

JOURNEY INTO INTIMACY
Helping Couples Across the Marriage Map

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How to Use This Resource: The pieces within this resource are intended to provide some daily focused activities for a week of marital growth in the setting of the couple's home. Pastors or family ministries leaders may wish to adapt the materials to better suit their local situation or simply reproduce and distribute them as found here. An introductory letter (see "Pastoral Letter") to each couple will provide instruction, encouragement and the awareness that the church leadership is joining them in this period of marital growth. Alternatively, the resources may be incorporated into a weekend seminar or a series of programs on marital growth.

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Introduction

Life in marriage is not unlike a journey across a countryside. There are high and low points in the terrain, roads that are rough in spots and smoother in others, and occasionally detours. Too frequently couples embark upon the trip, often with an inadequate map, perhaps without any awareness of road or weather conditions likely to influence their travel. Too few stop for fuel and provisions and some run out. Others fail to care for the vehicle and experience breakdown. A clear destination, better preparation, information about the landscape, and careful refueling and maintenance offer the best hope of a successful journey.

Marriage is a journey into intimacy. Each encourages the other toward divine ideals, while seeking to incorporate God's provisions for human brokenness and personal failings. Together they reach for deep levels of love, affection, companionship, and commitment. Together they face life's challenges and work to develop their relational skills so that they may be better able to effectively handle their family routine, cope with varying circumstances, and resolve issues of conflict or controversy. Side by side they form a partnership, each contributing talents and spiritual gifts so that they may do something great for God.

The resources in this section offer a fresh approach to marital growth. They provide a marital growth menu that includes information, reflection, skill-building, and ideas for enhancing romance, deepening friendship, and expanding marital commitment. They provide an opportunity for

enrichment of a couple's life as they traverse that part of the marital terrain in which they find themselves.

Pastoral Letter

[A personal letter (sample below) should introduce couples to the marital growth experiences.]

Dear ____ and ____:

We just want you to know how much we value you as members of our church! We want you to know, too, how much we care about the quality of your relationship as a married couple. Your church places such importance on strong families that the week of February 17-24 has been set aside as a special week for strengthening marriages worldwide.

We know your lives are full, but we also know that you place a high estimate on the love that binds you together—for your own sakes, for the sake of the children, for the sake of the community of believers and for the good of society. So we want to encourage you to take time to celebrate the good things in your marriage this week and also to challenge you to become intentional about marital growth. Enclosed you will find some ideas for a couple time each day this week. We hope they will provide a catalyst for sharing that will bring you encouragement as a couple and call you, in Christ, to stretch toward God's wildest dreams for your relationship.

We will be spending some quality time together this week too, just for ourselves. But we will also be praying for you. If there are issues right now that make communication difficult, know that all couples pass through seasons when they could benefit from talking to a professional, just as we need the services of our dentist or family doctor from time to time. You will find enclosed a list of several Christian counselors in our area. If we can be of further help, please speak to us.

[You may wish to add a paragraph here about a special program planned for Christian Home Day, Sabbath, February 24.]

May God bless us together as we celebrate His good gift of marriage.

Warm regards,

(Pastor and spouse)

Enclosures:

Marital growth activities.

List of Christian family counselors *[Pastors will need to provide this list from their area. If you do not have a list of counselors to whom you refer, one place to begin is to visit with several pastors of other denominations in your town/city and ask them for names of the counselors they are using. A personal visit to these counselors to get acquainted with them as the pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can be very helpful. Your Conference Family Ministries Director may be able to provide additional names of reputable Christian counselors in your area.]*

Seasons of Marriage

Before starting out on a long journey, a wise traveler will make every effort to determine what will most likely be encountered along the way—the road conditions, the weather, the availability of services, the possibilities in case of emergency. Marriage is a journey through stages or seasons, some of which are predictable and similar for many couples, others of which are more or less distinctive in the life of a particular couple and often times unexpected. Learning to view changes as potential seasons for growth will also help couples to redefine roles, beliefs and behaviors and negotiate differences as the seasons pass.

In his book *Seasons of a Marriage*, H. Norman Wright identifies six typical seasons in marriage across the developmental life span of a couple. *As you review these seasons together, talk about your marriage journey. Is your marriage following a similar path? Where have you taken a different fork in the road, for what reasons? What have been the hills and the valleys in your journey together? What storms have you survived? Who has supported you, helped you over the rough spots? What have you learned that makes you hopeful about the future?*

The season of expectation. Most couples begin their journey together with each partner making assumptions about what their life together will be like, often without checking with the other. Thus a primary task of this marital season is to identify both partners' expectations, evaluate whether or not they are realistic and reasonable, and work toward those that are healthy.

The twenties and thirties. Couples in this season are beginning to settle down. Five primary tasks occupy their relational energies: defining roles, creating new relationships with parents, transforming their romantic attraction into a love based on steady commitment, beginning a family if they so choose, and learning to be separate as individuals and yet connected as a couple. All the while, they are pouring enormous energy into career, friendships and other priorities.

Mid-life. Mid-life men, weary of the stress of the workplace, often turn toward home and intimacy while their wives, released from the care of small children, turn outward and become more autonomous. Flexibility is essential in this stage of accepting what is possible and what is not. It is a time for learning patience, endurance and contentment.

Empty nest. With children grown and gone, healthy adjustment involves developing a new sense of intimacy, new roles with children, and a new range of friendships and interests.

Role reversal. In this season we become parents to our aging parents, coping with their decline and passing, and recognizing the inevitability of our own aging and mortality.

Bereavement. The primary challenge of widowhood, the final season, is to complete the process of grieving. This means emotionally separating ourselves from the deceased spouse, adjusting to life without him or her, and taking up a new life with new relationships and possibilities.

The Marriage Miracle

Read and reflect together on the story from John 2:1-12.

Permission to Celebrate. Jesus' presence at the wedding feast at Cana showed Him to be One who had a social nature. Parties and social events were not off-limits to Him. People invited Him and He enjoyed the experience. The serious business of the work of the Kingdom did not stop Him from entering into fellowship and the light-hearted spirit of a wedding reception, a family and community get-together. *What are the implications of Jesus' action for your marriage relationship?*

A Wedding Inaugural for the Messianic Age. A wedding ceremony marked the climax of the Creator's activity when He made the *first* man and woman. But sin has radically altered the relationship between the sexes and the institution of marriage. Now, as Creator becomes Re-creator, His first work in the restoration of all that had been lost is at a wedding. *How might the following passages about Christ's redemptive work be directly applied to your marriage?*

1. The kingdom of God has come to us in Christ (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; 17:21).
2. Believers are rescued from the powers of this evil age (Gal. 1:4) and enabled to taste of the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5).
3. In Christ there is a new creation, old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17).
4. As Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, we may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:17-19).
5. My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Jesus Christ (Phil. 4:19).

Water to Wine. Jesus' first miracle of changing water into wine was about much more than saving an ill-prepared family embarrassment. The waterpots at the wedding feast were filled with the best water, the purification water of the Jews. This water represented the best that human beings had been able to do to care for sin, in this case the effects of sin on marriage. But all these rituals become meaningless in the presence of Jesus who wants to radically transform marriage to represent His creation ideals — equality, mutuality, a loving co-regency of husband and wife over all that God has placed in their hands. Christian marriages, in Christ, will be as radically different from the marriages around them as water was perceived to be inferior to the best wine. "Like every one of God's good gifts entrusted to the keeping of humanity, marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty" (Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, p. 64).

How have you as a couple experienced the brokenness that sin has brought to marriage? If Jesus were to begin a new work of re-creation in your relationship today, where would you first like to feel His healing touch? Ask Him together for the first miracle you would like Him to work in the way you relate to one another. Talk about how you can prepare yourselves to receive His grace.

A Time For Dialogue . . . My Gift to You

Read the following passage together and talk about your hopes and expectations for this week of marital growth together.

I come to dialogue with you in search of mutual understanding, not in pursuit of victory. I want to share my most precious possession, myself, with you. Emotional warning flags are fluttering all over the place, telling me that this is risky business, and I know this. But I want to take this risk for you because I love you and want to make this an act of love. I know that there is no gift of love without this gift of myself through self-disclosure.

I know also that I am asking through this self-revelation. I am asking first for your understanding and acceptance. I am also inviting you to reciprocate, to share yourself with me. You, too, will know instinctively a sense of risk. It may be that my taking this risk for you will empower you to take a risk for me. Whenever you are ready for that risk, I will be here for you. Do not feel that you must respond to me on my terms or at my time. Love is freeing, and so my love for you must always leave you free to respond in your own way and at your own time.

So I come to you in dialogue, wanting you to know me and willing to take the risk of transparency and the revelation of my deepest feelings. More than that, I want to know you and share your feelings. And when I have put aside all my games and facades and left myself naked before you, please stay with me and clothe me with the gentle garments of your understanding. For this is the essence of the love I need, the love I am stretching to be able to give.

Adapted from *The Secret of Staying in Love* by John Powell, S.J. © 1974 Tabor Publishing. Used by permission.

Marriage As Children of the Light

The following passages establish God's high ideals for marriage. No marriage on earth perfectly embodies these ideals. But the good news of the gospel is that Christian husbands and wives are declared to be perfect marriage partners in God's sight because Jesus' perfection as Bridegroom and Husband is ours when we are in Him. What a gift! Contemplate it together.

Because the Kingdom of God has come to us in Christ, a new season is born in our marriages. We are no longer in darkness. We now live in His marvelous light! Talk together about how you will respond to the gospel's call to stretch toward God's ideals, to as Paul puts it, "live as children of the light" (Ephesians 5:8). What steps will you take personally to respond to the counsel given below in your relationship with your spouse? How can you encourage one another as you move step by step together out of darkness into light in your everyday relationship as husband and wife?

There are many who regard the expression of love as a weakness, and they maintain a reserve that repels others. . . . We should beware of this error. Love cannot long exist without expression. Let not the heart of one connected with you starve for the want of kindness and sympathy.

Let each give love rather than exact it. Cultivate that which is noblest in yourselves, and be quick to recognize the good qualities in each other. The consciousness of being appreciated is a wonderful stimulus and satisfaction. Sympathy and respect encourage the striving after excellence, and love itself increases as it stimulates to nobler aims. (Ellen White, *Happiness Homemade*, p. 25)

Though difficulties, perplexities, and discouragements may arise, let neither husband nor wife harbor the thought that their union is a mistake or a disappointment. Determine to be all that it is possible to be to each other. Continue the early attentions. In every way encourage each other in fighting the battles of life. Study to advance the happiness of each other. Let there be mutual love, mutual forbearance. Then marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love. The warmth of true friendship, the love that binds heart to heart, is a foretaste of the joys of heaven. (Ellen White, *Happiness Homemade*, p. 24)

Respond to each other by finishing the following:

I want to give love rather than exact it by . . .

I want to show my appreciation and respect for you by . . .

I want to continue my early attentions by . . .

I want to encourage you by . . .

I want to offer you the warmth of true friendship by . . .

Learning to "One Another"

One of the recurring themes of the New Testament is the call to "one another" fellow believers in Christ. Read the following passages in several modern versions, making a note of the gist of each passage as you read:

Romans 14:13; 15:7 _____

Galatians 5:13, 15, 26 _____

Ephesians 4:29, 31-32; 5:19, 21 _____

Colossians 3:9, 13, 16-17 _____

1 Corinthians 11:33 _____

2 Corinthians 13:12 _____

1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:15 _____

Hebrews 10:25 _____

James 4:11; 5:9, 16 _____

1 Peter 4:9 _____

1 John 4:7 _____

Reflect together on how each of these passages might be applied to your marriage relationship. What changes would you personally have to make to grow toward these evidences of the presence of Christ in your life?

While marriage is intended by God to add a bright thread of joy to our personal lives, marriage is also ministry. Reflect on the following passage:

Our sympathies are to overflow the boundaries of self and the enclosure of family walls. There are precious opportunities for those who will make their homes a blessing to others. Social influence is a wonderful power. . . . The work to which we are called does not require wealth or social position or great ability. It requires a kindly, self-sacrificing spirit and a steadfast purpose. A lamp, however small, if kept steadily burning, may be the means of lighting many other lamps. Our sphere of influence may seem narrow, our ability small, our opportunities few, our acquirements limited; yet wonderful possibilities are ours through a faithful use of the opportunities of our own homes. If we will open our hearts and homes to the divine principles of life we shall become channels for currents of life-giving power. From our homes will flow streams of healing, bringing life and beauty and fruitfulness where now are barrenness and dearth. (*Ministry of Healing*, pp. 354-355)

Talk together about how God might use your marriage to bless others and to bring the Good News into their lives.

A Day to Remember

Pick a day this week to give your spouse a special gift. Need ideas?

Make a collection of wild flowers together.

- Browse through the library, sharing books you'd like to read or have read.
- Spend half a day accomplishing a task together that you have been avoiding, then relax.
- Go stargazing.
- Start a sustainable exercise program together.
- Get your picture taken together and frame for your home, workplace, family members.
- Volunteer together to help in a community service project.
- Prepare and enjoy a new recipe together.
- Exchange back rubs with a good smelling body lotion.
- Find a quiet place to talk, only this time write out your conversation back and forth in silence.
- Make lists of 25 things your spouse does for you and say "thanks."
- Share stories from your lives as children.
- Memorize a passage of Scripture together.
- Go exploring.
- Create a family tree that goes back at least 3 generations for each of you.
- Practice the instruments you used to play.
- Take one step toward making your bedroom a more attractive place.
- Make a long-range plan to accomplish 3 important couple goals in the next year.
- Go bird-watching.
- Create a "couple time capsule"--a collection of things that symbolize and describe your life together right now and seal it in a container for opening five years from now.
- Go fly a kite.
- Make "as needed" love coupons to exchange with each other.
- Answer "wild questions" like "If you had a thousand dollars and had to spend it all tomorrow, what would you spend it on?" "What have you done recently that you are proud of?" "What famous living person would you like to spend a day with?" "What do you know now that you wish you didn't?" "What is your favorite spot to be alone?"
- Listen to your spouse's favorite music.
- Learn about your spouse's hobbies or help one another get involved in an interest they have always wanted to pursue.
- Plant a flower garden.
- Go on a picnic.
- "Kidnap" your spouse by secretly arranging for their responsibilities and taking them on an unexpected outing.
- Read the Song of Solomon aloud together.
- Admire a sunset.
- Write a letter to your in-laws thanking them for your spouse and let your spouse read it before mailing.

Redigging the Well

Reflect on the following passages:

An Old Testament Story. Isaac and Rebekah were living in enemy territory because of a famine in their homeland. God had affirmed their decision to live there and repeated to Isaac His promise of abundant blessing first made to Abraham. But like his father, Isaac feared for his life because he was married to a beautiful, much desired woman. So he lied to the men who asked about her, saying she was his sister. But when Abimelech, the king, looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife, he confronted Isaac with his lie. While the king gave strict orders to his men to protect Isaac and Rebekah from molestation, soon their wealth became the envy of the Philistines. And so it was that "all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth" (Genesis 26:15). Ordered to move on by Abimelech, Isaac settled again in another valley where his father had also lived. There "Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died" (vs. 18). And "Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there . . . and told him [Isaac], . . . "We've found water!" (vs. 19, 32).

Advice from the wise man.

Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.
May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.
(Proverbs 5:17-19)

Jesus' conversation at a well with a woman with five failed marriages. Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." "Sir, give me this water!" is her immediate response. (See John 4:1-30)

For reflection:

Some ways in which our relationship is like a well in the desert . . .
Our acknowledgment of our need for "Living Water" in our relationship . . .
Some things in our marriage that are like dirt and debris which stop up our well . . .
Some things we can do to keep our marriage well clean and fresh . . .
If we could start digging a new well in our relationship right now, I would like it to be . . .
My commitment to you to drink water only from our own well . . .

A Journey Called Marriage

The Inevitability of Change. D. H. Lawrence, in his book *We Need One Another*, writes: "I should say the relation between any two decently married people changes profoundly every few years, often without their knowing anything about it; though every change causes pain, even if it brings a certain joy. The long course of marriage is a long event of perpetual change. . . . It is like rivers flowing on, through new country, always unknown." *In what sense is this true of your marriage? In what ways were you prepared or not prepared for the changes you have experienced in your circumstances, in each of you as persons, in your relational life as a couple?*

Predictable Journey. David Augsburger in his book *Sustaining Love* (1988, Regal Books, Ventura, CA 93003, pp.24-25. Used by permission), suggests that persons who stay married to one partner may experience as many as four marriages within a marriage:

1. Dream Marriage. During this early period, couples have very high expectations for their relationship. They express feelings cautiously or not at all and they tolerate, accommodate or overlook differences--all to avoid conflict. Romantic feelings are perceived as intimacy. The dream is largely an illusion which must be recognized for what it is for love to deepen.

2. Disillusionment Marriage. When disillusionment strikes, the dream vaporizes. Couples, weary of accommodation and avoidance, often turn to manipulation to get what they want. They try to eliminate differences by attempting to change their partner, and deal with conflict by fighting, bargaining and threatening. Intimacy is intense when things are going well, absent when there is tension. Relationships are often competitive and adversarial. Hope fades, and life together becomes empty and alienated. Many go looking for dream again during this period, and many marriages die. But disillusionment will inevitably follow dream with the new partner just as it did with the original spouse.

3. Discovery Marriage. During this phase, couples discover each other. They learn to communicate and to own and express feelings with freedom, candor and caring. They discover that differences both make us unique individuals and offer creative possibilities within the marriage. They learn to fight more fairly and seek mutually satisfactory solutions to conflicts more quickly. There is balance in their relationship between separateness as individuals and connectedness as a couple. They become intentional about stretching toward equality in their relationship. True intimacy is now possible and hope rises.

4. Depth Marriage. This stage can only dawn in a marriage as deeper levels of maturity dawn in the personal lives of husband and wife. Now couples genuinely share and listen, with a free flow of both feelings and thoughts. Both delight in, even cultivate, the differentness of the other. Conflict is accepted as a healthy process and the couple utilizes it to work for mutual growth. Intimacy becomes more wholistic—emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual as well as physical.

Both partners feel secure, whether near or far. The future is full of promise.

In which of these "marriages" do you find yourselves right now? What is hopeful about understanding these stages? What would facilitate your growth into the next "marriage"? How can you work to put your ideas in place in your church to benefit both yourselves and others?