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Becoming Your Spouse's Better Half

Why Differences
Make a Marriage Great

Rick Johnson



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Introduction

Marriage Is Tough

Marriage is tough. Anyone who says it isn't is either a liar or a fool. Even after twenty-eight years of marriage, trying to understand and satisfy my wife's needs is still a daunting challenge. And I'm sure she feels the same way about me.

It's not that we don't have great times together. In fact, we're best friends. I enjoy her company as much or more than I ever have. My respect for her has grown exponentially over the years. Over time the initial rush of heart-stopping passion, lust, and infatuation has been replaced by a more mature, steady, deeper love and affection. I still find her the most beautiful and mysterious creature I've ever known.

Sometimes I look at an attractive woman and then look at my wife. I am always astonished at how beautiful she still is, even in comparison to much younger women. She's charming, and her emerald green eyes sparkle with electricity when she's being flirtatious. Every so often I look at her

and am stunned speechless when I see a vision of the young girl I married who has ripened into an even more glorious version of womanhood. When she laughs at my jokes, all is good with the world. Her peals of laughter warm my insides like a cup of hot cocoa on a frosty winter's day. Our bodies fit together like a pair of comfortable old Levi's. She truly is what makes my world go around.

Differences—Strengths or Weaknesses?

Despite all that, we are two separate beings with individual backgrounds, tastes, experiences, and personalities. This merger of individual identities is the confluence that blends two separate streams of consciousness into the river of marriage. Even though I respect and admire her more than anyone I've ever met, she still frequently frustrates me to the point of exasperation. She is a bewildering mix of quandaries, enigmas, contradictions, and vexations. And I'm no better. We are two unique individuals with opposing personalities and habits.

One glaring example would be the time we spend in the bathroom. I typically shower, shave, and slap on some Old Spice, and I'm good to go. Give me another minute or so to slip on jeans and a T-shirt, and I'm ready—a total of ten minutes tops (fifteen if I'm taking my time) from start to finish. Suzanne, however, uses a considerably greater amount of time and resources preparing for the day. I've never actually timed her with a stopwatch, but I'm pretty sure that even under times of great urgency, she's never broken the one-hour barrier. And that definitely does not include getting dressed. Of course, the end result is a whole lot more spectacular than how I turn out, but the amount of time spent seems a little excessive to me.

In almost everything, we are diametrically opposed. For instance, I can guarantee that anywhere we go in the world, the absolute strangest person in the room will come up and talk to her. She draws those people like a magnet. Then she enjoys spending time chatting with the “different” kinds of people who approach her. Perhaps that is what makes her such a great special-needs teacher. I, on the other hand, tend to try to discourage those kinds of individuals from latching on to me. Frankly, they make me a little nervous.

In addition, Suzanne is bizarrely unorganized; I like to know where everything is. She is incorrigibly late; I believe anything less than five minutes early is disrespectful. She likes vegetables; I like meat. She is very relatable in one-on-one situations; I teach well in front of large groups. She is more loving and intuitive; I am more analytical and logical. She is flexible to change and comfortable in the face of surprises (in fact, she appears to relish chaos); I need to be prepared and organized in order to be comfortable.

However, because we have recognized the value of these differences, we are able to use our strengths to compensate for and even complement the other’s weaknesses. It makes us a formidable team, both in ministry and in our marriage. We believe that as a team we are greater than the sum of our parts. While her differences may annoy me from time to time, I have come to understand the value they bring to our relationship. We have worked out our roles in marriage so they are complementary, allowing us to thrive by working together instead of against one another.

This doesn’t mean that we are not equal partners, or that one is more dominant than another. Equality in a relationship does not mean sameness—it means each person is valued for the contribution they bring to the table. In fact, the very differences we have are perhaps our greatest strengths when

they are recognized and used effectively instead of being at odds with one another.

Why You Chose Who You Chose

Did you ever wonder why you were attracted to the person you were, and why they were attracted to you? Not only that, but remember how exciting it was when you first met your spouse-to-be? Life was fun and you felt alive! What was that all about?

Harville Hendrix, in his classic book *Getting the Love You Want*, explains what happens during the attraction phase of a relationship:

The brain releases dopamine and norepinephrine, two of the body's many neurotransmitters. These neurotransmitters help contribute to a rosy outlook on life, a rapid pulse, increased energy, and a sense of heightened perception. During this phase, when lovers want to be together every moment of the day, the brain increases its production of endorphins and enkephalins, natural narcotics, enhancing a person's sense of security and comfort.¹

Most lovers report going through phases where they feel that they have always known the other person (even when having just met), that the other person is easy to talk to, and that they couldn't live without that person. Hendrix purports that when we meet someone having negative characteristics that remind us of our parents or childhood caretakers, a portion of our brain is unconsciously and instinctively attracted to that person as a way of trying to "go back" and meet certain basic needs that were not fulfilled during childhood. The unconscious mind is trying to repair our wounds

by attracting us to people who have the same compilation of bad characteristics as those who wounded us in childhood.

One reason we feel so good at the beginning of a relationship is that part of our brain believes we have finally been given a chance to be nurtured and become whole again—the way God created us. This may work out great, or it may result in disaster, as neither we nor our mate are conscious of this desire to get these needs met. The greater the damage done during childhood, the needier and more dramatic our desire for fulfillment becomes. And since our mate is not the offending parent, he or she will probably not be able to fill that void left over from childhood.

During courtship, this unconscious drive in our brain frequently causes us to be in denial regarding many of the negative traits of our mate-to-be. Because that need for wholeness is so powerful, we are tempted to overlook or even deny the existence of characteristics that later on tend to annoy us. They seemed cute at the time but drive us crazy once the bloom of romance has worn thin.

Additionally, have you ever noticed that most people marry someone with the opposite qualities and characteristics they have? For instance, if someone is introverted, he or she generally marries a person who is an extrovert. Someone who is messy frequently marries a person who is highly organized. This is because during childhood, certain traits or facets of our psyche and personality are unhealthily repressed, denied, or lost, creating a false self-image or at least a partial psyche that we present to the world and even to ourselves. So when we meet someone who possesses those traits we have repressed or lost, we are naturally drawn to them as a way of vicariously attempting to regain our wholeness. We feel comfortable, for that person's strengths round out our being, and thus we are drawn to them.

Realizing this can benefit both partners and the relationship. The problem comes when both partners expect and need the other to fix their needs, but neither knows what those needs are or how to meet them.²

But a healthy marriage can heal our wounds and help bring us to wholeness. Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott say, “Wholeness is found in an *interdependent* relationship, in which two people with self-respect and dignity make a commitment to nurture his or her own spiritual growth, as well as his or her partner’s.”³

Why Marriages Falter

Marriage today seems less binding than a cell phone contract. The average first marriage in this country lasts seven years. The average second marriage lasts five. As if the challenges of a first marriage weren’t tough enough, anyone who has been in a blended family will tell you about the myriad of additional trials this scenario presents: two sets of kids; two separate histories; two completely different life philosophies, parenting styles, and sets of baggage. And when two sets of careers and monies are mixed in along with the obligatory prenuptial agreements, it’s almost like admitting that the marriage is doomed to fail anyway.

Because of the legacy they’ve observed from their parents’ generation, most young people today are fairly pessimistic about the chances of a marriage lasting a lifetime. If you talk to them about marriage, you can see that they yearn for the kind of intimacy possible only through a long-lasting relationship, but they have little hope of having one themselves. Couples may spend hundreds of hours and tens of thousands of dollars on the actual wedding day, but no energy, resources, or forethought whatsoever toward the marriage that follows.

Many people quickly discover that being married and staying in love are just plain hard work—too hard. Combine that intense struggle with our society’s instant-gratification mantra, the court’s “no fault” divorce laws, and a cultural legacy of relative truth, and you have a recipe for divorce. Our Western culture does not like to suffer, so we shy away from anything that is uncomfortable or difficult. When marriage is tough, many people just think it’s broken and then go look for another mate who won’t be so much work.

Unfortunately, the problem is generally with us and therefore follows us from relationship to relationship. I recently told a friend that a first divorce we might be able to blame on our partner, but any divorces after that we need to look in the mirror to see where the problem lies. And one fact that almost no one wants to admit is that the person we fell in love with is at the same level of emotional maturity we are. Look at your spouse and know that they are probably just as emotionally mature as you are, all your protests notwithstanding.

Also, the expectations each partner brings into a relationship make a huge difference in how successful that marriage will be. Unrealistic expectations that cannot be met by either spouse can make both partners miserable. Discussing numerous relevant topics such as religious expectations, number of children, parenting styles, familial obligations toward extended family, sexual expectations, and the roles and duties of each spouse (to name just a few) *before* entering into marriage is a crucial factor to preventing problems later on.

So, if God ordained marriage as the way a man and woman should live together as one flesh, then there must be some way he designed that to happen. What guidelines did he provide to help us understand how to keep from killing each other or, even worse, creating families just to turn around and tear

them asunder? What types of things do couples who have been married for a long time say are important, and what advice do they give to create longevity in a marriage?

In my research for this book, I discovered that men frequently operate on an objective-based, goal-oriented system, while women more often incorporate a whole-world view in their thematic approach to life. These observations can best be summed up as a husband's "seven modes" and a wife's "seven moods."

Guys tend to operate in modes, which allows them to compartmentalize the different areas of their life; women tend to be driven by moods or emotions. Males are able to separate the various components of their life and forget about some while concentrating on others. Seldom does one area of life bleed into the others. Women, on the other hand, tend to view life as an overall "whole" with every area of their lives interconnected and interrelated. These differences alone are baffling and often confusing to the opposite gender. Bill and Pam Farrel describe this as women thinking like a pot of spaghetti, where everything touches everything else, and men thinking like waffles, where each element of their life is in a separate box.⁴ Helen Fisher, in her book *The First Sex*, says women tend to think in terms of "interrelated factors, not straight lines," whereas men use "compartmentalized, incremental reasoning process."⁵

When a husband understands and appreciates his wife's moods, and when a wife recognizes and respects her husband's modes of operation, marriage becomes a wonder instead of work, fascinating instead of frustrating, a commitment to intimacy instead of a settling for "just staying together."

People want an easy marriage. They don't want love to be so much work. Two people start out with their hearts melting

as one in a natural way, but they're living on the high of bliss-filled hormones. This will carry them for a while, but people can't live on bliss; there will always be a "coming down," or crash, from the high. When that happens, and they are unprepared for the daily labor of love, they will soon be hitting their heads against the walls of each other's hearts.

When we're willing to put forth the effort to understand our mates and help our mates understand us, this softens our hearts and opens the door to intimacy. When we don't make this effort together, usually one partner will stop banging his or her head against the wall of the other's heart and give up. While fighting can be a red flag, a relationship reaches a critical stage when one spouse or the other stops trying and gives up.

When you have the key, it's easy to go in and out. You don't have to knock the door down or break a window. You just walk in. But without the key to understanding, marriage is hard work.

Ideally, a Christian marriage begins with both parties committed to loving God and each other. But later, after the "buzz" of love begins to fizzle, communication tails off and spouses can start taking each other for granted, losing empathy, respect, and love for one another. Life is tough, and instead of working as a team, they begin fighting with each other in an attempt to get their individual needs met. They scream at and accuse their mates and then expect their mates to want to satisfy their needs. Each spouse soon loses the desire to meet the other's needs, and each loses sight of the fact that love is an action, not an emotion. That is why the very action of meeting the other's needs (acting loving) can lead to feeling the emotion of love. Without that action, it is natural to slide into a state of need and self-indulgent gratification.

Harville Hendrix explains this mentality:

Their partners are going to do it all—satisfy unmet childhood needs, complement lost self-parts, nurture them in a consistent and loving way, and be eternally available to them. These are the same expectations that fueled the excitement of romantic love, but now there is less of a desire to reciprocate. After all, people don't get married to take care of their partners' needs—they get married to further their own psychological and emotional growth. Once a relationship seems secure, a psychological switch is triggered deep in the old brain that activates all the latent infantile wishes.⁶

Eventually, husbands and wives allow their neediness—their lack of understanding, empathy, and respect for each other—to pull them away, instead of using their differences to glue them together. If lack of understanding and loss of respect happens over a span of years, the intimacy that could have been created through a couple's differences becomes a chasm that is often too wide to bring them together again as one flesh.

A chain reaction or vicious circle is the inevitable result: Lack of understanding and respect lead to hurt, confusion, anger, and frustration, which lead to contempt, hate, or resignation. Those feelings then lead to physical escape (often-times sinful behavior) and/or emotional divorce, with the appearance of marriage but not the intimacy, and finally end in legal divorce, with all of the ramifications that this has to future generations.

Anyone who has been through a divorce will tell you what a painful, gut-wrenching experience it is. And we are only just now recognizing the devastating effects to children whose families have been ripped apart. Perhaps now is the time to start trying to understand how to turn all marriages, good or

struggling, into a satisfying lifelong commitment. Previous generations did it. Why do we struggle so much?

How to Use This Book

This book has chapters for men and chapters for women. It was meant to be read together by a husband and wife. The “Men’s Modes” section is to enlighten women about their husbands, and the “Women’s Moods” section is to help men understand their wives’ needs.

My wife and I love reading books together. Every evening we try to sit down and pray together before reading a portion of a book. Generally I read out loud to her while she knits or does some other repetitive task. Other times she reads aloud while I am fixing something that doesn’t require much concentration. This activity has allowed us to grow together, and it helps us spend quality time together each day. It also creates great intimacy between us and prompts us to have quality discussions about important topics that we might never have talked about. However, this takes a significant amount of effort and commitment on the part of both spouses. It is very easy to take a day off and then never get back into it again. But I have noticed that when we as a couple are consistently praying and reading together, our relationship and marriage are at peak performance.

This book has two sections—one for women and one for men—each with seven chapters. The chapters on women’s moods should help men understand their wives better. Likewise, as women read the chapters on men’s modes, I hope they’ll understand their husbands better.

Since women are generally more relationally minded, I wanted the men to feel understood and inspired at the start. Guys, if you’re anything like me, I was afraid if you were

forced to read through seven chapters of women's needs first, you might get bored, frustrated, or just plain overwhelmed and want to quit, so I began with men's needs.

Reading the chapters together will allow both of you to stop and ask questions as they come up. It's a good chance to determine whether you think I'm full of baloney or whether I'm making some good points that can transform your relationship. Ideally, both husband and wife will understand how the other gender functions and operates, making for a better relationship and marriage.

Expectations

I've now lived more years as an adult with my wife than I lived before I got married. We've raised two babies to adulthood together, suffered through a business failure, been rich and been poor (more often poor), and helped each other through devastating personal losses. My relationship with my wife today is changing rapidly just by the nature of our ministry's growth and the challenges that presents. We also just launched our children into the world. We need to be on the same page and understand what makes each other tick in order to grow together and weather the storms we face caused by these changes. We need to grow together, not apart, to have a successful marriage in times of change and the stresses that brings.

Your marriage relationship is a living, dynamic entity. It needs continuous nurturing, refining, changing, and fine-tuning. Hendrix describes marriage this way:

Marriage is a psychological and spiritual journey that begins with the ecstasy of attraction, meanders through a rocky stretch of self-discovery, and culminates in the creation of an

intimate, joyful, lifelong union. Whether or not you realize the full potential of this vision depends not on your ability to attract the perfect mate, but on your willingness to acquire knowledge about hidden parts of yourself.⁷

Marriages that do not last long enough to go through the rocky stretches of self-discovery never reach that destination of an intimate, joyful, lifelong union that Hendrix talks about. This requires sacrifice on your part. Your mate is not perfect, and the truth is the only person you can change is yourself. Your relationship will change as each of you grows and enters into new seasons of life. After all, the only constant in life is change.

This book will help you and your spouse understand each other better. Simply recognizing that men and women are pretty much diametrically opposite can help you relate to and accept your spouse. Then when you understand how and why someone does something, it allows you to develop empathy for them, which helps you to see things from that person's perspective. When that happens, love and intimacy soon follow, and they will give you the ability to have a fun, healthy, lifelong marriage.

I encourage you to read this book with the expectation that it will change your marriage and help draw you closer to your spouse. The expectations with which we enter into something generally greatly increase the odds of those goals being fulfilled. Your marriage is too important not to believe with all your heart that it can be a loving, dynamic, lifelong experience.

So get ready, because you are about to experience the awesome process of growing together and becoming lifelong partners in this frightfully wonderful relationship God created called marriage. Hang on, because it can be a bumpy but ultimately incredibly satisfying journey.