

Introduction

I was in a Chicago suburb one cold Saturday morning, leading my “The Marriage You’ve Always Wanted” seminar, when I first met Maria. Earlier I had given the audience a summary of my book *One More Try: What to Do When Your Marriage Is Falling Apart*. I had encouraged audience members to get a copy for any of their friends who were separated. Maria had purchased the book and was holding it in her hands.

“Dr. Chapman, when are you going to write a book for me?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure this book is good for those who are contemplating divorce,” she said, “but what about people like me? My husband and I are not separated. We have been married for seventeen years. Neither of us believes in divorce; we have strong religious convictions, but our marriage is miserable. We have some really big problems that we have never been able to resolve. We’ll fight about them and then make up, and things will be fine for a few weeks. Then we’re back into warfare again. We need help.

“We went for counseling one time for a few sessions, but it didn’t seem to help. We’ve read some books on marriage, but they just don’t seem to deal with our problems. I know there must be other couples like us who really want their marriages to work but haven’t been able to find answers.”

I found out later that Maria was living with an alcoholic

husband who, for that and other reasons, was also irresponsible in his work patterns. Thus, finances had been a problem during their entire marriage.

Since my conversation with Maria, I have written several more books, but I have never forgotten her question: “When are you going to write a book for me?” I have had no further contact with her and do not know what has happened in her marriage. But if I could see her again, I would say, “Maria, this one’s for you.” Yes, for Maria—and for thousands of others like her who sincerely want to make their “miserable” marriages work.

Three factors motivated me to write this book. First, large numbers of people like Maria have approached me at my seminars, asking for practical help with what I (and they) consider to be major barriers to marital unity, the kind of issues that we do not have time to deal with in a weekend seminar—problems that have lingered for years and whose roots run deep; problems that, if they are not solved, can and do destroy many marriages.

The second catalyst for writing this book is the memory of my own struggles in the early years of my marriage. I well remember the pain that followed months of trying to do what I thought was right, yet to no avail. I remember the sense of helplessness that overwhelmed me, the recurring thought that I was married to someone with whom I would never have real intimacy. The problems seemed so deep and my resources so shallow that I found it difficult even to pursue “another approach.” But there were answers, and eventually we found them. Karolyn and I have been married for more than fifty years now and have come to experience an intimacy I never dreamed possible. The pain is a distant memory, but it motivates me to help others who struggle as sincerely as we struggled.

The third force that pushed me to write this book is the steady stream of individuals with whom I have worked in the counseling

office over the years—people who have had to deal with alcoholism, verbal and physical abuse, the unfaithfulness of a spouse, a controlling personality, or those who have had to deal with a painful past involving child abuse or low self-esteem; others have been married to workaholics, and others to irresponsible mates. One of the rewards of counseling is seeing these kinds of people take responsible steps to deal with genuine problems, to support them in their efforts, and to see the fruit of improved relationships. I am convinced that their successes need a wider audience and that perhaps the steps they took will also give guidance to others.

I have changed their names and enough details to protect their privacy, but the accounts you will read in the following pages depict the lives of real people with real problems who found meaningful solutions in desperate marriages.

In each chapter, I will seek first to identify the nature of the specific problem and draw from social and psychological research where available. In questions of morality, I will offer guidelines from my own Judeo-Christian heritage. In addition, following a number of the chapters, we give you resources for further help.

My intended purpose is to give practical suggestions on how to move your marriage from where it is to where you want it to be. Obviously, I cannot guarantee you success, but I can guarantee you the satisfaction of knowing that you have given your marriage your best effort.

Yes, Maria, this one's for you.

PART 1



when
you're
desperate

The Valley of Pain

Thousands of couples are struggling in their marriages. Maybe you are one of them. You could write a book titled *How to Be Married and Miserable*. Some of you have been married for five years and others for twenty-five years. You entered marriage with the same high hopes with which most of us said, “I do.” You never intended to be miserable; in fact, you dreamed that in marriage you would be supremely happy. Some of you were happy before you got married and anticipated that marriage would simply enhance your already exciting life. Others entered marriage with a deeply dysfunctional history. Your hope was that in marriage you would finally discover meaning and happiness.

In every case, a man and woman anticipated that marriage would be a road leading upward, that whatever life had been to that point, it would get better after marriage.

Your experience, though, has been that since the mountain-top celebration of the wedding, the road has wound downward. There have been a few peaks of enjoyment and a few curves that offered a promising vista. But the vista later turned out to be a

mirage, and the marital road again turned downward. For a long time, you have lived in the valley of pain, emptiness, and frustration. You live in a desperate marriage.

You probably really don't want to divorce. For many of you, religious beliefs discourage you from taking that exit. For others, the children strongly motivate you to keep your marriage together. Still others find enough moments of happiness or support to keep alive your hopes for a better marriage.

You sincerely hope that things will get better. Many of you feel that you have tried to deal with the issues that have kept you and your spouse from marital unity. Most are discouraged with the results. If you have gone for counseling, it has not been very productive. If you have read books, you have read them alone, wishing that your spouse could hear what the distant author is saying and be moved to change. Some of you have tried the calm, cool, straightforward method of gentle confrontation. Your spouse has responded with silence. In desperation some of you have tried yelling and screaming. Your pain has been so intense that you have actually lost control trying to express it. In some cases your loud cries for help have prompted your spouse to launch a counter-attack. In other cases your spouse has simply withdrawn.

The problems with which you and other married couples grapple cannot be solved by having a nice chat. Nor do the problems melt under the sunny cheer of pious platitudes. These problems, like cancer, eat away at the vitality of a marriage. The issues vary from couple to couple, but the intensity of the pain runs deep for all.

Through the pages of this book, I will take you behind closed doors into the privacy of my counseling office and let you listen as husbands and wives share their painful situations. I also invite you to listen to what people tell me at the marriage seminars I lead across the country. (I have changed names and details to

protect these people.) I urge you to believe that there is hope for your hard marriage.

HOPE FOR THE DESPERATE

In this book I will talk about how to deal with a spouse who is irresponsible or a workaholic; a spouse who is controlling, uncommunicative; verbally, physically, or sexually abusive; unfaithful or depressed; a spouse who is an alcoholic or drug abuser. For all of these situations—and others—you can find solutions that may preserve your marriage.

I am under no illusion that I can provide a magic formula to bring healing to all such marriages. However, I do believe, based on my own experience in counseling, research in the field, and sound moral principles, that there is hope for the hardest of marriages.

I believe that in every troubled marriage, one or both partners can take positive steps that have the potential for changing the emotional climate in a marriage. In due time, spouses can find answers to their problems. For most couples, ultimate solutions will depend not only on their own actions but also on the support of the religious and therapeutic community in their city. But I will say it again: There is hope for lasting solutions in troubled marriages.

ARE YOU A CAPTIVE TO MYTHS?

First, you have to look hard at what you believe—which is a part of what I call practicing *reality living*. Reality living begins by identifying myths that have held you captive. Then it accepts them for what they are—myths, not truths. You can break their bonds as you begin to base your actions on truth rather than myth.

Reality living means that you take responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings, and actions. It requires you to appraise

your life situation honestly and refuse to shift the blame for your unhappiness to others.

Look at the following four statements. Answer them honestly with *true* or *false*.

1. My environment determines my state of mind.
2. People cannot change.
3. In a desperate marriage, I have only two options—
resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out of the marriage.
4. Some situations are hopeless—and my situation is one of these.

If you answered “true” to any of these statements, please read on. In fact, all four statements are false. Unfortunately, many people in desperate marriages base their lives on these commonly held myths.

Those who accept any of the four myths above will act accordingly, so that their actions become a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution. Let’s look at the outcome of accepting and acting on each of these myths.

Myth Number One: My environment determines my state of mind. The commonly held view of our day is that we are all victims of our environment. This myth is expressed in the following statements:

“If I grew up in a loving, supportive family, I will be a loving, supportive person.”

“If I grew up in a dysfunctional family, then I am destined to failure in relationships.”

“If I am married to an alcoholic husband, I will live a miserable life.”

“My emotional state depends on the actions of my spouse.”

This kind of approach to life renders anyone helpless in a hostile environment. It prompts feelings of hopelessness and often leads to depression. In a desperate marriage, this victim mentality leads a spouse to conclude, “My life is miserable, and my only hope is the death of my spouse or divorce.” Many people daydream of both.

Your environment certainly affects who you are, but it does not control you. Rather than being a helpless victim, you can overcome an environment thick with obstacles, whether blindness (Helen Keller) or polio (Franklin Roosevelt) or racism (too many to name) or an alcoholic parent whose abuse has stayed with you and impacted your marriage. Your environment may influence you, but it need not dictate or destroy your marriage and your life.

Myth Number Two: People cannot change. This myth asserts that once people reach adulthood, personality traits and behavior patterns are set in concrete. Those who believe this myth reason that if a spouse has demonstrated a certain behavior for a long period of time, he or she will continue to act this way.

A wife assumes that her husband, who was sexually active with multiple partners before marriage and sexually unfaithful after marriage, is addicted to this behavior and cannot change.

A husband assumes that his wife, who has been irresponsible in money management for the first fifteen years of marriage, will always be financially irresponsible.

If you accept this myth as truth, you will experience feelings of futility and hopelessness. The fact is, you can go to any library and find biographies of people—adults—who have made radical

changes in their behavior patterns. Saint Augustine once lived for pleasure and thought his desires were inescapable. The late Charles Colson, following a conversion while in prison, repented of his wrongdoing in the Watergate scandal and launched an international agency to offer prisoners spiritual help.

People can and do change, and often the changes are dramatic.

Myth Number Three: In a troubled marriage, I have only two options—resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out of the marriage. Those who believe this myth limit their horizons to two equally devastating alternatives and then become a prisoner of that choice. Thousands of people live in self-made prisons because they believe this myth of limited choices.

Shannon and David believed this myth. For fifteen years they

experienced misery and contemplated divorce, but as they left my office after six months of counseling, David said, “I used to leave your office with rage in my heart toward Shannon. Today I leave realizing what a wonderful wife I have.”

*Don't simply
settle for misery
or divorce.*

A smile spread across Shannon's face as she spoke. “Dr.

Chapman, I never dreamed that I could love him again and we could have the marriage we have.”

Obviously, Shannon and David broke the bonds of this myth. You can do the same. Do not let yourself believe that you have only two options in a desperate marriage. Don't simply settle for misery or divorce.

Myth Number Four: Some situations are hopeless—and my situation is one of these. The person who accepts this myth believes: Perhaps there is hope for others, but my marriage is hopeless. The

hurt is too deep. The damage is irreversible. There is no hope. This kind of thinking leads to depression and sometimes suicide.

I listened with tears as Lisa, a thirty-five-year-old mother, shared her story of watching her father murder her mother and then turn the gun on himself. Lisa was ten when she experienced this tragedy. No doubt her father felt his situation was hopeless.

You may have struggled in your marriage for years. You may feel that nothing you have tried has worked. You may even have had people tell you that your marriage is hopeless. Don't let yourself believe that. Your marriage is not beyond hope.

This book will explore the nature of problems in desperate marriages and encourage you to dismiss these myths and take steps toward healing rather than sinking deeper into the misery of such relationships. But first, let's look at what has become a rather popular approach to such major marital problems, namely the exit-marked divorce.

WHY NOT JUST WALK AWAY?

Ours has been called the "Throwaway Society." We buy our food in beautiful containers, which we then throw away. Our cars and tech devices quickly become obsolete. We give our furniture to the secondhand shop not because it is no longer functional, but because it is no longer in style. We even "throw away" unwanted pregnancies. We sustain business relationships only so long as they are profitable to the bottom line. Thus, it is no shock that our society has come to accept the concept of a "throwaway marriage." If you are no longer happy with your spouse, and your relationship has run on hard times, the easy thing is to abandon the relationship and start over.

I wish that I could recommend divorce as an option. When I listen to the deeply pained people in my office and at my seminars,

my natural response is to cry, “Get out, get out, get out! Abandon the loser and get on with your life.” That would certainly be my approach if I had purchased bad stock. I would get out before the stock fell further. But a spouse is not stock. A spouse is a person—a person with emotions, personality, desires, and frustrations; a person to whom you were deeply attracted at one point in your life; a person for whom you had warm feelings and genuine care. So deeply were the two of you attracted to each other that you made a public commitment of your lives to each other “so long as we both shall live.” Now you have a history together. You may even have parented children together.

No one can walk away from a spouse as easily as he or she can sell bad stock. Indeed, talk to most adults who have chosen divorce as the answer, and you will find the divorce was preceded by months of intense inner struggle, and that the whole ordeal is still viewed as a deeply painful experience.

Kristin was sitting in my office two years after her divorce from Dave. “Our marriage was bad,” she said, “but our divorce is even worse. I still have all the responsibilities I had when we were married, and now I have less time and less money. When we were married, I worked part-time to help out with the bills. Now I have to work full-time, which gives me less time with the girls. When I am at home, I seem to be more irritable. I find myself snapping at the girls when they don’t respond immediately to my requests.”

Thousands of divorced moms can identify with Kristin. Divorce doesn’t treat them fairly. The stresses of meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children seem overwhelming at times.

Not all who undergo divorce experience such hardship; yet all find the adjustments painful, even when they remarry.

Michael was all smiles when he said to me, “I finally met the love of my life. We’re going to get married in June. I’ve never

been happier. She has two kids, and I think they're great. When I was going through my divorce, I never dreamed that I would be happy again. I now believe that I'm about to get my life back on track."

Michael had been divorced for three years at the time of our conversation. However, six months after his marriage to Kelly, he was back in my office, complaining about his inability to get along with Kelly and her children.

"It's like I'm an outsider," he said. "She always puts the kids before me. And when I try to discipline them, she takes their side against me. I can't spend a dime without her approval. I've never been so miserable in my life. How did I let myself get into this mess?" Michael is experiencing the common struggles of establishing a "blended family."

And what about the children who watch their parents divorce? In her book, *Generation Ex*, author and child of multiple divorces Jen Abbas writes candidly:

As I entered adulthood anticipating my hard-earned independence, I was stunned to discover that my parents' divorces seemed to affect me *more* each year, not less. Even though I was successful academically and professionally, I found myself becoming more insecure each year about my emotional abilities. As I began to see my friends marry, I started to question my ability to successfully create and maintain intimate relationships, especially my own future marriage. I began to see how the marriages—and divorces—of my parents had influenced my relationships, especially when it came to trust. And when it came to love, I was paralyzed because what I wanted so desperately was that which I feared the most.¹

Through the years I have counseled enough divorced persons to know that while divorce removes some pressures, it creates a host of others. I am not naive enough to suggest that divorce can be eliminated from the human landscape. I am saying, however, that divorce should be the last possible alternative. It should be preceded by every effort at reconciling differences, dealing with issues, and solving problems. Far too many couples in our society have opted for divorce too soon and at too great a price. I believe that many divorced couples could have reconciled if they had sought and found proper help. Thus, the focus of this book about difficult marriages is not on divorce but on something I believe offers far more hope—reality living.

Reality living, which begins by recognizing the myths and continues by rejecting those myths, ends up embracing the positive actions that one individual can take to stimulate constructive change in a relationship. In the next chapter I will give you the basic principles of this approach, and in the following chapters I will show you how to apply these principles to really hard marriages—which, as you will see, take many forms.

Where You Start: Attitude and Actions

When we are deeply unhappy, we can become stuck in our own misery, feeling there is no way out—especially if the situation we’re in never seems to change. Yes, it’s hard to be positive when you’ve struggled in a hard marriage for years. It’s hard to be positive when we feel as if we are the victim and that our spouse is the one with the problem. At one level, that’s true: we are not the alcoholic, we are not the abuser, we are not the irresponsible one.

But we *can* change some things. And if our situation is to change, we first need to deal with *how we think about it*—beginning with moving beyond the myths we identified in the previous chapter. We start by telling ourselves four important truths:

My environment does *not* determine my state of mind.

People *can* change.

In a desperate marriage, I do *not* have only two options—resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out.

My situation is *not* hopeless.

6 REALITIES

But there's more. Let me share six realities—focusing on how we think about ourselves and our marriage—that can start to pull us out of that “no way out” sense of hopelessness.

1. I am responsible for my own attitude. Reality living approaches life with the assumption that we are responsible for our own state of mind. Trouble is inevitable, but misery is optional. Attitude has to do with the way we choose to think about things. It has to do with focus.

Negative thinking tends to beget negative thinking. If you focus on how terrible the situation is, it will get worse. But if you focus on one positive thing in a situation, another will appear. In the darkest night of a miserable marriage, there is always a

flickering light. If you focus on that light, it will eventually flood the room.

*In the darkest
night of a
miserable
marriage, there
is always a
flickering light.*

Wendy said, “My husband hasn't had a full-time job in three years. The good part is not being able to afford cable TV or Netflix. We've done a lot more talking in the evenings.”

She went on to say, “These three years have been tough, but we have learned a lot. Our philosophy has been ‘Let's see how many things we can do

without—things that everybody else thinks they have to have.’ It’s amazing how many things you can do without. It’s been a challenge, but we are going to make the most of it.”

Three weeks after I met Wendy, I encountered Lou Ann. She was at the point of mental and physical exhaustion. Her husband had been out of work for ten months and was working a part-time job while looking for full-time employment.

Lou Ann had been biting her nails for ten months. She was certain that they would lose everything they owned; she decried the fact that they could not afford much in the way of entertainment and talked about how difficult it was to operate with only one car. Every day she lived on the cutting edge of despair.

The difference between Wendy and Lou Ann was basically a matter of attitude. Their problems were very similar, but their attitudes were very different—and that difference had a profound impact on their physical and emotional well-being and, ultimately, their marriages.

This challenge of maintaining a positive mental attitude is not a contemporary idea. It is found clearly in the first-century writings of Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul the apostle): “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds. . . . Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.”¹

This first postulate of reality living is that I am responsible for my own attitude. The second is closely associated with the first.

2. My attitude affects my actions. If we have a pessimistic, defeatist, negative attitude, we will express it in negative words and

behavior. At that point, we become a part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The reality is that you may not be able to control your environment; you may have to deal with sickness, an alcoholic spouse, a teenager on drugs, a mother who abandoned you, a father who abused you, a spouse who is irresponsible, aging parents, and on and on. You can, however, control your attitude toward your environment. And your attitude will greatly influence your behavior.

Clearly Wendy and Lou Ann demonstrated this reality. With her positive attitude, Wendy did several things to enhance the climate of her marriage. She gave her husband affirming words when he got discouraged in his job search. She assured him that the right job would come, and that in the meantime, they would make it on his part-time job and her freelance career. She suggested that they sell some things on Craigslist to obtain “fun” money. They made enough so that they could occasionally go out to eat and attend a movie or some other recreational activity. Wendy’s positive attitude led her to positive, creative actions.

On the other hand, Lou Ann was verbally critical of her husband for ten months. When he came home without a job, she asked him, “What did you do wrong this time?” She told all her friends how disappointed she was in her husband. He often overheard her on the telephone saying such things as: “I don’t know what we’re going to do if he doesn’t get a job soon.” Her husband had a part-time job, but she did not. Her reasoning was, “We can’t make a living on part-time jobs, so why bother?” She spent most of her time sleeping, watching television, and visiting with her friends. Her marriage was in serious trouble. Her negative attitude led to negative actions, which compounded the problems in her marriage.

I understand that when you have been dealing with a problem for years it becomes harder and harder to muster up a positive attitude and the emotional energy to focus on solutions. Negative thoughts have created deep neurological pathways in the brain. But as humans, we are capable of altering these pathways. Attitude affects actions, and actions influence others. This brings us to the third principle of reality living.

3. I cannot change others, but I can influence others. The two parts of this reality must never be separated. That we cannot change a spouse is a truth we recite often, but we often overlook the truth that we can and do influence a spouse. Because we are individuals and because we have free will, no one can force us to change our thoughts or behavior. On the other hand, because we are relational creatures, others do influence us. Advertisers make millions of dollars each year because of this reality.

So in marriage, you must acknowledge that you cannot change your spouse. You cannot make him or her stop or start certain behaviors. Nor can you control the words that come from your spouse's mouth or the way he or she thinks or feels. You can make requests of your spouse, but you cannot know that he or she will respond positively.

When you fail to understand this reality, you are likely to fall into the trap of manipulating your spouse. The idea behind manipulation is: "If I do this, I will force my spouse to do that." Manipulation may involve positive stimuli: "If I can make my wife happy enough, she will respond to my request." It can also involve negative stimuli: "If I can make my husband miserable enough, he will respond to my request."

All efforts at manipulation will ultimately fail. No one wants to be controlled by a spouse.

Your inability to change your spouse must be laid alongside your very real ability to influence a spouse for better or for

worse. All spouses influence each other every day with attitudes and actions.

This means that your spouse's words and behavior may cause you tremendous pain, hurt, or discouragement. But this reality also means that through positive actions and words, you can influence your spouse toward positive change.

Over the years, I have tested this reality with numerous individuals in troubled marriages. When one spouse willingly chooses a positive attitude that leads to positive actions, the change in his or her partner is often radical.

One woman said, "I can't believe what has happened to my husband since I have tried to respond to him with positive words and actions. I never dreamed that he could be as loving and kind as he has been for the last two months. This is more change than I ever anticipated." The reality of the power of positive influence holds tremendous potential for desperate marriages.

I hear you saying, "But, Dr. Chapman, how can I be positive when I am feeling so angry?" Read on for the next reality-living principle.

4. My emotions do not control my actions. In the last several decades, Western society has given an undue emphasis to human emotions. In fact, we have made emotions our guiding star. The search for self-understanding has led us to the conclusion that "I am what I *feel*" and that authentic living is being "true to my feelings."

When applied to a desperate marriage, this philosophy advises, "If I don't have love feelings for my spouse any longer, I should admit it and get out of the marriage. If I feel hurt and angry, I would be hypocritical to say or do something kind to my spouse." This philosophy fails to reckon with the reality that human beings are more than their emotions.

The truth is, you experience life through the five senses: sight,

sound, smell, taste, and touch. In response to what you experience through the senses, you have thoughts, feelings, desires. And you take actions.

In your thoughts, you interpret what you experience through the five senses. If you see dirty dishes in the sink at 10:30 p.m., you might interpret that to mean that your spouse is lazy and uncaring.

Emotions will accompany your thoughts. Believing that your spouse is lazy, you may feel disappointment, anger, and frustration.

In response to thoughts and feelings, you have desires. The dirty dishes may fire you up to give your spouse a lecture on irresponsibility: “Why didn’t you clean up? I asked you to! And now it’s time for bed! Oh, never mind, *I’ll* do it . . .” (heavy sigh, clattering).

How do you think your spouse will respond? Cheerfully? Maybe. But probably not. And you won’t be feeling so good yourself, angry at bedtime. If, on the other hand, you ask yourself, “*What is the best thing to do in this situation?*” you are far more likely to take positive action. You might, again, decide to clean up yourself—but this time tell your spouse, “I love you so much that I didn’t want you to face those dirty dishes in the morning.” Or you could decide to simply let it go and not react.

Those who say it is hypocritical to take positive action when they have negative feelings are operating on the assumption that the true self is determined by emotions. I am suggesting that is a false premise, and to the degree that it has permeated Western thinking, it has been detrimental to family relationships.

In other areas of life, you often go against your emotions. For example, if you got out of bed only on the mornings that you “felt” like getting out of bed, you would have bedsores. The fact is, almost every morning, you go against your feelings, get up, do something, and later feel good about having gotten out of bed. The same principle is true in relationships.

You can learn to acknowledge your negative emotions but

*You can learn
to acknowledge
your negative
emotions but not
to follow them.*

not to follow them. You should not deny that you feel disappointed, frustrated, angry, hurt, apathetic, or bitter, but you can refuse to let those emotions control your actions. You can choose the higher road by asking such questions as: *What is best? What is right? What is good? What is loving?* You can allow your actions to be controlled by these noble thoughts.

Taking such positive actions holds the potential for bringing healing to a relationship and restoring positive feelings in your marriage.

I am not suggesting that emotions are unimportant. They are indicators that things are going well or not so well in a relationship. But if you understand that negative actions will make things worse and positive actions hold the potential for making things better, you will always choose the high road. Your emotions always influence you, but you do not need to let them control you.

This reality has profound implications for a hard marriage. It means that you can say and do positive things to and for your spouse in spite of the fact that you have strong negative emotions toward them. To take such positive actions does not deny that your marriage is in serious trouble. It means that you choose to take steps that hold *potential for positive change* rather than allowing negative behavior to escalate.

One husband said, “My wife has disappointed me so much and hurt me so deeply that I have no desire to do anything good for her.” He is stating clearly his emotional state and his lack of desire for positive action. He was not being hypocritical when

he added, “But understanding the power of positive actions, I will choose to wash and vacuum her car because I know that is something she would like for me to do.”

One positive action does not heal the hurt of a lifetime, but it is a step in the right direction. A series of positive actions holds the potential for turning the tide in a troubled marriage.

5. Admitting my imperfections does not mean that I am a failure. Most miserable marriages include a stone wall between husband and wife, built over many years. Each stone represents an event in the past where one of them has failed the other. These are the things people talk about when they sit in the counseling office. The husband complains, “She has been critical of my performance on the job and as a father. . . . She never says anything positive about what I do, and she puts me down in front of the kids.”

On the other hand, she gripes, “He is married to his job—even when he comes home, he’s in his home office catching up or watching sports on TV. He doesn’t help around the house and hardly gives me the time of day.”

The list goes on and on. Each spouse recounts what the other has done to make the marriage miserable. This wall stands as a monument to self-centered living, and it’s a barrier to marital intimacy.

Demolishing this emotional wall is essential for rebuilding a

Many times one spouse is more at fault than the other, but the fact is that neither has been perfect.

desperate marriage. Destroying the wall requires both individuals to admit that they are imperfect and have failed each other. I am not implying that the responsibility for the wall is equally distributed between the husband and the wife. Many times, one is more at fault than the other, but the fact is that neither spouse has been perfect.

To acknowledge your imperfections does not mean you are a failure; it is an admission that you are human. As humans, you and I have the potential for loving, kind, and good behavior, but we also have the potential for self-centered, destructive behavior. For all of us, our marital history is a mixed bag of good and bad behavior. Admitting past failures and asking for forgiveness is one of the most liberating of all human experiences.

When you admit your failures and request forgiveness, you begin tearing the wall down on your side. Your spouse may readily forgive you or may be reluctant to do so, but you have done

the most positive thing you can do about past failures. You cannot remove them, nor can you remove all their results, but you can acknowledge them and request forgiveness.

*I am fully aware
that most of the
people who read
this book will
read it alone.*

Many people have found the following statements to be helpful in verbalizing their confession of past failures:

“I’ve been thinking about us, and I realize that in the past I have not been the perfect husband/wife. In many ways I have

failed you and hurt you. I am sincerely sorry for these failures. I hope that you will be able to forgive me for these. I sincerely

want to be a better husband/wife. And with God's help, I want to make the future different."

Whether your spouse verbalizes forgiveness or has some less enthusiastic response, you have taken the first step in tearing down the wall between the two of you. If the hurt has been deep, your spouse may question your sincerity. He or she may even say, "I've heard that line before," or "I'm not sure that I can forgive you." Whatever the response, you have planted in his or her mind the idea that the future is going to be different. If, in fact, you begin to make positive changes as a spouse, the day may come when your partner will freely forgive past failures.

To admit your own past failures does not mean that you are accepting all the responsibility for the problems in your marriage. It does mean that you are no longer using your spouse's failures as an excuse for your own failures. You are stepping up to take full responsibility for your own failures, and you are doing the most responsible thing you can do by acknowledging your failures and asking forgiveness. In so doing, you are paving the road of hope for a new future.

I am fully aware that most of the people who read this book will read it alone. In a desperate marriage, it is unrealistic to think that husband and wife will sit down together and work through a book. That may happen in a healthy marriage but not in a deeply troubled marriage. Therefore, if you are reading this book, I want to encourage you to tear down the wall on your side. You may feel that the bulk of the wall is on your spouse's side, and that may be true. But the reality is that you cannot tear down his or her wall; you can only tear down the wall on your side. However small it may be, this is a step in the right direction. It lets your spouse know that you are consciously thinking about your marriage relationship.

And now we move on to consider the power of love, the sixth reality-living principle.

6. Love is the most powerful weapon for good in the world.

Most of the couples who sit in my office talk about the lack of love, affection, and appreciation they have received from a spouse through the years. Their emotional love tanks are empty, and they are pleading for love. I am deeply sympathetic with this need. I believe love is humanity's deepest emotional need. The difficulty in a desperate marriage is that spouses focus on receiving love rather than giving love. Many husbands say, "If she would just be a little more affectionate, then I could be responsive to her. When she gives me no affection, I just want to stay away from her." He is waiting for love before he loves. However, someone must take the initiative.

The final principle of reality living declares love to be the most powerful weapon for good, and that especially applies in marriage. The problem for many husbands and wives is that they have thought of love as an emotion. In reality, love is an attitude, demonstrated with appropriate behavior. It affects the emotions, but it is not in itself an emotion. Love is the attitude that says, "I choose to look out for your interests. How may I help you?" Then love is expressed in behavior.

The fact that love is an attitude rather than an emotion means that you can love your spouse even when you do not have warm emotional feelings for him or her. That is why in the first century, Paul the apostle wrote to husbands, "Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her [by willingly dying on a cross]."² In another of his letters, Paul challenged the older women to "urge the younger women to love their husbands."³ Love can be learned because it is not an emotion.

SPEAKING YOUR SPOUSE'S LOVE LANGUAGE

Part of the problem spouses have in demonstrating love to one another is that they fail to understand that they speak different “love languages.” After many years of counseling, I am convinced there are only five basic languages of love. They are:

Words of Affirmation

Verbally affirming your spouse for the good things he or she does

Quality Time

Giving your spouse undivided attention

Receiving Gifts

Presenting a gift to your spouse that says, “I was thinking about you.”

Acts of Service

Doing something for your spouse that is meaningful to him or her

Physical Touch

Kissing, embracing, patting on the back, holding hands, having sexual intercourse

Seldom do a husband and wife have the same love language. By nature, you tend to speak your own language. For example, if quality time makes you feel loved, then that's what you try to give your spouse. But if that is not his or her primary language, it will not mean to your spouse what it would mean to you.

So you need to know, and then speak, your spouse's primary love language.

This simple concept, which I have shared in marriage seminars and the book *The 5 Love Languages*, has helped millions of couples.⁴ Discovering your spouse's primary love language and choosing to speak it on a regular basis has tremendous potential for changing the emotional climate of your marriage.

Love is the most powerful weapon for good not only in the world but especially in a desperate marriage. When you choose to reach out with a loving attitude and loving actions toward your spouse in spite of past failures, you create a climate where the two of you can resolve conflicts and confess wrongs. A marriage can be reborn. Reality living says, "I will choose the road of love because its potential is far greater than the road of hate."

These six realities hold tremendous potential for desperate marriages. In the chapters that follow, we will look at examples of deeply troubled marriages and listen in on husbands and wives who have applied these reality-living principles and found healing.

I am sympathetic to those who feel that there is no hope for their marriage. But let's not assume that past failures must be repeated in the future. With a new set of guidelines and a willingness to take action, there is hope for a hard marriage.

I understand that you wish your spouse would join you in working on the marriage. That is probably an unrealistic hope at the moment, but that does not mean that your marriage is hopeless. One person must always take the initiative. Perhaps that person will be you.