

Couples' Foundations

Lesson 1: Built to Last

Marriage is so much more than “just a piece of paper.” It is a contract between two people and each has to fulfill their part to make it work. This is true for both married couples and partners in committed relationships.

Why commitment matters

Research from Dr. John Van Epp's book *How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk* confirms that the benefits of a committed relationship are enormous, especially for men. They include:

- Longer life
- Better health
- Increased financial security
- Greater sexual satisfaction
- Improved mental and emotional health
- A more stable home environment for children

Couples can have a wonderful partnership that can get them through life's struggles, be they health, finances, children, or other challenges life brings. Happy, healthy relationships can and do happen. This class is an overview of how to make them happen for you.

Lesson 2: Smart Dating: Finding the Right One

Date smart by *slowing down*. Don't rush commitment or physical intimacy. It takes time to actually get to know someone, and if you get into a relationship and/or get physically involved, it can cloud your judgement.

Physical involvement in particular can lead to confusion and heartbreak when not built on a foundation of friendship and trust. Kissing, caressing, and sexual involvement can make us feel more “in love” than we actually are. They create a counterfeit intimacy because when we get physical with another person, dopamine, oxytocin, and vasopressin are released into our bodies.

Dopamine is a chemical that is released any time we do something we enjoy; it reinforces that activity in our brains so we want to do it again. Oxytocin and vasopressin are bonding hormones whose purpose is to connect us to another person. When you get physically involved with another person before you really know them, the release of these hormones creates a false sense of intimacy. In other words, you feel like you're more in love than you really are.*

- In dating, don't rush physical involvement or relationships.
- Early physical involvement leads to a false sense of intimacy.
- Take the time to get to know the person, see if who they really are matches who you think they are.

We don't actually trust people. We trust who we think they are. We construct an idea of the person in our mind, based on our observations, and then fall in love with the idea.** It's important not to make these assumptions. We learn a few things about someone, we find them attractive, and we fall into a relationship (or into bed) with them. A few weeks or months later we say, "Wow! You're not who I thought you were!"

It takes three to four months for a person to reveal who they really are, and that's if they're not actively being deceptive! Most people are on their best behavior for the first 3-4 months. Deceivers can keep it up much longer. So how can one know the sheep from the wolves-in-sheep's clothing?*

- There are three things necessary to really know a person:
 - time, talk, and togetherness
- See them in as many contexts as possible

If you're not spending a good portion of your time talking, you're not getting to know them. If you're not together in the same geographic location, it's difficult to see them for who they really are, even with advances in communication technology. You need to see this person in a variety of situations to see if who they really are matches who you think they are.

* From the book *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting Our Children*

**From Dr. John Van Epp's book *How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk*.

Lesson 3: Be Okay to Be on Your Own

You have to be okay to be on your own. It's okay to want to have someone in your life, but when that becomes a need, you're vulnerable to people who'll take advantage of you. Look at it this way: if you are afraid of drowning in a sea of loneliness and despair you'll grab ahold of any slimy piece of driftwood that comes floating by.

You need to learn swim by yourself before you swim with another. Build a life that is worth living on your own. Nurture relationships with loved ones, pursue goals, find fulfillment in making a difference. That way, when you get into a romantic relationship it will be because you choose that person, not because you just need someone in order to feel complete.

Be okay to be on your own. Have patience for the right one.

The truth about “bad boys” and “wild girls”

If a person does not possess integrity, the relationship will sour. Period. This may take anywhere from a few weeks to a few years, but it will happen. Nothing is sexier than integrity. Don't mistake passion and excitement for love; love is built on trust. When you are dating someone, watch to see:

- How they treat other people
- If they are honest and kind

If they are dishonest, unkind, or cruel to others they will eventually treat you the same way. You want someone who is honest, kind, considerate, and acts with integrity. If they are not willing to change for themselves, they will not be able to change for someone else. When dating, you do not want a “fixer-upper.” They should not have any major issues unresolved. That said, we are all flawed. **It isn't about finding someone who is perfect, but rather finding someone with whom you can learn and grow.**

Does Compatibility = Sameness?

Compatibility isn't about being the same — it's about how well you go together. Peanut butter goes well with jelly, honey, bananas, or Nutella®, but nobody wants a peanut butter and peanut butter sandwich. Find someone who complements you.

When it comes to hobbies, interests, movies, music, recreation, etc. there should be some overlap, but it doesn't all need to be the same. More important is that you are with someone who loves and respects you for who you are without trying to change who you are.

When Does Sameness Matter?

There are a few areas in which you want to be the same. These areas are:

- Plans for family
- Finances
- Spirituality

You'll have greater chances of success if you and your partner are mostly the same when it comes to your plans for a family, division of labor, and finances. You'll want to match spiritually. Spirituality is defined as a connection to something greater than yourself. Persons of shared beliefs are more likely to stay together, but you needn't have the same religion if you share the spiritual value of honoring the other person's worldview. You need to be able to compromise when it comes to finances.

Lesson 4: Nurture Your Relationship

Your marriage can be compared to a garden. Just like any garden, you're hoping to reap fruits or vegetables or flowers. These good things are the reason you planted the garden. But weeds pop up and need to be cleared out. Thorns show up. How often is your partner a rose, but all you see are the thorns?

To maintain our "marriage garden" we need to:

- Clear out weeds — the serious things that will truly strangle the relationship
- Use fertilizer — conflict resolution. It's stinky and unpleasant, but needs to be done and helps the relationship grow. We need to voice our concerns and problems, hear one another with understanding and humility, be accountable, and make changes.
- Allow thorns — tolerate your partner's idiosyncrasies: the little things that annoy you that simply are part of who they are.
- Give light and water — or in other words, affection, friendship, intimacy, and kindness so that the marriage garden can flourish

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Poor communication is a symptom. It's not the disease. The disease is selfishness and affection deprivation. Couples can be happy and close even if they're not the best communicators or if they fight more than they'd like.

Happy couples show abundant affection, are selfless, can put the other's needs first, apologize and mean it, and take ownership/accountability for their mistakes.

Happy and unhappy couples fight about the same amount. The difference is, happy couples show much more affection and accountability in between arguments while unhappy couples bitterly withdraw, withhold affection, and fail to take responsibility for their individual actions.

You want at least a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. In other words, there should be at least five times as many positive experiences as negative.

Express gratitude and love every day. Do it openly, specifically, and in a way your partner understands. Learn more about this in the Five Love Languages.

Lesson 5: Speaking Your Partner's Language

How can we show affection day by day? Does your partner feel cherished, loved and respected? Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages* illustrates that each of us shows and receives love in a specific way or "language." It's important that we recognize how our partner receives and recognizes affection. Most often the way your partner shows affection is the way they want to receive it from you.

The Five Love Languages are:

Gifts – thoughtful gifts and gestures, including remembering special occasions and gifts just because.

Quality Time – one-on-one time, face-to-face conversation, activities, dates, and trips, without interruptions or distractions from one another.

Words of Affirmation – encouragement, affirmation, appreciation, and empathy. Kind words, notes and cards. Listen to understand, not to refute.

Acts of Service – doing things to lighten the other person's load. Examples include house and yard care, repairs, maintenance, tending to the children, and errands. Ask "What else can I do?"

Physical Touch – hugs, kisses, cuddles, massages, and sexual intimacy. Lovemaking is important, but it's not all that matters. Take time to engage in other affectionate and/or sensual touch.

The Golden Rule of Relationships: Treat your partner the way they want to be treated.

Lesson 6: Is Anger the Problem?

The conflict between "fixing the problem" and "validating the emotion" is unnecessary: you can do both at the same time!

Fixing

Fixers are often seen as insensitive by the person who just wants to be validated and heard. Fixers do care, and that is why they want to "fix" the problem: they don't want a loved one to suffer. YOU CAN STILL BE A FIXER! Shift your focus from the "nail" (or what you think is the problem) to the actual problem: your partner is upset and just wants to be heard. Listen with empathy and understanding. Problem fixed!

Validating

There are people that just want to be heard, to have their emotions validated regarding their experience. Validators want to be empathized with until they feel understood. They feel rushed and insulted when someone immediately offers solutions. The problem isn't the "nail." The problem is that they are hurt, scared or upset. By listening to them they are no longer, hurt, scared or upset. They will then feel validated and pull their own "nail" out (fix their own problem).

Allow Yourself to be Vulnerable

All anger is actually another emotion in disguise. Anger blinds and deafens us to our own emotions and to the other person's perspective. Calm down, identify the underlying emotion, and express that instead. Being vulnerable by expressing the underlying emotion allows us to connect.

Lesson 7: Pride vs. Humility

Allow Yourself to be Humble

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?

4 things to say to your partner in a successful relationship:

1. You're Right
2. I'm wrong
3. I'm sorry
4. I love you

Take ownership of your mistakes, don't minimize or shift blame. Accept feedback and correction

It's almost never one person's fault. Both are part of the problem. Both are part of the solution. Forget about your partner's faults for a minute. How are you contributing to the situation? Often we accidentally sabotage the very changes we want our partner to make.

For example, I may want my partner to be honest with me, but when they tell me the truth I shame them, shut them down, or tell them they are wrong. I am stealing their motivation to tell me the truth. I need to look at how I am contributing to the situation.

Another example: if I want more sex, but during the day I'm not letting my wife know I'm thinking about her, when I get home I sit down to watch TV instead of helping with chores or kids, and I only touch her when I'm trying to initiate sex, I may be contributing to a situation where she doesn't feel very sexual. She feels disconnected from me and exhausted.

You can help your partner change their behavior by asking yourself how you contribute to an undesired situation and how you can improve. How can you make it easier for your partner to change?

Two exceptions to the "Two to Tango" rule:

1. Infidelity
2. Abuse

Infidelity — the situation that was created where one felt lonely and neglected may have been created by both partners. However, crossing the line into infidelity is the choice of the individual. It cannot be justified by the partner's behavior.

Abuse — emotional, physical, or sexual abuse is the choice of the perpetrator and is never acceptable or justifiable. It is the responsibility of the person who made the choice to be abusive and they need to take responsibility for the abuse before other problems can be addressed.

Lesson 8: Staying Best Friends

In lesson 2, we talked about the importance of getting to know someone before getting into a serious relationship. Continuing to get to know them, talk to them, and spend time with them are equally important in maintaining the relationship as beginning the relationship.

- Make time for and find shared interests
- Allow for Individuality
- As a couple, make time for fun
- Put your partner's needs first

"I am convinced that a happy marriage is not so much a matter of romance as it is an anxious concern for the comfort and well-being of one's companion."

– Gordon B. Hinckley

Lesson 9: Supporting One Another

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is like oxygen — without it your relationship cannot survive. You need to forgive one another.

Forgiveness involves letting go of hurt and bitterness. You can still show love and affection instead of being bitter and angry. Forgiveness and trust are not the same thing — trust needs to be earned back through behavior.

Support Each Other's Dreams

Supporting one another is how you will stay together. You need to feel like your partner is helping you succeed at your dreams, not holding you back.

Do you know what your partner's dreams are? Ask him or her:

- What do you really want to do?
- How can I support you in doing that?

Your relationship will thrive if you are supporting one another in your dreams and passions.

Lesson 10: Kids

- Make major decisions regarding children and parenting before marriage, if at all possible.
- Respect your wife/partner regarding pregnancy: her body, her timing.
- Children are stewardship, not property.
- Establish choices with consequences.
- Honor their free will. It's your job to teach them that choices have consequences, not to force obedience.
- Beware of splitting and "parent-shopping."
 - Be united in front of the kids
 - Support each other's decisions
 - Disagree in private
- Make effort to love any step-and-adopted children as much as biological children.
- Apologize to your children. As parents we make mistakes. It's okay to own our mistakes in front of our kids.

Lesson 11: Money & Sex

Finances

In this, perhaps more than in any other area, couples differ. There is no one right way to manage finances. Find what works for you.

- No one partner should call all the shots on finances.
- It is healthy to go over your financial goals, income, and expenditures, weekly if needed.

Sex

Sexual fulfillment is not about technique, wild positions, perfect bodies, variety of partners, or the size of your body parts.

- True sexual satisfaction comes from the quality of the relationship.
- The highest quality sex comes when you feel connection, comfort, and trust.

- Couples who relax and embrace imperfection have amazing sex more often than couples whose focus is on amazing sex.*
- The ears are the most important sex organ.

When sexual experiences occur outside of a committed relationship, the bonding hormones of oxytocin and vasopressin drop and mostly dopamine is released. Without the bonding agents, you don't feel the connection, comfort, and trust required for amazing lovemaking. Sexual satisfaction is decreased.

Staying Faithful

- There is nothing sexier than integrity.
- "From the first time I saw her, till the day I die, she's the only one for me."
- You are in control over what you think about, whether you flirt, and your behaviors.
- What would my partner think if they were watching this interaction?

*The "Good Enough" Sex Model by Michael Metz and Barry McCarthy

Lesson 12: Endurance: Never-ending Honeymoon

Love should flow. Once a week sit down and talk to your partner to "unclog the drain."

- Discuss your schedule for the upcoming week
- Set goals: spiritual, family, relationship
- Discuss finances
- Share what you appreciate, 5:1 ratio
- Address things you would like to do differently.

(For more guidance on this topic, see the "Family Councils" course.)

What are the blockages that keep us from sharing love or feeling love?

- Hard and hurt feelings
- Holding onto bitterness and past offenses
- Feeling unsupported
- Distracted by so much else going on
- Stress

What are you doing to give one another hope?

Pull together, not apart.

Your partner is not the problem. The *problem* is the problem. Work it out together.

Be strong when the other is weak. Be each other's rock