



The Incredible
Journey

I4
STEPS
TO A

HAPPY MARRIAGE

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14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

Every couple that walks down the aisle and exchanges wedding vows hopes for a long and happy marriage – but most of us have little idea about how to make it happen. Many of us assume that because we're in love, because we share common values and dreams, we've got everything required for a lasting marriage.

Then the reality of living with another person hits home – and we soon realise that marriage has its ups and downs. For many married couples, falling in love, walking down the aisle and saying “I do”, was the easy part. Living happily ever after is the part that's the real challenge and takes a whole lot of work, patience and commitment.

2 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

When we plan to build a house, it's important to establish a strategy for the project and make careful plans. We engage an architect. We hire a builder. We get expert advice. We follow instructions. We invest a lot of time and effort to ensure success. But when it comes to building a lasting marriage, many couples don't invest the same time, energy and effort to ensure its success.

Our marriages deserve our very best efforts. We need to invest in them and do all we can to improve and strengthen them. It's worth it. It will bring happiness. The question is, where do we begin? Where can we find expert advice and instruction?

The best place to begin is God's Word, the Bible. God is the ultimate authority on marriage. After all, marriage was His idea. He instituted the marriage union between a husband and a wife. The Bible has so many vital words of life, so many practical answers for building rich, abundant, personal relationships, and in particular, happy, lifelong marriages. And not only that, the validity of this Bible advice is

continually being backed up and supported by contemporary sociological research. Yes, the Bible was right all along!

So, whether you would like to make a happy marriage even happier, or are hoping for one someday, God's original blue-print for a happy and lasting marriage is worth investigating and implementing. And remember, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain (Psalm 127:1).

Step 1:
**LET YOUR HEART HAVE AN
UNSHAKEABLE HOPE FOR YOUR
MARRIAGE**

Read:

- Psalm 31:24
- Proverbs 13:12
- Hebrews 11:1-6

Without a doubt, the dream of a happy marriage is one of the most consistent longings of the human heart. Forget the bleak statistics we've seen, forget the bad rap that committed, lifelong marriage gets in the media – we want to marry our best friend, then enjoy our spouse and enjoy being married. And many people do! So, what makes the difference?

The Bible has so many vital words of life, so many practical answers for building a rich, abundant, lifelong marriage. And it is awe-inspiring to see that social research findings “reveal” what the Bible has said all along.

In all our research with thousands of men and women, there is one bottom-line common

denominator among marriages that survive versus those that fail: hope. The feeling that we can and will make it. This is the courage of those who hope not in themselves, but in the Lord. And for a great marriage, it is this we must never give up.

When trouble and pain press in on every side, many couples become depressed and deceived by the feeling that there is no hope. They are tricked by the frequently quoted but incorrect idea that half of all marriages end in divorce. They worry, “If half of all other marriages can’t make it, what makes us so special?” and they give up as their courage slips away – due to a lie that is tailor-made to steal our hope.

Don’t let it. That myth has been debunked. The vast majority of marriages last a lifetime. This miraculous institution that God has created to mirror the relationship between Jesus and His church, still works (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:21-32). God is still working. You can trust in Him, even when you cannot trust yourself or your spouse.

6 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

But you must live in that hope. Even if you are the only one clinging to that hope – CLING.

You also must walk in the faith of things not yet seen, doing what you are called to do, as if the answer is guaranteed. We all know that in this fallen world there ARE no guarantees. But the power of our hope in God is so transformative, so life-giving that if even one partner is fighting for the marriage, if even one person won't give up, if even one person does what they can do regardless of whether their spouse does the same... it is not only possible for that marriage to survive and thrive, it is *likely*.

Not to mention what the marriage can do and be once it is back on solid footing! After all, God's perfect design for marriage is one of supernatural closeness and joy. So, whether you have a wonderful marriage already, or are hoping for one someday, step out in courage to do what the Bible asks each day – and have hope for that abundant outcome.

Step 2:
**ASK GOD TO OPEN YOUR EYES TO WHAT
YOU MOST NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR
SPOUSE**

Read:

- Proverbs 24:3-4
- Romans 12:1-2

It is common in marriage to pray for wisdom and understanding – but when was the last time you prayed for knowledge?

It turns out we need to. In the Bible – and in the research – it is clear that it is usually not the big-ticket *issues* (in-laws, money, sex) that cause the problems in a marriage – or which lead to mutual delight. It is how we *handle* those things. It is the daily unspoken beliefs, assumptions, and practices that make the difference *regardless* of the big issues.

The vast majority of people in our research – more than 99% – deeply care about their mate. Even in difficult marriages! We are trying hard, but we simply don't know some of the things

8 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

that matter most to our mate. We don't "get" some of their deepest needs. We honestly don't recognise their hidden vulnerabilities, fears and insecurities. So, we are trying hard in the wrong areas. Or worse, we hurt them without intending to.

So, we get upset and demoralised, thinking *She doesn't appreciate everything I do for her.* Or, *He doesn't care about me.* We respond defensively, or out of hurt – and the whole thing spirals down.

For example, a husband might be working sixty-hour weeks to provide for his wife and say "I love you" – but what if that makes her (like seven out of ten women) feel abandoned because what she most needs is his presence? Or a wife might be exhausting herself late into the night to make sure the house is clean and beautiful for him – but what if what he most needs (like nine out of ten men) is their intimate time together?

We need to SEE those things that matter, so we can direct our efforts to the right areas. This is

how we can avoid causing tragic, unnecessary hurt to the person we care about most.

Are the rooms of your house filled with joy and delight? Or with confusion and heartache? The Bible says it is through the right knowledge that our life together will be filled with rare and precious treasures.

Ask God today to open your eyes to see the things that matter most, that you just didn't see before. They are often small. But they are immensely powerful, and – for you and me – nearly priceless.

Step 3:
**CHOOSE TO ALWAYS LOOK FOR THE
BEST IN YOUR SPOUSE'S INTENTIONS**

Read:

- 1 Corinthians 13:7
- James 2:13

Every day in our relationships, there will be moments when we are hurt. And that will certainly happen in the most intimate relationship of all. But when someone causes us pain, our human tendency is to ascribe a hurtful motive. They hurt me, therefore they don't really care about me.

You had the perfect romantic date planned last night, but your husband worked late, and you missed your dinner reservation. You can't wait to surprise your wife after spending all day Sunday repainting the bathroom - she's been asking for a while now. But she is disappointed the colour isn't right.

He doesn't care. She doesn't appreciate me.
Those thoughts are so subconscious we may

not even realise that's what we're assuming – but that is why we're hurt. It turns out that one of the main things making people unhappy in marriage is believing the “he/she doesn't care” lie that just isn't true. Because in the vast majority of those surveyed, even in struggling marriages the spouses deeply care for one another. But to have an abundant marriage, *you have to believe that truth even when you're hurt.*

This is where we remember what God's Word asks: rather than judging the situation and our spouse for the hurt they have caused, we can choose to believe the best of their intentions. Even when there is a very real issue to work through, it doesn't mean they do not care. We can choose to let mercy triumph and let love reign. Just as He showed us mercy and love in our moments of weakness, we can do the same for our spouse!

Sure, we may *feel* hurt, disappointed, or angry, but we can make the choice to believe what is almost certainly the truth: that our husband or wife really does have our best interests at

12 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

heart regardless of what our emotions – or the situation – might be telling us at the time.

When we allow God's love and mercy to flow through us to our spouse, we will find less conflict, more grace, quicker forgiveness and much more delight at home.

Step 4:
**DOING THE “LITTLE THINGS” IN LOVE
MATTERS BIG TIME**

Read:

- 1 Corinthians 13:3-5
- Ephesians 5:33

We all care deeply about our spouses. We want to “love” them well. But so much of the confusion and heartache in marriage comes because we are not making the other person FEEL cared for in the way we think we are. Or we’re even hurting them and not realising it! Doing “all the right things” that we think should be important to the other person – in other words, insisting on loving our spouse in our own way – really gains us nothing if it doesn’t signal love to them.

And what we found in the research is that there are different little actions that deeply matter to the opposite sex – but which we tend not to know are important. If you will learn and do those little day-to-day things, it will help your spouse believe in a deep-down way that you

14 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

truly care about them.

For example, wives: notice the little day-to-day things your spouse does and say, “Thank you.” This is the emotional equivalent of him saying “I love you!” “Thank you for putting the laundry away.” “Thank you for mowing the lawn even though it was so hot outside.” “Thank you for putting the kids to bed. You’re such a good dad.” Sincerely saying “Thank you” several times a day soothes his deep (and hidden) self-doubt about whether he measures up. It makes him feel appreciated and respected – which is what he needs, in order to feel cared for.

Or, husbands: take your wife’s hand when you are walking across a parking lot or put your arm around her when you are sitting together at church. Regardless of what her ‘love language’ is, those gestures deeply please the vast majority of women I’ve surveyed, because they relay the all-important message that, “You’re mine” and “I would choose you all over again.” Yes, it seems so simple, but it is a priceless reassurance of your love; a signal that soothes her hidden question about

whether she is lovable and whether you really do love her.

These daily little comments and actions may seem so simple or minor that it is easy to discount them – *but don't*. They are so powerful that they can transform a relationship even if only one person does them! Why? Because they signal how you feel in a way that your spouse will actually understand and absorb – and which builds a deep confidence in his or her heart that 'my spouse truly does care about me'.

Step 5:
RECOGNISE WHEN SLEEPING ON IT
MIGHT BE SMARTER AFTER ALL

Read:

- Ephesians 4:26
- Psalm 4:4

We've all heard: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." So late at night, when we're tired, anxious and emotionally drained from a contentious "discussion", we continue to hash it out.

"No, we can't go to sleep", we tell our spouse, "We have to resolve this!" Most of us have heard happy couples say "never go to bed mad" but it turns out they don't follow their own advice! In the research, when pressed on what they actually do, these wise couples admitted that when they are getting emotional and upset, they sometimes realise it is better just to go to bed. And that strengthens their relationship instead of weakening it.

Why? Well, it turns out that Ephesians 4:26, is taken much out of context. Here's the full

verse: *“Be angry, yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”* It turns out that Paul is quoting a verse from the Psalms: *“Don’t sin by letting anger control you. Think about it overnight and remain silent”* (Psalm 4:4, New Living Translation).

You might want to read that again.

The Bible never says, “Don’t get mad” or even “Don’t go to bed mad”. The key is not to sin – to never let anger get the best of you and cause you to hurt someone else. The happiest couples have found that, if they are too tired or upset to come to a peaceful resolution, putting an unresolved issue on hold is not sinful. What would be sinful is trying to not address an issue and holding on to your fury at your spouse. What would be sinful is escalating to hurtful words, or until an exhausted spouse agrees to something they will later regret.

“A person finds joy in giving an apt reply — and how good is a timely word!” says Proverbs 15:23. And that is certainly easier after a night of rest.

18 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

In fact, the pressure to resolve it right now can be even less fair to a husband who, like most men, may need some time to process what he's thinking and feeling so he can truly feel heard... and so you both can get to a better resolution the next day. And that, it turns out, is the key difference between the happiest marriages and those that are struggling. Happily married couples sometimes go to bed with the issue unresolved; but if the issue is still a concern the next day, they deal with it. The problem comes when we avoid something hurtful and hope it just goes away.

So, the next time you're up late, weary from trying to bring closure to an issue, don't feel guilty about thinking about it overnight and remaining silent. Chances are, you'll see more clearly in the morning. There's even a good chance that that major issue won't seem so major to you anymore.

Step 6:
**KEEP SCORE... OF WHAT YOUR SPOUSE
IS GIVING**

Read:

- 2 Timothy 1:3
- Luke 17:11-19

According to 1 Corinthians 13:5, love is not self-seeking and keeps no record of wrongs. But it turns out, love does keep record of rights! The happiest couples do keep score: they just keep score very differently. In the research, the spouses who became the happiest in their marriages – including many who were once miserable – said that their relationships had turned around because they started keeping track of what their mate was giving.

Once these folks noticed how much their mates did for them, wanting to do something, anything, to give back came very naturally. After all, how could they not try to compensate when they realised how much they truly owed their spouse?

This pattern was particularly clear and important

during seasons when one spouse was having a particularly difficult go of it at work, or with the kids, or whatnot. It was almost a feeling of “Wow, he has been working really long hours, and it’s causing him so much stress! How can I make things easier for him? Maybe I’ll bring him a dinner every few days, so he doesn’t have to worry about getting home for dinner and can relax a bit.”

As a result of noticing what their spouse was giving, the person “keeping score” began to feel a great debt of gratitude. “He’s such a great provider, I really owe him my thanks.” So those “I’ll bring him dinner” type actions were coming out of the heart instead of out of a sense of duty. And since there was such a sincere awareness of how much the other person was giving during that time, they also weren’t looking for praise in return. How are you doing in keeping score of what your partner is giving? In almost every marriage, even when there are real issues, each partner does wonderful things that are worth noticing and which will make you want to “give back”. But you have to notice those things first!

It may not come naturally at first but keeping score in that way will be one skill you'll be grateful you learned!

Step 7:
**THINK ABOUT WHAT IS WORTHY OF
PRAISE... NOT WHAT IS WORTHY OF
DRIVING YOU CRAZY**

Read:

- Philippians 4:4-9

Have you ever found yourself discontented or frustrated by something your spouse is doing – or not doing? OK, there's probably no need to ask! Here's the better question: how did you handle it? Because following the Biblical prescription for handling those feelings is one of the most important keys to having an abundant, happy marriage.

Guys, say you've been exhausting yourself by working extra hours over the weekend and you ask your wife to record the game so you can watch it as soon as you get home. Even though you asked several times, you arrive only to discover that she completely forgot about it.

You're angry, but even as the smoke starts

billowing out of your ears, you remember: this is the same woman who always cooks you dinner, makes sure the kids' homework is done, stays on top of the laundry...!

The more you think about it, the more you realise what a minor issue the game is. You actually have a pretty amazing wife.

What just happened? You were thinking on what was worthy of praise, rather than what was worthy of driving you crazy. This is what the happiest couples do. They don't simply "exercise control" over the nasty feelings – they learn how to change those feelings and talk themselves out of being mad! In fact, two-thirds of these couples said it becomes such a habit that they usually *stop that negative train of thought before they get too bothered to begin with*.

It turns out that our feelings actually follow our actions, not the other way around. If we want to feel better, happier, more content we can refuse to dwell on our negative feelings and rehearse the positive that is always

24 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

there somewhere (even if the steam coming out of our ears makes it difficult to remember sometimes!).

In fact, let's be honest: Either direction our thoughts go (the negative or the positive) is a choice, right? And we're told which choice to make: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.... And the God of peace will be with you."

God isn't just trying to distract us from the annoyances of life. He created us with the ability to change our feelings by wilfully changing our minds. So, the next time you're frustrated with your mate, refuse to let those feelings control you and think about whatever is praiseworthy about your spouse instead. You'll be amazed at how your feelings change!

Step 8:
**CELEBRATE WHAT YOUR SPOUSE CAN
GIVE, RATHER THAN FOCUSING ON
EXPECTATIONS THAT ARE DIFFICULT OR
IMPOSSIBLE FOR THEM TO MEET**

Read:

- Proverbs 10:28
- James 4:1-3

One main reason for unhappiness in any area of life is expecting something, but then finding that the expectation is not met. Have you ever seen that in marriage? As King Solomon put it in Proverbs, *“The hopes of the godly result in happiness, but the expectations of the wicked come to nothing.”*

You might be thinking, *Wicked? That’s not me!* But the wise author of Proverbs often uses stark either-or language to help us see a pattern that is anything less than pure and godly. So, here’s our revised question for you:

Do you have any ongoing expectations of your spouse that you think make perfect sense, but

which your spouse finds difficult or impossible to meet? Have you ever found yourself unhappy because you're focusing on the fact that your spouse isn't doing the things you wish they would do – or is doing things you wish they wouldn't do?

Ah. All of us have certain things that come naturally – and all have things that are very difficult to do consistently, or which take a long time to learn. Instead of continually expecting something and then getting hurt or upset when it doesn't happen, those in the happiest marriages recognise when they might be expecting something a bit unrealistic from their spouse. They stop themselves from thinking something like, *If he really loved me, he would.... Or, If she really appreciated me, she wouldn't....*

Even better, these happy spouses choose to focus on their mate's great qualities and appreciate what they can do. For example, a wife may think instinctively, "If he really loved me, he would give me a big hug when I am

upset with him.” This could be replaced with, “*He is probably confused and upset himself and needs to get away and process*”. So, she responds with grace and decides to not get hung up on that. Instead she appreciates the way he is always willing to come back and talk about things the next day.

Also, realise your mate doesn't have psychic abilities! Maybe you hoped your wife would spice things up for your anniversary getaway by buying a special, intimate outfit. Instead of getting frustrated that she didn't, realise: How could she have known? If there's something we want or need from our spouses, we have to say something.

There is a difference between expecting a loving partnership and expecting your spouse to do the impossible. The good news is if you look to God – not your spouse – as the source of your happiness, you will find it much easier to celebrate what your spouse can deliver and set aside those things that they can't. And you will find that BOTH of you are much happier in the end!

Step 9:
**MUTUALLY RECONNECT WITH AND
FORGIVE YOUR SPOUSE AFTER
CONFLICT**

Read:

- Genesis 32:13-20
- Genesis 33:4-11
- Matthew 18:21-35
- Colossians 3:13

When it comes to marriage, how you end a fight is just as important as how you avoid one, because disagreements are inevitable. When you and your mate experience hurt feelings and conflict, it is vitally important both to signal the forgiveness that God commands of us and the acceptance of being forgiven. One of the most effective ways to do that is to share a private signal that says, “We’re okay.”

So many of the happy couples that were interviewed said that they had their own secret language to say, “I’m sorry” and “We’re OK”. One reason many couples went from

troubled to strong in their relationship was this habit of mutual reconnection after hurt feelings. These signals don't necessarily mean the problem itself has been resolved, but they let both spouses know that *in spite of the problem*, the relationship is okay.

What were these signals? They ranged from a basic statement ("are we okay?" "yeah, we're okay") all the way to silly little private-language elements that would only make sense to them. Some husbands and wives touched pinkie fingers, some had a funny phrase they shared to make the other person crack up, some had great make-up sex, but almost all of them had their own way of reassuring each other that they were choosing to get over their hard feelings, and their relationship was still strong.

Does "moving on" without making up have the same effect? Well... 70 percent of the happy couples sent these signals, where only 22 percent of the so-so or struggling couples did. It makes a difference.

It also makes a difference if we are willing to receive a signal, not just initiate it – which is why *mutual* signals are so important. There's a great example in Genesis 32-33 when Jacob realises that he has deeply cheated and offended his brother. Using a cultural signal his brother would instantly 'get', he sends before him a very generous gift to show he is reaching out for reconciliation. Esau is overjoyed, and gladly accepts his offering. *Both* people know "we're okay".

Do you sometimes find yourself struggling to not hold on to your hard feelings? To ask for forgiveness? To accept it? If we want to be happy in our marriages, we need to be willing to give the "all clear" signal and be willing to accept it.

Step 10:
GIVE THE GIFT OF TIME

Read:

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- John 15:4-11

God designed marriage to be the most close and intimate of all friendships: at the most basic level, our spouse should be our best friend.

What is the most important factor for creating good friends of any type? You might be surprised to learn that the greatest predictor of close friendships is not shared values or personality: it is geographic proximity. You're simply closest to the people you see the most often.

It works the same in marriage, which is why the happiest couples have learned that if they want a close marriage, they need to hang out a lot! Or at least spend time together via phone or email if they are separated by many miles.

More than eight in ten of the happiest couples said they made it a point to spend time together at least weekly, and usually much more often. And although an official date night was nice, their “together time” was often more informal. These couples made choices like driving together to a child’s soccer practice – just to hang out. Spending Sunday morning reading the newspaper – not engaged in deep conversation, but just being together.

See a pattern? They were together. So, they simply felt closer. They were better friends. Which insulated them from the inevitable shocks that hit a marriage.

Jesus points us to this same pattern: He valued close friendship, walking day to day in proximity with his twelve best friends. He told them (and us) to not just show up, but to abide in Him. *“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love”* (John 15:9). Abide. Spend time with. Both with God and with your spouse.

Time together is especially important when you are feeling distant or at odds. There is such a temptation to avoid each other, to avoid all the conflict, emotion, and irritation. But that means you're spending less time together right when you most need a strong friendship. Instead, the happiest couples lean in to their friendship during those times. They particularly avoid the subtle-but-poisonous temptation to spend more time with those friends who support them, than with their spouse. Because that would inevitably mean that they begin to feel closer to these friends than the spouse who is supposed to be their best friend.

To have a great marriage, you don't need to schedule candlelight dinners and stare deeply into each other's eyes (although there's nothing wrong with that!). But when you simply hang out together... when you carve out time for your most important relationship... when you make a point of sharing the little day-to-day moments... the results of that in your marriage are profound.

Step 11:
**SPEAK IN KINDNESS INSTEAD OF JUST
“TELLING IT LIKE IT IS”**

Read:

- Proverbs 18:21
- James 3:3-12
- Ephesians 4:15
- Proverbs 12:18

Have you ever been out in public and heard someone talking to their spouse in a way that made you wince? Like: “I cannot *believe* you forgot to bring the kids’ coats today! It’s freezing outside! What were you *thinking?*”

Most of us would never speak that way to our spouse in public. But how about at home, where nobody else can hear? Has an exasperated tone ever crept into your voice? When you are angry, hurt or frustrated, have you ever let it all pour out with no filter?

It is so easy to take a spouse for granted, and to take intimacy for licence. We can subconsciously think, *Since we’re married, I*

don't have to be as careful to be polite. We have to love each other regardless, so I can just speak without thinking about how it is perceived. It is easy to assume that – but it is poisonous to the relationship.

In the research, it was clear that instead of taking the most license, the happiest couples display the highest degree of kindness. Sure, they are honest and share the “real deal”, but they are also especially careful to do it in a way their mate will never perceive as hurtful. Sure, they joke around, but never at the expense of their spouse’s real feelings.

Today, we often hear that “You have to be able to be brutally honest in marriage.” Yet the Word says that reckless words “pierce like a sword”. Instead of allowing brutal honesty to hurt our spouse, we can choose to discipline our tongue. There will be times when we need to have a hard conversation, but that is when we need to be the most careful to protect the heart of the person who means the most to us. That is when we need to be the most careful

to not just speak the truth – but speak the truth in love.

So how should you address it with your spouse, that even when you ask, they don't remember to do things like putting the kids' coats in the car? Well, do unto others, right? How would you want them to share a concern with you, about an area where you have fallen short?

No matter what is going on in our lives, we can decide to be respectful of our spouses in public and in private. Even better, we can look for opportunities, every day, to be more like Christ towards our spouse, and speak words of life.

Step 12:
**DON'T LOOK TO MARRIAGE OR YOUR
SPOUSE TO MAKE YOU HAPPY**

Read:

- Psalm 37:4
- Exodus 20:1-6
- Psalm 55:22

In our research with teens, we were fascinated to find that the happiest kids were not the ones whose parents put them (the kids) first. Instead, they were the ones who knew their parents loved them, but also knew their parents were looking higher and prioritising their marriage even above the children.

We found an interesting parallel in the research with the happiest spouses. They loved each other, and enjoyed having a happy marriage, but didn't put their spouse at the centre of their life and weren't *looking* to marriage for happiness. Instead, they looked higher. In large numbers, they said they put God at the centre of their marriage and tried – however

imperfectly! – to look to Him alone for fulfilment and happiness.

This wouldn't have surprised us if we'd only studied people in churches – but we purposefully conducted random interviews everywhere in order to include those who, statistically, might not believe in God. But the happiest couples kept bringing Him up! Whether it was someone at the airport or in a doctor's waiting room, those who were the happiest in marriage kept mentioning the importance of looking to God alone. Both because they relied on His power to be selfless when they didn't want to be(!) and because looking to God took the pressure off their mate.

It can be so tempting to want your spouse to make you happy. But think about it: would you want the reverse? Do you want your spouse to depend on you for his or her happiness? No way! I (Shaunti), for one, *know* how imperfect and selfish I am, and I would fail miserably if Jeff depended on me to make him happy. We would both end up miserable.

Maybe you have seen that yourself. So how can you avoid looking to marriage (or your mate) for the fulfilment that only God can deliver? First, purposefully commit to God that you are putting Him at the centre of your marriage. You can do this even if your spouse doesn't. Ask for his help in leaning on him in tough times, instead of letting your happiness be tied to what is going on in your marriage. For example, in a difficult season, try not to let it throw you. Do what you can to make it right, but trust God to bring things around. Take your frustrations and needs to God, instead of taking them out on your spouse. One wife told me she would say, "God, give me your love for my spouse, because I just ain't feelin' it right now! If divorce isn't acceptable, would murder be okay?"

And start praying for your marriage. In the research, some of the couples who became very happy said they started praying together. Other couples didn't pray together very often but would simply let each other know they were praying about something separately. No

40 14 STEPS TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

matter what they did, though, they had a sense of relying on God to carry their marriage.

And as a result, these couples found they didn't have to worry about being "strong enough" to weather the storms of life. Because they knew their hope and strength ultimately came from God.

Step 13:
**STOP TRYING TO PROTECT YOURSELF,
AND BE “ALL IN”**

Read:

- 1 John 4:15-21
- Proverbs 3:5-6

Our culture doesn't always make it easy to stay married, does it? One of the messages we hear is that we should keep a little piece of ourselves private. You know, like feelings you keep from your mate but share with some other friend. Or a secret bank account with a little stash on the side “just in case”.

We're told that's the wise thing to do. And yet the research was clear: the actions we take to protect ourselves actually build a wall. They create a lack of trust. They cause suspicion to creep in. For instance, “Why won't you show me your bank account statement?” “Well, why will you tell your friend this stuff, but not me?” In other words, we create the very problem we are trying to protect ourselves from.

God has designed marriage to be the ultimate “all in” institution. That is why God joins a man and a woman for life: He wants us to be set free to take what seems like the scary risk of complete, naked, utter transparency with no self-protection, knowing that the other person isn’t going anywhere. It can indeed feel scary to step out in that way. But once we do, we find that this ultimate risk is what creates the ultimate security.

In the research, many of the couples had moved from being very troubled in their marriage to being very happy. And the change came when they stopped trying to protect themselves and eliminated their other options. They removed the word “divorce” from their vocabularies. They took a deep breath and gave each other access in areas they had previously kept private. They made themselves completely vulnerable to each other.

Is there something you’re holding back? If you’re afraid of the “what if’s”, find boldness in God’s great love for you. Don’t lean on and

trust your own understanding, because your own understanding can have hurt feelings and suspicions and can never truly know the mind of God. Instead, trust Him. Let His love come in and banish the fear that causes you to hold back in your marriage. Then you can live confidently and boldly through Him.

In marriage, you truly get what you give. We get so much more when we give our spouses our all, when we are all in no matter what. So, go ahead: jump into the deep end, and get in over your head! You will find God is there with you every inch of the way.

Step 14:
**VALUE YOUR SPOUSE AND REALISE
THAT YOU HIT THE JACKPOT**

Read:

- Romans 12:10
- Philippians 2:3-11

One of the most profound things we saw in the research was when we asked the couples, “Who is responsible for the happiness in your marriage?” Most people on the anonymous survey said something like: “Really, it’s me. I work hard to be a good spouse, and it makes a difference.”

Strikingly, there was one exception: the happiest couples. They said the opposite. Eight out of ten pointed at their spouse and said, with gratitude in their heart: “It’s all her; she’s an amazing wife.” “It’s all him; I hit the jackpot.”

One of the greatest secrets to a happy marriage is gratitude. Thankfulness. An overt recognition that you hit the jackpot. And this comes when

you realise that you are not perfect and are so grateful to have someone who is on your side and loves you anyway.

It is so easy to focus on ways we're doing great and what the other person is.... well... not. But the Word of God says that we should regard one another as better than ourselves. One spouse said everything changed in her marriage when "I allowed myself to see the amazingness of my spouse. I know that isn't a word – but it should be!" There is such power in being attuned to the "amazingness" of your spouse. You live in a constant state of gratitude and awe of the blessing of being married to this wonderful person.

This requires you to take on the attitude of humility. Not every day is perfect and of course there will be times your spouse makes mistakes. Rather than allowing yourself to think that you are pulling the weight of the relationship, you can choose to honour your spouse and what they *do* contribute. Christ chose to regard us above Himself. You can do

the same for your spouse.

So, the next time your spouse doesn't take out the trash or seems to not appreciate you, choose to not roll your eyes. Ask God to reveal the ways you don't always measure up, either, and just how much your spouse does do for you. Think about and honour the personality God has given them, that is exactly what you need. Think about and honour who they are.

As you realise your own shortcomings and affirm the value of your spouse, you will find gratitude popping up everywhere. And as you respond with true thankfulness, it will lead your spouse to want to become the person you already see them to be.

Every day, ask God to open your eyes to the "awesomeness" of your spouse. Seeing the best will bring out the best. And you will find that you have "hit the jackpot" all along in the partner God has blessed you with, to walk through life together.

Marriage is the oldest institution given by God, and is one of His most wonderful gifts to the human race. It's a treasure worth working on, cherishing and sustaining. God's instructions and advice on marriage are as valid and relevant to us as ever. To follow them is a wise choice that will bring inner peace and lasting happiness.

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Shaunti Feldhahn has studied thousands of men and women to learn the most important factors that contribute to an abundant, happy marriage. It turns out, her research findings match what the Bible has said all along. This booklet highlights those key Biblical secrets that we often miss — and which, once we apply them, usually make an immediate, wonderful difference.



Shaunti Feldhahn received her graduate degree from Harvard University and was an analyst on Wall Street before becoming a social researcher, best-selling author and popular speaker.



Pastor Gary Kent is Speaker for **The Incredible Journey** ministry. He has spoken and produced numerous documentaries on subjects including the Bible, Bible prophecy, world events and natural health. His passion is to share the good news of Jesus' imminent return.

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