

The Utah Marriage Handbook

Keys to a Healthy Marriage

Helpful marriage
resources

GOT TOUGH ISSUES?

How to build a
Healthy Stepfamily

4 Myths about
domestic
violence

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TEAMWORK!

Establishing
a marriage mission

.....

How well do you
know your spouse?

TAKETHE QUIZ ON PG. 10

YOU **CAN** DO IT ALL!

How to Manage
money, children,
in-laws & MORE!



The Utah Marriage Handbook

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Project Manager – Brian Higginbotham, *Utah Cooperative Extension System*

Editors – Scott Henderson, Connary Fagen, Ashlee Karren, Michael Langenheim

Graphic Design – Mary Ferguson

Written and compiled by:

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Children, Youth, and Families, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University; Extension Specialist, Alabama Cooperative Extension System

David Schramm, Ph.D.

Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D.

Family-Life Extension Specialists, Utah Cooperative Extension System; Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Utah State University

Amber Paulk, M.S.

Center for Children, Youth, and Families, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

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UtahStateUniversity

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

StrongerMarriage.org

Congratulations!

You've made a commitment to join in marriage with a very special someone. Marriages happen in different ways and at different times for different people. You may be young, middle-aged, or a senior. This may be your first marriage or your second or third. You may have children, or you may be gaining a stepchild. You may get married in a home, a church, a synagogue, a temple, or a courthouse. **While no two marriages look exactly alike, all people enter marriage with similar hopes.** You want your marriage to be successful, happy, and long-lasting. You want to be friends, lovers, and partners for life. You have a vision of taking care of each other as you grow older and being there for each other through life's ups and downs.

Something you may realize already is that **strong, healthy, long-lasting marriages** don't just happen on their own. They **happen when two people are intentional about their marriage.** That means each person makes an effort to build strong bonds with his or her spouse and work together so that each feels valued, supported, and connected. A healthy, happy marriage and family life are great for you and for your children. As you enter into this new phase of your life, there are things you can do to help create the kind of marriage and family life everyone hopes for.

Did you know there's information available that can help you build a healthy marriage? Although some people have seen wonderful examples of healthy marriages and have learned a lot from watching other couples, others may not have seen great relationships or may not fully realize what it is that builds strong marriages, even if they have seen them.

Did you know there's been a lot of research about the kinds of things that people do that lead to strong, long-lasting marriages? This handbook is designed to share some of that information with you. Some of this might confirm what you're doing already; some of this might be new, helpful information.



We hope that you will:

Read this handbook and discuss it with your partner. Try out some of the tips in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

•

Save this handbook and look at it from time to time, especially when questions or difficult situations come up in your relationship.

•

Check out the publications, resources, and websites suggested in this handbook. They can provide additional information about topics in this guide.

•

Participate in premarital preparation before you marry or in marriage education programs at any time in your marriage. These programs teach valuable tips, skills, and attitudes that form the foundation for good relationships. Both men and women find these programs very helpful—and enjoyable!

•

Seek help for your marriage if you experience trouble. Not all marriages can or should be saved, but many can be. Don't wait until your situation is very serious before getting help.

•

There are many agencies, organizations, and individuals in the state of Utah who care about you and your efforts to build a strong and lasting marriage. Healthy marriages and healthy families create healthy communities—something we all want. We wish you all the best and hope that this guide is helpful in your journey.

Keys to a Successful Marriage



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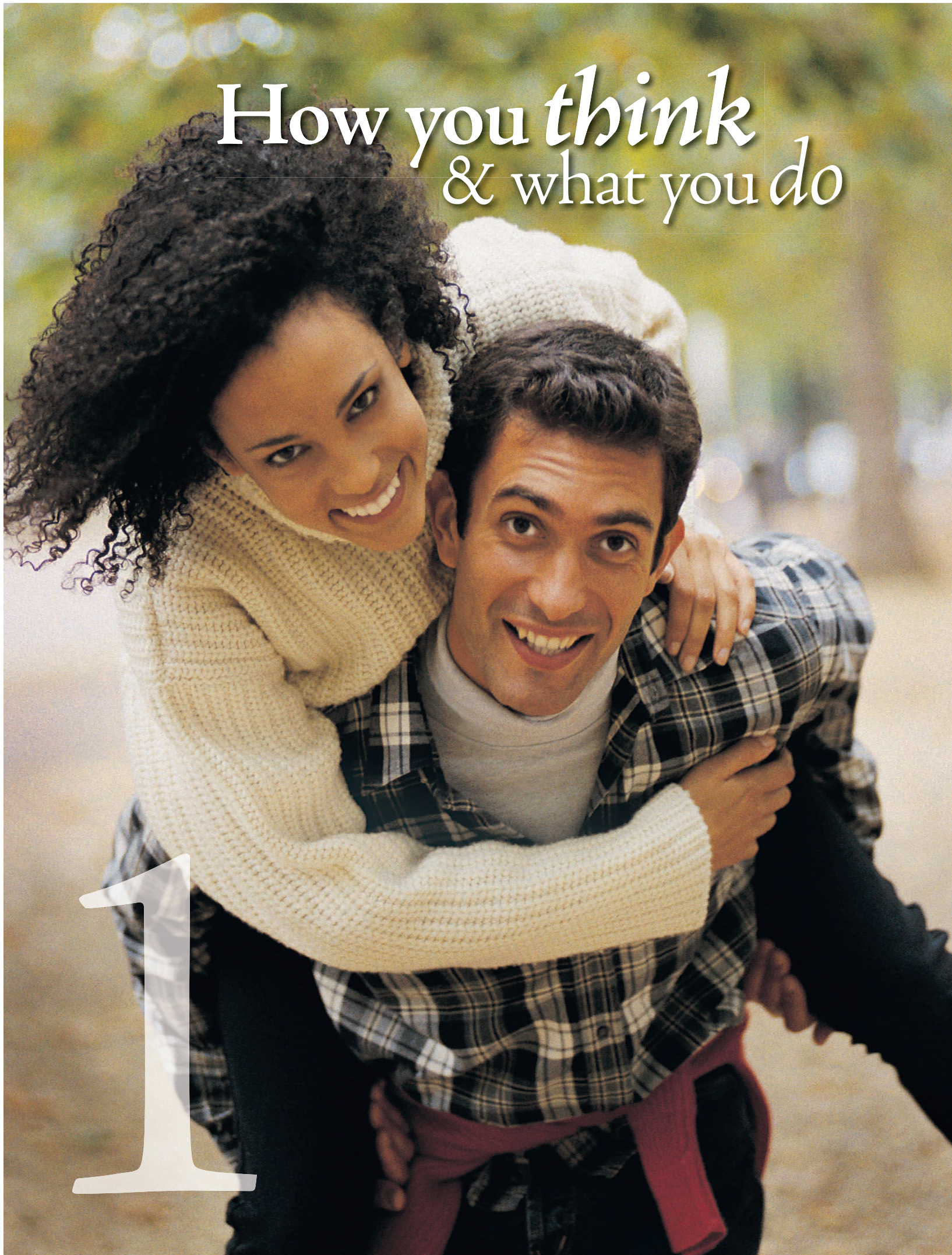
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How you *think*
& what you *do*

1



How You Think

How you think affects the quality of your marriage. The *expectations* you have upon entering marriage, the *commitment* you make to your relationship as a couple, and having a *positive attitude* all have a great bearing on the success of your partnership.

❖ **Expectations**

People who enter marriage with unrealistic beliefs and unrealistic expectations often feel frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction when their expectations go unmet. On the other hand,

people who have more realistic expectations and who think about their partners in positive ways—often giving them the benefit of the doubt—have more satisfying marriages. Because no person is perfect, happiness in marriage is higher for a person who focuses on the positives rather than the negatives in his or her spouse and relationship.

Remember, too, that how you think about a situation can lead to how you *behave*. What do you expect in your marriage? What do you expect of your spouse? Have you thought about it?
Try this exercise.

.....

Indicate whether you think the following statements are true or false.	True	False
1. Because we are in love we should never disagree.		
2. My spouse should know what I'm thinking and feeling without my having to say it.		
3. My spouse will never change (for the better or for the worse).		
4. I will always feel those exciting, passionate feelings for my spouse.		

.....



If you thought, “These statements are unrealistic,” then you’re on track—they are all false. Research shows that people who strongly hold these expectations are usually less satisfied in their marriages.

In reference to number 1 above, having conflict is a *normal* part of being in a relationship with another human being. There’s nothing *wrong* with your marriage if you have disagreements. Skills for managing disagreements and conflict are very important for healthy relationships. Some recommendations are offered in the next section.

For number 2, although a few people might be quite good at it, mind-reading is a rare skill. A person can love you deeply and still not be able to know what you’re thinking or feeling.

For number 3, people can and do change and grow. And remember, when you hit some rough spots, in most cases, people can change for the better with support, love, and encouragement.

For number 4, long-lasting love experiences some highs and lows in passionate feelings. Mature love takes time to grow and is better described as strong feelings of connection, caring, and respect for the other person.

Marriage is much more than the happily ever after you see in the movies. All couples have differences and disagreements. The issue is not whether you have disagreements but how you manage them. Couples who stay together learn how to turn romantic, fairy-tale love into real, lasting, committed, mature love.

**Tip #1 • Recognize
any unrealistic
expectations
you may have.**

People enter marriage with very specific expectations and beliefs about how things should work and who should do what. Have you talked about some of these? Complete this questionnaire separately, and then compare your answers. You might find some very interesting differences!



Tip #2 • Share your expectations with each other.

Who will/should do these tasks?	You		Spouse		Both		Not Sure
HOUSEHOLD TASKS							
Indoor (cleaning, dusting, etc.)							
Outdoor (lawn, garden, etc.)							
YOUTH & CHILD CARE (Present or Future)							
Teach sex education							
Give guidance and discipline							
Help with school work							
Teach family values							
Attend parent/teacher conferences							
FINANCES							
Bookkeeping							
Pay bills							
Plan family budget							
DECISIONS							
When to purchase car							
When to remodel house							
How to spend family income							
When to have additional children							
SPIRITUALITY							
Decide level of church involvement							
Decide family spirituality practices							
Teach children related topics							
FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES							
Run errands							
Grocery shopping							
Maintain family car							
Transport children to school and activities							
MARITAL ROLES							
Resolve conflict							
Initiate affection							
Initiate sex							
Initiate recreation							
Initiate social activities							
Make retirement plans							
Make contact w/ your extended family							
Make contact w/ spouse's extended family							

❖ Commitment – From Me to We

Another important part of thinking in ways that lead to a healthy marriage is to adopt a *commitment attitude*, which means that you consider you and your spouse as part of the same team.

Tip #3 ♦ Think of you and your spouse as a team.

You're in this together now—and most people have lots of hurdles and challenges to face in life. If you think of yourselves as part of a team, you're more likely to behave in ways that make you feel more and more connected. You'll support each other when one of you faces a challenge. You'll make choices that build trust between the two of you.

Part of thinking as a team means talking about your expectations as well as your goals and purpose in coming together as a married couple. You and your spouse grew up in different families, have had different experiences, and think differently. Whether it be something as small as who you think should take out the trash or as large as deciding whether and when to have children, share with your spouse your expectations, hopes, and desires. Failure to talk about what's in your heart and mind can quickly lead to frustration and disappointment. The more agreement you and your spouse have in terms of your expectations and beliefs,

the greater your chances for harmony in your marriage. If you find that you and your spouse share very different views in any area, it may be wise to come to some sort of agreement that you are both comfortable with before you get married. Where there are differences, try to work for common ground. Keep in mind that in marriage, when one spouse loses, both lose. Strive for solutions that satisfy both members of your marriage "team."

Think, too, about your broader goals. Many companies and organizations have a mission statement, which states their purpose, goals, and commitments to customers and employees. It is a good idea to do this for your marriage. Think about what you personally want in your mission statement. What do you as a couple believe, want, support, and value? With your spouse, discuss the questions at the bottom of the page (and think of some others), and see if you can come up with a mission statement for your marriage.

Tip #4 ♦ Establish a shared mission for your marriage.

Consider using this statement as a guide throughout your marriage. You may even want to hang it in a place where you and your spouse will regularly see it. From time to time, read it together and evaluate whether your daily behaviors, choices, and use of time are consistent with your commitment to one another.



What do we want out of this relationship?

How will we treat each other?

What will we do to keep our relationship strong?

Our Mission Statement

❖ Attitudes

People in healthy relationships and marriages focus on the positives and trust each other, giving the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Think about how you would respond in the following scenarios with your spouse, and then share your thoughts with him or her.

.....

Your spouse leaves early for work without waking you and telling you goodbye.

•

You come home to a messy kitchen and find your spouse playing outside with the kids.

•

You have a 6:00 p.m. dinner date on the other side of town. It is now 5:45, and your spouse is still not home.

.....

In each of these scenarios, you could easily choose to feel slighted, ignored, or frustrated. Was that your first instinct? Did you find that there's also a more *positive* way to think of each of the scenarios?

.....

"How thoughtful that he didn't wake me!"
or
"She wanted me to rest as much as possible!"
•
"How wonderful that she takes time to nurture the children!"
or
"What a wonderful involved dad he is!"
•
"Something must have kept her at the office; I'll bet she's upset that she's running late!"
or
"I hope everything's alright; it is not like him to keep me waiting!"

.....

It should be easy to see that when you think more positively about a situation, you're more likely to act more positively with your spouse.



Even though it might seem that how you think about a situation just *happens*, you can control your thinking and *decide* to have a more positive attitude about your spouse. Learning to do this is a skill that leads to greater happiness and satisfaction in marriage.

Tip #5 • Give your spouse the benefit of the doubt.

But what if you gave your spouse the benefit of the doubt and you were wrong? When you've been let down frequently, it may be difficult for you to give your spouse the benefit of the doubt. In such cases, talking about your frustrations and deciding together how to change the situation is important. Each one of you will need to focus on changing some behaviors that are distressful to the other, as well as reinforcing the positives. Instead of constantly pointing out when a spouse does something *wrong*, try to notice and comment when your spouse does something *right*. For example, if he or she constantly forgets to call when behind schedule, try doing something really nice the first time he or she does remember to call. People typically respond better to praise than to criticism.

Let's face it, no one is perfect! There will always be some things about your spouse that drive you crazy, so it is very important to not let the negatives in your relationship overshadow the positives.

Take a minute to brainstorm 10 things you really like about your spouse. Write them down here, and come back to them the next time you find yourself frustrated with something about your spouse.

**Tip #6 • Focus more
on the positives in
your spouse and in
your marriage.**



10 Great Things About My Spouse!

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

What You Do

In addition to thinking in ways that support and build the relationship, people in healthy marriages make a habit of *doing* certain things that keep their friendship, their commitment, and their connection strong. Some of these behaviors may come more naturally for some people than for others; however, *everyone* can build skills in these areas with effort and practice.

✱ Maintaining & Growing Your Friendship

It should come as little surprise that couples with a strong friendship quite naturally handle their conflicts better. Couples are often very good in the beginning of their marriage at doing the things that enhance their friendship and positive feelings for each other. The following are suggestions that are fairly simple but very powerful in maintaining and growing your friendship throughout your life together.

Tip #7 + Frequently ask your spouse about his or her thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

You may know a lot of things about your spouse already, but always striving to more deeply know your spouse can positively affect your marriage. The more a spouse is aware of the details of the other person's world (his or her stressors, hopes, likes, and dislikes), the better the marriage. Knowing your spouse well leads to a strong friendship—the true key to a long-lasting, healthy marriage.



Test how well you know your spouse by answering the following true or false questions.

	True	False
I can name my spouse's best friends.		
I know my spouse's favorite type of music.		
I know my spouse's favorite movie.		
I know my spouse's most stressful childhood event.		
I know my spouse's most embarrassing moment.		
I know what my spouse would do if he or she won the lottery.		
I know what my spouse's ideal job would be.		
I know my spouse's ideal place to live.		
I know the things that currently cause my spouse stress.		
I know the names of the people that have irritated my spouse recently.		
I know some of my spouse's life dreams.		
I am very familiar with my spouse's religious beliefs.		
I know my spouse's favorite and least favorite relatives.		
I feel like my spouse knows me pretty well.		
I trust my spouse.		
My spouse trusts me.		

*Adapted from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by J. Gottman (1999).

If you were able to answer true to more than half of the questions, you know your spouse fairly well. If not, take some time to find the answers to these and other important questions about your spouse. It will improve your friendship and your commitment to your spouse. Share the answers on your list with your spouse, and don't feel badly if you didn't know a lot of things. Use this as an opportunity to share with each other. Enjoy the conversation, and make it a regular part of your time together.

Tip #8 ♦ Show your spouse in small ways daily how much you care.

Interestingly, it is not the big, grandiose displays of love and affection that keep a marriage strong. It is the daily, small, positive behaviors and habits that work best. Researchers have even discovered a formula among healthy couples: there are five positive behaviors for every one negative behavior in the relationship. Often, when couples struggle in a relationship, it is not necessarily that there are lots more negative behaviors—it is that they have lost the many daily kind and thoughtful behaviors and routines that existed in the early part of their relationship.



As daily physical exercise builds strong bodies, there are some daily relationship exercises that build strong marriages. *Try these. Post these exercises on the refrigerator, and try them.*

Couples report amazing results!

Exercise 1

Before saying goodbye to your spouse in the morning, learn about one important thing that's happening in his or her life that day. This will break the habit of inattention that eventually turns couples into strangers.

2 minutes per day

Exercise 2

Decompress after work by discussing the most stressful parts of your day. This will prevent job frustration from spilling over into your home life. Also share your joys and successes. When it is your spouse's turn to talk, resist the urge to give advice. Instead, be supportive and say you understand. Be a cheerleader for the joys and the challenges.

20 minutes per day

Exercise 3

Once a day, spontaneously tell your spouse you appreciate something he or she has done or that you admire a certain quality in him or her.

5 minutes per day

Exercise 4

Show affection outside the bedroom by occasionally kissing or touching.

5 minutes per day

Exercise 5

Plan a date once a week, just like when you were single. Go someplace—just the two of you—and get reacquainted with each other.

Once a week for at least 2 hours

❖ Learning to Communicate

Communication is the key to a good relationship. How many times have you heard that? Well, it is true. Finding ways to be *heard*—and to *listen*—to your spouse are very important skills for healthy marriages. Some people are really good at this; others need to work at it.

The way your family members—those you grew up with—communicate with each other has a great influence on how you interact with your spouse. It can help you both to examine the patterns of communication you’ve learned.

Check the answers below that best describe your original family’s communication patterns. Were you aware of your and your spouse’s family patterns before completing this questionnaire? Did you mistakenly think that you were both familiar with the same communication style? What often happens when two people have different styles of communication?



1. How would you describe the communication?

- ☐ Open
- ☐ Closed

2. Within your family, how do the members feel toward each other?

- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Connected

3. The conversations in your family tend to center around which topics?

- ☐ People
- ☐ Facts
- ☐ Feelings
- ☐ Ideas

4. To whom would you rather talk?

- ☐ A parent
- ☐ A sibling
- ☐ A relative
- ☐ A friend
- ☐ No one

5. How often would your family members get together to talk about concerns?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Several times a week
- ☐ Only when there is a problem
- ☐ Never

6. When did your family spend time together in conversation?

- ☐ After school
- ☐ At mealtime
- ☐ Late evenings
- ☐ On weekends
- ☐ Never

7. How would you describe your family’s ability to handle change?

- ☐ Go with the flow
- ☐ Very stressful
- ☐ Get angry
- ☐ Resistant

8. Who made the major decisions in the family?

- ☐ Father
- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Children
- ☐ Grandparents
- ☐ Varied

9. Are family members free to disagree with one another?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

10. How would you describe the overall tone of the conversation style in your family?

- ☐ Quiet
- ☐ Loud
- ☐ Argumentative
- ☐ Critical

11. Are there topics at home that are off limits for discussion?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. Do family members value each other’s opinions?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

* Adapted from *Connections: Relationships and Marriage*, by C. Kamper, The Dibble Fund.

Tip #9 • Talk about your differences in communication patterns, and decide together what areas you will work on so that you can communicate more effectively.



It is important to remember that communication is like a game of tennis. There's a sender, and there's a receiver—and both of these things have to happen or the ball (the message) will be dropped (not communicated).

Get in the habit of sending and receiving in your everyday life together. For the sender, use "I" messages to tell your message from your viewpoint, for example:

.....

*I am excited about _____
because _____.*

*I am frustrated about _____
because _____.*

*I am happy that _____
because _____.*

*I am nervous or uneasy about _____
because _____.*

*I am hopeful about _____
because _____.*

.....

As one spouse communicates his or her thoughts and feelings, the other spouse should make an effort to receive and understand the message that's being conveyed. One of the easiest ways to facilitate understanding is by asking your spouse questions about what he or she has said.

Receiving the information in communication is usually the more difficult part for couples. Practice by saying back to your spouse what you heard her or him say; for example,

"So, is what you're saying...?"

Let your spouse clarify if necessary. Take turns being the sender and the receiver. This back-and-forth kind of communication might feel awkward at first, but if you can make it part of your habit of talking with each other in your daily life, it will enter into your communication patterns when you're in conflict.

Tip #10 ♦ In talking with each other, be sure that you take turns and make an effort to really hear what your spouse is saying and feeling.

❖ Managing Conflict

A major difference between satisfying and unsatisfying relationships is not whether the couple has conflict; it is how the conflict is *managed*.

No two people agree on absolutely everything, and avoiding issues or trying to pretend there is nothing wrong can create major problems. All human beings in relationships have conflict now and then. Conflict doesn't mean that there's something wrong with your relationship.

It's important to remember that *how you communicate—how you respond to each other when you're in conflict—can either strengthen your relationship or tear it down*. It is possible for a couple to learn healthy ways to disagree and not damage their relationship in the process. It may even be possible to resolve some problems together.



Rate yourself on the following statements.

I use language that does not put a person on the defensive, such as telling my feelings rather than blaming or accusing.

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

I am not immediately defensive when my spouse brings up an issue or problem.

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

I speak kindly to my spouse (no sarcasm or name-calling).

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

I will apologize.

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

I take time to listen to what my spouse is saying. (I'm not just thinking about what I'm going to say next while he or she is talking.)

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

I stay engaged with my spouse and don't just shut down and not try to talk things out.

- ☐ I'm really good at this!
- ☐ I'm okay at this.
- ☐ I really need to work on this!

.....

How did you do? Why is it important to keep your words focused on yourself rather than on your spouse? Why is it important to not immediately respond defensively?

Human beings are defensive by nature. Ask your spouse to hold up one hand; push your hand flat against his or her hand, and watch the reaction. What seems to be the natural reaction? *To push back!*

It should be easy to understand that attack/defend is not a good method of communicating with each other. If you're attacking, your message is not getting through—the other person is too busy pushing back.

What are some ways to avoid or move out of this trap? First, *use a softer start* when you have an issue or problem you want to discuss. Anger is usually met with anger, so if you start with emotions that are not so strong, your spouse is less likely to respond with strong, angry emotions.

When you're in an emotionally charged argument, either one of you can pull back and reduce the conflict level. Push on your spouse's hand again, and when he or she pushes back, relax your hand in response. What does the other person do? *He or she usually doesn't push as hard.*

There are lots of different ways to pull back. You can intentionally talk more softly and slowly. You can reach out to your spouse emotionally by

saying, “You must be feeling...” or by sharing your emotions and asking for help.

It’s vitally important to use *soothing behaviors* and to find ways to keep the angry emotions manageable when you’re in conflict. If someone becomes too upset, all the wonderful knowledge and skills you have to keep your connection with your spouse strong can fly right out of your head!

❖ **More Tips for Effective Communication During Conflict**

With your spouse, put a star by the tips below that you think are especially important for the two of you. Write these rules and others you come up with together on a piece of paper, and post it somewhere you will see it often.

Tip #11 • Describe your feelings, using “I” instead of starting with “you...” Starting with “you” usually puts the person on the defensive and may start to get him or her emotionally upset.

Tip #12 • Focus on the specific and current behavior, and don’t label the person in a bad way. “I” statements can be combined with a specific focus on the behavior. Labeling a person can quickly make that person defensive and upset. See how these are different:

- “You’re such a slob,” versus “I’d like it if you’d remember to put the wet towels in the hamper.”
- “You’re thoughtless,” versus “I feel really sad that you forgot our anniversary.”
- “You never help with the children,” versus “I’d feel much less stressed if you helped with the children’s bedtime routine.”

Tip #13 • Don’t be so focused on winning. Be able to apologize.

Usually, an apology is almost immediately soothing to your spouse’s upset feelings. It is a very powerful response.

Tip #14 • Use kind words and a kind tone of voice. Isn’t it amazing how kind and polite we are to friends, acquaintances, and even strangers? Do you speak to your spouse with kindness? Consciously work on adding polite, genuinely kind words and phrases to your dialogue with your spouse, such as “please,” “thank you,” and “I so appreciate when you...”

Tip #15 • Express some kind of appreciation before offering a complaint.

There is a management style that recommends several positive strokes for every one complaint or critique given, making it more likely that the complaint will be received (listened to). Have you ever worked with someone like that? What does that feel like? Even in the midst of conflict and strong emotions, you can find something about your spouse that you appreciate, and you need to verbalize this. It can go a long way in soothing upset feelings.

Tip #16 • Don’t keep things inside until you feel filled up and then dump everything out at once. If you carry around your complaints and hard feelings and then dump them all at once on your spouse, it is more likely that it will be too much for him or her to handle and he or she will be automatically defensive and not hear what you have to say. Say what you’re thinking and feeling as soon as it is appropriate. Don’t wait for things to build up.

Tip #17 • Avoid ultimatums. Statements that begin with “You better do this or else...” are not helpful in resolving conflict. They limit options and back your spouse into a corner, forcing him or her to make a choice neither of you may be happy with.

*Many of these tips in this section are from *Saying I Do: Consider the Possibilities*, by J. Marshall, Utah State University Extension.

Tip #18 • Listen to what the other person has to say. Each person involved has his or her own point of view and should have the chance to express it. Don't interrupt each other. Take turns, and *listen*.

Tip #19 • Always check your perceptions.

Don't assume you know what's going on or how your spouse feels or thinks. Check and recheck for understanding.

Tip #20 • State wishes and wants clearly and directly. Don't beat around the bush or make your spouse guess what the problem is. A technique that can work is W-I-N: When you...I feel... I Need...

Tip #21 • Don't use sex to smooth over an argument. Sex can be a great part of making up after you've worked through a conflict with your spouse, but it is a poor substitute for really understanding each other on a difficult issue. Also, don't withhold sex as a threat or use it in a manipulative way.

Tip #22 • Don't fight dirty. Don't be physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive or manipulative. Don't intentionally say or do things that you know are upsetting to your spouse. Of all the people in the world, you probably know how to hurt your spouse most effectively. Respect your spouse enough to refrain from dirty fighting.

Tip #23 • Don't give the silent treatment. The silent treatment is a form of quiet aggression. It will not help you resolve anything and only prolongs the agony of the conflict for both of you.

Tip #24 • Call time-outs and fouls.

Sometimes it is necessary to take a short break to cool down if things get heated. Be sure to come back to the issue, though. Also, set up an agreed upon way to call a foul, or time-out, if your spouse begins fighting dirty or breaking your rules for fair fighting.

Tip #25 • Don't take it out on your spouse.

If you're mad at someone, don't yell at your spouse. You can share your sad or angry feelings with your spouse, but be careful not to make your spouse feel like he or she is the target.

Tip #26 • Use humor.

Humor can be a good way to deal with conflict as long as it is not sarcastic. Loving humor can break the tension of an argument in a split second!

Tip #27 • When the fight is over, drop it. Forgive and forget. Don't keep bringing up the fight or hold on to your anger once an argument is over, even if it wasn't resolved the way you wanted.

Tip #28 • Try writing down your feelings.

Sometimes direct confrontation is not the best way to talk to your spouse about an issue. Written words don't carry quite as much emotion as spoken words sometimes do. Your spouse may be more willing to listen to what you've written.

Tip #29 • Use these important phrases: "Now I understand," "Maybe you're right," and "I'm sorry." And go ahead and add a fourth to that list: "I love you!"



❖ **The Big Red Flags**

Throughout your marriage, pay particular attention to the following four behaviors, which are considered to be especially destructive and predictive of marital failure.

Criticism

There's a big difference between complaining and criticizing. A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, such as "I'm angry you didn't put your clothes in the hamper." Criticism goes the next step and assigns a character trait, such as "You're so lazy!"

Defensiveness

In response to a complaint, it might seem natural to defend yourself. But rather than defuse the attack, this response usually escalates it. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your spouse. You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't me, it's you."

Contempt

Too much negativity leads to conversations full of sarcasm, cynicism, and mockery. Contempt is poisonous to a relationship. It conveys disgust, and it eats away at any good in the relationship.

Stonewalling

When there's no hope of progress, one partner (the man in 85 percent of cases) simply tunes out. He doesn't care; he doesn't even appear to hear. Stonewalling usually arrives last. It represents a deadly disconnection.

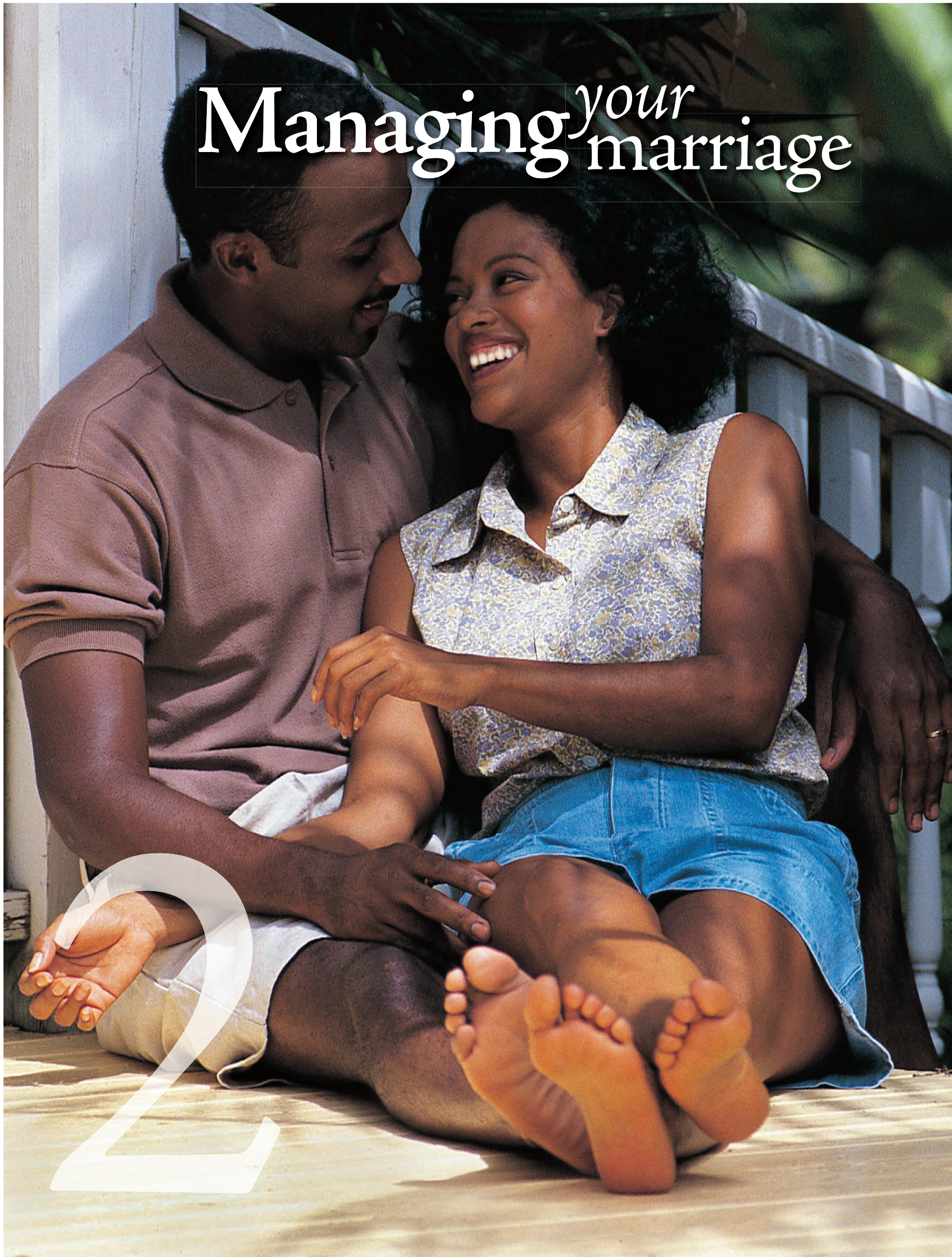
* Information in this section was adapted from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by J. Gottman (1999).

Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling can sneak into even the best of relationships. Undoubtedly, an occasional snide remark will occur at some point in the marriage, but be on alert—if a conscious effort is not made to stop these behaviors, they create a cycle of negativity that becomes increasingly destructive and difficult to stop.

Tip #30 • Be on alert for the big red flags: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.



Managing *your* marriage



Managing Your Marriage

In this section, we'll focus on using those *thinking* and *doing* skills when facing certain challenges.

❖ Managing Money

All marriages include the management of issues and tasks. One issue that all couples deal with is how to handle money. An important place to start is talking to each other about your values for spending.

What's important to you? Why do you spend your money the way you do? If 10 people were given a \$100 bill, they would most likely spend it in entirely different ways. Why? Because people are different and value different things. The deep-rooted beliefs you have about what is desirable and good are known as "values." Values grow from personal experiences. You have made—and will continue to make—choices based on your values. Values are not necessarily right or wrong; they express what is most important to you. Families set goals based on their values. A major reason why many couples argue about money often involves differing values and goals between partners.



.....

Read over the list below. Put a 1 beside the things that are most important to you. Put a 2 by the things you consider somewhat important and a 3 by things that are not important to you. After you've completed the list, ask your partner to do the same.



- _____ religion
- _____ education
- _____ vacation
- _____ saving money
- _____ our own business
- _____ jewelry
- _____ family
- _____ health
- _____ cultural events
- _____ sports
- _____ job success
- _____ food
- _____ insurance
- _____ lots of money
- _____ friends
- _____ new car
- _____ pay off debts
- _____ clothes
- _____ entertainment
- _____ boat
- _____ other



You have just won \$10,000 in the lottery. What will you do with the money? Decide how you would spend the money and fill in the chart below.

\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____
\$ _____	for _____

.....

You have just been laid off of your job. You must make a major cut in spending. What would you cut first?

.....

Now compare your responses from above with your spouse's.

Do you both value the same things?

•

Do you want more new clothing when your partner would prefer to go on a fishing trip?

•

Do you and your partner agree on your spending values?

•

Are you spending money on the things that are really important to both you and your family?

It is hard enough for one person to decide which is more important, but even harder for two people to agree on the same things. Take some time to compare your actual spending to your rated priorities to see if they really do match.

❖ Money-Talk Tips

Here are some tips that will help you effectively manage your money together.

Tip #1 • Set aside a regular time each month to discuss money issues (your budget, planned expenses, debt-reduction plans). By having a regular meeting, you'll spend less time overall and may avoid problems since you've set aside time to work together.

Tip #2 • Talk regularly about ways to better manage your money.

Tip #3 • Use a team approach. Respect each other's differences, and work toward decisions both of you agree with.

Tip #4 • Keep each other up to date on all personal assets and debts.

Tip #5 • Discuss and come to agreements about how to use any extra money (such as tax refunds).

Tip #6 • Write short and long-range financial goals together.

Tip #7 • As you set financial goals, remember to be realistic, specific, and flexible.

Tip #8 • Remember to use positive communication skills when discussing money. Avoid language that will put your spouse on the defensive, such as criticizing, ridiculing, or demanding.

* Information in this section was adapted from *Managing Your Money*, by E. Ames, Ohio State University Extension.

❖ Managing Work & Family

Unfortunately, many couples get married without spending much time discussing their expectations about what their work and family life will be like. It is important that you and your spouse have a joint understanding of each other's thoughts and expectations in these areas.

Answer these questions individually, and then compare your answers with those of your spouse.

Do you and your spouse both plan on working?

If you both work, will one spouse's job take priority over the other's?

Are you and your spouse in agreement about the type of work you both will do?

Do you expect your spouse to be open to relocating if your job requires it?

If both you and your spouse do not need to work for financial reasons, will both work anyway?

If your spouse became unemployed, for how long would you be comfortable being the sole provider?

How will your work affect your decisions of whether and when to have children?

Should either of you consider staying home to care for the children? Who should that be?

If both you and your spouse need or want to work, what are your childcare options?

How many hours do you expect to work in a typical week?

What type of hours do you expect your spouse to work in a typical week?

Is career development or family life your top priority?

Whether one or both of you work, it is important for you to create a healthy balance between work and home.

Although it is impossible to completely separate your work life from your home life, there are some potential benefits to having a little separation between the two.

Complete the following sentences so you'll have a better understanding of how your work life spills over into your home life. Read through your responses with your spouse. Which responses do you feel good about? Which responses show how your work life might be negatively affecting your home life?

• If I work overtime, when I get home...

• After a hard day at work, when I get home...

• If I feel hassled at work, when I get home...

• If my boss compliments me, when I get home...

• If things have gone well at work, when I get home...

• If my work environment has been noisy, when I get home...

• If I've been bored at work, when I get home...

• If I feel underpaid, when I get home...

• If I've had to take orders all day, when I get home...

• If I'm proud of my day's work, when I get home...





Balance vs. Stress - Now consider the level of balance or stress in your life. Circle your responses to the statements below as strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neither (N), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA).

At the end of the day, I feel frustrated because I did not accomplish all that I planned to do.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
I find myself trying to be everything to everybody.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
I have difficulty setting aside time for activities with my spouse.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
I feel good about how much my spouse contributes to the care and maintenance of our home.	SD (5)	D (4)	N (3)	A (2)	SA (1)
I often cannot participate in family activities because of my work.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
I often cannot get work done because of commitments to my family.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)

Tally the points that are associated with each of the responses you circled.

If your score is 6 to 12 — you are probably doing well in managing your work/family balance.

If your score is 13 to 20 — you may want to look at a few areas of work/family life and think of ways to reduce the stress a bit.

If your score is 21 to 30 — it is important that you and your spouse discuss strategies for reducing your stress and restoring some balance to your life.

❖ Tips for Managing Work & Family

Changes don't have to be big to make a difference. Try some of these pointers to help you manage the daily routines of work and family.

.....

Wake-up time

- Get to bed earlier and get up earlier.
- Get ready before waking others.
- Have children make their own lunches.
- Coordinate and share morning tasks with your spouse.
- Take time for breakfast.
- Set clocks ahead 10 minutes.
- Reward yourself for arriving at work on time.

After work/dinnertime

- Transition with a change of clothes.
- Take time to listen and debrief about each other's day.
- Prepare meals together.
- Sit down for dinner together at the table.
- Allow each other some time alone.
- Share cleanup of the dishes and house.
- Make the next day's lunches.

Cleanup/bedtime

- Stick with an agreed TV cutoff time.
- Do a few maintenance chores daily (bills, dusting).
- Arrange items that you need access to in the morning in a familiar place.
- Plan and lay out what to wear tomorrow.

If you're really feeling off balance, it may be important to put greater effort into managing your time and stress load.

- ✦ Make a list of weekly activities, and prioritize them on a checklist.
- ✦ Schedule time with your spouse each day.
- ✦ Schedule your exercise each week.
- ✦ Maintain good nutrition and adequate sleep.

- ✦ Plan something fun to do together as a couple at least once a week.
- ✦ Talk with your employer if your workload is creating too much stress or pressure for you. Be prepared to offer some suggested strategies.
- ✦ Talk to your spouse if you feel that his or her work is negatively affecting your home life (using the techniques you've learned for positive communication). Develop strategies together.

❖ **Managing Home & House-Care Responsibilities**

Look back on pg. 6 at the table showing marital role expectations. How much alike were your and your spouse's responses to the questions related to household tasks and family responsibilities? It is really not so important who does what and who does more or less, it is *whether you agree how the homecare responsibilities should be handled and shared*. You should each feel that the distribution of labor—how much and what each of you does—is *fair*.

If one or both of you do not feel good about your current situation—or if you've never discussed what your homecare responsibilities will be—it's

a good idea to do a little detailed work to set up a plan and an agreement.

Take a few minutes to make the following lists.

List all of the household tasks that need to be done. (It helps to put the tasks into categories such as indoor work, outdoor work, childcare, financial management, and wage earning.)

List how often each task needs to be done. (Is it daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or yearly?)

List how long it takes to complete each task.

List who will do or usually does the task. (Is it primarily your job, your spouse's job, or a shared job?)

Household task	How often?	How long?	Who does it?



❖ Tips for Managing Housework Together

One of the challenges for busy dual-earner couples is carving out enough time to get the necessary household work done without cutting into personal, couple, and family time. This problem is a source of stress in many relationships. While one solution would be to hire someone to help clean the house, most couples can't afford this. Here are some tips on managing the "second shift."

Tip #1 • Prioritize. What really needs to be done and when? Some jobs are clearly more important than others. What must get done each day? What can wait until the weekend? What can children do?

Tip #2 • Make a plan.

A little planning can go a long way. Working out a plan of responsibility for household jobs—like the one suggested on pg. 23—can benefit both spouses in terms of their personal well-being as well as the health of their relationship. Making a plan can also help clarify who is doing work that the other may not know about.

Tip #3 • Divide tasks by abilities, interests, and needs.

Divide tasks by abilities, interests, and needs rather than simply by "men's work" and "women's work." Most couples today are dual-earner couples, and the pattern of women doing all the "inside work" and men doing the periodic "outside work" is not often viewed as fair. A wiser division of tasks allows for balanced sharing and individual preference.

Tip #4 • Ban micromanaging. Make a rule that whoever does the task can do it his or her way without criticism. In the case of different standards, partners can work to reach a compromise that both can live with.

Tip #5 • Be flexible. Switch household jobs every now and then to minimize boredom. Also, allowing the other person to take responsibility for a household job might reveal some hidden talent or creativity.



❖ Managing Children

Having children is clearly something to discuss with your spouse before you marry. Do you expect to have children with your spouse? How many?

Once you've decided you will have a child, you'll need to discuss with your spouse what your solutions for work and childcare may be.

.....

Will one of you stay home after the child is born? If so, who? If so, for how long?

•

Will you work at home?

•

Will you ask family members outside of the home to provide childcare?

•

Will you hire someone from outside the home to provide childcare?

•

Will you trade childcare with a friend or neighbor?

•

Will you use the services of a daycare center?

•

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?

.....

Having children brings changes to a marriage. "We really wanted the baby," Sharon says, here eyes brimming with tears. "And we still do. It just feels like we've grown farther apart since she came." Jim pipes in: "Between our jobs and caring for little Samantha, there's not much time for anything else." The writer Nora Ephron summed it up pretty well, saying, "When you have a baby, you set off an explosion in your marriage, and when the dust settles, your marriage is different from what it was. Not better, necessarily; not worse, necessarily; but different."



Adding a baby to the family represents a major life change for most couples. Children can bring new meaning and depth to a family. While children certainly bring joy, most couples find that responsibilities, routines, and relationships change in some ways after the baby comes. *Many couples notice that parenthood sets off some ripples of relationship dissatisfaction for at least a couple of years after the baby arrives.* For dual-earner couples, the arrival of a child often changes the employment status of at least one partner. Even when these changes are desired and planned, they can be accompanied by negative feelings, maybe even depression. To add to the challenge, young babies often pick up and respond negatively to stress, and this adds to the new parents' problems.

According to the authors of *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*, new parents like Sharon and Jim often show four related signs of stress: they keep score, their focus narrows, they resent pressures of the outside world, and they lose their perspective.

They keep score.

When stress levels are high, people begin noticing and comparing how much work they're doing with what they think their partner is doing. This is always dangerous because while Sharon is well aware of all that she is doing, it is hard for her to see everything that Jim is doing! And the things that Sharon does always seem more difficult and important to her than those that Jim does.



Lately, when she finds herself keeping score, Sharon tries to keep quiet until she can remind herself that Jim is working as hard as she is. Both she and Jim have decided that the score is likely to even out over time.

Their focus narrows.

When life gets intensely stressful with many demands, many people respond by focusing on one aspect of their lives (often the baby, work, a hobby). *This one area begins to edge out the others, and their world shrinks.* They may feel they don't have time to relax, have fun, or do things in other areas of their lives. Of course, this can be a problem because the other partner may begin to feel very resentful. Jim began focusing more and more on work in the months after the baby came. Sharon felt that she could barely make contact with him anymore. When they finally talked about this, Jim was shocked. He felt that he was being a good provider. During this emotional conversation, Jim promised to not let work take over his life.

They resent the people, pressures, and activities of the outside world.

Because time is tight and sleep is precious, new parents often feel overwhelmed by what used to be normal social ties and activities. The tendency is to cut off those pressures, and it is hard to remember that sources of pressure can also be sources of support. Sharon began noticing that her sister and mother were planning big family dinners far too often. The resentment built until she blew up at them one morning and accused them of trying to stretch her too thin. That's what it felt like! After cooling down and talking with Jim, Sharon realized that the family dinners were no more frequent than before the baby. She realized that she really cherished those chances to see other family members. She and Jim worked out a plan for attending some, but maybe not all, the dinners. For this young family, it worked best to set realistic boundaries but keep the relationships alive.

They lose their perspective.

What used to be little things can sometimes look unbearably large after the arrival of a little one. Previously accepted standards may have to shift. Jim had never thought of himself as a neat-freak, just a somewhat-cleaner-than-average guy. When Sharon went back to work and the newly walking baby began wreaking havoc on the house, Jim felt constantly irritated. One day he blew up at Sharon. "Can't you at least get this mess cleaned up?" After some time for cooling off, Jim realized that making messes is part of the way that just-



walking babies learn about the world and that Sharon only made it home an hour before him. In the end, he decided that it was really not a big deal, certainly not worth his energy nor hurting Sharon. These problems are hard to avoid completely, but it can help to recognize them and try to have realistic expectations.

When difficulties do arise, expert John Gottman has some advice: stay calm, speak nondefensively with your partner, and take the time to express understanding of his or her position. Some couples have difficulty communicating when they're having a disagreement. When couples decide to talk about conflicts, they should avoid put-downs and negative assumptions about their partner. Rather than waiting for conflicts to occur, prevention is a wise investment.

New parents in dual-earner families are often especially challenged to find time to focus on their relationship, and many feel guilty when they do take the time. Setting aside some time, even small amounts throughout the day and week, can be very nourishing for a relationship strained by a loved but needy new child. Once the new baby has settled into a reasonably predictable pattern, new parents can actually plan some little dates throughout the day. These can be as brief as five minutes (a morning snuggle, an evening bath after baby falls asleep, and/or a brief but sincere "how was your day" followed by active listening to the response). Finding ways to have fun and nurture friendship is important. *While some dual-earner new parents feel guilty about spending nonworking time away from their child, keep in mind that a healthy relationship between two parents is the best gift they can give their child.* The parents' relationship with one another has been called the child's blueprint for his or her future relationships. It makes sense to invest in keeping your relationship strong even when time is tight.

* Information in this section was adapted from *Intentional Harmony*, by A. Wiley, University of Illinois.



Recommended Reading

Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows. 1999. Pamela Jordan, Scott Stanley & Howard Markman. Jossey-Bass, publisher.

What Children Learn from the Parents' Marriage: It may be your Marriage but it's your Child's Blueprint for Intimacy. 2000. Judith P. Siegal. Harper Collins, publisher.

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail. 1994. John Gottman. Simon & Schuster, publisher.



❖ Managing In-Laws

Our parents and other members of our extended family can be sources of support—and sources of stress.

Take a few minutes to answer the following questions with your spouse about your thoughts and feelings about your in-laws.

.....

Rank the following people as to their likelihood of being problematic in your relationship with your spouse.

- _____ Father-in-law
- _____ Mother-in-law
- _____ Stepfather-in-law
- _____ Stepmother-in-law
- _____ Sister-in-law
- _____ Brother-in-law
- _____ Other extended family member

•
By what titles do you address your in-laws?
Do the titles you use indicate your types of relationships?

•
Are you satisfied with your in-law relationships? Why or why not?

•
Which set of in-laws is most likely to give you aid or any kind of help?

•
Which mother is most likely to be asked for child-rearing advice?

•
Which mother is most likely to give child-rearing advice?

•
In the later years of life, are you likely to become caregivers of your parents or in-laws?
If so, how will that affect your relationship?

•
If an elderly parent or in-law needs to live with your family, which of your elderly parents/in-laws would likely be the least stressful to have living with you?



If you have a difficult relationship with your in-laws, it can have some devastating consequences on your marriage. The more mutual respect and appreciation you have for your in-laws, the more security and stability you and your spouse will have in your marriage. Try these suggestions for building a strong relationship with your in-laws.

Seek approval. If you aren't yet married, seek the approval of your parents and your spouse's parents for your marriage. If you have their approval, you're more likely to have their long-term support.

Know what to call them. Ask your in-laws what they would like you to call them. Some might prefer that you call them Mom and Dad, but others might prefer you call them by their first names. Finding this out will help you feel more comfortable with one another. Also, this may change over time.

Get your own place. Some couples, for one reason or another, decide to start their married lives together by living with one set of parents. This rarely works out well. It will be difficult both for you and the parents with whom you are living. Having your own place is a crucial step toward independence and marital happiness.

Be independent together. You are beginning your own nuclear family. You and your spouse should make your own decisions regarding such issues as schooling, finances, children, and employment. Asking your parents or in-laws for advice is okay,

but make sure you and your spouse make the final decisions together.

Set boundaries together. When you get married, it is a good idea for you and your spouse to set boundaries so that in-laws are clear about your time and privacy limits. This may involve a discussion of how often and how long you visit each other's families, whether it is okay for them to drop by your home unannounced, or whether weekly family dinners together are too much. Politely letting your parents know how you feel will help them know when and how often they're welcome in your new home. *Also, it is important that each of you present your ideas directly to your own parents.*

Share some activities. Identify some social and/or recreational activities that both you and your in-laws enjoy. Doing some things with your in-laws will help you get to know them better and feel more comfortable with them.

Appreciate them. Be sure to thank your in-laws for anything they do for you, including being the parents of the spouse you love.

Avoid financial puppetry. Remember that financial support from in-laws could have strings attached, and you may end up feeling like they're using those strings to manipulate you. Know what strings, if any, are attached to their support, and abide by those expectations, or don't accept the money to begin with.

Focus on their strengths. As with all relationships, it is always best not to focus on the negatives. Accept any differences that exist, and look for positive attributes.

* Information in this section was adapted from *Saying I Do: Consider the Possibilities*, by J. Marshall, Utah State University Extension.



Remarriages



Remarriages

❖ Myths & Realities

About 50 percent of all marriages in a year are remarriages for one or both spouses. Remarriages and marriages that form stepfamilies (one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship) are more complex from the start. It's vital that couples forming stepfamilies learn some specific information about how to build healthy stepfamilies.

Take the following quiz, and see if you can identify what is reality, or true, and what is a myth, or false.



	True	False
1. Attachment between stepparent and stepchildren needs to occur quickly.		
2. Children ages 9 to 15 usually have the most difficult time adjusting to a new stepfamily.		
3. Children of divorce and remarriage are forever damaged.		
4. The stories and myths about wicked stepmothers do not affect today's stepfamilies.		
5. It is not unusual for a stepfamily to take at least 4 years or more to feel like a solid family unit.		
6. It helps stepfamily adjustment if the nonresidential parent withdraws.		
7. Living in a stepfamily formed after a parent dies is easier than living in a stepfamily formed after a divorce.		
8. Part-time stepparenting is easier than full-time stepparenting.		
9. A strong couple relationship is an important part of forming a strong stepfamily.		
10. A stepparent living with a stepchild has the same legal rights as the biological parent.		

Answers

1. False: More than likely, attachment between stepparent and stepchildren won't happen right away. It takes time, often years, for family members to get used to, accept, and adapt to different family histories, rules, routines, and individual habits, attitudes, values, and rituals. The more new relationships to be formed, the more time it will take. Keep the following in mind.

• The stepparent should not expect to take a parental or disciplinary role with stepchildren in the beginning years.

• The biological parent should not expect the stepparent to feel the way he or she does about a biological child.

• In general, the older the children the longer the process of adjustment.

2. True: Older children have the most history with biological parents and typically have the following characteristics, making it more difficult for them to adjust to a stepfamily.

• Developmentally, they are very self-focused and may think you've messed up their lives with all these changes.

Answers (continued)

- They have the capacity to focus on what others think. They may feel embarrassed by the divorce and the remarriage.
- They are most susceptible to loyalty conflict dilemmas (feeling caught between their parents). Developmentally, teens are very focused on relationships and actively process and think about what they mean.
- Younger children think with less complexity. They are often more willing to be inclusive and open to accepting more than two parents.

3. False: It's important to know that most children of divorced parents (more than 80 percent) do well despite increased risks to their well-being. There is a lot of variation—and there is a lot that families and communities can do to support children's development after they've experienced divorce and/or remarriage.

4. False: Stereotypes can set up expectations and affect everyday life. Parents should discuss preconceived notions about relationships and stereotypical thinking with their children.

5. True: Instant love or instant blending of a stepfamily does not exist—that is an unrealistic expectation. Most stepfamilies take years to adjust.

6. False: When a child has no contact with a parent, he or she may build fantasies about that other parent. Unless there is abuse, a child benefits from contact with both biological parents.

7. False: A child who has had a parent die may build fantasies about that parent and may have a standard that the stepparent cannot live up to. The child may also feel jealousy or resentment toward the stepparent. It's important to allow a child time to process a parent's death. Most will need some professional help.

8. False: The role of the stepparent is usually even less clear when stepchildren are part-time residents of a household. It works best if the biological parent is the primary parent and disciplinarian and the stepparent supports this role.

9. True: The couple relationship is the newest and the weakest link and therefore is the most vulnerable. Taking time together as a couple and working to build strengths in the couple relationship are key to successful stepfamily living.

10. False: Stepparents are not automatically recognized as legal caretakers of their stepchildren. Stepparents cannot sign consent forms or authorize medical services unless authorization is formally given by the biological parent. Also, there are no legal ties to stepchildren if the biological parent dies or if the couple divorces.

❖ Strategies for Stepparenting

Because the “baby carriage” came before the “love” and “marriage” in stepfamilies, it is vital that couples discuss the approach they'll take in parenting their children. Below are some tips developed from studying the patterns of successful stepfamilies.

Develop realistic expectations for a stepparent/stepchild relationship. Don't expect instant love from stepchildren. *You can expect respectful behavior, and your spouse should help you emphasize this,* but you cannot expect a child to care for you the way he or she cares for a parent they've spent many years with. In turn, behave respectfully toward your stepchild by acknowledging his or her feelings, concerns, and desires. Modeling this behavior usually results in a stepparent being treated respectfully. *There is rarely a perfect blending in stepfamilies, where everyone in the family feels the same level of connection to each other.* These can be different levels of closeness for each pair. In stepfamilies, it's most important that family members are satisfied with the level of closeness they have with each family member and realize that it is okay to feel closer to some than others.

Discuss your role with your spouse. Stepparents sometimes feel compelled to step in as a “savior” for the parent who's been having a hard time with the children, taking over to provide order and discipline and often the biological parent is in favor of this. *The couple should realize, however, that children are often not ready for a stepparent in a disciplinarian role, so this is usually doomed to failure.*

Sometimes stepparents see their spouses as “too easy” on the children and want to enforce stricter discipline in the home right from the beginning. A discussion is necessary. Biological parents need to take time to hear and understand the stepparent's input, but stepparents need to take a more gentle, nonjudgmental stance and hear the biological parent's point of view. *A helpful model is that the stepparent gives input into how things are done, but the biological parent retains the final say until the children are ready for the stepparent to take a larger role in their lives.*

Determine the roles of the primary parent and the secondary parent. Parenting usually includes having disciplinary power. A stepparent should take his/her time with this, especially with older children and teens. The biological parent should remain the primary disciplinarian in the early years of stepfamily development. When both biological and stepparent are present, discipline is best administered by the biological parent until the child is ready to accept the stepparent as a disciplinarian. When the biological parent is not present, the stepparent operates much like a babysitter or an aunt or uncle. You are an adult in charge, but you are not the parent. You enforce the rules of the house; for example, you say, "This is the rule of the house. Homework is done before television."

You can respond to "You're not my parent," with "Yes. You are right. You have a mom and a dad, and I'm not going to replace either one of them. You and I are going to get to know each other a bit at a time. Meanwhile, though, I'm the adult in charge here tonight, and the rule is no television until homework is done."

As children get more comfortable, a stepparent can become more of a primary disciplinarian. *Follow the child's lead—do not force parental status.* As time goes by, you and your spouse can help the children understand that just as a parent can have more than two children and care for each in a special way, *so can a child have more than two parents and respect and care for each in a special way.*

A rule of thumb is that a child's age is the number of years it may take for the stepparent to transition into full parental status; therefore, for children who are adolescents when the stepfamily forms, it is probably not realistic to expect that a stepparent will ever serve in a full parental role—and that's okay. The stepparent can still be an important, loving, respected adult in the child's life.

Even if the children are young when the stepfamily is formed, it is not always a straight path toward two primary parents. *It is not uncommon for a couple to choose to revert to primary/secondary parental roles during adolescence.* This can serve to protect the stepparent/stepchild relationship. Adolescence is usually a challenging time for parents, and the biological parent/child relationship is usually more resilient in the face of these challenges.

Remember, though, that *secondary parenting doesn't mean "second-class."* This is an important issue for stepparents. Within the implementation of these suggestions for the primary/secondary parenting team in stepfamilies, *the biological parent should ensure that the stepparent is treated respectfully.*

Learn about child development. If you are not a biological parent or if your own children are younger than your spouse's children, read up on child development. *Realistic expectations for children's behavior is an important starting point when dealing with children.* It is not an excuse for inappropriate behavior, but it often provides *some understanding* of what might be going on and what the child's capabilities are.

This information might help you determine what are stepfamily issues and what are developmental issues. Often, stepparents assume that inappropriate behavior is directed at them because they are the stepparent. If you look closer, the biological parent is probably receiving similar treatment, and the child's developmental stage has more to do with the behavior.

Develop the relationships in the family one-to-one. In the early years of the stepfamily, the stepparent should focus on building a relationship with *each* of the stepchildren individually. Although doing things as a family seems like a good idea, for stepfamilies, it's actually better to plan one-on-one activities to build and strengthen relationships. Try to find

activities that are unique—that can become “your” activity with your stepchild—such as being the adult partner in your stepson’s Boy Scout group or being the one to take your stepdaughter to basketball practices and games. *Also, remember to allow the biological parent to maintain regular alone times with each child as well.*

Empathize. Although it can be normal to feel defensive, it is important to try to *put yourself in the other person’s place—to empathize*. Both adults and children in stepfamilies should try to empathize with the other’s feelings and situations. This can go a long way in easing conflicts and reaching compromise.

Stepfamily living brings together different histories, and family members usually deal with many differences—from seemingly small (“What do you mean you don’t sort the small forks from the large ones?”)—to major (“You’re turning your child into a spoiled brat!”). When dealing with different views and patterns of behavior, first, *spend as much time and energy trying to understand other stepfamily members as you do trying to get them to understand you*. When your spouse or child tells you something threatening (“I’m jealous.”), take a deep breath. Calm yourself; then tell them what you do understand before you respond with your point of view. This is not the same as agreeing. It is simply letting the other person know you hear and understand him or her. It is then easier for them to hear what you have to say. Try to imagine yourselves in each other’s position.

Acknowledge that a child can be part of two households. In order to prevent loyalty conflicts for the children, *it is important that both you and your spouse not badmouth the other parent*. As long as there’s no threat to the child either physically or mentally, the child should spend time with the nonresidential parent and *should be supported in that relationship*. Even if the other parent does not return this support, continue to validate the child’s feelings for and relationship with the other parent. This approach has a much better

chance of enhancing your relationship with your stepchild than if you speak badly of someone he or she cares about. *In addition, don’t involve the children in conflicts with the nonresidential parent or quiz them about the other parent’s activities.*

If the other parent behaves badly, acknowledge the behavior in a neutral tone; for example, “Your dad does say bad things about me sometimes. That must be really confusing for you. Most kids would find that hard. I’m sorry he feels that way. Hopefully, with time that might change.”

Also talk in a neutral tone about differences between households. Consistency of household rules is rarely achieved. Children can adjust to two separate sets of rules. “In your dad’s house, you can watch as much TV as you want, but you can’t eat in the family room. In this house, your TV time is limited, but you are allowed to have snacks in other rooms if you clean up afterward.”

You and your spouse should continually speak in ways that help your children sort out feelings of “split loyalties.” “You’ll always love your daddy, and he’ll always be your daddy, no matter who else you love or like. I know I’m brand new to you. We’re getting to know each other a step at a time, and over time, I hope we’ll become closer and closer.”

Strengthen the couple relationship. The couple relationship creates the family, yet it’s the newest relationship in the family and therefore the most vulnerable. One of the main reasons couples divorce is due to problems with stepchildren. To avoid becoming part of this statistic, it is important that you *build in time to nurture your couple relationship* and that you communicate well with each other. Work on the marriage itself, and you’ll find that the negotiations around stepfamily issues go much more smoothly. Often, the issues presented as stepfamily issues are actually markers of the quality of the couple relationship.

* Information in this section was adapted from *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey*, by F. Adler-Baeder.

Find resources and use them early on. Read about stepfamily development together. Discuss how you each see the other's role. Discuss your parenting plan and philosophy. Take a class especially for stepfamilies. Take a marriage education class. Utilize family therapy or counseling early on when issues present themselves. Make sure the counselor or therapist is someone knowledgeable in stepfamily formation and dynamics.

Millions of adults in this country are parenting nonbiological children—and the numbers are growing at such a rate that *estimates are that half of all Americans will be in a step relationship in their lifetimes*. Some experts believe that soon stepfamilies will be the most common family form. Because stepfamilies are formed differently from first families and because they are usually more complex, it's important for a stepparent and his or her spouse to think through and plan their interactions with the children in the family based on models of successful stepfamilies, not first families. These actions can help a stepfamily run more smoothly and can create a healthy environment for the adults and the children in the family (Papernow & Adler-Baeder, 2003).

Recommended Resources

National Stepfamily Resource Center
www.stepfamilies.info

Stepfamily Relationships: Development, Dynamics, and Interventions. 2017.
Lawrence Ganong & Marilyn Coleman.
Springer, publisher.

❖ Coparenting with Ex-partners

In many new marriages, one or both of you will continue to deal with the other biological parent of a child (usually an ex-partner or ex-spouse). These coparenting relationships can often be challenging. One parent may make it difficult for the other parent to visit the child. Another parent

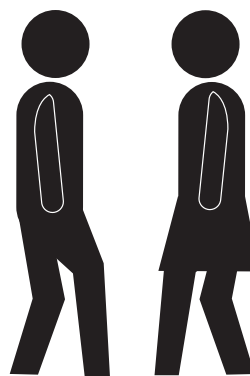
may use late child-support payments as a form of getting back at the other parent. Conflict between households is stressful for the children, stressful for the adults, and stressful for your marriage. It is important for everyone, therefore, to build cooperative relationships with your children's other parent(s).

An important first step in managing the coparenting relationship is to *ensure that you are appropriately separated from the other parent and appropriately connected*. In healthy patterns of partner and family transitions, two biological parents who are no longer together *move from an intimate relationship to a nonemotional, more businesslike relationship*.



Intimate

- Many assumptions
- Unspoken/unwritten expectations
- Informal
- High emotional intensity and personal involvement
- Low personal privacy
- High personal disclosure



Businesslike

- No assumptions
- Explicit agreements, contracts
- Formal courtesies, structured interactions, meetings, specific agendas
- Low emotional intensity and personal involvement
- High personal privacy
- Low personal disclosure

* Information in this section was adapted from *Mom's House, Dad's House*, by I. Ricci (1997).



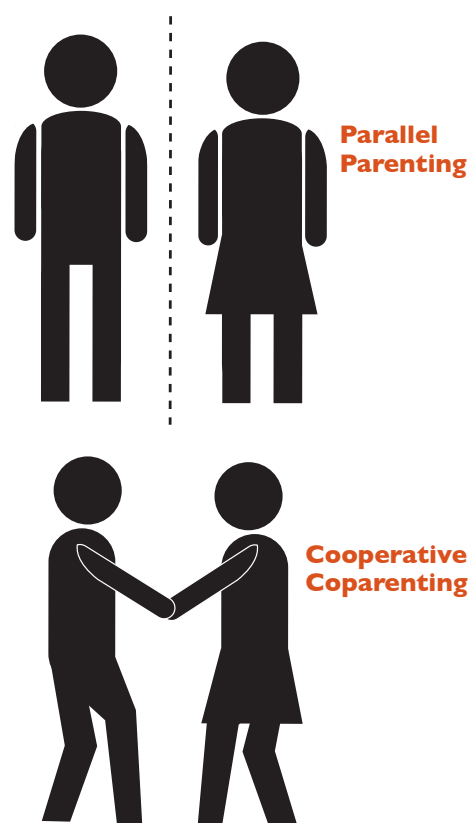
Coparenting - Rate your level of involvement with your child's other parent to see which relationship model is most like yours. Circle your responses to the statements below as strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neither (N), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA).

I make lots of assumptions about my child's other parent.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We are so close we do not need to talk about our expectations.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We are very informal with each other.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
Our relationship is very emotionally intense.	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
We each maintain a high level of personal privacy.	SD (5)	D (4)	N (3)	A (2)	SA (1)
We do not tell each other a great deal of personal information.	SD (5)	D (4)	N (3)	A (2)	SA (1)

Add up the numbers associated with each of your responses. The higher your score, the more likely it is that you have an over-involved and inappropriately connected coparenting relationship. A score of 15 or more may threaten your marriage, as overinvolvement with an ex-partner can interfere with your efforts to build a strong and stable marriage.

It is also useful to consider the range of coparenting practices. Although a *cooperative* coparenting relationship is ideal, the reality for most parents is that they move up and down a continuum of coparenting, depending mostly on how they manage the inevitable conflicts that can arise. The main difference between *parallel parenting* and *cooperative coparenting* is the amount and type of interaction between parents. Parallel parents communicate only when absolutely necessary and have little direct communication, such as face to face or by phone. Instead, they put things in writing or ensure that someone neutral is present or they're in a neutral place when they're communicating directly. Cooperative coparents can speak directly to each other more frequently about the business of parenting.

These may be times when direct communication is going well and then something occurs that initiates conflict (such as a remarriage), and all attempts to communicate effectively repeatedly fail. You should consider moving toward more parallel parenting and make attempts over time to re-establish your previous level of cooperative coparenting.



A cautionary note: Cooperative coparenting is not appropriate when domestic violence has occurred between parents. Cooperative coparenting requires face-to-face contact between parents and should not be used if one parent feels he or she may be in danger. Safety is the primary goal.

❖ Tips for Coparenting

The following are some suggestions for all coparents, no matter what the level and style of coparenting.

Tip #1 + Agree to keep conflict away from your children.

Tip #2 + Use respectful words, and don't put each other down, particularly in front of the children. Don't use sarcasm or make snide or hurtful remarks.

Tip #3 + Say positive things about each other, particularly when the children are present.

Tip #4 + Don't make promises you can't keep.

Tip #5 + Don't make the children feel they must choose between you and the other parent.

Tip #6 + Encourage your children to love and respect the other parent. Encourage their connection with the other parent.

Tip #7 + Send messages to each other directly. Don't use the children as messengers.

Tip #8 + Respect each other's new relationships.

Tip #9 + Communicate directly with each other about the children instead of with the other parent's new partner.

Tip #10 + Call a time-out when a discussion becomes too intense. Stop and separate so that you both can calm down. If this pattern continues, it is best to take a longer time-out from direct face-to-face communication for a while and use other methods of communicating information.

Tip #11 + Allow for each other's parenting styles. Pick your battles. As long as the child is safe, emotionally and physically, he or she can adjust to different parenting styles and rules between households.

Tip #12 + Practice good communication skills if you need to discuss an issue.

Tip #13 + Ask new partners and members of your family to respect these guidelines as well.

Often, parents who are following these types of rules become frustrated if the child's other parent is not. The recommendation is to just keep doing what you're doing. This is what is best for you, your children, and your family. *You cannot control the actions of the other parent.* If you keep doing the right things, chances are much greater that the other parent will start following the guidelines as well.



Issues *that* hurt relationships



Issues That Hurt Relationships

❖ Substance Abuse, Gambling, & Other Addictions

Addictions of any kind hurt relationships. They hurt children, too. If you or your spouse is a habitual or binge drinker in amounts that interfere with work and/or relationships, abuses drugs of any kind, or gambles frequently and uncontrollably, then professional help is needed. When treatment works—and it often does—your life will turn around, and your relationship with your spouse will improve.



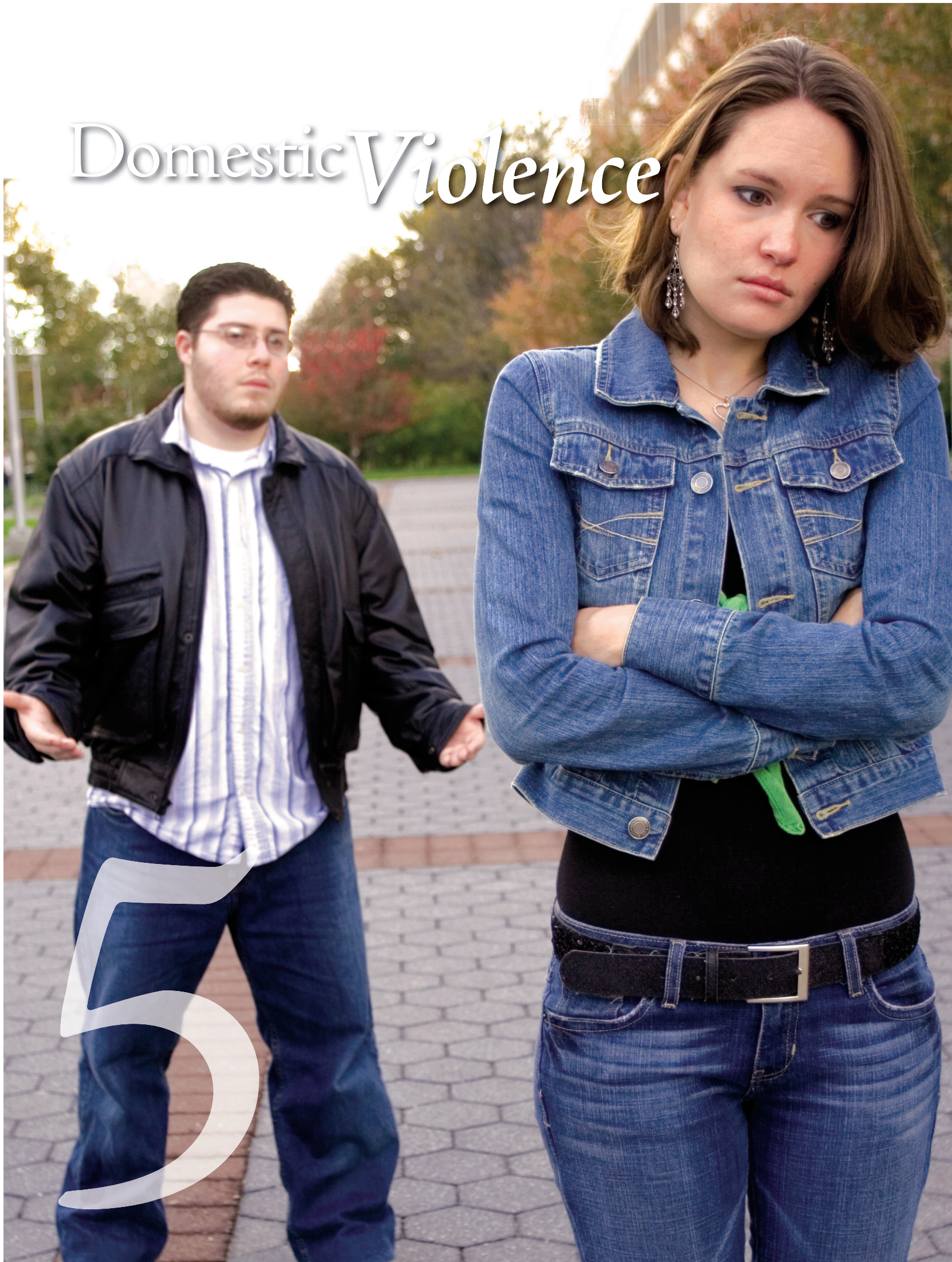
❖ Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems are very common and are nothing to be ashamed of. If you or your spouse is feeling depressed or down for more than a couple of weeks, ever talks about suicide, is constantly worried or anxious, or seems out of touch with reality, professional help is needed. Treatment for depression and other mental health issues is often successful. Support your spouse by acknowledging the problem without blame.

❖ Sexual Infidelity

❖ Choices you make at work, on the internet, and in social settings can lead to infidelity. Unfaithfulness, or cheating, can ruin relationships. The strength of your marriage and the trust between you can be broken and even destroyed when there is actual or perceived fooling around, flirting, or secretive relationships with others. If there is an act of infidelity, it is important to be open and honest when talking about the situation and to get professional help. Only you two can decide together if this experience will end your marriage or if you will work together to rebuild the trust that is vital for healthy marriages.

Domestic *Violence*



Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is physical, mental, sexual, or emotional abuse in an intimate relationship. It occurs when one person uses abusive tactics to gain power and control over a partner or former partner.

Domestic violence hits homes in every community. It has a devastating effect on victims, children, families, and communities.

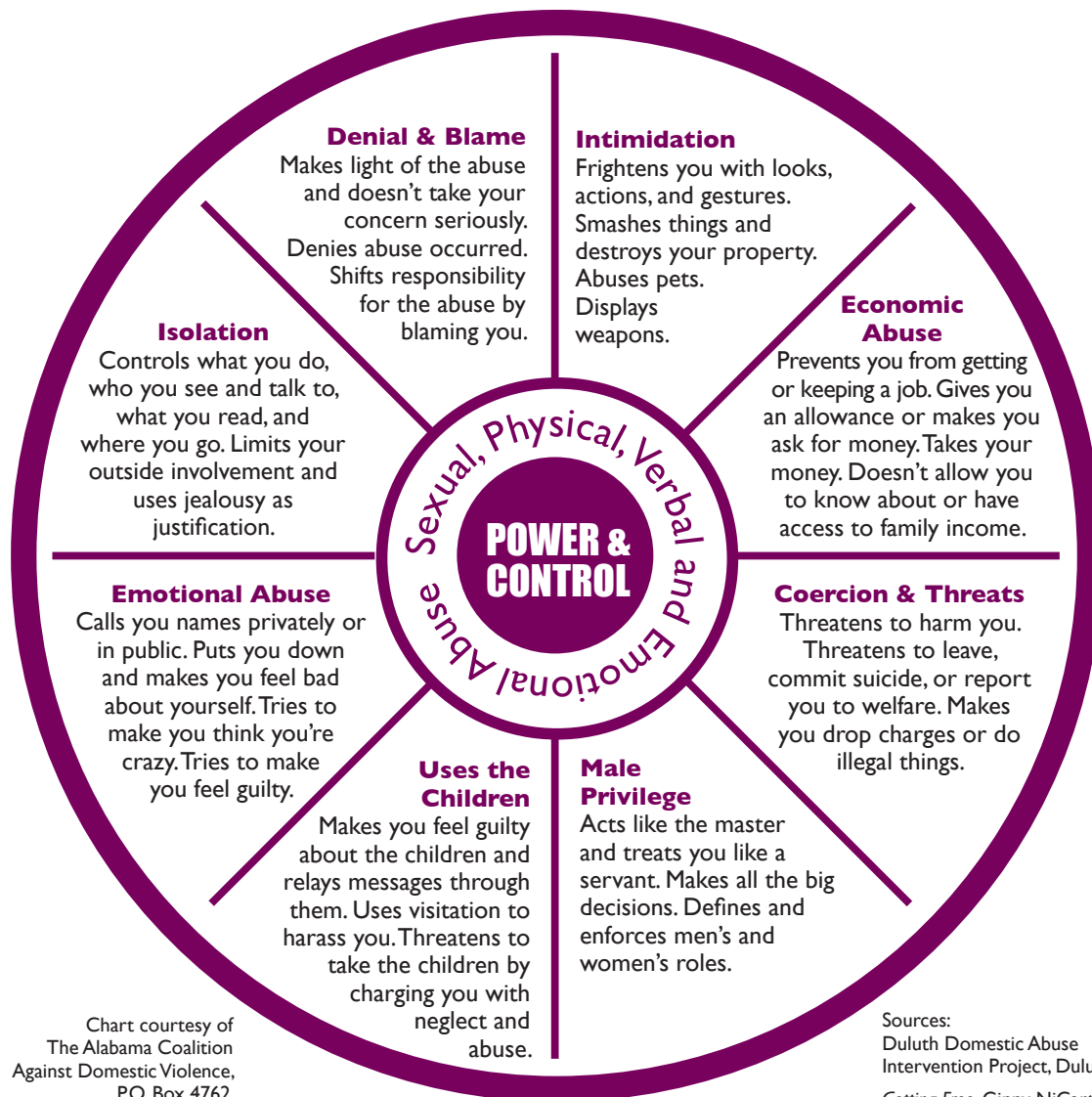
If you are a victim, you can get help by calling the Utah Domestic Violence LINKLine toll-free, 24 hours a day at 1-800-897-5465. There are safe shelters across the state for you and your children, as well as many other services.

There is no excuse for domestic violence. If your spouse engages in one or several of the behaviors listed on this page, it may be an indication that you're in an abusive relationship, and you should carefully evaluate your relationship and talk with a professional who can help.



- Makes you feel like you're walking on eggshells to keep the peace
-
- Makes you feel like a prisoner in your own home
-
- Yells at you frequently and calls you hurtful names
-
- Is unpredictable or has sudden mood swings
-
- Threatens you with violence
-
- Breaks or hits things in your presence
-
- Gives you hateful or threatening looks
-
- Shoves, slaps, or hits you
-
- Abuses your children
-
- Keeps you from seeing friends or family
-
- Hurts your pets
-
- Follows you, spies on you, or shows up at your job, school, or friends' homes
-
- Listens to your phone calls or keeps you from using the phone
-
- Is forceful with affection and/or sex
-
- Accuses you of having affairs
-
- Controls all the money and gives you little or none
-
- Keeps you from getting or keeping a job
-
- Pushes you to make a commitment before you feel ready
-
- Has a history of battering in other relationships
-
- Gets very angry or upset with you often and then apologizes with gifts, flowers, and promises

* Information in this section was adapted from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.



❖ Myths & Facts about Domestic Violence

The following are some myths—and the facts—about domestic violence.

Myth #1

Domestic violence does not affect many people.

Fact: Nearly one in three adult women experiences at least one physical assault by a partner during adulthood. (American Psychological Association, Violence and the Family: Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, 1996.) Men are also victims of domestic violence.

Myth #2

Battering is only a momentary loss of temper.

Facts: Battering is the establishment of control and fear in a relationship through violence and other forms of abuse. The batterer uses acts of violence and a series of behaviors, including intimidation, threats, psychological abuse, isolation, and others, to coerce and control another person. The violence may not happen often, but it remains as a hidden and constant terrorizing factor. (Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990.)

Two-thirds of women physically assaulted by an intimate partner said they were victimized multiple times by the same partner in a 12-month period. (National Violence Against Women Survey, July 2000.)

Myth #3

Domestic violence only occurs in poor, urban areas.

Facts: Women of all cultures, races, occupations, income levels, and ages are battered by husbands, boyfriends, lovers, and partners (Surgeon General Antonia Novello, as quoted in *Domestic Violence: Battered Women*, publication of the Reference Department of the Cambridge Public Library, Cambridge, MA.)

Approximately one-third of the men counseled (for battering) at Emerge (Perpetrator's Intervention Program) are professional men who are well respected in their jobs and their communities. These have included doctors, psychologists, lawyers, ministers, and business executives. (*For Shelter and Beyond*, Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups, Boston, MA, 1990.)

Myth #4

Domestic violence is just a push, slap, or punch; it does not produce serious injuries.

Facts: More than one-third of all rapes and physical assaults committed against women by intimate partners result in injuries that require some medical care. (National Violence Against Women Survey, July 2000.)

Most research reports that violence against women escalates during pregnancy. One study found that 37 percent of obstetric patients were physically abused during pregnancy. (A. Helton, "Battering during pregnancy," *American Journal of Nursing*, August 1986.)

Each year, medical expenses from domestic violence total at least \$3 to \$5 billion. (*Domestic Violence for Health Care Providers*, 3rd Edition, Colorado Domestic Violence Coalition, 1991.)

❖ Where to Get Help

No one, married or single, deserves or has to put up with abuse. All 50 states have laws and shelters that protect individuals from abusive spouses. Help is available if you ask.

If something about your relationship with your spouse scares you and you need to talk, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY). You can chat or text with a live advocate at www.thehotline.org. Assistance may also be obtained by e-mailing the National Domestic Violence Hotline at ndvh@ndvh.org, though this is not an emergency e-mail contact. Help and information can also be requested by contacting the Utah Domestic Violence Council at 801-521-5544. Resources for adults, teens, and children are available at www.udvc.org.

* The above information is from the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence website (www.acadv.org) and is used with permission thereof. For more facts and resources visit www.thehotline.org



Utah Resources



Utah Commission on Marriage

The Commission is hosted at Utah State University and supports healthy marriage initiatives. Their mission is to help people form and sustain a healthy and enduring marriage. They provide information and resources to Utah citizens and professionals to support healthy marriages and stable families.

Website: www.strongermarriage.org

Utah Cooperative Extension System

Extension is the primary outreach arm of Utah State University. Extension delivers research-based educational programs that enable people to improve their quality of life and economic well-being.

Website: <https://extension.usu.edu>

Utah State Courts

This website highlights marriage and divorce laws in Utah. It also provides information on custody arrangements, civil disputes, divorce orientation classes, mediation and divorce education for parents and children.

Website: <https://utcourts.gov>

Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS)

DWS provides many services for individuals and families. Services include job listings, workforce trainings, and assistance with food, finances and child care.

Website: <https://jobs.utah.gov>

Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

DHHS provides Utahns assistance to live safe, healthy and successful lives. Services are available for children, youth, families and adults.

Website: <https://dhhs.utah.gov>

Utah Office of Recovery Services (ORS)

ORS helps ensure parents are financially responsible for their children by providing child support services and support for children in care.

Website: <https://ors.utah.gov>

Utah State Board of Education (USBE)

USBE offers Adult Roles and Responsibilities and Adult Roles and Financial Literacy classes to help prepare students for the adult world.

Website: <https://www.schools.utah.gov>

Utah State University Create Better Health

Free classes are available in homes, small groups, or online. Topics include nutrition, shopping tips, menu planning, food safety, budgeting, and physical activity to support a healthy lifestyle on a budget.

Website: <https://extension.usu.edu/createbetterhealth>



Other Resources



Administration of Children and Families

Information on the Administration's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative is available from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Website: <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs>

National Association of Relationship and Marriage Education

NARME provides information for research-based educational programs. NARME educates on best practices for marriage, parenting, and fatherhood services.

Website: <http://www.narme.org/>

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Provides free, confidential support, crisis intervention, and safety planning for individuals experiencing relationship abuse, available 24/7.

Website: <https://www.thehotline.org>

National Extension Relationship Marriage Education Network (NERMEN)

The NERMEN website provides information on healthy relationship and resources available across the Extension system. NERMEN strives to support professionals who are working with youth and adults in relationship and marriage enrichment programming.

Website: <https://www.fcs.uga.edu/nermen>

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is a clearinghouse for information and resources on healthy relationships. It contains resources for experts, researchers, policymakers, media, and marriage educators.

Website: www.healthymarriageinfo.org

National Stepfamily Resource Center

The National Stepfamily Resource Center's primary objective is to serve as a clearinghouse of information, linking best practices and family science research on stepfamilies. The center provides research-based resources for stepfamilies and the professionals who work with them.

Website: www.stepfamilies.info

Therapist Locator

TherapistLocator.net is a public service of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. The online directory assists in locating a marriage and family therapist. The directory provides information on therapists' office locations and availability, practice description, education, professional licenses, health plan participation, achievements and awards and languages spoken.

Website: <https://www.therapistlocator.net/>

211.org

A free, nationwide service that connects individuals to local resources for food, housing, healthcare, counseling, and family support.

Website: <https://www.211.org>



Take time for the relationships that matter most.
Sign up for a course today at:



**Healthy
Relationships
Utah.org**



Smart Dating



Couples



Parenting



Stepfamilies



Self-Improvement



Extension
UtahStateUniversity





Utah Marriage
Commission
at Utah State University

Online learning whenever you need it.



Couples



Parents



Individuals



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The Utah Marriage Handbook



Healthy Marriages, Healthy Families

FR/Marriage/2026

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