6 Steps to Help a Couple Improve Marriage Satisfaction
You Can Have an Impact!

The first time we met with a couple one-on-one they were in a really bad place and it was difficult to get that couple to start to communicate in a way that wasn’t criticism, contempt, defensiveness or just shutting down and stonewalling. We felt overwhelmed and we walked out of the meeting wondering if we helped in any way.

Since then, we have learned to stick to the principles of creating a safe environment and applying the key concepts that we know will work.

When we train new mentors, I think back to that first meeting and recall our feelings. If you feel a little nervous, overwhelmed or intimidated, I understand.

Bill Doherty is a well-known psychologist at the University of Minnesota. He’s said that when he sees couples that are struggling they first need support from support people, mentors, other couples in their lives. Then, marriage educators. Then, they need mental health professionals. In that order.

Lay people we can have a big impact!

The purpose of 6 Steps to Help a Couple is to give you a quick overview of areas where you can have a big impact.

These six areas represent a proven path to marriage health.
Step 1: Change the Focus

When a couple is struggling, they often come into a meeting with a list of complaints. Often times, they are blaming and pointing the fingers at each other. They may even be embarrassed or ashamed that they are struggling. One of them may have objections about doing some type of a marriage program. They may not want to admit that they need help.

Reframe the Conversation
We like to reframe the conversation away from being about what their spouse is or isn’t doing to thinking about their relationship together. We introduce the concept that marriage is about the bond. We do this to help the couple to focus on their connection and NOT on what each of them is getting or not getting from the relationship. This allows us to have a language of “Is that building up your bond or tearing it down?”

We ask questions to change the dialog. What would you like to have in your relationship? More connection? Less fighting? What do they want their relationship to be like in five years? It helps them to get outside of their current struggles and to look forward to what we’re trying to accomplish. It focuses them on the future and a solution that together we’re going to be working towards.

Create Positive Interactions
We also focus on creating positive interactions. It’s much easier to do something positive than to work through all the negative. We say, “I bet you know what you could do tonight to tear down your bond. What can you do to build it up?” What can you do over the next week?

But honestly, focusing on positive interactions is very difficult for some couples. They are so lost in their hurt that they have a hard time thinking about anything else. If that is the case, we don’t push too much. But we do continually ask them, “What will build your bond vs. what will tear it down?”

Questions to ask:
- What do you do that improves your bond?
- What do you do that tears down your bond?
- What will be the impact to your bond if you continue in these behaviors?
- What are you willing to do to improve? (Focus on "I" statements)
Step 2: Increase Validation

Couples often struggle because they don’t communicate well. They often don’t understand what is really going on with each other so they revert to poor communication behaviors.

Michael and Jennifer came to us at their wits end. They were contemplating divorce. All they seem to do was fight.

We worked with them to help them to increase their validation. We helped them to listen for thoughts and feelings. As they were better able to validate one another, they were able to decrease their poor communication behaviors.

This is a very common cycle.

**Validation Decreases Poor Communication**

To really understand each other, they needed to uncover their emotional needs. In other words, listen for thoughts and feelings. As a couple focuses on emotional needs, it reduces poor communication behaviors such as criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling.

Coaching couples to better validate each other helps them to connect at a deeper level. You can have a huge impact with couples by helping them to validate and understand each other.

**Questions to ask:**

- What has happened in the past when you share your feelings?
- What prevents you from sharing feelings?
- What behaviors tear down your understanding?
- How does feeling validated and understood impact your relationship?
- What do you need from your spouse to validate you?
Step 3: Recognize Emotional Triggers

Emotional triggers are what frequently fuels many of our conflicts. Our spouse says something and it triggers an insecurity inside of us that causes us to react. That in turn causes our spouse to get triggered by something else and things continue to escalate.

Communication skills are important, but you’ll never get to some of the true issues until you get to the emotional triggers. Understanding those filters make it easier to be compassionate and to have empathy for your partner. If you understand that you are reacting that way because that’s the way your dad reacted, then you can be softer and choose better ways to communicate.

Messages from Our Childhood
Messages from our childhood influence how we think and feel. They act like land mines for us.

Jim and Lori seemed to never be able to get along. Jim thought that Lori would blow up at the smallest things and Lori felt that Jim was ignoring her. Lori had a big aha moment. Her father left when she was young. Ever since that time, she was afraid of rejection. When she felt rejected, it would trigger all the feelings she had as a young girl. When she explained this to Jim, it helped Jim to not feel blamed by Lori. It has helped to rebuild their connection.

As mentors, you can have a big impact on a couple just by asking some simple questions. We have seen couples have some very deep insights. These insights have had a positive impact on their connection to their spouse. It enables the couple to focus on how to build their bond over tear it down.

Questions to ask:

- What filters do you have that are causing emotional triggers?
- What would help you to feel safer with your spouse?
- How do you react when your spouse expresses emotions?
- Do you resort to logic to calm emotional encounters? What’s the impact on your spouse?
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Step 4: Identify Conflict Patterns

Couples often seek help because they are fighting so much. It’s tempting to think of managing conflict is just a need for better negotiation. But, conflict is not usually about solving the problem, it’s about how you treat one another.

Couples often fall into conflict patterns. So they continue to follow the same patterns over and over again, regardless of the topic.

It can look like this:

**He:**
- Criticizes
- Criticizes again
- Defends

**She:**
- Defends
- Counter-criticizes
- Stonewalls

**Choose Different Patterns**
When couples recognize their patterns, then they can choose different patterns and different reactions.

As mentors, we hope that you’ll be able to help the couple to identify their poor patterns. Remember, focus on helping them see it themselves over giving them advice. Once the couple can recognize their pattern that is causing them to escalate or to disconnect, they can make different choices.

Often times, we will have them pick out a conflict that is not emotionally charged. Once we can determine the pattern, we ask them what they were feeling when it happened. Where they feeling rejected, attacked or abandoned? Did it trigger a deeper emotion or filter? How could you change the pattern to address each person’s emotional needs?

**Questions to ask:**
- What does conflict look like in your relationship?
- Do you have behaviors that aren’t healthy? What is the impact of those behaviors? Are there other behaviors that you like or dislike?
- How do you think that you contribute to this pattern?
- How does your pattern affect your marriage relationship? What’s the consequence of that?
- What do you need from your spouse to stay engaged?
Step 5: Process Resentment

Resentment can build up over time. At the core of resentment is not being able to forgive. We hold the hurts and pains internally and then they suddenly pop up again and impact our current relationship.

Sometimes, resentment and unforgiveness build up over time, but sometimes there are big shocks – like finding out about an affair.

As a mentor, you can be effective in helping a couple to heal by allowing them to address their anger and grieve.

Forgiveness is a process. It looks like this:

If people don’t deal with their pain, they risk being stuck either in bitterness and resentment or shutting down emotionally which leads to depression.

As mentors, it is important to help people to process this pain. You can help them to express their anger in a constructive way that enables them to process their emotions and be able to heal from their past hurts. This may take some time.

Questions to ask:

- How do you react when someone harms you?
- How are you processing the hurt, anger or resentment?
- How is it impacting your life or relationship?
- What would be the impact to your life if you could let go of the hurt?
- In what ways do you see past offenses impacting your interpretations of events with your partner?
Step 6: Build Intimacy

Prior to leading a marriage seminar, we sometimes do a pre-survey to determine areas of interest. There are three topics that usually lead: communication, conflict management and physical intimacy.

And yet, when we get to the sex topic it seems like this is something that can be difficult for many couples to talk about. Why is it that we have a difficult time talking about sex with the person with which we are the most emotionally intimate?

Provide a Safe Environment

Your role as a mentor may simply be providing a safe environment where that couple can talk about their needs, their wants, what’s working and how they might want to increase the intimacy in the bedroom. The couple sets the pace on what they are comfortable speaking with about with you.

Areas of challenge include:

- Inviting God into the bedroom
- Differing ways to be “in the mood”.
- Using sex to feel close vs. feeling close to have sex
- Comfort in talking about sex
- Frequency of sex

Questions to ask:

- Is there anything that you would change in your ability to talk to each other about physical intimacy?
- What prevents you from sharing your likes and dislikes with your spouse?
- What would make it easier to talk about what you like and dislike?
- Is there anything that you wish to change in the frequency of your love making?
- How often do you feel under pressure to perform?
- How often do you feel rejected?
Conclusion

Did any of these areas resonate with you? Perhaps you’ve struggled in some of these areas?

If so, that’s perfect! I know that I would rather seek help from someone that has experience struggling with issues. Somehow, other couples that have struggled seem more equipped to provide empathy and experience that can help me.

We recently led a small group using the Connected Marriage online materials. Tony and Amada attended. They had been separated and they attended the group to see if they could get back together. During the seven-week class, they decided to reconcile and they moved back in together.

They went to visit Amanda’s parents at their lake cabin. They heard this conversation between their four-year-old daughter and her grandfather.

“Grandpa, you have two houses, right?”

“Yes, I have a house in the city and I have this cabin.”

“We used to have two houses, but now we only have one house – just like a real family.”

When I heard this story, I teared up. By working with struggling couples you have the opportunity to not just impact their relationship, but their kids as well. What could be better than that?

We know that mentoring couples will take more preparation work than merely reading a few pages. But, we want to help!

Connected Marriage is committed to training you with resources, tips and tools that can help you to educate other couples on proven concepts that will impact their marriage satisfaction.