



What the Happiest Couples Do Before Bed:

Grow Your Love in 9 Minutes a Day



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By Alisa Bowman

a Project: Happily Ever After ebook

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9 Minutes to a Better Marriage

Think about how you spend your evenings, especially the minutes leading up to bedtime. If you are anything like me, you tell yourself that you will use this time of day wisely. After all the kids are in bed and the workday is finally over—yet there is still lots to do.

Maybe you've told yourself that you will do some light housework every evening. Maybe it's your goal to plan out some meals or even do a little prep work.

Yet it's just not happening, not consistently anyway. Maybe you are productive at night for a week or two or even three. Then it's back to the old routine.

Again, if you are like me, instead of ending your day feeling productive, you end it in a stupor—aimlessly surfing the Internet, checking status updates on Facebook, participating in mind numbing texting marathons, or just generally zoning out in front of the television. There's really nothing wrong with any of those activities if they leave you feeling fulfilled. Chances are, however, that they don't. They leave you empty.

Worse: they do nothing to melt the frost that can form over a marriage, especially once kids enter the picture.

When we connect to a screen, we disconnect from our spouse. This is true even if our spouse happens to be sitting right next to us.

We have precious few minutes to connect with our spouses. Often the only time we have is the hour between the kid's bedtime and our own. So why don't we use the end of our day wisely? There are many reasons but fatigue probably tops the list. It's so much easier to lounge on the couch than it is to stretch, right? If one is just going to fall asleep as soon as one meditates, why bother? Are you with me? Am I right?

That's why I wrote this little ebook—because it's my belief that we can all use the last 9 minutes of the day wisely, but only if we cater to our fatigue and lack of inspiration. Since you are dead tired at the end of the day, I recommend you read this book together while in bed. Do it just before turning off the light and saying, "Good night."

Since most people have little inspiration at day's end, don't try to get creative. Just flip through the pages, find one exercise, and do it.

Each exercise in this ebook takes roughly 9 minutes to read and execute. That's it. None of them require much acrobatics, but all of them are designed to take your marriage to a much happier place.

I've organized the ebook into five categories:

1. Forgiveness
2. Sex
3. Romance
4. Communication
5. Intimacy

Those are the same categories that I personally tackled and wrote about in Project: Happily Ever After.

Please don't overwhelm yourself (and your spouse) by trying to read and absorb the entire ebook at once. I recommend you spend one month on each topic category. You'll find between 15 and 20 exercises within each topic category. Read only one topic at a time. Carve out 9 minutes a day or every other day to read the devotional, consider what you've read, and then talk to your spouse about it.

You won't find enough entries to fill all of the days of the month. There's a reason for that. You have a life.

More important, it takes time and patience to save a marriage. I don't want you to burn yourself out by creating your own version of a marriage boot camp. Go slowly. Consider the exercises carefully, and take as many days to complete various exercises as you need.

Some entries require you to merely read and reflect on the message. For others, you'll find a suggestion for change. You can do some on your own. Others will require the participation of your partner.

It's okay if you skip around. It's okay if you skip

some altogether. This is your marriage. Your marital problems are unique to you and your spouse. You may not need to read every single suggestion in this manual. You may find that most do not apply to you and your marriage. That's a good thing! That means your marriage isn't quite as bad as you may have thought!

Even if just one entry helps you and your marriage, I consider my job done.

Keep one thing in mind as you read, though: You cannot know for sure if something will or will not work for your marriage until you try it. Sometimes the silliest things can bring you to a closer place. So have an open mind, and enjoy.

I wish you the best of success.

Month One

Forgiveness

Make a Firm Decision to Forgive

Many people use the words “I can’t” when talking about forgiveness, as in, “I can’t bring myself to do it.”

But you probably can. Forgiveness is a decision. When you feel like you can’t forgive, it’s because you are holding onto the old hurt as if it were a precious jewel, and you are afraid to let it go. You are so used to carrying it around that you fear what might happen if you just put it on a shelf and leave it behind.

Often we hold onto grudges because we erroneously believe they hurt the other person. (This is true of grudges of all kinds; not just grudges about our spouses). Yet grudge holding doesn’t hurt the other person. Usually it just hurts you. The sooner you release that grudge, the sooner you will get to happy.

You must make a firm decision to part with the grudge. Think of the grudge as a toxic, co-dependent relationship. The time has come for you to walk away from that relationship. Give your grudge a last imaginary hug and kiss, and then imagine yourself walking away from it.

Then make a firm resolution to never allow yourself to think about it again. Whenever that grudge invades your mind, tell yourself, “I will not think about this right now,” and walk away from it, yet again.

Shoulder Some of the Blame

Think about this question:

How have you contributed to the failure of your marriage?

Are you thinking something along the lines of this: “Look Alisa, I’ve done nothing to hurt my marriage. It’s all my partner’s fault. Now if you would kindly tell me how to fix my partner, everything would be just swell.”

I thought that, too, when I first came across that question. After all, I was the one who was not happy, and I wasn’t happy with him. I could have listed hundreds of ways my husband had contributed to our failed marriage. Me? I was perfect.

Wasn’t I?

I eventually realized that my husband and I were stuck in dysfunctional pattern that was, in part, caused by my inability to ask for what I wanted. For example, my husband would ask, “Is it okay if I go for a bike ride?” I’d say, “Yeah sure” when I really meant, “Are you out of your mind?! Don’t you see how over-whelmed I am right now? Are you that blind or just completely insensitive?”

It's true that my husband is not a sensitive mind-reading type. He doesn't get body language. He doesn't pick up on tone of voice. Expecting him to somehow read my mind is like expecting an infant to sing the alphabet. It's never going to happen.

Yet, my husband is really good at following directions. Once I found the ability to speak my voice and stand up for my needs, he found the ability to listen and do as I requested. He just needed an instruction manual.

Looking back on it, I'm thankful that he was such a failure at reading my mind. It forced me to grow up and become a better person, one who is now more assertive in every area of her life.

So think about that question. How are you contributing to your bad marriage? It takes two people to have a good marriage, and two people to have a bad one. You are just as much a part of your dysfunctional marriage as your spouse. Your spouse hasn't been perfect, but neither have you. When you see yourself as a person who deserves forgiveness, it's easier to see your spouse as someone who deserves forgiveness, too.

Choose to Stay Married

Many people stay in bad marriages because they think they have no other choice. They think that they are stuck, and they blame this

sensation of being stuck on their spouse.

But if you are stuck, it's your fault and not your spouse's.

You are not stuck. You have choices—three of them.

They are:

Choice #1: You can choose to do nothing and be miserable for the rest of your sorry married life.

Choice #2: You can face your fear and try to save your marriage.

Choice #3: You can ask for a divorce.

Choice #3 is as admirable as Choice #2. I am not against divorce. Some marriages cannot be saved. What I am against is misery. I'm against Choice #1 because so many people make that choice without even knowing they are doing it. They stay in miserable marriages because they don't allow themselves to see the alternatives. They stay in miserable marriages out of fear of the unknown.

If you are miserable, why are you staying in this relationship? By staying in a bad relationship, you are choosing to be miserable. Why are you making that choice? Chances are, you are doing so because:

- You fear what family and friends might think about you making any other choice.

- You fear being alone more than you fear staying in a miserable relationship.
- You don't think you deserve better.
- You put the happiness of others—even that of your spouse—above your own personal happiness.
- You worry how any other choice will affect your children. Yet, by staying in a miserable relationship—and doing nothing about it—you teach your children to follow in your footsteps.

You deserve to be happy. You have the right to be happy, and you have the choice to be happy.

Choose to either be married or not. Make a choice. And wake up every morning and make that choice again. Once you see you have control, you will stop feeling like a victim.

Hold One Last Stockpiling Blowout

It's tempting to hold onto old hurts because they allow us to feel superior to our spouses. But grudge holding never brings a marriage to a better place. It always drags it to a more miserable one.

To help yourself move on from the past and start with a clean slate, list all of those old grudges on a piece of paper. Go back in time and relive every drop of anger and hurt. Then, when you and your spouse are both calm, go over your list.

Now, this isn't your time to beat up on your spouse and prove to him that he's the rotten person you think he is. No, it's not about that. It's about getting it out of your system. So say something like this, "I'm having a hard time moving on from the past, and I really want to move on. I know you are better than I give you credit, but these old wounds still need to heal. Can we talk about these past incidents? I'd like to tell you why I felt hurt. I would really appreciate it if you told me that you were sorry. I know it may seem silly, but please bear with me. I'm really trying to forgive and I think this might just help."

Go over each grudge one at a time. Talk about them. Listen to your spouse's side of the story. Then say three very important words, "You are forgiven."

See Your Spouse's Suffering

Mark Twain once said, "You are about as happy as you make up your mind to be." Similarly, it's my belief that you are about as in love with your spouse as you make your mind up to be. Many people think of the sensation of being in love as this magical force that we humans have no control over. Hogwash. You have complete control over your thoughts and feelings.

You just don't know it yet.

The way to gain control over your thoughts and feelings: meditation. Meditation is nothing

more than focused concentration. It's a way of strengthening your mind so that you can focus it on whatever you want. Meditation allows you to choose your thoughts rather than having your thoughts choose you.

The following meditation will help you refocus your mind to be able to see your spouse as a whole person who deserves your love.

To do it, sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Relax your body and focus on the sensation of breath at the tip of your nostrils for a few minutes. Do this just long enough to feel relaxed and focused.

Then bring the image of your spouse to your mind. Think about all of the ways that your spouse suffers. Try to see that your spouse's negative actions –what your spouse does out of anger, fear, or jealousy—are really projections of your spouse's deluded mind. If your spouse were a happy person, your spouse would not behave in such ways. Happy people do not lash out at others. Happy people are not passive aggressive. Happy people do not have control issues or take part in power struggles.

Your spouse does what he or she does because your spouse is unhappy. The poor thing! Try to see your spouse in the same way you might see a child who is having a temper tantrum. The child can't help it because the child doesn't know how to cope. The same is true of your spouse.

If you start to feel angry during the meditation, stop thinking about your spouse for a little while and bring your attention back to your breathing. Calm down and then try it again. Keep going until you can think of your spouse while remaining calm. Contemplate the unhappiness and suffering of your spouse until you can build compassion for your spouse.

Forgive Yourself and Your Spouse

This meditation will help you build a sense of compassionate love for your spouse. (It also works on other people, too).

Go somewhere quiet. Close your eyes. Get yourself nice and comfortable. Do some deep breathing. Now, think about some- thing that makes you happy. For instance, I often think about my daughter. You might think of a child or a pet or something else. Just use an image that allows you to generate a warm, peaceful sensation throughout your body. You want to— as the medicine man suggested in the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*—feel as if you are smiling in your liver—and everywhere else in your body, too.

Try to maintain that total body smile as you bring the image of two people to your mind's eye:

1. You
2. Your spouse

To each person, hear yourself say, "I forgive

you. I love you. I wish you well.” Do this until you really mean it. You might have to release the image, return to your breathing and re-establish that happy sensation a few times. But once you can wish both images happiness and really mean it, release the image of that person from your mind’s eye.

Wish Your Spouse Happiness

This is the third and final meditation that you will find in this book:

Sit or lie comfortably. Get yourself nice and relaxed. Focus on your breathing for a minute or two. This will help you to clear your mind of random thoughts.

Then think of something that makes you happy. Again, you might think of your child or a beloved pet. Feel that warm sensation in your chest and the ooey gooey sensation all over your body. Then, slowly, while maintaining that ooey goey sensation, bring the image of your spouse to mind. If you lose the ooey goey sensation, think about your dog or cat or kid for a while until you can bring it back. Then try again with your spouse. Keep doing it until you can feel good when you think about your spouse. Mentally think to your spouse, “I want you to be happy. I wish nothing but happiness for you.”

Keep a Gratitude Journal

Often in marriage, our minds tend to dwell on

the negative, especially during those moments when we are angry. It's much harder to notice, champion and remember the positive.

That's where the gratitude journal comes in.

Whenever your spouse does something positive, write it in the journal and date the entry. It can even be something minor— like calling to say he'll be late or closing the bedroom door in the morning so he doesn't accidentally wake you.

It takes time to see your spouse for who he is today and not who he was yesterday, but it will eventually happen, and it will happen faster if you take note of all of the things he is doing right, so you can remind yourself just how far he's come.

Also, whenever you find yourself obsessing about all of his negative traits, you can pull out your journal to remind yourself that he's not 100 percent bad.

Today is a New Day

Tomorrow, wake up and pretend that you do not know the person in the bed next to you.

Instead of all of those complaints that usually fly around your brain when you look at his or her face, I want you to wake up and pretend that all of that is not just history. It's gone.

What you believe about your spouse is a choice, and today you are going to choose to

believe that your spouse is a swell human being who loves you and who deserves all of your love. Remember: you control your thoughts. Your thoughts do not control you. Choose to think positive thoughts about your spouse all day.

Treat your spouse like this swell human being all day today and see what happens. Then, tomorrow, wake up and do it all over again.

Burn the Memories

If you have already tried many grudge releasing exercises and still can't seem to release old grudges, try this.

Write them all down on a piece of paper. Then set a timer for a certain amount of time. It might be 10 minutes. It might be 30. It might be the whole day. The point is: give yourself as long as you need to really wallow in the misery of these grudges. Savor them. Get angry about them. Mutter about them. Do whatever you need to do to get sick and tired of them.

Once you are done, say, "I will not think about these anymore. These grudges have lost their usefulness." Take a match and burn them.

Ask to be Forgiven

Does your spouse continually bring up old stuff during every fight? You think you are fighting about a thoughtless comment that slipped out of your mouth today, but then suddenly your spouse is talking about that

stupid birthday gift you gave her 20 years ago.

It's frustrating, isn't it?

Try this: ask to be forgiven. "I forgive you" are powerful words, yet we rarely say them or hear them. And people who stockpile- dredging up the past - usually do it, in part, because they feel powerless. By telling you about all of the past wrongs you've committed, your spouse is attempting to get on equal footing with you.

Say, "I feel really badly about all of these ways I've hurt you. I want to be a better spouse, someone you can admire. What would really help, though, is if you could forgive me for the past. That would allow me to work on the here and now. Will you forgive me?"

Put the Focus on Yourself

Bring to mind a few instances in life when you've really screwed something up. Maybe you made a careless comment. Maybe you had an abysmal cooking disaster. Maybe you messed up a project at work. Whatever it is, ponder why it happened.

I'm guessing that, as soon as you think about this, you start having thoughts like, "Just because I screwed that up doesn't mean I'm a bad person. It was just a mistake, okay? Cut me a break."

Those are the same thoughts your spouse has whenever you hold a grudge for a long time. As soon as you see yourself as a fallible

person who deserves forgiveness, it will be easier for you to see your spouse as a fallible person who deserves forgiveness, too.

Find Yourself

Sometimes we expect too much from our spouse and from marriage. As a result, we never feel satisfied and our spouses never measure up.

I've made a casual study of people who seem to have found their callings versus people who have not. The people who have found their callings tend to be much happier. They also tend to expect less from their partners and from marriage. They are also less likely to be paralyzed by fear. They stand up for themselves in marriage because they know that they will not shrivel up and die without their partners. Yes, the loss of a partner would hurt and yes it would not be an ideal situation. But they have a purpose, and this purpose transcends all hardship.

Your calling doesn't have to be something that earns you an income—although it can be. You might find your calling in volunteer work. You might find it in spirituality or religion. You might find it through the pursuit of a hobby. Your calling is the thing that makes you feel alive, and it's the thing that allows you to leave a unique legacy behind.

My advice for finding your calling is as follows:

1. Your calling is not about prestige or money or fame. A calling isn't just what you want to tell people you do for a living. For instance, I hear from many people who "always wanted to be a writer." When I ask, "Why aren't you writing?" I usually hear excuses such as "no one will pay me to do it" or "I don't know what to write about." If the words are not pouring out of your soul and you're unwilling to put those words on paper until someone pays you, writing is probably not your calling.
2. Callings are generous. That's why we refer to them as "gifts." They are designed to be shared with others.
3. You probably already know your calling, but some part of you thinks that it's silly or stupid or impossible or not- important- sounding-enough.
4. You'll need some courage to follow your calling because callings can get you into trouble. Callings have gotten religious figures killed. They've put people in jail, and they've gotten people fired. Yet I doubt anyone has ever regretted following a calling.
5. Callings are not empty. If your calling brings sadness, confusion and emptiness to your life, it's probably not your calling. Rather, it's probably something that you wanted to be a calling - possibly because you thought it would make people like you or make you seem important.

6. Callings change. It's possible to fulfill a calling during your lifetime. When that happens, it's time to discover another calling.

7. Your calling might not save the world. It might not be something that will get chronicled in the history books. But it will save you, and that is important.

8. Your calling is about you. It's the one thing that you can offer the world that no one else can offer.

9. Only you can find your calling. Only you can believe in your calling, too. If you wait for others to believe in your calling for you, you might end up waiting a lifetime. That would be a shame.

Get a Life

One of the biggest sources of marital dissatisfaction is this: overly high expectations. We want our spouses to be our everythings.

But this just isn't realistic. Your spouse may very well have a number of admirable qualities, and your spouse might be compatible for you in a number of ways.

But no person on this planet completes you. There will always be something about your spouse that isn't quite in sync with you.

And that's okay. It's normal. Embrace it.

Don't expect your spouse to be your everything.

Create a full life, and see your spouse as the chocolate syrup that is drizzled over that life.

Here are some ways to do that:

- Give yourself a night. If you do not designate the night, the night will never happen. Mine is Monday. Every Monday, without fail, I leave the house. I usually use this night to attend a meditation class. But the point is that every Monday, I punch out from my jobs as mother and wife and allow myself to just be me.
- Meet friends. Suggest movie dates. Suggest walking dates. Suggest Girls Night Out (GNO) dates.
- Rediscover old interests. I started reading again. I love books. I started going to book club again. I even started my own book club. For you it might be something else. It might be knitting or yoga. Think of an activity or hobby that you once loved, but you gave up after becoming a wife and mother.
- Find new interests. Take classes at your local community college, bookstore, or community center. Sign up for a fitness group. Get involved at your church or with

a non-profit.

- When you have no plans, go out anyway. Never give up your night. You can spend it walking around the mall by yourself. You can spend it sleeping on a couch in your local bookstore.
- Just keep trying. If you haven't had a life in a really long time, the process of recreating one will feel foreign, scary, and uncomfortable. Over time, however, your time to yourself will become a cherished part of your routine—so cherished that you will have a hard time believing you were ever the woman who didn't have a life in the first place.

As you create your life (and your spouse also creates a life), discuss with your spouse expectations and boundaries. What would you like your spouse to be involved in? What do you prefer to do without your spouse?

And be honest about those expectations. It's okay to say, "I wish you loved to dance because I love to dance. I know you hate dancing, and that's okay. I love you anyway and I can go dancing with my girlfriends. Still there is a part of me that wishes that you loved it just as much as I do."

Sometimes it's just a matter of saying the words that allows us to reach a place of patience acceptance about the situation.

Just Say, “Stop.”

Many years ago a therapist taught me this simple little trick. It’s so simple that I didn’t believe it would work. I was so desperate to feel better, however, that I tried it anyway.

Whenever I caught myself obsessing, I said, “Stop!” (I didn’t say it out loud, mind you). Then I brought myself into moment. I did that by focusing on something I could see, such as watching a bird at the feeder. I did it by focusing on something I could hear, such as a favorite CD. And I did it by focusing on something I could touch, such as the softness of my dog’s ears.

In the beginning I had to tell myself “Stop” more times in one hour than there are seconds in a year. Over time, however, I found that whatever I’d obsessed about gradually dissipated.

You can use this technique whenever you find that you are obsessing about your spouse’s wrongdoings. Just say “stop” and refuse to obsess. Let it go.

Month Two

Sex

About the Nature of Attraction

When you first were attracted to your partner, you were mainly attracted to two qualities. One was mystery. Everything you didn't know about your partner made sex so gosh dang exciting. Two was validation. Your partner was completely besotted with you back then. She or he stared at you, laughed at your jokes, listened to whatever you had to say, and did his or her best to worship you.

Whether you like to admit it or not, all of that probably turned you on.

After many years of marriage, the mystery goes away. You know every inch of your partner's body. And your partner rarely surprises you anymore.

Some of that validation has probably ebbed, too. Life has gotten busy. Instead of worshipping each other, you are now worshipping your careers, children and other life interests.

And so it might come to pass that one day, you look at your naked partner's body and think, "I wonder what's on TV?"

And right around this time, you might find

that you see a fully dressed person that you are not married to, and you think, “I wonder what’s underneath those clothes?”

And when this happens, you are bound to think, “I’m not attracted to my partner anymore.”

This is all very normal. At this stage of marriage, many people make the mistake of seeing this lack of attraction as a terminal problem—one that can only be fixed by trading in a spouse. It’s not terminal, though. In fact, if you persevere, the best sex of your married life is right around the corner—and you can have that sex with the person you are married to today. The advice in this section will help you fall back in love with your spouse.

Push Your Sexual Limits

Some of the art of getting your socks knocked off has every- thing to do with technique. You can teach each other how to be better lovers. It just takes an open mind and some practice.

Most of us have learned how to have sex somewhat accidentally. As a result, we end up relying on a small number of techniques, using them over and over again. Big yawn. Pretend you are 16 again (or younger, if needed) and that you know nothing about how to please a man or a woman. Learn everything you can, and ask your partner to do the same. Explore the art of the hand job. Find out more about oral sex. See if there are new positions you might

want to try. Resources that might help you in this quest include Ian Kerner's books *She Comes First* and *He Comes Next* and the educational DVDs at Vivid-Ed.com.

I also highly suggest taking yourself out of your sexual comfort zone. A little mystery and adventure would do you well. Case in point: there's a study out there somewhere that found that a woman will feel more attracted to a man after riding a roller coaster with him than before. I'm not saying that you need to ride a roller coaster every time you want to have sex, but be creative. Maybe you leave the blinds open. Maybe you do it in the laundry room. Maybe you dress up like Catwoman. Maybe you handcuff him to the bed. You get the idea.

Emotional Intimacy Breeds Physical Intimacy

The more I've been able to share my quirky secret inner self with my husband, the more attracted to him I've become. It's a priceless feeling to know that someone "gets" you, despite everything he knows about you.

Because I feel so close to my husband emotionally, I want to make love to him. This wanting isn't necessarily the same thing as that lusty attraction that young couples feel. It's different. It's more of an honoring. It's my way of saying, "Thank you for being in my life. You so deserve to have your socks knocked off. It's my pleasure to make you happy."

To create a deeper emotional connection, tell

him about those skeletons in your closet. Reveal those deep dark secrets that, until now, you've been too ashamed to talk about. You just might find that it generates a sexual spark that leads you both to the bedroom.

Fall in Love with Yourself

Many women avoid sex or do not enjoy it because they do not feel sexy. Are you one of them?

Do something about your body image, then, because it's probably ruining more than just your sex life. I suggest the following.

1. Go to the beach or a swimming pool. Check out other women who are larger than you. Ask yourself, "Does she really look terrible?" The answer to that question, if you are looking at a truly confident woman who carries herself well, is, "No. She looks great."
2. Start a health program that will allow you to feel good in your body. Note I did not say "diet program." Some of the most tortured women wear a size 2. They don't need to lose weight. They just need to learn how to feel good. So get fit. Eat healthy, and do other things that allow you to feel healthy.
3. Stand naked in front of your husband. See what happens. He likes your naked body, and he can prove this to you without using his words.

4. Have sex with the lights on and with your eyes open. Do this as often as needed, until you feel good about yourself.

5. Ask him to tell you that he thinks you are sexy and beautiful, because he really does think this. He just forgets to tell you, because he thinks you already know.

Worship Your Spouse Outside of the Bedroom

Sex requires a certain amount of vulnerability. If you belittle your spouse whenever you are out of the bedroom, your spouse isn't going to want to go anywhere near your naked body inside the bedroom (or anywhere else in the house for that matter).

It takes a full 24 hours for a woman to get in the mood. If you don't help her in this quest by worshipping her—telling her that she's beautiful and smart and the best thing that ever happened to you—it's an automatic turnoff as far as sex is concerned.

Here are some turnoffs that you will want to avoid:

1. Sarcastic, biting remarks.
2. Ignoring your spouse.
3. Not pulling your weight around the house.
4. Only being affectionate with your spouse when you want to get busy. Try to be affectionate without wanting sex

10 times to every one time that you do want sex.

Pretend You've Never Met

You might feel as if you've experienced every inch of your spouse's body a million and one times.

Are you really sure about that?

The next time you have sex, pretend your spouse is a stranger. Then seduce and make love to this stranger.

Think about:

- How would you initiate with someone you don't know as well as you know your spouse?
- How would you look at a stranger differently?
- What would you tell a stranger that you would not normally tell your spouse?
- How would you undress differently for a stranger than you would for your spouse?
- How would you kiss differently?
- How would you touch or fondle differently?
- How would you change up the order of what you do in the bedroom?
- What else would you experience and do differently?

Then do it.

Schedule It

Not everyone is a fan of scheduling sex. They claim that scheduling sex takes some of the spontaneity out of the equation.

If you are one of these people, I have a question for you to ponder: When was the last time you had spontaneous sex?

If you just can't remember, scheduling it could not possibly hurt your sexual relationship.

Don't wait until the mood strikes. This sets you up for problems in two ways. First, for some people, the mood never strikes. This is especially common in women with young children. We're so exhausted and busy that we don't give ourselves enough time to relax in order for the mood to surface.

Also, one partner usually has a higher sex drive than the other. If the higher drive partner is always in the role of initiating and the lower drive partner is always in the role of turning down, a power struggle can easily emerge. The highly drive partner feels unloved and the lower drive partner feels guilty. If you schedule it, you can break out of this role. Talk to your spouse about an ideal sex schedule. It might be as often as three times a week or as little as once a month. Pick a frequency that is somewhat more often than the partner with the lower drive is comfortable with, and somewhat less frequent than the partner with the higher drive is comfortable with. In other words: compromise.

Scheduled sex does not have to be boring sex, though. In fact, it can and should be the opposite. Since you know when the sex is coming, you have time to plan a full sexcapade. Take turns directing this adventure. Make it as exciting as possible.

And make your sex date sacred. Don't allow anything to interfere with it. Get down to business even if you are not in the mood. Just get into bed together and see what happens. Chances are, once you tune out the world and tune into your partner, the mood will strike.

Change Your Definition of Foreplay

Years ago, I went from gynecologist to gynecologist and I asked them all about the same issue. I thought I had a low sex drive, and I wanted them to fix it.

Well, being honest, I wanted the female version of Viagra. Alas, it did not exist.

So what I got was the same advice over and over again. They all told me to focus on foreplay. I kept thinking, "I could do foreplay for two hours and I still would not be in the mood. That's the problem."

It wasn't until I changed my definition of foreplay that things changed.

Most of us think of foreplay as what happens inside the bedroom. We think of kissing, touching and groping.

I now define it more broadly.

For me, foreplay starts hours before the actual event. Foreplay is:

- Thinking about sex
- Showering before sex, and especially shaving my bits before sex
- Lubing my body up with oil before sex
- Getting dressed up in something sexy

Foreplay can also be:

- Cleaning the house together or cooking a meal together—either while naked or while wearing lingerie
- Taking a bath together
- Massaging each other
- Phone sex
- Sharing sexual fantasies

And it can also be you seducing him. By the time you are done with whatever little routine you've dreamed up, you will be full of desire. Take a pole dancing class. Explore strip aerobics. Practice doing strip teases in front of a mirror until you think you have it down. Dress up like a Catholic schoolgirl and ask him to help you with your homework. Be creative. Have fun.

Foreplay is also all of the ways that your spouse makes you feel good about yourself and your body. Teach your spouse how to do this for you. What do you want to hear your spouse

say? What do you want your spouse to do? Talk about it.

Learn How to Give a Blow job

Let's say you are the lower drive partner. Let's say your partner is in the mood. Let's say that you just can't bring yourself to have full on intercourse.

But, let's say, you love your spouse and you want your spouse to be happy.

Then bring on the blow job. If you can give a fantastic blow job, then offer this gift on the nights when you just are not in the mood and your partner is.

Generally, the most sensitive parts of a man's package are:

1. The head—the smooth, round part at the top.
2. The frenulum—the cute little flap on the underside of the head. It's similar to the little flappy thing under your tongue, only smaller.
3. The perineum—the area between the balls and the butt.
4. The balls.

To get started, lightly touch the shaft with your fingertips while you kiss and lick other parts of his body. Then lube him up with some coconut oil. I like coconut oil because it's real food. It has little to no taste—unlike most commercial lubes that taste medicinal. Lube is important

because the skin on the shaft of the penis is thin and sensitive to chafing. If you're going to be using your hands on your man, you need lube. Otherwise, he's going to get pretty uncomfortable. Alternatively, you can lick him up and down and spit on him a little, using your saliva as lube. Whatever works.

Kiss and lick the shaft. Circle the head with the tip of your tongue. Tickle the frenulum with your tongue. Lick his balls, his perineum—basically everything. Occasionally, suck the balls. (Ask for permission. Some men might find this overly sensitive). Cupping the balls gently up and down is good too.

Progress from lighter licks (just brushing his skin with the tip of your tongue) to firmer and firmer ones (using your tongue on him as if he were an ice cream cone).

Put one hand around the bottom of his shaft. Then slowly bring your lips over his head. Roll your tongue around the head. Bring your lips around the edges of the head. Eventually, when he seems like he's beside himself from it all, start bobbing.

Use your hand as an extension of your mouth, if needed. As you bring the shaft into your mouth, slide the head along the roof of your mouth. Start with slow, even bobs and progress to faster ones. If you stick your tongue out a little while you bob, it stimulates the frenulum area more.

Learn How to Go Down On a Woman

I could not include blow job advice in this ebook without also including some of the opposite.

Note: the following advice is from my bisexual friend Violet, who originally wrote it for ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. I did not change her language.

Take your time getting there. Don't spread a woman's legs open and immediately start pounding her clit with your tongue or sucking on it voraciously. There's always something to be said for buildup, teasing...making her go get that pleasure.

Unless it's one of those intense sexual hook-ups where the throw-down is in overdrive or you only have 10 minutes until the kids come home from school, don't go straight for the goods. Take some time to kiss her whole body, every once in a while brush by her pussy—with your lips, your fingers your tongue—just enough to let it know you're on your way.

Dive in sideways. Have you ever looked at a pussy? It looks like a mouth, just turned sideways. You've got lips, you've got a deep, warm hole, you've got the clit and its hood and shaft sticking out like a tongue. Turn your mouth, or your whole body, sideways to meet it where it is, and make out with it. Soft kisses at first, all over. Then, bring the tongue in, lightly

at first—keeping your lips glued to hers, literally just like you were kissing her real mouth. Let the tongue go deeper, suck the clit, its shaft and hood (the whole central area of the pussy) in and out of your mouth.

Sink your tongue inside her vagina. Have fun—the sensations your lips and tongue are feeling can be almost as delightful to you as they are to her. She's so soft and warm. Go from light and easy to deep, strong kissing—teasing her, letting her excitement rise and fall, but ultimately building. Note: many women don't enjoy or can't tolerate hard-core sensations for too long. It can be too much and actually cause numbness.

Use the right part of your tongue. How exactly should you hold your tongue? There are really two options. You can point it, using the hard tip, or you can keep it flat and soft. You'll have to ask her which she likes more—or maybe she likes it all.

Make love to the shaft. A surprising number of people don't know this, but the clit isn't just a little button floating in the pussy. The button is connected to a shaft, much like the penis. It's incredibly stimulating to have a finger on each side of the shaft rubbing up and down, just as you would do to a penis. (Up and down can either mean from the base up to the clit or back and forth from the top of the pussy towards the bottom). Of course, the tongue can also rub the shaft and the lips can move around it as they would on a cock.

Add some fingers or a toy. Some women really love and need penetration to achieve orgasm. If this is the case with your woman, add fingers or a dildo to the mix—matching the rhythm of your tongue on her clit to the thrusts of the penetrating tool. Again start slow and build up your pace and pressure in time with what you're getting from her body.

Be patient. This whole process from the easing down of the panties to orgasm will take exactly...as long as it takes. I know some women that come within seconds, others that take hours and some that just can't come via oral sex. But they all say that it still feels fantastic. If you're not in it for the long haul, that's okay. Cunnilingus is excellent foreplay.

Watch, listen and feel. Remember how I told you that all women are different, all the time? As such, it's your job as the giver to watch, listen to and feel what's going on with her. When you're doing something right, her body will rise and writhe, she might tremble or shake, she'll get wetter and wetter, she'll moan, pant, scream, tell you what to do ("harder, more, do that other thing again"), grab your head and pull it in deeper. Or? You've got her laying there fairly motionless. If that's happening, you need to read this again (or better yet, talk to her and find out what she wants.)

Make Sex a Criticism Free Act

Never verbally critique your spouse during sex.

It's a turnoff. Talk about sex when you are not having sex. Ask for change outside of the bedroom, and do it in a gentle way. For instance, while you are making dinner or driving in the car, you might say, "Do you remember years ago when we used to have sex in semi-public places? I really miss those times. Would you be up for something like that again?"

You can also write it down if you are too uncomfortable talking about sex face to face. Write your spouse a sex instruction manual that lists all of the new things you'd like to try in the bedroom. In the manual write about what you'd like more of. Focus on the positive. Don't say, "Our sex is boring." That hurts and will encourage your spouse to shut down. Instead say, "I'd really like you to..." or "If you did X, I think that would be really hot."

During sex, give lots of positive feedback. Moan and groan. Say things like, "Wow that feels good" and "I really like that." And, if needed, place his or her hands where you want them. For instance, I love having my breasts fondled during sex, but my husband often gets transfixed with my backside, something that does nothing for me (but a lot for him). Sometimes I just take his hands and put them on my boobs. You can also show him what you want by touching yourself, which allows him to copy your movements.

Practice Choreplay

Choreplay is when a woman gets turned on by the sight of her husband doing household chores that she would normally be doing herself.

When researchers from George Mason University surveyed 17,636 men and women in 28 countries, they determined that married men did less housework than single men. Married women did more housework than everyone, including single women and single men, and way, way more than married men.

Think about it. Can you really get turned on when you're exhausted? Can you feel frisky at the same time you feel unappreciated and taken advantage of? I certainly can't. And when I'm working full time on top of doing 80 percent of the parenting and household chores, exhaustion and irritation are a constant state of emotional affairs.

Second, I don't know about you, but whenever I try to let it all go—you know, try to live in the dusty, toy laden, newspaper strewn, dog hair covered moment—I can't get turned on because I can't focus on the task at hand. Instead, all I can think about is, "Can we get this over with already so I can unload the dishwasher and get those pee stains off the potty?"

So if your partner tends to do more housework than you do—and also tends to want sex less often—that's important feedback. Whip out the vacuum. Go find the dust cloth. Straighten up the bedroom. Doing so just might get your

spouse in the mood.

On Power Struggles and Withholding Sex

The lower drive partner has all of the power in the bedroom. This can be exceptionally problematic in a relationship, especially if that's the only power the lower drive partner has.

If you are the higher drive partner and also the person with more power outside of the bedroom, think about sharing some of that power outside of the bedroom. If your spouse feels more empowered outside of the bedroom, he or she will be more likely to want to empower you inside of the bedroom.

If you are the lower drive partner, make it a firm rule to never withhold sex only because you feel disempowered. When you withhold sex because you are irritated with your partner, you start a Bad Marriage Cycle. It goes like this. He ticks you off. You declare your vagina a Man-Free Zone. He gets frustrated because he's not getting any, so he becomes even more irritating. You not only declare your vagina a Man-Free Zone, you start wearing frumpy underwear. He sees the underwear and starts thinking other women are sexier than you are. Do you see where this is going?

If you do the opposite and Reward Him with Sex, however, you just might save your marriage. Have sex whenever he's been a good boy. Trust me. It works.

Have an “It’s All About Me” Night

For many years, I tried to diligently keep things fair in the bedroom. It was all about mutual enjoyment and reciprocation.

Although this makes sense if both people have the same sex drive and can get in the mood in the same amount of time, it just doesn’t make sense if one person is capable of rising to attention and getting to orgasm within three minutes and the other person needs a full 15 minutes just to feel remotely warmed up.

Talk to your partner about how he can help you get in the mood. It may very well be that the first 10 to 20 minutes of your sexual encounters are about him pleasuring you, and you sitting back and enjoying it.

Month Three

Romance

Have You Let Your Romance Go?

We purposefully romance each other in the beginning because we use the romance as a lure. Once we're married, most of us backslide and just take for granted that our partner will never leave. The flowers and polite gestures end.

That's a shame isn't it?

Think back to those early days when you wooed your partner. What did you do back then that you are no longer doing now? What gestures really made your partner happy? What were the things you did just to make sure your partner noticed you and eventually married you?

Now think about how your partner romanced you in the beginning. What is no longer happening today?

Talk about what you both liked and didn't like about how you romanced one another years ago. Then rekindle romance by bringing back what you both liked.

What Are You Waiting For?

Whenever I talk to couples, I usually hear that

both partners feel that there is not enough romance in their relationship, and both are waiting for the other to do something about it.

Why are you waiting for your partner? That strategy could have you waiting the rest of your life for romance. Do something about this now.

The quickest way to get your partner to romance you is to romance your partner first. Take the initiative and be the most romantic person in your relationship.

Do Some Romance Surveillance

So you would love to romance your partner but you don't know how. You could always come out and ask (see the next entry about that). Or you could act like a private detective and observe your partner's speech and actions to get a sense for the kinds of things your partner would like you to do.

For instance, when you are out at a party and you see another couple, casually make a comment about what the other couple is or is not doing. For instance, "I noticed Johnny went to the bar and got Jane a drink."

Your partner might say, "I know! He is the sweetest man ever!" If so, um, big hint. Take the bait.

Or, when watching a movie, you might talk up some of the more romantic scenes afterward. Ask questions about what your spouse thought was over the top and what your spouse thought

was sexy.

And finally: really listen to the little comments your spouse makes about her friend's spouses. Chances are your spouse is dropping little hints all over the place—and you are just not as adept as you might think at picking up on them.

Expand Your Definition of Romance

When I was trying to bring more romance back into my marriage, I read a number of books and websites that listed various romance tips. I'd see tips about this and that and I would think:

Boh-ring!

No way am I ever doing that!

Yeah, right, like that's going to work.

That is the stupidest idea I've ever heard of.

I wasn't an easy convert, that's for sure. But part of the problem, I later realized, was that my definition of romance is very different than most people's. I would find many gestures—say my husband writing “I love you” in the sand on a beach—to be over the top and just dang embarrassing.

It occurred to me that every person is different, and that every man and every woman wants and needs to be romanced differently. And this is precisely why it's so hard for your spouse to figure out the right way to romance you.

Romance is how you show your love for your spouse. Romance is how your spouse—through his or her actions—makes you feel adored.

For you that might be your spouse writing “I Love You” in the sand. Or it might be completely different.

Have a discussion with your spouse. Talk about your various definitions of romance. This isn't as easy as it sounds because, if you are like me, you don't know what you want. There! How can he know what you want if you don't know yourself? To help figure out what you want, think about these questions:

1. Romance is the way your spouse shows his love for you. What words or actions make you feel adored?
2. When you watch other happy couples together, what do they have that you pine for?
3. When you watch romantic movies or read romantic books, what do the male characters do or say that makes you swoon?
4. Think back to when you were happier in your relationship. How did he romance you then?

Then write it all down in a manual for your spouse to carry around and consult as needed.

Act In Love

Love isn't passive. It's not just something you feel.

Love is a verb. It's something you do.

Love is an action. It's a behavior. Love is completely within your control.

Just because you aren't fighting and tossing dishes at each other every day doesn't mean everything's good. If you are not "in love," then you are not prioritizing your relationship. Rather, you are stuck in a rut. You might live together. You might be sharing a life, but you are not actively loving each other. You're taking each other for granted. You've gotten lazy. Your relationship has become robotic.

If you want to feel in love again, you need to act in love again. Acting in love might entail greeting your partner at the door and giving her a hug as you say, "Wow, I've really missed you." It might be noticing that your husband has just eaten the last of his favorite ice cream bars, so you restock the supply the very next day, even though it was not your official grocery-shopping day.

Love is in the small, everyday gestures that say, "You are important to me." Love is how you make your partner feel special and adored. Love is how you stretch yourself thin in order to improve your partner's life.

Love is many, many actions performed day in and day out. When you are both performing these daily acts of love, you will eventually feel good about each other. If you want to call

this gooey, happy feeling “being in love,” then call it that. Call it whatever you want. Just know that the behavior precedes the feeling. If you want to feel in love, you need to act in love.

Treat Your Spouse Like a Waiter

When you are in a restaurant and your waiter or waitress brings your meal to the table, what do you do?

If you are like me, you say, “Thank you.”

When you are at home and your spouse brings your meal to the table, what do you do?

If you are like most spouses, you might say, “Oh geez, I really don’t like broccoli and you should know that by now.”

See the difference?

We treat waiters much more politely than we treat our spouses. And our spouses are cooking and bringing us our meals for no payment and no tip. The waiter is getting a thank you AND a tip!

Make it your goal for the next few days to treat your spouse just as politely—if not more so—than you treat strangers. Say please and thank you. Be on your best behavior.

Notice What Your Spouse Does Right

Too often in marriage we continually berate our spouses for their shortcomings. We complain about the housework that isn't getting done or the groceries that never made their way into the fridge.

Rarely do we remember to say, "Thank you." Rarely do we compliment our spouses. Rarely do we take the time to notice what our spouses are doing right. It's especially important to compliment your spouse for being romantic. That's the best way you can ensure your spouse is romantic again.

And complimenting your spouse can be the greatest act of romance there is. Here are some ways to do it:

1. To your spouse's face
2. Tell a friend something nice about your spouse while your spouse is in earshot
3. Text a thank you to your spouse
4. Write something nice about your spouse on Facebook, for all of your friends to see and comment on (and fuss about to your spouse)

How to Have a Romantic Dinner

I can vividly remember a dinner my husband and I had out many years ago. It was one of the only nights we'd had together—without our daughter—in months. We were at a white

tablecloth restaurant. We were drinking wine.

And we were silent.

All I could think to say was, “Wow, I’m so tired.” And all he could think to say was, “I’m tired too.” After the dinner, we picked up our daughter early from the sitter and went straight to bed. It was a sad situation.

But it’s very common. I hear from couples that tell me they either don’t talk during a so-called romantic dinner or that they talk about the kids and work.

You can turn this around, but it will take some planning, some patience and some practice.

Plan a romantic dinner with your spouse. Ahead of time, tell your spouse that you want him or her to come prepared with two questions to ask that will stimulate conversation. They can be questions about anything except for the mundane. In other words, the only types of questions your spouse can’t ask are, “Did you remember to buy my strawberry bars this week?” You will also come prepared with two questions. The questions could be:

- What is your favorite memory from when we were dating?
- Did I ever do something that made you feel especially loved? If so, what was it?
- How could I support you more?

On top of this, do some brainstorming and come up with some ways to make the

dinner a bit more special than the usual ho-hum. Anything goes here, but you might think about:

- Going commando and casually mentioning this fact over appetizers
- Making a point of looking intently at your spouse and saying, “I’m so glad I married you” or “I really love you” or “I really miss you.”
- Making sure the restaurant is able to do something special during your dinner—such as bringing your spouse’s favorite wine or rare food to the table as a surprise

Rediscover Your Spouse All Over Again

Part of the spark early on in the relationship stems from mystery—of not fully knowing your spouse. Over time this mystery dissipates as you get to know one another and the spark fades.

But you can bring it back. Chances are you don’t know your spouse as well as you might think. We all have secrets that we hide from our spouses. I’m not talking about affairs (although I am quite sure that some people have those, too). I’m talking about secrets about our inner worlds—what we think about, what we worry about, how we feel and what makes us tick.

You can’t ever fully know your spouse because you don’t share your spouse’s body or brain. If you can learn to see your spouse as a continual mystery to unravel, the spark will come alive again.

One of the best places to start rediscovering your spouse: all of those things that he or she does that you've never understood in the first place. Ask her why she loves shoes and purses so much? Ask him about his plans to keep your grass as green as possible. Sit down and watch football or baseball with him, and ask him to explain the allure. Ask her why she loves her latest book club pick so much.

Think about all of the things you make fun of about your spouse (and the opposite sex in general) when with your male or female friends. Then pretend you are an anthropologist and set out on a mission to understand this seemingly strange behavior.

Make Small Romantic Requests

No one likes to be a nag, and it's an especially uncomfortable situation to feel as if you are nagging your spouse to be more romantic. But romance is a habit, one that can involve a lot of backsliding in the beginning. Your spouse will need some reminding.

One way to continually remind your spouse without feeling like a nag is to make statements like, "I really loved it when you used to...."

Other openers that work are:

"It really turns me on when you...."

"I was just thinking about the time you..."

“I miss how you used to...”

Notice When Your Spouse Bends Over Backwards

The most romantic thing my husband ever did for me was this: he gently picked up a beetle from our carpet and carried it outside.

He did this because I had just been telling him about my Karma project and about how I'd been trying not to kill bugs. He didn't necessarily think my Karma project was a great idea. In fact, I'm sure he thought it was a total fruitcake thing for me to care about.

But he still did his best to help me out. He could have killed that beetle, but he didn't. And he didn't kill it for one reason and one reason only—he loved me.

Those are perhaps the most important acts of romance in any relationship. Anyone can fake romance and order you flowers or even whisk you away for a surprise island vacation. Only your spouse can do that one thing that is so important to you— because only your spouse knows you well enough to do that one thing.

Just Surrender

Every relationship has a power struggle in it somewhere. One of ours was how the laundry was folded. For you it might be something else.

Think about giving your spouse a gift by ending your resistance and just doing what he

or she wants in this one area. Fold the towels that extra special way that you have openly said is so stupid and such a waste of time. Be strict and don't let the kids have that candy that you are often sneaking them because you don't know why your spouse cares so much about that.

Do or don't do that one thing that you've been drawing the line in the sand over for years and years and years. You just might find that the surrender doesn't make you feel weak at all. In fact, you'll probably feel stronger. More important, it will endear your spouse to you—and you will be rewarded for that, too.

Cuddle

Cuddling is probably one of the simplest ways to feel closer to your spouse, and it's also the most neglected, especially once kids enter the picture.

This is especially true of moms. We tend to give all of our best snuggles to the kids and we forget to save any for our men.

Try to bring the cuddle back into your relationship. Start with a goal of touching in a non-sexual way just once a day. It might be sitting closely on the couch as you watch TV. It might be giving your spouse a special hug for no reason. It might be spooning before falling asleep.

Look for opportunities to touch. Hold hands. Run your fingers over his back or shoulders. Sit

closely.

Once you are touching consistently once a day, try to double your skin-to-skin exposure. And then try to triple it.

Make Out

Early in my relationship, a good make-out session was the hottest thing ever. Eventually, though, we started relying on the good old-fashioned quickie and we hardly kissed at all.

For a while I assumed that I just didn't like kissing my husband. I figured this was no big deal. It's better to not like kissing him than to not like having intercourse with him, right?

Here's the thing: I was wrong. I do like kissing my husband. I was just out of practice.

Now I start every lovemaking session with a good, steamy kissing session. It's huge for me for foreplay.

Try it. Rediscover the kiss. Act as if you've never kissed each other before. See what happens.

Give Your Spouse Some Space

If you have kids, always remember that one of the most romantic things you can ever do for your partner is grant him or her the gift of time away from the family.

This might be as simple as telling her that she can take a nap, closing the bedroom door and

making sure the kids stay quiet for an hour. It might be as complex as suggesting your spouse can and should take a vacation without the family.

Sometimes we have to confront a lot of fears in order to grant a spouse space. You might worry, on some level, your spouse might never come back.

But it's an incredible act of love to give your spouse the one thing she or he needs to get to happy—and space is often that thing, especially once kids enter the picture.

Learn How to Give a Massage

Many years ago I thought I no longer wanted to be a writer, so I went to school to become a massage therapist. It ended up that I didn't want to be a massage therapist. There's a big difference between massaging your spouse and massaging random strangers.

At any rate, though, I learned how to give a good massage, and my husband is very thankful for this. Whenever I crawl on top of him and start kneading away at his back, he says, "Aw, my wife really does love me."

It doesn't matter how small you are or how big he is. Your hands are strong enough to give a good massage. You just need a few techniques.

Let's say he's lying on his belly. Straddle his rear end. I physically sit on top of my husband, but use your best judgment here. My husband is 6 foot 1, 180 pounds, and I'm 5 foot 3, 120

pounds. I can sit on him without hurting him. This might not be the case for every couple.

Use one of the following hand positions:

1. Your flat palm, putting the most pressure into the heels of your palm
2. Your fist, either using the flat pinky side of the fist or the flat knuckles against his back.
3. Your thumbs or knuckles, reinforcing them as needed with your opposite hand or additional fingers.

You'll use your palm or fist against the meat of the muscle. If you are staring down at his back, that's the part of the back muscle that is rounded outward. You'll use your thumbs or knuckles along the edges of a muscle, which is basically the small crease between the muscle and the spine or the muscle and the shoulder blade.

Use long, slow strokes. Keep your arms firm and lean forward into your hands, using the weight of your body to create more pressure with your hands. In other words, you are not pressing with all of your finger might or all of your arm might. You are pressing forward from your abdomen and chest.

If your spouse likes really deep pressure and you just don't have what it takes to do it with your hands, use an elbow or your forearm.

Month Four

Communication

Make Communication Techniques Work for You

Many couples tell me that they've tried things like the Speaker Listener Technique or talking in "I" Statements and that neither worked for them. I think these techniques fail to work in some cases because they feel forced and clinical. Communication, by nature, is a natural, relaxed process. Once you overlay a technique on top of it, it can cause your words to dry up.

End result: you are not fighting (because you are using the technique!) but you are not saying much of anything with substance, either.

There is no one best way to communicate. If a specific technique doesn't work for you, it doesn't mean that your marriage is doomed. It just means that you may need to modify the technique.

So, for instance, let's break down the Speaker Listener technique. In this one, you take turns. One spouse talks while the other listens. Once the talker is done, the listener paraphrases what she's just heard. Then you switch roles.

Clinical right? This is how I modified it to work for me. When my husband is irritated with me,

I ask, “What’s wrong?” and then I do my best to shut up. I allow myself to ask probing questions for clarification. But I do not allow myself to respond by:

- Sticking up for myself
- Telling him that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about
- Rolling my eyes or being sarcastic

I make it my goal to understand him, and I don’t allow myself to talk until I think I totally get where he is coming from. This works for me, but it may or may not work for you. The important point to remember is this: you can and should modify any technique to suit you and your marriage.

Say It Face to Face

Do you ever try to communicate with your spouse through other people? Perhaps you are angry with your spouse, so you tell a mutual friend about it—all the while hoping that the mutual friend will, in turn, smack some sense into your spouse.

Or maybe you are mad at your spouse, so during a social event you make a disparaging comment about your spouse in front of a bunch of other people.

This type of talkaround never helps your marriage. For one, it’s like playing the telephone game (aka Whisper Down the Alley). The message that gets back to your spouse – if

a message gets back to your spouse at all—is likely to be distorted.

Second, it's doubly hurtful and angering for your spouse to hear about your unhappiness from someone else rather than straight from you. It might feel easier to fight with your spouse through a go-between. In the long term, however, it inflicts more damage on your marriage.

Third, when your spouse hears about your displeasure second-hand, it's much easier for your spouse to ignore the information and do nothing.

Find the courage to be assertive face to face. Start with small confrontations and work your way up to the bigger, scarier ones. You'll probably find that confronting your spouse is a lot easier than you think—and much more effective than talking about your spouse behind his or her back.

Talk Short

Most people have short attention spans and, chances are, your spouse is one of them.

That's why it's so important to keep your super important discussions short and to the point. It's tempting to drag these discussions out by telling all sorts of stories, analogies and using the "feelings" word 80 million times. But usually, this just isn't necessary, and it's not effective either.

Think about what you do when you are confronted by an angry person who goes on and on and on and doesn't allow you a chance to say a word? Think about situations at work when this has happened. Think about situations with your family of origin or with friends.

What was your knee jerk reaction? Chances are you shut down and stopped paying attention after just a few sentences.

Make a study of your reactions to people as they talk. Try to notice when you start to lose interest and when you must struggle to pay attention. It's usually fairly early on, isn't it?

Make it your goal to phrase your requests for change succinctly. Try to keep them to just three sentences if you can. Make it easy for your spouse to listen.

The Problem with “I” Statements

You probably have heard that you should mention your feelings, especially during a moment of assertiveness.

After all, that's basically what the I Statements are all about. I feel terrible because I don't feel loved by you.

Well, that's all well and good when getting your feelings across is the most important part of the discussion. But, most of the time, our feelings aren't what is most important.

Think, for a moment, what might happen if you

were ordering a salad at a restaurant and you wanted the dressing on the side. Let's say you decided to order in I Statements, and you said something like this:

I'm feeling a little fat today, so I'm thinking that I should cut back on calories, and I've done a lot of reading and I understand that salad dressing is really high in fat and calories. So I really want to be able to control just how many calories I consume through the dressing. I feel bad about asking this because I'm worrying that it might be a lot of trouble for you. But this is really important for me because I really do want to lose weight and this is a really important change that I need to make. So would you be so kind as to bring me a salad with dressing on the side? I would really appreciate it. It would help me out so much if you would do that.

Chances are the waiter or waitress would stare at you for a while—trying to figure out what it is that you really want.

The same thing generally happens when you go on for too long about your feelings with your spouse. In general, try to keep conversations with your spouse short and to the point. Confront your spouse in the same way you would order salad dressing on the side.

The one exception to this rule is when your feelings really are the point of the conversation. Your feelings are important when:

- You are mad, but you don't know why
- You feel embarrassed, but you don't know why
- You are hurt, but you are too scared to talk about it
- You are sad, and that makes you feel weak

You get the idea. You talk about feelings when feelings themselves are the problem. For instance, the other night I was annoyed at my husband. I wasn't precisely sure why I was annoyed. But, nevertheless, I was. So I talked about feeling annoyed and that I didn't know why. I said it might have something to do with him getting our daughter riled up at bedtime, but that I wasn't sure. I thought maybe I was just tired and liable to become annoyed by anything.

Basically I just needed to talk about my feelings, and I needed him to sit and listen to me talk. I needed to talk about them so my husband could better understand my feelings, and so I could better understand them, too.

Practice Communication Techniques on Strangers

It's my firm belief that it's better to say something badly than to not say it at all. You can't learn how to be a better communicator if you never try.

Sure, your initial attempts might be flops. But you are both human. Yours is still a good marriage in training. You will have a few fender benders along the way. Deal with the damage

and move on.

The more you practice, the better you will get.

And your spouse is not the only person you can practice your communication techniques on. You communicate with friends, extended family, coworkers and random strangers, too.

Practice your techniques on all of them.

Communication is a skill—one that takes practice to perfect. If you only practice on your spouse, you won't get a lot of practice in. If you practice on everyone in your life, you will get a lot more practice and your skills will improve a lot more quickly.

Practice listening to the dental hygienist, for instance, as she cleans your teeth. Practice assertiveness when ordering food at restaurants. Practice phrasing polite requests for change with people who need to hear them.

Make Your Spouse Feel Safe

If your spouse worries that her concerns will be belittled as soon as they come out of her mouth, she's going to voice those concerns with a louder tone of voice.

If she feels safe and knows that you are going to listen, she will be more likely to speak up in an assertive but unthreatening tone.

To help each other feel safe, try to eliminate bad habits like:

- Eye rolling

- Sarcastic remarks
- Long loud sighs
- Angry gestures such as banging a fist on the table
- Turning away from each other or walking out (unless you need a time out and have said as much)

These bad habits are all ways of telling your spouse, “You are not important.” That hurts. If you need to release anger, focus your awareness on your breathing, such as the cool sensation you feel at the tip of your nostrils whenever you inhale. Or, if you start to lose your temper, call for a time out. But try to put an end to hurtful body language and comments.

Trust in the Greater Good of Your Marriage

If you worry that your spouse will stop loving you if you are assertive and ask for what you want, you will have a very difficult time standing up for yourself.

So think about how much trust you have in your spouse. Do you trust your spouse to be there no matter what? Do you trust your spouse to stand beside you even when you are being your worst?

If you don't, then this basic lack of trust is going to serve as a roadblock that prevents you from solving other marital problems.

So think about it and talk about it. Why don't you trust your partner's love? Why do you worry that your partner will stop loving you if you are

assertive? Find the answers to those questions and then discuss them with your spouse.

How to Figure Out What You Want

All of the best communication techniques in the world will fail you if you don't know what you want to communicate about.

Yes, you know you are angry. You know you are unhappy. You know your marriage isn't what you want it to be.

But do you really know how you want your partner to change? Can you give your partner an instruction manual? If not, you don't know what you want. Here are some ways to figure that out.

Step 1: Define the problem. It sounds simple, but this can be harder than it seems. You want your definition to be more specific than "I wish my husband were dead" or "I'm so miserable I would rather clean up another child's diarrhea than sleep next to my spouse." Those are good starting points, though. To define your problem, ask yourself, "Why?" Why are you this miserable? Why do you wish he would drop dead? Why do you dread having sex?

Step 2: Be okay with your Why. This is important, because so often we walk around in a state of denial that is, in part, fueled by the desire to seem normal and well adjusted. You might find yourself, for instance, trying to talk yourself out of believing that you have a problem, saying things like, "If only I were

a stronger person, I could endure this.” Well, you know what? You aren’t stronger. You are who you are. You have a problem. Chances are, your problem is not all that odd or embarrassing, either. You are okay. Own your Why.

Step 3: Brainstorm possible solutions. Ask yourself questions like: How might I solve this problem? What might improve this situation? What are some things we can try? If you draw a blank, then think of ways you can research your problem. What are possible solutions that bloggers like me suggest? How about your friends? Or marital improvement books?

Step 4: Consider every possible solution, even if some of them seem stupid. Then pick one to try. Note: it’s really common to get stuck here, especially if you start obsessing about all of the possible ways your plan could backfire. Don’t let fear and negative thoughts stand in your way. Things can only get better from here, so take a deep breath and screw up your courage.

Step 5: Try the solution. Ask your spouse for what you want.

Ban Teasing

I am a middle child who was sandwiched between two brothers. By the time I was an adult, teasing was a way of life. Yet I eventually came to see that teasing and sarcasm usually has a hurtful edge. It rarely generates a warm

fuzzy and close feeling with the person who is being teased. Usually it generates a rift instead, and rifts are not good when it comes to marriage.

Lately, I've tried to do the opposite—both in my marriage and throughout my life. Instead of teasing people about their shortcomings, I compliment them on all of their strengths.

If you like to tease, I'd like you to test this out. Ask people if your teasing and sarcastic remarks sting. Watch their body language as you release your teasing. Notice if they tense up or retreat. If they do, chances are your teasing is more hurtful than you might realize—especially for your spouse.

Also, think about your intent. Are you trying to lift this person up and make this person feel better about him or herself? If so, did your words convey that message?

Or did your words really put that person on a lower plane than you—and make you feel better (and the other person worse)? There's a fine line. Know the line.

Step Up to the Plate and Swing at the Ball

There's a joke that is often told at weddings. It goes like this: "What is the secret to a happy marriage? Always say, 'yes, dear.'" Here's the thing: it's not true. Being "yes deared" is frustrating. Whenever you "Yes, dear," you are telling your spouse, "I think you are an idiot, but I'm going to do what you say so I can blame

it on you later.”

Yes, it’s okay to take one for the team every once in a while. That’s called compromise and all healthy spouses do it to some degree. But Yes Dearing is a state of permanent passivity that will continually erode your marriage.

Yes Dearing isn’t the only type of passivity that hurts your marriage. So is permanent procrastination: agreeing to do something when you truly have no inclination to actually do it.

Have the courage to play an active role in your marriage. Speak your voice and offer your opinions. Tell your spouse what you think of his or her requests. For instance, you might say:

- I’m not sure what I think of that. I feel pressure to say, ‘Yes,’ just to make you happy, but I don’t think this is something I can agree to.
- I would like to think this over.
- I really want to make you happy, but I don’t think I can fulfill this request.

Have the Courage to Speak Your Mind

One of the reasons my marriage fell apart was this: I expected my husband to read my mind. He just couldn’t.

Therefore I felt more and more hurt because he continually didn’t address my concerns. He continually didn’t address my concerns

because he didn't know about them.

It was hard for me to learn how to speak up. It went against a lot of my instincts. I worried that asking for help would make me seem weak. I worried that he would not be amenable to what I had to say.

I worried that speaking up was worse than staying silent.

You know what? It's not. I've since learned that staying silent is much worse.

Sure, speaking up might result in some short-term tension. The initial conversation might not go well.

But pay attention to how it changes your relationship. Is it slowly moving to a better place? Then the initial tension is worth it.

Your spouse can't read your mind, and the tension and iciness that envelopes your home whenever you bite your tongue is no fun for either one of you. Have the courage to speak your mind. Yes, you might encounter some conflict as a result, but that conflict will usually result in a closer relationship.

Hold a Communication Night

In the very beginning, when my husband and I were mired in marital problems, we had a night once a week that we reserved for problem solving. We don't do this now because we don't need to. We have a lot fewer problems! So now we just address them as they come up.

But you will probably find that a set night is helpful, especially in the beginning. For one, it forces you to work on things. It's really easy to chicken out and not say what's on your mind. If you have to sit down together once a week just to communicate, you will be less likely to chicken out.

Setting aside an official night to “talk” also prevents you from threatening your partner with the phrase, “We need to talk.” Certain people—and my husband is one of them—completely shut down when they hear those four words. Instead of “We need to talk,” they hear, “You are so far into the doghouse that I am declaring my vagina hands off for an entire year. And I’m not going to be civil to your mother for at least six months, too.” And once they hear that, they stop listening until you’ve stopped talking.

Use the following steps:

Step 1: List your issues. Spend some time alone thinking about everything you don't like about your marriage and your partner. List it all on a piece of paper. Then go through the list and check off the issues that really and truly matter. Perhaps, for instance, you can learn to accept his absence of table manners. On the other hand, you probably want to address the fact that he talks down to you.

Step 2: Pick your battles. Prioritize your list, picking just three items to address sooner than later. Of those three, pick just one to

address right away.

Step 3: Address that one issue on the communication night.

Flip a coin to see who goes first. Follow these rules:

- You can only bring up one issue. This is why I asked you to prioritize your list, to prevent you from asking your partner to change 50 aspects of his behavior and personality in just one night.
- While one person is talking, the other listens. If you find yourself formulating comebacks while your partner talks, **YOU ARE NOT LISTENING**. When listening, take notes if needed. Repeat back to your partner what he just said. Knowing that you must do this will force you to listen.
- As you talk about your issue, smile and keep an even tone of voice. It's okay to avoid eye contact though. In fact, it might help alleviate the tension. If your man is a strong and silent type, consider piggybacking your "let's talk" session with a "let's exercise together" session. You might find that he's much less threatened and much more communicative if you talk as you walk.
- Help each other solve the problem. This is not about winning. It's not about figuring out who is wrong or who is the poorer excuse for a spouse. It's about finding a

solution, so you can both be happier. Mutually define the problem together. Then come up with lots of different solutions, listing the pros and cons. Remember: tackle only one problem at a time.

How to Put Yourself in a Time Out

We put our kids in them all the time, but we rarely do it for ourselves. Sometimes, though, we just need time alone—time that will help us release our anger.

Talk about time outs and how you will take them during an argument. Create a phrase that you can use when you need one. It might be, “I need a moment” or “I need a time out” or “I need some air” or “I need a breather.” Use a phrase that works for you both.

If you become ultra-heated during an argument, call for it. During your time out, try to calm yourself down. Try exercise. Try deep breathing. Try ranting in a journal. Do serious damage to a punching bag. Do whatever it takes to get the anger out of your system.

During your time out, remind yourself that your objective is NOT to win. Your objective is to come to a common understanding. As you calm yourself down, try to stop formulating comebacks and zingers. Instead, try to see the situation from your partner’s perspective. Don’t even bother opening your mouth again until you can do this.

How to Apologize

Instead of just saying, “I’m sorry,” do you hide your mistakes? (No, honey, the credit card bill never arrived this month. It must have gotten lost in the mail.) Do you justify them? (I only did it because...) Do you blame them on someone else (My dog made me do it), or attack the blamer (Well, if YOU hadn’t have done x, y, z then I wouldn’t have been forced to do what I did)?

We avoid apologies for all sorts of deluded reasons. They include:

Delusions of Slipperiness. We think we can trick someone into forgetting she’s mad simply by changing the subject or ignoring the issue. My husband tries this quite often on me. This tactic, however, never works. Although it often makes me laugh, it also makes me question my husband’s intelligence.

Delusions of Mind Control. We mistakenly believe that we have the ability to change a mad person’s mind. As a result we spend a good deal of energy trying to hoodwink people into thinking that THEY are wrong and WE are right. This tactic, however, only makes mad people even madder.

Delusions of Perfection. We think we can convince others that we are perfect simply by pretending to be perfect and admitting to no wrongdoing. This only makes people think we are even more imperfect.

In the end, saying the S-word saves time,

energy and peace of mind. The more easily and more quickly you say it, the faster you can get on with the rest of your happy life.

How to Say It

I like to break apologies into two categories: apologies you use when you know you are the worst type of pond scum imaginable, and the ones you use when you're not sure you did anything wrong, but you definitely don't want the other person to stay angry with you, either.

Let's start with the Pond Scum situation. You have two options.

Option 1: The heart-felt apology. Say something like, "Wow, I am so sorry. I feel terrible for [fill in the blank]. What can I do to make it up to you?" And then make it up to them.

Option 2: The humorous apology. This is a good strategy if you are a perfectionist, because it helps you to poke fun at your perfectionism and can ease you into the Art of the Apology. It's also good in a tense situation—such as a marital argument—because the humor lowers the tension a notch. Say something like, "Wow, I am a total stupid idiot. Really, I can't believe they let me graduate from middle school. If I had the IQ of a Labrador Retriever, I would never have ..." Keep in mind that you need to come off as sincere. Don't choose the humorous approach at the expense of sounding as if you are giving a fake sorry. Also, make fun of yourself, not the other

person.

Now let's talk about what to do if you don't think you did anything wrong. Your knee-jerk reaction will be to fight back, trying to convince your spouse of his or her deluded thinking. This rarely works, though, and you don't need me to tell you.

What does work? Validating their feelings. Most people just want to be heard and understood. Listen to your spouse's complaints and then validate him or her by apologizing for how they feel. For instance, you might say something like, "I'm really sorry this got you so upset. That was never my intention."

Don't Create Another Reason to Apologize

You can really mess up the best-intended apology if you:

- Negate your apology with the word, "But." Example: "I'm sorry I forgot our anniversary, BUT my mom usually reminds me and she for some reason didn't remind me this year." Anytime you use the word "but," your apology will lose its effect.
- Try to convince someone that you didn't do anything wrong. Don't blame it on someone else. Don't blame it on your period. Don't blame it on the economy. Don't blame it on your addiction. Take ownership of your apology.
- Continually do the same hurtful thing

again. For instance, if your wife is mad at you for leaving your dirty socks on the floor, don't say, "I'm sorry I'm such a slob" and then continue to leave your socks on the floor. Similarly, don't apologize for being late if you are always late and don't plan to change.

- Say sorry all the time. Apologies lose their effectiveness when they are given too often. If you say, "I'm sorry" every other sentence, it's the same as crying wolf. People stop believing you mean it.
- Say sorry for something you are about to do, such as, "I'm sorry for interrupting." If you were really sorry, you wouldn't do it. Also, know that apologizing gets easier over time. It's a skill that you can perfect. The more you practice, the better you get.

Create Fair Fighting Rules

I know a couple that has a talking stick. When one partner has the stick, the other partner isn't allowed to talk. It's not necessarily something that will work for everyone, but it does work for them.

It's a good idea to talk about how you will and will not fight. Have this discussion when you are not currently fighting. Maybe you will use a talking stick. Maybe you won't. Here are some fair fighting rules to consider:

- We will not talk about the past during a present fight.
- If either of us gets heated up, we'll call for a time out. (Note that some problems can't be solved right away. Some problems take days or weeks or months or years to solve.)
- Neither one of us will ever threaten to leave.
- We will never express our anger physically, by hitting or throwing things at each other.
- We will never involve the kids.
- We will never involve other people. It's okay to vent anger to a friend, but we won't lure friends and family into a fight by forcing them to take sides or, in some way, participate in the argument.
- We will never fight while one of us is at work.

How to Prevent a Blow-Up

Anger usually surfaces for the following reasons:

Grumpiness. One or both of you is sick, tired, not sleeping well, hungry, or not eating right. Doing what you need to do to take care of yourself—by getting plenty of sleep, exercising, relaxing, and so on—will improve your marriage by making you a less tense and moody person.

Stress. Problems at work and in other areas of your life can easily stress out your relationship, too. If you are the type of person who likes to brood quietly, learn how to communicate this

to your spouse. You might just say, “Something’s bothering me. If I seem grumpy or standoffish, don’t take it personally. It has nothing to do with you.”

Not speaking your voice soon enough. Too often, we get ticked off about something but, for any number of reasons, decide not to say anything about it. Then, time goes by, but the anger simmers and simmers and simmers. Left unaddressed, it will eventually boil over.

So whenever you find yourself slamming drawers, throwing laundry on the floor, or just generally fuming about something your spouse did or did not do, stop and do the following:

1. Think about what’s wrong. How do you feel? Angry? Taken advantage of? Overwhelmed? Label the feeling.
2. Why do you feel this way? What happened, and how did it lead to this emotion?
3. Is the emotion legitimate? Be honest with yourself. Are you just grumpy or did your spouse really do you wrong?
4. Get it out of your system—and not when your spouse is around. Go for a long run or walk. Call a friend and rant for a while. Write in your journal (or blog).

Once you are calm, address it. Tell your spouse

how you felt and why. Talk about how to prevent this problem in the future. Would you appreciate a change in behavior? For instance, do you want your spouse to not talk to you in a certain tone of voice, not make fun of you in front of your friends, or not ignore the kids? Ask for what you need.

Say, “Thank You.”

Whenever you say, “Thank you,” you validate and reward your partner’s behavior, encouraging your partner to exhibit the same behavior in the future. It’s especially important to thank your spouse whenever he follows through on your request.

Think about saying the words or even showing them by:

- Smiling
- Hugging
- Doing a reciprocal favor
- Complimenting your spouse to a friend, while your spouse is in earshot
- A hand-written thank-you note

How Texting Can Help Your Marriage

I hear many spouses complaining about their forgetful husbands or wives. I don’t believe that most people—even those in bad marriages—are intentionally forgetful, though. I just think that most of us have way too much to remember.

This is especially true after parenthood. The

brain just can't keep all of the information stored where it belongs.

Help your spouse out by putting important reminders in writing. For instance, I often text my husband information that I want him to remember. That way he doesn't have to keep it stored up in his head. The information is on his phone—so he can check it whenever he needs to.

You can also use email, Post-It notes, and other forms of written communication.

How to Get Your Spouse to Listen

Many couples tell me that they yell at their spouses in an attempt to be heard.

The problem with yelling, though, is that it rarely gets you heard. In fact, it does the opposite. The more you yell, the more your spouse stops listening.

If you don't believe me, then pay attention to what you do when people are yelling at you. Are you paying attention to their every word? No, you are paying attention to a conversation inside your head that goes like this:

Why is she yelling at me? OMG what did I do? What is her problem? I do not deserve to be treated like this! I can't believe she is mad at me. I should be mad at her. In fact, I AM mad at her....

Chances are you are not hanging on the

yelling person's every word. No, instead you are hanging on your every threatened thought.

To really be heard, you need to be able to do two things:

1. Get your spouse's attention
2. Say what you need to say without threatening your spouse

When you shout, it momentarily might get your spouse's attention, but it threatens your spouse, too. So it causes your spouse to soon stop listening to you and start listening to him or herself.

A better way is this: ask for your spouse's attention and then hold it by whispering.

By asking for the attention, you are getting your spouse's permission to hold a conversation. This way, your spouse will either willingly turn off the TV or turn off his or her thoughts, or your spouse will say, "Hon, this isn't a good time. Can you give me 5 minutes?"

One way or the other, you will have your spouse's attention, and you will have gotten it with his or her permission. Shouting is a way of getting your spouse's unwilling attention. It's not as effective because your spouse is only paying attention, initially, out of fear and not out of want.

Then you hold your spouse's attention by lowering your voice instead of raising it. What

do you generally do when someone is talking too low for you to hear? You lean in and you listen because you are afraid that you are going to miss something, right? This is how you will best get your spouse to listen to you.

Talk lowly. Talk slowly. And talk short (see earlier entry about talking short). This will get you heard without the shouting.

Month Five

Intimacy

Do you practice Anti-Intimacy Habits?

Intimacy is a misunderstood word. Many people think it means the same thing as “sex,” but it doesn’t.

Intimacy is about knowing and it’s about feeling both connected and comfortable. You will feel more intimate with your partner if you feel safe talking about anything—any opinion, any feeling, any behavior, any thought.

Early in your relationship, you probably did many things that made your spouse feel safe. You listened. You smiled. You encouraged.

As your relationship progressed, you may have both taken on some Anti-Intimacy Habits. Instead of making each other feel safe, Anti-Intimacy Habits cause you to feel self-conscious, embarrassed and/or scared. When you feel any of these emotions, it’s tough to be yourself.

Here are some Anti-Intimacy Habits that tend to erode safety:

- Belittling what your spouse has to say
- Acting as if your opinions and needs are more important than your spouse’s

- Interrupting
- Not giving your spouse your full attention (i.e. checking email or texting while your spouse is pouring out his soul to you)
- Making fun of your spouse to other people
- Making your spouse the butt of jokes
- Referring to your spouse with negative nicknames such as “the ball and chain”

There are probably plenty of others that I didn't list, too. Do you regularly practice Anti-Intimacy Habits? What do you do that might make your partner feel unsafe, uncomfortable or self-conscious? What does your partner do that brings out these emotions in you? Talk about these Anti-Intimacy Habits and jointly agree that you will both take steps to avoid this type of behavior in the future.

Reveal a Secret

When you first met, you probably revealed all sorts of dark secrets. You talked about those really embarrassing teenage years. You mentioned all of the various neuroses that you thought you had. Nothing was off limits.

Now, however, you might be more guarded. This is partially due to years of the two of you practicing Anti-Intimacy Habits. You are guarded because you don't feel safe being you. But you can only learn to be safe being you by

taking a few risks.

Have a discussion with your spouse during which you each reveal a secret—something that you have been hiding because you worry that your spouse will think it's silly, dorky, stupid or something else. It doesn't have to be a huge secret. Because you are both starting fresh and still practicing making each other feel safe, it's probably better to start off with something relatively minor. Here are some sentence starters:

- I've been keeping this from you because...
- I'm afraid to tell you this because...
- I'm worried you will think _____ about me because...

Give Your Partner Your Full Attention

We often give less important people in our lives much more undivided attention than we give our spouses. This might be because we live together and sleep together and are just so dang used to hearing words come out of each other's mouths. That said, not giving your spouse all of your attention is one of the quickest ways to hurting your intimacy.

Whenever you interrupt your spouse or you multitask or daydream while your spouse is talking, you are subtly telling your spouse: You are not important enough to me for me to give you my full attention.

Ouch, right? You don't have to give your spouse 100 percent of your attention during every

conversation. It's perfectly acceptable to unload the dishwasher while the two of you talk about mundane things like current events, the weather and your kid's extracurricular activities.

It's not okay to multitask when your spouse is telling you about a problem, a stressor, or something that has made your spouse upset. It's also not okay when your spouse is telling you something difficult—for instance, about test results she just got from her doctor. And it's not okay even when your spouse is telling you about something celebratory—such as his recent win at an athletic event.

During these times it's important to listen with your full attention.

Be Your Spouse's Biggest Cheerleader

When I met my husband, he was an expert cyclist who competed semi-professionally in several arenas. He raced on the track. He raced cross-country. He raced on the road. He raced downhill.

I rarely went to his races because, as I put it: "He knew I wasn't a cheerleader when he met me."

Now I do cheer for him. I can't say that I go to every single event of his. There just isn't enough time for that. But my daughter and I do go to some. And we always make a big deal out of my husband's cycling. We wish him well when he leaves. We ask him how he did when he returns. And we jump up and down and act

as if we've just won the lottery whenever he's come in first, second or third.

We stroke his ego—and this is a good thing. I look back over the years when I didn't do this and I mourn for that loss. I missed out during those years, and so did my husband. We could have been even closer, if only I had gotten over this silly “feminist” notion that I could not cheer for my man.

I've learned that there really is no reason to treat your spouse's achievements as not important. It hurts your intimacy and your marriage when you take a blasé attitude to what is most important to your spouse.

Be Your Spouse's Public Defender

In public, my husband and I are a united front. Even if someone comes to me with a complaint about him—and even if I think that complaint might be valid—I do not join in.

For instance, he runs a store and occasionally customers will complain to me about him. I nod and I listen, but I do not join in. Similarly, occasionally he might get in a tiff with one of his buddies (yes, this happens with guys, too), and his buddy will come to me. I might listen, but I won't talk about my husband behind his back.

And that's even true of I think the customer or friend has a valid complaint.

I'm even this way with my mother.

I might say something to my husband later—in private—and we work it out. But I don't belittle his opinions to other people.

That's one of the fastest ways of driving a wedge between the two of us.

Marriage is hard enough without other people getting in the middle of it. Don't allow outsiders to pull you and your spouse apart. Always support and stick up for one another in public. Argue and disagree in private.

Learn to See Your Spouse's Opinions as Important

Too often when people have differences of opinion, they argue with one another in a flawed attempt to get the other person to change his or her stance.

But this rarely, if ever, works.

We find differences of opinion frightening because they make us feel inadequate. We worry that another person with an opinion that is different from our own means that our opinion might be wrong. Therefore, we argue with the other person. If we can get that person to see things our way, well: we must be right!

Although you and your spouse might agree on a lot of things, you will never agree on everything. There will always be times when your spouse takes a view that is different from your own.

When this happens, try to resist the urge to prove your spouse wrong. It's okay (and encouraged) to have a kind, spirited debate. That's what makes marriage interesting! But don't allow a spirited debate to turn into a tug-of-war.

Think back over arguments that you've had that were based on a difference of opinion. What kinds of words did you use during those arguments? Did you call your spouse's opinions silly, stupid, short-sighted, or something else equally as negative?

Now imagine that your spouse said the same thing about your opinions. How mad would this make you? Pretty dang tootin' mad, right? It would because invalidating your spouse's opinions is a subtle way of saying: I am better than you. You are not as important as I am.

How safe do you think your spouse feels with that going on? Not very.

Your spouse's opinions are just as valid as yours. They are just as important. They are just as intelligent. And those opinions are just as important to your spouse as your opinions are to you.

This is true if your spouse is a Democrat and you are a Republican. It's true if your spouse is an atheist and you are Catholic.

Your spouse believes in his or her opinions just as strongly as you believe in yours. And just because your spouse will not convert to your

opinion doesn't mean that your spouse doesn't love you. It only means that your spouse doesn't agree with you.

Know the difference.

Be willing to agree to disagree, and to love your spouse for his or her differences.

Create a Bedtime Ritual

In *Emotional Intimacy for Couples*, Barton Goldsmith has a chapter titled "Go to bed together." It is there that he writes, "Sleeping together is one of the most important parts of a relationship...Going to bed together is one of the most valuable and accessible tools a couple can use to stay connected for the long haul."

That's why he recommends a bedtime routine that involves doing something together. It doesn't have to be a deep heartfelt discussion, and it doesn't have to be sex, either. It can be some- thing as simple as him watching TV while you rest your head on his lap as you read a magazine. The important part is that you are together, and you are touching.

Indeed, Goldsmith even recommends flipping off the TV about 15 minutes before bed and using that time to just hold one another. Sure, that holding might lead to sex, but it doesn't have to and it's not necessarily intended to. It's just a very simple yet powerful way to create a deep sense of connection.

For couples with mismatched sleep/wake

cycles, any routine will do. For instance, the partner who stays up late can tuck the early riser in at night. The early riser might wake the late riser with a back rub or by bringing coffee to his or her bedside.

Create a Stress Response Plan

If you have a stressor coming up—say one of you is going back to school, you are about to have a baby, or you happen to know that money is about to get really tight—talk about how you will ride it through as a couple.

Plan out ahead of time how you want your spouse to be there for you.

Do this ahead of time because it's much more difficult to ask for what one needs when one is under severe stress and is mentally or emotionally compromised. When I was sleep deprived and suffering from postpartum depression, I couldn't even figure out how to turn on my car's headlights. How was I supposed to tell my husband how to care for me?

I think it's important to have this conversation about a range of topics. Talk about how you want your spouse to comfort you if you lose your job. Talk about how you want your spouse to comfort you when you are grieving. Talk about what kind of comfort you need when you are under a great deal of career stress. How could your spouse really be there for you if you were

sick, incapacitated or hospitalized?

Imagine yourself in these scenarios and imagine the world's perfect spouse taking care of you. What does the world's perfect spouse do for you?

When you are under stress, do you want to be left alone? Do you want to be held? Do you want your spouse to listen? Do you want your spouse to do things without being asked? And, if so, what might those things be?

These are not easy discussions. They fall into the same category as “what I want you to do with my body after I die” and “how much should I insure myself for?” But they are important. It's foolish to think that you can navigate a lifetime of marriage without a huge stressor. I hate to break it to you, but something unfortunate is bound to befall you or your spouse at some point.

It's just the way life is.

And it's much easier to hash these things out when we are not under stress. If you wait until the stress is already there, you won't be thinking clearly and logically and you'll be less able to ask for what you need.

Write Each Other's Eulogies

Writing your spouse's eulogy:

1. Gets it out of the way. In the event of your spouse's untimely death, you'll already have this task done. It will be one less thing on your to-do list during a time when you should be allowing yourself to stay in bed all day long.
2. Forces you to contemplate your spouse's good side. Yes, he has one. You would not have married him if he did not.
3. Helps you get some anger out of your system, especially if your first attempt is a rant that includes all of the reasons mourners should hate your spouse.
4. Encourages you to work on your marriage. After all, if you can't think of a single positive thing to say about your spouse, you must question the state of your marriage.

Now for the hard part: how to do it. Rather than a list of endearing qualities, you'll end up coming up with one snarky remark after another. Not to worry. Keep trying.

Remember:

The eulogy is a work in progress. Work on it a little at a time. Your spouse probably has many years left to live. It doesn't have to be perfect until the day of the funeral.

Work on forgiveness. Whenever you find yourself ranting, “He did this. He didn’t do that,” take it as a sign that the two of you have unfinished business. The negative remarks that you initially put in the eulogy are examples of issues you should be working to address with your spouse. For instance, he never compliments you? Explain to him how much this hurts. When you talk to him, does he flip on the TV and stop listening? Explain that this makes you feel invisible and unappreciated.

Be on the lookout for positive behavior. He feeds the cat everyday because the smell of cat food makes you want to hurl? Put it in the eulogy. He helps the kids with their homework? That’s eulogy material. He’s doing the hard work required to improve your marriage? That’s definitely a strong point.

Imagine how other people might eulogize your spouse. What positive things might they have to say?

Finish the sentence, “If someone really knew my husband, they would know that he...” What does he care most about? What are his hobbies? What are his quirks? What are his values? What does he most fear? What does he most love? What is his idea of a perfect day? What are his favorite books and movies?

Where does he go on the Internet? What is his favorite sleeping position? His favorite food? Where in the world has he always wanted to go? What life dream has he always wanted to accomplish? What? You don’t know the answers

to those questions? Find out. It will deepen your relationship.

Think back over the years you've known this man. When did he make you laugh? When did he make you cry tears of joy? When did he surprise you? When did he do things that seemed counter to his personality? Put it in the eulogy.

Renew Your Wedding Vows

After my husband and I spent four months improving our failing marriage, we decided to write new vows. We now had the life experience we needed to write vows that we not only would remember, but would want to remember, too. If you've been married many, many years, I encourage you to do the same, especially if you are like me and can't remember that original promise.

And that's what vows are. They are a promise. I think of them almost as a marriage contract. When writing your new vows, consider: "What do I need to keep my marriage strong? What do I need from my spouse so I can be happy?"

Renew your vows in a symbolic location, a place that is meaningful to you both. We did it alone, on a golf course, just feet away from the restaurant where we'd first met. After you renew them, post them somewhere. Frame them. Periodically read them again. It's a great idea to read them to each other every year on your anniversary.

On Enabling vs. Growing Up

Many people write to me, asking, “How do I get my partner to change. If he wasn’t so screwed up, we could have a happy marriage!” Or, they might say, “My partner thinks our problems are all my fault. Are they?”

Ah, blame. We have trouble sharing so many things in life— dessert, money, land, bed space, hot water—but blame is not one of them. Blame? We’re willing to give it all to someone else. We never want to take any for ourselves.

I’m no exception. When my marriage was in the pits, I blamed it all on my husband. He was the one who didn’t help with the parenting. He was the one who talked to me in this cold, stony voice as if he thought I had the mental intelligence of a two year old. He was the one who thwarted my every request. If I said I needed a new computer, he’d tell me why I didn’t need one.

I could go on and on. The point is that I thought our problems were entirely his fault. Me? I was a blameless victim. The only thing I’d done wrong? Married him.

Except that was not true. I had contributed to our bad marriage in many ways. For one, I often didn’t tell him what I wanted and needed. When I was suffering from postpartum depression, I needed help. Did I ask for it? No, because I

assumed a man who really loved me would be able to 1) see that I needed help 2) would want to help without being asked.

That was stupid, though, because if I've learned anything about marriage it's this. The day two people get married, they start enabling each other like nobody's business. In fact, that's why most people are drawn to each other in the first place. It's also why miserable people tend to stay married. They complete each other. One of them is strong where the other one is weak and vice versa. Some people actually think this is a good thing and they refer to it endearingly at weddings as "two halves making a whole."

But that's really not it at all. It's two halves preventing each half from becoming whole. It's enabling. It's a meek person never learning to be assertive because she married an assertive man. It's a slacker man never learning to be responsible because, um, his wife plays that role.

So, in not telling my husband what I needed and wanted, I was enabling him to continue to be a slacker. I was allowing him to shirk responsibility, and I was preventing myself from growing up, too. I needed to learn how to speak my voice. If he'd read my mind and did what I wanted without me asking for it, he would have been enabling me. That's not love. That's the opposite of love.

So I was just as much a part of the problem as

he was. We both contributed to the dysfunction of our relationship in different ways.

Now that we've worked on things, we no longer enable each other. I don't send thank-you notes to my husband's family when they send gifts. That's his job. I'm allowing him to grow into it at his own pace. He doesn't solve my problems for me. I speak up when I'm feeling taken advantage of. He steps up to the plate and does what I ask (most of the time, anyway).

We are not two halves blending into a whole. We are two complete wholes. Well, we're getting there.

That's where you want to eventually be, too. Own your share of the blame. Work together to grow into stronger, better people. Become two wholes.

Be Transparently Honest

Many months ago, I came across a website that challenged readers to imagine a hidden camera were with them at all times, that everything they did or said would be reported back to their spouses.

At first, I thought it sounded easy. After all, it wasn't as if I was having an affair or doing anything that I felt guilty about. Me? I didn't have any secrets. My husband could stash Wifey Cams all over the place and he'd come up with

zilch-o.

Or so I thought.

I began imagining that I was being filmed and ratted on at every turn. You know what? I realized that I did a lot of things that I would never want to get back to my husband. For instance:

- Making fun of him behind his back
- Occasionally buying something that was not in our budget and neglecting to tell him about the purchase
- Making an investment decision without consulting him
- Realizing as I was loading groceries into my car that I'd forgotten his favorite frozen strawberry bars and thinking, "I'll just tell him I couldn't find them if he asks about it."
- Occasionally blogging about something that I was hoping he would never get around to reading

So I pledged to become a completely honest and transparent wife. You want to know what happened as soon as I made that pledge? I stopped saying negative things about my husband to other people. Instead, I only said those things to him. I stopped making unilateral decisions. I began opening up more, too. I told him more about me, what I was working on, what I was thinking about, and how I was feeling.

We grew closer—a lot closer. And I feel freer and more authentic as a result. Think about this: If my partner could watch me doing this, would I still do it? If the answer is, “No,” then you might want to think about not doing it.

Know the Difference Between Anger and Grumpiness

The positive of a long-term relationship is that you are both comfortable around each other. You can let it all hang out. No longer do you have that tension that arises from worrying about doing or saying the wrong thing.

The downside of this, though, is that, at times, you could be a bit too comfortable—and you can treat one another in ways that you would never treat anyone else in your life. When you are grumpy at work, for instance, you probably try your best to manage it and not show it. When you are grumpy with friends, you probably ask for forgiveness.

But grumpy with your spouse? You might not even notice that you are as difficult to live with as you are.

Grumpiness can destroy intimacy though, because it’s really hard for your spouse to relax and be herself when she feels as if she is walking on eggshells. Also, your spouse is liable to interpret your grumpiness as a major marital problem: He’s being like that because he hates me. He doesn’t love me anymore. He’s having an affair. Why does he always treat me with so little respect?

Talk about grumpiness. Are either of you guilty of inflicting it on the other? Be honest and own up to your own grumpy episodes. Resist the urge to blame this all on your spouse. Chances are likely that you are both guilty of being grumpy from time to time.

Then set some Grumpy Rules. When one of you is feeling grumpy, will you announce it? Perhaps you might both learn to something like, “I’m on my last nerve, so you might want to stay away from me. I don’t want to say something hurtful that I don’t really mean.”

And you might create rules for checking in with each other. For instance, whenever one of you feels threatened, you might ask: Are you just grumpy or are you really mad at me?

Create a Connection Routine

My favorite time of the day is in the morning when I walk my daughter to school and then on to my husband’s store where he makes me a cup of coffee. I only spend about 5 minutes at his coffee shop, but those 5 minutes are precious.

My husband always greets me with a smile. I always hug him or kiss him—or both. I share a story from my morning—usually something funny that our daughter did. Usually we’re both in a good mood because it’s the morning and the day hasn’t yet started—so nothing has happened to put either one of us out of whack.

It’s nice. It’s simple, and it’s a connecting

moment.

During the very busy years of parenthood and career, these moments are precious. Without them, marital connections can be reduced to a boring and lifeless rendition of the top news at the day's end. You know all about that. It goes like this:

Honey, how was your day.

Oh, not so bad. How about yours?

Oh, the same. That's nice.

It's a conversation without a connection. Think about ways you can insert a connecting moment or two or three into your daily routine. It could be as simple as a shared moment before you leave for work. Maybe it's a quick call during the day to check in. Or maybe you get into texting one another.

There are no rules as to what or how you connect—only that you do it.

Practice Random Acts of Affection

How do you let your spouse know that you are happy to have him or her in your life?

I try to let my husband know by how I greet him. I try to seem happy to see him (and I usually am happy to see him). I greet him with a smile and a hug.

My husband lets me know with random compliments that he's happy to have me in his

life. Whenever he sees me in my underwear, for instance, he whistles and/or gooses me. Whenever I stop into his store in the morning, he greets me with a “Hey, good looking!”

It’s important to continually and regularly build your spouse up. The temptation is to do the opposite—to practice random acts of sabotage. Sabotage is when you belittle your spouse— sighing, eye rolling, and nasty sarcasm.

See how many random acts of affection you can work into your daily marital routine. Get creative. Nothing is off limits.

About the Author

ALISA BOWMAN is known for her disarmingly honest and penetrating observations about what it takes to live happily ever after—in marriage, parenthood, career, and friendships. Her book *Project: Happily Ever After* is the reverse of a fairy tale. It tells the honest, real life story of how she went from the brink of divorce to falling back in love—with the same man.

Her blog ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com attracts more than 100,000 readers each month and has been voted one of the top marriage blogs on the Internet.

The relationships columnist for *Prevention* magazine, Bowman's articles and essays have appeared in *Parents*, *Family Circle*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Women's Health*, and many other publications.

A former reporter for the *News-Journal* in Delaware and former senior editor at *Runner's World* magazine, she lives happily ever after (most of the time) with her husband, daughter, and dog.