



*Willie & Elaine Oliver*

REAL  
*Family Talk*  
Answers to Questions About Love, Marriage, and Sex



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## Awfully Wedded

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*My husband and I don't have a very good marriage. The first few months after our wedding we had a lot of fun and got along quite well. Since then, things have gone south. We seem to disagree with each other in every conversation, and since the children arrived—we have two boys—it has just added to the stress in our marriage, and our lack of peaceful conversations with each other. If things don't get better soon between us, I may not be able to stay in this marriage much longer. Please help! We can't talk to each other anymore.*

Effective communication is essential to the survival of every marriage. If we were to look at marriage as a living organism, good communication would be like healthy blood running through every cell in the system to remain viable. And if marriage were a car engine, good communication would be like oil with enough viscosity to keep the parts well lubricated in order to function well.

One of the greatest challenges in married life—once the honeymoon is over—is for couples to engage in frequent conversation that is calm, civil, constructive, affirming, peaceful, and understanding. It is a delusion to believe getting along well before marriage means you will continue to do so after marriage. It is amazing how much stress, tension, and trouble a few dishes that need washing, bills that need paying, floors that need sweeping, and babies who need feeding can bring to an otherwise wonderful and blissful marriage.

Good communication is not a skill we often bring to marriage. Most of us came up in families in which voices were raised—sometimes more than just a little—when people disagreed with each other. This unfortunate legacy must be discarded to survive the rigors of real life in marriage.

There are two elements that are particularly important to having good communication in marriage, or any other meaningful relationship: making it clear and making it safe.

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Quite frequently lack of clarity causes miscommunication in marriage. Many of the most heated arguments take place because a husband or wife failed to understand what his or her spouse meant to say, making things very unclear and leaving spouses very angry at each other.

Having a great marriage means that both husband and wife should be able to express their feelings, beliefs, concerns, and preferences clearly without damaging the relationship in the process. For this to happen, each spouse must feel safe to share what is on his or her mind, which can be accomplished only in an environment in which each spouse is careful about not hurting the feelings of the other.

To accomplish these two important concepts that are essential to great communication, there should be an agreement to (1) listen first and talk second. (2) Resist the urge to defend yourself. (3) Paraphrase what your spouse is saying to make sure you understand each other and are on the same page. (4) Share the process so you both have an opportunity to listen and speak to each other. (5) Pray for patience, a willing heart to resolve your differences to satisfaction, and a desire to give honor and glory to God in the process.

The Bible states in Proverbs 25:11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” Determine that every time you speak to your spouse it will be like giving him a gift of gold and silver, so your conversation with each other will find new joy and peace, and be a blessing to your children and their children.

### **How to Cope With Mental Illness in the Family**

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*A few months ago my husband of ten years had a mental breakdown and attempted to commit suicide. He was committed to a psychiatric hospital and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I always expected marriage to be challenging and was prepared to deal with that, but nothing prepared me to deal with a spouse with mental illness. I'm struggling with whether or not to leave him. I want my kids and me to be safe. What should I do?*

While you are the only person who can ultimately decide how to handle your present situation, we hope the following information will guide you in making the decision that is best for you and your family.

Mental illness can be a devastating stressor for any marriage or family. For too long, mental illness has been the “silent” illness in many faith communities. Unfortunately, this silence has caused many to go undiagnosed and untreated, and has left family members unprepared to deal with a very real, and sometimes destructive, illness.

When a family member is diagnosed with a lifelong, life-threatening illness, it can scare a spouse away or leave parents and other family members in distress. According to the article “Managing Bipolar Disorder” in the November 2003 *Psychology Today*, in marriages in which a person has bipolar disorder it is estimated that 90 percent of these marriages end in divorce. Studies suggest that nearly half of the people living with bipolar disorder attempt killing themselves. The unpredictability and instability of volatile emotions of someone with mental illness can lead to insecurity and fragility in the marriage and the family.

In spite of daunting statistics, many marriages and families have survived living with a spouse or family member with mental illness. Recently it has become far too common for people to say of someone who is behaving strangely, “Oh, that person is bipolar.” Most people would not easily recognize signs of mental illness, and just because someone is a little moody may not necessarily mean he is bipolar. What is important is to identify if a spouse, child, or other loved one behaves in erratic and unpredictable ways that create a lot of tension and instability in the family. When you identify such disruptions, getting help from a professional counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist is critical.

Early intervention and proper diagnosis and treatment are important first steps in managing mental illness. As a supporting spouse or caregiver, educate yourself as much as possible on the person’s illness. Spouses and families must also develop coping strategies and safety plans for the person with the illness and for the rest of the family. For someone who has attempted suicide and survived, it may take weeks, and maybe even months, before medication and therapy reduce his suicidal feelings. Empathy, kindness, and support from loved ones are a valuable part of treatment. Of course, this may be extremely difficult for loved ones who are confused, frightened, and angry themselves. Learning to cope with

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both the behavior of the mentally ill person and one's own reactions to that behavior often requires counseling for a spouse and the rest of the family as well.

One huge advantage for the Christian who is living with a mentally ill relative is faith in God. Recent studies have affirmed that a person's faith plays an important role in helping such an individual cope with challenges in his or her life—including helping family members cope with the stress of caring for a mentally ill relative. However, this faith has to be intrinsic, rather than extrinsic; meaning, the person must truly believe what he or she claims to believe. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

We hope our response will help you and others in similar circumstances. Beyond that, always remember the promise of God in Isaiah 41:10, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

### Making Differences Work

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*I am an introvert, and my wife an extrovert. I like to spend time with her but also like to read and spend time quietly. She likes to talk all the time. When we do things my way, she feels lonely and abandoned. When we do things her way, I feel drained. How can we meet both of our needs and feel good about each other?*

**Y**our question is thoughtful and timely. What is remarkable about your situation is that you and your wife made it through dating and actually decided to get married despite the obvious differences you see now. What happened? This is the question many couples are asking. What was special when you dated that made you overlook these significant differences? Why is it a concern now?

The truth is, your dilemma is very common in marriage. When you are dating, opposites attract. However, in marriage we tend to be much more honest with ourselves, knowing that our situation is meant to be for

life. Here is where the differences are no longer attractive; they become annoying, and we are not as quick to overlook them.

To some degree this happens to every couple, because we all have different temperaments. In psychology the notion identified as temperament is that part of a person's disposition that they were born with, which makes them an introvert or an extrovert. Essentially, this is what is going on with you and your wife. You are naturally different. You don't behave that way on purpose to annoy the other; it is the way you both instinctively behave.

Now that you are married and life has set in, your respective temperaments have become much more noticeable to each other. Now that the chase is over—which often makes us too excited to notice the differences—and you have come down from cloud nine, which is much more real in relationships than we realize, you can actually notice the differences.

In order to remain happy and satisfied in your marriage, you and your wife need to sit down and talk openly about your differences, preferably with a good marriage counselor if your relationship has deteriorated to the point you can only shout and scream about this matter. Acknowledge your differences, and decide how you are going to manage them. “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

Because you love and are committed to each other, you can make this work. Marriage behaves like everything else in life: you have to conquer the rough spots to really enjoy what is important in what you are involved in. Also, find strength in the reality that married couples all over the world have also experienced what you are going through.

Thank God for your spouse, and by His strength allow Him to use these differences to help you grow stronger in your faith, and in your love for each other.

## **Let's Talk, Please**

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*My husband never wants to talk about any subject that causes conflict. I can change myself, but I can't solve our problems by myself. What do you suggest?*

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Understanding that you can change only yourself puts you in a unique place to do well in relationships. Most people waste much energy and time trying to change their mate, only to be utterly disappointed with the reality that there is nothing they can do to make that happen. On the other hand, we feel your frustration about wanting to clear the air about issues in your relationship while thinking your husband has no interest.

Ask yourself why your husband seems reluctant to talk about issues you often disagree about. Is it possible that when you are not getting along there are bad feelings between you for a long time? Or, perhaps, when you speak about disagreements your conversation tends to escalate out of control, and you say things you later regret that further distance you from each other? Most men want to have peace at home, avoiding any kind of “drama” at all cost.

From the beginning of time, our ancestors—Adam and Eve—were fearful of dealing with differences. This is the reason they covered themselves when they first sinned. They concealed those parts of their bodies that were the most different. Little did they know, those differences were the very places God wanted them to find the greatest joy. As fallen humans we have inherited this legacy from our first parents, and continue to encounter challenges in this area. Managing differences is the most challenging reality in marriage.

The truth is, when a married couple takes the time to talk about their differences (conflicts) in a controlled and calm way, the results are often outstanding. In order for this to happen, couples need to learn to communicate effectively—not an easy task, even for the best of us. As a rule we tend to believe we are right and our mate is wrong. This is the reason we get upset, making it very difficult to talk to each other in a kind and gentle voice.

Make up your mind that you will approach areas of conflict in your marriage in a calm and agreeable way. Start with issues that are pretty simple, those you can handle relatively easily. When you solve these seemingly insignificant differences, your marriage relationship will experience greater intimacy. The more closeness you experience with your husband, the easier it will be for him to talk with you about other areas of conflict. The more you clear the air between you, the stronger and more satisfying your relationship will become, creating an environment of greater trust and openness to deal with more issues.

This approach will not solve your problems overnight. However, the more patience you exercise, the more successful and rewarding your marital relationship will be. When you create this kind of home environment, you will be a blessing to your children, to your neighbors, and to your friends. This is very difficult to do. Ask God for the strength (Matthew 7:7), and you will be victorious.

We hope you and your husband will experience greater peace and a renewed marriage relationship. We are praying for you.

## Life After an Empty Nest

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*When you become empty nesters, how do you keep or reignite the spark in your marriage?*

The level of health of every marriage relationship is based on the habits the spouses practice toward each other on a consistent basis. If a husband and wife are kind, understanding, patient, spiritual, nice, dependable, honest, thoughtful, forgiving, helpful, and make their marriage relationship a priority, marriage will be a little heaven on earth. The opposite is also true. By being irritable, impatient, sarcastic, unforgiving, selfish, dishonest, undependable, mean, spiteful, cruel, disconnected, and not making marriage their priority relationship, this type of marriage will become conflicted and devitalized.

What is commonly known as empty-nest syndrome is a sensation of loneliness felt by parents or other adult caretakers (guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and so on) when one or more of their children leave home to go to school, get married, or simply move out on their own. While these feelings of loneliness are more likely to be experienced by women, men often experience them as well. These feelings develop when parents feel they are becoming less influential in the lives of their children, while the authority or influence of others (professors, spouses, friends, and so on) seems to be growing.

It is essential for married men and women to understand that marriage needs to be the primary relationship in their lives. As much as one loves



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one's mother and/or father, when one gets married, the spouse becomes the highest priority relationship after God. This is not our opinion; it is God's directive. In Genesis 2:24, God says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This means marriage is the only relationship under the sun in which we get to become one with another person. We cannot (must not) become one with our son or daughter; that oneness is reserved for only our spouse.

When children are born to a married couple there is a tendency for the child (or children) to become the focus of primary attention. Because babies are helpless and need the attentiveness of responsible adults to survive and thrive, we have the predisposition to go overboard and become careless with each other. If husband or wife feels justified in taking this approach the marriage relationship will take a back seat and naturally deteriorate. If not caught early, this pattern may continue until the child or children leave home, rendering marriage a distant, often cold, and spark-free relationship.

If you are married and still child free, follow the counsel we gave in the first paragraph by being intentional about making your spouse your priority relationship, even when children come. If you follow this course, when your children leave home you will still have each other for support, love, and affection, and the spark will still be in your marriage. If you have done differently, have a serious conversation with your spouse about the reality of your marital relationship. Ask your spouse for forgiveness, then find a good Christian counselor who can help you talk through the hurt and pain of the past in order to get a new perspective on the type of marriage you want to have. Dealing with this matter with the help of the right professional will clear the way to reignite the spark you once had.

Trust God to develop the kind of marriage relationship He meant for you to have. We are praying for you.

### **A Preview of Reality**

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*I just got married two months ago to my on-again, off-again boyfriend of six years. During our dating we often argued about his computer game habit. I thought that when we got married it would change. But it's the same, and it*

*has gotten even worse. Since he hasn't finished college, I enrolled him in an online course last year, with his consent, but until now he has not completed one lesson. I thought that he would study now that we are married, but his attitude toward studying is still the same as it was before we got married. We have worship frequently for about fifteen minutes each time, he then rushes to continue his online games until he gets tired. I don't know what to do for him to minimize his playing online games. It is gradually wrecking our marriage. I am trying to understand him but just don't know how. My husband is thirty-four and I am thirty-two. Please help me to work out this marriage.*

**W**e were saddened to hear your story but pleased that you reached out to us. Like you, many young adults make the mistake of marrying someone who has glaring flaws they think will disappear after marriage. Most people do not change very much after marriage. Like your husband, men who played video games incessantly before marriage invariably continue that behavior after marriage. The same is true about their interest or lack of interest in school or work. The best predictor of what your mate will be like after marriage is what your mate is like before marriage. You must realize that you cannot be your husband's mother and that you cannot change him. You cannot decide it is time for him to finish school, or for him to work longer hours, or for him to quit playing video games. These habits will change only if your husband determines he wants to change. You have absolutely no power to change your husband.

We suggest you take this matter to the Lord in prayer. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Ask Him to help you change your attitude and the way you approach your husband. Since you chose to marry him, love him unconditionally and accept him for who he is. Once your husband feels accepted it will be much easier to speak with him and encourage him to get professional help.

Claim God's promise never to leave you alone (Matthew 28:20), to keep you in perfect peace (John 14:27), and to supply all your needs (Philippians 4:19). You will continue to be in our prayers.