

Keep the Love Alive

Three principles to help fix your marriage before it's too late.

It is said that every relationship we have is either growing and moving forward or sliding backward and deteriorating. Relationships never stand still very long.

We've certainly noticed this in our marriage. There were times when not only were we sliding backward; we'd almost slipped over the edge. But something always kept us from going too far, and eventually we got back on track.

Even when we were moving forward, though, we found that it still wasn't easy or pain-free. We are living proof that great marriages don't just happen but always result from hard work. What we are experiencing today as a couple makes yesterday's work worth it all.

Three basic principles, which we share here, have kept our marriage on track. When we've taught them in seminars and retreats, other couples have enjoyed similar results. We believe your marriage will benefit from them too.

Principle No. 1: Decide You're in for the Long Haul

When we see marriage as a covenant, not a contract, it's confirmation that we are meant to stay together until death parts us. In *A Model for Marriage*, Jack and Judy Balswick point out that "the core characteristic of a covenant marriage is commitment, a factor that is profoundly important to marital stability, according to research findings."

The very nature of wedding vows implies a covenant, but for most brides and grooms, the common attitude is to see marriage as a contract that can be broken. Typically, a couple—despite vowing to endure better or worse until death—live by the

principle that they'll stay together only as long as their spouse fulfills their end of the bargain. That's an attitude that feeds into the "short haul" approach.

The first 10 years of our marriage were terrible—what we call the "Great Tribulation." Yes, we had some good times; but, overall, we didn't have a good marriage. Yet we never considered divorce as an option. Though we were both young when we married, one thing was clear: We were determined to make it work. We didn't think of our marriage as a covenant in those days, but we lived as if we had made a covenant. We understood our vows. We were there for the long haul—for better or for worse.

How different our lives would have been if we had given up because we were miserable. Eventually, we grew past our misery and started to build something special together.

A number of marriage studies have been based on interviews with couples on the verge of divorce who, of course, reported that they were miserable. Many of these studies are designed so the researchers can go back and reinterview the same couples years later. Invariably, the couples who divorced report that they still are unhappy; but most of the couples who stayed together report that they are now happy.

I've worked with couples who were miserable but came to counseling because divorce just wasn't an option for them. One of these couples came back recently to deal with some extended-family issues. I hadn't seen them in years. My last memory of them was their telling me they believed they'd turned the corner in their marriage and had the tools to keep their relationship on-track. It turns out they did, and they thanked me for helping them turn things around. What had been misery to them—and the cause of divorce with many other couples—was long past. They were in the process of becoming everything they had hoped to be as a couple.

Marriages go through seasons. When a couple can genuinely make an unconditional commitment to stay the course during the cold, dark season of a marriage, then spring and even summer seasons follow.

There is a saying that goes something like: "Don't doubt in the darkness what you know to be true in the light." You can apply this warning to the seasons of a marriage. When you hit the dark , cold winter season together, don't question the vows and commitments you made to each other in the light of the summer season. Stay the course. Love unconditionally and know that spring will come.

Principle No. 2: Focus on What You Have, Not on What's Missing

When a couple are ready to give up on their marriage, they'll often say there is nothing positive going on between them anymore; it's all bad. Researcher John Gottman at the University of Washington found that in a healthy, growing marriage, positive behaviors outnumber negative behaviors by a ratio of at least 5-to-1. This means that every negative behavior directed toward one's spouse requires at least five good behaviors to offset it.

As a couple's marriage begins to unravel, the number of positives compared to negatives begins to drop below 5-to-1. Even in a good marriage, negative behaviors have more impact on us, but they really take on more power when they no longer are being offset by positive behaviors.

Here's an interesting point: By the time two people are ready to divorce, the positive behaviors are actually about equal to the number of negative behaviors. The positives are not absent or even outnumbered—except in the minds of the divorcing couple. But they are overpowered by the negative behavior, which has a way of blocking our vision of the positive.

This feeds on our natural human tendency to focus on the

negative. Even the optimist can get caught up in seeing the glass as half empty when it comes to marriage behavior. We seem to take the positive behavior for granted, but we can't let go of the negative very easily.

When a couple focus on what they believe is missing in their relationship, they are looking at what *isn't* there. They are also ignoring the very things that brought them together.

When I can get them to remember the good things they saw in each other at the start of their relationship, they begin to look again at what they have that is positive. Often a man's or woman's positive feelings for their spouse will last beyond the counseling session and prepare them to take the next step together.

Principle No. 3: Give Each Other Grace

I've seen couples who supposedly still love each other but nonetheless attribute some negative motivation to what their spouse is doing or saying to them. It becomes an automatic response for them and usually follows a pattern that was set in motion in childhood, when self-protection required them to prepare for the worst from a parent.

When this protective pattern is carried over into marriage, the spouse will have no rational reason for assuming the worst. It just seems to come naturally.

Few things put a bigger damper on expressing love than for your spouse to misunderstand your motivation for what you are doing or saying. By contrast, few things are more powerful in keeping love alive than showing grace and forgiveness to your spouse.

The Balswicks write: "As agents of grace, each spouse participates in ... talking and listening, giving and receiving, honoring differences and affirming giftedness, forgiving and being forgiven. The far-reaching effects of [this] culminate

in a deeply satisfying relationship.”

When a couple assign negative motivations to each other, the complaint often follows that the two spouses aren't compatible. Whenever a husband and wife say this to me, I always agree—but add that every couple is incompatible. The incompatibility is universal simply because one spouse is male and one is female.

The differences between male and female are enough to make every marriage an incompatible relationship. When you add to it personality and family differences and the couple's differing expectations, you wonder sometimes how any marital relationship succeeds.

When we don't give each other grace, especially for our incompatibilities, we eventually make those things even greater. When both spouses accept each other's differences with loving grace, their marriage experience is better.

In our marriage, we've developed compatibility where there had been incompatibility. When we embraced each other's differences, we experienced grace and love that has fueled our desire to keep our love for each other alive.

Grace is a gift we give each other. It is never earned. I can't say, “I would give you more grace if only you would” Giving grace to your spouse includes the ability to forgive when he or she has failed you in some way.

As followers of Christ, we are encouraged to “forgive one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32, NKJV). How did God forgive us? He did so freely without any expectation of us except that we accept His forgiveness. We can't earn or buy God's forgiveness. Like grace, it is His gift to us.

Think what will happen in a marriage when the partners freely offer forgiveness to each other, and act and believe that

their spouse's motives and intentions are for the best, even when it doesn't seem that way.

That's what it means to give each other the gift of grace.

These three principles are the essential ingredients of a healthy and fulfilling relationship. They are foundational to keeping love alive in marriage. We trust you will be able to apply them to your unique circumstances and that they will enrich your lives as you and your spouse journey together.

David Stoop, Ph.D., and Jan Stoop, Ph.D., *lead seminars and marriage retreats nationally and internationally. More tips to keeping the love fires burning in marriage are available in their book Better Than Ever: Seven Secrets to a Great Marriage. Or visit them online at .*

To find out how a Christian couple on the brink of divorce restored their marriage, check out