

CLOSE TO YOU

Fostering Emotional Intimacy

One of the *We* aspects of marriage is emotional intimacy; couples must work together to build emotional intimacy to achieve an eternal-quality type marriage. Although there are many different definitions of intimacy, they all have one aspect in common: connecting and experiencing deep bonds of closeness with your spouse through interpersonal communication.² Couples vary in their levels of emotional intimacy: some are like hostile enemies; some are indifferent associates; others are like college roommates, good friends, or even best friends; and some are lovers in every sense of the word, both emotionally and physically. Couples in thriving marriages have high expectations regarding emotional intimacy, in which they aim for the ideal: to love their spouse as God loves, wholly and with every possible facet of their being.

Sadly, some couples are in real trouble when it comes to having any type of genuine emotional intimacy; we have observed couples that just plod along and coexist without any effort to make any deep connections. Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed that “co-existence is not real brotherhood” and if a couple is

only coexisting in the same living space—living, in essence, parallel lives—it does not a marriage make.³ Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee have written that marriages that do “not provide nurturance and restorative comfort can die of emotional malnutrition.”⁴

By contrast, the path of marriage is God’s plan to ultimately exalt us, and therefore it is expected that we will do more than just coexist or live parallel lives in our marriage. Building emotional intimacy is necessary to achieve a thriving eternal marriage. This chapter will discuss the reasons why emotional intimacy is vital in marriage and will present ways in which couples can grow emotionally together, including building communication skills, learning each other’s love languages, increasing positive feelings, continuing courtship, and establishing shared meaning or purpose.

Equal Partners to Support Each Other

The principle of emotional intimacy was taught first to Adam and Eve. Eve was given to Adam as his “help meet.” As husband and wife, we are the help *meet* for each other. Often we have seen people combine those words talking about Eve as a helpmeet or helpmate to Adam. In the scriptures, they are found as two distinct words: “help meet” (See Genesis 2:18, 20; Abraham 5:14, 21; Moses 3:18, 20). The word *meet* means appropriate or equal to the task. President Russell M. Nelson provided a clear understanding of this term, “From the rib of Adam, Eve was formed (see Genesis 2:22; Moses 3:22; Abraham 5:16). . . . The rib signifies neither dominion nor subservience, but a lateral relationship as partners, to work and to live, side by side.”⁵ Thus, as husband and wife, we are perfectly suited to partner with each other in working, or striving, toward perfection.

In life’s tremendous undertakings, we need a partner in whom we are emotionally connected and in whom we can trust and feel comfortable leaning on when the fatigue of the journey



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sets in. Ecclesiastes 4:9–11 teaches, “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?”

This type of partner is not found in our business relationships, in which we are meeting each other fifty-fifty in contractual obligations; it will only be found in a covenant relationship in which we each give 100 percent. The *only* covenant relationship we have with another person is the marital relationship we have with our spouse.⁶ We are to make our marriage a living, eternal relationship. As such, our Father in Heaven expects husbands and wives to be emotionally tied and interdependent in supporting each other through life’s joys and life’s refining fires.

Missionary companionships can be seen as a type and shadow for the marriage relationship. Book of Mormon missionary companions Alma and Amulek illustrate for us the concept of supporting each other in our respective needs and trials. In Alma 8, Alma returns to the land of Ammonihah to preach, and

Reflections

Strains in a marriage can happen even after more than two decades together. I have a demanding job and have served in busy priesthood leadership callings for most of our marriage. The intensity of those combined demands kicked into high gear for a prolonged period; I was having a difficult time managing the stress and was very unhappy and felt trapped by my obligations. Rather than open up to my wife, I kept it all bottled up so that she wouldn't worry. I became aloof. My wife and family got the short end of the stick and were the easy outlet for my frustration. Pride kept me from sharing my struggles with my wife because I was always the person that "kept it all together." It created a wedge in our marriage. After struggling for a significant period of time, I humbled myself and opened up to my wife. It was only after I was willing to be emotionally vulnerable that our relationship began to heal. The problems haven't completely gone away, but my eternal companion is now at my side, where she should be, supporting me. It is like a light being switched on in a darkened room—hope and happiness have returned.

approaches Amulek to ask, "Will ye give to an humble servant of God something to eat?" (verse 19). Amulek receives him into his house and gives him bread and meat (verse 21). Alma ate "and was filled" (verse 22). Amulek, knowing that Alma had fasted for many days, was sensitive to his needs and allowed Alma to stay with him for many days (verse 27).

As we know, Amulek then became Alma's missionary companion. In doing this, Amulek, "for the word of God," gave up his riches and was "rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and kindred" (Alma 15:16). Amulek had lost everything. "Alma having seen all these things" (verse 18) was sensitive to Amulek's plight and lovingly reciprocates the care that Amulek had given to him previously: "Therefore he took Amulek and came over to the land of Zarahemla, and took him into his own house, and did administer unto him in his tribulations, and strengthened him in the Lord" (verse 18).

In our marital relationships, we will need to be aware of and sensitive to the needs of our spouse. We will need to work to create a trust and intimacy upon which we can each rely. If our spouse does not feel close to us, does not feel like we care about them on an intimate level, or doesn't trust us to be able to handle the sensitive material of their lives, then they will likely not choose to share their

deepest feelings and involve us in their significant life decisions. The quality of the marital relationship deteriorates when spouses fail to connect to each other in deeply meaningful ways.

Intimacy Is Important for Both Sexes

Culturally and historically, there is a common stigma that women need emotional intimacy more than men. However, men also need warm and intimate relationships in order to flourish in their lives. Some may not necessarily realize or even accept this, but there is research that bears this out.

The Grant study, coordinated by George Vaillant, has become the longest longitudinal study ever done on the lives of men. For more than seventy-five years it has studied Harvard men recruited from the classes of 1939–44. Its purpose was to find what lead to an “optimum life.”⁷ Ten life accomplishments were identified as factors predicting a man’s ability to be a well-adjusted, successful adult. One of these was having a good marriage. They also identified the importance of other emotionally intimate relationships, such as those with mothers, fathers, siblings, and close friends.

The power of these intimate relationships influenced very real aspects of the men’s lives, such as income and personal happiness. Relative to income, although all of the study participants entered the workforce with an education from Harvard University, the fifty-eight men who had the highest scores regarding warm relationships made about \$150,000 more per year than did the thirty-one men in the study with the worst scores on relationships.⁸ Relative to personal happiness, the most successful marriage in the Grant study also produced the happiest man in the study.⁹ “In short, it was the capacity for intimate relationships that predicted flourishing in all aspects of these men’s lives.”¹⁰

Continuing with the findings from the Grant study, it was shown that the happiest couple in their study, Mr. and Mrs. Chipp (a pseudonym), enjoyed doing a variety of activities together,

such as reading, sailing, taking yearly canoeing trips, and walking together. They talked openly about life issues. They kept a sense of humor with each other, even at times of conflict. They depended on each other “just by being there.”¹¹ They rated the quality of their marriage highly for decades, and at age eighty Mr. Chipp proudly told interviewers, “I’ve lived happily ever after.”¹² Vaillant concluded, “The more the men became able to appreciate shared dependence as an opportunity rather than a threat, the more positive feelings they expressed about their marriages.”¹³

These opportunities are available to both men and women within the marital relationship. Happiness and joy come when we allow ourselves to be open to our spouse and truly connect in a genuine, validating, and intimate way. What follows is a discussion of some basic practices needed to foster and build emotional intimacy with our spouse.

Talking

Verbal connections are important to emotional intimacy. Yet men and women are generally so diverse in their needs in this area that the discrepancy has become an easy target for jokes and comic strips alike. The gender differences commonly seen in this area have become stereotyped—and for many couples, including ourselves, the stereotype is indicative of their true experience. A story from early in our marriage illustrates these discrepancies; we laugh at ourselves as we reflect back on this story, but we certainly weren’t laughing when it happened.

RICHARD: *One evening early in our marriage while we were in our bedroom, Debra was sharing something with me that was a personal concern to her. I was actively listening for the first few minutes but began to grow impatient and to withdraw from the conversation because I had offered her my answer about the problem several times and thought we should be done. Yet Debra continued to talk about the issue from several different angles in order to process and wrap her head around it. Essentially, she shifted into a monologue to which I felt captive.*

After forty minutes, I metaphorically hit the wall, feeling like Debra was recycling the same thing over and over again, and I just couldn't handle it anymore. I made some impatient comment as I went into the bathroom. Debra was surprised and frustrated at my reaction and told me that she wasn't done yet and that I needed to continue to listen. I retorted back in irritation, "I've listened for forty minutes!" To this, Debra yelled back, "Well, this one just might take forty-five!"

We smile as we look back at that experience, because after years of marriage we have come a long way in moving toward a middle ground regarding verbal communication. I now do a much better job at listening and participating in the conversation when Debra wants to talk, knowing that she is using our conversation to help process her concerns rather than just wanting me to answer her problem. I also make a greater effort to share my thoughts or details about my life with Debra. In the meantime, Debra has shifted her approach as well, taking less time to talk through issues than she used to previously. Although we do not always satisfy each other's preferences completely, we have reached a healthy balance that accommodates both of us.

Talking and listening allow words and feelings to be communicated, which then helps spouses feel connected to each other. This has a great power in soothing, comforting, and lifting. Elder Richard G. Scott said:

Do you tell your wife often how very much you love her? It will bring her great happiness. I've heard men tell me when I say that, "Oh, she knows." You need to tell her. A woman grows and is greatly blessed by that reassurance. Express gratitude for what your spouse does for you. Express that love and gratitude often. That will make life far richer and more pleasant and purposeful. Don't withhold those natural expressions of love. And it works a lot better if you are holding her close while you tell her.

I learned from my wife the importance of expressions of love. Early in our marriage, often I would open my scriptures to give a message in a meeting, and I would find an affectionate, supportive note Jeanene had slipped into the pages. Sometimes they were so tender that I could hardly talk. Those precious notes from a loving wife were and continue to be a priceless treasure of comfort and inspiration.

I began to do the same thing with her, not realizing how much it truly meant to her.¹⁴

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Remembering the importance of words, we must each keep in mind that there is a difference between talking *to* our spouse and talking *with* our spouse. In Richard's story, we can see that Debra had gotten into a cycle of talking *to* Richard, and it was not useful in fostering intimacy. Psalm 55:14 tells us, "We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company." In this verse, the footnote on company says "or fellowship." As we talk with each other, bonds of connection grow and the feelings of fellowship deepen. Nephi illustrates this principle relative to how he managed his intimate relationship with the Lord: "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, returned from speaking *with* the Lord" (1 Nephi 3:1; emphasis added).

Martin Seligman delineates four choices we have in responding to the communications of others:

1. *Active constructive* communication is to respond authentically, enthusiastically, or supportively.
2. *Passive constructive* communication is to offer brief, unspecific support.
3. *Passive destructive* communication is to ignore the stimulus rather than addressing it.
4. *Active destructive* communication is to point out the negative aspects of the stimulus.¹⁵

Only the first of these options represents healthy, intimate discourse.

Thus, to build our relationship with our spouse, we want to seek to respond to them in an active constructive manner. For example, if our spouse says, "I got a new calling today!" we can respond with interest and caring: "Great! What are you going to be doing? What are your new responsibilities? How do you feel about it?" This type of communication will stimulate a conversation that creates opportunity to build intimacy and bonds of trust. If we fail to turn toward our spouse with this type of supporting interaction, we may unwisely respond with one of the other unhelpful and even destructive communications. In this

example of the new calling, a passive constructive statement may be a simple “That’s nice.” That type of flat comment cuts the conversation to a very abrupt close. A passive destructive statement may work to change the conversation entirely: “You know, the fire alarm is beeping in the hallway again. I need you to replace the batteries.” An active destructive comment may be intended to undermine and discourage your spouse as they begin a new phase of Church service: “I tell you, this new calling is going to take a lot of extra hours every week! And dealing with all those people is going to be nothing but drama!”¹⁶

As we work to respond and communicate with our spouse in an active constructive manner—thus improving the *process* of our communications—we need to be aware of the quality of the *content* we communicate. Talk can sometimes be cheap, and we want to avoid that pitfall as well. We want to be vulnerable and communicate about things of real importance to us, even things that make us feel vulnerable. For example, Douglas Brinley and Mark Ogletree, LDS marriage and family therapists and BYU religion professors, have taught that there are three levels of communication in marriage.¹⁷ These include the superficial level that is informative and low risk; the personal level that shares deeper parts of ourselves, such as our goals and dreams; and the validating level in which we praise and compliment the other.¹⁸ For a sense of intimacy to be present in the

Reflections

I realized some years ago that when my wife offered me counsel, I often fought against her suggestions because I felt inadequate or incompetent. As a result, my wife felt she could never offer any suggestions to improve our marriage or our family. Soon, we quit talking about the things that mattered most. My wife later revealed to me that she wanted to keep our conversations “safe,” so we only discussed things like who would pick up the kids from soccer practice or take the dog to the vet. Deep down, I wanted my wife to be impressed with me. Therefore, every time she challenged an idea or had a better suggestion, I took it personally. I guess it was a blow to my ego.

marital relationship, husband and wife need to make sure their talking includes a balance between all three.¹⁹

Unfortunately, many couples keep their communication on the superficial level. Ogletree commented: “Superficial communication can supplant deep and meaningful conversations. If couples tiptoe around deeper issues that should be discussed, they will never learn to resolve conflict or connect with each other. Couples bond as they discuss things that matter—not things that don’t. I have seen many couples in my practice who have tried to preserve their relationship by keeping their communication at the superficial level. By avoiding the “weightier matters” (Matthew 23:23), they have actually destroyed their marriage.²⁰

Instead, we need to be willing to extend ourselves, opening ourselves up to communicating on the personal and validating levels as well. This requires some vulnerability on our part, and for some couples being vulnerable may feel risky or even threatening. Yet, for true intimacy to grow within our relationship, we must share ourselves and allow our spouse access to those parts of us that perhaps others in the world do not see. Those are the types of conversations that can assist in building greater emotional intimacy or even rekindling a sense of closeness that may be lost.

Listening

Talking is only one side of the verbal communication process that fosters an emotionally intimate relationship; we must also be responsive, compassionate listeners. If we remember that we have two ears but only one mouth, perhaps we will remember to use our ears more! Luke reminds us, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:35).

One social science model called the interpersonal process model of intimacy explains that intimacy reflects two primary components: self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. The

intimacy process is initiated when the speaker communicates personally relevant and revealing information to the listener, as discussed in the previous section. In return, the listener must respond to the specific content of the initial disclosure and offer understanding, validation, and caring for the speaker. For the interaction to feel intimate to the speaker, the speaker must be able to perceive or interpret the listener's responsiveness.²¹ One writer commented on the significance of the speaker being "heard" by their spouse: "Being heard is akin to being loved; in fact, being listened to is one of the highest forms of respect and validation. By listening, we are saying to our spouse, 'You matter to me, I love you, and what you have to say is important.'"²²

In order to successfully navigate the listening portion of our verbal communication, we must "be swift to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19) and not listen with the intent to respond but with the intent to truly understand. Elder Neal A. Maxwell counseled, "Let us, therefore, define service to others as including genuine listening—a listening that is more than just being patient until it is our turn to speak; rather, a listening that includes real response, not simply nodding absorption."²³ This requires stillness or calmness in our demeanor.

As we are patient and work to stay present with our spouse during conversation, we must additionally lessen impulsivity, nervousness, or anxiety that makes us want to get our spouse to behave as we'd like in order to get them to conform to our needs. We must allow space for our spouse to communicate fully what they need to communicate without pressuring them to hurry up for *our* sake. Elder Maxwell continued:

Let our service, at times, include a willingness to hold back in conversation when what we would have said has already been said—and perhaps better. To contribute . . . time and space, so that another can expand is to reflect quiet nobility. There are so many times when to forgo is to make way for another.²⁴

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It is important that we listen and ask clarifying questions about what our spouse is communicating. To do this requires that we learn to listen with a soft heart. “How vital is a ‘listening heart’! The heart hears feelings while the mind attends to words. Often, what we are feeling needs to be heard even more than what we say.”²⁵

Listening with our heart requires discernment and sensitivity to the underlying messages or issues our spouse is seeking to convey; this may require careful attention to nonverbal communication from our spouse as well. This type of listening does not happen by accident. Listening with our heart requires humility to ask, What is my spouse really communicating? Perhaps a story about a difficulty at work is not really about work but about feeling vulnerable or incompetent. Maybe a diatribe about how hard it is to stay home with the kids is not about diapers or messy houses but a request for help or about feeling undervalued or personally stagnant. It would be excellent if our spouse could always explicitly communicate what they need from us during a particular exchange, but that is not always the case—sometimes they themselves may not know exactly what it is they need. So, as we listen with our hearts, the Spirit will guide us to know the true message our spouse is seeking to convey.

As we talk about using our hearts to listen, there is another aspect we must also consider: “To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Hebrews 3:15). Sometimes, what we hear is difficult to hear. It may be difficult to hear our spouse talk about what we have done that has hurt them or to have them offer us correction in some way. Yet, if we listen with a soft heart, we will not take offense. We will not become defensive and then hijack the moment and launch into a rant that turns the tables and makes *them* listen to *us*. As we have done our part to listen, in time the natural rhythm of the discussion will allow us to then share our feelings about what we have heard. So we can trust that

process and not jump in too quickly in order to react, rebut, retort, or retreat.

Love Languages

Talking and listening are just the start of building intimacy in marriage. The scriptures admonish us to “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Elder David A. Bednar counseled, “We should remember that saying ‘I love you’ is only a beginning. We need to say it, we need to mean it, and most importantly we need consistently to show it. We need to both express and demonstrate love.”²⁶

We can be most successful in demonstrating our love to our spouse when we do for them what *they* value rather than what we value. For example, when we extend love to our spouse in a manner that they value, the message is generally received as such: “I am reaching out to you because I want you to know that I love you.” But, if we make an effort to connect in a manner our spouse does not highly value, the sincerity of our meaning may likely be lost. Since 1995, Gary Chapman’s book *The Five Love Languages* has resonated with millions of people and has been clinically useful for therapists.²⁷

DEBRA: *Indeed, the love language paradigm has been helpful to us in our own marriage and to many of my therapy clients. While Chapman’s book*

Practice

If your spouse’s love language is words of affirmation and yours is not, you may need to remind yourself. Gary Chapman suggests you remember the mantra “Words are important!” He also suggests activities such as writing a love letter (or love paragraph or even a love sentence) and giving it to your spouse, or complimenting your spouse in the presence of their family or friends.³⁰

Reflections

My husband and I have been married over twenty years, and we still struggle with gift giving on Christmas and birthdays. I feel like I can buy “stuff” for myself anytime and would like my husband to think of something thoughtful to give me on these occasions. I’d be happy with a homemade gift as long as there was some kind of thought behind it. In return, I enjoy coming up with thoughtful gifts for my husband, things that show him how much I love and appreciate him. My husband is frustrated with this need I have because he feels like he has to come up with the perfect thoughtful gift or my holiday will be ruined. After an argument we had on Christmas Eve about seven years ago, we started buying our own gifts in order to avoid future Christmas Eve arguments and postbirthday disappointments. Yes, it’s a little strange to buy, wrap, and then unwrap our own gifts, but it has made holidays and birthdays much easier—my husband doesn’t have to stress about getting me the perfect gift, we get what we want and don’t have to return or exchange items, and there are no expectations of one person doing something for the other that would be unfulfilled.

has been a success, we want to note here that there has been very little scientific testing of its claims. However, one study examining the five love languages did show a significant relationship with a commonly accepted relational maintenance scale.²⁸

In his work, Chapman identified five ways that people communicate and receive communication of loving feelings: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch.²⁹ What is your love language? Consider how you would fill in the following blanks: “I find it most meaningful when my spouse does _____ for me”; “I find myself asking for _____.”

What if our spouse’s love language is words of affirmation, but for us talk really is cheap? What if our language is receiving gifts, so we spend a lot of time and energy planning and making a gift for our spouse, only to have them unenthusiastically say, “Oh, thanks,” and set it aside? As discussed by Chapman, metaphorically speaking, if we speak Chinese and our spouse speaks French, then no matter how genuine and warm our efforts to communicate our sentiments are, if we don’t learn some French and our spouse doesn’t learn some Chinese, some

subtle and nuanced communication is going to be missed. The missed communication is not necessarily because our spouse isn't trying to be loving, give us the benefit of the doubt, or understand us, but without some training in our language, our spouse perhaps *can't* understand us. Chapman addressed the confusion we experience when we find ourselves in this situation: "We are expressing our love, but the message does not come through because we are speaking what, to them, is a foreign language."³¹

If we have different love languages, we will want to learn each other's language "if we are to be effective communicators of love."³² Once we learn and understand, we can then work throughout our marriage to practice speaking our spouse's language—purposefully using that knowledge by translating our messages of affection into our spouse's language.

DEBRA: *When we first married, I expressed to Richard that it was important to me to hear words of love; I needed to be told I was loved and that the things I did throughout my day to serve Richard and the family were noticed and appreciated. We established traditions of writing love letters to each other for particular special days in the year. Richard has had to work at these letters over the years, but in time they have become easier for him to write. Also, he has improved in his ability to express deeper feelings to me in my love language as he has practiced doing so. In addition, he has made efforts to leave me supportive notes or send me kind emails or texts at random times while he is away at work. I appreciate his efforts to communicate to me in a way that feels meaningful to me.*

RICHARD: *My love language is giving acts of service. I love serving others, especially Debra. It has taken Debra many years to realize that when I am doing an act of service, such as laboring on a house project she wants done, the reason I prioritized the project over doing other things I might prefer to do for myself is that I get a lift by seeing her excited about something I did for her. She always feels grateful for the time and energy I spend working on house projects, but even though she enjoys the practical consequences of the completed project, having the project done doesn't necessarily make her feel "warm fuzzies" of love and intimacy. In fact, sometimes the time it takes for me to do the project means I have less time to spend connecting directly with her, as she would prefer. Once Debra identified that*

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my service was a love offering that satisfied my love language, she began to work harder to not only express gratitude but be warm and affectionate in return.

Likewise, even though Debra's love language is words of affirmation, in addition to verbal and physical expressions of caring, Debra has made greater efforts to do service for me so that I can feel her love for me in my language. She makes me delicious dinners or makes my favorite Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies. She keeps my laundry clean and folded. She offers foot rubs or back rubs when I've had a particularly tiresome day. These are deliberate efforts; the message she wants me to hear is "I am making a love offering in your language. Please accept my love."

In more recent years, I have tried to make more of an effort to reach out to Debra in her love languages of words of affirmation and quality time. I can often tell when she needs a listening ear and needs to hear empathetic words of comfort and understanding about the challenges she faced that day. I have reached out to cuddle with her. I have also sought to be more open about how my day has been by explaining some of my own frustration, hurts, or challenges. She really loves it when I open up and share these things with her because it helps validate how important she is to me as an equal partner and spouse. I truly respect her insights and opinions, and so making quality time together is a blessing for both of us.

DEBRA: *Quality time is one love language we are continually working on negotiating in our relationship. After a long day of working for our professions, Church callings, children, and home, I want to connect with Richard by spending time alone together and talking. We have sought to prioritize alone time by enforcing bedtimes for the older children, but sometimes this does not always work since our older girls often want time and attention from us in the evenings.*

In addition, once alone, I want to connect in a meaningful way, which to me means more than a five- or ten-minute interaction. This connection time energizes me and sometimes I can talk for quite a while. Richard is often tired in the evenings and wants to wind down, not get into a lengthy or deep discussion. Sometimes he will end the discussion abruptly or fall asleep, and then I feel jilted and unsatisfied emotionally. This is an important time of connection for me, but I have over time come to realize that Richard just isn't as much of a night owl as I am, and his sleep needs are as important as my talking needs. So I have made a more conscious effort to limit my talking in the late evening when Richard has tired out.

Identifying the love language of our spouse can streamline sentimental communication. When we speak in our spouse's language, they likely will receive our love message more clearly and easily than if we communicate in our own love language only and expect them to accurately translate. In addition, recognizing our own love language can assist our spouse in more fully showing love for us. It is requisite that we educate them about what feels meaningful to us so that they can make more efforts to communicate through those means.

Building Positive Sentiment

Building positive sentiment, or creating warm feelings of caring and love within our marriage, is another way we improve emotional intimacy. It's generally not difficult to go out of our way to be nice to our spouse when we already have positive feelings for them. However, even if positive feelings are not present, we can purposefully and intentionally do things to *create* those types of feelings. In this section, we will discuss how to create positive sentiment, more carefully notice positive acts that our spouse is already doing, strengthen foundations of friendship, and continue postwedding courtship.

How do we build positive sentiment so that we can feel more connected and emotionally intimate with our spouse? John Gottman and Nan Silver teach about the process of building positivity in the relationship with a metaphor—the emotional bank account. We can put deposits into our bank account and we can make withdrawals. We can build up a large balance by making many deposits. If we withdraw too much, we can bankrupt the account.³³

As a couple, making deposits in our emotional bank account helps to build feelings of closeness and intimacy. Deposits include any behaviors that increase positivity in the relationship. Examples include offering a compliment to our spouse, holding

Reflections

My husband passed away eleven years ago, after almost fifty-two years of marriage. Our parents did not show affection to each other. Yet I learned early in our marriage that my husband liked to show affection for me in public. I liked that a lot. It brought us together. He would sit down by me; he would grab my hand and hold it; he would put his arm around me. Whenever we would go for a walk, we would hold hands. We would hold hands in the car. He would always kiss me goodbye when he would go somewhere. These behaviors bonded us—it was a way of bonding us and staying in communication with each other. As his health began to decline, he remarked, “Well, we’ve had a good run of it, haven’t we, my love?” The separation since he passed away has been heart-wrenching. I still feel him close to me during different things, such as baby blessings—like he’s watching me. I know I will see him again, that he will come and get me when it is my time to pass. I can’t wait to hold his hand again.

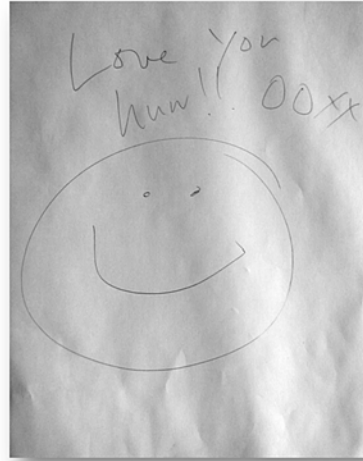
hands, kissing our spouse goodbye, and calling or texting our spouse during the workday to touch base and let them know that we are thinking of them. Withdrawals from the account include any behavior that undermines trust or closeness, creating negative sentiment. Examples may include reacting impatiently, thoughtlessly making a rude comment, failing to offer support, failing to follow through with commitments, or any other destructive attitude or behavior (see chapter 7 on conflict). So to begin building intimacy, we can work to increase positive sentiment by making as many deposits as possible into the emotional bank account.

Another way of assessing and increasing the amount of positive sentiment in our marriage can be done through awareness of some research from an area of psychology known as positive psychology. It teaches that people tend to flourish when their ratio for positive and negative affect is 3:1.³⁴ When the positive outweighs the negative, we feel happy and productive. This 3:1 ratio works for individuals; however, in marital relationships the standard is higher. Gottman found that couples who rated themselves as happily married have a positivity to negativity ratio of 5:1.³⁵

Does our relationship with our spouse fall below the 5:1 threshold? The good news is that if we find we are coming

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up short in reaching the 5:1 positivity to negativity ratio, we can easily increase the positive sentiment in our marriage. We read in Alma 37:7, “And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by *very small means* the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls” (emphasis added). We don’t have to make grand gestures that take a lot of planning or money; we can increase positive sentiment by small and simple means—very small means done on a consistent basis.



EVEN A SHORT, QUICK NOTE CAN CONVEY LOVE AND STRENGTHEN EMOTIONAL INTIMACY. RICHARD PUT THIS NOTE IN THE REFRIGERATOR FOR DEBRA TO FIND. COURTESY OF RICHARD MCCLENDON.

RICHARD: *Things I try to do for Debra from time to time include leaving an encouraging note taped inside the refrigerator or on her pillow, sending her a supportive text, bringing a treat home from work to share with her, or praying specifically for her during our evening prayer together. Debra frequently expresses gratitude for my hard work in behalf of the family, praises my handyman skills (excepting those projects completed with duct tape), gives me hugs or kisses, makes me my favorite cookies, or reaches out to hold my hand. Over time, small deposits such as these have created a large balance in our emotional bank account; when trouble comes and withdrawals are made, they do not bankrupt the account—they don’t even get close.*

Thus, small things can be very powerful to not only inoculate the emotional relationship but promote flourishing. President Joseph Fielding Smith and his wife, Jessie Evans Smith, illustrated this concept in their own marriage: “During their 33 years of life together she accompanied him most everywhere, near and

far. He in turn helped her do the grocery shopping, dry the supper dishes, and bottle fruit in the fall. He had no qualms about being an apostle with an apron on.”³⁶

Perhaps you may not feel confident that investing the energy to make these types of small efforts will significantly help your marital relationship. Maybe you think it seems superficial or fake. Or perhaps you feel your marriage relationship has too many substantial, even insurmountable, problems. Not so. Don’t ignore this easy but powerful opportunity to strengthen and improve your relationship because it seems too simple.

Remember the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1–14. He was angry because the prophet had told him to do something small and simple in order to cure his leprosy. His servants counseled him, “If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he said to thee, Wash, and be clean?” (verse 13). Naaman humbled himself and went and did according as directed, and he was made clean.

Elder L. Whitney Clayton of the Seventy shared this testimony about the power of small and simple acts of faith and obedience to bless our lives and help us with our daily concerns. His words are applicable, as well, to small and simple acts of caring in our marital relationship:

Those who are deliberate about doing the “small and simple things”—obeying in seemingly little ways—are blessed with faith and strength that go far beyond the actual acts of obedience themselves and, in fact, may seem totally unrelated to them. It may seem hard to draw a connection between the basic daily acts of obedience and solutions to the big, complicated problems we face. But they are related. In my experience, getting the little daily habits of faith right is the single best way to fortify ourselves against the troubles of life, whatever they may be. Small acts of faith, even when they seem insignificant or entirely disconnected from the specific problems that vex us, bless us in all we do.³⁷

We also testify to the truthfulness of this principle in marriage. Small and simple acts designed to increase positive sen-

timent in our relationship make small deposits into our emotional bank accounts. With those deposits we can, in time, create a massive positive balance large enough to offset even the most chronically difficult and painful marital dynamics (see the Richard Paul Evans story of saving his marriage in chapter 7).

Notice the Good Already Happening

Another way couples can increase positivity in their marital relationship is by simply noticing the positive efforts that are already present but are currently overlooked. Gottman and Silver reported that those in happy marriages noticed almost all of the positive things their partners did for them, while those in unhappy marriages failed to recognize 50 percent of their spouse's positive acts toward them.³⁸

Our earlier discussion on love language becomes salient here. Perhaps our spouse is reaching out positively, but due to differences in our love languages, we're not registering their efforts. Being mindful and aware will help us to give purposeful attention to

Reflections

My husband and I came from different backgrounds and have different personalities. I grew up in between small towns. If we "went to town," we needed to have a list; there was not much spontaneity. We were a very close family; we all worked together in our family business. Our religion was very important. I am conservative, like to plan, and err on the safe side of things. I also tend to worry and sometimes end up being pessimistic. My husband grew up in the city, making it easier to be more involved with his friends. He lived kind of rowdy during his teenage years and was very independent. Religion was definitely not at the forefront of his life during that time. He is very spontaneous, adventurous, and fun. Meshing the two of us together hasn't always been easy. We don't always see eye to eye. Parenting has been a challenge. I get frustrated when he cannot understand or agree with my perspective, but I try to remember that he would never do anything intentionally to upset me or to be hurtful. Also, we have learned that instead of leaving a confrontational situation, if we talk through our problems they can be solved. We have different backgrounds that bring us together and make us a more rounded couple—two lifetimes' worth of different knowledge into one unified companionship. I wouldn't want it any other way.

the behaviors and efforts they are making on behalf of our marital relationship.

Build or Enhance Friendship, Fondness, and Admiration

In addition to trying new things to build positive feelings as well as more consistently recognizing those positive things that are already present, couples can also build emotional intimacy by focusing on just being friends. It is not uncommon to find couples that love each other but don't necessarily *like* each other. This often occurs when couples have not continually fostered positive marital behaviors to build the type of intimacy that maintains friendship. Gottman and Silver advocate building friendship and affection.³⁹

In essence, after years of marriage, we can sometimes forget why we got together in the first place. We can ask ourselves these questions: When we were dating previous to our marriage, what kind of conversations did we have together? Have we had a conversation like that *lately*? In marriage, we may need to reacquaint ourselves with our spouse's current life goals, dreams, likes and dislikes, friends, and so on. Spend time getting to know each other again and reconnecting. Gottman and Silver explain: "This may all seem obvious to the point of being ridiculous. People who are happily married like each other. If they didn't they wouldn't be happily married. But fondness and admiration can be fragile unless you remain aware of how crucial they are to the friendship that is at the core of any good marriage."⁴⁰

Sometimes couples are completely different in preferences, styles, and interests. For these *opposites attract* couples, this concept of building and maintaining a friendship may be particularly important, since the differences that seemed exciting when dating can end up creating ongoing friction during marriage. If you and your spouse are one of these couples, you can ask yourself these questions: Even though you knew your spouse was a different *flavor*,



what drew you to marry them anyway? What excited you? How did you think the differences would benefit you?

Be Purposeful in Building Your Relationship

Again, we can build warm feelings for our spouse even when they may not currently be there. We must be intentional and act with deliberate purpose in order to build and create the type of intimacy we desire. If we go on autopilot and mindlessly float along without much effort to dedicate positive energy to improving our marital relationship, then we will never attain the wonderfully strengthening and fulfilling intimacy we desire from our marriage.

Reflections

In premarriage dating I would play and have fun on dates, but much of my life was not playing or having fun. It was mundane. I wanted to see how my prospective spouse behaved while in the midst of mundane tasks. It worked great. By the time my wife and I were married, we had spent hours upon hours in a study lab, had done many loads of laundry together, and may have even filed a tax return or two. We learned that we wanted to be together regardless of what we were doing and that each other's company made any situation more pleasant. After marriage, however, there are no extra points for mundane dates. It is good to know that we can spend time enhancing our relationship in the blandest of circumstances, but such situations are already abundant. Now it is time to go have some fun. This is the woman I am spending my life with! We have now done some of the most exciting things of our lives together and hope to do many more. Some of them have and will account for our most lavish expenditures. Dating plays a critical role in our relationship for the simple fact that with children at home it is a challenge to communicate in a way that is relationship enhancing. A date gives us the precious time we need to talk. A date is also ideal for escaping the mental context in which daily responsibilities become a distraction from reconnecting with each other.

We encourage specificity as we make commitments to more fully build positivity and friendship in our marital relationship. It is hard to achieve a vague goal. What does it mean to be “more loving” to each other? It is hard to do and it is even harder to know whether or not we are being successful. So we can make an *operational definition* (clear, concise, detailed definition) of our goal, if necessary.

For example, we may individually define “more loving” as “one time each day I will go out of my way to do something nice” or “I will text or call my spouse each day with a warm or supportive message” or “I will give my spouse a foot massage when they have had a long day.” We may also choose to define a couple's being “more loving” as “we will take time to talk with each other each night after the children have gone to bed” or “we will spend time cuddling on the couch while watching TV.” Operational definitions, such as these, make it much more likely that our newfound goal will be easier to accomplish successfully because we will better know what we are trying to do and what we will need to prioritize.

Continued Dating

Relative to building positive sentiment, we must not underestimate the power that dating will have in our marital relationship—it is critical to fostering intimacy. Dating can revitalize us when we are tired and feel disconnected or can keep us from becoming tired and disconnected in the first place. President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “Many couples permit their marriages to become stale and their love to grow cold like old bread or worn-out jokes or cold gravy.”⁴¹ He also taught that to prevent this “there must be continued courting and expressions of affection, kindness, and consideration to keep love alive and growing.”⁴²

When we take the time for dating, increasing positive sentiment becomes easy. A simple activity, such as going out to dinner or an event, provides opportunity for the husband to open the wife’s car door, for the wife to reach out and hold her husband’s hand during dinner, for each spouse to share thoughts and feelings and to focus our complete attention on no one but each other. A date says to our spouse, “I value our marriage enough to make it a priority.”

For those with small children this often takes extra planning and expense, such as the need to secure and pay for a babysitter. Sometimes, as it was for us

Reflections

In the last three years of my twenty-five-year marriage, I have finally allowed myself to not fret over spending the extra money for the occasional nice dinner date. It all came together at one of our favorite Mexican restaurants. Certainly, it takes less than sixty seconds in any grocery store to be forced to wince at the price of food, but we talked that night about the cost of a typical complete home-cooked meal. It was much higher than I had previously thought! Even though we don’t eat a lot of meat, we don’t eat just rice and beans at every meal either. After subtracting the normal cost of a meal at home from the prices on the menu in front of me, I determined the cost differential, and it was readily apparent that the true cost of the date was significantly less than I had conjured up in my mind. And once you add in the ideas that my wife is not slaving over the stove, that someone else is doing the dishes, and that we are able to be together without needy children for a few minutes, it all seems worth it.



during busy baby and toddler years, physically going out of the house for a date was difficult, so dates were held after the children had gone to bed: we talked with each other while sitting on the back deck, enjoying the view from our home. In dating, the point is to spend time to, in a more formal or personal setting, connect with each other and build positive sentiment. Debra was once taught, “The purpose of the task is to strengthen the relationship.” Thus, we advocate creating dating experiences that help us to make more emotionally intimate connections.

In order to accomplish the task of strengthening the marriage, we echo counsel Debra received from a professor during her undergraduate training: “On dates, do not talk about jobs, money, or kids. Dating is for talking about hopes, dreams, future

plans, and the like.” This counsel challenges us to extend ourselves in a way that can build emotional intimacy. It forces us to get outside of the day-to-day mindset of superficial communication and find meaningful, more lasting ways to connect. Popular social work researcher and TED talker Brené Brown has written, “Connection is the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment.”⁴³ This type of intimate and validating connection can be a challenge when we may be more accustomed to connecting around job stresses, bills, or the kids. We will need to be thoughtful and particular about our conversations.

DEBRA: Richard and I are not perfect at following this counsel, but when we go on dates, we do our best. We like to talk about Richard’s travel and work trips to new locations, my professional interests or activities that give me a much-needed break from full-time mommyming, and dreams of future travel, such as serving a mission together when the children are grown. We fantasize about life without toddlers and talk about the things we’ll do when we have more freedom. We reflect on how far we’ve come, such as how things have changed in our lives in the last year (or some other designated time frame). We marvel at what we’ve accomplished and offer compliments to each other for the hard work we have put in to building our marriage and family. We joke with each other that we need to slow down—but we never do. We discuss a gospel principle or something we learned from our daily scripture study. If we attend a cultural event or artistic performance, we discuss our time there, critique the event, or have a discussion of some topic sparked by the content of the activity.

Again, as we focus on connecting with our spouse in an intimate way that draws us together and makes them feel valued and validated, the possible date opportunities are endless. Our efforts to connect in this way will pay handsome dividends into our emotional bank account.

Creating Shared Meaning

Another principle in building greater intimacy is to create shared meaning in our marital relationship. Gottman and Silver explain, “Marriage isn’t just about raising kids, splitting chores, and making love. It can also have a spiritual dimension that has to do with creating an inner life together—a culture rich with symbols and rituals, and an appreciation for your roles and goals that link you, that lead you to understand what it means to be a part of the family you have become.”⁴⁴

We learn in Doctrine and Covenants section 25 about how husbands and wives can support and sustain each other in a shared meaningful pursuit. Joseph Smith and Emma Smith were unified in their dedication to the Lord and to their service in His church. The Lord indicated to Emma that her “calling shall be for a comfort unto [His] servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., thy husband, in his afflictions, with consoling words, in the spirit of meekness” (verse 5). What may be less commonly recognized in the section is that the Lord also tells Emma about Joseph’s role in supporting her: “And thou needest not fear, for thy husband shall support thee in the church” (verse 9). Joseph and Emma had found a common purpose and they worked together to support each other. What great power came from their relationship to the benefit of all mankind!

Joseph and Emma Smith were also joined together by great love. On several occasions Joseph wrote letters to Emma expressing his heartfelt feelings of affection and concern. It was recorded that a few days prior to her death, Emma told her nurse, Sister Elizabeth Revel, that Joseph had come to her in a vision and told her: “Emma, come with me, it is time for you to come with me.” As Emma passed from this life to the next on 30 April 1879, she called out, “Joseph! Joseph!” Thirty-five years after his martyrdom, it was believed that Joseph, her beloved husband, had come from the other side of the veil to escort her home to Father.⁴⁵

We, also, have found a great deal of shared meaning within our marriage relative to our activity in the Church. Activities such as reading to each other from the scriptures or the words of the modern prophets; having discussions about our callings, gospel doctrines, political and moral issues that are encroaching on the teachings of Christ; attending meetings together; and the like all help us feel close to each other.

Another shared purpose that has become quite meaningful, and even joyful, for us is sharing with others what we've learned about marriage through our gospel and professional training. When we first dated and married, we enjoyed having discussions laced with reference to social science principles, and we enjoyed that our professional areas were similar enough that we could talk intelligently with each other. Yet, beyond that, we never expected that there would be a time, not too long after marrying, when we would be marrying our professional interests as well.

We had a good marriage when we began formally writing about the topic of commitment in marriage from a three-fold perspective of sociology, psychology, and religion.⁴⁶ Yet, after spending several years writing, giving presentations together, and working on this book together, we realized a fundamental shift for the better had occurred in our relationship. We went from having a good marriage to having a great

Reflections

I introduced my husband to mountain biking when we were first dating, and it was something we could enjoy together. We now bike almost every week during the summer and fall months. We plan out our adventures and look forward to our ride every week. We both feel so grateful to be able to enjoy a sport we are passionate about together. We sometimes bike with a few of my husband's friends whose wives get impatient with them because of the time they take mountain biking. This causes stress in their relationships, and my husband and I feel fortunate that this is not an issue in our marriage. There is nothing we love more than to enjoy breathtaking scenery and feel the excitement and thrill of mountain biking with the person we love most. Biking has definitely brought us closer as a couple, and our children have enjoyed seeing us have a good time together. They feel secure knowing our relationship is strong, active, and healthy.

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marriage! Our work constantly reminds us of the things we are supposed to be doing to make our marriage flourish, and so we try to do them often.

RICHARD: *The work Debra and I do together creates a sense of shared meaning for us, in which we experience a great sense of joy and fulfillment. I wrote this to Debra in one of her Valentine's letters:*

The writing of our book together has been another highlight of our growth and trust in each other this year. Reading and editing each other's work has brought me closer to you. It has built trust because I have gotten to know your thoughts and beliefs in a way that perhaps I never would have otherwise. I love your testimony of and faithfulness in marriage and the gospel and in every principle we have written about. It brings me a lot of satisfaction to see you light up when you get an idea that you want to write about and then see you go grab your computer and start your fingers buzzing.

Gottman and Silver state, and from our own experience we agree, that “the more shared meaning you can find, the deeper, richer, and more rewarding your relationship will be.”⁴⁷

Creating shared meaning in our marital relationships does not mean that we must always find connection through activities or pursuits which we both *already* enjoy. We have the power to create a new common bond. As a couple seeking to build an eternal-quality marriage, we can share the things we love with our spouse, and they can choose to learn about them, participate with us in doing them, and even learn to love and feel passionate for the things we love. This will often take an active effort on our part, and even if we don't learn to love our spouse's interests, just participating with them can make a positive difference in the building of intimacy. Elder Henry B. Eyring shared this amusing story about his parents' efforts to connect with each other: “My father and my mother were very different from each other. My mother was a singer and an artist. My father loved chemistry. Once at a symphony concert, my mother was surprised when my father stood up and began to leave before the applause began. My mother asked him where he was going. His response was, in all innocence: ‘Well, it's over, isn't it?’ Only the gentle influence

of the Holy Ghost got him there with her in the first place and brought him back to concerts time and time again.”⁴⁸

We need to take time to share ourselves with our spouse. We can teach them about our interests, explain why they are exciting to us, and give them experience with our interests so they can more fully understand the role they play in our life (and the role they might play in their life). Ideally, our spouse will grow to be excited about our interests too and want to participate with us. But, if not, through this knowledge they can at least support us in an effort to build and strengthen our relationship rather than feel resentment or jealousy when we spend our own time engaged in that activity.

RICHARD: *I enjoy watching BYU football and the Utah Jazz playoffs on TV. That’s about the extent of my TV time. Debra grew up playing soccer, but she never found any interest in watching sports. In our first few years of marriage, I noticed that Debra felt jealous of the time I spent watching football or basketball and felt judgmental that I was just wasting time. I felt that my sports watching was reasonable, but it was hard because I wasn’t getting much support from Debra.*

At one point, Debra realized she spent her own downtime on her own interests, yet I never complained. So she decided to be supportive and even, to my surprise, went a step further and took the approach: “If I can’t beat him, join him.” She intentionally began to show some interest when I was watching a game by stopping in front of the television for a few minutes and asking questions about what was happening, including questions about the rules or a player. Eventually, she began to sit down and watch larger portions of the games and actually began to feel her own interest in what was happening, particularly in the basketball games as she got to know some of the players. Although she’s never come to appreciate the football games for herself, she found that she enjoys basketball and was disappointed when the Utah Jazz traded some of her favorite players.

Now, when I want to watch a game on television, I don’t feel nervous about Debra feeling jealous of my time, but instead I feel she genuinely wants me to be able to relax and have some entertainment after working so hard for the family throughout the week. Because of that support, I feel much closer to her and have

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in turn wanted to more fully support her and go out of my way to learn more about her own interests.

As a final note, as we seek to build shared meaning within the marital relationship, it does not necessarily mean we must *do something* together. Building shared meaning may relate more to having a common vision, which then leads to supporting our spouse in their general life pursuits. If we support our spouse in their jobs, education, and callings because we are on board with their goals and efforts, they will be happier and more successful and our marital relationship will be strengthened, as their gratitude for our support will infuse positivity in the relationship. Elder Carlos Godoy, speaking in general conference in his native language of Portuguese, shared an experience he had with his wife in seeking additional educational opportunities: “I undoubtedly needed the support of my wife. . . . [Her] support was essential. I remember that, at first, Mônica and I needed to carefully discuss the change in plans until she felt comfortable and also became committed. This shared vision caused her not only to support the change but also to become an essential part in its success.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

Emotional intimacy is an essential building block of successful marriages. An overall tone of mutual interdependence within the relationship creates bonds that strengthen and support each other individually, and creates a thriving and loving relationship. Openly and constructively communicating, becoming proficient at speaking each other’s love languages, creating higher ratios of positive sentiment, continued dating, and creating a sense of shared meaning are all necessary to create connection points and improve bonds of affection and trust. As we pursue these qualities in our relationship, we will be able to create and maintain marital friendship so we can say that we not only love our spouse

but like them as well. This creates a vital sense of unity and intimacy which greatly contributes to our ability to find happiness and joy.

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