

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 .