

# Foundations

*A Newsletter for Married Couples*

Spring

## Reaching for Harmony

In the many years that we have been working at marriage enrichment, there has never been a situation that has affected so many couples all at once. Wars have disrupted married life for many, but not to the scale of what we see going on now. Many couples are working at home together, some of them trying to care for children at the same time.

Many are out of work. Those in food service especially are in a situation where the whole industry has been turned on its head. On the other hand, health care workers are stretched to the limit and worried that they are bringing a deadly virus home with them as they return from their shifts.

There is some comfort in knowing that we are not alone as we face these very unusual times. But our love tanks get empty much faster these days as we try to figure out what life is going to look like on the other side of this quarantined world of ours. There was an article recently in *The Atlantic* magazine entitled *The Three Equations for a Happy Life, Even During a Pandemic* [www.theatlantic.com/family](http://www.theatlantic.com/family). The article points out that one of the most essential ingredients is having loving friends and family in your life. And if you have those people in your house all the better, as long as you keep the lines of communication open.

Because it is a time of stress, it means that our communication skills are more important than ever. Set aside ten or fifteen minutes a day just to connect



with each other. It may be in bed before you get up to face the day. It might be over breakfast or taking a walk, but find a time to check in with each other. The goal is to communicate three things:

**1. I want to know how you are today.**

Are you feeling optimistic? Sad? Frustrated? Sometimes a spouse might think their partner is upset with them, when really they are just upset at the world. There's a big difference in how you respond if you know the upsetness is not directed at you.

**2. I want to express gratitude and appreciation for you.**

Let your spouse know that you are glad to have them for your friend and grateful for their contribution to the household and to your wellbeing. Whether they're pitching in with more household

chores or working hard on their work assignments to keep money coming in, let them know you notice and are grateful. Parents are often told, catch your child doing something good. Same can go for your spouse.

**3. Is there anything I can do for you?**

It might be as simple as buying their favorite brand of soap, or calling city hall to find out if garbage is being collected. In other words, it might be an indulgence or taking an unpleasant chore off their plate, but communicating your desire to help may be what they need to feel your love. An act of caring is an act of love.

Being home together is both an opportunity and a challenge. Hopefully the tips in this issue of *Foundations* will help.

# A Soft Start

**D**r. John Gottman's research is the basis of so much that we know about how couples can succeed in having a good relationship. One piece of advice he has passed along is that the way an argument starts is a pretty good indication of where it will end. Start by yelling, or start by accusing and chances are you will not be happy about where it ends up.

## Something positive

So the alternate route is to start softly. That means that you can try to think of something positive to say before you register your complaint. For example, you could say, "I know you really work hard and you're good at your job, but if you work all the time, I feel like I don't matter to you." How much easier is that to hear, and how much easier to respond to, than "You're never home! Don't you even care that you're married? Do I mean nothing to you?"



## Make Room for Understanding

Soft starts increase the likelihood of a good resolution immensely. Your partner has a chance to do two things: one is to explain. It could be that there is a special project going on right now, and in a week they won't be so stretched. Or they might apologize and say they didn't realize

how you were feeling. If you start with an attack they most likely will defend themselves. "What do you care how much I work? You're on the phone all the time anyway!"

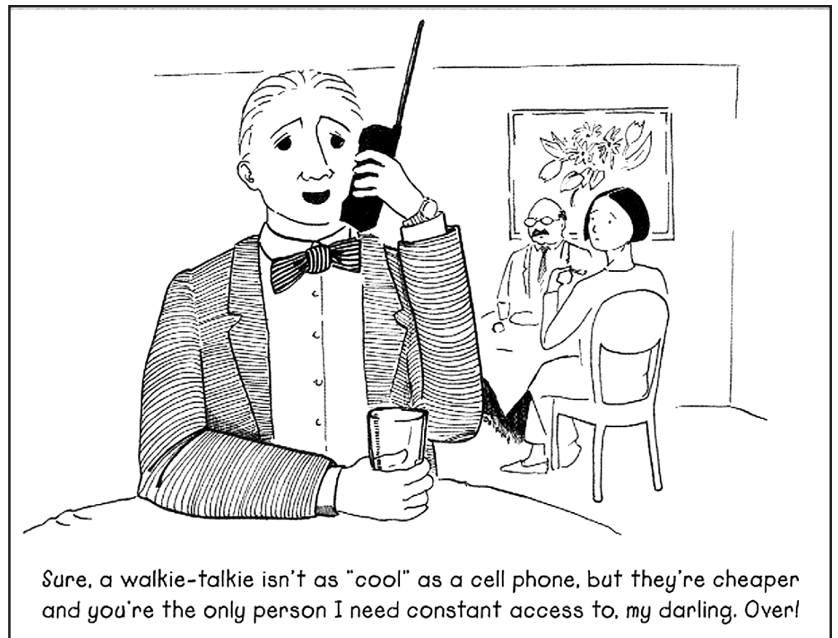
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# Building the Adventure

Two couples were talking about the early years of their marriage. Here is a version of the first couple's report.

*"When we were first married, we were so poor! We lived in a studio apartment, a third floor walkup. We had spaghetti almost every night. We pretended we were in Italy – we laughed! We had so much fun!"*

The second couple gave the following account.

*"When we were first married, we could barely scrape together enough money to buy a box of spaghetti. He was never ambitious; even then he couldn't make a decent living. We had to live up three flights of stairs – it wore me out to have to climb all those stairs to a hot, stuffy apartment. Apartment! It was barely more than a closet!"*

You see the point. The couples started out their married life in pretty much the identical way, but couple one saw it as the beginning of an adventure, full of romance and fun even if there was no money. Couple two saw only deprivation. They were miserable then and they are miserable now.

## The Stories we tell

The way we see our history tells a great deal about the quality of our relationships. Couple one had a great marriage from the start. They enjoyed each other and there was no blame cast for their meager circumstances. The second couple may have been having a better time when they were young than they remember now, but they are unhappy with each other now and so they talk about their past as though things were rough right from the start. Their story communicates the disillusion they are feeling about their marriage right now.



## Keep the love alive

To keep the story of your early days the beginning of an adventure story, keep it fresh. Talk about how you can make your dreams stay alive. If you are confined to your house you can't go hiking in Tibet, but you might be able to start planning for a hike once it's safe. Music lovers, maybe you can't fly to New York for a dynamite concert, but there are some pretty good things being streamed that you can listen to.

## Virtual dreams

Our current situation is challenging us to find new ways to frame things – our dreams, among them. Our adventures have to be virtual right now, and our vision is being eclipsed by anxiety. We are learning how to shrink our world to the size of a living room, but not our dreams. What's in your tone of voice, in

the openness of your face, in the affection of your touch – that will show that the dreams are still alive and well.

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# Exercise

Take some time every day for a playful conversation that will help you know each other better. Your marriage is a lifelong journey to get to know each other better.

These are starter questions: you might come up with lots more and better ones.

Would you rather take a vacation that's an unknown adventure or go back to a well-loved spot?

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Do we have friends that we would like to introduce to each other? Could we do it by Skype?

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Do you have something fun you'd like to learn? Or something we could learn together?

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What's your favorite kind of game? Board game? Cards? Video?

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How about puzzles do you like crosswords? Jigsaw? Mazes? Anagrams?

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Did you have a nickname when you were a kid? Did you like it?

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Describe your ideal home. Would it be a condo? House? Cabin? What could you see from the window?

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If we started a business together what would it be? What would we name it?

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What favorite book of yours would you like to see made into a movie? Who would star in it?

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What's your favorite snack food? Has it always been your favorite?

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know each other better.



# Three Communication Tools

We all have had the experience of misunderstanding our partner's message, or the intent behind the message. Your partner says, "You certainly seem hungry tonight." You think, he means I'm gaining weight. Or you say, "Great job cutting the hedge," and he hears the addition of "now that you finally got around to it."

What is said and what is heard often does not match up. Here are three tools that can help close the gap.

*Love Languages:* Gary Chapman's book has sold millions of copies and has been translated into many languages, and his thesis is very simple. He believes that there are five primary love languages and each of us has one by which we hear we are loved most clearly. They are **acts of service, words of affirmation, gifts, physical touch, and quality time**. If your spouse buys you a gift when you'd rather they spent time with you, then you can't hear that they are trying to say, "I love you." There's a quiz online. Take it and find out your love language and your spouse's. [www.5lovelanguages.com](http://www.5lovelanguages.com)

*Introversion and extraversion:* there is a personality assessment called the Meyers-Briggs personality test. Its great strength in helping people communicate lies in the difference between introverts and extraverts. Introverts like to think in order to talk, while extraverts like to talk in order to think. When you need time to process what your spouse just said and they keep on talking, it can be frustrating. On the other hand, if you're



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throwing out ideas and your spouse treats them like they are the final word, that's also frustrating. Learning to understand and respect conversational styles can smooth over many potential roadblocks in marital communication. You can

learn about these differences and more at [www.16personalities.com](http://www.16personalities.com)

*Bids:* When your partner speaks to you and you don't respond, that (again, according to Dr. John Gottman) is a bid that your partner has made and you dropped the ball by not responding. He claims that we all miss many opportunities to connect because we don't pick up on one another's bids. Cellphones and other screens are responsible for a lot of the distraction, but these days, stress and anxiety are things that cloud our minds and make us less likely to respond. Try to notice the next time your partner reaches out to connect with you, and try to respond positively. You'll be surprised how they light up when you do. See Dr. Gottman explain it here [www.facebook.com/GottmanInstitute/videos](https://www.facebook.com/GottmanInstitute/videos)

# Spirituality

Recently the Sunday gospel reading was about Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb. You may remember the story. Jesus was visiting with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Then he went off to preach in another town. Lazarus then got very sick, and his sisters sent for Jesus to come and heal him. But Jesus did not get there in time, and when he arrived Lazarus was already dead. Martha has a conversation with Jesus, but it seems like it is Mary's tears that move Jesus to action. He has men roll the stones away from the tomb and let Lazarus free, then he instructs them to take the burial cloths off him. "Untie him and let him go," Jesus says.

## Loosing the Bonds

One of our tasks in marriage, as each other's best friend, is to loose the ties of pain and suffering. Just as Jesus has the friends of Lazarus take off the strips of cloth that covered him from head to toe, so we are meant to take off the layers of pain that encrust each of us. There is a great likelihood that your spouse is suffering in this current world – loss of a relative, friend, job. You may be able to help by allowing them to talk through the pain such a loss inflicts.

## Pain Around Us

Then there is the global anxiety all of us are feeling. Will we ever feel safe out in public again? Will our local businesses return? Will schools be able to recoup from all the lost time, never mind the lost transitions of step up days and graduations? Never in our lifetimes has there been a period of such uncertainty.

## We Grieve the Life we Knew

Grief is a process that ties a person up and tires them out while they get used to the world without the people, routines, employment that they were accustomed to. Sometimes all it takes is the reassurance that we will give them the time they need to grieve. Sometimes they need us to listen, or to tell them of our love for them. Because this situation affects us all but

may affect us differently, we need to tread carefully to know how we can "untie" them.

## Sometimes it may be you

It is very likely that you also are in pain, you too are tied up. And in addition to all the psychic pain, you might be in physical pain. It is so helpful if you can tell your spouse what they can do for you. What actions can they take to help you be released from those bonds?

## What's the Message?

As with all the New Testament stories, the story of Lazarus is meant to help us live out our lives today. They are not just accounts of things that happened two thousand years ago. Those of us who are Christians today should be able to find something in them to lead us forward and live the lives that Jesus hoped we would lead. Isn't it possible that Jesus was teaching us how to be the best kind of friend in this pandemic when he told Lazarus' friends, "Untie him and let him go"?



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Contact us at PO Box 1632, Portland, ME 04104-1632, or by email at:

[foundationseditor@gmail.com](mailto:foundationseditor@gmail.com)

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