

Strengthen Your Most Intimate Relationship

7 SECRETS TO AN AWESOME MARRIAGE

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Foreword by Craig & Amy Groeschel

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7 Secrets to an Awesome Marriage

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Secret Number 1:

STOP

The Insanities That Hold Us Back

“Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results”—this is the textbook definition of insanity. Most of us don’t consider ourselves insane, of course, yet this is the exact pattern we often act out in our relationships. And that’s where the real problems begin.

The insanities we bring into our relationships, of course, don’t just arise out of the blue. They all have roots. Some roots are more difficult to get rid of than others. In fact, many of the roots grow out of our family of origin. But no matter the source of our insanities, they seem to keep us from following God’s plan for marriage. That is the greatest insanity of all.

The longer we have practiced our insanities, the more difficult it is to break free of them. Whether you are young or not so young, married, divorced, widowed, single, or whatever, the odds are pretty good that you have an insanity or two that needs to be addressed. If you choose to deal with the skewed way of thinking, life gets better and relationships can get a lot better. If you choose to not deal with it, then . . .

Meet Richard and Lisa. Richard just turned forty. Lisa is thirty-five. Today they are married. Tomorrow, who knows? This

is the third time Richard has been married, and he is sure it will also be his third divorce. Same for Lisa. People come to my office for a number of reasons. Some have hope that things can get better, and often they do. Some come to counseling so they can tell family and friends that they tried “everything” before giving in to divorce. I was pretty sure that Richard and Lisa were in the latter category. Visiting the counselor’s office was the last thing on their list that needed to be checked off. I listened as they unfolded their stories.

Richard grew up in a divorced home. He was the oldest of three kids, and from the time he was eight he was the “man of the house.” His mom worked long hours to support the family, and his dad just disappeared. Richard had no model of what it took to be a dad, a husband, and a man. He was forced to figure that out on his own. He took a paper route at the age of twelve, and by the time he was sixteen he worked a full-time job.

It was easy for Richard to believe that he just married the wrong person the first time. But he never took the time to look within himself and see what needed to change.

At seventeen, he fell in love, and the summer he graduated from high school he walked down the aisle for the first time. It seemed the right thing to do. They were in love, they both had jobs, they rented a little apartment, and they both planned to start at the junior college in town in the fall. But by September, she was pregnant. Her pregnancy was rough. They began to fight a lot, money was tight, and by Christmas she had moved back in with her parents. Richard never lived a day in the same house as his son. Marriage number one.

Like many of us, it was easy for Richard to believe that he just married the wrong person the first time. But he never took the time to look within himself and see what needed to change. Richard was doing the same thing again and expecting a different result. Insanity. He took his time and at twenty-three met the

love of his life. They worked in the same office. She was a year younger and had never been married. She wanted a strong man, and Richard seemed to fit the profile.

They dated almost a year, and at the age of twenty-four Richard entered his second try at marriage. He was sure that this one would work. Both had good jobs, they bought a house together, and the first year was like a love story right out of Hollywood. It was fifteen months before they had their first fight and, according to Richard, they made up for lost time. In his first marriage, when the conflict began, the marriage ended. Richard was determined it would not be that way this time. He was not giving up and would not let her give up either.

For seven years they lived a roller-coaster life of peace and chaos—a few days of bliss and then a day or two of fighting. But they never learned how to resolve conflict, and that was their biggest problem. So the same issues returned over and over. It was similar to marriage number one but on repeat for a much longer period of time. Finally the days of conflict dominated their calendar, and they agreed to part ways. Marriage number two.

Richard said he then went through a period of soul searching. He asked himself questions. “What happened?” “What went wrong this time?” Yet he walked through this process alone, without wise friends or a counselor. Finally, he came to the same conclusion he had for marriage one: he had married the wrong person, again.

Still, maybe he needed to try church, he thought. It could not do any harm, and he just might meet the right woman. Richard began church shopping and finally settled on one that had a good singles program. Richard’s definition of a “good singles program” was one with plenty of attractive, eligible women.

Richard had been in the church a little over a year when Lisa walked in one day. He could not take his eyes off her. Now it all made sense. He had married the wrong woman—twice! They began to date and over the next eighteen months did everything

the church asked them to do to prepare for marriage. Richard admitted that he was just going through the motions of what the church asked them to do. Lisa was the right one for him and that was all that mattered. This was different because he had found the one. At the age of thirty-four, Richard walked down the aisle for the third time.

As he stood at the front of the church, Lisa walked down the aisle to meet him. Richard thought how beautiful she was and how she was different from the others, but he had no idea that Lisa was bringing some baggage of her own.

Lisa's Story

Lisa loved her dad. She had an older brother and an older sister, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind that Lisa was his favorite—hands down, the favorite. With her dad giving most of his attention to Lisa, her mom tried to make up the void to her siblings. It almost became a game. Which parent could outdo the other?

In Lisa's eyes, her dad won and her parents' marriage lost. They never openly fought, but their marriage was not much of a partnership, either. They never divorced, but a repeat of her parents' marriage was not something Lisa wanted. As a result, Lisa's role model of a wife, mother, and a woman was tainted. She never really had a relationship with her mother as she grew up, and now as adults their relationship was worse than ever.

After college, Lisa focused on building her career. Marriage was not appealing in Lisa's eyes. She seldom dated because she simply did not have time for those relationships, or so she told herself. At the age of twenty-eight she began to panic as the reality of her life hit her head-on. She was getting older, and in the back of her mind she knew that at some point in life she wanted children. It was now time to begin that quest.

Lisa did not worry about her past. Sure, her family was dysfunctional, but that was a long time ago. She was way past those

issues. Now she was successful in her work, confident and attractive, and focused on what she wanted.

A friend introduced her to Dustin and they really hit it off. He treated her well—just like her dad had. Four months of dating later, and they were planning a private, romantic destination wedding—with just the two of them. But the romance began to fade as soon as they boarded their plane home—that was when Mr. Wonderful began to change. At thirty thousand feet, he outlined his list of expectations of her, including what she could and could not do. Lisa was shocked but said nothing at first. Eight weeks later, she could not take it any longer. She moved out and filed for divorce. Marriage number one was over.

A friend suggested a support group for people going through divorce. Lisa agreed to go, but she felt out of place. Most of these people had been married for at least a few years. Her marriage had lasted a few weeks. Sticking it out was difficult, but the final night of the support group came. Coffee and cookies were served after the meeting, and she decided to stick around for a few minutes. In those few minutes, she met her second husband. He was almost perfect and totally understood her. After all, they had been through the same thing.

They began a nine-month dating relationship. Marriage number two.

On the plane ride home from their honeymoon, there was no list of expectations. Lisa knew this marriage was different, and for a while it was. The honeymoon phase lasted almost a year, and even though some of the romance began to fade, Lisa was happy.

For Lisa, the next couple of years were a blur. Her husband was placed on the “fast track” at his job. The demands on him and his time were great, but so were the rewards. Lisa liked the rewards at first. She always drove a new car and was living in her dream house, but rewards without a husband there to enjoy them with her was not what she wanted in a marriage. The times they were together were marred by fighting. They grew further and further

apart, and one day Lisa was done. Marriage number two ended just like marriage number one.

Lisa was devastated. What was wrong? All she wanted was a happy marriage. Was that too much to ask? She talked to a friend at work who was also divorced. The friend invited her to church. She wanted Lisa to go to the singles class with her. Lisa was reluctant. Walking into a room full of singles scared her, and she had never been big on the whole church idea. After weeks of saying no, Lisa finally said yes.

Lisa was really not sure what she was looking for in the class. Maybe community or new friends or just a safe place to be. Her plan was to give it three or four weeks and then, if none of those were happening, to gracefully bow out.

Lisa may have looked calm on the outside that first week, but on the inside she was scared to death. It was like her first high school dance all over again. Maybe even worse. Week two was better, and by the time week three rolled around she had no anxiety and was getting bored with the whole thing. The people were nice, but she was not attracted to any of the men. The lessons were probably okay, but she did not listen well. Not telling her friend, she made up her mind that Sunday number four would be her last.

That fourth Sunday morning brought no anxious feelings. This was just a routine that she was getting ready to break. She spent little time picking out what to wear, putting on her makeup, and fixing her hair. Why bother? Nothing was going to change. She left the house late and was ready to get this over with.

The class had already started when Lisa walked in. Fortunately, her friend had saved her a seat. As she scanned the room, her gaze stopped on someone new. She nudged her friend and asked if she knew the new guy. Lisa found out that the guy was not new. His name was Richard, and he had been out of town the past few weeks. Lisa thought to herself, "Miracles do happen." As the lesson ended, Lisa slipped out to the restroom to freshen her makeup and redo her hair. As she walked back in, she ran into

Richard—literally! They laughed and talked and went to lunch together. This was the guy. She knew it deep inside.

Lisa's version of their dating relationship mirrored Richard's except that she took seriously the instruction the church offered them as they prepared for marriage. She assumed Richard was taking it just as seriously. The wedding was wonderful, and all their church friends attended. This marriage would be different. Lisa had learned from her mistakes and knew what to do and what not to do.

For almost two years she put into practice all the things she had learned to make marriages work. Then Richard changed. It was almost an overnight change. Where did the Richard she had fallen in love with go? He was short with her, and his words were often terse. She remembered thinking that she had never seen him angry, and now she seldom saw him when he was not. She took it for a long time and finally started fighting back. The fights got ugly and Lisa was done. Really done. More done than marriage number two.

Two Choices

As Lisa finished her story, they both turned to look at me. I was not sure what they were thinking, but I thought it was along the lines of, "We know our marriage is hopeless. Just confirm that for us, and we will get out of here."

I sat there a long time without saying anything. Silence is difficult for most of us, and this was certainly true of Richard and Lisa. They began to squirm a little. I was not playing a game with them. I wanted them to really hear what I was going to say. It would not be a lecture. It would not be a confirmation of their hopeless situation. Instead, it would be a challenge to both of them.

"As I see it, you have two choices. One choice is to divorce and move on with your lives. You do not have children, so that makes it easier for you because you will never have to see each other again. If you choose this option, my guess is that I will see you both again back here in a couple of years, each with a different

mate. I believe you will just continue the pattern you are in of falling in love, getting married, and getting divorced. There is no reason to think that you will stop this insanity.

“You also have a second option. You can choose to make this marriage work. It will not be easy. It will take a lot of effort and a lot of time from each of you. In the end, I believe it is the only sensible thing to do. Together you can discover what building and living an awesome marriage is all about. The decision is yours.”

As a counselor, my dream is to help couples say yes to the challenge of building a healthy marriage with joy and enthusiasm.

But Richard and Lisa just sat there. I had ruined their buzz. They were already mentally dividing up the furniture, the money, and the other possessions. Richard had signed up for an online dating service. I threw them a curve ball because I told them that I had hope.

I asked them to hold off doing anything for a week. During that time, I asked them to do a couple of things. First, I asked them to pray and seek God’s guidance in this decision. Second, I asked them to talk to people who have good marriages and to ask them what they had done to get where they were today. Then I booked them a follow-up appointment. Richard and Lisa stood up, thanked me, shook my hand, and walked out of my office. I had no idea if I would ever see them again.

Facing Your Baggage

Richard and Lisa mirror many of the issues I see couples and individuals face today. Let’s look at Richard first. By outward appearances at age seventeen, Richard looked pretty good. He was responsible, with a strong work ethic, good grades, and high hopes for life. Not a bad package. Yet as a husband he was a train wreck waiting to happen, and it did. Richard never had a dad as a model. What he learned about being a man and a husband he picked up from life experiences. That included TV, movies, his best friend’s divorced dad, and an alcoholic uncle.

Richard searched for the right things in all the wrong places.

Then he was young—just seventeen on the day of his first marriage. Teen marriages are tough, and the statistics on them are not good. Granted, some couples make it, but they are the exception. I believe the final straw came when his first wife became pregnant. Here was this young couple trying to figure things out, starting college, and now adding parenting on top of it. The stress was great, the maturity was not there, and the marriage crashed.

That part of Richard's story is not uncommon. Many couples go into a first marriage with the odds stacked against them, and usually the odds win *unless*—and this is a big unless—they take the time to deal with the dysfunctions from their past.

The key to whether they will succeed is the next step because we usually do one of two things. Some people back up, get help, take a long look at themselves, and reinvent their thoughts and ideas of what it takes to have a successful marriage. Even though none of us wants to repeat unhealthy cycles, those habits and hangups do not just go away. We need to work and often to seek the guidance and wisdom of a pastor or Christian counselor to help guide us through the process. This then gives the opportunity to break any unhealthy cycles we may be in. That is how prospective couples may begin to prepare for marriage instead of preparing for divorce.

Some people back up, get help, take a long look at themselves, and reinvent their thoughts and ideas of what it takes to have a successful marriage.

The other thing people usually do is basically nothing. Like Richard, they blame the failed marriage on marrying the wrong person. That makes the transition easier. They think, “I do not have to change. I just need to find the right person.” Let me tell you how often I think that analysis works—never!

Lisa learned how to be a wife the same way that Richard learned how to be a husband: from TV, movies, and a few other

people that she was around. She never gave it much thought because, when the time came, she would figure it out. After all, she was an intelligent woman.

Richard and Lisa did what far too many of us do today. We work hard, we get an education or learn a trade, we make money, we buy things, we have kids, and we think marriage will take care of itself. Then we are shocked when it does not. What if we put as much effort into our marriages as we did into our careers?

Let that soak in. Would our marriages be better? Would the divorce rate go down?

You see, just like Richard and Lisa, we have a choice. We can continue in our destructive patterns in marriage or we can choose to stop the insanity.

Our Newlywed Wake-Up Call

Looking back, we can often see God's hand at work in our lives in a way that we cannot in the middle of our circumstances. In high school, as a junior, I made an early decision to attend an out-of-state college after graduation. It seemed like a good choice. There were older guys I knew who attended the college and liked it.

My parents were on board as they wanted me to go out of state at least for the first year. Done. One problem that surfaced later with this decision was the fact that I never visited the school campus before my parents dropped me off at the beginning of my freshman year. By the time their car taillights faded in the distance, I was thinking that I had made a big mistake.

Having always been resilient, I decided I could make things work in this new situation. By the end of week one, my resilience was gone and I was sick—literally. I vomited in the bathroom and I vomited walking to class. I was never more miserable in my life, and I had no one to blame but myself.

Transferring schools went from an option to a necessity. My parents said yes, but not until the end of the semester. I spent six hours drawing a countdown calendar that I hung above my bed.

My roommate thought I was crazy, and he was close to being right. I was obsessed with leaving. The question was no longer when I would get to leave. It was where was I going. I was desperate.

My senior year in high school had brought a new out-of-state student to our school. We became friends, and he was headed to Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Listening to him, I always thought TCU was a good choice. It was a perfect fit for him. Now it became my promised land. I enrolled for the second semester of my freshman year at TCU and walked on to my second college campus in five months.

Even though I made the same mistake with TCU that I did with college number one (my first day of school was the first time I stepped foot on the campus), I had a sense this would be different. I had a good friend there, and Fort Worth was a comfortable fit for me. It seemed more like home, and I was excited to be there.

As I began the second semester of my freshman year in college, Nancy was in her junior year of high school in Houston. As time grew closer to high school graduation, Nancy was headed to a large state university. As a courtesy to a friend, she also applied to TCU with no intention of going there. Two weeks before the start of her freshman year of college, Nancy made a bold, unexpected move and passed up the state school, instead heading to TCU. As my junior year began, I had no idea that my soul mate was now on the same campus with me.

By the middle of that year, I was pretty frustrated with the whole dating process. Far too many of my dating experiences had gone sour. I'd had lots of blind dates, but none ever worked out. I had a couple of decent relationships, but they were pretty short-lived. Halfway through my junior year, I decided to focus on schoolwork, hang out with my friends, and only date when I had to.

In February came my first "had to." There was a party, and everyone was going. I was facing a Saturday night alone when my roommate asked me one more time if he could "fix me up" with

one of his girlfriend's friends. He had asked before, and I always said no. In my mind all blind dates were the same—bad. As the weekend got closer, in a weak moment, I finally said yes.

That Saturday night my life changed forever. As I sat in the freshman girls' dorm lobby waiting for my date to come down the elevator, my mind was on a lot of things besides the date. Having a date let me go to the party and not feel like some nerd who was there alone. Once we arrived I could hang with my friends, and she could hang with hers, and then I would take her back to the dorm. Great plan.

About that time the elevator door opened, and out walked Nancy. I am seldom at a loss for words, but at that time and in that place, I was. She was beautiful and had a smile that made my heart pound in my chest. I had no idea what was happening inside of me, but I liked it. That night I made a total fool of myself, and Nancy told my roommate's girlfriend that she never wanted to go out with me again. When I finally had a date with a girl who mesmerized me, I had blown it.

Now this is the part where things got interesting. Even though I would have done almost anything to have another chance with Nancy, for some reason, I let it go, and I never let it go. I wanted to call her, but I did not. I wanted to find out where her classes were and just "run into" her, but I did not. I wanted to ask her friends if they thought there was any chance, but I did not.

Then the miracle happened. Three weeks later she casually mentioned to her friend that for some reason she wanted to go out with me again. I jumped on the opportunity, and this time I was prepared. With the shock factor gone, I was determined to just be myself. If she liked me, I knew it would not be because I was trying to be someone that I was not. That successful second date became step one as we began our life together.

Dating and marriage are different. I tell people that all the time, but they often do not believe me. They think if they get along well while they are dating, they will get along even better in

marriage. I thought the same thing, and after two years of dating we walked down the aisle. Perfect wedding. Perfect bride. Perfect everything.

Our first year was pretty normal even though we discovered that we had a lot of adjusting to do. It was just weird living with someone of the opposite sex. There are many things about the opposite sex that neither of you even thinks about going into marriage. If you are married, you get that, and if you are not, I am not about to burst your bubble here. Besides, Nancy's adjustments were by far greater than mine.

We lived in a small apartment, and it provided little space for privacy, which seemed to be more difficult for the wife than the husband. We shared a tiny bathroom, a tiny closet, and a ginormous king-size bed that almost filled our bedroom. The apartment was also beginning to fall apart. Doors were coming off their hinges, the kitchen cabinets began to sag, and the hood above the stove crashed down on top of our almost-ready dinner. Eventually we were able to graduate to a bigger apartment, but this is where we started out. Maybe your story is similar.

When you're dating, it's natural to focus on the ways you are so much alike. You bond through what you have in common. That was me. On the outside, I thought my family and Nancy's family were similar, but as we began married life together, I found out that they were not. No one ever talked to us about dysfunction. No one told us about differences. No one taught us how to communicate or fight. I had this brilliant belief that in marriage, sex solved everything. But as I quickly found out, this was not the case. This whole being married was a weird deal that was difficult for me to comprehend.

Our newlywed bliss shifted into a newlywed wake-up call—unlike anything I had ever expected. It confused me. I was living with my best friend, and I was crazy about her, but there were times I thought we were going to kill each other. Let the insanity begin.

The Insanity of Unrealistic Expectations

There are probably as many “insanities”—patterns of destructive habit we repeat over and over—as there are marriages. We all seem to have them. Mine may be different from yours, but they are still there.

And just like some of our insanities are rooted in our past and our family upbringing, others are rooted in our expectations of the future. So let’s take a look at the expectations we bring to marriage. My mother, for example, was not perfect but was pretty close. That was not just my opinion.

It seemed to be the opinion of most everyone that was ever around her.

As I grew up, our home was the place all my friends wanted to be.

Mom not only always had food to offer but also a listening ear. My

friends loved talking to her. Often I would have friends over and find myself alone in my room as they made their way to the kitchen to spend time with my mom.

There are probably as many “insanities”—patterns of destructive habit we repeat over and over—as there are marriages.

As I look back, I see that many of the skills I use as a counselor I learned from her. She listened well and gave wise counsel at the perfect time. She was a strong woman with a gentle spirit. As a wife, she let my dad lead, but he listened to her, and he valued her input. They were truly a team and deeply respected each other. This was my model, and I thought every home was pretty much like mine. That is what many of us do. The home we grew up in, right or wrong, was our first textbook of what marriage is or is not all about.

Nancy grew up in a fairly dysfunctional home with little security and lots of turmoil. Trusting was difficult for her. When we married, I wanted her to trust me and my decisions—that was my expectation. Nancy needed to be like my mother. Two problems came with this belief. Nancy was not my mother, and she was not going to just blindly follow anyone whether that person was her husband or not.

Stop: The Insanities That Hold Us Back

One of my biggest challenges came when I shared something with Nancy and she began asking questions. If I shared an idea, she asked questions. If I wanted us to do something, she asked questions. My expectation was that she would like and support my ideas and go along with the things I wanted us to do. Her questions made me feel like she was throwing cold water on everything I shared with her, and I would respond in anger.

It did not take long for me to realize that there was something deeply wrong. My problem was that I thought the wrong was with her. How could I be wrong? My family was perfect. The problem had to be with her. She is the one who came out of a mess.

So I began the process of trying to change her into the person I knew she needed to be. Have you ever tried to change a type A, smart, independent woman into anything? I didn't get it. How could she be refusing this opportunity that I was giving her? I thought I could lift her out of the pit, and we could have a great marriage just like my parents did.

It often amazes me as a counselor that I can clearly and usually quickly see the issues in my patients, but in my own life, it is like sometimes I am wearing blinders. Finally I took the blinders off and began to see the situation more objectively. I realized that I needed to do something different. (I can often be a very slow learner.) I was as much a part of our insanity as she was.

Many years into marriage, I was studying different ways people communicate and how that can affect a marriage. Nancy and I took an assessment that not only pointed out our differences but also gave us practical insight into how we could actually embrace these differences and grow our marriage. Finally, I understood. Nancy was not questioning my ideas or what I wanted to do. She was just trying to better understand what I was saying.

This was relationship-changing for us. My expectation had been unrealistic. Over and over I told her how much I wanted her to be on my side, and she said that is what she wanted, too. Yet, when I shared something, here came the questions. Now I

understood. This wife that I thought was my adversary could be my biggest advocate. I just needed to take the time to answer her questions. Once she understood and her questions were answered, she was 100 percent on board.

Healthy Versus Unhealthy Expectations

When you hit pause to reevaluate your expectations, the effect can be exactly what it was for Nancy and me: relationship-changing. As you think about the word “expectations,” what does it mean to you? The dictionary tells us that the word, a noun, is “a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future.” Thus, applied to marriage, I think my spouse will respond or act in a particular way. Now that is not all bad.

When Nancy and I stood at the altar and were married, we made some commitments to each other and to God. The expectation that we would be faithful to each other was an outgrowth of those commitments. So were the expectations that we would stand by each other’s side through trials like sickness and financial hardship. The expectation that I would work and provide for Nancy and our family was an expectation that we agreed on. We both had expectations of how we wanted to be treated and how we wanted to treat each other. These were good and mostly came from God’s instructions in the Bible.

So there are many good, healthy expectations for a husband and a wife in a marriage.

Two of the keys in dealing with expectations are whether they are spoken or unspoken and whether they are realistic or unrealistic. If I have an expectation of Nancy and do not tell her what that expectation is and then get angry with her because she did not do it, is that fair? Of course not. Yet, how often do we do that in marriage? We expect our spouse to greet us with a kiss when we wake up in the morning. We expect our spouse to call or text us during the day to stay in touch. We expect our spouse to help around the house.

Stop: The Insanities That Hold Us Back

Now, none of those expectations are wrong. They are pretty healthy ones in a marriage today, but if I expect these and never share those expectations with my spouse, that is not fair. For example, if my expectation is for my spouse to contact me sometime during the day to show her love, and I do not tell her about this expectation, it is unfair if I get mad when she does not. Expectations need to be shared.

Some of our expectations are realistic and some are unrealistic. If Nancy expects me to provide for the family, that is realistic. If she expects me to provide multiple homes for us in exotic places around the world, that is unrealistic.

I know that is an extreme example, but you would be amazed at some of the unrealistic expectations I hear from people in the counseling room. One that I often hear is that their spouse is not meeting all their needs. The reality is that in God's design, He should meet certain needs in our lives, and then there are needs He will help our spouse to meet. If I have an expectation of Nancy, I need to share it. Then she can tell me if it is realistic or not.

Healthy expectations are good for a marriage. Unhealthy expectations can kill a marriage.

Action Step

Think about the expectations you have in your marriage, and then write them down. Now, carefully go over your list. Beside each expectation place an "S" (for shared) if you have shared that one with your spouse and a "U" (unshared) if you have not. Then put a star by each expectation that is realistic and cross off each one that is unrealistic. That last step may be difficult for you. Your pen may run out of ink or your pencil lead may break or your computer may lock up.

Try this: Take each of those expectations before God in prayer. Ask Him to help you with your list. Now what does your list look

like? Take your refined list, sit down with your spouse, and go over it with him or her. This is a tough process, but one that will do amazing things for your marriage. Honest evaluations of your expectations can stop the insanity.

Hidden Insanities

The truth is, unrealistic expectations—left unchecked—often turn into insanities. And of course, these “insanities” can sometimes be difficult to see. They may be evident to others, but we are oblivious.

Look at this scenario. Michael grew up in a Christian home. His parents were married in their late twenties, and Michael was born a couple of years later. Michael was the oldest of three children, and his mother stayed at home with them. At about ten years of age, Michael noticed some changes in his mother. In the afternoon when he came home from school she was happy, but as the evening wore on she became agitated and easily angered. There were times she even threw pans across the kitchen and slammed the pantry door.

Michael’s dad worked hard and usually late in the evening. He was seldom home before seven. By that time of the day, his mother was more in control, but Michael confided in his dad about his mom’s “crazy times.” Things did not change much over the next few years. Michael learned to cope with it and thought all moms had these crazy times. Besides, his mom was a Christian, and they went to church every week.

Once Michael began to drive, he stayed away from home in the evening until his dad got home. He had a part-time job and studied at his girlfriend’s house. His parents bought it. Michael knew things were not quite right, but it was his “normal,” and he learned to adapt.

What Michael did not know as a child was that his mother was addicted to pain medications. Her behaviors were not normal. In fact, they were far from normal, but nobody ever told Michael.

Think with me a minute. What are some of the insanities that Michael could drag into marriage and never see as insanities? Remember, that was his normal, and he believed that there was nothing unusual in his family of origin.

Could Michael fall in love with and marry someone with an addictive personality? Could Michael have an addictive personality? What are some of the things Michael saw as normal that were really unhealthy? How does Michael see his role as a husband and a father? Will he be as absent as his own father was? There are lots of ways this could play out in marriage, and most of them are not good. If things are to be different for Michael, he will need to identify the insanities and begin to deal with them.

Insanities That Haunt from the Past

Jennifer was a victim. In counseling, I see a number of people who put themselves in the victim role, and I see others who are true victims. Jennifer was a true victim. She brought me a picture taken of her on her seventh birthday. She was a beautiful little girl. Her eyes sparkled in the picture, and she had a smile that covered her face. Then Jennifer showed me a picture of her taken on her ninth birthday. As they grow, kids can change a lot, but this change was drastic. Gone was the sparkle in the eyes and the big smile. I was looking at a picture of a nine-year-old girl with sad eyes and an empty look.

Shortly after Jennifer's seventh birthday she was sexually abused by a teen neighbor, and the abuse continued for over two years. She never told anyone because the boy said if she told he would kill her dog, so she stayed silent. Jennifer was the middle child in the family, and it was a busy family. Her parents would ask her what was wrong and then not listen to her answer. Jennifer was an overachiever who dove headfirst into her schoolwork. She made all A's and made the honor roll, and her parents bragged on her often. She learned to stuff down the feelings the abuse caused in her. She ignored them, and when the neighbor boy's family moved

away shortly after her ninth birthday, she relaxed. It was over, but she still never told anyone.

Slowly the smile returned but not the sparkle. She had lots of friends, and the boys all thought she was cute even though she wanted nothing to do with them. She had a few dates in high school, but with “good guy” friends she trusted. Mainly she stayed in groups surrounded by her close girlfriends. Jennifer graduated valedictorian of her class and scored high on her college entrance exams. She chose a university close to her house and decided to live at home. That was safe.

During her senior year, Jennifer met David. David was a nice guy. He was a Christian and did Bible study with her and prayed with her. They talked a lot and shared hopes and dreams and values. David was a virgin and was committed to purity till marriage. The night David shared that commitment with Jennifer, she went home, got sick, and cried till she finally fell asleep. The next morning she called me. It was one of those tough calls. I knew this woman was hurting, but I could barely understand what she was saying. Finally, I asked her to come to my office, and there she began to unload her story for the first time ever.

Many of you who are reading this identify with Jennifer at some level. Sexual abuse is way too common in our society. It is devastating and wrong and does great harm to the victim. Jennifer took a first step that literally changed her life. The story she had hidden for so long was now in the light. I will not lie to you. Jennifer’s healing process was difficult and took a long time, but today she is a different woman. God has healed her pain and shame, and she lives a life filled with hope. If you saw her picture today, you would see one similar to that seven-year-old little girl on her birthday. The smile and the sparkle are back, and David waited for her.

What if Jennifer never made that first step to get help? Maybe she would have sucked it up and let David believe she was a virgin. Maybe they would date and marry. Or maybe she would continue to see herself as “damaged goods” and never date again.

Let me stop here for just a moment. Please hear this. No matter

who you are or what you have done or what has been done to you, *you are not damaged goods*. Period. No one has the right to define you but God, and He says you are fearfully and wonderfully made and through your faith in Christ you are made perfect in His sight. Please never lose sight of this truth.

Maybe Jennifer would marry but never be able to enjoy the sexual relationship in marriage the way God intended. All of these maybes are insanities. They do not address or solve the problem. They perpetuate

the false belief that things cannot be different. If this hits close to home for you, promise me one thing. Tomorrow you will call someone and take the first step toward getting help. If you do not, you continue to give power to your abuser. Don't do that. Stop the insanity and embrace the transforming power that God can give you. He has more for you than you could ever imagine.

No matter who you are or what you have done or what has been done to you, you are not damaged goods. No one has the right to define you but God.

Facing Your Insanities Together

Insanities come in all kinds of packages. Some are very volatile, while others are not. The choice of where a couple chooses to attend church can cause friction. One of my cases held the possibility of insanity in this realm, but it took a change in life circumstances to bring it to light.

Brian and Laura had been married five years when I first met them in my office. They were a striking couple, and they sat down close to each other on the couch. That kind of body language is usually a good sign in my office, since troubled couples often sit as far from each other as possible.

Brian and Laura communicated their history to me. After meeting at work, they dated about a year and a half and then married. For six days each week their marriage was close to perfect, but when Sunday came, things were far from perfect.

Brian had grown up in an Episcopal church while Laura had grown up as a Baptist. They felt that their beliefs were not that

far apart, but they had never been able to resolve which church to attend together. They gave me some history. They started out in their marriage trying to compromise. They attended the church of Brian's choice one Sunday and the church of Laura's choice the next Sunday. That worked pretty well for a year or so.

Brian was content, but Laura wanted more. She wanted to feel more connected to a church and did not think they could do that by bouncing back and forth each week. Laura was shocked when Brian agreed, but she was not excited about his solution: Laura could go to her church, and he would go to his. That way they could both get more involved in the church each wanted to attend. Laura reluctantly agreed.

So for the next two years they followed Brian's plan. Surprisingly, Laura got somewhat used to the idea. If there was a big event at either church, they would attend together. They shared sermon notes with each other, and Brian felt they had the best of both worlds.

What was never really resolved had seemed to work for the two of them. But it was not going to work as their family grew. Laura was pregnant, and a lot of questions began to run through her mind. One of them centered on where the family would attend church. Finally, after much thought and prayer, she brought up the subject to Brian. It was a subject that had never crossed Brian's mind, and he did not see it being an issue.

Then the problem began. Laura was adamant. They had to attend church together as a family. Brian agreed in theory but was still not willing to budge. The next few weeks were tense, to say the least. Conversations were terse and sparse. Finally they agreed to counseling but were not hopeful that a resolution could be found.

My belief is that a marriage has to be centered on God. Doesn't it just make sense that the author of marriage Himself probably has the best plan for a marriage? I think there is great value in a husband and a wife attending the same church together on a regular basis since one of the ways He has provided for us to grow closer to Him and to others is the church. It is not a cure-all for marriage, but it sure helps a lot.

Stop: The Insanities That Hold Us Back

I have counseled couples who do not go to church, couples who one goes and the other does not, couples who go to separate churches, and couples who worship together Sunday after Sunday in the same church. In my unscientific survey, the couples who worship together weekly in the same church have better marriages than any other arrangement.

As I sat with Brian and Laura, I asked them many questions about what each liked about the church they attended and what they did not like about the other's church. This was more complicated than I thought it would be, because they both had many items for the list. I then asked them to name some churches their friends attended that they felt were good churches.

Then came the challenge. I asked them if they would trust me in an experiment. They looked at me and then each other and then laughed and said okay. I gave them a list of three churches different from the ones they had been attending and told them that I felt each of the churches met many of the things on their lists they liked and almost none of the things they did not like. They also had friends at each of the churches.

I asked them to visit each of the churches three times over the next nine Sundays. At the end of the nine weeks, they were to choose one church and begin going there. This would be their new church home.

Then a funny thing happened. They again looked at each other, nodded, and said okay. Honestly, I had never tried that process before, but I am big on problem solving, and I believe God always has an answer for us.

The week before the baby was born Brian and Laura came back to see me. They had a new church home and they loved it. They decided to visit each church once. After round one and much prayer TOGETHER, they knew without a doubt where they were to go. God made it perfectly clear to both of them.

I was pretty sure that would happen. God wants us in church, He wants us united, and He is not a God of confusion. He was not going to lead Brian one way and Laura another. The insanity

stopped. Brian, Laura, and God worked together and found a solution that brought healing to their marriage.

Your Turn

Every couple has their insanities. As you read about Richard and Lisa, you may have thought that no one makes that many mistakes over and over. I promise you that they do. If over half of first marriages end in divorce, do you think the stat for second marriages is better? No. It is worse. I have counseled people on their sixth marriage. If we do not stop the insanity, we will repeat the same pattern over and over and over. Richard and Lisa did not initially come to counseling to get help; they had already given up. But after soul searching, they decided to give it one more try.

When Nancy and I married young, we had no idea what marriage was really about. We made a lot of mistakes. We fought bad, unfair fights. We threatened divorce and were a step away from following through after year seven. We had insanities coming out of our ears, but through all our craziness, we did one thing right. One thing that made all the difference in the world: We prayed together. We got honest with both God and each other about our insanities, and He honored that in a powerful way. He healed our insanities and lifted us off the roller coaster of our craziness.

Many of you come from families of origin where there has been a lot of dysfunction like Michael experienced. Your normal was not normal, but you did not know it. The source may have been one or both of your parents or a sibling. The list of dysfunctions seems to be endless. However, we have a choice. We can continue the pattern or break it. Michael, for example, could just stay away from home as a teen, but if he wanted a healthy marriage as an adult, he had to address the insanities he saw in the home he grew up in. There would be a lot of steps for him. Yet, God had a better life for him, without the insanities.

And finally, if you are truly a victim, that does not mean you are doomed to being stuck your whole life in that role. But staying stuck is insanity. Trust me in this. There are answers and healing

where you never thought there could be. Where you feel unlovable, there is eternal love and acceptance. Where you feel broken, there can be wholeness. Jennifer took that first step and today is a different person. It is your choice, and only you can take step one, but I promise that if you take that step you will never regret it. Take it today and never look back.

Don't stop short with a Band-Aid solution like Brian and Laura did with going to different churches. Like a lot of us, they settled for a temporary fix. The insanity seemed to stop, but it was only on a short hiatus. Don't settle. Work it out. Get help. Talk to someone. It is insane not to. Follow it through to a solution as they finally did.

Look at some questions and thoughts with me:

- Where is your marriage today?
- If you rated it on a one-to-ten scale with ten being the best, where would it fall?
- How would that compare to a year ago or five years ago?
- Where do you want it to be this time next year?

One of the things that Nancy and I fell into was identifying problems, talking about how we wanted things to be different, and then doing nothing. Time would pass, and things seemed better, and then the unaddressed insanities would surface again. Each time they surfaced, they stayed longer and got uglier, a marriage-killing cycle.

There are seven secrets to an Awesome Marriage in this book. Each one is unique and stands on its own, but together, they have the power to transform your relationship as you know it. You cannot go to secret two until you deal with secret one.

If you are or ever have been involved in any type of twelve-step program, you understand the process. Step one is always admitting you have a problem, whether it is alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, or whatever. Until the person admits things are out of control and he cannot do anything about it, healing never takes place.

Welcome to step one of having an awesome marriage. This step is true whatever your status. Whether you are married, divorced, single, or something else, you have a problem. You have your own insanities, and without intervention, you will bring them into your relationships and never be able to live out God's plan for your marriage. Wherever you are, acknowledge that you have a problem. And welcome again to step one of having an awesome marriage.

The first step is always the most difficult, but nothing will ever change until you take it.

Some of you are thinking that I am not talking to you, but here's the simple truth: I am talking to me and you and everyone else. We cannot live in this world today and not have a few insanities. Sure, some are worse than others, but we all have them.

Take this challenge:

Set aside some time alone. Bring a notebook, a pen, and your Bible. Make sure it is quiet and there are no distractions. (Turn off the TV.) Ask God to guide you and to show you the insanities in your life. Then write. Write whatever comes to your mind. If God prompts you to open the Bible and read, do it. Then ask God to show you how those insanities are affecting you and your relationships.

If you are married, share what you learned with each other, and then commit to taking whatever steps are necessary to rid your life and your marriage of those insanities. This can be a turning point in your marriage. This can stop the insanity and give you hope that you never had before.

The first step is always the most difficult, but nothing will ever change until you take it. Whatever is standing in your way is not worth it. Stopping the insanity is the first secret, and today is the time to embrace it.

Secret Number 2:

START

The Practice of Putting God First, Spouse Second

Life was pretty good for me growing up—until I hit puberty, that is. My dad’s parents lived on a small farm, and it was my favorite place in the world. This was the place where I spent most of my summer days each year. School and books and having to study were a million miles away. I had everything I needed. There was a horse to ride, pigs to feed, eggs to gather, and crops to reap.

As much as I loved the days, the nights were really special. My granddad (Pop) and I would lie side by side in our two hammocks gazing at the stars. It was magical. The sky was so dark and the stars were so bright. I knew about God because as far back as I could remember, our family always went to church, but my first real awareness of the awesomeness of God came on those summer nights. I couldn’t get my mind completely around it, but I knew this God was really big, and somehow I began to see that He cared about me.

Pop was a big part of that process as he taught me about unconditional love. No matter what I did, he loved me, and it made me want to return his love and do the things he wanted me to do. This amazing relationship had a huge impact on my life.

Pop was one of those Christians who never went around telling people that he was a Christian. He didn’t have to. It was written

all over him in the way he lived his life and how he treated people. Sure, if he had the chance, he would tell people about Jesus, but most of the time he just lived like he thought Jesus wanted him to live. At an early age, I decided that was how I wanted to live, too.

Maybe one of my greatest attractions to the farm was the fact that it was pretty easy to do what I thought God wanted me to do when I was there. There was not a teacher making me do things or kids bugging me or parents making me eat things that were good for me. My days and nights were filled with doing all the things that I wanted to do. I remember thinking as I was getting older that I wanted time to stand still. Kids on my block at home were growing up, and I did not like what I saw. If I could just stay eleven and be on the farm forever, I didn't think life could get any better.

I used to think about Adam—the first guy in the Bible. God put him in this perfect garden and loved him unconditionally. I liked the story and thought Adam and I had some things in common. He had the garden and I had the farm. Things were good at the farm for me, and things were good in the garden for him. We both had someone to love us unconditionally. I wondered if Adam ever wanted things to just stand still like I did. Yet I found that there was one big fallacy about wanting things to stand still. They won't and they don't. I grew up, and Adam ate the apple.

The summer I turned twelve found me spending only half of my days on the farm. I had friends that wanted me to go to the lake with them, and there was this new girl that moved in down the street from my house. I still loved the farm, but I was beginning to love my other life, too. By my thirteenth summer, the farm was relegated to just a couple of weekend trips. I was growing up and my interests were changing; the following God thing was getting a whole lot tougher, too.

Things also changed for Adam. This woman, Eve, came into his life, and the plan was that they were supposed to bring out the best in each other. God put them together and placed them in

this incredible, enjoyable paradise. That plan worked for a while, but then things got really messed up. Eve listened to a lie and ate a piece of fruit that God told them not to eat, and then she gave some to Adam and he ate it too. As they were digesting their fruit, God came into the garden, and Adam realized his time in the garden was over. That fruit thing that seemed like such a good idea at the time was not.

If Adam and Eve could have a do over, do you think they would jump at the opportunity? I know I would. The need for do overs was becoming evident to me as I navigated my way through middle school and high school. Like Adam and Eve, I was slipping away from God. I listened to people I should not have listened to and did things I never should have done. I often found myself in messes just like Adam and Eve's.

Adam and Eve probably thought God had given up on them. They probably wondered if they would ever hear from God again. As I looked at my life, I was not sure what God thought of me, either. I did try to touch base with Him every once in a while, but I usually didn't stay in touch long enough to see if He was there or not. It had been a long time since I lay in a hammock on a dark night looking at the stars.

Have you ever had a time like that in your life? Have you had a time when God seemed so far away that you had no hope of ever reaching Him again? It seems those are the times we see Him show up. Just when we think He is gone, He isn't. Just when we think He has given up on us, we realize that He hasn't. This God of creation is a God of love.

It is often when our nights are the darkest that He shines the brightest. Adam and Eve were on the outside of the garden. It seemed that all was lost, and then He showed up again. It was not paradise, but life went on and God was with them. They had a baby boy and then they had another. They tended the land they now lived in, and it prospered.

One generation led to another, and lots of baby boys were

born all the way down to this baby boy named Jesus. God reached out and fixed things. He was there for Adam and Eve, and He is there for you and me. No matter how far we have strayed, He has given us a way back to Him. Jesus' family tree goes all the way back to Adam and all the way forward to you and to me. Amazing, isn't it?

Think about this. God created everything—including us. He also created marriage. Now this is the cool part. Just as God has a perfect plan for your life starting with the day you were conceived, He also has a perfect plan for your marriage—starting at the altar.

I take my car to the dealership when it needs service, because the dealer knows my car. It is one of theirs. They know what makes it run the best, and they understand what it needs when it is not working well. You can get marriage

advice from myriad sources, but why go to sources when you can go to the Source? Just like my dealer knows my car, God knows marriage. He knows it inside out and

upside down. He even has this unique plan for you because each marriage is unique. He knows exactly what you need and exactly what your spouse needs and exactly what your marriage needs.

That is more than awesome. It borders on miraculous! So you have a choice. You can do things your own way and ignore God, or you can seek Him and His plan for your life and your marriage. The choice is yours. We can learn from the mistakes Adam and Eve made, or we can repeat them over and again. Choose you or choose God. Over the years of my life I haven't always chosen to put God first, but today I do. I choose God.

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has given up on us, we
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This God of creation
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By Kim Kimberling, PhD

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