend alone enjoying each other, the stronger your bond becomes. This naturally deepens your intimacy and brings you closer together.

8. *Date nights are a great way to reconnect.* Dating helps you unplug from your busy and hectic pace of life in order to simply enjoy being together.
9. *Date nights rekindle the romance in your relationship.* Having a night out with your spouse is an important part of keeping romance alive.
10. *Date nights inject excitement into a stale marriage.* Under the stress of work, household duties and childrearing, spouses can become nothing more than distant roommates. Just like the young couple at the beginning of this chapter, spouses need to feel that rush of excitement and adrenaline from time to time. They must never succumb to the idea that their marriage is simply a recycled union of two tired and bored souls.
11. *Date nights help you both decompress.* Every couple needs a chance to enjoy one another's company without being weighed down by the demands of life. A date night should be free from the distractions of children, extended family, friends, or work. It should represent an opportunity for you to rediscover the person you fell in love with. We'll explore this concept in much greater detail in the next chapter.
12. *Date nights strengthen your commitment.* By making date night a priority, you are communicating to your spouse that divorce is out of the question and that you are committed to strengthening your marriage by spending ongoing, quality time together.

Granted, you don't really need us to tell you that spending uninterrupted, quality time together is good for your marriage. But did you know there is a growing body of scientific research that illuminates and confirms these same concepts about the importance of marital dating?

Take, for example, the prestigiously named Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG), a national study of more than 1,600 married couples aged eighteen to fifty-five that was conducted in 2010 and 2011 by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. This detailed survey cited a wealth of additional social science data confirming that couples who had date nights experienced enhanced communication, a greater sense of marital excitement and novelty, increased emphasis on romantic love and sexuality, a deeper sense of commitment, and a decrease in stress.<sup>1</sup> In other words, many of the common-sense benefits of marital date nights outlined above are confirmed by a wealth of scientific data.

Even more specifically, the Survey of Marital Generosity found a strong connection between relationship quality and "one-on-one couple time," which is a broader category that could include not only structured date nights but also other alone time between married couples. For example, the SMG found that husbands and wives who engaged in couple time with their mates at least once a week were 3.5 times *more likely* to report being "very happy" in their marriages compared to those who spent less quality time together.<sup>2</sup> Couples who spent weekly couple time together also reported dramatically higher rates of satisfaction in their communication and

sexual satisfaction (both to the tune of a *300 percent* increase!), and in their levels of commitment to one another (a 250 percent increase).<sup>3</sup> The authors of the study concluded that “couples who devote time specifically to one another at least once a week are markedly more likely to enjoy high-quality relationships and lower divorce rates, compared to couples who do not devote as much couple time to one another.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, our own research testifies to the validity of these studies. Greg spearheaded a date night program a few years ago when he was working with Northwest Arkansas Healthy Marriages. Soon after, our good friend Tim Popadic orchestrated Date Night Challenge events in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 2011 and 2012. We surveyed the couples who participated in the Florida Date Nights and discovered that a whopping 92 percent of them saw an increase in their relationship satisfaction. That’s an astonishingly good rate of return!

Since Greg came to Focus on the Family to assume the role of Executive Director of Marriage and Family Formation, we have seen the Date Night concept explode. Focus now hosts an annual Date Night Challenge, a live event that is produced as a DVD to be used by churches, Bible studies, and small groups worldwide. Our 2012 Date Night Challenge saw participation from more than 900 churches, representing all fifty states as well as several countries around the world.

The concept itself is simple: We challenge couples to go on three dates in three weeks, and then commit to one date per month for a year. And without fail, we hear from husbands and wives whose relationships are invigorated, re-energized, and revitalized

as a result of participating in the Date Night Challenge. We're convinced that, after reading this book and making a similar commitment to "date your mate" on a regular basis, you will share their enthusiasm.

"This is all well and good," you say. "But it's easier said than done."

You're right! It might not be easy, but it *is* possible. In the next chapter we'll outline some simple strategies you can employ to not only make date nights *possible* in your marriage, but also make them the rewarding, fulfilling, *fun* occasions they're supposed to be. Onward and upward!

## Notes

1. W. Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Drew, *The Date Night Opportunity: What Does Couple Time Tell Us About the Potential Value of Date Nights?* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia, 2011) 3–4.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.



# Discover Common Interests

*Friendship . . . is born at the moment when one [person] says to another, 'What! You too? I thought that no one but myself. . .'*

—C. S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves*



It's a common theme for many married couples—he likes to do “guy stuff” and she likes “girly stuff.” He's a *Saving Private Ryan* fan while she loves any film with the phrase “based on the novel by Jane Austen” in the credits. He could eat meat and potatoes at every meal, while she enjoys sampling cuisine from all over the world. And on it goes.

Certainly, there's nothing wrong with husbands and wives having different likes and dislikes based on gender differences, as well as on their unique personalities, talents, and experiences. But it would be a serious mistake for couples to assume that every moment of free time should be relegated to “his interests” and “her interests,” and never the twain shall meet. When husbands and wives get too caught up in doing their own thing, they're missing out on critical opportunities to connect with one another.

Developing common interests and hobbies can decrease conflict in marriage and strengthen the idea that you and your spouse are a *team*. Having common hobbies can help couples deepen their sense of intimacy, connection, and friendship.

When was the last time you thought about your spouse as your friend—someone you enjoy spending time with and with whom you can engage in mutually satisfying pursuits? If husbands and wives have a firm grasp of their roles as partners, lovers, or parents, but fail to understand what it means to be *friends*, they are missing out on a key component of marriage. The Bible places the concepts of friendship and romantic love in the same context: “This is my lover, this is *friend*” (Song of Songs 5:16).

### Date Night Planning

***Dinner: Your first opportunity to discover a shared interest.***

One of the foundational tenets of *every* date night is to find a new and exciting place for dinner each time. But that has special significance for this date, during which you will endeavor to discover areas of common interest. Find a restaurant or a type of cuisine that *neither* of you has tried before. You’ll experience something new together for the first time. And who knows? You both just might like it!

***Discuss your interests over dinner***

As you prepare for your adventure together, discuss what makes each of you tick when it comes to hobbies and pastimes. Here are a few questions to ask your spouse:

- What were some of your favorite hobbies as a child?
- Did your parents and other family members support those hobbies?
- Have any of your childhood hobbies retained your interest as an adult? If not, what are some of your favorite hobbies *now*?
- Do you prefer activities that are more physical in nature or those that provide a mental challenge?
- What hobby would you pursue if time and money were not factors?
- Are there any popular pastimes that you know just aren't for you and that you would definitely like to avoid?
- What are some of the hobbies that you feel are equally suited for both men and women?
- Do you view hobbies as primarily for rest and relaxation or for personal enrichment and growth?

### *Discover your common interests*

Now for the fun part—picking an activity to do together. With creativity and communication, you will enter a process that will enable you to take the focus off of “his interests” and “her interests” to create an enriching new category: *our* interests. The following list, while by no means exhaustive, contains twenty activities you may find mutually enjoyable.

1. Playing sports or learning a new sport
2. Bicycling
3. Bird watching
4. Coauthoring a blog

5. Participating in social work
6. Collecting antiques or artwork
7. Composing music together or jamming on instruments
8. Photography
9. Clay modeling or pottery
10. Scuba diving
11. Horseback riding
12. Learning a form of self-defense
13. Using a metal detector to look for “treasure”
14. Disc golf
15. Exploring a specific movie genre or director
16. Hiking
17. Gardening or landscaping
18. Cooking
19. Volunteering at church, or with a local social service agency
20. Visiting local tourist attractions or museums

***Discuss your date***

After your activity is over, talk about your time together. Did both of you truly enjoy your shared experience? Remember, the goal here is not to let one spouse be a martyr for the sake of the other, suffering through something that he or she truly doesn't enjoy. The purpose is to identify and cultivate activities that both spouses genuinely appreciate doing *together*.

- What did you learn about your spouse as a result of performing your activity together? What did you learn about yourself?

- If you read a book or watched a movie together, what did you learn? What were some of the underlying themes and messages? Were there certain parts of the story that resonated with you? Were there parts with which you disagreed?
- What exactly did you enjoy about the activity? How did it make you feel?
- How was your experience enhanced as a result of doing it with your spouse, as opposed to doing it alone?
- What is one thing you learned about your spouse that you didn't know before?
- How can you create further opportunities to share interests and hobbies?

### *Maybe next time . . .*

Don't feel discouraged if this first attempt at finding a common interest didn't work out. There will be plenty of other opportunities to discover a shared passion in the future.

Consider what you're already doing. Your wife may enjoy your woodworking hobby. Your husband might like to try gardening with you. But have you ever asked him or her to participate?

As you continue to look for hobbies and activities to share together later on, don't knock an activity until you've tried it. Wives, there are plenty of women who enjoy attending sporting events, and husbands, there are a ton of guys who appreciate the finer points of cooking or sewing. Don't dismiss certain activities out of hand until you've at least given them a chance.



# Windshield Time

*Stop worrying about the potholes in the road  
and celebrate the journey.*

—ATTRIBUTED TO FITZHUGH MULLAN



According to the US Department of Transportation, adults between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four spend more than an hour a day driving.<sup>1</sup> We can all relate to that, right? Whether it's the daily commute to and from work, a hectic schedule of taxiing kids to school and other activities, or simply running errands, driving is a significant part of our everyday experience.

The question is “How do you use that time?” Is driving simply a chore—a means of getting from point A to point B? It doesn't have to be that way. Rather than allowing drive time to become just another part of the daily grind, consider making it an opportunity to connect with those you love. You don't have to wait for family devotions or some other preplanned event to connect with your kids. You can have meaningful conversations and make genuine connections during the hour or more every day that you spend in the car with them.

The same is true for you and your spouse. It's important, while you're in the car together, to embrace the opportunity to connect

through conversation. It's about *enjoying* the drive rather than simply *getting through* it. We call this Windshield Time. You may be simply making a quick trip to the grocery store. But those few moments in the car—something that seems so basic and routine—represent an opportunity for you and your spouse to share your feelings and connect. That's Windshield Time!

Think about some of your recent date nights. Did you talk about anything meaningful in the car on the way to dinner, or were you simply in a hurry to get to your destination? After dinner, did you share anything special with one another when you were en route from the restaurant to your next stop? Whenever you're in the car together, remember: It's not just about the destination, it's about the journey!

## Date Night Planning

### *Hit the road*

As we've already noted, most often Windshield Time will take place during the course of your daily routine, such as running errands or picking the kids up from school. However, in order to get more comfortable with the idea of connecting with your spouse while driving, the majority of this month's date will be spent in your car. Just drive, and enjoy having the extra time to connect with one another. Here are some ideas to get you started on your mini road trip.

- Don't be afraid to venture outside the city limits. Kick off your date night by driving to a neighboring city for dinner!

- Are there any scenic byways in your area? Are there out-of-the-way roads that are known for their sightseeing potential? Explore the world around you.
- If you'll be driving after dark, find out whether there are any roads in the area that overlook the city lights. There's nothing like taking in a romantic cityscape.
- Even if you'd rather stay close to town, there are likely places nearby that you might enjoy seeing from inside your car—a famous building, a city landmark, or an historic neighborhood.

### *Make it meaningful*

Remember, driving for driving's sake is not the point here. The purpose is to learn how to connect with meaningful conversation while you're in the car. Windshield Time is a chance to invest in your spouse and take an interest in him or her. This is important on your date night, of course, but it's especially critical during those times in the car that might otherwise seem routine and mundane. Here are some possible topics of conversation:

- What are four questions that I could ask you on a regular basis that would tell you I'm interested in your daily life? (For example: How are you feeling? How is your relationship with our kids going? How are things going with your friends? What has God been teaching you lately?)
- What are some ways I can show you that I'm interested in you and knowing you better?
- What are some ways I can more effectively communicate that I love you?

- Did you go on family drives with your family as a child?  
How did that time make you feel?
- Out of all the date nights we've experienced together thus far, which one has been your favorite? Why?
- What is one thing you learned about me tonight that you didn't know before?
- Over the coming weeks, what are some ways we can maximize Windshield Time to help stay connected?

### **Notes**

1. United States Department of Transportation, *The 2001 National Household Travel Survey*, "Figure 10 Mean Minutes and Miles Spent Driving by Driver Age," [http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/highlights\\_of\\_the\\_2001\\_national\\_household\\_travel\\_survey/html/figure\\_10.html](http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/highlights_of_the_2001_national_household_travel_survey/html/figure_10.html).