

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman smiling and nose-bumping. The man is on the left, with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark jacket over a blue and white checkered shirt. The woman is on the right, with blonde hair, wearing a dark jacket and a small diamond earring. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR MARRIAGE



CENTER FOR MARRIAGE
EXCELLENCE™

Strategies for **Strengthening your Marriage**

Congratulations on your desire to strengthen your marriage relationship. Well done! The quality of your primary relationship affects everything else in your life, especially during stressful times.

What you will find in this document

This document covers five Marriage Strengthening Strategies:

- Shift Your Focus
- Strengthen Your Friendship
- Seek to Connect
- Soften Your Approach
- Spot the Signs of Overwhelm

Each strategy includes:

- A detailed explanation of the strategy
- A bulleted summary
- One or more exercises
- A brief example of how my husband, Roy, and I have done the exercise/applied the strategy to our marriage
- Strategy two - Strengthen Your Friendship - includes an "Afterthought" section with a bit of additional information on communication style.

One way to work through this material

There is a lot of content here and it may seem overwhelming. I encourage you to move through it a little at a time. One option is to print out two copies, one for you and one for your spouse. You can separately read the content for one strategy at a time, highlighting the ideas and concepts that stood out for you. You can then share these with each other.

Your next step may be to read and do the exercise(s). You may choose to work on applying just one strategy for a week or more before moving onto the next. There are many ways to approach this. Find the one that works best for you and your partner.

Feedback and Requests

I would love to hear your feedback on the five strategies and how you have applied them, along with suggestions for content you might like to see in future FREE gifts.

Please leave your comments on Facebook at Center for Marriage Excellence, or, if you prefer, please email them to me at: support@centerformarriageexcellence.com

To building an excellent marriage,

Susan

Strategy One - Shift Your Focus

We've been trained to focus on the negative

Many of us have been trained to focus on the things in our lives and in our partners that we don't like or that aren't working for us. Where did we learn this?

It starts when you are about two years old and you hear "No" twenty seven times a day for every "Yes" you hear. Two-year olds are busy and they get into a lot of trouble.

It continues when we take our first spelling or math tests in school. Did you get nine gold stars next to the nine items you got right? No! You got a great, big red X next to the one item you got wrong.

On a long road trip, did your parents say, "Is that harmony I hear in the back seat? Thank you so much for getting along so well and making this trip so pleasant." No. You were more likely to hear, "Don't make me come back there" or "Don't make me pull this car over!"

The same theme continues throughout high school, college, dating and finally marriage and family life. Our attention is drawn to what is not working or what we do not like.

I remember coming home from work one evening and, though my husband had washed the breakfast dishes, cleared the kitchen table, and purchased the groceries I had requested, my attention was drawn to the counters that were covered in crumbs and other food residue. My first comment was, "Oh my gosh! The counters are a mess!" I even wondered if there was a genetic defect in men that kept them from realizing that counters needed to be wiped down.

Then I caught myself. I stopped and wondered, "How would I feel if I had done several tasks to help my husband and upon arriving home all he noticed and spoke to me about was the one task I hadn't done?" I would not feel very good about it. Why hadn't I thanked my husband for the tasks he HAD done rather than honing in on the one thing he hadn't?

We may feel uncomfortable giving our spouse a compliment

Many of us have been criticized for our flaws and mistakes throughout our lives rather than recognized for our strengths and successes. As a result, we are not very good at complimenting others, including our spouses. It doesn't feel natural or comfortable to us. Some of us even neglect to say, "Thank you," which is the most basic compliment - acknowledging that someone has done something nice or kind for us.

I encourage husbands and wives to get in the habit of thanking each other on a regular basis. When I cook dinner, my husband says, "Thank you." When my husband washes the dishes, I say, "Thank you for washing the dishes, honey." We are careful to appreciate what we do for each other. Just making this one small change can make a difference in your relationship.

After the "crumbs on the counter" incident, I decided that I would be intentional about spotting the positive: what had been done well, or was kind, or thoughtful, or worthy of praise. Instead of criticizing my children when they fell short, I made a habit of letting them know the good I had seen. Instead of, "You left your toothbrush on the bathroom counter, please put it in your cup," I said, "Thank you for brushing your teeth. They look so bright and shiny! You are so good at taking care of your teeth!"

In just a short while, I learned that this type of behavior encouraged more of the same, not only with my children, but with my husband as well.

One evening he took my car out, gassed it up and backed it into the garage so that I could easily pull out in the morning. When I came home the next evening, I thanked him for being so thoughtful and told him how nice it was to just pull right out of the garage. Would you believe that after that, he continued to gas up my car at night, and back it into the garage for me? He did! For years!

A word of caution. We don't focus on the good things and thank our partner for them in order to manipulate them into doing more for us, but out of a true heart of gratitude. Most of us can spot manipulation a mile away and run from it.

There's nothing good about him

A woman who was very unhappy in her marriage went to a counselor to get some help. Well, actually, she went to get permission to divorce her husband. The counselor asked her to describe her relationship. "There are many things I enjoy doing, but my husband seems to have no interest in my life or the things that I do. I am really good at making crafts of all kinds - I even have a craft room in my house, but he has never so much as peeked in the door. He comes home from work, eats, then sits in the living room in front of television drinking beer until he goes to bed."

"Hmmm, said the counselor. Tell me something positive about your husband." She racked her brain and could not come up with anything. The counselor encouraged her. "Surely there is one thing that is good, admirable or positive about him or his behavior."

She thought some more. "Well, he is always there. He always comes home." "Ok," said the counselor. "Let's start with that. I want you to find as many ways as you can to let him know that you appreciate the fact that he always comes home, is always there."

She doubted that this would make any difference, but she committed to do it. The first evening, she came alongside her husband in his easy chair, put her hand on his shoulder and said, "In this uncertain world, it is so nice to be able to count on you always being here in the evening." She continued finding different ways to let him know how much she appreciated that he was always there.

A week later, while she was in her craft room working, her husband appeared in the doorway. "So what are you working on, honey?" She almost fell off sewing stool.

She returned to the counselor and reported what had happened. She had had no idea that complimenting her husband would have had such an effect on him. It was amazing to realize that she, herself, single-handedly could make a positive change in their relationship.

I am happy to report that both she and her husband have made changes and are now enjoying their relationship again.

What if he/she were the complete opposite?

A helpful tip. If your partner has a quality or characteristic that is difficult for you to accept, ask yourself, "How would I feel if my partner were the complete opposite?"

My husband, Roy, for example is super task-oriented while I am much more relationship-oriented. There are times that I just want him to stop moving and doing and instead sit down and talk to me.

When I get frustrated with this quality I ask myself, "How would I feel if he were the opposite? What if he just came home from work, sat in a chair, and didn't do anything else?"

Given that choice, I much prefer that he be who he is. This way of thinking helps me to value and appreciate even those qualities that I may be tempted to be critical about.

This doesn't mean that I have to accept him never sitting down to talk to me. I can always make requests of my husband, i.e., "I would really love to be able to have a conversation with you. When, in the next day or so, could we schedule some time together?"

We all have a desire to feel known, loved, and appreciated for who we are. When we don't, we tend to pull away from our partner, distancing ourselves emotionally from him/her. By focusing on the good in our partner and letting them know we appreciate them, we are safe-guarding our relationship.

In Summary:

- We have been trained to focus on the negative - what we DON'T like or what is NOT working for us.
- We need to learn to draw our attention to the positive - what we DO like or what IS working for us.
- Complimenting and thanking our partner may feel unnatural or uncomfortable at first, but it has a powerful effect on them and our relationship.
- We need to consistently let our partner know how much we appreciate their behaviors and qualities.
- We can even learn to appreciate behaviors and qualities that may initially seem negative to us by asking ourselves, "How would I feel if my husband/wife were the complete opposite of this?"

Exercise:

Come up with 3-5 positive words or phrases to describe your partner's characteristics or behavior. Then identify specific instances when your partner has demonstrated that behavior. Share this information with him or her. Thank him/her and let them know how much you appreciate this quality or behavior. Take turns with your partner. You share one item about them, then they share one item about you until you have gone through your entire list.

Example:

1. Hard working
2. Kind
3. Strong - physically and emotionally
4. Intelligent
5. Great listener*

*"Honey, I love how you stop what you are doing and listen when I need to talk. It makes me feel loved and important. For example, last Sunday afternoon when I was feeling a bit down about my Covid-19 weight gain, you listened with compassion, told me I was beautiful and said that you were sorry I was feeling down about myself. Thank you."

I hope you enjoy this exercise. I trust that this first strategy, Shift Your Focus, will make a positive difference in your relationship.

Strategy Two - Strengthen Your Friendship

Learning to resolve conflict is not the place to start

Many people believe that conflict resolution is the place to start when you want to improve your relationship, but this is not true. Learning to resolve conflict more effectively will only take you so far. It will not lead to a strong, thriving marriage.

Think about the friendships you have. Some of them are sure to be more meaningful to you than others. Chances are you don't have a great deal of conflict with ANY of your friends, yet some friendships still mean more to you than others. What accounts for this difference, if it is not about conflict?

The difference has to do with how well you know each other, how much of yourselves you have revealed to each other. This is what gives depth and meaning to any relationship. You cannot love someone - friend or spouse - if you don't really know them.

In the beginning

A strong friendship is at the heart of any great marriage. It builds closeness, makes it easier to resolve conflict, and leads to passion. When your friendship is strong, you don't see your spouse as the enemy, but as a partner who is working with you, rather than against you, to solve your problems.

When we first met our spouse and began dating, we could not get enough of them. We constantly thought about them, wanted to be with them, and were eager to learn everything we could about them.

Some of this knowledge was stored away so that we could surprise them later. If he mentioned that he liked a certain kind of wine - we would be sure to get him a bottle for his birthday. If she mentioned that her favorite flowers were pansies - we would be sure to plant some in a beautiful pot (her favorite color, of course) for her birthday.

It is a powerful thing to be deeply known by someone else on the planet, and we revealed more of ourselves as we grew to trust each other more. We all want to have a witness to our lives, to our history.

We can lose track of each other

The drive we initially had to know each other tends to fade as time goes by. We get to a place where we believe we know all of our spouse's stories and have a firm grasp on their history.

But the world around us is always changing, as are our thoughts and feelings about what we are experiencing. If we are not intentional about staying up to date on each other's lives, we can lose track of each other and end up feeling like strangers.

Add to this that as life moves along there are likely to be more demands on our time and attention. We may be giving our energy to many things, but not to maintaining or strengthening our relationship with our partner.

We tend to become careless with our relationship

All relationships need care and feeding, but sometimes our most important relationship just gets the leftovers. We become complacent and careless with each other and take our partner for granted.

As I'm writing this, an old country song just popped into my head. Here are some of the lyrics.

"It hit me just this morning, when I passed you in the hall.
I swear I caught you looking, like you don't know me at all.
Well, let me show you who I am...
All week I've been your husband, tonight I wanna be your man."

The title is, Tonight I Wanna Be Your Man, and the artist is Andy Griggs. You might want to take a listen. Every time I hear it, it reminds me that I need to be intentional about spending time with the man I love getting to know him all over again. This helps to keep us connected.

Without connection, passion doesn't happen

I don't know about you, but having brief logistical conversations about where we have to be when, household concerns or the kid's activities is not the kind of conversation that satisfies my need to feel close to my husband.

And, being a relationship-oriented female, I'm not interested in being intimate with my husband when I don't feel connected to him.

In Summary:

- Learning to resolve conflict well is not the answer
- A strong friendship is at the heart of a strong marriage
- We must be intentional about keeping up with each other's lives
- Feeling disconnected from our partner may affect our desire for physical intimacy
- We need to respect our partner's communication style because it is rooted in their core personality (See "An afterthought," below.)

Exercise:

Create a list of ten questions that you would like to ask your partner to help you stay current on their lives and understand them at a deeper level. Take turns asking each other your questions. Once you have asked all ten, you can trade lists and ask your partner the same questions that they asked you. Some questions may be light and fun, while others may be more thought-provoking. Here is a short list of questions to help get you started.

Example:

1. If you had a yacht, what would you name it and why? *
2. What is something new you have learned in the last six months?

3. Where would you like to go on our next vacation?
4. If you had to leave our country and go to live in another country, which one would you pick and why?
5. What are your three all-time favorite movies? What did you like about them?
6. What three words would you use to describe each one of our children? (If you don't have children, you could use close friends or family members.)
7. What's one thing I could do for you this week that would make you happy?
8. If you could have any profession other than the one you have now, what would it be and why?
9. Who are your two closest friends? What qualities do you respect or admire about them?
10. What is something you enjoy doing that you have not had the chance to do in a while?
11. If you could go to a store and buy any one quality or characteristic off the shelf, what would it be?
12. What was your favorite trip or vacation that we have taken together? Why?
13. What is one of your life goals or dreams?
14. What's your favorite food? Kind of cookie? Ice cream flavor? Beverage?
15. What three things would you like to be known for? (I.e., being generous, never saying anything negative about anyone, hardworking, trustworthy)

* If my husband asked me question number one, above, I would say, "I would name my yacht, 'Seasick Husband,' because I know that that's what you would be if you ever came on board."

Have fun with this exercise and make sure to give each other enough time to talk. Listening with interest takes energy and focus. Realize that one of you may be more talkative than the other. Don't be discouraged if your partner responds with just a few words.

An afterthought - communication style

The way we express ourselves has to do with how we are hard-wired, our personalities. Practice acceptance of each other. My husband is a math teacher - a numbers guy - and is not very expressive verbally. Two or three words from him is a big deal. He does not try to limit the number of words I speak, therefore I do not try to make him expound on things when he has nothing further to say.

Show interest in what he has to say

It is common for women to want their husbands to talk with them more. Realize that when your husband talks, he is going to talk about the things that interest him. If we are not careful, we will run right past the moments when our husbands want to say something to us, both because we are not watching for the cues, and because when they start to talk about something we have little to no interest in, we quickly tune them out, show how disinterested we are, or end the conversation.

My husband is teaching classes from home via Zoom these days. He was teaching a class on tessellations and asked me if I knew what they were. What followed was a twenty minute lesson on tessellations, complete with a Google search and photographs illustrating the concept. Ugh!! This is so not what I would choose to talk about. In fact most times that Roy starts to talk about math I say, "Please don't terrorize me with math!" Math was my worse subject in school and the first C grade I ever got. It was in a college calculus class. The professor had a very strong accent and was difficult to understand. He spoke facing the board while scribbling away. I couldn't even see what he was writing. I got on my knees and thanked God for that C at the end of the semester.

If your husband wants to talk to you about tessellations, or any other subject that doesn't naturally interest you, let him. Demonstrate as much interest as you can. When you do, you will find that he will engage you in conversation more often. Let what is important to him be important to you.

Strategy Three - Seek to Connect

A vacation is not the answer

Most of us love to go on vacation, not just because we get to see new places and experience new things, but because we get to spend more time with our partner. As much as we love vacations, they are only a small part of our lives together.

I have known couples struggling in their marriages that chose to go on a lavish vacation in an attempt to restore their relationship. In each case, it failed abysmally. If you are

not getting along in your everyday life, a vacation is not going to magically change things.

The win is in being consistent in small ways

What has a much greater impact on a relationship are the small ways you connect with each other day in and day out. This would include being responsive when your spouse makes a comment, helping each other with a task or doing things for each other, and having some fun together.

Doing small things consistently has a much greater impact than occasional grand gestures. This includes the words you speak and physical touch.

Be responsive

We all want to feel that we matter. When I make an off-hand comment to my spouse, I want to know that he heard me and considered what I said. I only know this if he responds in some way, even if it is just with a facial expression.

If, for example, we're watching the TV program, *The Curse of Oak Island*, and I say, "Oh my gosh!!! I am so frustrated for the Lagina brothers; I really want them to find some treasure," I want to hear my husband say, "Yeah, me, too," or, "Yeah, I get it," or, "With all the money they have invested so far it would have to be one enormous find to make it worth it!"

It's not that I need him to agree with me or say something brilliant, I just need a response of some kind. Responding shows me that he cares about what I think and say, and that I am important to him.

My husband is analytical and not very auditory. He needs time to process the things he hears. Sometimes when I make a comment, he pauses so long that I'm not sure he heard me. When this happens I say, "Roy?" More silence. "Did you hear what I said?"

This does not feel good to me. It feels like I don't matter. So I make a request. "Honey, when I make a comment could you please respond in some way, even if it's just to say that you are thinking about what I said?"

Give your partner your full attention

There are also times when Roy walks away right in the middle of a conversation we are having. As I mentioned earlier, he is very task-focused. I can be talking to him and it suddenly occurs to him that he needs to move the laundry from the washer to the dryer (Yes, I'm grateful that he does the laundry.) and he'll just walk off and do it. He might say, "I'm still listening," but that does not work for me. To me, it is insulting, like I'm not as important as the laundry is. When I'm talking to him, I want to see his eyes, to know that he is tracking with me. Him having his head inside the washing machine doesn't cut it.

All this to say, that part of the Seek to Connect strategy is responding to your spouse's comments and giving them your attention when they are speaking to you.

Affectionate touch builds connection

Then there is touch. When I walk into a room where my husband is, I usually touch him in some way. I may put my hand on his shoulder or come up behind him and hug him, kiss him, touch his hand, or massage his shoulders, if he is working at his computer. These small touches also help to keep us connected and are like money in the bank.

Building good will

The little ways you connect throughout the day are like deposits you are making into each other's hearts. They build up good will between you for when difficult times come.

Doing with and doing for

Helping each other with tasks is another way to connect. When Roy is folding our bedsheets (Yes, he folds, too.) I get up from my comfy chair and help him, even if I am engrossed in something else. It's a task more easily done by two people than one. When I am cooking, he'll step into the kitchen and ask if there's some way he can help.

We also do things FOR each other. He gases up my car and gets it washed. I pay our bills. He does our yardwork. I do all our vacation planning. He vacuums the house (I know how lucky I am!) and I cook our meals.

True confession, we have a bad habit of eating in front of the television. Nonetheless, I serve his dinner to him and pick up his plate when he is done. I also get him seconds, if he is interested. He has a servant's heart and is always seeking and finding ways to serve me, so I look for small ways that I can serve him as well. He sits down so infrequently that when he does, I want him to be able to really relax.

Have some fun together

Another way to stay connected is by having fun together. You can engage in activities that you both enjoy, or you can do something that one of you enjoys but the other generally doesn't. This is a way of saying that what is important to your spouse is important to you. I may not especially like going to the shooting range, but because my husband enjoys it and he is important to me, I will 'take one for the team' and happily do it. He does the same for me.

Your personal catch phrases

And finally, every couple can develop their own phrases and sayings that are unique to them. My husband loves to work out. He gets up at 4 am everyday (when we are not quarantined) and works out at the gym for an hour and a half before heading off to teach high schoolers all day. I, on the other hand, work out for health reasons and not because I love working out. When he goes off to work out I say, "Have fun" because I know he will. He once told me to "Have fun" as I was heading off to work out and I said, "Please don't ever say that to me again. Working out is not fun for me. Instead, you can say, 'Enjoy the results' because this is why I do it." To this day, whenever I head off to work out he says, "Enjoy the results!"

Another example. One day he asked me if I was going to work out. I responded with, "What I just heard in my head was, 'You really need to work out because you are fat,'" That was not at all what he said or the intention of his question. He was just trying to arrange his schedule around mine. So he said, "Tell your voice to be quiet!" After that, when I would play around and make some kind of silly comment to him, like, "Do you want me to show you an easier way to slice that onion?" He'd respond with, "Oh my voice is screaming!!!" Roy has also been known to say to me, "Please don't hear what I'm not saying," meaning, please don't make stuff up in your head that I have not said."

And finally, when I walk into a room and he is there, I will stand up on my toes (He is 6 foot 4 inches and I am 5 foot 8 inches), put my arms around his neck and say, "Kiss me like you mean it."

These phrases/responses we have may seem silly, but they are ours and they connect us.

In Summary:

- Connecting in small ways everyday builds good will between you and your spouse
- We connect by:
 - Responding to a comment our spouse makes
 - Giving our spouse our full attention when they are talking to us
 - Touching our spouse
 - Doing tasks together
 - Doing tasks for each other
 - Having fun together
 - Creating and using phrases that have special meaning just for the two of us
 - Touching our spouse affectionately

Exercise One:

Assess how well you are doing with regard to the different ways of connecting with your spouse. Each spouse assesses himself/herself on each connecting behavior using the rating scale below. Share your self-ratings with each other. Each of you makes a commitment to improve in one area of connection. Assess and discuss again in two weeks to check your progress on your commitments.

Connecting Behavior

1. Responding when my spouse makes a comment
2. Giving my full attention to my spouse when he/she is speaking to me
3. Joining in and helping my spouse with a task/doing a task together
4. Doing things for my spouse

5. Having fun together
6. Creating and using phrases that have special meaning for us
7. Touching my spouse affectionately

Rating Scale

- 1 = almost never
- 2 = at times
- 3 = regularly
- 4 = almost always

Exercise Two:

Below is a list of some ways that you can have fun together. Feel free to try some of these or build a list of things that you each enjoy doing together and then share your list with each other. Decide on two activities that you will do together over the next two weeks. Please notice that I have listed “quarantine-friendly” activities because of our current situation.

Some Fun Things to do Together

1. Play a game (dominoes, cards, Clue, Fluxx, Battleship...)
2. Give each other a back, neck, hand, head or foot massage
3. Put on some music and dance together (Note - You could order some DVDs and learn a new dance)
4. Watch a movie and talk about it afterwards
5. Take a walk
6. Do some strength training exercises
7. Prepare a meal or a fancy appetizer or dessert
8. Shave your husband's face (unless he has a beard - then just trim it, if he'll let you.)
9. Sit out on your porch, your deck, or in your back yard
10. Set up a zoom meeting with some close friends or family members to catch up with each other
11. Have a virtual playdate with a grandchild via Zoom or FaceTime

12. Reminisce over some photos
13. Wash each other's hair
14. Take a candlelit bath/bubble bath
15. Write a letter to each other and read them out loud
16. Go outside and throw or kick a ball around together
17. Have a short "state of your union" meeting and talk about what is going well in your marriage
18. Light a fire in your fireplace (if it gets cold enough) and talk or listen to music
19. Search YouTube for songs you liked when you were young and play them for each other*
20. Make a craft or do some kind of home project together

Example:

*My husband and I searched YouTube to play some songs for each other that we enjoyed when we were younger. I learned that my husband loved Sha Na Na. He learned that I had a crush on Bobby Sherman. He also learned that when my grandmother told me she was going to give me a really special gift for my tenth birthday, I thought she was going to have Bobby Sherman come to her house. Instead, she replaced the main diamond in her engagement ring with my birthstone - an emerald - and gifted her engagement ring to me. I didn't really appreciate it at the time - would have preferred a visit from Bobby Sherman. In retrospect, I realize how precious her gift was.

Strategy Four - Soften Your Approach

The first three strategies help you soften your approach

As you consistently apply the first three strategies, Shift Your Focus, Strengthen Your Friendship, and Seek to Connect, you will feel closer and more emotionally connected to your spouse. This will make it more likely that you will bring up marital issues and problems to each other in a way that does not make things worse.

More than ninety five percent of the time, the way a discussion starts determines how it will end.

When you are upset with your spouse's behavior or a specific event or situation, you can start a conversation in a way that leads to a solution and positive feelings about your spouse and marriage, or in a way builds resentment and creates greater distance between you.

The wrong way to start

One way to start poorly is by attacking your spouse's *personality* or *character*. "You *always* do what you want to do." "You *never* think about how your choices affect me." (Using "always" and "never" are very likely to put your spouse on the defensive.) "You don't care about me or how hard I work." "You're good at walking past anything that needs to be picked up, as if you didn't even see it." "You're lazy, selfish, careless, disorganized, irresponsible, bad with money, spoiled, a workaholic..." Comments like these are sure to add fuel to the fire and put your spouse on the defensive. Defensiveness escalates negativity.

Another wrong way to start

A second way to start poorly is to speak to your spouse in a way that *demeans* your spouse or conveys that you are *disgusted* with him or her. This includes speaking down to your spouse from a position of perceived superiority. "I am more responsible, realistic, organized, capable, mature, generous, and hardworking than you are."

Example:

Wife - "Could you please let me finish what I'm saying?"

Husband - "Why should I?" "You just make up your own reality." "I'm the only one in this relationship that sees things the way they really are."

Make allowances for each other

Living in close quarters with anyone over long periods of time is going to cause us to become annoyed, frustrated, or irritated with them. We all have faults and flaws and no one sees these more clearly than our spouse. I like to tell engaged couples, "Before you marry, keep your eyes wide open; after you marry, keep your eyes half shut." We all need a lot of grace from each other. We need to make allowances for each other's shortcomings.

The right way to start

So how *do* you start a conversation with your spouse about a behavior, situation, or event that is bothering you? You use a simple formula - EIR.

The EIR formula - Event, Impact, Request

E- Event

Describe the *event, situation or behavior*.

Try to avoid starting with an accusing, "You" statement that may put your spouse on the defensive. Your spouse is more likely to hear and consider what you have to say if you speak from *your* perspective using an "I" statement and phrasing that is as neutral as possible.

Describe what is going on, or has gone on. Describe the situation or event factually. Leave your subjective opinion about the situation out of it when describing the event or situation. The place where you can be subjective is when you explain the impact that the situation has had on you. When describing a behavior, describe it just as a video would film it. Do not add your opinions about the behavior. Focus on what was said or done, or not said and not done.

I - Impact

Share *how* the event, behavior or situation *impacted* or *is impacting* you.

This may include how it made you *feel, think, other ways it affected you*, or what you had to *do* as a result.

R - Request

Make a *request*. Ask for what you want or need.

It is never effective to try to tell your partner what to do. Keep in mind that we do not get to control our partner or give them orders or ultimatums. No one wants to be

controlled. Whenever we feel pushed by someone else, we will automatically resist or push back. It is a natural response, a reflex.

Example One:

E - Event

Describe the event, situation or behavior:

- "The trash wasn't taken out last night."

I - Impact

Describe the impact it had on you: (How you feel about it and/or other ways it impacted you)

- "I'm angry because I had to take it out early this morning in the bitter cold."

Or

- "I'm upset because it made the kitchen smell and I'm having friends over for lunch today."

R - Request

Make a request. (Could/Would you please...?)

- "Could you please clean the can out with Lysol and then put in a fresh garbage bag?"

Or

- "Could you please put an alert on your phone to remind you to take the garbage out on Monday nights?"

Example Two:

An overwrought mother with a newborn speaking to her husband

Initial approach

- “*You* are a terrible father. *You never* take care of baby Max.” (Attack on partner’s character.)

A better approach (Speaking from an “I” perspective and describing the situation)

- “It seems like *I* am the only one watching over baby Max today, and *I* am really tired.”

- “Could you please give him a bottle and put him down for his nap so that I can have a few minutes to myself?” (A clear, specific request)

There may be negativity

I’m not saying that when you share your concern with your spouse there will be no anger or negativity. When you are irritated, angry or annoyed, it will most likely be heard in your voice and seen on your face. And that is ok.

The words you speak as you describe the situation and how you are feeling about it, and the way you make your request will determine the outcome of your discussion. Either the negativity will escalate, leaving both you and your partner in worse shape than before you tried to address the issue, or you will be able to bring the issue to some sort of resolution.

Think before you speak

We are all able to pause, take a breath, and think about what we are going to say and how we are going to say it. We do this on a daily basis with our bosses, colleagues, friends, and extended family. Unfortunately, there are times that we do NOT extend this same courtesy to the person who has committed to share their life with us - the person who deserves the best of us, not the worst. Taking a few seconds to phrase something in the best possible way may save you hours of stress and tension.

When your spouse’s behavior is the problem

If what you want to talk to your spouse about is a certain behavior of theirs that is impacting you in a negative way, you may start with your feelings rather than a

description of their behavior. You may have to use the word “You” at some point when describing their behavior, but that will be the second phrase rather than the first.

“I feel hurt when we’re at parties and *you* touch and dance with other women. Could you please not touch them?”

“I love to dance with you when we’re at parties and it makes me feel uncomfortable when *you* dance with other women. Could you dance just with me tonight?”

Using a bit of creativity you may still be able to get at a request for behavior change by using an “I statement.”

For example, instead of saying, “You never spend any time with me,” you could say, “We used to spend so much time together and I miss that. Do you think we could have a date night this weekend?”

Other examples:

Instead of, “I feel like everything in your life takes priority over me and that you have no time for me.”

Say, “I feel lonely for you. Could we schedule time to have a glass of wine and catch up on each other’s lives this weekend?”

No need to focus on what your spouse has done wrong

Speak to what you want, rather than what your spouse has done or is doing “wrong” or “poorly” in your opinion. Blaming and accusing will not motivate your spouse to change his/her behavior. Focusing on what you want, rather than on blaming your spouse will minimize defensiveness and increase the chances of your spouse considering your request.

Instead of, “You never stay close to me when we go to parties. It seems like all you want to do is talk to other people.”

Say, "You are so good at talking to people at parties. I always feel a little uncomfortable at a party. Would you be willing to stay with me for the first half of the party tonight until I feel a bit more comfortable?"

Instead of, "You never help me clean the house when we're getting ready for company."

Say, "There's so much to do before our company arrives this evening. I would like to feel like I have some energy left to enjoy them when they get here. Could you help me by vacuuming and cleaning the main floor bathroom?"

In Summary:

- The first three strategies will build emotional closeness between you and your spouse. This will make it easier to surface difficult issues in a way that leads to a productive outcome.
- Beginning a discussion by attacking your partner's character or personality will only increase the negativity between you.
- Verbally demeaning your spouse or speaking to them as if you are superior to them in some way will only escalate a conflict. The same applies to speaking in a way that conveys that you are disgusted with them.
- Use the EIR (Event, Impact, Request) formula for surfacing difficult issues.
- We cannot control another human being. We honor our spouse by making requests, not demands.
- We can all pause, take a breath, and think about the best way to say something.
- When discussing one of your spouse's behaviors that negatively affects you, you may want to begin with your feelings rather than a description of their behavior.
- It is possible to make a request for a behavior change without talking about your spouse's negative behavior. Instead, speak about the behavior you'd like to see.

Exercise:

1. Think about a recent argument or conflict you had with each other.

2. How did you approach it?
3. What went well? What didn't?
4. Did either of you attack the other's character or personality? What effect did this have?
5. Did either of you "tell" the other what to do rather than making a request? What effect did this have?
6. Make a request of each other using the three parts of the EIR formula.
7. Give each other feedback on the EIR message and how it impacted you. *

Example:

* "I've been so focused on work lately that I feel like I really need to have some fun. Could we plan on doing something fun this weekend?" (Feeling, request. No need to mention partner's behavior.)

You would NOT want to say, "You never want to have any fun! Could we *please* do something fun this weekend?"

Strategy Five - Spot the Signs of Overwhelm

Flooding - a state of physical and emotional overwhelm

No matter how carefully you surface a difficult issue, your partner may still become emotionally and physiologically overwhelmed. In psychological terms, this is called flooding. My husband likes to call it an emotional tsunami.

A person becomes flooded when they perceive they are under attack or are facing a threat of some kind. The amygdala, part of the limbic system of the brain, plays an important role in emotions and behavior and is best known for its processing of fear.

When a threat is present, the amygdala sends signals to the hypothalamus to trigger a fight or flight response. This leads to an increased heart rate and other physiological reactions that prepare the body for action.

Your amygdala can respond to a threat before your cerebral cortex even consciously processes it. Your cerebral cortex is responsible for higher thought processes like

speech and decision making, but once your amygdala has taken over, these higher processes shut down.

When someone becomes flooded, they are not able to hear well, process what you are saying, or think and communicate clearly. Their heart rate goes up, their blood pressure rises, they may hold their breath or begin to breathe more quickly and shallowly, their stress hormones surge, and sweat output increases. Any chance of rational thought or creative problem solving goes out the window.

Once a man or woman becomes flooded, they will either fight - verbally attack their spouse - or flight - shut down. They may remain physically present, but they will no longer respond to what you are saying. They will not make eye contact or speak. This can be very infuriating to the other partner.

Why men are more likely to become flooded

Men are much more physiologically reactive than women are and are much more likely to become flooded during stressful marital conversations. This is why men tend to avoid tough marital issues. As the negativity increases and the discussion becomes more tense, a man's heart rate and blood pressure will go up higher and stay elevated longer than a woman's will. When a man or woman's heart rate reaches 100 beats per minute, they can no longer hear you.

Once a man becomes flooded, it takes a minimum of twenty to thirty minutes for his mind and body to calm back down, while women are able to calm themselves much more quickly. This is because natural selection favored men whose adrenaline rose quickly and stayed elevated over longer periods of time. This allowed them to hunt effectively in situations where they were surrounded by danger - i.e., being vigilant for the saber tooth tiger sneaking up behind them while at the same time preparing, along with their fellow hunters, to attack the woolly mammoth in the clearing in front of them.

For women, natural selection would have favored the woman who could calm herself quickly after becoming flooded. Staying calm allowed her to produce more milk and increased her children's chances of survival.

Men who were highly reactive and women who were effective at calming themselves were the ones who survived.

Minimize the chances of flooding

The interesting thing about the limbic brain is that it responds the same way whether the perceived threat is a dangerous animal or an angry wife.

The key when trying to solve a problem or work through a conflict is to do all you can to prevent either of you from becoming flooded, and to learn to take steps to calm down when one of you does become flooded. (85% of the time, it will be the husband.)

Softening your approach when you surface a difficult issue - strategy four, will help you avoid flooding. If one of you becomes flooded, you will need to end the discussion. If you continue the discussion you will do damage to the relationship.

Extend an olive branch

Another tool for preventing flooding is to notice when tension and negativity rise during a discussion and make a comment or gesture that will bring it down. At times you will "extend an olive branch" - do or say something aimed at restoring peace with your partner. You may apologize for something you said or the way you said it. You may admit responsibility for your part in creating or contributing to the problem.

Reduce the tension

You may make a comment or use a gesture that reduces the tension. Your comment or gesture may be serious or silly. It may even be wrapped in an angry tone. The idea is to say or do something that will put the brakes on the increasing negativity and tension.

When Roy and I argue, I may put my hand on my hip, make a fake angry face and say, "You're not the boss of me" just like a young girl might do when arguing with a friend. Or, Roy might say to me, "I love you, though" which is one of our pet phrases. One of us may say, "I think things are getting out of hand. How about we take a break?" Other times we may say, "I feel like we are not hearing each other. Let's take a break for a while."

Take the time you need to calm down

When you decide to end a discussion, do not come back to it until you have taken a full thirty minutes to calm yourselves down. The challenge during the thirty minutes is to do something that helps to calm you and keeps you from thinking about or dwelling on the discussion you were having.

I encourage you to calm down separately until you feel like you may be able to help each other calm down. One of you may choose to take a walk, while the other lifts some weights. You may choose to take a bubble bath or listen to some music. Once each of you has calmed down, you may help each other, i.e., with a brief massage or by leading each other through a relaxation exercise - tensing and relaxing each muscle group.

Once you calm down, you'll see that your discussion becomes productive again.

A final word about flooding

When one of you routinely gets flooded when interacting with your partner about a certain problem or issue, you will begin to avoid the topic and/or your partner. Being flooded is like being out of control and it feels awful. It is logical that you would do whatever you could to avoid it.

When you begin to avoid a certain topic or avoid your partner, you end up avoiding your marriage. This leads to emotional distance between you and ultimately, feelings of loneliness. Rather than avoiding your partner or certain topics, practice softening your approach and reducing tension when having difficult conversations. Take breaks when one of you begins to feel flooded.

In Summary:

- Softening your approach when surfacing an issue will help prevent flooding.
- Once you or your partner is flooded, it will be impossible to have a productive discussion.
- Men are more easily flooded than women.
- Women are better at calming themselves down than men.
- Natural selection accounts for these differences.

- Extend an olive branch to make peace between you.
- Seek to reduce tension by making a comment or using a gesture.
- It is easier to recognize your partner's attempts to make peace or reduce the tension during a conversation when your marital friendship is strong.
- Consistently applying the first four strategies will strengthen your marital friendship.
- When flooded, take the time you need to calm down before continuing your conversation.
- Feeling routinely flooded when interacting with your partner will cause you to distance yourself from him/her.

Exercise One:

Below is a list of some of the behaviors that may cause you to become flooded. Check all those that apply to you and then share them with your spouse. If you become flooded while sharing your lists, take a break for thirty minutes before resuming your conversation.

I become flooded when my spouse...

1. Raises their voice
2. Yells at me
3. Makes demeaning comments
4. Acts disgusted with me
5. Acts as if they are superior to me
6. Attacks my personality or character (Give an example of a specific comment that was made)
7. Interrupts me
8. Is not willing to search for a compromise
9. Uses anger to shut me down
10. Refuses to listen to what I am saying
11. Refuses to take responsibility for their part in creating or contributing to the problem we're discussing
12. Doesn't make eye contact with me
13. Doesn't respond to what I'm saying
14. Completely shuts down during our discussion
15. Walks off during a conversation

- 16. Starts crying
- 17. Counter-attacks (a form of defensiveness)
- 18. Acts like a victim (another form of defensiveness)

Commit to work on changing one or two of the behaviors that cause your spouse to feel flooded.

Example:

Roy and I recently had a conversation about his involvement with my biological grandchildren. (Both his first wife and my first husband passed away. We are a blended family with five adult children between us.) Roy does not play with them when my grandchildren come over, nor does he come with me to visit them. (They do live far away.) He does not call or facetime with them either.

I told him that I felt hurt about his lack of involvement and explained that I planned on being as involved with his grandchildren as I am with my own - if and when his children have little ones.

During our conversation Roy made what seemed to me to be excuses. I.e., "The grandkids like playing with you much more than they like playing with me." "It is too far for me to drive to Virginia and back with you over the course of a weekend when I have to teach school on Monday." I realized that I became flooded when he did not take any responsibility for his part in contributing to this problem. All I really wanted to hear him say was, "You're right. I have not been as involved as I could be. I will try to do better." Or, "How can I make this better? What one thing would you like to see me do differently?"

Exercise Two:

Individually, create a list of comments/phrases and gestures/signals that you can use to restore the peace or reduce tension and negativity during a stressful conversation. Share your lists and select the phrases/gestures that you feel comfortable with. Using these phrases/gestures should help prevent flooding or allow you to recognize that one of you is flooded and you need to temporarily stop the conversation.

Here is a partial list to get you started

Comments or Phrases

1. "I'm feeling stressed."
2. "It seems like the negativity is escalating."
3. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." *
4. "Could I rephrase that?"
5. "That hurt my feelings."
6. "I think we can do better. Can we start this conversation again?"
7. "Can I please have a do-over?"
8. "Could you say that another way?"
9. "Maybe we should take a break."
10. "I feel under attack."
11. "I feel like you're attacking me."
12. "It would help me if we took a break."
13. "I'm not sure this discussion is getting us anywhere. Can we take a break for a while?"
14. "Could we take a time out?"
15. "I'm having trouble listening."
16. "I'm having trouble focusing on what you're saying."
17. "I'm having trouble processing what you're saying."
18. "I'm feeling flooded."

Signals or Gestures

1. Making a goofy smile or apologetic face
2. Using your two hands to make a timeout "T"
3. Zipping your lip and locking it with a key
4. Sticking out your tongue in a playful way
5. Smacking the back of your own hand as if reprimanding yourself
6. Putting your hand on your hip and saying one of your pet expressions
7. Putting your two arms straight out in front of you with your palms in the "STOP" position

Example:

* During the conversation about my grandchildren above, I realized that I had made a critical comment about my husband. I had said, "You don't care about my grandchildren." That was an attack on his character. I knew that I needed to extend an olive branch, so I said, "I am very sorry that I said that. It was disrespectful. Will you please forgive me?" He graciously did.

In Closing

So there you have it, all five Marriage Strengthening Strategies.

If you invest time and energy understanding and applying these strategies, they are sure to positively impact your marriage.

Please feel free to submit questions or comments on my Facebook page, Center for Marriage Excellence, or via email at support@centerformarriageexcellence.com.

To making your marriage an excellent one,

Susan