

# **12 Hours To A *Great* Marriage**

**A Step-by-Step Guide for Making Love Last**

**Howard J. Markman • Scott M. Stanley  
Susan L. Blumberg • Natalie H. Jenkins  
Carol Whiteley**

**Copyright © 2004 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved**

**Published by Jossey-Bass**

## **Introduction:** **Stepping Up to the Plate**

If someone asked you what you wanted most out of life, what would you say? One of the deepest longings of people everywhere is to have a great relationship, especially in the form of a great marriage. No matter what their background, age, or circumstances, most adults on the planet yearn for the love, fun, acceptance, and deep connection that can come from a happy, lifelong relationship.

Do you dream of having a great marriage? It's a good dream to have. A great, forever marriage is a wonderful thing to be part of, and can enrich your life. The question is, though, how do you turn your dream into reality?

This book was written to help you bring your dream closer. In it we've condensed everything we've learned from our 25 years of marital research and experience into a 12-hour program that will help you develop and protect a loving relationship. Whether you are happily married and want to stay that way, having issues you'd like help with, or planning to marry and want to know how to preserve all the great things about your relationship, the information in this book can help you make it happen.

Just 12 hours to a great marriage? We understand if you're a little skeptical. We want to say right up front that it's going to take more than 12 hours to develop a happy, deeply satisfying, loving, lasting marriage. In fact, you and your partner are going to have to commit to a lifetime of teamwork to have the relationship you really want. But the approximately 12 hours it takes to read this book and do the exercises can put you well on your way to making your dream come true.

If you're like most people, though, it might be hard for you to find even 12 hours to devote to this program. Life just keeps getting busier and busier. But if you want to celebrate your 50th wedding anniversary some day, carving out 12 hours now to help you make sure those 50 years are good ones doesn't seem like too much to ask.

To help you out, we've set things up so you don't have to find the 12 hours all at once. We've organized this book so you can work on its easy-to-understand, proven program just one hour at a time, one chapter at a time. We think you'll find each hour so full of real help and inspiration that you'll make the

time to do all 12 hours soon. But you don't have to stay up all night or go without food to get under way.

## **THINKING IN NEW WAYS**

Taking it an hour at a time is a wonderful way to start creating your dream partnership. So is thinking about marriage in a way you've probably never thought about it before—like (are you ready?) a great game of baseball!

Baseball? Baseball and marriage? Yes. Definitely. After working with thousands of couples to improve their relationships and prevent divorce, we think a good game of baseball has a whole lot in common with marriage. Here's what we've found they have in common:

- To succeed, you've got to work as a team.
- Each player must cover his or her own position.
- You've got to play by the rules.
- Good strategy can make the difference between winning and losing.
- All players need to keep up their skills.
- It's possible to strike out, but with hard work and determination you can hit a home run.
- Unsportsmanlike behavior can get you benched or thrown out.
- Sometimes you have to sacrifice.
- You're supposed to have a good time.
- There's no spitting allowed. (OK, we *wish* there were no spitting allowed.)

Do you see what we mean? Marriage and baseball really do have a lot in common. So as you work with this program, we suggest you think of baseball as a helpful comparison. By stepping up to the plate, digging in, and following the proven strategies you're going to learn here, your team can have a championship season.

## **WHY CAN IT BE HARD TO MAKE LOVE LAST?**

Experts often tell us that it's easy to fall in love but hard to stay there. But why should it be hard if lifelong love is what we desire?

The answer is that, since World War II, the institution of marriage has changed enormously. Before that time, the divorce rate was low: only adultery and abandonment were reasons to end a marriage. Men and women also had similar expectations about the roles they would play and the way they'd raise their family.

Today, things are much different. Women's roles have changed and expanded. People are more mobile, and much less likely to live near family or friends. And expectations for romance and passion have skyrocketed. For many people, there's a big gap between what they have and what they think they should have.

It's also gotten easier to end a marriage. That's good when the marriage is destructive. But it has also caused couples to believe that no marriage works well for the long term, so their marriage must be hopeless too.

Considering all these changes, it's not hard to see why many couples don't achieve the happy, committed marriage they long for.

What is the impact of not having these deep longings met in marriage? For many couples, it means feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and unsure. It also means that, to handle all the new choices and new issues marriage now involves, partners have to negotiate with each other. And the way they handle conflict and differences—part of *all* relationships—has a huge effect on the state of their marriage and the survival of their happiness. In other words, because conflict in any long-term relationship is inevitable, you have to figure out how to manage disagreements and solve problems in a way that protects and preserves your love.

## **WE'RE GOING TO COACH YOU**

In our clinical practices, we've seen many once-happy couples ruin their marriage by fighting in destructive ways. We've also heard them say that they wished they'd learned what we're teaching in this program much earlier in their lives.

Although nearly half of all marriages today end in divorce, yours doesn't have to be one of them. If you use the research-based, field-tested marriage enhancement strategies in this book, you *can* prevent divorce. You *can* increase your happiness.

So think of this book, and us, as your coach. We're going to help you develop your relationship skills, deepen your motivation, and improve your chances of having a happier and richer life with your partner, now and in the future.

## **OUR WINNING PROGRAM**

Just what is this book based on? It's based on a program called PREP®, which stands for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program. We developed PREP after years of in-depth research to show engaged and married couples how to build strong and happy marriages. We've used it to train, counsel, and coach thousands of couples in workshops and seminars over the years, most often through a 12-hour program like the one featured here. Our program has helped couples learn the skills and attitudes that our research shows lead to good relationships, and now we want to help you.

PREP's track record is great: we've helped many couples build their friendship, enhance their commitment, boost their fun, and reduce the negatives that can damage closeness. Because they work so well, our materials are used all around the world. Here in the United States, they're used in community settings, by government agencies, in religious institutions, and throughout the branches of the U.S. military. We're certain they're so successful because they're based on sound research findings from many respected social scientists as well as the continuing research we conduct at the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. They offer simple, straightforward knowledge that you can use to make a difference in your marriage.

Our approach isn't magic. And it isn't therapy or counseling. It's a program that tells you about, and has you practice, a number of simple, effective strategies to develop and protect the love and happiness you want in your relationship. It's a program to help you better your marriage and prevent divorce.

## **FOUR HALLMARKS OF A GREAT MARRIAGE**

Research has shown that the happiest, most deeply contented couples have four things in common, though they may demonstrate them in different ways:

1. They share friendship and love in many ways.
2. They treat each other with kindness and respect.

3. Both partners do their own part.
4. They're committed to staying together, even when it's no bed of roses.

We'll talk more about these ideas in Hours 1 through 12. But here, in a nutshell, is a bit about each.

## **Your Field of Dreams**

Remember the movie *Field of Dreams*? In it Kevin Costner plays a husband and father who is moved by mysterious forces to build a baseball field in Iowa. Even if you haven't seen the movie, you may remember the line, "If you build it, they will come." One way we summarize the four hallmarks of a great marriage is by using a baseball field. At first base, we have protecting and sharing friendship and love. Second base is treating each other respectfully when dealing with conflict. Third base is commitment to your marriage—keeping your relationship in first place. At the pitcher's mound is the centerpiece: doing your own part. If you build your field of dreams, you will always be "safe at home."

## **Sharing Friendship and Love**

When we ask people what they want in a lifelong mate, they often say, "A best friend." Most of us long for a partner who will love us and accept us no matter what.

Friendship is essential to a great marriage. In fact, friendship sustains marriage as much as passion does—maybe more. Romantic passion is wonderful, and later in the book we'll give you lots of ways to keep it alive. But there is probably no better way to keep love strong in your marriage than through friendship.

## **Treating Your Partner with Kindness and Respect**

All of us want to be honored and treated well—especially by our partner. But in reality most of us honor least the ones we love the most. When we get mad or frustrated or disappointed, we often take it out on the person closest to us. (We see you nodding!) And our research shows that couples who put each other down and are hostile to each other are the most likely to develop serious problems.

Problems are going to come up in every marriage. That's something you can count on. But when conflicts come up between the two of you, you don't have to react to them with anger or disrespect. And they don't have to put your marriage at risk. The approaches we teach in this book will show you how to prevent or stop destructive ways of handling conflict. They'll also show you how to solve problems with kindness, generosity, and good will—without your being afraid to say what you really think or worry about what might happen.

In other words, our methods for handling conflict should make you feel emotionally and physically safe—and that's essential for having a deeply connected, loving relationship.

### **Knowing and Doing Your Part**

To give your marriage the best chance to succeed, each of you needs to work on your part of the relationship. For example, if you think your spouse is being unfair to you, instead of yelling or doing something unfair back, you should do the most constructive thing you can think of. Your partner's poor behavior mustn't keep you from doing your all for the team—unless you're constantly being victimized. Then you need to seek out other help. (See *Getting More Help When There Are Serious Problems* at the end of the book).

Your partner's bad behavior also shouldn't justify bad behavior of your own. Far too often people feel justified hurting their loved ones because they feel hurt themselves.

Because your team is made up of two individuals, each of you will have the most control over your relationship by controlling your own thoughts and actions within it. But if you think you have to understand your behavior before you can control it, don't worry. Although it can be good to know why you do the things you do, you don't have to understand it completely right now.

Instead, you can start by being the best friend and partner you can be and acting in a loving way. Then, as you learn more, you can show your love in even more effective ways. Work to identify and decrease negative behaviors and increase positive ones. And remember that one part of loving well is accepting your partner for who he or she is.

The quizzes and exercises in each hour will help you learn to do your part as well as how to work together better as a team. We'll also give you advice on things that are best done together.

### **Three Important Ways to Do Your Part**\_\_\_\_\_

1. Regularly do things that will please your partner. It can be as simple as rubbing her back after a long day at her desk, if that's something you know she enjoys. Or it can be surprising him with tickets—for both of you—to see his favorite team's next home game.
2. Let negative or annoying comments roll off you. If something needs to be dealt with, do it when both of you are calm and you can discuss it in a constructive way.
3. Be the best person you can be. Take responsibility for your own issues, personal growth, appearance, and health. Make the effort to take good care of yourself and improve yourself, for your own sake and the sake of your marriage.

### **Committing to Staying Together**

When they marry, many couples think mainly about the here and now—the wedding, the honeymoon, setting up house. But marriage can and should last a lifetime. (Remember that line about “till death do us part”?) So PREP not only shows you how to change things for the better now but also helps you build a strong relationship for the long term. Our studies show that couples who do the best over the long term think and act in terms of lifelong love.

That means they're committed. And commitment makes some wonderful things happen. When you commit yourself to your marriage, you let your partner know that he or she can count on you—no matter what. That understanding brings you both a great sense of safety. It also brings a sense of permanence. That feeling of permanence—knowing that no matter what is said or done, it won't destroy the relationship—goes a long way to solving relationship problems.

As we take you through the program, we'll give you lots of suggestions for creating that sense of safety and permanence. We'll also encourage you to develop and take great care of the vision of your future together.

## THE BENEFITS OF A LASTING MARRIAGE

Although many of you may be reading this book to learn how to sustain an already good marriage, some of you may be reading it because you're experiencing pain.

Some marriages are destructive or even dangerous. Many others are not destructive, but one or both partners are in pain because they've drifted very far apart. If your marriage is physically dangerous, we don't have the advice that will make it safe. For that, we urge you to seek out a person who specializes in helping those in danger get to safety. But if you want to turn a drifting marriage around, much of our advice will be crucial. If the seed of hope is still there, you and your partner can use it to do amazing things together.

But why should you put in the effort? Because the benefits of a strong, lasting marriage are great, and the effects of divorce can be devastating:

1. Children, on average, do best when they're raised by two loving parents. But divorce can have lasting negative effects on children. Children of divorce—especially from families in which the parents fell out of love and the children didn't see the split coming—are more likely to find it hard to have close relationships as adults. They're also at greater risk for dropping out of high school, becoming pregnant in their teens, having mental health problems, and living in poverty.

But all children of divorce aren't doomed. Many do quite well. However, the odds that children will experience negative outcomes sometime in their lives go up with divorce.

It's unclear what effects divorce has on children whose parents have chronic, high levels of conflict, because conflict, in itself, is so damaging to children. Although children from divorced families are at increased risk compared to children raised by parents who get along well, children could be even worse off in life if instead of divorce they have to endure years of nasty conflicts between their parents. If you have children, the best thing you can do for them is also the best thing you can do for yourself and your partner: work to make your marriage strong and happy.

2. People who remain happily married tend to be happier in life and be healthier and live longer than other people. Ongoing marital strife can literally

make you sick, making you more likely to suffer from a variety of physical and mental health problems over time.

3. Long-term married couples are the most likely to be financially secure. In contrast, divorce can cause financial distress and, sometimes, disaster. Many divorced couples who lived comfortably when they were married can find themselves living at a much lower income level, perhaps even ending up in or near poverty.

If your marriage has become painful and difficult, we can't promise that you can turn it around. But we can tell you that many couples have. In fact, a recent survey showed that 34 percent of married people had been so unhappy at one point in their marriage that they'd thought about divorce. But 92 percent of those people said they were glad they had stayed and worked things out. You *can* turn things around, and our strategies have helped many couples do just that.

## **IT'S YOUR TURN AT BAT**

Even without our telling you, you probably know that marital unhappiness and divorce can cause great pain and damage. If you've been reading this introduction, you also know that we think it's possible to prevent divorce and be part of a happy and deeply committed relationship.

Should you work on the program on your own, or is it better to do it with your partner? The answer is, both ways work well. If you're reading this book by yourself, you'll find powerful ideas for helping your marriage individually. If you're working with your partner as a couple, you'll also find great suggestions for ways that both of you can take responsibility. If you are working as a couple, you and your partner may want to begin by agreeing to the following:

- You will work on your relationship as a team.
- You will not fight destructively during the course of the program.
- You will follow the program because you both want the relationship to work.
- You will keep fun and friendship in your partnership.
- You will do your part.
- You will try hard to make your partner feel safe.
- You will not say things that threaten the security of your marriage.

- You will focus on what you put into your relationship rather than what you get out of it.

Whether you're looking to strengthen your marriage on your own or with your partner, we're certain that the strategies we're about to teach you will help you think and act in ways that can turn your "I do's" into "We can."

Are you ready to get started? Let's go!

## HEADING FOR HOME

To help you create a lasting love, we've divided this book into 12 chapters based on the 12-hour program we provide to many couples in our workshops. Those chapters are grouped into four parts. Each part focuses on one of the PREP keys to success: handling conflict, making positive connections, forgiving, and making a long-term commitment.

### **Part One: Getting to First**

Part One focuses on managing conflict—essential for a smooth playing field. Here you'll learn that although many couples think it's their differences and disagreements that cause the big problems in their relationship, it's really *how they handle* those differences that's important.

Part One teaches you a simple way to handle relationship problems. It also alerts you to the major risks to your relationship and the danger signs to watch out for. Part One also covers the different (sometimes amazingly different!) ways that men and women handle conflict. And we provide specific techniques you can use right away to stop negative behavior patterns and talk without fighting. In addition we'll show you how everyday problems often cover deeper issues—and how to deal with both. We end the section by giving you a set of steps to use to solve problems, plus six simple ground rules that will let you solve problems without damaging your relationship.

### **Part Two: Reaching Second**

In Part Two you'll learn how important fun and sex are to the health and happiness of your marriage. If you've lost that loving feeling, or want to make it even stronger, the chapters in this section will give you ways to rediscover and

deepen it. We'll help you find the time to have fun together and keep conflict from ruining your party, and we'll even suggest activities if you're at a loss for enjoyable things to do. We'll also tell you how you can keep anxiety and conflict out of your physical relationship and how to talk about sex without fear.

Our research has shown that the positive connections you make through fun and sex will do much to strengthen your marriage. We've also found that talking about and building your core beliefs can also improve your connection, so we've included that information as well. Core beliefs can and do involve religious beliefs. But they also include the life-shaping ethics and ideals that people hold—such as the principles that guide the right way to behave.

In Part Two we'll give you specific ideas for enhancing your connections through community involvement. If you and your partner don't share the same religion or worldview, we'll show you how you can keep your differences from damaging your relationship.

### **Part Three: Rounding Third**

In Parts One and Two we talk about what you can do right now to get your marriage on the move. In Part Three we give you ideas that can help it go the distance.

Part Three discusses two issues that are key to a long-term happy marriage: expectations and forgiveness. Expectations—what we believe is going to happen—affect everything, from who's going to take out the garbage to what makes an enjoyable day. Our expectations come from our background and our experiences. Some are explicit and talked about publicly, some are assumed and never communicated out loud.

But what if you and your partner have hugely different expectations? We'll show you how to be aware of expectations, be reasonable and clear about what you expect, and meet your partner's expectations even if they're not your own.

Being in a relationship means you can get hurt from time to time. And when you get hurt, you may feel like striking back—or withdrawing, or denying there's a problem, or holding it against your partner. None of that helps. In fact, they can all make things worse. What does help, as we've seen time after time, is forgiving. Couples who forgive each other not only get over both minor and major hurts but also move forward—happily and together. We'll give you a step-by-step

method for working toward forgiveness and making it a rewarding part of your life.

#### **Part Four: Safe at Home**

In the last part we focus on two things that will keep your marriage strong and secure for the long term: friendship and commitment. Although sex and passion are definitely important, we've learned that deep friendship between partners will help them go the distance. But being a friend can sometimes be hard, when you're also a lover, mother or father, PTA president, office manager, and dinner maker. So we give you powerful techniques for renewing, deepening, and protecting friendship in your marriage.

Commitment is one of the most important parts of this program. That's because couples need to believe that their relationship will last forever if they are going to take risks, open up to their partner, and put in the effort that will get them around the bases. We'll tell you what other couples do to develop a sense of "us." We'll also give you ways to dedicate yourselves to your shared future.

### **THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS BOOK**

Each chapter in this book should take about an hour to read, take the quiz, and do the exercises. If you're reading this book as a couple, either out loud or taking turns, we encourage you both to read each chapter before doing the exercises. A key part of the program is learning and working as a team. Moving through it together will give you lots of chances to talk about the information as well as put it into practice.

But what if you're all set to read the book and start using the techniques, and your partner doesn't want to? We encourage you to talk with your fiancé or spouse about how marriage is a partnership—there are two of you in it—and that successful partnerships need both partners to participate. It's much more likely that your marriage will be sweet if both of you work to make it that way. You should also point out that our program is based on research and the experiences of successful couples, and ask your partner to read the section "Our Winning Program," above.

If your partner isn't interested in reading and using the book, take heart. You can still do the program on your own and see great results. Each chapter

includes a quiz to do on your own, a chance to write about your reaction to the information, and exercises that are relevant to your situation. What *you* learn and put into practice will have a positive effect on your relationship, because when one partner makes a change, the partnership changes. What you do on your own can bring about a happier marriage for both of you.

Once you're ready to start, we encourage you to suit up with confidence. If you're sure you're headed for divorce court and that nothing can help, you may very well end up there. Or if you think you've already achieved a good marriage but that a great one is out of reach, you may stay right where you are.

The good news is that many couples who follow this program have found lasting love and happiness in a deeply committed relationship. If you think you can, you can do it too. Although we make no promises, we believe that by using the skills you'll learn here, you will greatly increase your chances of not only staying together but staying joyously together.

We're rooting for the home team.

We asked happy couples to divulge the secrets of a happy marriage. Take away some awesome tips and advice on how you can make your marriage a success. Would you like to know the secret sauce to a happy and long-lasting marriage, especially from those happily married couples who have aced the art of leading a happy relationship? We unveil 15 secrets of a successful marriage that will help you problem-solve the marital issues, disarm the conflicting spouse and help you create and maintain a successful marriage.