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Healing the *Time-Starved Marriage*

Time flies on wings of lightning;
We cannot call it back.
It comes, then passes forward
Along its onward track.
And if we are not mindful,
The chance will fade away,
For life is quick in passing.
'Tis as a single day.
(*Hymns*, no. 226)

No matter how wealthy we are or how poor, no matter how intelligent we are or how ignorant, no matter whom we are related to or how attractive we are, each one of us has the same amount of time allotted to us each day. We cannot purchase extra minutes, create extra hours, or trade rainy days for sunny ones. One of the greatest challenges and opportunities of this life is to learn to manage the twenty-four hours a day that each one of us has been given. How we allocate our time is driven by what we value

the most, who we love the most, and duties and responsibilities that demand our attention. President Brigham Young taught that we should be “indebted to God for the ability to use time to advantage, and he will require of us a strict account of [its] disposition” (*Teachings*, 1997, p. 286).

One of the most significant challenges in modern marriage is balancing the demands and pressures that are placed upon husbands and wives. Family expert Judith Wallerstein explained:

In today’s marriages, in which people work long hours, travel extensively, and juggle careers with family, more forces tug at the relationship than ever before. Modern marriages are battered by the demands of her workplace as well as his, by changing community values, by anxiety about making ends meet each month, by geographical moves, by unemployment and recession, by the vicissitudes of child care, and a host of other issues. (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 7)

Latter-day Saints are not immune from these time-related challenges. Indeed, perhaps one of the most significant trials in the lives of contemporary Latter-day Saint couples is the apportionment of time. With so much to do, how can husbands and wives find time for each other? Careers, church responsibilities, children’s activities, household duties, and community involvement often interfere with maintaining a close connection with one’s spouse. Many contemporary couples seem to spend the bulk of their time in other pursuits, neglecting what should be their highest priority—their sacred, covenantal marriage. It seems that the longer people are married, the less time they spend together (Kingston & Nock, 1987). Yet the amount of time couples spend together in face-to-face interaction is critically important to marital happiness and satisfaction (Glorieux, Minnen, & Tienoven, 2010).

Unfortunately, too many ancillary activities can keep couples distracted from each other. Today, being hyperbusy is the new status symbol; the social

prizes no longer go to the wealthiest, but the busiest. As contemporary couples attempt to “keep all the balls in the air,” marital connection and intimacy are often placed on the sacrificial altar. Marriage expert Michele Weiner-Davis (1992) argues that the most significant contributor to the breakdown in marriages today is the lack of time together.

Since husbands and wives are often pulled in different directions, the strength of their relationship and marital satisfaction often suffers. In fact, research confirms that couples who experience a lack of time together report lower marital satisfaction (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2005). In the National Survey of Marital Strengths, spending time together was identified as one of the top ten strengths for happily married couples; 71% of happy couples agreed with the statement, “We have a good balance of leisure time spent together and separately” (Olson, 1980, p. 3). Conversely, only 17% of unhappy couples felt that they spent a healthy dose of leisure time together (p. 3). In the same study, researchers identified the lack of time together as one of the top ten stumbling blocks for married couples. Over 80% of husbands and wives who were having struggles in their marriage identified insufficient couple time as a significant problem (p. 5). Finally, in measuring couple connection and closeness, 97% of happy couples reported that they enjoy spending free time together (p. 17). For couples who reported they were unhappy in their marriage, only 43% reported that they enjoyed spending time together (p. 17). If couples want to strengthen their marital bonds, spending time together is not optional! President Dieter F. Uchtdorf (2010) recently reminded us that when it comes to family relationships, “love is really spelled t-i-m-e” (p. 22).

Most couples are not likely to admit that their marriage relationship ranks at the bottom of their priority list. If they were asked, most adults would contend that their marriages and families are the most important priorities in their lives (Stinnett, 1985). However, how much time couples actually spend with each other and their families may indicate how they feel about their true priorities. Our priorities are driven by (a) what is scheduled

and (b) whom we are accountable to; hence, what screams the loudest is going to receive the most attention. Doctors Les and Leslie Parrott (2006) have stated, “Time is made whenever we decide what matters most. A top priority gets more time. If you decide that collecting stamps is the most important thing in your life, you will begin to schedule your day around it, you will spend your money on it, and you will talk about it. Because you prioritize it, you’ll make decisions that create more time for it” (p. 65).

What can be said, then, of Latter-day Saint couples who seem to have little time for their marriage relationships? What if they have strong desires to spend time together, but logistically it is practically impossible? For example, LDS husbands and wives may feel committed and responsible to their daughter’s traveling soccer team, their son’s elite baseball team, the Parent Teacher Association, their professional work schedules, and, of course, their church callings, long before their marriage or family responsibilities demand their time. After all, what would happen if a father didn’t take his son to the final game of a seven-game championship series? Or what if a mother, who also happened to be the stake young women’s camp director, simply refused to plan young women’s camp? On the other hand, what would happen if a husband failed to take his wife out to dinner on a Friday evening? The consequences could be quite different. Unfortunately, marriages often get whatever is left over after everything else has been said, done, and accounted for, which often isn’t much (Doherty, 2003). When couples fail to put their marriages first, they risk the possibility of having significant marriage complications down the road.

Meanwhile, couples who engage in meaningful activities and validate each other in the marriage are most often happy people (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Nevertheless, even though most couples understand the value of time together, they have a difficult time managing their priorities. Most active Latter-day Saint husbands and wives are busy people. Aside from the regular duties that most couples are responsible for, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have the extra weight of Church assignments and callings, often more children than non-Latter-day Saint parents, and



The happiest marriages are those where the couples engage in meaningful activities and validate each other. By putting the welfare of our spouse as one of our highest priorities, we can create a celestial marriage. Welden Andersen, © 2006 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

additional financial obligations that having children entails (food, lessons, missions, college, and weddings). With increasing responsibilities and pressures, Latter-day Saint couples risk facing the consequences sure to follow when their most sacred duties and covenants are neglected. On the other hand, when we esteem the welfare of our spouses among our highest priorities, a celestial marriage can be created—celestial in this life and in the life to come (Nelson, 2008)!

This chapter will explore the time famine that many Latter-day Saint couples struggle with, common distractors that pull husbands and wives away from each other, and the rituals that can help couples reconnect and build a strong marriage.

The Time Famine

Elder Russell M. Nelson (2006) taught: “Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship. Yet some married couples fall short of their full potential. They let their romance become rusty, they take each other for granted, allow other interests or clouds of neglect to obscure the vision of what their marriage really could be. Marriages would be happier if nurtured more carefully” (p. 36). Couples who allow their “romance [to] become rusty” or “allow other interests or clouds of neglect” to interfere with their marriages have misplaced their priorities and have limited the amount of time they spend together. Marriage is difficult enough—even without such sins of omission.

Happy and successful marriages are not easily created—they take time and effort. Elder Dean L. Larsen (1985) once explained: “I repeatedly encounter the illusion today, especially among younger people, that perfect marriages happen simply if the right two people come together. This is untrue. Marriages don’t succeed automatically. Those who build happy, secure, successful marriages pay the price to do so. They work at it constantly” (p. 20).

If successful marriages take work, time, and effort, what can be said of marriages where couples have little time to devote to nurturing the marriage? Such marriages will struggle to thrive in our current time-starved environment. Contemporary marriage and family therapists often hear treatment-seeking couples make the following statements:

- “This relationship isn’t working for me anymore.”
- “Our needs are just so different.”
- “We just grew apart.”
- “Everyone else’s marriage is so much better than ours.”
- “He’s not the same person I married.”

- “After the children left home, I realized I had nothing in common with her—we had nothing.”
- “Our relationship has gone stale. There is nothing exciting about being married anymore.”

Although there are many potential reasons for such marriage problems, a common denominator points to a “time-starved” marriage. When couples fall in love, they spend substantial amounts of time together, supply each other with healthy doses of compliments and praise, and shower each other with physical affection. Ironically, time-starved couples cease doing the very things that propelled them towards marital bliss. Once couples decrease the amount of time they spend together, they become disconnected physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Connection in marriage reenergizes the relationship; likewise, disconnection kills it off. Over time, nurturing is replaced with nagging, and praise is supplanted with pessimism. Simply put, no marriage will survive without nurturing. Without proper nourishment, the marriage will ultimately wither—just as a lawn will without sunlight, water, or fertilizer. President Spencer W. Kimball (1976) explained further:

Love is like a flower, and, like the body, it needs constant feeding. The mortal body would soon be emaciated and die if there were not frequent feedings. The tender flower would wither and die without food and water. And so love, also, cannot be expected to last forever unless it is continually fed with portions of love, the manifestations of esteem and admiration, the expressions of gratitude, and the consideration of unselfishness. (p. 6)

Some faithful marriage partners have time for each other only at the end of the day—when both are completely worn out and exhausted. It is difficult to build a marriage when both husband and wife are running on vapor; nevertheless, most couples continue to buy into the notion that next week will be much better. They tell themselves, “If we can just get through

this week, then things will slow down,” only to discover that things never change unless they put some kind of intervention in place.

About ten years ago, I interviewed over twenty middle-aged Latter-day Saint women, (interview notes in possession of the author) asking them about their most significant family challenge. These women were active, temple-attending, covenant-keeping Saints. However, they were honest enough to admit that they still had marital challenges to deal with. One woman said:

After 46 years of marriage and raising six children, I think hyper-busyness robs LDS couples of time together. You become like preschoolers who engage in parallel play. . . . Just going on your personal treadmills, thinking you are doing the Lord’s work, but much too busy to do the most effective work—which is relationships, talking, listening, pondering, and loving. Now, I see the same busy patterns in my own married children’s lives. We are running too fast for our own good.

Another woman responded:

My husband thinks that one of the greatest challenges for active Latter-day Saint couples is to learn to grow together, and not separately. When you and your husband are involved in children, church responsibilities, and work, it seems that you are constantly going in different directions. How do you find the time to grow together? How do you make it so that when the children leave home, you and your spouse are not complete strangers? I know several couples who were not able to work through these challenges. Now, as older couples, their marriages are hollow and unfulfilling. They spent the majority of their time on everything else except their marriages.

These women are not alone in their reflections. Many happily married Latter-day Saint couples have the desire to spend more time together—they

simply do not know how to do it. They ask, “Where will the extra time come from?” In my counseling practice, I once met with a couple who were having challenges spending time together. As the wife complained to me that her husband was rarely home, and when he was home, he was exhausted. The husband responded, “What would you like me to do, quit my job so we can have more time together?” The frustrated husband then explained to his wife that he *could* quit his job, but that they would be living under a bridge instead of in a nice home. His wife rolled her eyes, feeling completely exasperated. Answers to these issues do not come easily.

Lost Priorities

Marriage requires much more than half-hearted compliance. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2000) taught that couples “cannot succeed in love if you keep one foot out on the bank for safety’s sake. The very nature of the endeavor requires that you hold on to each other as tightly as you can and jump in the pool together.” A healthy marriage requires whole-souled devotion, dedication, and commitment—and that is exactly the problem. It seems that many couples today either don’t have the time, or are not able to invest the time to give such commitment to their marriages. Marriage expert Michele Weiner-Davis (2009) explained:

I’m convinced that the single biggest contributor to the breakdown of relationships today is the fact that couples aren’t spending enough time together. They aren’t making their relationships a number one priority. The relationship gets put on the backburner. Everything else seems more important—careers, children, hobbies, community involvement, and personal pursuits. And when relationships aren’t attended to as they should be, trouble sets in.

People who don’t prioritize their relationships tell me that they often end up fighting during the little time they do have together. They argue about day to day issues; unpaid bills, uncleaned



If your marriage is a priority, you make time for each other. You can find ways to spend time with each other amidst the day-to-day grind. Craig W. Dimond, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

houses, unruly children. And it's no wonder. It's difficult to do what needs to be done to keep life moving in a productive direction, let alone try to coordinate your efforts with your partners when you're under a time crunch. But the truth is, arguing about "who's doing what around the house," is really just a symptom of deeper problems—isolation, loneliness and resentment. You argue about the mundane issues when your emotional needs aren't being met. The [soda] can left in the living room becomes a symbol of a lack of caring for you. (para. 2–3)

Contention increases when marital needs are not met, and thus the downward spiral begins. The lack of time and nurturing erodes positive communication, bonding time, intimacy, conflict resolution, and meeting each other's marital needs. A marriage that lacks nurturing and time together will ultimately be suffocated by the demands of work, family, community, and even church. And when the marriage suffers, the entire family will be negatively impacted. Molehills can be made into mountains as each member of the family feels emotionally cheated. In a short period of time, parents and children in time-starved relationships never get their emotional cups filled. Ultimately, happiness, family satisfaction, and nurturing become nonexistent.

Origins of the Time Famine for LDS Couples

There are many distractors that can pull Latter-day Saint couples apart. Do you find, as a couple, that you have very little time for each other? When was the last time that you did something fun together as a couple? Do you remember your last date with each other? Can you remember the last time you did something spontaneous together? When was the last time you sent a love note to your spouse, or did something special for him or her? Do you feel that your children's schedules dominate your life? Do you have something going every night of the week, and even on weekends? Does your family ever have time to relax or talk, or simply "chillout"? Although there

are many distractions that can drive a wedge between LDS couples, three significant distractors will be addressed.

Work Time

The demands at the office are colliding with marriage and family responsibilities “and placing a tremendous time squeeze on many Americans” (Gerson & Jacobs, 2004, p. 29). Working men and women spend 14 more hours per week at work than their cohorts did 30 years ago (Sayer, 2005). Today’s working American man averages 49.4 hours of work per week while today’s working woman averages 42.4 hours of work per week (Brandt, 2003). In fact, more than one-third of male managers and professionals work more than 50 hours per week (Gerson & Jacobs, 2004, p. 31).

Moreover, there are currently more women in the labor force than at any other time in our nation’s history. In 1970, only 43% of women were employed. However, in 2008, that number increased to 77% of mothers with older children, and 63% of women with younger children (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, for the first time in the history of the United States, women now hold the majority of the nation’s jobs. And, of the 15 job categories projected to grow in the next decade, all but two will be primarily occupied by women (Rosin, 2010).

According to a religiosity and life satisfaction study, 56% of Latter-day Saint women between the ages of 24 and 44 are working. However, of married Latter-day Saint women with children at home, only 23% work full-time. Another 22% work in part-time jobs (Johnson, 2005, p. 205). It appears that not as many Latter-day Saint women are in the workforce when compared to the national average. However, these statistics point to almost half of all LDS women working, which is a huge disrupter for marriage and family life.

Meanwhile, men are working longer hours, traveling more with their jobs, and spending much more time at the office than they initially signed up for. Today, 65% of all fathers work more than 40 hours a week, compared to 36% of working mothers. Furthermore, 25% of working fathers

work more than 50 hours per week (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007, p. 121). Of course, more time at work translates into less time as a couple, and of course, less time as a family.

If couples want to experience happiness and satisfaction in their relationships, they will need to make their marriages a top priority. President Ezra Taft Benson (1987) taught the brethren of the priesthood, “Nothing except God himself takes priority over your wife in your life—not work, not recreation, not hobbies. . . . What does it mean to ‘cleave unto her’? It means to stay close to her, be loyal and faithful to her, to communicate with her, and to express your love for her” (p. 50).

Media

Perhaps the most significant distraction in marriages today is time spent with media. Approximately 2.5 billion (not million) people view television programs daily. In the average American home, the television set is on approximately seven hours per day (Ballard, 1989). According to researchers Robinson and Godbey (2000), television viewing now occupies 40% of the free time of the average American adult (p. xv). One study documented that American men spend 15 hours per week watching television, while women spend almost 17 hours per week in front of the tube (Fisher & Robinson, 2009, pp. 2–3).

It wasn’t too long ago that solely television or videos could rob a couple of precious time. However, in today’s world, there are enough media options to distract us for a lifetime. Of course, there still are interruptions of time caused by television and movies. But on top of that, there are distractions such as smartphones, Internet surfing, gaming, e-mail, and social networking. Who would have thought that with all the technology designed to give us more time that we would be cramming all those “extra moments” we’ve saved with even more time-consuming wizardry? The problem is that, with all the gizmos and gadgets, we feel more frenzied, more harried, and more out of breath than ever before. It seems ironic, but the very things we think are going to save us time often end up stealing it (Parrott, 2006, p. 85).

According to the US Census Bureau (2011), over 75% of American homes had a computer, and almost 72% had Internet access. The percentages of home computer use increases with education, income, and employment. Furthermore, 90% of people with college degrees had a computer at home, and almost 87% of them had Internet access. Today, almost 50% of the colleges educated have smartphones, allowing them to access the internet almost anywhere. With such easy accessibility, more and more men and women spend a large quantity of their discretionary time on the computer. Brad Stone (2005) of *Newsweek* reported that 75% of Americans spend an average of three hours a day online.

According to a recent Nielsen survey, men between the ages of 18 and 34 are now the most prevalent users of video games, with 48.2% of all American men using a video console each day, averaging over 2.5 hours daily (Bennett, 2011, p. xxii). The average age of a gamer is now 32 years old (Online Education). A recent study conducted by researchers at Brigham Young University reported that 75% of gamers' spouses wish their spouse would put more time and effort into the marriage (Sifferlin, 2012). Moreover, 82% of gaming occurs between 6:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Of those who play online role-playing games, 36% are married, and 22% have children (Jabr, 2012). Many wives and children are being ignored during prime family time. The use of media during prime family time is a marriage killer.

In a recent interview (interview notes in author's possession), a middle-aged mother from Idaho stated:

I hate electronic media, all of it. I feel that so much time is wasted on unimportant facts and information. I will admit that when my husband gets a new computer, iPad, iPhone, or other gadget, I get jealous. I want his time and attention. The truth is that our family only has a few short hours a day together. So, when my husband comes home, I do not like competing with media devices for his time. I want us focusing together on our family; cooking dinner, eating dinner, doing homework, and cleaning up together—with both parents engaged.



Many family members feel ignored due to a family member's choice to play video or computer games or use other media during prime family time. Jonathan Hardy, © 2012 BYU Photo.

Men are not the only media junkies in marital relationships. Contemporary women can spend inordinate amounts of time in media usage. Several years ago in my counseling practice, I saw a distressed husband who didn't know what to do about his wife. She was involved in online gaming and social networking half of the day—and most of each night. Because of her media addiction, she could not change her behavior—nor did she desire to. Their marriage ultimately ended in divorce.

Elder Ian S. Ardern (2011) recently spoke pointedly about the dangers that are sure to accompany those who spend too much time in media-related activities. He declared, “I know our greatest happiness comes as we tune into the Lord (Alma 37:37) and to those things which bring a lasting reward, rather than mindlessly tuning in to countless hours of status updates, Internet farming, and catapulting angry birds at concrete walls. I urge each of us to take those things which rob us of precious time



Couples who never spend time together because they are constantly tending to the needs of their children will also be discouraged in the marriage. © Cathy Yeulet.

and determine to be their master, rather than allowing them through their addictive nature to be the master of us” (p. 32).

Do you spend time watching television when your spouse is home with you? Do you watch television together as a family or couple activity, or is it a separate activity? How many hours per day do you spend on your home computer? Do you find yourself engaged in social networking and other media activities on your phone or computer that takes you away from your spouse? Elder Russell M. Nelson (1991) has taught, “If marriage is a prime relationship in life, it deserves prime time” (p. 23).

Children’s Schedules

Marriage, children, and family relationships lie at the core of the plan of salvation. A happy marriage and family life brings joy and fulfillment into the hearts and homes of faithful Latter-day Saints. However, sometimes husbands and wives can become unbalanced in the time they devote to their children in proportion to the time they spend with each other.

Marriage expert Dr. John M. Gottman explained that in child-centered marriages, “couples often use their parenting obligations as an excuse for neglecting their relationship with each other. . . . The sad irony is that in striving to create the perfect life for their children, these parents fail to provide what kids need most—a happy home” (Gottman, Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006, pp. 232–233).

Parenthood can be stressful, and children can become one of the largest drains on their parents’ time. The presence of children in the home increases the time demands for housework more than any other factor. In fact, the more children that are in the home and the younger the children are, the less time couples will have together (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003, p. 1003). In a recent study, “spouses with children at home reported spending nearly two hours less per day together than did those without children at home” (Wilcox & Dew, 2012, p. 9). Compared to their predecessors, both mothers

and fathers are expected to spend more time with their children in nurturing roles (Stearns, 2003).

Latter-day Saint families are often larger than other families; thus LDS parents generally have more people and activities to manage. Often, fathers and mothers divide the family several nights a week, load the children into different cars, and attempt to cover all the stops: soccer practice, a piano recital, and a baseball tournament—all at the same time. Sometimes, in order to cover all of the activities, parents are left to divide and conquer. William J. Doherty (2003) has explained:

The biggest threat to good marriages is everyday living. That may sound strange to you. What I mean is getting lost in the logistics of everyday life. We spend most of our time at home managing a household, taking care of children, and pursuing solitary activities like watching television or working. The coming of children especially seems to doom personal time for conversation between spouses, and even the time we do have is dominated by logistical talk about schedules and household tasks. At best, we feel like effective co-managers of a family business. At worst, we feel like ships passing in the night. By the time the kids leave home, we may not remember how to be different with each other. (p. 125)

Obviously, it's not 1960 anymore, when the family can gather around the fireplace every evening and sing songs while drinking Tang. The world has changed dramatically since those days. For Latter-day Saints with multiple children, to get a free night at home with nothing on the schedule calls for a celebration! Often, when parents are not driving their children to and from activities, children still “need” their parents. Studies confirm that children have first claim on their parents’ non-working time, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. However, when husbands and wives neglect each other in the name of “the children,” they may become frustrated with each other. Moreover, couples who never spend time together because they are

constantly tending to the needs of their children will also be discouraged in the marriage. Couples who spend significant and meaningful time together will have their emotional cups filled and consequently will be able to give their children much more—not less.

Moreover, couples who work with their children as a team will be much happier in their marriage relationships. Nevertheless, too many contemporary parents spend much of their parenting time shuttling their children to fun activities, parties, and to friends' houses. Once again, free time isn't directed towards the marriage, but towards the children.

A Latter-day Saint bishop (interview notes in author's possession) recently shared the following:

Our children's time demands and commitments is the single reason we don't spend enough time together as a couple. This causes trouble in our marriage because when we don't spend adequate time together, our marriage slips. We probably tend to let our children be too involved. We've talked about limiting their activities, but we always come back to the fact that we want them to develop their talents and do things they want to do. Because of my work and church schedule, and our children's activities, there is never time for myself or my spouse. We both face the same challenges so finding time for each other is difficult. Even if we wanted to have a special night every week for a date, it is almost impossible because our children will have a game or activity.

This busy bishop isn't much different from most Latter-day Saint parents. There is a constant desire to spend more time together as a couple, but how? What would need to be sacrificed? What would need to be changed in the family structure? Sometimes adults and children are simply too busy, and some things need to be dropped from the schedule. At other times, couples must choose to forge ahead until the season is over. Nevertheless, couples will need to seek the Lord's direction for viable solutions.

I recommend that married couples keep the “big picture” in mind as they raise their children. The “big picture” is the perspective that, ultimately, their children will grow up and have families of their own. As children begin to leave the nest, husbands and wives will have more time for each other. If they haven’t discovered ways to enrich their marriage along the way, what kind of relationship will they have when they are empty nesters (Stahmann, 2007)? Too many older couples look at each other after the children are gone and realize that they no longer have much of a marriage relationship. Do not let this happen to you!

While your children are still in the home, learn to serve each other, share with one another, sacrifice for each other, and love each other. If you do so, you will experience a high degree of happiness and marital satisfaction. However, no one can have a happy marriage without the investment of time.

The Role of Rituals in Strengthening Marriage

Elder F. Burton Howard (2003) stated:

If you want something to last forever, you treat it differently. You shield it and protect it. You never abuse it. You don’t expose it to the elements. You don’t make it common or ordinary. If it ever becomes tarnished, you lovingly polish it until it gleams like new. It becomes special because you have made it so, and it grows more beautiful and precious as time goes by. Eternal marriage is just like that. We need to treat it that way. (p. 94)

If couples want their marriages to last, they must demonstrate that they value their spouses; they must view their marriages as sacred and place them as one of their highest priorities. Therefore, couples who value their marriages will find ways to make time for each other. In the Survey of Marital Generosity, researchers reported that spouses who experience high levels of couple time were significantly less likely to report that they are prone

to divorce. In fact, wives who reported having couple time less than once a week were 4 times more likely to report above-average levels of divorce proneness when compared to wives who enjoyed couple time at least once a week with their husbands. Meanwhile, husbands who reported spending less than once per week in couple time with their wives were 2.5 times more likely to be divorce prone when compared to husbands who had couple time with their wife at least once a week (Wilcox & Dew, 2012, p. 6)

The bottom line is that the more time husbands and wives spend together, the less likely they will be unsatisfied in the marriage or file for divorce. Researchers Wilcox and Dew (2012) have concluded that couple time leads to higher quality marital relationships because communication is strengthened, sexual satisfaction increases, and commitment is fortified.

One way to ensure couple time together is to employ rituals in the marriage. Rituals are social interactions that are repeated, coordinated, and significant to both parties in the relationship. It does not matter how often rituals are repeated—it could be nightly, weekly, monthly, or annually. But they are repeated. Rituals also must be coordinated. There must be a time and place for the ritual to occur, and, of course, both parties must know when to engage in the ritual. Importantly, rituals must also be significant to both husband and wife (Doherty, 2003). For example, a husband could tell a friend, “My wife and I have a great ritual. Every Monday evening after we put the children in bed, we watch Monday night football together.” However, if that event is not emotionally significant to the wife, then watching football together isn’t a ritual. Instead, it’s probably a marriage problem.

Other couples may believe that they have rituals in their relationship, but oftentimes these rituals are actually routines. Like rituals, routines are repeated and coordinated. However, routines lack emotional significance. Therefore, if a couple eats dinner each night in front of the television—while the wife views the program and the husband reads the newspaper—this couple has established merely a routine that does very little to strengthen the marriage. However, another couple may watch the exact same television program each week—together. As they view the program, they may scratch

each other's back, hold hands, and discuss the program in detail. Since this activity is repeated, coordinated, and significant to both parties, it is a ritual.

The purpose of marriage rituals is to help couples strengthen emotional bonds. Individuals fall in love with each other through rituals of intimacy and connection. When most couples commenced dating each other seriously, their time together most likely consisted of romantic dinners, long talks, bike rides, skiing, dancing, going for walks, exchanging gifts, and talking on the phone for hours (Doherty, 2000, para. 2). Most often, the very rituals that bring couples together are discontinued shortly after the marriage. Since a large proportion of Latter-day Saint couples marry while they are still in college, or even while working full-time, it doesn't take long for school and work to invade their couple time and negate their romantic rituals. Before long, babies come, along with work and church demands. Within a few short years, some good, otherwise emotionally healthy Latter-day Saint couples begin to feel that their marriage quality has fallen far below their expectations. Many husbands and wives feel that their marital needs are not being met and that marriage is less fulfilling than they had expected.

Some couples become overwhelmed with time demands, responsibilities, and perhaps even guilt. Soon, their marriages become stale and stagnant. If busy Latter-day Saint couples desire to spend more time together as husbands and wives, they must "ritualize" their time together. Happy marriages are not created by accident, and couples who spend time together must carve their time out from other worthwhile activities. Rituals can restore meaning to marriages; in fact, rituals help couples to connect and stay connected.

Connection rituals in marriage create opportunities for couples to share time and attention together. Examples of connection rituals in marriage include good-byes in the morning, greetings in the evening, phone conversations during the day, texting each other, eating together, verbal expressions of love and affection, working in the yard together, doing home improvements together, or eating at a favorite restaurant. William J. Doherty (2003) argued that "connection rituals are at the base of the pyramid of marriage, right above commitment" (p. 126). For marriages to thrive, connection

rituals must be employed. The most significant connection rituals to heal and strengthen a marriage include greeting rituals, talk rituals, and dating rituals.

Greeting and Good-bye Rituals

Healthy greeting rituals occur in a marriage when the couple meets for the first time in the morning, when one spouse has been away on a trip, or when a spouse walks through the front door after a long day at work. Believe it or not, many spouses can walk through the front door of their homes without anyone in their family noticing. One husband reported that he would walk into his home each evening and no one acknowledging his presence. He would then go into his bedroom, change his clothes, and then read the newspaper before his wife even realized he was home.

Some couples get into bad habits of coordinating when they see each other for the first time. A wife may say to her husband who has just walked into the house, “Hurry and change clothes so we can get to the choir recital,” or a husband could say to a wife after a long day, “Your pizza is in the fridge. Eat it quick so we can get to the game.” One man reported that once when he walked into his home at the end of the long day, his wife said, “Did you close the garage door?” (Doherty, 2000, “Examples of Marriage Rituals,” para. 1). Another man explained that when he entered his home, his wife would often say, “What’s that smell?” Wow, isn’t it great to be home? Instead of these poor greeting responses, couples should discuss the way that they greet each other after a long day apart. Examples would include a hug, a kiss, or a verbal expression. I know one couple who, when the husband would walk in the front door, they would walk, hand in hand, to an isolated room in the house where they would sit and talk to each other for ten or fifteen minutes just to catch up on the day.

Your children should have no doubt that you and your spouse are happily married—don’t hide your marital happiness under a bushel! If you and your spouse do not have a strong, noticeable greeting ritual, you need to create one. Establish a ritual that will mark the moment and remind



Establish a ritual that will mark the moment and remind everyone how much you love each other—including yourselves! And don't worry if your children catch you in the act. Every child needs to see his or her parents display some public affection, even if it grosses the child out to some degree. Let there be no question in the lives of Latter-day Saint children that their parents are madly in love. © Hongqi Zhang.

everyone how much you love each other—including yourselves! And don't worry if your children catch you in the act. Every child needs to see his or her parents display some public affection, even if it grosses the child out to some degree. Let there be no question in the lives of Latter-day Saint children that their parents are madly in love. Greeting rituals could include a hug, a kiss, or a verbal expression of love, a family phrase, or anything else that is significant to both spouses.

One couple confessed that their greeting rituals were pathetic. It was typical for Jennifer or Ron (names have been changed) to walk into their home and not even notice each other for the first half hour. What they did notice, however, was that their golden retriever, "Rex," had more passion for greeting family members than they did. For example, when Ron walked into his home after a long day, "Rex" would bark in happiness for several minutes and run circles around him. It was obvious that at least "Rex" was happy that Ron was home. Therefore, Jennifer and Ron decided that they would create a greeting ritual that could top the dog. Today, when Ron walks into their home after a long day, Jennifer goes berserk, and Ron loves it! Both husband and wife benefit from this ritual.

Indeed, husbands and wives need to be more excited than the family dog when a spouse walks into the home after a long day away. I would recommend that you choose a greeting ritual that you can both get excited about. Practice the ritual until it becomes a habit. Don't be afraid to ask your children if they know what your greeting ritual is.

Good-bye rituals are just as important as greeting rituals. A ritual that marks the parting moment for a couple demonstrates that you will miss each other and look forward to being together again. I remember as a young boy, observing a couple at the end of our street. Every morning as I walked down the street to school, this middle-aged husband and wife would be in their driveway, hugging and kissing as if he was going off to war for several years. Of course, he was just heading off to his sales job and would return home before dinner. As a young boy, there was no doubt in my mind that this couple really loved each other. Every couple needs to establish a ritual

when you are leaving each other. Find a way to tell each other good-bye that is unique, that demonstrates you will miss each other, and that validates your love for each other.

And while you are at it, find a way to improve your “good-night” ritual as well! Too many couples doze off to sleep with the television blaring, while reading a book, or as they listen to the “enchanted sounds of the forest” from a CD they purchased at a drug store. Lying next to each other at the end of a long day, touching each other, and expressing love and appreciation is a perfect opportunity for prime-time connection.

Talk Rituals

Many Latter-day Saint couples understand the importance of communication; after all, that is most likely how they fell in love in the first place. Several years ago, I interviewed fifteen newly married couples on the campus of Brigham Young University. Practically every couple related to me that they fell in love by talking to each other. In fact, these couples discovered that they could talk to each other about anything, that their communication came with ease, and that they often talked into the late hours of the night about almost everything. Healthy communication is one of the most important ingredients in a successful marriage. Unfortunately, as couples become busier, their depth of communication often wanes. Marriage scholar Judith Wallerstein (1995) explained the need for deep communication and talk rituals in marriage:

Our needs for comforting and encouragement are deep and lasting. A main task of every marriage from the early days of the relationship to its end is for each partner to nurture the other. The loneliness of life in the cities, the long commutes, the absence of meaningful contact with people have sharpened our emotional hungers. We feel tired, driven, and needy. More than ever before we need someone special who understands how we feel and responds with tenderness.

Love begins with paying attention. . . . A marriage that does not provide nurturance and restorative comfort can die of emotional malnutrition. . . . [The] task of marriage . . . is to give comfort and encouragement in a relationship that is safe for dependency, failure, disappointment, mourning, illness, and aging—in short, for being a vulnerable human being. (pp. 239–240)

One way couples can nurture each other and renew their love is through talk rituals. Or in other words, couples need to do more than just talk; instead, they need to create moments where talking can occur without interruption. Moreover, couples must not merely look for ways to find more “free time” to be together—they must make time, and create opportunities to be together. I would invite you to find a way to talk for fifteen minutes each day. Remember; don’t look for fifteen free minutes on your schedule—they probably are not there. Your task will be to create those fifteen minutes. For busy Latter-day Saint couples, creating more time to be together, even if it is just fifteen minutes, can be challenging and often difficult. Dr. William J. Doherty (2003) argued that if “a married couple with children has fifteen minutes of uninterrupted, nonlogistical, nonproblem-solving talk every day, I would put them in the top five percent of married couples in the land. It’s an extraordinary achievement” (p. 130).

When couples are dating, especially when they are engaged, it is common practice to talk to each other until late into the night. However, after marriage, the time compression is activated. The same spouse who was quoting poetry to you and singing love songs until 2:00 a.m. could be snoring like a lumberjack at 10:15 p.m. every evening. However, talking about deep and significant marital issues at 11:30 p.m. when both parties are exhausted is not an effective practice either. One couple recently reported to me that when they both jump into bed at the end of a busy day, they grab their smartphones and surf the Internet, read e-mail, or view their Twitter account until they fall asleep. This is not exactly the way to build a strong marriage.

Talking rituals can help couples stay on track and connect with each other. Your task will be to create rituals that will work for you as a couple. One husband and wife shared a significant talk ritual in their marriage. After dinner each night, their children would clean up the kitchen while the husband and wife slipped off to the family living room. There, they would drink their favorite beverage together and discuss their day (Doherty, 2003). Superficial talk was not allowed! They disciplined themselves to talk on a more personal level, sharing their opinions, beliefs, and ideas about a myriad of topics. It was also a time to validate each other and share compliments and praise.

Dr. William J. Doherty (2003) reported that one of his finest investments was his hot tub. Fourteen years ago, he and his wife purchased a Jacuzzi and placed it out on their deck, underneath the stars. At about 10:00 p.m. each evening, they venture out to their tub, listen to jazz music, and talk about anything other than bills, report cards, and soccer tournaments (p. 130). In order for couples to fortify their marriages, they must find the time to talk to renew and strengthen their emotional bonds. If a Jacuzzi can enrich a marriage, then I recommend one for every couple! However, there are other ways that couples can connect, and you and your spouse should discuss a communication ritual that will be custom-fit to your present circumstances.

There are a myriad of talk rituals couples can practice that will strengthen their marriages. Couples can go on walks together and talk about practically anything. Many husbands and wives often call each other at certain times during the day and text love messages to each other regularly. One couple shared the following ritual that strengthens their marriage:

Here's a ritual that my husband and I have been sharing for the 22 years of our marriage. We have kept a diary of our anniversaries every year. After the kids are in bed on our anniversary, we pull out the diary, light the wedding candle that was on the altar of

the church when we married, and reread the diary together. In it, we've recorded what we did to celebrate the day, any highlights of the previous year, changes that have come to our family (like the birth of our kids, moves, and so forth). It's a nice way for us to see the ebbs and flows of our relationship, and to remember how we've been blessed in all of it. It takes us a little longer each year to read the diary (by the 50th, we figure we'll need to start at about 2:00 in the afternoon), but I can't imagine doing the anniversary without it. (Doherty, 2000, "Sawing the Log," para. 9)

President Harold B. Lee (1970) once emphasized the perils of indifference. President Lee spoke pointedly to the priesthood holders when he said, "the most dangerous thing that can happen between you and your wife or between me and my wife is apathy—not hate, but for them to feel that we are not interested in their affairs, that we are not expressing our love and showing our affection in countless ways. Women, to be happy, have to be loved and so do men" (p. 241). Husbands and wives must nurture each other through talk rituals. Men cannot become apathetic in this endeavor! Find a talk ritual that you are both comfortable with and practice it often.

I would encourage husbands to take the lead on this ritual. Do not wait for your wife to "kick this practice off." Sit down with her and ask her how you can improve the communication in the marriage. After she recovers from fainting, towel her off, sit her down, offer her a cool drink, and then discuss with her several realistic options and talk rituals you would like to implement in your marriage. However, don't stop here. Continue to do this weekly, ensure that the ritual happens, and solicit your wife's valuable feedback.

Wives, if your husband isn't prone to take the lead in this area, feel free to initiate the ritual and use it as a time to bond, not bash. If you build him up and give him some confidence, he will come to enjoy your time together and desire that this ritual continue.

Dating Rituals

President Brigham Young (1930) said, “Life is best enjoyed when time periods are evenly divided between labour, sleep and recreation. . . . All people should spend one-third of their time in recreation which is rebuilding, voluntary activity—never idleness” (Gates & Widtsoe, p. 251). Couples would do well to follow President Young’s counsel and spend more time in wholesome recreation. Dating is a form of recreation that renews emotional bonds and can heal the time-starved marriage. Dating is what brings couples together initially, and steady dating can advance the relationship to engagement and marriage. Dating provides women and men with an opportunity to talk and do something fun together as a couple.

It is unfortunate that so many couples discontinue dating after they are married. This is a surefire way to snuff out the flame of intimacy in any marriage. Some couples argue that they would like to date, but with several small children, babysitters are too expensive. To those couples, consider that babysitting is not an expense, but an investment. Besides, babysitters are much cheaper than divorces.

Too often, husbands make the mistake of assuming that dates must be elaborate and expensive. Many women have told me that they would be happy to get out of their homes for a few hours—regardless of where they go. What women—especially young mothers—need is the opportunity to step away from the chaos and be renewed. Sometimes, walking around the block or spending some casual time at a park will provide the same benefit as an expensive restaurant.

Husbands should initiate dating in the marriage relationship. This isn’t to say that wives cannot plan dates, but the husband is responsible to make certain that this part of the marriage remains strong and consistent. Husbands and wives should hold a couple’s meeting each week to coordinate schedules, talk about finances, solve problems, plan gospel training in the home, and discuss their weekly date.

I also believe that couples should also try to break out of the mold of going to dinner and a movie on each date. Elder Richard G. Scott (2012) recently spoke to students on the Brigham Young University campus regarding their dating relationships. He mentioned that attending movies on dates is a “stupid” idea for couples who are trying to get to know each other (p. 170). The same could be said about married couples who are trying to strengthen their marriage relationship. What good is it for couples to sit for two hours in a movie theater where they cannot talk or even see each other? One of the most significant purposes for a “date night” would be to open communication channels and restore emotional connection.

Couples who are trying to renew their relationships would do well to engage in some of the activities they once did when they were dating. Go putt-putt golfing, bowling, or go-kart riding. Perhaps there are more cultural activities that both spouses enjoy, such as visiting an art museum or attending a musical concert. The point is that there are many activities couples can engage in besides dinner and a movie. Recent research documents that “couples who engage in novel activities that are fun, active or otherwise arousing—from hiking to dancing to travel to . . . games—enjoy higher levels of relationship quality” (Wilcox & Dew, 2012, p. 4).

Couples who often date each other are able to restore romance in their relationships. Thus, effective dating can lead to high levels of sexual satisfaction in the marriage. Moreover, frequent dating restores commitment in the relationship. Family scholars Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew (2012) report that “partners who put one another first, who steer clear of other romantic opportunities, and who cultivate a strong sense of ‘we-ness’ or togetherness are markedly happier than are less-committed couples” (p. 4). Couples who regularly date each other are able to “de-stress” their lives and escape the concerns that real life presents.

Several years ago, in speaking to Church educators, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1999) related how difficult and stressful life was for him and his wife, Patricia, while he was a graduate student at Yale. At the time, Elder Holland was a member of the stake presidency, a director in the institute



*Continually dating your spouse will help to restore the romance in your relationship.
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program, a full-time student, a husband, and a father of a couple of children. Meanwhile, Patricia was the ward Relief Society president, a wife, a mother, and a part-time babysitter to make ends meet. However, this powerful couple decided that no matter what, every Friday night would be their night together. Elder Holland (1999) reflected:

But on that one night for a few hours we would be together. We would step off the merry-go-round. We would take a deep breath or two and remind ourselves how much we loved each other, why we were doing all of this in the first place, and that surely there must be a light at the end of the tunnel somewhere.

I do not remember those dates ever amounting to much. I literally cannot remember ever going to dinner, but we must have. We certainly must have at least gotten a pizza occasionally. I just don't remember it. What I do remember is walking in the Yale-New Haven Arboretum, which was just across the street from our student housing. I remember long walks there holding hands and dreaming dreams of what life might be like when things were less demanding. Down at the end of the street was a Dairy Queen where we would occasionally end up for a cone or, on really good nights, a root beer float. (pp. 2–3)

Elder Holland further stated that both he and Patricia needed those nights just to give them a sense of sanity and direction. It was a time to reconnect and celebrate what mattered most in their marriage. Those Friday night dates were something the Holland's both looked forward to, and the time they spent together was renewing and healing. Elder Holland concluded, "A drugstore psychologist once said that people need three things to be emotionally healthy: someone to love, significant things to do, and something pleasant to look forward to." He then challenged the men, "Brethren, make sure your wife has something pleasant, something genuinely fun, to look forward to regularly" (pp. 2–3).

Elder Joe J. Christensen (1995) urged couples to keep their courtships alive by doing things together—just husband and wife. “As important as it is to be with the children as a family, you need regular weekly time alone together. Scheduling it will let your children know that you feel that your marriage is so important that you need to nurture it” (p. 65).

Renowned marriage scholar John Gottman (1999) discovered that couples who devoted five extra hours per week to their marriage gleaned tremendous benefits—especially when compared to couples who did not spend extra time to strengthen their marriage. During these “Magic Five Hours,” as Gottman labeled them, couples concentrated on five things: first, before leaving for the day, learning one thing that will happen in the other spouse’s life that day; second, engaging in a stress-reducing conversation at the close of the day; third, doing something daily to communicate genuine affection and appreciation to each other; fourth, demonstrating physical affection throughout the day; and fifth, having a weekly date together. Although these activities require a minimum time investment, the dividends will make a significant difference in each spouse’s life.

There are other rituals to consider, such as love rituals, special occasion rituals, and even community rituals that can strengthen a marriage. There are several other rituals that will help couples take their marriages back and set a course in place that will strengthen their marriage:

- If you no longer go to bed together on a regular basis, then start again.
- If there is a television in your bedroom, get rid of it.
- Express a kind word of compliment to your spouse. Be specific.
- Have a couples’ meeting each week where you can discuss ways to strengthen your marriage.
- Make your spouse a booklet, expressing in it all of the things you love about him or her.
- Have a romantic dinner together.



Dating your spouse is an important way to enhance your marriage. John Luke, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

- Go for a 24-hour retreat, even if you stay in hotel just down the street from your home.
- Find a way that your entire family can celebrate your wedding anniversary this year.
- Do something special for Valentine's Day this year, especially if you did nothing last year!

Conclusion

Our busy culture is not necessarily “marriage-friendly,” and there are many distractions than can pull husbands and wives apart from each other. If couples do not find ways to prioritize their time, their marriages could become hollow, frustrating, and unfulfilling. If contemporary LDS couples want to strengthen their marriage relationships, they will need to insert rituals in their marriage to ensure quality time together.

Establishing rituals in marriage demonstrates to each spouse that their marriage is a priority and that they are willing to invest time and energy into the marriage because it is the most important thing in their lives. I would encourage you to have a couples meeting together and establish several rituals that will set your marriage on a course for continued happiness and fulfillment. Practice these rituals until they become habits.

President Spencer W. Kimball (1977) taught, “While marriage is difficult, and discordant and frustrated marriages are common, yet real, lasting happiness is possible, and marriage can be more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive. This is within the reach of every couple, every person” (p. 4). Rituals in marriage can help couples reach this promise of ecstasy—or joy and fulfillment—that can be found in any marriage when couples are willing to invest time, attention, and love towards each other.

Years ago, Elder Hugh B. Brown served in the First Presidency, was an Apostle, and served in many other Church capacities. Perhaps, however, it was his service to his wife that was most impressive. In

his first address after being called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Brown paid this tribute to his wife: “I would be ungrateful if I did not acknowledge that Zina Card Brown, my beloved wife, is more responsible for my being here today than I” (Kimball, 1999, p. ix).

Elder Brown’s daughter, Mary Firmage, spoke of a ritual that she observed between her parents for years. Mary related that every day of their marriage, Elder Brown would kiss his wife, Zina, good-bye before he would leave for work. The couple would then walk to the front porch together, and Elder Brown would walk down about three steps, turn back towards Zina, and ask, “Did I kiss you goodbye?” Zina would respond with, “Why, no, you didn’t.” Then Elder Brown would kiss her again.

Then, as he would walk to the car, Zina would run into the dining room where she would blow kisses to her husband through the window. Next, as Elder Brown was backing the car out of the driveway, Zina would run back to the front porch where their ritual began, and she would wave a handkerchief until Elder Brown drove out of sight. However, just before the car turned the corner at the end of the street, Elder Brown would blink the brake lights three times, his code for “I love you” (Avant, 1974).

President Brown taught a powerful lesson to each of us in this ritual. The relationship between he and his wife, Zina, is a reminder to each one of us of the power of love, and the ability to heal the time-starved marriage. I would encourage every couple to create a similar ritual to President and Sister Brown. Regarding love and affection in marriage, President Brown (1960) taught:

When the husband and wife tell each other of their affection and demonstrate it by their conduct by both what they do and refrain from doing, then their marriage, like the tides of the ocean, will not be seriously disturbed by surface storms. . . .

While deep feelings of affection are too sacred for flaunting, each person in love, especially after marriage, should seek every

opportunity to display affections in the home. Love is the key that unlocks the inner feeling of the heart, and it must not be lost or allowed to rust through disuse. Any key that rests will rust. . . .

Daily investments in mutual compliments pay wonderful dividends in family solidarity, understanding, and success. . . . Little acts of tenderness, kindness, and consideration continued through life, will make the tree of love ever bearing, like orange trees, with buds, blossoms, and ripened fruit the year round. Love in December can and should be as warm as it was in June—and even sweeter. (pp. 95–98)

Time management can be a challenge for most Latter-day Saint couples. However, ignoring the time challenges and hoping that life will magically get better is not the solution. Couples must be purposeful in employing rituals that will help them prioritize their marriage relationships. As they engage in discovering rituals that will enhance their marriage, peace and happiness will be their reward.

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