

FamilyGrowth Reports

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Five Foundations for a Successful Marital Relationship™

Introduction

Over the past several years as I have worked to help couples restore and grow their marriages, I have looked for patterns to better explain what was happening to them. I have seen some patterns that tear marriages apart and others help them grow together. One set of observations I've made appears to be involved in both destruction and restoration, and over time I have come to describe these as the *Five Foundations of a Successful Relationship™*. Let me make myself clear: I do not believe these are the only foundations, and I do believe that others can be more important at specific times over the course of a marriage. However, I believe that these *Five Foundations™* are vital regardless of other factors involving the marriage. With that in mind let's explore these foundations.

Commitment

I believe the most basic foundation for a couple is **commitment**. Commitment is the conscious decision to choose a type of relationship and meet certain obligations and responsibilities for the defined a period of time.

Every few weeks I receive an offer from a music club that says they will give me 11 CDs for just one penny if I commit to buy five additional CDs at regular club prices over the next three years. I usually throw those offers in the trash, because I do not want to commit to that kind of relationship. When I was in college and lived away from home I entered into various commitment relationships with landlords and

roommates where we agreed to certain expectations for a period of time that usually ended with the school year.

Marriage is a relationship that has commitment as the most basic foundation. Married couples begin their commitments in informal ways during the dating process by going steady, discussing expectations, and meeting those expectations. The first formal commitment is usually the engagement, a promise to get married on a specific date, with the giving of a ring as a visible sign of the new commitment. The commitment that formally establishes the marriage takes place in the wedding ceremony with the vows that establish certain parameters. As an example here are the vows I spoke to my wife, Shannon, on our wedding day.

"I, Larry, choose you, Shannon, from all other women in the world, to be my wedded wife, to love and cherish in the bonds of marriage. I pledge you my abiding faithfulness and constant love throughout all the changes in our lives as long as we both live. May the Lord seal my vow to you."

In that vow, I set several parameters: (1) no other women but her, (2) love and cherish her in the establishment of marriage, (3) keep this vow throughout the changes of life, and (4) the commitment lasts for as long as we both live.

When a couple comes to me for counseling, I always assess where each of them are regarding their level of commitment. Today, we live in a society that cares little about marital commitments, and these societal views do influence all families to some degree. Even if we have a super strong commitment in our own marriage, it doesn't surprise us to hear of a friend or family member getting a divorce. We may say "That's too bad; they should try to work things out," but how often do we jump in to guide them to reconciliation. Most likely we have bought into society's view that "divorce happens." As I assess each spouse, I explain that commitment is a decision that involves responsibility and obligation, not to simply tolerate the bad, but to strive to achieve everything that a marriage can be. If I had my choice, I would rather have a couple who were failing in the other foundations yet strong in commitment, because they are more likely to see their marriage through to success.

When commitment is missing, I often ask the couple what is keeping them together, and from that answer, I try to determine how much time we have to work with before they cash in the chips and pursue divorce. For example, if they do not have commitment to their marriage they may be together because they have children, the marriage is a financial convenience, one or both are afraid to live alone, or they stay together for sexual relations.

As I write this, I am reminded of a counseling joke I heard several years ago. It goes that a very elderly couple met with a marriage counselor. The counselor, noting their advanced age, asked how old they were and how long they had been married. The gentleman stated that he was ninety-eight and his wife was ninety-seven and that they had been married eighty years. The counselor then asked how he could help them, and the wife replied that they wanted to get a divorce. Astonished, he asked how long they had wanted a divorce, and the husband replied that they had serious problems since they first got married and had always known they would some day get a divorce. The counselor then asked why they had waited so

long to seek a divorce, to which the wife replied, "We wanted to wait until the kids were dead!"

I know, it's a pretty bad joke (please forgive me), but it illustrates that many marriages are held together by the wrong kind of glue. Sometimes that "alternative" glue doesn't hold for very long and other times it holds for a long time, but in the process it destroys the couple and/or other members of the family. I usually try to determine whether I have a few weeks or several months to help the couple see positive change in their marital relationship, and I tailor my counseling accordingly.

When working with a couple with low commitment, I sometime have to become a salesman and convince them that marital reconciliation is worth the investment. Investing in reconciliation is a hard sell in the short term, because it is much harder than the ease of divorce. In divorce you just tell your spouse "Have your lawyer call my lawyer," and if both want a divorce it can happen in a matter of a few months. Reconciliation is much harder than that in the short term, because you have to deal with issues that like to stay in the shadows. However, when talking about the long term, reconciliation wins hands-down. Reconciliation results in an improved marriage that becomes easier with time because of practicing new skills in resolving conflict. In divorce the problem issues remain unresolved and haunt the broken family for a lifetime. Not only do most "ex's" have to deal with each other on holidays and special occasions, a splintered family is very difficult on the kids whether they are little or grown adults with children of their own.

As a counselor, I have to get both husband and wife together on commitment. If one is committed and the other is not, it is kind of like being a carpenter who is meeting with couple about what to do with their old house. If the husband says restore the house to its previous beauty and the wife says bulldoze the sucker down, what is the carpenter to do? It is the same for the counselor.

If you and your spouse have a commitment to your marriage, make a commitment to

maintain that commitment. Protect it. Guard it. Don't take it for granted. One simple task I encourage all my couples to do is to remove the word "divorce" from their vocabulary. When one or both partners toss around the word divorce, it destroys the sense of security that commitment provides. It is kind of like flying in an airplane when the pilot and copilot both fly the plane wearing parachutes and have their hands on the ejector seats. I don't know about you, but I am not flying on their plane. Don't let your spouse believe that you have your hand on the ejector seat. When a problem persists, always reinforce the notion of working through the problem to mutual satisfaction for the sake of the marriage and family. Another thing you can do is review your wedding vows in an enjoyable, yet serious way. Think about your vows and what they really mean. Take the occasion of your next wedding anniversary to ponder upon them and write out what those vows mean to you now after all these years. Exchange your thoughts with your spouse and see how each of you has grown in your understanding of commitment to each other and to your marriage together.

Respect

Music has always been an important part of my life, and every time I think about the word "respect" two songs come to my mind. The first song is an Aretha Franklin classic and has a line that says, "*R-E-S-P-E-C-T, Find out what it means to me.*" The second song was recorded by Mungo Jerry (1970) called "In the Summertime." It has been remade by everyone from Elton John to Shaggy. This song has a line that goes, "*If her daddy's rich take her out for a meal. If her daddy's poor just do what you feel.*"

I believe these songs describe two fundamental truths about respect. **First**, respect is something needed by each person and is viewed differently by different people. I do not take a universal understanding of respect for granted, and in counseling I ask several questions to "find out what it means to me." **Second**, lack of respect can very easily lead to exploitation and abuse. This lack of respect does not just have to be for the person, but can be for

the family, neighborhood, career, or even how much money his or her daddy is worth.

Throughout our lives, we will respect many people and disrespect others. Why? Why do we respect some and not others? I believe much of our concept of respect rests in how respect was demonstrated in our families as we grew up. Later, our concepts of respect were either modified or reinforced by our personal experiences resulting in what we believe and how we act today. It is this sense of respect that we instill and pass-on to our children, primarily by our comments and actions.

Think to yourself of someone you respect. It can be someone you personally know or someone you only know of. Why do you respect them? Maybe it is what they have done with their life or what they have accumulated. Maybe it is how they have "beaten the odds" that seem to be stacked against them. We might respect someone because of her parents or family. As you explore this question, you will likely find that the person displays traits or values that you agree with or would like to have yourself.

Now, think to yourself of someone you do not respect. Why don't you respect him or her? Likely, you can identify a trait, belief, value, or behavior with which you strongly disagree or would not consider believing or performing yourself. It becomes easy to say, "I am above that belief or behavior, so I am above that person," and disrespect begins taking root. I call this the "Disrespect Trap."

We may also either respect or disrespect a person based upon the family they come from. Our view is not so much based on the person as it is based upon their parents, family name, race, or heritage. This is where my reference to the second song initially comes into play: "*If her daddy's rich take her out for a meal.*" Out of respect for her daddy, you treat his daughter with respect. But, if you disrespect her daddy, if you see yourself as being above her daddy, then you are also above the daughter and can exploit her: "*If her daddy's poor just do what you feel.*"

Now, it is bad enough when disrespect and exploitation enters into society, but it is

devastating when it enters into the marital relationship. Do you respect or disrespect your spouse? Since your spouse is not perfect, you are going to disagree with or disrespect certain actions that her or she has done, but have you taken the next step? Have you fallen into the Disrespect Trap by saying to yourself, "I would never do that to him, yet he is doing it to me. I am above that behavior, but he is not. I am above him, because of the things he does. I do not respect him; as a matter of fact I disrespect him."

Whether working with engaged or married couples, I try to bring them to what I see as the foundation of respect: respect for the other person's father and family. However, I am not talking about their earthly father, I'm specifically talking about their Heavenly Father. A few years ago, I was at a men's conference where a speaker on marriage asked us a question. He asked whether we ever stopped to think that we were married to one of God's daughters? I had never really stopped to ponder that question. He further asked whether we respected her heavenly father, and were we treating her in accordance with that respect. That got me thinking.

When I was dating my now wife, Shannon, there was a level of respect I afforded her because of the relationship I was developing with her stepfather, Jack. I was accountable to him for how I treated Shannon. When we take that concept a level higher, I need to continually afford her respect because of the relationship I am continuing to develop with her Heavenly Father. I am accountable to Him for how I continue to treat Shannon. However, there is a key difference between Jack and God, besides the obvious, and that is it is possible to deceive Jack, but it is impossible to deceive God. God not only knows my actions, but He knows my hidden thoughts and attitudes. When I began changing my view on "respect" from one of belief and action to that of relationship with God, I had a fundamental shift in how I viewed my wife as well as how I viewed other people.

When a couple practices respect based upon their relationship with God, they are better able to maintain healthy respect for their spouse even

when they offend or hurt each other. This kind of respect does not whitewash the offense; it still needs to be addressed through confession and forgiveness with each other. But, respect based upon our relationship with God helps us to avoid the Disrespect Trap.

So, what can you do now? Assess the type of respect process you typically practice with your spouse, then spend some time thinking about your relationship with your spouse's Heavenly Father. Give Him a call in prayer to discuss your attitudes towards His son or daughter that He has entrusted to you as your husband or wife. Ask Him to lead you in developing a closer relationship with Him in respect to your spouse, and ask Him to show you the valuable traits He sees in your spouse. I pray that you never see your spouse in the same way ever again.

Love

Love is probably the most misunderstood word in the English language. You can love your spouse, love your kids, love your dog, love your job, love the Cubs, love a book, and love TV, but hopefully not all in the same way. With our societies overuse of the word "love," it's no wonder that so many people have difficulties putting love into successful practice in their marriages.

Healthy marital love appears to be composed of three primary components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Let me explain what is meant by each of these components and how they work together.

Intimacy

The best definition I have heard for intimacy, and the one I use in counseling sessions, is "into-me-see." I heard this used several years ago and do not recall who deserves the credit. Intimacy is when I make myself transparent to my spouse allowing her to see into me -- all of me -- "the good, the bad, and the ugly." To be intimate, I need to know myself fairly well and be comfortable enough with myself to share myself with another trusting individual, namely my spouse. Obviously, intimacy goes hand-in-hand with trust. I need to trust myself to be intimate

with myself, and I also need to trust my spouse to be intimate with my spouse. Intimacy is an emotional state.

Passion

When I think of passion I tend to think of someone or something that "physically charges" me. The physical charge is not necessarily sexual and can be experienced in a variety of ways with a variety of interpretations. A person may experience physically charged passion about his job, a sport, a movie, one's children, a planned vacation, a spouse, a coworker.... just about anyone or anything. Please note again that passion can be, but is not necessarily, sexual. However, in our society we are often trained to interpret all passion as sexual and are conditioned to be able to sexualize many situations. This inappropriate sexualizing of anything and everything that causes passion is what gets many people into all kinds of problems with their spouse or society, but that is for another report.

Serious passion results in a physical release of neurotransmitters in the brain called endorphins, which are the good-feeling, narcotic-like chemicals that bond us to whatever we are passionate about. If we are passionate about our spouse, then we are biochemically bonding with our spouse. If we are passionate about a sport, then we are biochemically bonding with that sport. Passion is a physical state.

Commitment

Commitment is a decision regarding one's relationship to someone or something that is closely related to the term "sacrifice." Generally, the more we are willing to sacrifice for something the more committed we are to it. For example, your teenage son may really want a car but does not necessarily want to get a job to cover the payments, insurance, and gasoline. He may have passion for the car, but his commitment level appears to be quite low. Knowing one's commitment level about things of importance is vital. There are people who believe that passion and commitment are the same thing and lead lives of frustration for themselves and those close to them.

In marriage, commitment is vital, and accurately knowing your own, as well as your spouse's, level of commitment can either make or break a marriage. When I counsel married couples who are contemplating divorce, I plainly ask them, "How committed are you to this marriage?" Because, if one or both are not committed to paying the blood, sweat and tears price of reconciliation, then they have little chance of making it. However, even if intimacy and passion are non-existent, but they have a strong commitment to see their marriage through to reconciliation, then I get excited, because I know they have a good chance at succeeding at making their marriage better. Commitment is a decision.

You may want to go on the Ferris Wheel at the county fair, but until you make the decision to pay for a ticket, all you are going to do is watch. You may want a great marriage, but until you make the decision to commit to your spouse and do whatever it takes to make it work, all you are going to do is watch other people have successful marriages. Commitment is an intellectual state.

In summary, healthy marital love is composed of three parts: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Each of these parts tap into the three spheres that make us human: (1) Intimacy is emotional, (2) Passion is physical, and (3) Commitment is mental.

Forgiveness

Tuesdays around the Quicksall household hold mixed blessings, because Tuesdays are trash days. During the week when a trash can or diaper pail gets full, we tie the bag shut and take it to the big garbage cans in the garage by the door. By the time Tuesday morning comes around, the garage cans smell pretty nasty (especially during the warm summers). So, in one way, I like Tuesdays, because the garage gets free of that stinky mess. The down side for Tuesdays is that I also go around the house and empty each room's trash can, so we can have a "fresh" start to the week. Some cans are not that bad, while others are not very pleasant and get a spray of Lysol. As you can tell, I don't like

dealing with the trash, but everyone in the house creates it, and the alternative of simply letting it pile up is not a realistic option.

Families have to deal with another kind of trash in their lives. This kind of trash is when we accidentally or intentionally hurt each other, and we hurt each other all the time. Sometimes the offense is small, while other times the offense is great. Regardless of how hard you try to be good and do the right thing, someone sometime is going to get hurt. Now, the question turn to how do we deal with these offenses?

Families often deal with the trash of hurting one another in a number of ways:

- **Ignore It:** If I don't mention it and the other person doesn't mention it, then that means it isn't a problem. *(I know she wanted me to paint the porch this past weekend, but she hasn't mentioned anything about it since, so it must not really bother her.)*
- **Blame Someone Else:** Shift blame to someone else. *(It wasn't my intent to be at work that long, but the boss told me it had to get done ASAP.)*
- **Rationalize It:** Justify why you had to do it, so as to get you away from any responsibility for the action. *(This was the last thing I wanted to do, but you started it last week when you were out late.)*
- **Pay Restitution:** Offer a token that is intended to make up for the offense. *(I hope these flowers make up for last night.)*

I'm sure that there are many others that we could add to the list, but this gives you an idea as to how easy it is to avoid the issue at hand.

The sad thing, in each of these situations, is no one actually eliminates the trash. It is either ignored, blamed on someone else, rationalized, or covered up. And what happens to old trash? It starts to stink really badly. Many times couples that come to see me for marital reconciliation have an odor problem: they stink from unforgiveness. All they do is move around the painful trash in their lives without actually getting rid of it.

Let me be the first to say that forgiveness is often every difficult to do, because our society does not readily teach us to forgive. Oh, we use words like "sorry" and "that's alright," but that can be a far cry for really forgiving the offending person. We also have a lot of misconceptions about forgiveness that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to forgive someone.

I remember one time asking a lady, who was seeing me for marital problems, to explain her definition of forgiveness. She looked at me with shock and asked, "You think I haven't forgiven him?" I told her that I simply wanted to understand what forgiveness meant to her. After a moment, she looked up at me and with anger in her voice said, "Well, I tolerate him, don't I?" This lady had taken the view that if she never brought up the issue with her husband, then she had forgiven him. However, just the opposite occurred, and after many years of living with unforgiveness she had become a very bitter woman. Now let's take a look at what forgiveness actually is, and we will see how a couple gets the trash from the house to the landfill.

In the Beginning

When God created Adam & Eve, he created them pure and sinless to live in a perfect world. When they disobeyed God they introduced sin to the human race, and everyone since has had to deal with frustration and anger. Now, were Adam and Eve created with the ability to handle anger? No, they weren't. They would never have needed that ability in a perfect and sinless world, but now they had to somehow deal with it. Thankfully, God did not sit content to just watch them and us wallow in frustration, anger, and bitterness. He demonstrated to us a model of forgiveness that he commands us to follow.

Throughout biblical history God's people sinned against him in some way, shape, or form. Rather than waiting for his people to realize on their own what they had done, he sent prophet after prophet to tell them that what they were doing wrong and that if they turned towards God and repented that they would see his forgiveness. It is this example that I encourage

married couples to follow to make forgiveness a functional part of their marriage.

How it Works

When one spouse is hurt by the other, I encourage the hurting spouse to approach the other to do two things: (1) to let the other know that what they did was wrong and that it hurt them, and (2) to express a desire to forgive them and restore the relationship. To do this, you have to have a desire to forgive them and reconcile the relationship. When we forgive, we are saying that for the sake of the relationship we will not continue to hold the offense against them. It is important not to approach the spouse with the wrong attitude, such as revenge or to rub-in the fact that the spouse did wrong.

"But if I was hurt, why should I have to approach my spouse?" Well, have you ever accidentally hurt someone without realizing it? Many times! If you don't know you hurt someone, how can you make the first move at reconciliation? Well, how can your spouse approach you about an offense that he did if he didn't know that you were hurt?

"But, my spouse knows he did something to hurt me, because the offense was intentional." Yes, sinful humans sometimes intentionally hurt one another. Don't we sometimes intentionally sin even though we know it is wrong and hurts God? Still, God forgives us when we approach Him with a broken and remorseful heart. Simply put, if our spouse hasn't approached us to confess their wrong, then we need to approach them to confront them with the desire and goal of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"If I forgive my spouse, isn't that saying that what he did was OK?" Not at all! Forgiveness can only take place when an offense has occurred. When you forgive someone, you are telling your spouse what he or she did was wrong, completely wrong, and that is why it needs to be forgiven. Remember, you are forgiving the offender, not the offense.

Another good reason to initiate the forgiveness process is that if you sit in anger and unforgiveness it will eventually turn into bitterness and destroy you. Yes, destroy you. I

have never seen anything destroy someone and their family like unforgiveness. I once heard a person describe it this way, "Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting it to kill the other person."

"What if a person is so angry or bitter that they can't approach the person with an attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation?" That is a very good question, and I have two answers. The first applies to a good and healthy relationship in which the anger response is specifically associated with the current offense. In this situation, I would encourage you to take a break to talk it over with God in prayer, asking Him to help you let go of the anger. You may need some time alone with God to do this, such as a walk or a long hot bath. The second applies to a situation in which anger and bitterness goes way back before the present offense. In that case, I instruct people to begin a four-step prayer process in which God defrosts our iced-over hearts and makes us willing and able to forgive the spouse.

The Four-Step Prayer Process

This process involves four prayers that are variations of the prayer that Jesus made from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" – Luke 23:34. Now, those who crucified Jesus knew exactly what they were doing; they were executing him. But, if they could have seen with God's eyes, they would have seen they were kills the chosen Messiah, the Son of God. If they knew what they were doing, the last thing they would be doing was killing Jesus; they would be worshiping him. And, if your spouse knew what he was doing, he would not have done anything to hurt you. He only did so, because he has been blinded by his sinful nature.

I instruct people to start this process by praying, **"Father, forgive him, because he doesn't know what he is doing."** Every time you think about your spouse or the offense, send that short prayer to God. You may offer this prayer a couple of times a day or dozens of times a day, but keep offering the prayer every opportunity you get. This prayer acknowledges the fact that you are not ready to forgive your

spouse, but that you are asking God to forgive him. Keep praying that prayer until you believe God is touching your heart in such a way that you can offer the next prayer.

The second prayer is, "**Father, make me to forgive him.**" At this point you are still not ready to forgive, but you acknowledge the fact that God wants you to forgive your spouse. By asking God to "make" you forgive, you are submitting yourself to God's sovereignty and inviting Him to lead you where he wants you to be. In this prayer we are requesting the Holy Spirit to sanctify or change us. I instruct people to again offer this prayer every time they think of their spouse or the offense until they believe they are ready to offer the next prayer.

The third prayer is, "**Father, help me to forgive him.**" At this point, God has led us to the place where we desire to forgive our spouse, and we consciously want God to help us. Rather than stubbornly resisting, we have a softened heart that desires forgiveness. Pray this prayer as before until you can offer the next prayer.

The fourth prayer is, "**Father, forgive him, because I forgive him.**" By the time we offer this prayer, God has led us to the point where our anger and bitterness has melted into a desire for restoration. When you can pray this prayer you are likely able to approach your spouse with the proper attitude to make your marriage much better than it was before.

Closing Thoughts on Forgiveness

As I write this I am frustrated with the confines of keeping this section of the report at a reasonable length. There is so much I want to write, but for the sake of brevity, I will end. For some of you, I may have given you hope, while for others I may have caused frustration by not addressing what you need. If you need further assistance in the area of forgiveness, please seek out a Christian counselor or pastor in your town. Do it now, rather than waiting any longer.

Trust

The fifth foundation in this series is trust. Trust is vital to every marital relationship. Without trust, what do you have? Often trust is so taken for granted that established trust quickly

erodes under the couples noses. It is easy for couples to assume either that trust will always be there or that so much has already happened that trust will never return.

There are many things we can do in our marriages to destroy trust: lie, break promises, fail to meet expectations, set expectations too high, refuse to forgive, and focus on faults. The reasons for failing trust that I most often see in my counseling practice include lack of forgiveness in the marriage, compulsive lying to a spouse, emotional or physical affairs, and failed promises to change a bad behavior.

The number one question I hear from people regarding trust would be, "***How do I learn to trust him/her again?***" To answer that question, let's take a closer look at the marital foundation of trust.

According to Eric Erickson, psychosocial stage theorist in secular psychology, the first developmental stage that we encounter is Trust vs. Mistrust. In short, in early infancy we learn to either trust or mistrust our parents or those who take care of us. If we learn to trust, then we will naturally trust people whom we meet until they give us reason to not trust them. However, if we learn to mistrust, then we will naturally not trust people until they convince us to begin trusting them. As you can see, this can cause multiple problems for a marriage right from the start and may require therapy to correct.

As I look at the foundation of trust, it appears to be a different kind of foundation than the others of commitment, respect, love, and forgiveness. Trust appears to be strongly based on the successful implementation of the other foundation and grows out of them. Let me offer an analogy to explain.

I have a small garden in the back yard, and I like to grow tomatoes each summer (***nothin' beats home-grown tomatoes***). If I want to grow big, healthy tomatoes then I need to do a few specific things over the course of the growing season. First, I need to dedicate a patch of good soil for raising the tomatoes. I'll also need to make sure they get the right amount of water, plenty of sunlight, and pull any weeds that start

growing around the plants. If I do these things I should have a good crop of tomatoes as the season progresses.

The same appears to be true for growing **TRUST**. You have to **COMMIT** to making the marriage the best it can possibly be "till death do us part." You **RESPECT** your spouse with all of his or her strengths and weaknesses. You provide plenty of healthy, marital **LOVE**. You practice the kind of **FORGIVENESS** that pulls out all those nasty "weeds" that destroy a relationship. When you have healthy amounts of commitment, respect, love, and forgiveness, then trust will grow.

So, if you are having trouble trusting your spouse, do a quick check of your other foundations to see if they are healthy. If they are out of whack, then you might have good reason for not trusting your spouse. If the other foundations are good, then check to see if you are allowing trust to grow. Remember, efforts to grow a good marital foundation today will yield a bountiful crop come harvest.

About the Author

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