

Book Sampler

the
BEST YEAR
of your marriage



the
BEST YEAR
of your marriage



52 DEVOTIONS TO BRING YOU CLOSER

JIM & JEAN DALY

- GENERAL EDITORS -

FOCUS
on FAMILY



the **BEST YEAR**
of your marriage





JIM & JEAN DALY

- GENERAL EDITORS -

WITH PAUL BATURA



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

The Best Year of Your Marriage: 52 Devotions to Bring You Closer

Copyright © 2014 Focus on the Family

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995.

TYNDALE, Tyndale's quill logo, and *LeatherLike* are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (AMP) are taken from *The Amplified Bible*, Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Portions of this book are adapted from *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, ISBN-10: 1-58997-041-1; ISBN-13: 978-1-58997-041-0. Copyright © 2006 by Focus on the Family.

Some names and details of certain case studies in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. The events and underlying principles, however, have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior permission of Focus on the Family.

Cover design by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Cover photograph of couple holding hands copyright © mediaphotos/Getty Images. All rights reserved. Bird artwork copyright © debra hughes/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data pending

ISBN 978-1-62405-136-4

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Foreword xiii

Introduction xvii

Part 1: Getting to Know You 1

1. Making Time to Talk 5
2. Honesty: the Best Policy? 9
3. Helping Each Other to Open Up 13
4. Adjusting to Your Spouse's Personality 17

Part 2: When It's Not What You Expected 21

5. Surprise! 25
6. "But I Thought My Spouse Was Perfect" 29
7. Why Isn't Your Spouse More Like . . . 33
8. Did You Marry the Wrong Person? 37

Part 3: Can You Hear Me Now? 41

9. When One of You Is the Silent Type 47
10. When One of You Won't Stop Talking 51
11. Learning Each Other's Language 55
12. How to Connect Without Talking 59

Part 4: Your Love Life 63

13. What Does He Want from You? 67
14. What Does She Want from You? 71

- 15. Moving Beyond the Past 75
- 16. Where Did Our Love Life Go? 79

Part 5: When You Can't Seem to Agree 83

- 17. Is Fighting Fair? 85
- 18. We Can Work It Out 89
- 19. Making Decisions Together 93
- 20. Agreeing to Disagree 97

Part 6: Becoming Soulmates 101

- 21. Faith Can Keep Us Together 105
- 22. Praying with Your Spouse 109
- 23. Helping Your Spouse Grow Spiritually 113
- 24. Serving God as a Team 117

Part 7: Mastering Money 121

- 25. "My Spouse Spends Too Much" 125
- 26. How Much Should We Give? 129
- 27. Staying Out of Debt 133
- 28. Planning for the Future 137

Part 8: Finding Your Place in the Family 141

- 29. How Two Become One 145
- 30. What Does It Mean to Be a Wife? 149
- 31. What Does It Mean to Be a Husband? 153
- 32. Dividing Up the Chores 157

Part 9: Having Children 161

- 33. Do They Really Change Everything? 165
- 34. Is It Okay Not to Have Kids? 169
- 35. Making Sure Children Succeed 173
- 36. You Deserve a Break Today 177

Part 10: A Christ-centered Home 181

- 37. Building the Foundation 185
- 38. Being a Spiritual Leader 189
- 39. When You Like Different Churches 193
- 40. Helping Kids Grow Spiritually 197

Part 11: Emotions in Motion 201

- 41. Let's Talk About Feelings 203
- 42. Those Irritating Habits 207
- 43. Keeping Romance Alive 211
- 44. Should We Settle for Less? 215

Part 12: Honoring One Another 219

- 45. Trying to Change Your Spouse? 223
- 46. Forgiving Each Other 227
- 47. Staying Faithful 231
- 48. Respecting Your In-laws 235

Part 13: Going the Distance 239

- 49. You Don't Have to Drift Apart 243

50. Is It Ever Too Late for a Marriage? 247

51. Getting Wise Counsel 251

52. What Makes a Marriage Last? 255

Epilogue 259

Notes 263

THE AUTHORS

Lon Adams, M.A., L.M.F.T.

Paul Batura

Jim and Jean Daly

Sheryl DeWitt, L.M.F.T., L.M.F.C.C.

James Groesbeck, L.C.S.W., L.M.F.T.

Daniel Huerta, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

Romie Hurley, L.P.C., N.C.C.

Rob Jackson, M.S., L.P.C., L.M.H.C., N.C.C.

Betty Jordan, R.N., M.A., L.P.C.

Sam Kennedy, M.A., L.M.F.T.

Sandra Lundberg, Psy.D.

Glenn Lutjens, M.A., L.M.F.T.

Randy Southern

Amy Swierczek

Phillip J. Swihart, Ph.D.

Mitch Temple, M.S., L.M.F.T.

James Vigorito, Ph.D.

Wilford Wooten, M.S.W., L.M.F.T., L.C.S.W.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We appreciate the monumental editing needed for a volume encompassing the work of so many diverse authors, which was provided by John Duckworth, senior book producer, Focus on the Family. We also wish to recognize our colleague, Aarin Hovanec, for her perceptive observations and comments. In addition, we're thankful for Sharon Manney's technical assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

—*Phillip J. Swihart, Ph.D. and Wilford Wooten,
M.S.W., L.M.F.T., L.C.S.W.*

FOREWORD

By Jim and Jean Daly

Remember the moment you first fell in love?

It seems like an easy, straightforward question. But is it?

Many of us, when asked, find our minds wandering back to our first “crush” or an innocent kiss stolen under the stars. At the time we thought we were “in love,” but if we were really young, chances are we weren’t.

Instead, we were in love with the idea of it all, not the person whose hand we first held.

There’s a big difference—as the two of us know.

We’re still passionate about marriage—helping couples experience marriages that don’t just survive but thrive. Having recently passed our twenty-seventh anniversary, we can honestly say our marriage is getting better by the year.

But we haven’t always experienced this upward trajectory. There have been tough times, as there always are. There have been seasons of struggle and periods of frustration. We’ll share some of them in the following pages. Through it all, though, we’ve challenged ourselves to keep close by seeking to remain in consistent fellowship with the Lord.

We don’t know where you are on the marital spectrum, of course. Maybe you’re newly married and the future looks as bright as the morning sun. Maybe you find yourself in the

“doldrums,” a period of stagnation; things aren’t really bad, but they aren’t very good, either. Or maybe you’re doing pretty well and want to maintain that status—which is why you’re reading this book.

Wherever you are on the marriage continuum, there’s something here for you. Because marriage was God’s idea, He wants the very best for our relationships. It must break His heart to see so much strain, strife, and stress battering homes around the world.

It need not be this way.

Designed as a gift to mankind that brings glory to the Creator, marriage is an institution critical to the sustainability and stability of society. God has built into every human being a desire for companionship and craving to love and be loved.

There are some who seem determined to undermine the importance of marriage as God intended. Sadly, these individuals and movements grab the headlines. But they don’t represent the majority opinion. David Popenoe, a former professor of sociology at Rutgers University, recently suggested that people who say traditional marriage is becoming obsolete might be voicing a fear, not expressing a wish. We think that’s pretty insightful.

If you ask people what they fear most, it’s not uncommon to hear talk of terrorism, death, pain, and even public speaking and spiders. Yet, if you speak more intimately with these same

people—or even watch how they live as opposed to listening to what they say—you often get a very different take on what truly burdens them.

Since God created people for companionship, it makes sense that many of us fear loneliness most of all. Studies have confirmed that loneliness is on the rise in the U.S., a curious thing since we're increasingly connected—at least technologically speaking.

By some estimates, 60 million Americans (20 percent) are lonely. A significant percentage of these people have absolutely nobody with whom to talk over important or intimate matters.

It's no wonder that many would fear the loss of marriage as an institution, especially given its emotional, spiritual, and physical benefits. If there's no marriage, there's no hope of that long walk into the sunset with your aging spouse by your side.

We're reminded of a favorite observation from the late President Ronald Reagan, whose love affair with his beloved Nancy has been so well chronicled. Regarding the gift and beauty of marriage, consider the Gipper's poignant reflection in a 1989 interview with reporter Mike Wallace:

Nancy's power was the power of, well, giving me a marriage that was like an adolescent's dream of what marriage should be. Clark Gable had some words once, when he said there is nothing more wonderful for a man

than to know as he approaches his own doorstep that someone on the other side of that door is listening for the sound of his footsteps.¹

Even while he was president, Mr. Reagan used to stand by the window in the White House and watch for the lights of the car that would bring his Nancy home.

We're called not only to preserve the God-ordained institution of marriage and highlight its benefits and His reasons for it; we're to model it well, too. Perhaps many people fear the loss of marriage because they've never seen a healthy one in their own families or communities. We'd be wise to quell that anxiety by living out our marriages as they were intended to be.

We hope this book helps you do that. We're delighted to add our perspective to it. In fact, we consider it a privilege to contribute. Most of what you're about to read has been lovingly and prayerfully written by the counselors of Focus on the Family. How we admire these wise women and men who day in and day out help millions of people see their relationships as God sees them. May the Lord bless them—and you and your spouse—as you journey through these pages.

INTRODUCTION

*By Phillip J. Swihart, Ph.D. and
Wilford Wooten, M.S.W., L.M.F.T., L.C.S.W.*

Most marriages start with the delight of “being in love.” The question is what happens next. Does bliss lead to adjustment, compromises, and learning to really love another person who may have very different needs and expectations? Or does it give way to poorly handled conflict, power struggles, and deepening frustration and resentment?

Even in marriages that end up thriving, marital bliss is often replaced by marital stress. Financial problems, for instance, challenge many couples. So do schedules; if some spouses feel as if they never see each other, it’s because they never do.

Trying to agree on priorities is stressful, too. What purchases should you make? What should you forgo? Where should you live? Just finding out what your spouse thinks is normal to spend on clothes can be enlightening—in a very negative way.

Other stressors include getting used to in-laws. Discovering what your mate’s family is really like can be a shock.

So is finding that neither of you seems to have any conflict management skills. As one comedian noted, “My wife and I never fight; we just have moments of intense fellowship.” Instead of dealing constructively with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements found in any marriage, you may quickly

devolve into blaming, yelling, and withdrawing—a toxic cocktail that can send a marriage spiraling downward.

And then there's sex. Whatever happened to the glorious expectations you had in that wonder-world of dating? It may only take a few months of marital reality for the fantasies of “true love” and sexual excitement to clash with the disappointments of sharing a bed with another imperfect person who's sometimes tough to like, let alone love.

Another stressor for many married couples is pregnancy—and the joys and strains of parenting. Trying to learn a whole new skill set is hard enough, but it's much harder when you're desperate for a few more hours of sleep. Even spouses with more than the usual maturity find themselves unusually irritable and hard to get along with.

The spiritual dimension of your relationship can be a point of contention, too. This often forms fertile ground for spiritual attack by an enemy who would love to destroy a relationship that God has blessed as holy.

Many of these challenges stem from distorted expectations. More and more, we want everything to happen on demand. But marriage doesn't work that way.

The apostle Paul advised Christians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). As radio Bible teacher Alistair Begg has noted, we need to do the same in our marriages.

This is a book about working things out—trembling or

otherwise. But it doesn't just dispense advice. It gives you and your spouse a way to spend special time together, talking about things that matter, considering God's Word, praying, and taking action to strengthen and recharge your relationship. You can share these times as often as you like; once a week is a good place to start. It's our hope and prayer that these devotions will be a rich source of help and encouragement on your journey through the partnership called marriage.

There's another distinctive to this volume, too. Most of the authors are current or former professional staff members with Focus on the Family's counseling department. They're committed Christians and highly qualified mental health, marriage, and family therapists with many years of combined experience in working with thousands of couples like you.

Marriage is an adventure. As you enjoy your God-given partnership, enjoy this book, too.



I'd like to tell you how Jean and I first met.

We first crossed paths in 1985 at a wedding in California. People often say that weddings are great places to meet people (for good reason), but at the time I wasn't interested in finding a girlfriend. Honest! I'd recently returned from a semester in Japan and graduated from college. Business degree in hand, I landed a good position with a local paper company and began the corporate climb.

I'd decided to take a break from dating. It was just something the Lord had laid on my heart. As a result of that decision, my head was clearing and my prayer life was improving. It felt great to devote my full attention to my spiritual development, not the pursuit of a pretty girl.

My good friend Dan was incredulous. We bantered about it; he respected my decision to steer clear of romance, but I

could tell he was unconvinced. He was on the verge of marrying his fiancée, Tina, and asked me to be his best man. Honored, I accepted his invitation.

But something extraordinary happened on the Wednesday night before Dan and Tina's wedding. I'd decided to attend a service at Lake Arrowhead Christian Fellowship. I was not a regular attendee, and knew very few people there. In the midst of the worship service the pastor—whom I did not know—walked directly toward me.

“I have a word from the Lord for you,” he said. “The Lord has picked out a wife for you. She will have a heart for the things of God.” He paused and then continued. “And in the years to come you will spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to people all around the world.”

I was stunned. But my heart was tender and receptive to what this man said.

That coming Saturday, at the wedding, I met Tina's good friend. Her name was Jean. Despite the fact that it was Dan and Tina's big day, they worked like crazy to get us together—and succeeded. Jean and I made some pleasant small talk, but quickly parted ways. When I returned to my table, I couldn't believe what I heard myself say to my friend Victor: “I think I met the woman I'm going to marry.”

But life got busy; Jean and I didn't talk to or see one another for the next nine months! Once again our friends tried to play Cupid and orchestrated another meeting. For our first

get-together (not our official first date), I escorted Jean to an Amy Grant concert at the Pacific Amphitheatre in Newport Beach. I packed a picnic dinner of grapes, cheese, crackers, and iced tea. (I later learned that Jean hated iced tea—but that night she drank it with a smile.) In the fading twilight of that warm evening, I think we both realized something good was happening. But we kept our thoughts to ourselves.

Jean was still in college and due back to classes in September for her next year at the University of California at Davis. I hated to see her go, and wasn't crazy about having a long-distance relationship.

So what does a love-struck young man in this situation do? I quit my job and moved in with my brother Mike, who happened to live in Sacramento about 40 miles from Jean's school. For two semesters I burned through savings and income from a few odd jobs while Jean worked on her pre-vet degree.

Our dating life was lots of fun. We talked and talked and talked! While Jean was still in school, I bought a ring and proposed (with her father's permission) under the shade of a large Santa Barbara oak tree.

She said "yes"!

There's more to the story, but we'll save it for later. For now, I'll just point out what strikes me when I think back to the way Jean and I met. I'm reminded that though man has his plans, God will always have His way!

I'll also encourage you to explore the readings in this

“Getting to Know You” section. As Jean and I have found, discovering each other doesn’t end with the proposal or the walk down the aisle. It’s a lifelong process. As you read, have fun remembering the story of how you met—and looking forward to knowing each other better with each passing week.



I

Making Time to Talk

“You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice! Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.”

SONG OF SONGS 8:13-14

Caleb and Trina, recently married, didn't have much spare time. They had full-time jobs and took evening classes. They also found themselves over-invested in church duties and under-invested in each other. They spent little time together, and found even less time to converse. When they did talk, it was mostly to argue and criticize each other. They even questioned whether or not they should be married because they were “falling out of love.”

One day, Caleb took a drive in the country. Long into the evening, about two miles from home, the car suddenly stopped. It had run out of gas.

Something came to Caleb's mind at that moment: His marriage was running out of fuel, too. He knew that he and his wife needed help, and needed it immediately.

Fortunately, they were referred to a marriage counselor. The

first thing they learned there was the “24-5 Principle”—based in part on Deuteronomy 24:5: “If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”

Like Caleb and Trina, many couples don’t take enough time to talk, bond, and firmly connect with each other. How about you?

If you’re a newlywed, you can apply the 24-5 Principle by making an agreement for one year. Refrain from extra responsibilities in order to focus on and establish your marriage. Bond with your spouse. Bring happiness to one another. If your church asks you to take on a major task during this time, you might say something like, “Thank you for thinking of us. We’re so pleased with the church and so encouraged by all of you. But we’ve been strongly advised to invest in each other this first year. Please ask us again in a year or so.”

What if you’re past the one-year mark? You can apply the 24-5 Principle anytime by doing five things:

1. *Keep your promise to “become one.”* One of the best ways to do this is by spending time talking, setting goals, going shopping, playing tennis—even reading a devotional book.
2. *Be intentional and selective.* Everyone has the same amount of time—24 hours a day. If talking really is a priority for you, you’ll say no to time-stealers like TV sitcoms, reality shows, and the Internet.

3. *Be creative and perseverant.* Talk about a variety of subjects—solving problems, overcoming challenges, strengthening your spiritual life, and just having fun. And remember that bonding and connecting don't happen overnight.
4. *Enjoy and encourage uniqueness.* Think of how boring it would be to be married to yourself! Those conversations wouldn't be very interesting, would they? As you spend time together, resist the temptation to try remaking your spouse in your image. Let the Holy Spirit transform both of you into the image of Christ.
5. *Respect God's gift.* God has given you and your spouse each other. How are you nurturing that gift? Taking time to talk is part of that.

—James Groesbeck with Amy Swierczek

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Read Song of Songs 8:13-14 again. What does it mean to you to hear your spouse's voice? Where are your favorite places to "come away" and talk?

WORTH PRAYING ABOUT

Ask God to help you make wise choices about how you use your time this week, and to give you wisdom to make the most of your time together.

WORTH DOING

Choose a chore or recreational activity (washing dishes, hiking, weeding the garden, etc.) that you and your spouse can do together during the next 24 hours. Make sure it's something you can do while talking. Then pick a topic you'll discuss—something positive, like planning a vacation or remembering the two best movies you ever watched together. Some conversations require lots of concentration and eye contact, but talking while doing something else can be an efficient, nonthreatening way to break the ice—especially if you haven't communicated in a while.



2

Honesty: the Best Policy?

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

EPHESIANS 4:15

If you're a Christian, are you required to be “absolutely” honest with your spouse? After all, the Scriptures are clear that lying is a serious affront to God. Christians are to strive for honesty—and truth is absolute, not relative.

But what does that mean when your wife asks, “Does this dress make me look fat?” What does it mean when your husband was intimate with a girlfriend before he met you?

Being honest in the sense of telling the truth is not the same as imparting every thought and feeling you have. Joe and Suzie learned that the hard way.

They'd been married two years. Suzie often remembered that Joe had been “honest” in telling her during a premarital counseling session that he'd been intimate with two other women before becoming a Christian five years ago. As time went by, she found herself thinking more and more about these “other women.” She decided to be “honest” and tell her husband

that if he would just answer a couple of questions, she'd be able to forget the whole thing.

Joe reluctantly agreed to talk briefly about these old girlfriends. Much to his disappointment, these “honest” answers did nothing to satisfy Suzie’s increasing obsession with his history. She began to demand detailed information. Joe withdrew from Suzie’s “interrogations” and refused to talk about anything in his past. This effort to be “honest” turned into a painful, ugly series of interchanges that became toxic for their relationship.

So is honesty the best policy?

Couples should be honest before making a lifelong commitment to marriage, disclosing information that could influence that decision. This includes medical and financial status, past marriages and children if any, spiritual journey and current walk in the faith, criminal history, and other “risk” factors.

In considering how honest to be in a marriage, though, it’s important to examine the intent of the heart.

“Honesty” sounds pious, but can be a selfish excuse for meeting your own needs. In Suzie’s case, one of her motives was trying to relieve her insecurities. She was thinking, *How do I compare? If I don’t measure up, he’ll be tempted again by another woman.*

Some people give their spouses too much information about past and present sinful actions and thoughts. To feel better about themselves, they dump their guilt feelings on their mates—unnecessarily hurting them. Others even offer “honest” information to create anxiety or jealousy in the spouse.

Choosing not to disclose all events of the day or all thoughts that cross your mind isn't necessarily dishonest. In fact, sometimes the loving thing to do is to keep your mouth shut.

Giving a diplomatic answer in love rather than a cold, blunt "truth" is not the same as lying. For instance, it's not particularly virtuous to "honestly" tell your husband that he's boring or not much of a lover.

And if your wife *does* ask, "Does this dress make me look fat?" the biblical admonition about "speaking the truth in love" comes to mind. The flat truth is that the dress doesn't *make* her look fat. A more diplomatic and loving response than a simple "yes" is much advised. For example, you could tell her that although you think her blue dress looks better on her, she's very attractive no matter what dress she's wearing. "No, that dress doesn't make you look fat," you might say. "You look beautiful."

Being truthful in marriage is vital. But before demanding or disclosing "all," be honest with yourself about your motives. Is this for the benefit of your partner and the relationship? Or is it really an attempt to meet some of your own needs?

—*Phillip J. Swihart*

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Read Ephesians 4:15 again. Which seems to have a higher priority in your conversations as a couple—truth or love? What would have to change to give both "top billing"?

WORTH PRAYING ABOUT

Ask God to help you tell each other the truth, to help you know when it's most loving to remain silent, and to heal wounds that may have been caused by a self-serving kind of "honesty."

WORTH DOING

Just for fun, tell each other something you don't remember revealing before (how much you really recall of your wedding ceremony, for instance). But ask yourself first whether this information will damage or build your relationship—and make sure it's the latter, not the former.



3

Helping Each Other to Open Up

“An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.”

PROVERBS 24:26

Kim knew that when her husband came home he'd have an appetite for dinner. But what she hungered for was just a time to talk.

How will we ever get to know each other at this rate? I don't understand him any better than I did before our honeymoon.

When Matt came home, he kissed Kim and they sat down to eat. Kim launched into an animated account of her day. But Matt was his usual quiet self. He didn't seem to notice the favorite dinner she'd prepared. He silently chewed and nodded.

I shouldn't expect him to read my mind, she thought. I'll just come right out and tell him what I want. She explained as clearly as she could how much she needed him to open up.

Unfortunately, all Matt heard was criticism. He shot back that he already did so much for her. He worked long hours and

provided well for them. They even prayed together. What more could she expect?

The evening ended on a sour note. They both knew they had a problem, and needed help.

As they told a counselor their stories, it became clear that Kim was having difficulty accepting the fact that Matt showed his love for her primarily through action—working hard—rather than by talking with her. As Matt listened to Kim, he began to realize that his actions weren't enough; they had to be accompanied by loving words that would speak to Kim's heart.

The counselor suggested a way to get conversation flowing between them. He called it “the Ten-Minute Plan.”

The goal was to help Kim and Matt connect—in a way that fit their busy schedules. Three times a week, they were to spend four minutes reading a recommended marriage book together, four minutes having a positive discussion (no criticism), and two minutes praying. That was it—ten minutes of affirmation through reading, talking, listening, and praying, three times weekly.

It sounded easier than it turned out to be. But Kim and Matt didn't give up. Eventually the Ten-Minute Plan worked so well that they wanted more interaction—and more minutes together. They set aside time each week to do a routine task, giving them a comfortable context in which to talk even more.

By talking and listening, Kim and Matt found themselves more willing to open up to each other and adapt to each other's needs. Soon they knew each other better than ever.

As you try to get to know your spouse, is it hard for him or her to open up? Here are five principles to remember:

1. Communicate your need for conversation in a clear, respectful, forthright way; don't assume your spouse knows what you're thinking.
2. Notice when your spouse *does* try to talk with you. Express your appreciation for that with sincerity and kindness.
3. Commit yourselves to the Ten-Minute Plan of reading, talking, listening, and praying together. Don't give up even though it may be difficult at first.
4. Turn a routine activity into a time of conversation. For Kim and Matt it was cooking; for you and your spouse it could be anything from shopping to hiking to visiting garage sales.
5. Maintain a sense of humor about unexpected challenges in your conversations. Be patient and persistent.

As Kim and Matt found, it *is* possible to help a spouse open up. If it doesn't happen for you as quickly as it happened for them, keep at it!

—James Groesbeck with Amy Swierczek

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Read Proverbs 24:26 again. Why is it important to answer a spouse's questions? How is responding to your mate's efforts at conversation like giving him or her a kiss?

WORTH PRAYING ABOUT

Ask God to show you any hurts or misunderstandings that may keep one or both of you from opening up. Thank Him that, by forgiving each other, you can start fresh—just as His compassion is new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

WORTH DOING

Try the Ten-Minute Plan—ten minutes of affirmation through reading, talking, listening, and praying—three times this week. Then talk about how it went and whether you'd like to make it a habit.



4

Adjusting to Your Spouse's Personality

“If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.”

1 CORINTHIANS 12:17-18

“When she’s stressed out, she talks all the time. If I get tired of talking to her after an hour or so, she gets a second wind and calls a friend!”

“He’s so sensitive. I can’t correct him without it making him angry. No matter what I say, he takes it wrong.”

If these statements hit home, you’re not alone. Most of us have said—or at least thought—similar things about our spouses.

Couples often tell therapists that one of their toughest challenges is adjusting to a spouse’s personality. Many of those people are ready to give up and resign themselves to a miserable

state of existence. Others fear their situations will worsen to a point where the spouse's personality turns repulsive—and divorce will be inevitable.

So what do you do? Stay miserable? Get angry and resentful? Leave?

We suggest none of the above.

Instead, consider these facts about differences in personalities.

1. *God created us to be different.* He knew there would be a place in His plan for introverts and extroverts, for thinkers and feelers. When we realize that, it's often easier to accept and adjust to a spouse's personality. It may even become possible to celebrate those differences. Otherwise, why would God create us in such variety—only to tell us to pair up and remain together for life? He's a God of compassion, not cruelty!

2. *It's easier to spot a flaw than to see a strength.* Jesus put it in terms of spying a speck in another's eye, versus seeing a log in our own (Matthew 7:3-5).

When you were dating, you probably found it easy to focus on the admirable traits of your future mate. You seemed to like the same things, enjoyed the same conversational topics, and tended to overlook each other's quirks.

Bennett, for instance, married Deb because she was such a "great communicator." Now he's annoyed because she's such a "great agitator." Dana married Marcus because he was such a "confident, strong manager." Now he's an "overconfident jerk."

3. *Your ability to tolerate your mate's personality changes with time.* Most of us can stand negative behavior for a while. But everyone has a limit!

Belinda, for example, could put up with Jeff's ability to make a joke out of everything—for about a year. After she became the brunt of his jokes, her level of tolerance changed. She reached a point where she despised his voice, especially his laughter.

Is that the case with you? Maybe it's not that your spouse's personality has become more of a problem; it may be that your ability to value or overlook some attributes has diminished. The change is in your "irritation threshold," which may need adjusting.

First Corinthians 12–14 urges us to appreciate individual differences. The apostle Paul explains that every member of the "body" is valuable. Just because a part is different doesn't give us the right to despise it and set it apart from the others.

The same is true with your mate's personality. It may be different and sometimes difficult to manage. But God doesn't want this to allow division in your marriage.

One of Paul's points to the Corinthians might be summarized this way: "Learn to accept and adjust to each other, no matter what people look like or act like." That applies to husbands and wives, too.

—*Mitch Temple*

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Read 1 Corinthians 12:17-18 again. Is your spouse the eye, ear, brain, nose, hand, mouth, foot, spine, teeth, or muscle of your marriage? What would happen if you tried to take over that function?

WORTH PRAYING ABOUT

Thank God for two aspects of your spouse's personality that are different from yours.

WORTH DOING

Take a brief tour of your home together, looking for evidence of your own personality and that of your spouse. For example, your extroverted mate may have decorated a room with bright colors or lots of pictures of friends and family, or arranged chairs to form conversation areas. Find at least one positive thing to say about that trait and how it makes your life more interesting.