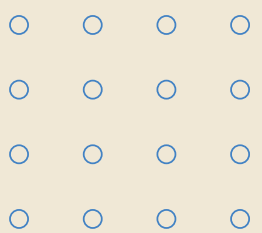
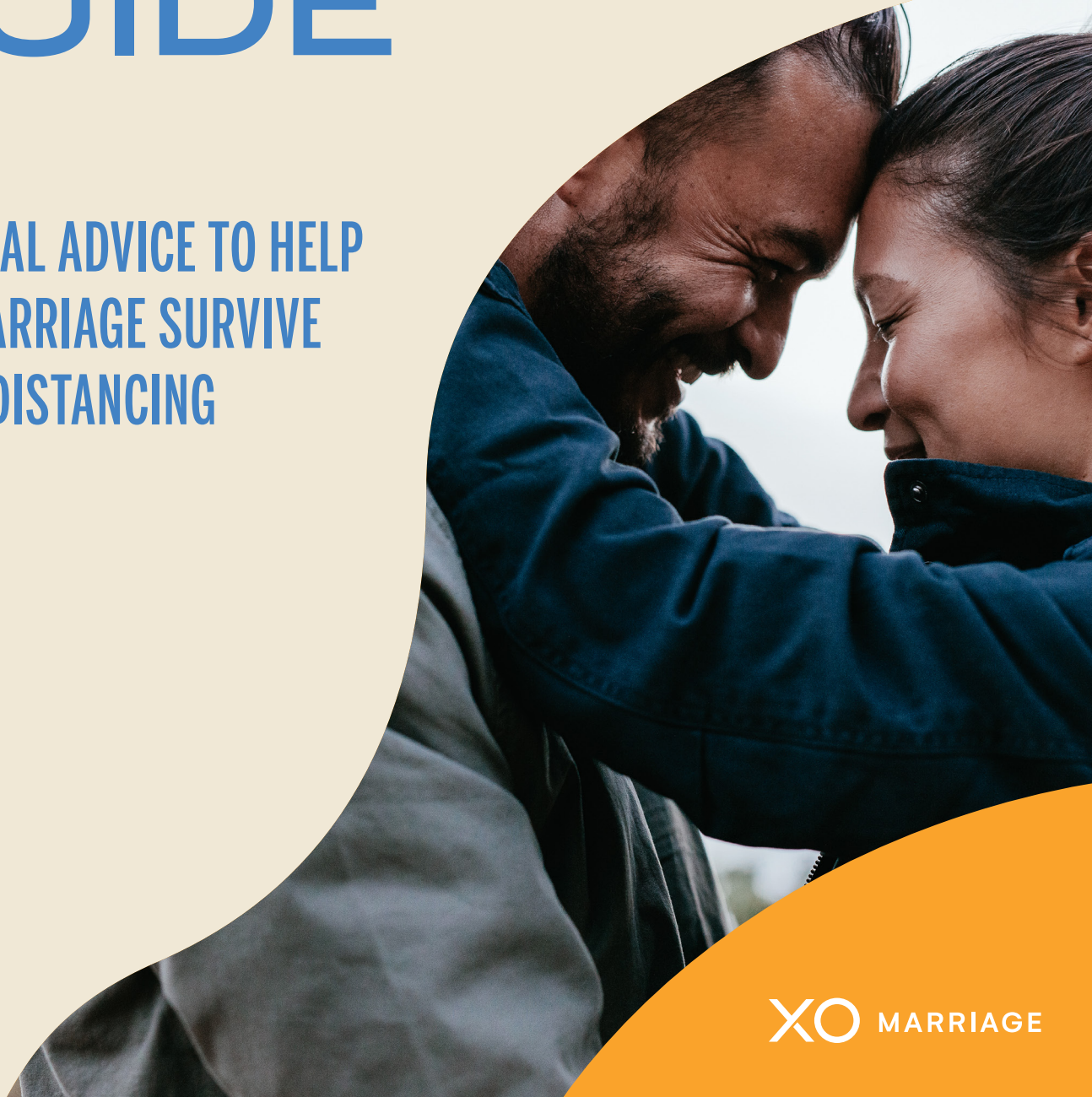




MARRIAGE SURVIVAL GUIDE

PRACTICAL ADVICE TO HELP
YOUR MARRIAGE SURVIVE
SOCIAL DISTANCING



FRIENDS,

If you're like us, you're trying to make sense of this new reality of life with COVID-19 dominating the news cycle. The Coronavirus has canceled many events and forced many of us to spend more time at home than ever before. The reality is that life is different than it has ever been, and it might never be exactly the same.

When the mass cancelations and calls for quarantine began, we posted a simple quote of encouragement on Facebook. The response was overwhelming. Within a few days, it had been shared almost 70,000 times and had many comments. Here's what we posted...

“Most kids are home from school and many events are canceled. What could seem like a time to panic might just be a gift from God to help us all get some unexpected rest and reconnect with family.”

As we started reading through the hundreds of comments, we quickly realized that there is a great deal of fear and anxiety right now. Many of the commenters were encouraged by the sentiment behind the quote, but many other comments also revealed the deep concerns we're all feeling connected to in these unprecedented times. People commented about financial stress or about how their work schedules would get busier in the weeks ahead. We heard from first responders and healthcare providers on the frontlines of this outbreak. We heard from others who are facing financial distress as the economy crumbles and this creates crippling anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

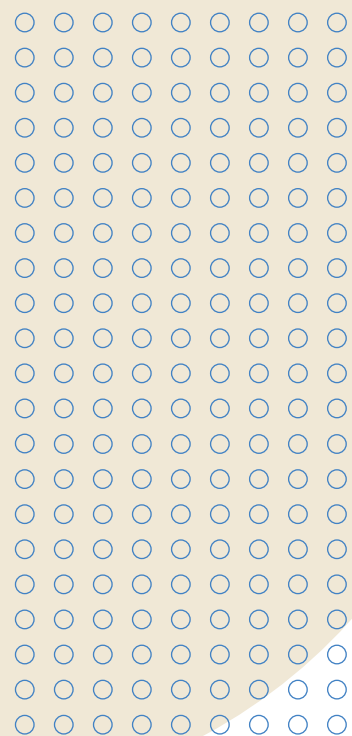
We're all trying to figure out how to navigate the road ahead. For those of us who are parents, we're trying to help our kids make sense of it all as well. We're on this journey with you, and we want to help! Along with Jimmy Evans and the team at XO Marriage, we've been working on a free resource to strengthen your faith, your

family, and your marriage as we hunker down and wait for COVID-19 to be a distant memory.

To help you make the most of this time, we've put together a "Survival Guide" to help you intentionally build your marriage with the extra time at home. Please enjoy this free resource as a gift from us. We are praying for you and believing that God will use this unique season to bring unexpected blessings to your home.

Your Friends,

Dave and Ashley Willis



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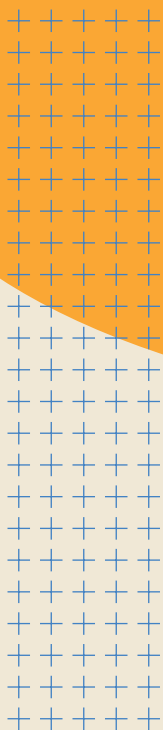
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SECTION ONE

SURVIVING FEAR & ANXIETY



THE ROOT CAUSE OF WORRY, ANXIETY, AND FEAR

BY JIMMY EVANS

Worry, anxiety, and fear are the same thing. They're the same emotion, just experienced on different levels, like stair steps.

Fear is a negative emotion caused by a real or perceived threat to our well-being. Anxiety means being uneasy and nervous about something we can't control—an event, person, or problem. Worry is to mentally dwell on difficulty or trouble. This chronic concern is the lowest level of the emotional staircase.

The first step is worry. Worry turns to anxiety. Anxiety becomes fear.

Scripture commands us not to do any of those things. Don't worry. Don't be anxious. Do not fear. God would

never command us to do something if we didn't have the ability not to do it.

As a kid, I was always worried. My life was filled with fear and anxiety. You wouldn't have known it, because I carried myself with confidence. But deep down, I had emotional problems.

Those problems turned into fear when I entered the ministry: Fear of men, fear of failure, fear of rejection, anxiety about everything. Even though my church was thriving, my life was filled with fear.

The root of all fear, anxiety, and worry is an orphan spirit. God was my Father, but I didn't know it. I didn't know He was taking care of me. I didn't understand how much He loved me—and how much He loves being our Father. Like an orphan, I had no idea who my Father was.

Today, I'm both a father and a grandfather. My grandkids call me Pappy, and I love being their Pappy. They are never a bother to me. One of the greatest joys of my life is when they ask me to do something.

However, compared to God's love, my love for my grandchildren looks almost evil.

God wants our lives to be free from worry, anxiety, and fear because these emotions distract us from God. They rob us of our families and joy. And yet we are in complete control of them. Worry and anxiety exist only because we allow them to.

How do we overcome them? First, we have to consider these thoughts to be agents of the enemy. They have been planted in our lives by the devil. Every morning, when you wake up, treat worry, anxiety, and fear like your enemies.

Second, turn every anxious and worrisome thought into a prayer until you find victory. Tell God, “This is what’s bothering me today.” Transform your worry list into a prayer list. Philippians 4:6 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

Third, confess that God is your loving Father and He cares for you. Let go of your orphan spirit. Orphans are on their own and have to take care of their own problems. But we are not orphans! Start rejoicing that you have the best Father in the universe.

Well-fathered children are fearless children. That’s why God tells us not to fear, not to be anxious, and not to worry. He is the answer to every problem, and like a loving, gracious Father, He has promised to take care of us.

5 THINGS GOD WANTS YOU TO REMEMBER WHEN LIFE IS HARD

BY DAVE WILLIS

Life is hard right now. As the entire globe reels from the onslaught of bad news connected to the spread of COVID-19, our faith is being tested in new ways. The good news in all this is that God wants you to have peace, and it's a peace that should start today without having to wait until the crisis passes. We can experience peace in the midst of any crisis if we'll trust in God's promises.

Even after the Coronavirus and its related chaos is all a distant memory, remember that struggles in life are inevitable, but destruction is optional. Choosing to trust these five principles can make all the difference...

1. Remember that your character should always be stronger than your circumstances.

We can't always control what happens to us, but we can always control how we choose to respond. In those moments when I choose to stop complaining and instead give thanks to God for the good in my life, the parts that seem bad start to seem much less significant. Choose to keep a positive attitude and thankful heart regardless of what you're going through.

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

2. Remember that your struggles always lead to strength.

Every difficulty in your life, whether big or small, is something God will use to produce more strength, faith, and perseverance in you if you let Him! All your pain has a purpose.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28

3. Remember that God’s timing is always perfect.

God’s plans are almost always different from our plans, but His plans are always perfect! Have the patience to wait on His timing instead of forcing your own.

“For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

4. Remember that God will never leave your side.

You may feel like you’re going through this struggle all alone, but from the moment you ask Jesus to bring you into God’s family, He will be by your side until the end, so never lose hope!

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” Deuteronomy 31:6

5. You WILL get through this!

Never lose hope. Never give up. You will get through this. God will carry you through.

BIBLE VERSES FOR THE ANXIOUS HEART

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

If you are struggling with anxiety and depression right now, I want you to know that you are not alone. You WILL get through this with God's help. And, these seven verses and prayers are a great place to start. It is my hope and prayer that they bring you peace and strength to face the day.

“And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus...” Philippians 4:7

Father,

My heart is heavy today. Sometimes, I feel like these condemning thoughts will never leave my mind. Remind me that I am not defined by these thoughts, and

they have no power over me when I surrender them to You. Help me to feel your deep love for me, Lord. There is not one terrible thought or action that can separate me from Your love. Thank You, Lord! May Your peace—Your perfect peace—surround my mind and heart like a fortress against my anxieties.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18

Dear Lord,

Thank You for Your steadfast love. Thank You for meeting me in the midst of my pain and struggle. Even when my spirit feels crushed, You lift me up, dust me off, and call me Chosen, Beloved, Child of God. You mend my

broken heart. Help me to know and believe that You are healing me little by little, each and every day.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.” Psalm 62:5

Father,

I feel weak today. I'm exhausted from a night of worrying and toiling over thoughts. Sometimes, I'm even sickened by it all to the point that my stomach aches and churns. Lord, be my strength today. Take this restlessness from me. Bring peace to my mind, body, and soul. Thank You, Lord, for being my Hope. Help me to rest in You today.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...” Romans 8:37

Dear Lord,

Help me to know that I won't have to live with anxiety and depression all of my life. Remind me that there is total victory in You. You are doing a work in me for my good and Your glory, and You waste nothing that I go through—the struggle and the healing. I am not a victim; I am more than a conqueror in Christ. Give me strength to face each day. I am Yours, Lord.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“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.” Philippians 4:8

Heavenly Father,

Fill my mind with good thoughts. I praise Your name—even in the midst of my pain—because You love me and help me to walk in Your truth. Give me eyes that see goodness and beauty all around me. Give me ears that tune into beautiful melodies and affirming words. Give me a spirit of thankfulness and joy that cannot be poisoned by worry, fear, and negativity. Thank You for the work You are doing in me and through me, Lord. May You be glorified.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10

Dear Lord,

Help me to realize that there is a spiritual battle after my

mind and heart. There is a thief who wants to distract me, beat me down, and force me to give up. But, You are more powerful than anything the thief throws at me. Help me to remember that you sent your Son to die on the cross so that I can walk in freedom and live a full, vibrant, and focused life. Help me to stand strong in You today, Lord. And, help me to recognize these mental and emotional distractions for what they are—crafty thieves after my peace and joy. Take them down, Lord!

In Jesus' Name, Amen

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path.” Proverbs 3:5-6

Dear Lord,

Bring peace to my wandering and worrisome thoughts today. Help me to remember that I don't have to “figure it

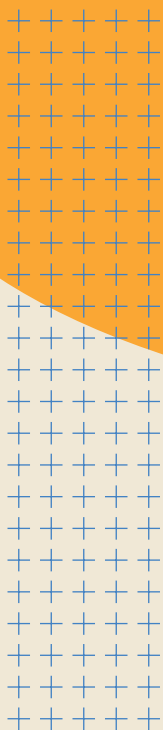
out”; I just have to trust in You. Lord, thank You for being the constant in my life. Help me to trust in You—not my emotions, not another person, and not my own intellect. I trust You to carefully direct and keep my mind and heart today. Thank You, Lord.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen



SECTION TWO

SURVIVING
FINANCIAL
STRESS



7 PRINCIPLES TO HELP MANAGE FINANCIAL STRESS

BY DAVE WILLIS

Perhaps the most devastating aspect of the Coronavirus crisis isn't the virus itself but the financial fear and devastation it's creating. As people watch their 401k's dwindle away, and many jobs are in jeopardy, the financial stress millions are feeling is overwhelming. The current economic crisis is definitely something very unique, but financial stress in marriage has been a hurdle for couples to overcome since the beginning.

Even before the current economic crisis began, I read a report that listed "financial stress" or "disagreements about money" as one of the top two reasons for divorce. Financial pressure can certainly squeeze a husband and a wife in some unexpected ways, and if the couple can't find unity around a financial plan, money troubles can become a wedge that drives them apart. Financial

stress is a factor in almost every marriage at one point or another, and how you choose to deal with it can make a tremendous difference in the long-term health of your relationship.

Ashley and I can relate to this in our own marriage. In recent years, we've been unified in our financial goals, but in the early years, our lack of a financial plan created immense stress. We were young and in love, and we naively thought love alone was enough. We learned the hard way that credit cards aren't the same thing as money and debt takes away freedom. We didn't experience anything like the "Coronavirus economic collapse" happening today, but the storms we weathered in our finances were still one of the greatest challenges we'd ever faced.

Digging our way out of financial debt from our early years of marriage took time and it took a disciplined plan, but most importantly, it required unity. Ashley and I

had to resolve to be on the same page when it came to money (and everything else for that matter). In retrospect, I'm thankful for those early, hard lessons, because working through them together actually strengthened our marriage.

We still feel the pinch of financial pressure at times, because as kids get older, they keep getting more expensive! When the pressure comes or an unexpected bill shows up in the mailbox, we try to take a deep breath and remember the hard-earned lessons from early in our marriage. We also feel it in times like these where there's such widespread economic uncertainty.

If you are in a season of financial pressure caused by the recent financial collapse (or any other factor) in your marriage, please remember these principles. I believe they could help your marriage as much as they've helped mine. In no particular order...

1. Remember that your spouse is always more important than your money.

First and foremost, you've got to remind yourself and remind each other that the marriage is more valuable than any financial matters. You can't put a price tag on your marriage or your family, so decide in advance that money struggles won't come between you.

2. Fight for unity instead of fighting against each other.

Decide that unity is more important than "winning." We all have a desire to "win," which essentially just means getting our way. In marriage, it's never worth getting your way at the expense of your spouse. You're on the same team, so you're either going to win together or lose together. Work to develop a set of goals where you both can win. You will both most likely have to give up some wants and some preferences along the way, but those minor sacrifices are well worth the investment into the health of your marriage.

3. Aggressively eliminate debt.*

The Book of Proverbs in the Bible is full of practical wisdom related to money. Proverbs tells us that debt is a form of slavery because it removes our freedoms, so we should avoid it, and if we're in it, we should relentlessly work to get free of it. *Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University book* and/or course is a great resource to help you start the process of getting out of debt and truly finding financial peace in your marriage.

**Note: In this season of financial crisis, you can give yourself the freedom to take care of basic necessities and start paying off debt when you're able. Make sure you're prioritizing food, shelter, and other basic necessities in your budget first. These are unprecedented times and you don't have to add unnecessary extra pressure to yourself by trying to pay off all your debts when you are struggling to buy*

basic necessities. You WILL get through this. You can re-evaluate the plan once the storm has passed.

4. Develop a plan and stick to it.

The word “budget” can be a scary word if you’ve never really had one before. Don’t look at a budget as a prison, but as a path to freedom. It’s pre-deciding what the family’s primary needs and desires are and then allowing your money to reflect those values without getting distracted by that shiny new thing at the mall. Make sure your plan includes saving because having a cushion of savings will help prevent future stress. The free app [Every Dollar](#) is a great resource to help you get started with a plan.

5. Communicate with your spouse about all financial matters.

As a quick clarification, fighting is not the same thing as communicating! Talk to each other about what’s coming in and what’s going out. Keep each other in

the loop about all unexpected purchases. For Ashley and me, a policy we've stuck to for years is we'll call or text each other if we're making any unexpected purchase over \$50 just to keep each other in the loop. Communication shows respect and brings unity.

6. Never commit “Financial Infidelity.”

Infidelity doesn't necessarily mean a sexual affair. That's one extreme form of unfaithfulness, but there are others including financial infidelity. The word infidelity literally means “broken trust.” Don't break your spouse's trust by hiding financial transactions or hiding money from each other. This form of dishonesty will prove to be devastating to the overall trust and unity in the marriage. If you've been guilty of this, confess it to your spouse and work together to create more trust and transparency in the marriage.

7. Remember that God owns it and you just manage it.

One of the Bible's most liberating and countercultural

teachings on money is that “your money” isn’t really yours. God owns everything, and He has given you the ability to make money and the responsibility to manage those resources well. Remembering that it’s all His will remove our sense of entitlement and free us to live with generosity and with an eternal perspective, instead of a temporary one. It will help us pass up on some of those impulse purchases that can create debt. Remember whose it is and remember whose YOU are too. You are a child of God with limitless, eternal value, and your “net worth” has nothing to do with your “self-worth.”

The bottom line is that money will be an opportunity to grow closer in partnership with your spouse or an excuse to grow apart from your spouse. It’s really all up to you. These lean times most of us are experiencing can actually be an opportunity to grow closer to your spouse and closer to God as you learn to live with

less temporarily and show gratitude for the simple blessings all around you. Don't let financial stress steal your joy! Life's greatest blessings can't be measured in dollars.



SPEAKING OF MONEY

BY JIMMY EVANS

“Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.”

Psalm 139:4 NIV

During the current crisis occurring worldwide, money has quickly become a difficult topic for many couples. Learning to understand how your spouse feels about money during this time will impact how you handle your money together. There are two things Karen and I have implemented in our marriage to help bring unity around our finances.

First, we submit our finances to the Lord. Before making decisions, we pray. We don't try to dominate each other or “win” arguments over money. We both realize that if we pray and find God's will, He will bless us and we won't fight.

Second, we honor each other's money language. In the bad days of our marriage, I would call Karen a tightwad, and she would call me a spendthrift. We each see money very differently and it caused us to argue and accuse each other.

Then one day I read an article by financial psychologist Kenneth Doyle about the four different money languages. Each of us have a predominant money language that affects our perceptions and decisions. The four money languages are:

Driver – Money means success. A driver says “I love you” by buying things and showing you through material objects you are important to them. Obviously, taken too far this can become materialistic and non-relational.

Analytic – Money means security. Analytics say “I love you” through saving and planning for the future. Taken too

far they can become miserable, no fun and controlling. They can also communicate more value for money than people.

Amiable – Money means love. An amiable says “I love you” by sharing and giving. Without balance and wisdom, an amiable can be impulsive and unprepared for the future.

Expressive – Money means acceptance. Expressives say “I love you” by buying, showing and sharing. Taken too far, expressives use money the way some people use alcohol—to deal with pain and anxiety in a wrong manner.

When reading these descriptions, most couples are able to immediately identify themselves and their spouses. Approximately eighty percent of all couples have different money languages. Understanding these differences helps you identify the strengths and weaknesses you

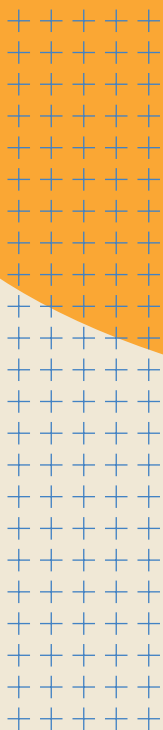
both have, and it can actually help you make better money decisions because you are able to balance each other's perspective.

So talk it out, identify which money language you think describes you and share that with each other. Talk about the ways you can balance each other's tendencies when making financial decisions.

Also consider setting aside a certain amount of money to help someone. Ask God to show you a family or individual whom you could bless by giving them a gift card or buying a specific item they need. Let's not hoard our resources out of fear, but let's put our faith in the Lord and love one another during this time.

SECTION THREE

SURVIVING
NO PRIVACY



HOW TO MAKE LOVE IN A HOUSE WITH NO PRIVACY

BY DAVE WILLIS

I'm a nerd who has always been fascinated by the History Channel. Learning about cultures and practices from centuries past is intriguing to me. Sometimes, what fascinates me the most are the questions that never really get answered in the books or documentaries. I have questions like, *“If pioneers lived in one-room log cabins and had a dozen kids, then when and how were they ever able to have sex in a house with no privacy?”*

That's a good question, right? Maybe for you, it's a more relevant question than ever because this Coronavirus quarantine might have you stuck in a house full of kids 24/7. While the unexpected surge of family time could have some positive benefits, one challenge it poses is how to have any alone time with your spouse. This really extends past just the logistics of how to have sex in a

full house; it also extends to how to have any private conversations.

So, how do we make this work? How do we maintain an intimate connection with our spouse in home dynamics where the regular routine has been turned upside down? Here are a few tips that might help...

1. Create a locked door “Do Not Disturb” policy.

We had our kids walk in on us one time when we were sharing a moment of marital bliss. They pushed through a flimsy locked door in a vacation rental home while we were sharing a home with extended family at the beach. It was a REALLY awkward moment, but one positive that emerged from that awkwardness is that it firmly established a locked door policy in our house. Now, whenever any of our boys approach our room and the door is locked, they know it means we are having some private time. Even if it's just to watch a show or have a conversation, your kids (of all ages)

need to know there are some “Do Not Disturb” moments for you and your spouse. Clearly, if your children are very young or there’s some kind of emergency you’ll need to leave the room, but establishing a policy could still make your bedroom a safe space where you can temporarily retreat for some privacy with your spouse.

2. Give your spouse a lot of non–sexual touch throughout the day (and some sexual touches too.)

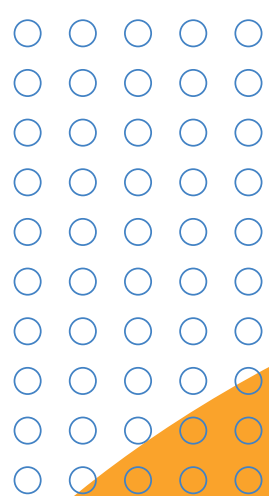
In a busy house where everybody is running into each other, it’s easy to start overlooking your spouse or just seeing them as another body in your way as you’re bumping into everyone and everything. Be intentional about pausing to touch your spouse in affectionate ways. Many of these touches will be non–sexual like a shoulder rub, a gentle grabbing of their hand, or a kiss on the cheek. These touch points are so important to stay connected. They also can pave the way to foreplay and eventual lovemaking later in the day. Even in seasons when you’re not stuck in quarantine, a lot

of touch throughout the day is a powerful way to stay connected to your spouse physically and emotionally.

3. Make some privacy a priority.

When your routine is shot and your house is full of people and noise, there might be a natural tendency to get into a survival mode where you get on cruise control and hit “pause” on any type of intimacy with your spouse. While this is an understandable response, it’s also a dangerous mistake. In times like these, you need private time with your spouse more than ever. Make it a priority to connect in conversations with each other. If able, leave the kids for a bit and go on walks around the neighborhood just to talk and get some exercise. Take advantage of your new “Locked Door Policy” and make your bedroom a safe and sacred space to connect. Many of these habits will serve you well if you’ll keep doing them long after the quarantine has been lifted!

Now is a good time to learn from our pioneer ancestors from centuries past. If they were able to survive quarantines from Cholera and countless other pestilences with no electricity and make it, then we can surely make it with air conditioning and Netflix! If they could find a way to consistently have sex in a one-room cabin and a dozen kids, then we can surely lock our doors and find time to make love while the kids are watching a movie. I know these are unprecedented times, but they also bring unprecedented opportunities to reconnect with your spouse. Make the most of it!



7 SURPRISING KEYS TO BETTER SEX

BY DAVE & ASHLEY WILLIS

So you're stuck at home. On the surface, that might seem like bad news, but it also presents some great opportunities. One of the best opportunities is that while you're looking for something to do, you and your spouse can do each other! Increasing sexual intimacy and frequency in your marriage can be a factor in improving all other aspects of your marriage as well. Use this time to reprioritize your sex life and it could create some great habits that will keep going strong long after the Coronavirus is a distant memory.

To keep your sex life thriving, remember these seven sexy principles...

1. Foreplay Lasts All Day

Foreplay shouldn't just be in the few minutes leading

up to making love. Foreplay should be happening all day through the ways you communicate with your spouse, the ways you flirt with each other, suggestive text messages throughout the day (from the other room), and a million other little ways to build anticipation.

2. Chore-Play

Men, I'm talking primarily to YOU here! For men, sex is a form of stress relief, but for most women, they need stress relief BEFORE they can be in the mindset to make love. If you take some things off her to-do list by serving around the house (doing laundry, dishes, yard work, etc.), it's going to free up her mind to be able to focus on sex instead of all the chores left to do. You're never hotter to your wife than when she sees you checking things off her to-do list.

3. Have a “Naked Marriage” (and not just in the bedroom)

Nakedness in marriage shouldn't just be physical, and I'm not advocating that you and your spouse just walk around the house with no clothes all day (though that might be a good thing if you don't have kids in the house). You should ALSO be naked emotionally. This means being vulnerable and transparent. It means having NO secrets from each other. Secrecy is the enemy of intimacy. Get naked emotionally with each other and then you'll find yourselves wanting to get naked physically much more often.

4. Try to do it as often as the spouse with the higher sex drive wants to

This isn't always realistic, but whenever possible, I'm convinced that a marriage will thrive if the spouse with the lower drive tries to fulfill the preferred frequency of the spouse with the higher drive. In reality, BOTH spouses need to be willing to step outside his/her comfort zones to put the needs of the other spouse

ahead of his/her own needs, but as a rule, more sex is almost always better for a marriage than less sex, so do your best to make it a priority.

5. Stay away from porn

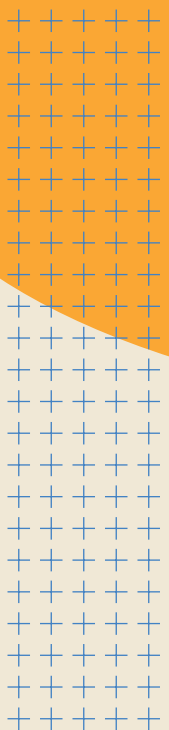
Some people look at porn like harmless entertainment or a way to spice things up in the marriage, but porn is destructive. In the long run, it doesn't actually help us connect with our spouse. Rather, it desensitizes us to being able to experience true intimacy at all. It replaces love with lust and cheapens sex to nothing more than an act of self-gratification. We share some stats and stories in our book, *The Naked Marriage*, but the short version is simple: Have a porn-free marriage. Be physically monogamous AND mentally monogamous. Keep your fantasies focused on each other.

6. Inside AND outside the bedroom, make time together a priority

Don't treat your spouse like an interruption; treat him/her like your highest priority. The strongest marriages (and the most fulfilling sex lives) happen between two best friends who are making time together a priority. There are no shortcuts to a great marriage. It takes time, and it's always well worth the effort!

SECTION FOUR

SURVIVING
CONFLICT



WHEN YOU AND YOUR SPOUSE ARE STRUGGLING TO GET ON THE SAME PAGE

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

I hear married couples say it all the time—“The two of us just can’t get on the same page” or “We’re just on different pages.” I’ve said it before, too. Many have come to accept it as a normal thing that happens in marriage. But, the longer we stay on different pages, the more our marriage suffers. With the onset of COVID-19, social distancing, and sudden homeschooling, it is crucial that each of us get on the same page with our spouse.

Firstly, we need to understand how we end up on different pages. It doesn’t happen overnight. It’s something that can sneak up on us, unless we are intentional about our time and investment into our marriage.

Secondly, we need to understand what it really means to be on “different pages.” It is a way of saying that one

partner is ahead of or behind the other. The two aren't going through life at the same pace or in the same direction. Over time, this can cause huge fights and discontentment in a marriage. Instead of feeling like they are playing for the same team, a couple ends up feeling like, and often acting like, opponents.

After years of working with married couples in crisis, my husband, Dave, and I have noticed some common reasons why couples end up on different pages. Here are four of them:

1. Communication Issues

This is probably the biggest one. Unless we make healthy communication a daily priority, then it will start to break down. Healthy communication means we are actively talking and listening to one another, and answering each other's phone calls, texts, and messages. We silence the cell phone, close the laptop, and turn off the television and look into each other's

eyes while sharing what's on our heart. When we fail to do this, we fail to really connect, and we eventually find ourselves on different pages.

2. Poor Choices

This is a hard one. In many situations, there is one spouse who continues to make poor choices, while the other tries to keep the marriage and family afloat. This causes great stress in the marriage and can tear a marriage apart. When one partner makes a poor choice, it affects both partners just the same.

Some common poor choices that people make in marriage are: flirting with someone outside the marriage, drinking too much, leading an unhealthy lifestyle, lying, hiding money, having an affair, and stealing. These poor choices damage the trust and intimacy in the relationship and inevitably lead to major marriage problems.

It's important that both spouses identify the destructive behavior(s) and get help before it becomes a full blown addiction or worse, and it's even more important that both the husband and the wife walk through this road to recovery TOGETHER. It's never just his problem or her problem; in marriage, it's always our problem, and we must choose to face it together for healing to take place.

3. Pride

Most of us are guilty of this one from time to time. We want to be right more than we want to admit fault and show our flaws. As husband and wife, we must learn to embrace the latter. We aren't in competition with our spouse; we're partners playing for the same team. So, let's stop this tit-for-tat game and humble ourselves towards God and one another.

The best way we can do this is by praying together. It doesn't have to be fancy or lengthy. Just find a time

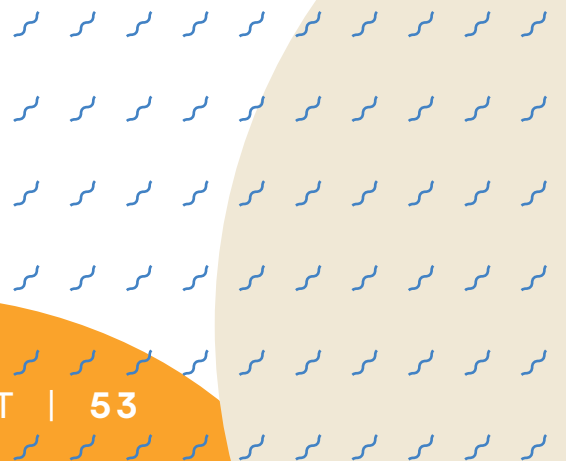
during the day, bow your heads, and talk to God. It's really hard to stay mad at someone and pray for them at the same time. When we pray together, God softens our hearts towards one another and helps us to lay down our pride. He helps us to see our spouse with fresh, loving eyes and to have wisdom as we work to stay on the same page.

4. Priority Problems

This is another biggie. This world tells us to choose achievement over relationships and hobbies over family time, but this kind of thinking will tear our marriage apart and leave us feeling empty in the end. There is nothing more important in this world, aside from your relationship with God, than our marriage and family. Nothing. There's no job, television show, game, hobby, food, friend, extended family member, social media forum, or accolade that should come before our spouse. So, why do we place those people and things ahead of our spouse time after time? It's

because we have our priorities backwards. We must fight to keep our families first, but they are worth the fight. If we aren't intentional about spending time with our spouse, then someone or something else will take that time from us.

If you and your spouse are struggling with being on the same page, please address these issues before more damage is done. Now is the perfect time, with many couples having more time together during this season of quarantine. Use it to your advantage, and you and your spouse will come out of this unprecedented time of social distancing with more unity, understanding, and connection.



ENDING THE CONFLICT CYCLE

BY DAVE & ASHLEY WILLIS

Have you ever felt like your marriage was stuck in a cycle of negativity? Without meaning to, you and your spouse seem to keep falling back into the same rut of negativity and criticism, and you're not sure how to get out of it. You keep letting the same topics trigger you into a rut of rehashing the same arguments over and over with no resolution in sight. I think most (if not all) marriages have experienced this at one time or another. This cycle of negativity can create feelings of desperation and hopelessness, and it can also threaten to model the wrong relational examples to our children.

Most marriages experience seasons with storms of frustration or conflict, but when those seasons turn into the status quo, the marriage's survival is at risk. There are so many factors that lead to this negative

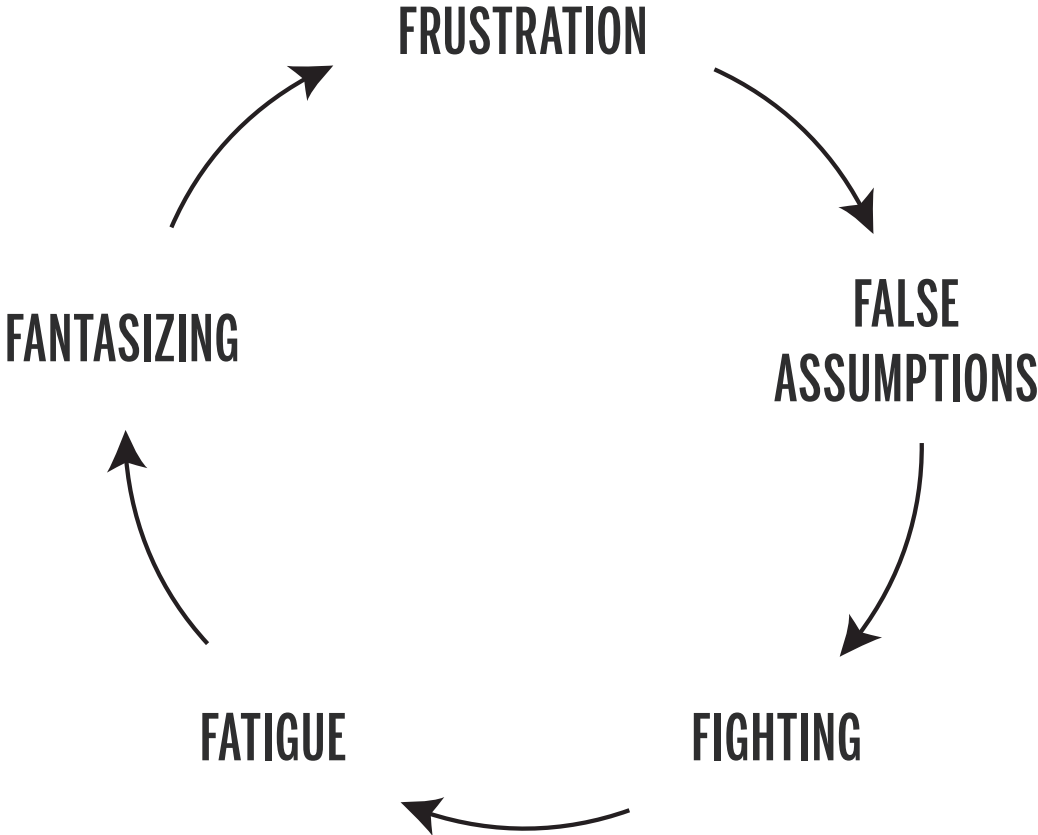
cycle. It can be set into motion by stress or exhaustion or miscommunication or a myriad of other things (such as social distancing and/or this uncertain time we are in right now). How it starts isn't nearly as important as how to break out of it, because if you allow the negative cycle to continue, it can devastate your marriage and teach your kids unhealthy lessons that could sabotage their future dating relationships and marriages.

We like to refer to this negative cycle as the “F5 Marriage Tornado.” My knowledge about tornadoes is limited to what I learned from the classic 1990's movie, *Twister* (is it just me or were movies way better in the '90s?). I remember that movie teaching that an F5 tornado is the most powerful storm on earth. When you're in the center of an “F5 Marriage Tornado,” it can feel like the most powerful storm in your life.

Here's how it works. There are five factors in this storm of marital conflict, and they all start with the letter “F”

(hence the “F5” reference). Each of these factors leads in a cycle to the next one on the list, and with each rotation around all five, the storm grows in ferocity. Maybe you’re a visual learner, so take a look at this simple graphic explaining the “F5 Marriage Tornado”, and then I’ll unpack how this works:

F5 MARRIAGE TORNADO



The storm always starts with frustration. We're all prone to frustrations at times. These frustrations might not have anything to do with your spouse, but how you deal with the frustration can have a tremendous impact on how you communicate to your spouse. When you're caught in this storm, frustration always leads to false assumptions.

False assumptions occur when you believe lies that your spouse is against you or they don't care as much as you do about the issue. Once these false assumptions fester, they inevitably lead to fighting, which can be a war of words or a war of non-verbal shots aimed at wounding one another.

The fighting eventually leads to fatigue, and this is dangerous because we tend to make our worst decisions when we're tired. Fatigue blurs our vision and keeps us from seeing the situation clearly. Fatigue also makes us susceptible to the fifth step in this cyclone, which is

fantasizing. When we grow weary from the whole cycle, we can slip into the toxic trap of fantasy in the form of escaping into pornography or romance novels or looking up old flames on social media or just imagining a better life without your spouse.

This process will lead you right back to the start of the storm with more frustration, and the cycle continues to repeat itself until one, or both spouses, either give up on the marriage or decide to fight for peace.

If you find yourself in this storm that has been the end of far too many marriages, please don't give up. Please don't believe the myth that your marriage will always be caught in this exhausting cycle of negativity and conflict. You have the power to bring peace. The F5 storm has an F5 solution. Here's how it works:

F5 MARRIAGE PEACE PLAN



The “F5 Peace Plan” starts with frustration. Like I said before, frustration is an inevitable part of life and marriage, but you don’t have to let that frustration lead you into the storm cycle. In the peace plan, the moment you feel frustration, you break the negative cycle by choosing forgiveness. Choose to let go of whatever grudge or animosity you’re carrying. It was Augustine who centuries ago wisely said, “Holding a grudge is like

drinking poison and then hoping the other person dies.”

Grudges and “keeping score” of faults will poison your marriage. Choose to forgive and move forward with grace. This is the first and most important step in finding true and lasting peace in your marriage (and life in general).

After you forgive, follow the Apostle Paul’s sage advice recorded in the Bible (Philippians 4:8) and “fix your thoughts on the good.” Don’t let your mind fixate on the negative. Whatever captures your focus will seem more significant, so make sure you’re focusing on good things. If you’re looking for your spouse’s flaws, that’s all you’ll see; but if you’re looking for the good, you’ll start to see it.

Fixing your thoughts on the positive should be a constant reminder to process to the next step, which is to focus on God’s promises. Remember that God is with you and He is bigger than whatever struggle you’re facing. His

promises are real and can be trusted. Immerse yourself in God's Word (the Bible) and choose to believe that God is in control even when life is complicated.

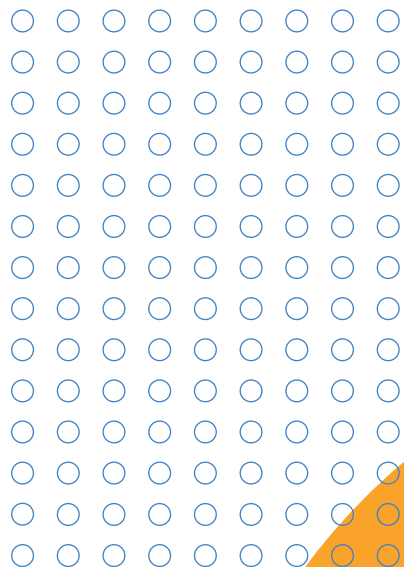
As you do these things, you'll discover a mental and spiritual renewal, which leads to the final step, which is "Finding Peace." I believe that real peace is found in the Prince of Peace. When Christ is the center of your thoughts, He will always bring more peace to your perspective. He wants to bring more peace to your heart, your home, and your marriage.

I love this simple peace plan for many reasons, but one of the most practical reasons is that you don't need your spouse to participate with you to do it. You don't have to get stuck in the cynical cycle of excuses that say, "Well if my husband/wife would just do their part, then the marriage would be great."

It's never your job to fix your spouse or change your spouse. It's your job to love your spouse and to trust God to do the rest.

If you follow this peace plan, even if your spouse isn't currently joining you in the peace process, you'll still find that God will start bringing more peace to your home. I believe your example will eventually be a factor in bringing a change of heart to your spouse too.

Choose to be the first one to stop the fighting. Refuse to keep living in the eye of an "F5 Marriage Tornado" when peace is within your grasp. Trust the Prince of Peace to calm the storms, and He will.



THE FIVE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

BY JIMMY EVANS

Think back to the period of time when you and your spouse were falling in love with each other. You spent hour after hour together. You discovered you were attracted to each other. But perhaps the most critical part of that process involved words. You talked and talked and talked. Communication is how you fell in love and communication is how you will stay in love.

Whether you've been married for a year or for thirty years, your relationship is only going to be as strong as your ability to communicate. Since you're both most likely spending extended time together due to social distancing, it's crucial that you communicate effectively and maintain a peaceful environment in your home. Here are five essential elements that need to be present to ensure good communication in your marriage:

1. The Right Tone

Everything you say in marriage has to be said with the right tone. In fact, often tone communicates more than the literal words themselves. Saying “You’re so wonderful” in a loving tone is very different from growling “You’re so wonderful” in a sarcastic, biting tone.

Tone tells the other person whether or not you care. It can show empathy and understanding. It can convey security to women or respect to men. These are significant needs, and tone helps deliver them. Always watch your tone when you’re speaking to your spouse.

2. Enough Time

For communication to accomplish what it needs to accomplish, it has to have enough time. Personal communication requires at least an hour or so daily. This is where a husband and wife catch up with one another

at the end of the day. You put down your phones and face to face, talk about work, the kids, or any issues that may have come up. If you can't find an hour a day to talk, you're too busy. For those of you with kids, come up with a plan to keep your children occupied so you can have adult time without distraction. I recognize this may be hard during this season, but the reward will help everyone be healthier and create a more peaceful environment for the entire family.

Finally, intimate communication may take you five to ten minutes a day. This is any kind of loving talk: You say what you love or appreciate about each other. This can be a part of sex, but it doesn't have to be. Though it's just a short portion of your day, time spent in intimate communication is also essential to a strong marriage.

3. An Atmosphere of Trust

Trust has to be earned in marriage, and your spouse

will not open his or her heart to you if they do not trust you. I once heard someone say trust is “earned in drops and lost in buckets.” You build trust by being faithful, servant–hearted, sacrificial, and humble. You also build it by being caring, empathetic, and attentive.

During periods of conflict, you build trust by being approachable and responsible. Your spouse knows that he or she won’t pay a price by telling you something. When confronted, you don’t deflect blame or cast accusations. You also build trust by maintaining confidentiality—the details of your marriage stay inside your marriage.

Early in our marriage, Karen had no trust for me. I didn’t deserve it anyway. I was not a good husband. I was inattentive. I had no empathy. I was only able to rebuild her trust one day at a time as I started to do the right thing, to take responsibility, and to communicate with her on a heart level.

4. An Atmosphere of Truth and Love

Ephesians 4:15 uses the phrase, “speaking the truth in love” as it relates to the process of becoming Christlike. Those two things—truth and love—have to accompany each other. Communication requires truthfulness, and if you don’t speak the truth in your marriage, you have a big problem. But grace has to pave the way for words of truth. Speaking the truth without love is simply mean. It can feel like an attack.

For instance, here are two different ways to approach a conversation. Let’s say your spouse says something that hurts your feelings. You could confront your spouse by saying, “Listen, yesterday you said this, and you meant this, and I know you were trying to pay me back for what happened last week.” You jump into the conversation having already come to a conclusion. It might feel like you’re speaking the truth, but your spouse will immediately go on the defensive.

A better approach is to start the conversation with gentleness. The first three minutes of a conversation will dictate the full conversation, so let love lead: “I don’t know if this is right, but something you said to me yesterday really hurt my feelings. I don’t want to attack you, but I do want to understand what you meant.” Grace has to go first.

5. Team Spirit

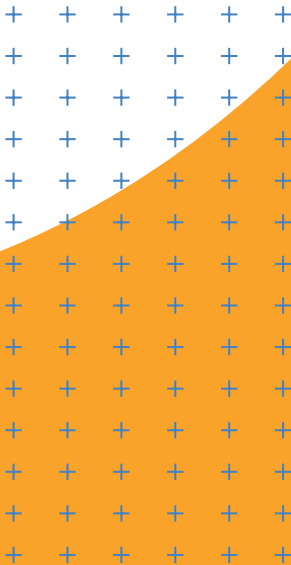
Husbands and wives differ from each other by God’s design, and we have to respect those differences. Compatibility in marriage isn’t based on sameness, but on shared character, faith, and values. Early in my marriage, I completely rejected so many things about Karen because I didn’t understand her. She wasn’t like me! Gradually I learned that’s a good thing. If both of you are the same, then one of you is unnecessary.

Today we are a team. We don’t criticize each other. We don’t take advantage of each other’s weaknesses.

But, we have learned to celebrate the ways we are different. That's how marriage works. We each have different strengths, and that allows us to help each other. Karen supplies what I lack and vice versa. We are stronger as a couple than we are as individuals.

To communicate successfully in a marriage, you have to be careful about your tone. You have to set aside time. You have to create an atmosphere of trust and season truth with love and grace. And you must be able to accept each other's differences. Pursue these five goals and you'll find that your communication improves.

And when communication improves, so does your marriage.



COMPLAINING VS CRITICIZING

BY JIMMY EVANS

Let's be honest, spending an extended amount of time with someone in the same environment every day has the potential to create conflict.

Many married couples are unable to resolve their conflicts because of one primary factor: they don't understand the difference between complaining and criticizing. This is such a crucial distinction to understand when we are trying to work through problems.

All of us need the freedom to complain to our spouse. We also need to make sure our spouse knows they have the right to complain to us. In a healthy marriage, there is a freedom of expression that allows us to talk openly without fear of retribution or shame.

When we complain, we must remember that it isn't about our spouse, it is about us. Even though we may be complaining about something they have done that bothers us, the focus is on how we feel. In other words, if Karen has done something that bothers me and I confront her about it I would say something like, "Karen, you were short tempered with me this morning and it bothered me. I don't know what was wrong, you could have been mad at me or it might have been something else, but I don't like it when you respond to me that way. If I've done something to make you mad then I want you to tell me."

Notice that I didn't begin by accusing or attacking her. I began by talking about how I felt and my desire to understand what happened. I also said that if I had done something wrong, then I wanted to know it and take responsibility for it. Complaining gets everything out on the table without demeaning our spouse or putting them on the defensive.

Criticizing is different.

Criticizing focuses on the other person as it accuses them and immediately puts them on the defensive. If I were going to say the same thing I said before to Karen, but I did it in a critical manner here is what I would say: “Karen, you were short tempered with me this morning and I don’t appreciate it. There is something wrong with you and I want you to figure out what it is and stop it. I don’t deserve to be treated like that. I’ve done nothing wrong and you’re just a hot head. The next time you do that I’m going to let you have it.”

Notice the difference in complaining and criticizing? Complaining explains the problem, but gives our spouse a gracious way to respond and explain their side. Since it focuses on how I feel and doesn’t try to interpret their actions, it keeps the conversation civil and constructive.

Criticizing immediately puts you in a battle mode.

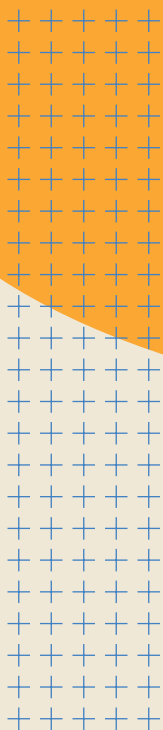
The confronter becomes the judge and jury and the confronted spouse becomes the criminal trying to prove their innocence in a hostile environment. Bottom line—criticizing doesn't work.

You must be careful to begin your confrontations with affirmation and respect for your spouse. Research has proven that a conversation will seldom rise above the tone of the first three minutes. Also, complain but don't criticize. Get your emotions under control before you confront, and keep your mouth in check. Focus on how you feel and allow your spouse the right to complain back to you and explain what is going on inside of them.

If you do this, you will see a lot of fruit from it. Your confrontations will be much more pleasant and productive. You will also be able to talk more freely with each other without the risk of hurting each other. This creates intimacy and friendship. That is the end result of successful conflict resolution.

SECTION FIVE

SURVIVING PARENTING



WE HAVE DIFFERENT PARENTING STYLES AND IT'S HURTING OUR MARRIAGE

BY DAVE WILLIS

One of the most challenging aspects of the current global crisis is that it's upending everyone's regular parenting routines. This may seem like a small thing, but over time, the stress that can come with disrupted routines and unclear expectations can put a huge strain on a marriage and a family. These challenges can be exacerbated by two different styles if one spouse is typically the one at home, and the current situation has both of you at home co-parenting together.

My wife, Ashley, and I receive messages every day on our blogs and Facebook pages from stressed parents who feel like their differences in parenting styles are negatively impacting the marriage. Ashley and I can relate to this one from personal experience. In fact, this

has been the primary source of stress and disagreement in our own marriage.

Ashley and I are alike in so many ways, but we surprised each other by how different we can be in our parenting approach to our four sons. These differences turned into some tense frustrations and finally reached a breaking point where we realized we needed to take action. We've still got a LOT to learn when it comes to this, but below are four things we've done that have made a huge difference in our marriage and brought more peace to our home.

If you'll do these four things, it will help your kids AND protect your marriage! In no particular order...

1. Don't use anger to get action from your kids. Use ACTION to get action from your kids.

We stole this nugget of parenting wisdom from Dr. James Dobson, who has written many great books

on parenting. We were in a bad habit of getting angry with our kids and then responding with anger in return. This just created more anger and very little action. We realized (and I'm continuing to slowly learn this lesson) that we can't just respond with anger. We need to control our emotions and simply respond with action. Let kids know ahead of time what the consequences will be for certain behaviors and then calmly carry out those consequences when the behavior takes place. It defines the boundaries and brings clarity instead of confusion. That consistency and predictability takes the emotion and guesswork out of the discipline process and it will bring more peace to your home.

2. Follow unchanging parenting principles instead of your own fickle feelings.

There are going to be moments in parenthood where there's not a clear roadmap for what to do next, but for the most part, the path is clearly defined. For Ashley and me, we agreed early on that the Bible was

going to be our roadmap for life, for marriage, and for parenting. The Bible (which actually has all kinds of great parenting insights) says, “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” (Proverbs 22:6) In other words, don’t just leave your kids on autopilot. Be intentional about defining the right path and helping them stay on the right path.

3. Be your kids’ biggest encourager; not their biggest critic.

Be the one who wipes away their tears; not the one who causes them. Teach them to be confident, but not cocky. Help them realize they are a unique masterpiece, created by God for a world-changing destiny! Believe in them even when they struggle to believe in themselves. The tone of your words will create the tone of your home. We want to build them up and not tear them down. Yes, there are certainly times we need to correct and plenty of times I’ve blown

it and yelled or criticized, but then I always try to be quick to apologize. We want our kids to know they're loved and that we're honored to be their parents. We want to cultivate the kind of relationship that makes our kids want to come hang out with us long after they've grown up and moved out!

4. We'll always have unity in front of the kids and we'll do our disagreeing and/or working through differences of opinion in private.

Don't let the kids work one parent against the other. Be united. In addition to having each other's back, let the kids know that you and your spouse are a team. Let them see you prioritizing your marriage. Don't put your marriage on hold while you're raising your kids or else you'll end up with an "empty nest" and an empty marriage! One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is to have the kind of marriage that actually makes them want to get married someday.

FOR THE MAMA WHO IS HAVING A ROUGH DAY

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

Sweet Mama, are you having a rough day? If we are all being honest, every single mother out there would admit that she's had her share of rough days where she feels defeated and depleted. This Coronavirus crisis and related issues have added a new level of stress to all of us. Many of us are experiencing more rough days than ever before.

You are not alone, friend. Maybe the day got off to a rocky start and you lost your temper on your kiddos. Maybe your kids haven't been listening well all day, and you've had just enough of the angst-filled attitudes. Maybe you are just simply exhausted from the never-ending tasks that come with raising your children.

I see you, Sweet Mama.

You're having one of those frustrating days that you just want to start over or just be done with it. You're feeling stress, exhaustion, uncertainty and, today, you're fighting feelings of defeat. You might even feel like you don't quite measure up as a mom. I get it. I've been there too. But, recently, God has been teaching me A LOT about my longing to "measure up." It all started when I read these verses...

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:15-19

Isn't that amazing! Mary—young and inexperienced—pregnant out of wedlock—misunderstood—simple, yet devout in her faith. She never dealt with COVID-19, but

she dealt with countless other life-threatening situations in addition to financial hardship and many other fear-inducing threats. Mary—mother of the Savior of the World—somehow got past her own insecurities, her pain, her frustration, and the chaos all around her, and she didn't try to measure up. That wasn't the call God placed on her and inside of her. Instead, she chose to treasure up God's goodness around her. But, how did she do this?

I love this verse because it gives us a glimpse of Mary's heart as a mother. I can't imagine what she was feeling as she carried Jesus all those months and then finally found a place to give birth after a long and difficult journey. I'm sure she was scared and unsure of her surroundings, but I also believe that God gave her a true peace that surpassed her understanding. In the midst of all the animal sounds and smells around her—all the exhaustion—all the pressure that would come with birthing and raising the Savior of the world—she chose

to treasure the moment. So awesome and inspiring! As beautiful and amazing as that is, this isn't the only time the Bible mentions Mary "treasuring up." Later in Luke 2, the author tells the story about Mary and Joseph losing track of Jesus during a festival in Jerusalem. This was the Passover festival where there would have been thousands of people. As the story goes, Mary and Joseph didn't even realize that Jesus was missing until three days later! Can you imagine?

To their credit, they were most likely managing a lot of kids within the very chaotic streets of Jerusalem and trying to make the trek back home.

Once they realized that Jesus wasn't with them, they began to panic just like any other parents would. They thought He was among the many relatives and friends who were making the journey with them, but He wasn't. I can't even imagine the utter panic they must have felt in their hearts! When they couldn't find him, they

turned around and rushed back to Jerusalem to find a calm and safe twelve year-old Jesus studying with the teachers at the temple.

It was in that very moment of finally finding Jesus, enveloped in relief and a whole mixture of emotions, that Mary “treasured up all these things in her heart.” She didn't dwell on the fact that they lost the Savior of the World for three whole days and worry about what others might think about them as parents. She didn't hold onto anger against Jesus for creating this panic in them by choosing to stay behind all by himself. She didn't allow thoughts of insecurity or failure to take residence in her mind and heart.

Mary didn't focus on trying to measure up to someone else's standard, or even her own for that matter. She chose to treasure up God's goodness around her. She chose to be thankful for finding Jesus safe and sound. She even chose to see Jesus' desire to learn from the

teachers and be in the temple as a sign of great maturity. I imagine Mary beaming with pride and tearing up as she listened to Jesus ask the teachers questions and grow in knowledge (once her heart calmed down a bit, of course). It's like she saw the very first glimpse of God's power and wisdom trickling out of her precious Son. And, you bet she treasured up every single drop of that goodness.

Sweet Mama, no matter what you are feeling at this moment, no matter how frustrated you are, and how much you think you or your kids have ruined the day, please know that God loves you. Resist those defeating thoughts that you will never measure up as a mom. Those are lies straight from the enemy, friend.

God calls you His beloved child (John 1:12). His daughter (2 Corinthians 6:18). A masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10). You measure up because He made you. When it comes to being the mom that God created us to be, He wants us

to try and treasure up His goodness in every situation. This doesn't mean that we won't continue to face hard things, but it does mean that we will NEVER face them alone. And, our minds and hearts will become accustomed to seeking out and finding the best kind of treasure there is—the sticky-sweet gifts and moments from God that He has placed in our lives.

5 PARENTING BOOKS THAT WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER PARENT AND EASE YOUR MIND

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

Whenever I feel like I am struggling as a parent (especially during these long days of social distancing and home schooling due to the Coronavirus), I love to find a good book on the subject. Over the years of raising our four boys, I have found myself using this short list of parenting books time and time again. That's the definition of a good book, right? So, I thought I would share my top five favorites with you in hopes that they might help you like they have helped me. And, they are amazing whether you read them OR listen to them. Here they are in no particular order:

1. ***Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*** by Stephen James and David Thomas

Years ago, I was talking to a sweet friend of mine

who is also raising a couple of boys of her own. I was sharing with her that I felt like I was completely failing my boys as a mom because I was so frustrated with them a lot of the time. My friend smiled and reassured me that I am not a bad mom, and she agreed that boys can be really hard to raise at times. Then, she told me about this AMAZING book on raising boys. I ordered it that day, and I couldn't put it down once I started reading it.

In *Wild Things*, James and Thomas—both Christian family therapists—unpack the difficulty most parents experience while raising boys. They walk parents through how boys need to be guided and nurtured through the different seasons of childhood based on their age and maturity levels. It was truly therapeutic and eye-opening for me all at the same time. I highly recommend it for all moms of boys.

2. Are my Kids on Track?: The 12 Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Milestones Your Child Needs to Reach by Sissy Goff, David Thomas, and Melissa Trevathan

Funny story about this one...

I recently had the exciting opportunity to go to the Chick-fil-a Headquarters in Atlanta and attend an “influencer meeting” with ten other authors and speakers from around the nation. I honestly couldn’t believe I was invited to be part of this awe-inspiring group of people, but I attended nonetheless. I ended up sitting beside David Thomas, a Christian family therapist, author, and speaker from Nashville. We introduced ourselves and talked about the kind of ministry/work that we do, and the whole time, I kept thinking, “I know this guy from somewhere...but where?”. And then it dawned on me, He is one of the authors of one of my favorite books about raising boys, *Wild Things!* Once I figured this out, I told him how much his book has helped me in my parenting (and sanity,

when it comes to raising boys). He was very gracious, super friendly, and extremely humble. I was honored to have met him in person.

A few months later, David reached out to me and asked if he could send me his newest book. And, of course, I said, “Yes!”. I was instantly pulled into this book by the title. How many times do we wonder if our child is on track, as parents?

All. The. Time. Right?

Well, *Are my Kids on Track?* answers this question and many more. It reminds parents that the most important parts of our children—their hearts—tend to be things that we don’t keep track of at doctor visits and at school. But, as parents, we need to be just as concerned with our kids’ emotional, social, and spiritual milestones as we are with their physical growth, academics, and health. In *Are my Kids on*

Track?, the authors offer parents 12 targets to aim for when it comes to their child’s “heart” milestones, and how we can encourage and foster this kind of development. Parents, this is one of those books you will go back to time and time again. It’s such a valuable and practical resource.

3. *Am I Messing Up My Kids?: ...and Other Questions Every Mom Asks* by Lysa TerKeurst

I read this book when I had only two of our four little ones at home. We had just moved across state lines, and we had no television or internet. Dark ages, right? We played inside a lot, because there was a river too close to our rental for our preschooler and two-year-old to play safely outside. Neither of the boys could swim yet. Naturally, we all became a little stir crazy and frustrated with one another. I was weary and out of ideas.

So, I decided to take the kiddos to the bookstore one

day, and *Am I Messing Up My Kids?* was one of the featured books at the time. It called to me as if it were spelled out with neon flashing lights. I purchased it right away and began reading it during nap time that day. I think I finished it in only a few days. I couldn't put it down. For the first time, I felt like another mom understood what I was going through. I wasn't crazy, and I wasn't messing up my kids for life. And, that felt so good.

Sweet Mama, if you are looking for a great read that will make you laugh, cry, and give you a sigh of relief as a mom, then *Am I Messing Up My Kids?* is the book for you.

4. *When Parenting Isn't Perfect* by Jim Daly

If you are familiar with Focus on the Family—an awesome non-profit specifically geared towards families—then you have probably heard of Jim Daly, the president and CEO of Focus. I have listened to

Jim Daly on Focus' radio spots for years, and I have learned so much from the stories and resources they have shared on the airways. So, when I heard that Jim Daly came out with a new book, I knew I had to read it. First of all, I LOVE the title. As parents, we long for perfection in ourselves. We so desperately want to get it right. We know the stakes of raising kids. And, yet, we fall short all the time.

In *When Parenting Isn't Perfect*, Daly drives home the point that "Perfection is the enemy of parenting." That's so good, isn't it? What a relief to hear those words. None of us are perfect, so none of us are perfect parents. And, we need to stop trying to be perfect and getting so frustrated with ourselves when we realize that we're not. *When Parenting Isn't Perfect* reminds parents that perfection isn't the goal. It's all about doing our personal best, and persevering through the tough parts of parenting. Step by step. Day after day. Even during these self-quarantining, uncertain, Coronavirus days.

When Parenting Isn't Perfect will pull you in with honest stories of parental struggle and probing questions for parents to consider. It's one that I will certainly read again in a few years and then a few years after that. It's that thought-provoking and edifying.

5. *Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours* by Dr. Kevin Leman

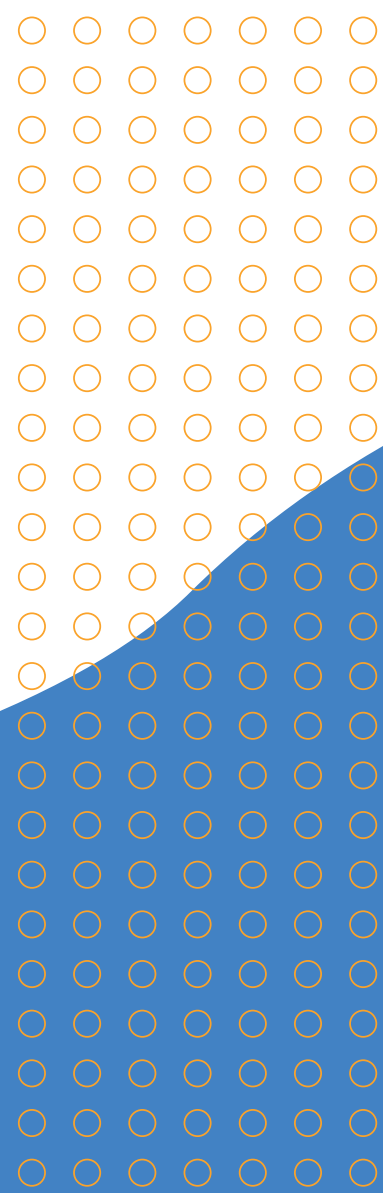
As a parent, I crave practical steps when it comes to disciplining my kids and bringing out the best in them. But, there are some gray areas when it comes to parenting, and each child can be so different. Sometimes, it's hard to know what approach we should take.

In the early years of parenting my kiddos, I read several books that had some wonderful philosophies on parenting and what the end goal should be, but I was often disappointed by the lack of practical steps a parent should take in implementing these philosophies.

So, one day, I was perusing the bookstore for a new parenting book, and *Making Children Mind Without Losing Yours* caught my eye. I was familiar with Dr. Kevin Lemman from a study we had completed at church, so I decided to give this new book a try.

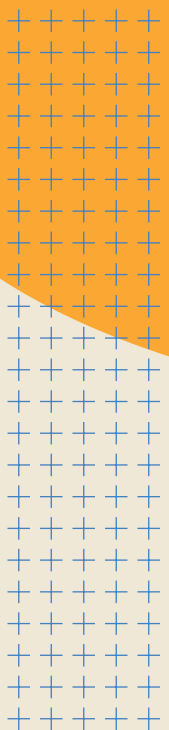
As I started to read it that night, I was so pleasantly surprised by the simple and practical steps that Lemman offers parents in this book. It's chock full of them. *Making your Children Mind Without Losing Yours* made me feel equipped as a parent, and that helped me to be less frustrated with my kids when I needed to discipline them. It also helped my husband and I to get on the same page with our parenting, so we became more consistent with our expectations and discipline. This book is one that I open up again and again. I highly recommend it for ALL parents—especially those who are just starting to discipline their little ones at home.

Also, I would love for you to read a FREE excerpt from my soon-to-be-released NEW book, *Peace Pirates!* It's all about how to find and keep God's peace in your heart and home—and oh, don't we desperately need that especially today? You can read an excerpt and find out more about *Peace Pirates* [here](#). Take heart, parents. You and God have got this!



SECTION SIX

SURVIVING SICKNESS



IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH: 7 WAYS TO LIVE OUT THIS VOW

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

With the reality of the Coronavirus increasingly on all of our minds, preparation is one way we can ease the tension in our homes. However, I'm not just talking about getting more toilet paper or cleansing wipes. As married couples, we need to prepare for how we are going to practically live out our vow to love and honor each other "in sickness and in health." What does it really look like to live out this vow—especially if one of us contracts the Coronavirus?

Sickness can run the gamut from a simple cold to a life-threatening illness. In either scenario, we have an opportunity to show great love, kindness, and patience to our spouse. The longer the illness, the harder it becomes. I have seen the hardship of a serious illness nearly destroy

the love and respect between a couple, but I have also seen couples come together with tremendous love, faith, and unity to support one another and overcome the sickness.

Some of you might be fighting a major disease right now. Some of you have compromised immune systems and are constantly in fear of contracting illnesses. Many of you are currently self-quarantining to ward off the Coronavirus and experiencing lots of uncertainty and fear. My heart and prayers go out to you and your family. No matter what the doctors or test results tell you or what the latest report is on the news, I want you to know that there is hope. I love these verses in **Ecclesiastes 4:9–12**,

*“Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.*

*But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”*

Every married couple is going to experience various trials throughout the marriage—many that we never see coming. However dire it may appear, we **MUST** come together and help one another. God gave us a great gift in one another, and HE is with us. This “cord of three strands”, as described in the verse, is you, your spouse, and God. There is tremendous hope when all three are tightly intertwined.

Whether you are going through a long season of illness right now, you are both currently healthy, or you are trying to be vigilant and ward off the Coronavirus, here are seven important things to do when your spouse is sick:

1. Acknowledge the illness

When our spouse is sick, the worst thing we can do is act like this problem doesn't exist. We must acknowledge the pain he/she is in and the fear that one has when facing a major illness. We need to stay close and offer encouragement, but also realize that the only way we can fight the illness is to first address that the illness exists.

2. Be there

If at all possible, we need to try and be at all the major appointments... especially if our spouse has requested that we be there. Sometimes, it might not make sense to us, but we still need to do it. Our presence can bring peace if we let it. We can be there to physically take care of them, pray with them, hold their hand, console them, and even cry with them if they receive some bad test results. We need to be present to remind our spouse how much we love him/her and that we aren't going to leave his/her side through this struggle.

3. Lighten the load

When we are facing a dangerous upcoming surgery or intense treatment, the fear and anxiety that ensues can be overwhelming. No matter which partner is going through the illness, it can affect both. As the healthy spouse, we need to try and bear the load with our spouse as much as possible. When he/she is having a particularly hard day with pain and anxiety, we need to try and get him/her out of the house. Sometimes we just need to create a diversion like going to a movie, eating lunch at his/her favorite restaurant, or taking a walk outside to get some fresh air. It's okay to laugh together. Laughter and smiles are good for the soul. Other times, we just need to listen...to their concerns, fears, details about the surgery or treatment, etc. Whatever we do, our willingness to jump in and lighten the load will help our spouse to face this trial without being overtaken by the weight of it all.

4. Honor his/her requests

In an age of social media, we can let the entire world

know about every little detail of our lives with a few clicks on the computer. Facebook is a great place to ask for prayers and even needs, but we need to check with our spouse first. Recently, some friends of ours have been facing a debilitating illness, and they have decided to only tell a few friends about it. They did this only because they didn't want too many people showing up at the hospital or unannounced drop-ins at their house. This may sound harsh to some of you, but I get it. Sometimes we want to put the news out there and accept the help and prayers, but other times we just want our inner circle to know. And, that's okay. In this scary season of the Coronavirus, sharing on social media that one of you has the virus might cause hysterics from those in your area, so it is important to use discretion and talk through these things with one another.

5. Ask for help

This is especially important when we are going through a long health battle with our spouse. If we

face something like cancer, the treatments can last for months and even years. In striving to maintain a job, family life, and some sense of normalcy, we are going to need help. We can't be prideful and think that we can face all these challenges alone. We need to reach out to friends and family we trust, and sometimes, that means hiring a reliable babysitter, nurse, or cleaning person who can help out during this time. There is no shame in that at all, and in fact, the extra hands will allow us to spend more time with our spouse.

6. Talk about it

Being there, day in and day out, with a spouse who is very ill can certainly take a toll on our own mind and heart. It's important that we have "safe" people in our lives that we can talk to about what we are going through. This person can be a SAME-GENDER friend, counselor, pastor, or family member (unless a brother/sister or parent). He/she must be someone we can trust with the details of the illness as well as our feelings and someone who is encouraging and

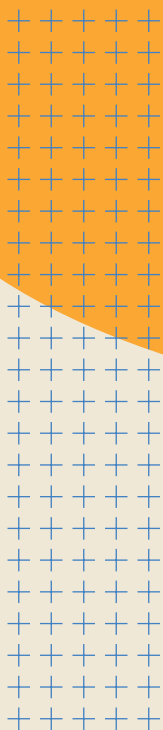
shares our faith. It's important that this safe person is our same gender only to protect us against temptation and inappropriate relationships that could be harmful to our marriage.

7. Pray about it

This is the most important one of all. When we face a serious illness, so much is unknown. We need the power of God in our lives. He is our ultimate Healer. He can give us peace that surpasses understanding and a calm in the unpredictable storm. Spouses need to pray together and individually. Pray for healing, peace, strength, good news, effective medicine, successful surgeries, and support. God hears our prayers and calms our hearts. More than anything, we need to perceive this crisis of illness as an opportunity to honor our marital vow to love each other in both sickness and health. God will use this to strengthen our marriage and our faith if we don't lose hope and stay strong together.

SECTION SEVEN

SURVIVING
BOREDOM



WHY PORN IS THE WORST SOLUTION TO BOREDOM

BY DAVE WILLIS

With the recent global Coronavirus crisis, people are dealing with stress in many ways. Sadly, many are using the extra time to escape through pornography. The world's largest porn provider recently made headlines by providing free temporary access to all residents of Italy while they're under a mandatory nationwide quarantine. Some see porn as a harmless form of fantasy and entertainment, but it's actually something much more insidious.

A recent survey from Barna revealed the troubling reality that 62% of men who claim to be “Christian” view pornography at least once a month and around 20% of “Christian” women said the same. Both those statistics are growing as the culture and even the church have become increasingly desensitized to porn. As a

Christian, as a husband, as a dad, as a marriage ministry professional and a recovering porn addict, these stats are incredibly troubling to me.

Our culture has normalized pornography to the point where we've started ignoring all sound reason and research that tells of the insidious repercussions left in its aftermath. I could cite all kinds of statistics to from Fight The New Drug or XXX Church, or a myriad of other sources to prove the personal and relational devastation caused by porn. I could tell you personal stories about how my own past porn use nearly sabotaged my marriage or how I've had a front row seat to seeing porn play a major role in the destruction of countless relationships.

I've written on these stats in detail in my past books and articles, but I'd like to do something different. Since pornography has become so laissez-faire within the church, I want to talk specifically about how God views pornography. With a Christian crisis in porn, I want to do

my small part to end (or at least disrupt) the epidemic of pornography within the Body of Christ. Since many preachers remain mute on this topic (which is tragic), there's a void in accessible teachings on what the Bible has to say on topics related to porn.

Did you know that God hates porn? Christians are often surprised to learn that God hates anything. Many of us have bought into an unbiblical depiction of God as if He is a perpetually-permissive, smiling “Buddha-like” deity who is never angered or offended by anything. “How could a loving God hate anything?” we might naively ask.

God is full of love and mercy. Thankfully, this is true. Our hope and our salvation depends on these attributes of God and the sacrificial atonement made possible through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection. God is indeed loving, but it's precisely because He loves us that He hates anything that seeks to destroy

our relationship with Him or with each other. Here are a few of the Bible's examples of things hated by God:

1. **“Vile images.”** (Ezekiel 7:20)
2. **“Detestable idols.”** (Jeremiah 16:18)
3. **“Abusing children.”** (Deuteronomy 12:31)
4. **“Divorce.”** (Malachi 2:16)
5. **“Sinful fantasies.”** (Proverbs 6:18)
6. **“Sexual immorality.”** (Revelation 21:8)
7. **“Lust.”** (Matthew 5:28)
8. **“Prostitution.”** (1 Corinthians 6:15)

There are many other places in Scripture where we see a clear picture of what God hates. I'm highlighting these eight because each of them have a direct correlation to pornography. Each of these eight items is a manifestation of porn. Compare the list above to these manifestations and descriptions of porn:

1. Porn is a “**vile image**” because it objectifies human beings created in the sacred image of God.
2. Porn is a form of “**detestable idols**” because idolatry means pursuing a counterfeit source of fulfillment in place of God.
3. Porn directly and indirectly causes the “**abuse of children**” through broken homes, sexual abuse, and many other factors.
4. Porn is a direct contributor to many “**divorce**” cases.
5. Porn’s primary intent is to evoke “**sinful fantasies**” in the mind of the viewer.
6. Porn is a celebration of “**sexual immorality.**”
7. Porn is fueled and funded by “**lust.**”
8. Porn is a form of “**prostitution**” since it’s performed by people being paid for sex and funded by consumers who are paying for sexual entertainment.

In short, porn breaks God’s heart because it breaks God’s children.

Here's the bottom line, the secular world may continue indulging in porn and sexual immorality, but if the church will rise up, we can make a difference. If people who claim to be followers of Christ would stop using porn, we could put a dent in the juggernaut of the porn industry and impact the human trafficking and many abuses connected to it. We could also bring healing to our own hearts and homes in the process.

I know this from Scripture, but I also know it from personal experience. I vividly remember the destructive cycle of sin and self-loathing that kept me trapped in porn. I also remember the sweet freedom once I finally surrendered this issue into the hands of my Savior and embraced the grace and healing He'd been waiting to offer me all along.

If you are where I once was and you feel stuck in the toxic trap of pornography, please know there's help available. You don't have to keep living like this. You can't keep living

like this. We have many resources to help you and equip you at [MarriageToday](#), and I'd also encourage you to listen to one of our newest episodes entitled "[Porn and Sex Addiction](#)" on [The Naked Marriage Podcast](#).

Since this is about God's opinions (not just my own), I want to make sure to give God the last word on the subject. Remember He is full of grace and mercy and He wants to set you free. The Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament has many strong words condemning "vile images," but it also includes loving words of hope like this...

"They will never again pollute themselves with their idols and vile images and rebellion, for I will save them from their sinful apostasy. I will cleanse them. Then they will truly be my people, and I will be their God." Ezekiel 37:23 NLT

5 MOVIES TO STREAM UNDER QUARANTINE

BY DAVE WILLIS

If there's one benefit to being stuck at home, it gives you a great opportunity to get caught up streaming some good shows and movies! Plus, movies also give you a much-needed break from the 24/7 news cycle filled with mostly dire news about COVID-19 and your tanking 401k. Turn off the news for a while and find a good movie.

From the time my wife Ashley and I first started dating, we have loved watching movies together. The shared experience of a movie can create inside jokes and catchphrases that can help add some fun into your relationship. Even today, curling up on the couch with some popcorn and Netflix remains one of our favorite “dates.”

Every couple has a different list of must-see movies, but below are a few I would highly recommend while you have some extra time at home. These aren't necessarily on my list of favorite movies in terms of entertainment value, but each of them display a married couple in real-life circumstances who experience some level of adversity. If you and your spouse will talk about what each on-screen couple did right and did wrong in their struggles, it could spark some very productive conversations that could ultimately bring growth in your own marriage*.

**Just as a disclaimer, this list doesn't mean I'm endorsing all the content in these films. Nearly every movie is going to have some words or scenes that I wish had been left out. Still, even with some questionable content, I believe there are some redeeming elements making each of these films worth seeing and discussing with your spouse.*

I'd encourage you to take advantage of the extra time at home in the coming weeks by adding these movies to your watch list...

Marriage Story

(Rated R for language throughout and sexual references)

This Oscar-winning Netflix drama tells the story of a couple suffering through a grueling divorce in the aftermath of infidelity. It's definitely not a "feel-good film", but this movie sparked more conversations about marriage than nearly any movie in recent years. I have a divorced friend who said Marriage Story was the most accurate depiction of the gut-wrenching chaos caused by divorce ever captured on screen. If you and your spouse watch this together, talk about the reasons why the marriage fell apart and what you believe they could have done differently to build a healthy relationship.

Fireproof

(Rated PG)

After watching a story where the couple doesn't make it, you need to see one where the couple perseveres through adversity and comes out stronger on the other side. Fireproof started a new generation of Christian films and many married couples have credited this movie and the accompanying Love Dare book with strengthening or even saving their marriages. The movie is entertaining and it also has some very practical insights into what makes a strong and healthy marriage.

The Notebook

(Rated PG-13 for some sexuality)

This movie is considered by many to be the quintessential date night movie. Adapted from Nicholas Sparks' most popular novel, it tells the origin story of a young couple through the eyes of the same couple in their older years. The health struggle at the center of the plotline paints

a powerful picture of what it means to love “in sickness and in health.” You’ll cry at the end of this one, but the tears are worthwhile and this movie will not only entertain you, but it might inspire you to look at love and commitment with a fresh perspective.

Coming to America

(Rated R for language and brief nudity)

After working your way through these heavy dramas, you’re going to need to laugh. I believe laughter should fill the soundtrack of a healthy marriage and the more you and your spouse can laugh together, the stronger your marriage will be. Ashley and I have always loved great comedies and the edited-for-tv version of this Eddie Murphy classic is one of our favorites. It has a lot of heart and a surprisingly-profound message about loving your spouse for who they are.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

(Rated PG)

Don't let the painfully–forced sequel make you forget just how great this original movie really was. Specifically, this film addresses the complicated nuances of blending two cultures and two families (which to a certain extent, happens in every marriage). Watch this movie with your spouse and enjoy the laughs, but also have serious conversations about the lifelong journey of uniting two families and two different “cultures” in your own marriage.

Whatever movies and shows you choose to watch, make it a habit of talking about the relational dynamics depicted on screen. When you and your spouse can share your thoughts about on–screen situations, it can create some healthy changes in your real–life habits.

In addition to movies, I'd strongly encourage you and your spouse to watch marriage–building content. Our new streaming service, XO Now, gives you 24/7 access

to the best Christian marriage-building content on the planet! It also includes the full sessions of all of our live XO Conferences plus many other streaming videos. You can learn more at xomarriage.com/now

10 BOOKS THAT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE

BY DAVE WILLIS

I have a confession to make... When I was young, I thought reading was boring. That's right, I'm an author who used to hate reading. I would have rather been doing almost anything else with my time. The older I get, the more I realize that reading (more than almost anything else) has helped me grow, connected me to new worlds, stretched my thinking, and benefited my life in a myriad of ways.

In our fast-paced, modern world, it can be difficult to develop the discipline to slow down long enough to read a book. We like our information in bite-sized, on-demand, tweet-able lengths, but real wisdom doesn't happen in a microwave; it happens in a crock pot! It takes time. There's no substitute for a good book!

There have been hundreds of books that have shaped my life, and I'm not going to try to make this a "Top

Ten” list, because at different seasons of my life, my list of most important books would change. Instead, I’m going to share some books I’ve read recently that have impacted me deeply. I believe these books could have a profound impact in your life as well. I’m also giving special preference to books you might never have heard of before (even though many of these are bestsellers). I find great satisfaction in introducing someone to a hidden gem they might have never found otherwise.

In addition to the Bible (which is always on the top of my reading list), check out these 10 books:

1. ***Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* by Brennan Manning**

This is one of the few books I’ve ever read and then re-read. I’m usually lucky to get all the way through a book the first time! This book was different. Manning’s raw, unfiltered, authentic style combined with the important topics covered in the book were transformational for

me. “Abba” is the intimate expression for “Dad” or “Papa” that Jesus used when talking to God the Father and He invites us to approach Him with that same level of intimacy. This book helped me rediscover my identity as a child of God and removed so much clutter and stress that comes from building our identity on anything or anyone else.

2. *Ghost Boy: The Miraculous Escape of a Misdiagnosed Boy Trapped Inside His Own Body* by Martin Pistorius

I love biographies and autobiographies, and this is unlike any other true story I’ve read. Martin Pistorius slipped into a coma as a child and was misdiagnosed as being virtually brain dead, but he was aware and alert through it all. A miraculous set of circumstances helped him emerge from his catatonic state years later and he wrote his journey in his own words. I laughed and I cried multiple times in just the first few pages. It’s one of the most powerful and profound stories of faith and perseverance I’ve ever read.

3. Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin

This is a book I'm currently in the process of reading, but it's already having such a profound impact on my thinking that I had to include it on this list. It's written by two Navy SEALs and it includes harrowing tales of heroism plus some very practical application to how their SEAL training can apply to every aspect of life. The foundation of the book is to take "Extreme Ownership" meaning we should stop making excuses and blaming circumstances, and instead embrace the accountability and responsibility for our own circumstances. It's inspiring, entertaining, and it's challenging me to rethink my approach to some things from work to goals to relationships.

4. The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis is my all-time favorite author. Everything from his epic *Chronicles of Narnia* to his works on explaining the faith like *Mere Christianity* have been

foundational to me. I recommend everything he's ever written. I chose *The Great Divorce* for this list, because it's arguably one of his lesser-known titles but it's profoundly brilliant. It's an epic allegory about a bus ride that goes from hell to heaven. It's a short book with an immensely entertaining and creative plot and a powerful message about heaven and hell and the ways both realities can be birthed in our lives long before we actually die.

5. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand

Okay, with this one I'm breaking my rule about books being "lesser known," because *Unbroken* is one of the most popular books of the past decade. Still, I had to include it on this list, because few books in my lifetime have moved me as deeply as the true story of Louis Zamperini as told through Hillenbrand's masterful writing style. I saw the movie after reading the book, and while the movie was decent, the book

is life-changing. I couldn't put it down and I couldn't stop thinking about it after I completed it.

6. *The Kindness Challenge: Thirty Days to Improve Any Relationship* by Shaunti Feldhahn

Shaunti is a dear friend of mine and she actually wrote the foreword to one of my books. She's had some huge bestsellers, including: *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*, among others. Her cutting-edge relationship research has been cited and quoted in nearly every popular relationship book in the last decade. *The Kindness Challenge* is one of her newest books and while it isn't as well known as some of the others, I believe it's one of the best books on the market. Her research and true stories about the power of kindness combined with the "challenge" of how to implement kindness as a lifestyle has the power to potentially change your outlook on life and transform the climate of your relationships.

7. *The Four Laws of Love: Guaranteed Success for Every Married Couple* by Jimmy Evans

As a marriage writer and speaker, you probably already knew there was going to be at least one marriage book on this list! There are many I could have chosen, but I picked *The Four Laws of Love* for several reasons. First of all, Jimmy and Karen Evans have modeled out these timeless principles in their own lives and have taught countless others to do the same. This isn't just a book but a lifestyle for them. Secondly, this book is a clear and practical guide for what it means to truly build your marriage on the foundation of God's Word. A marriage that implements these four laws can survive any season.

8. *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* by Timothy Keller

Tim Keller is one of my favorite authors. He's a modern day C.S. Lewis with a beautiful blend of academic brilliance and down-to-earth common sense. In this

short-but-powerful volume, he unpacks Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son recorded in Luke chapter 15. It's a story I've heard hundreds of times, but Keller's telling of it made it brand new for me and helped me get a beautiful glimpse of God's grace like few books I've ever read. Whether you're a Bible scholar or completely clueless about Christianity, this short book could change your life.

9. *The Noticer: Sometimes, all a person needs is a little perspective* by Andy Andrews

Once I started this book, I'm not sure if I put it down! It's written in a unique style blending fiction with powerful life lessons. In many ways, it's a modern-day parable with profound wisdom infused onto every page. You'll read it quickly, but it's life-changing lessons will stay with you for a long time! I'm so glad I read this one.

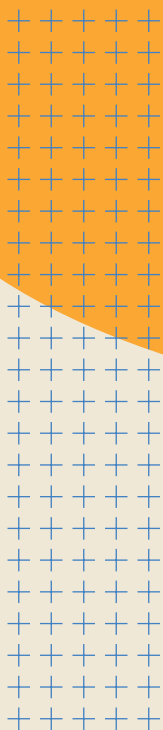
10. *The Naked Marriage: Undressing the truth about sex, intimacy and lifelong love* by Dave and Ashley Willis

Okay, this one might seem like shameless self-promotion, but I'm passionate about the message of this book! It represents the core message of our testimonies plus God's timeless plan for helping you and your spouse enjoy a fulfilling, passionate, and intimate relationship through all the seasons of life. If you prefer audiobooks, Ashley and I narrated this one and you can find it on Audible.



SECTION EIGHT

DON'T JUST
SURVIVE,
THRIVE.



WHEN YOUR MARRIAGE IS HANGING ON BY A THREAD

BY ASHLEY WILLIS

What our world is going through right now is unprecedented. We understand that if you were already walking through a hard season in marriage, this crisis can make it even harder. For the struggling marriage, please take heart and know that there is hope. Here are four things you can do right now to help your relationship...

1. Avoid “mental rabbit holes” that will sabotage your relationship.

This is a huge issue that you’re probably experiencing right now and you don’t even realize it. A “mental rabbit hole” occurs when we choose to dwell on the “what-ifs,” negative assumptions, and worries that often accompany crises in marriage. For example, maybe you’re not sure that you are really in love with your spouse anymore. Then, you start asking yourself

why and try to figure it out over and over again. This process will only lead to more frustration, confusion, and separation. Instead, we need to go to our spouse and talk to him/her. Lean into one another and be honest in the most loving way possible.

2. Resist the urge to share your struggle (or anything else) with a “friend” of the opposite sex.

This is extremely important. When we are at odds with our spouse, there is usually a breakdown in communication. We're upset and unwilling to talk about things with our spouse because everything feels like a fight. I get it. But, friends, we must resist the urge to talk about our personal lives with someone of the opposite sex at work, in our neighborhood, at our kid's school, church, etc. When we do this, we open ourselves up to developing an attachment to this person. Over time, this can turn into romantic feelings and even physical intimacy. And, before we know it, we find ourselves in a full blown affair that we never ever thought would happen.

Tragically, I hear too many of these stories almost every day. But, it doesn't have to be this way. We can protect ourselves and our marriage by resisting this urge. And, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't talk about our struggle with someone; it just means we have to be very careful about WHO we talk to about this. We should only share this information with someone we can trust and is our same gender (so we don't open ourselves up to the potential of romantic temptation). Be sure that this person loves you, loves God, loves your spouse, and is for your marriage. It's better if this confidant isn't related to you, because it is hard for a family member to forget the details of what you or your spouse are going through, and family tends to side with family. Your confidant could be a close family friend, a pastor, and even a counselor. When we are careful about these conversations, we respect our spouse and allow healing to take place.

3. Try a new approach to communication.

When our marriage is struggling, we can find it very difficult to talk to our spouse. I hear struggling couple's say things like,

“All we do is fight.”

or

“She/he just doesn't listen to me.”

or

“He/she just shouldn't feel that way.”

But, these kinds of statements don't get us anywhere, do they? In those times when we can't muster up anything nice or productive to say to one another, we need to switch our go-to communication style.

If every conversation between you and your spouse tends to end in an argument, try writing down your feelings on paper first. Then, read through it and rewrite it in the most loving way possible. Have your spouse do the same thing.

Then, at a certain point in the day, hand the letter to your spouse and ask him/her to read it. Take his/her letter and read it too. Then, take time to write a response to the letter. Then, read it and rewrite it. And, hand it to him/her. Do this exercise until you both feel like you can have a civil conversation. Then, sit down and talk to one another without distractions. Apologize for the hurtful conversations of the past, and share your hearts with one another. Do your best to get it all out, and don't interrupt each other. Listen until your spouse is finished with what he/she has to say. Then, respond in the most loving way possible.

When you both take the time to really hear each other out—without interruptions, excuses, accusations, and hurtful words—you will find that it is much easier for you both to get on the same page and move in the same direction.

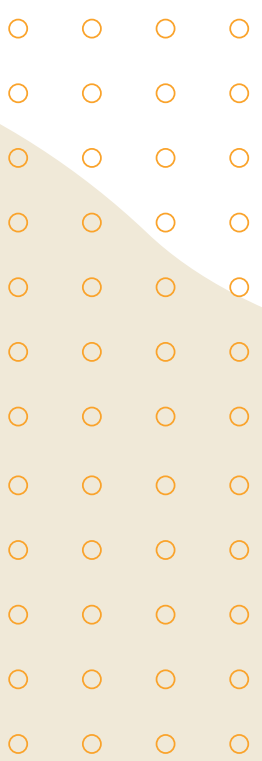
4. Commit to praying with and for each other every day.


Prayer is a powerful tool that helps us to humble ourselves towards God and one another, and it brings us closer together like nothing else can. And, there is no better time to pray than when we are in a rough patch in our marriage. Yet, many of us neglect this amazing gift because we are disillusioned and upset. But, friends, we must get past those sentiments and get on our knees in prayer.

God meets us right where we are, no matter what we have done or how hopeless our marriage may feel. He brings us strength when we are weak. He gives us the words to speak to Him and one another when we feel like we are completely depleted and uninspired. He can bring peace to what feels like a war zone in our home—if we let Him in. We can do this through prayer.

Join hands with your spouse and ask the Lord to forgive you both for any part of your lives that isn't honoring Him. Praise Him for the blessing of your spouse and marriage, and ask Him to help you both to do whatever it takes to heal it and strengthen it. Thank Him for all that He has done for you both. When you and your spouse take the time to pray together, you will feel the peace that surpasses understanding that only God can give. And, you will feel closer to one another too.

You WILL get through this time of struggle in your marriage when you both do whatever it takes to fight for your marriage and refuse to give up.





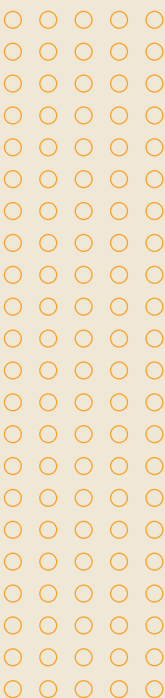
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HURTING?
THERE IS
HOPE

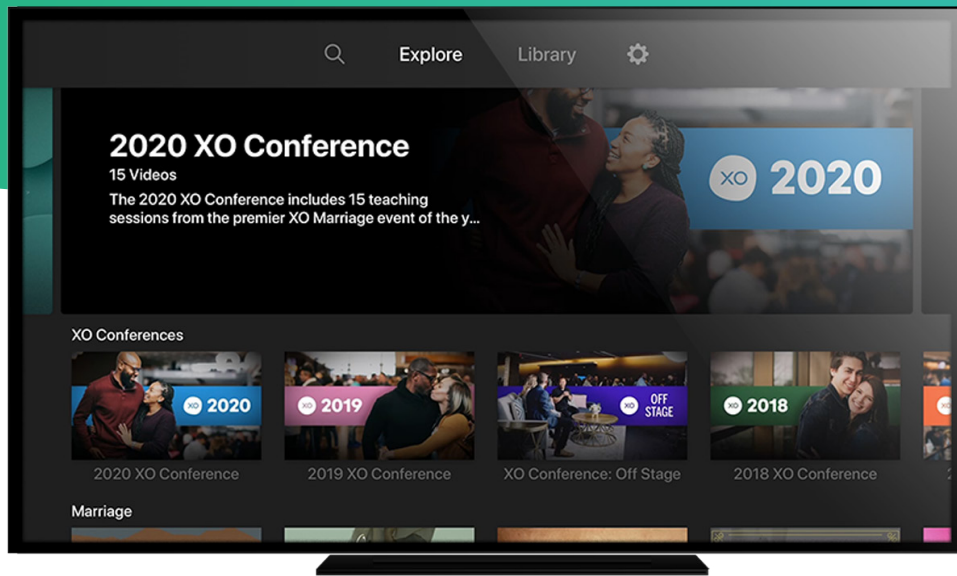
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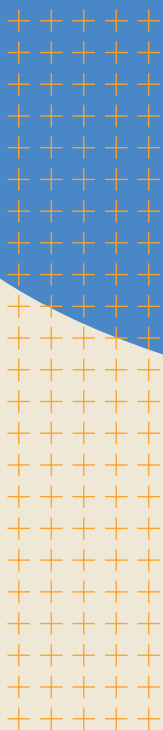


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RESOURCES



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By Dave & Ashley Willis

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MILITARY RESOURCES

American Warrior Association

americanwarriorassociation.org

Chris Kyle Frog Foundation

chriskylefrogfoundation.org

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Better Love

Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott

lesandleslie.org

Blended Kingdom Families

Scott & Vanessa Martindale

blendedkingdomfamilies.com

Family Teams

Jefferson & Alyssa Bethke

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Financial Peace University

Dave Ramsey

daveramsey.com

Journey For Life

George & Tondra Gregory

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Marriage 365

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Marriage After God

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Married & Young

Jamal & Natasha Miller

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Sean & Lanette Reed

seanandlanette.com

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Tony & Alisa DiLorenzo

oneextraordinarymarriage.com

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