

# Help Couples Build a Stronger Friendship

For couples, marriage is one of life's biggest opportunities to embody the Gospel: Christ's unconditional love, compassion and grace. Marriage can be an agent of God's healing to the other. Spouses can influence the other's view of themselves, as well as how they perceive God, by how they interact with each other.

As caregivers, we can help couples increase their investment in their friendship and make their relationship a priority, where each becomes a place of safety for the other. As their friendship grows, they will learn to handle the stresses of life better together. From the very first session, and as we journey with couples over time, we can help them tip the scales in favor of more positive interactions and teach them to pay attention to their spouses attempts to connect. Try building one or two of these suggestions into the session and gradually add more tools as the couples master the skills.

## Increase Positive to Negative Ratio

To maintain connection, couples need more positive interactions to counteract the negative. Dr. Gottman's research shows the happiest couples tend to have at least five positive interactions to every negative one, even in times of conflict. When not in conflict, that number is even higher, more like 8:1. Their positive to negative ratio may also influence both spouses' view of self.


- **Foster gratitude in session.** Start your couple sessions by having couples thank each other for one thing. This can be something the other person recently did that deserves appreciation or some quality they admire in the other.
- **Build thankfulness into their day.** Encourage couples to set aside three to five minutes each day to express appreciation out loud to the other before the day ends. They may feel appreciative but may not be in the habit of expressing gratitude to their partner.
  - "Thank you for the delicious meal you prepared."
  - "I appreciate and admire the way you're so caring towards our elderly neighbor."
- **Reduce overly negative interactions.** Teach them how to express empathy and validate the other's feelings. Getting defensive escalates the fight/flight mode and makes couples feel more at odds with each other, which can derail conversations. As couples learn to prioritize connection, they can maintain a greater feeling of safety and calm with one another, even in conflict.

- “I’m sorry for getting so upset about this. Let’s just stop for a minute so I can cool off. You matter more to me than this issue.”
  - “Wow, it really makes your life difficult when I procrastinate like this. I get why you’re so upset.”
- **Train their habits of blessing the other.** Teach couples to get into a habit of looking for opportunities to bless their spouse and show them they matter. This can be with small surprises or by doing things that show the other they care. Use session time to come up with a few things together, specific to the other spouse, such as making coffee in the morning, surprising them with their favorite sushi, a little note, etc. You can also have couples practice one display of thoughtful care between sessions.
- **Help them find time for fun and romance.** Work with couples to brainstorm how they can build both fun and romance into their lives. Couples have many roles together and apart: at work, at home, as parents, as friends and members of communities. They may feel more like business partners than friends. Help them recognize the importance of taking enjoyment and delight in each other to build their friendship.
  - What are rituals they can build into their day that are fun or romantic? Is it a 30 second kiss or hug to start or end the day, or when they are leaving the house?
  - Help them work through their schedules where date nights fit. As they make goals to spend time together, see if they can find two dates each month. When teaching about dates, explain that home dates are okay if necessary, but work and chores should be put away to focus on time together playing, talking or sharing an activity both enjoy.

## Turn Toward Each Other

In the Gospel stories, we see that Jesus turned toward people. He allowed himself to be interrupted. When someone sought him out or expressed a need, he gave each person, or the group of people, his full attention and addressed their need. We can help couples build the skill of turning toward each other. This ability to take in the other, turn attention towards them, and reflect on what they have just said builds a deep sense of trust in the relationship.

- **Emphasize the importance of undivided attention.** For most of us, one thing that vies for our constant attention is our phone. When one spouse makes a bid for connection or attention, the other can learn to put their phone down, turn it over, or silence it and make eye contact. In session, have them identify two



things that they are most distracted by and make a commitment to intentionally set them aside when the other needs attention.

- **Teach couples to give a whole-hearted response.** Each partner should learn how to positively respond to their partner's bids for connection by giving them their full attention and responding in a way that lets them know that what they have to say is important. Have them practice this skill in session: take turns giving bids for attention, with the other responding positively. Give them feedback. Reinforce the skill by having them express how it felt to ask for connection, and get—or give—a positive response.
  - Spouse 1: (bid for attention) "This has been such a long day. I just want to flop on the couch and not move."
  - Spouse 2: (puts down device and turns toward the other) "Oh man, tough day for you huh? I can see how stressed you are. Do you want to talk about it?"