

RES PRES

MARRIAGE CONFERENCE

FEB. 2-4.2024

Overview

Our culture tells us that marriage is about **finding** the right person. The truth is, marriage is about **being** the right people with each other. In other words, doing marriage well requires us to have skills and abilities in our character, in our hearts, to love well. The problem is not that our spouse is “the bad guy.” The problem is that both of us lack some of the skills for being married. This weekend we will be looking at the heart abilities, skills and "software" that we need to make a romantic relationship work, sustain, and grow.

The beginning point of a good marriage is moving from a position of **blaming one another** for our problems to a place of **looking together** at where our character blind-spots and missing heart abilities, are limiting us. This is the Gospel!!

Now let's grow together!

Whether you are married and longing for more, or single, and searching for a meaningful relationship, let's learn how you can grow more as a person to have a richer relationship.

Dr. John L Cox



Dr. John L. Cox is a clinical psychologist, and has been in practice at Live Oak Psychological Associates for 33 years. He received his B.A. in Psychology and English from Ole Miss, and a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy from Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Rosemead School of Psychology in Los Angeles.

Dr. Cox's practice is broad in focus, offering individual therapy for adults for a range of issues including depression, anxiety, addictions, OCD and bipolar disorders. He also offers relational and marital therapy, as well as consultation regarding problems with children.

Dr. Cox's therapeutic focus is grounded in his Christian faith as he strives to integrate God's way of leading us toward growth with the most competent professional psychological understanding derived from research and experience. Dr. Cox has been married for 39 years and has three grown children.



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Contents

Session 1:

Growing Together not Growing Apart: *How Your Growth as a Person can Enrich your Marriage*

Many marriages end up with couples blaming each other for their struggles. "If only you...!!!" The truth is that all of us come to marriage with an incomplete toolbox for making a romantic relationship work. This session will overview the basic heart skills that we need (whether married or searching) to love and be loved well.

Session 2:

Intimacy and Strength: *How to Make Closeness Work*

Marriage was created for closeness, but some people fear it; some people need it too much. Emotional Intimacy can become the epicenter of tons of marital conflict. This session will address making sense of sharing our heart, and receiving our spouse's heart? How can we learn better what intimacy is? What do we do if our spouse struggles with being emotionally close?

Session 3:

Conflict and Fighting: *Learning to Both Matter*

Any relationship that has two thinking people in it, will have conflict. It's how we make sense of not being the same person!! This session will address preventing conflict from turning in to a fight. How do we resolve a fight once it starts? And how do we resolve conflict in such a way that lets both people matter?

Session 01

Growing Together
Not Growing Apart

How Your Growth as a Person can Enrich your Marriage

Session

01

Growing Together Not Growing Apart

We are all missing some of the basic heart abilities that we need to make relationships work: You have blind spots, your spouse has blind spots... presto, we have marriage problems!

So what are the heart abilities we need to do marriage well?

I call them the "**FOUR I's**"

Intimacy

Do I have the **ability to let you in**?

Can I be intimate, close and let you know my heart...as well as care about yours?

And..

Do I have the ability to also **keep you in**?

In other words, even if we aren't being close right now, can I hold on to love and not let my needfulness control the relationship? Can I be strong and grounded in me and not just need you!?

NOTES:

Session 1 Cont'd: Growing Together not Growing Apart

Identity

Good relationships are always a complex blend of being close and yet still having healthy separateness. So again, two parts:

- Do I have the **ability to be me** in a relationship?
- Can I know who I am and what I want, and let that matter in my marriage?

Or do I become a chameleon or a follower, where somehow my heart and opinions disappear in the relationship?

And...

Do I have the ability to also **let you be you**?

Can I make room for you in the relationship too? Can I embrace that you are different from me?

And most importantly... Can we work together to **both matter** when we disagree?

Imperfection

Making sense of the “yuck” in life and in each other is a primary cause of marriage problems. Two parts:

- Do I have the **ability to forgive you** (and the fallen world) for letting me down?
- Can I metabolize and find peace with the ways in which you disappoint me without creating distance and anger? Do I live in constant protest against how fallen the world is, or do I have the ability to live with humility and patience?

NOTES:

Session 1 Cont'd: Growing Together not Growing Apart

And...

Do I have the **ability to forgive myself**?

Can I live in a place of humility and grace that doesn't require me to always have to be perfect for you?

And more importantly, can we live together as broken people from a position of **grace and humility** rather than **judgment and criticism**?

Impulse Control - Emotional Management

1. Do I have the ability to think...and not just react?

The hallmark of adult functioning is the ability to have a feeling (angry, insecure, hurt, ashamed) and instead of just reactively striking out or withdrawing...to be able to think about it...reflect on it...and DECIDE what to do.

And....

2. Can I access my emotional world and let it be part of our relationship?

In order to be emotionally close in a relationship, I need to be able to let my emotional world be a part of my life. **So can I Feel**, and let my heart be emotionally available?

NOTES:

Session 1 Cont'd: Questions for Thought and Discussion

1) Knowing which character skills are weak spots for us is an important insight for both of you to have in your marriage.

Talk together about which of the 8 character abilities you might have blind spots? (Let you in, Keep you in....etc)

In which ones do you think your spouse might struggle?

Where else in your life do you see your blindspots causing you trouble? (Parenting, job?)

Singles - What might your blindspots be? Do you see that affecting your dating? Or affecting the guys/gals you pick to date?

Talk with your growth people about your growth areas, and let that be a focus of your prep for marriage.

2) Most people come into a marriage with the expectation that "my spouse should make me happy." We talked about how our default approach to disappointment there tends to be blame; making your spouse the problem instead of solving the problem. Talk about ways in which you both might be using blame to address the losses and the hurts in your relationship. If we can talk about the boogey man of blame, it decreases its power and we can start working together as a team: to make this marriage better!!

Singles - How critical are you of the limitations of those you date? How critical are you of Your faults? How can you make yours and their limitations and faults something you can ultimately talk about in a safe way?

NOTES:

Session 02

Intimacy and Strength

How to Make Closeness Work

Session

02

Intimacy and Strength

What is intimacy?

We all live at various levels of closeness in different parts of our lives.

Drive-through level – This is the superficial interaction we have with people we cross paths with.

News, sports and weather – This is where we chitchat with others in a light conversational way.

Taking care of business – TCB - This is where we communicate out of our thoughts, opinions and advice. At this level, you know my thoughts about solving a problem, but you don't yet have my heart.

Abiding intimacy - This is the level of closeness where two hearts deeply share. In our first session we called this **Can I let you in/Can I keep you in?**

Can I share my experience of my heart with you and embrace yours?

Can I let you know what it feels like to be me, and care about what it feels like to be you? On the other hand, can I be strong and grounded in who I am, and live knowing that I am loved, even without your reassurance?

We all live somewhere in the **continuum** between "Let you in" and "Keep you in; between TCB and Abider.

NOTES:

Session 2 Cont'd: Intimacy and Strength

Dances with Intimacy

Abiders and **TCBer's** often marry and have interesting **dances** regarding intimacy. For instance the **Emotional Connector** wants more connection and makes this known!! This feels critical to the **TCB**. So they withdraw. Connector now feels their withdrawal... and pursues more. TCB feels more criticized....Repeat indefinitely...

Growing Together

TCB need to learn to see the relational world as valid.
Learn the meaning of "being with."

Emotional Abiders need to learn to...

Have room for your spouse to do intimacy differently than you.

Learn to take responsibility for your emotions and needs and not just share them, dump them or "Do" them.

Develop rich relationships in the body of Christ. Marriage was never intended to be the sole for all of our emotional needs.

NOTES:

Session 2 Cont'd: Questions for Thoughts and Discussion

1) For married and singles - Do you think that you are more of a Taking Care of Business type or a Emotional Abider type?

Which do you think your spouse/significant other is?

Can you see any dances this creates for y'all in your relationship?

2) Emotional Abiders - Reflect on ways that you can be more grounded and independent even if your spouse isn't connecting? Ask your spouse for their thoughts on this. How can you be using your body of Christ family to help address any urgency you feel in your emotional world?

3) TCBers - What are ways that you can be more connected?

Reflect on what keeps you from going there emotionally. Ask your spouse for their thoughts on this.

How can your Abider spouse make it easier for you to connect to them?

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Session 03

Conflict and Fighting

Session

03

Conflict and Fighting

Conflict is good!

Honest conflict is the way that two separate adults make sense of not being the same person! Problems arise however when the conflict becomes aggressive and controlling...when we are no longer working toward resolution, but to **get our way!**

Couples often turn conflict into a **win/lose** game. Who is going to get what they want? At that point many conflicts turn into a **fight**. A fight is about trying get what we want by hurting and controlling our spouse!! A fight is about trying win, be right, etc. And these win/lose, hurtful relationships unravel our closeness.

What can we do to stop a fight, find healing, and work our way back to a win/win resolution? **What are the rules of Fight Club?**

Step One

Go to time-out:

When you are triggered with frustration or anger in a fight, very little that you do will be productive. When you feel the escalation hit, literally **take a time-out** until you feel more grounded. This is one of the most underutilized tools in conflict resolution. Nothing you do while angry and volatile will be helpful. Trust me!! Step one, just stop the madness!!

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Session 3 Cont'd: Conflict and Fight

Step Two

Go Birdseye:

Every couple develops a dance in their conflicts, a habitual way in which you have fought since day one! A huge resource to use to begin addressing conflict is to be able to back up, go "Birdseye," and talk about what you are doing. "**We are having that same fight!!** You know the one where you feel like I'm not careful with our money, and then I feel controlled by you, so I become more careless with our money!! Let's back up and think of a new way to handle it."

Also, go Birdseye on **yourself!!** "Why the heck did that push my buttons so much!???" Just that objectivity can begin to break up fights, or maybe even stop them from happening in the first place!!

Step Three

Heal the hurt;

Once a fight starts, solving the problem together often gets lost in the hurtful things we say. Now you're hurt and that's all you care about! Until that hurt is addressed, you will never move forward, and **hurt is only addressed by feeling heard and understood**. Couples need to **take turns** hearing one another without argument or dispute... until you both feel like your point (or your pain) is at least seen as **valid**. Then your **spouse gets a turn** at being heard by you! Unless you do this, the fight will remain a tug of war of "who's gonna matter," or your hurt will continue to flavor the relationship indefinitely!

NOTES:

Session 3 Cont'd: Conflict and Fight

Step Four

Create a Win/Win:

Since all hurtful fights are a win/lose, obviously, to create better solutions, we need to find a **win/win**. Win/win is "**mutuality**." Win/win is a **commitment** we make to one another that whatever we do with this conflict, we are both invested in making sure no one gets left out in the cold. Win/win means that what your spouse needs in the conflict, needs to matter in the solution... And so do you! Once couples believe that their need will matter, the volatility of a fight diminishes. And you will be surprised at the creative mutual solutions you come up with once you stop fighting!!

Tips for preventing the fight from ever happening

1) Do your homework

- Before you launch into an attack, take your own time-out! What is it that you are needing? Why is this hooking you so much?

2) Present a problem and not an attack.

- Bring a problem to solve...a request to make. Not a blamey jab. "In the future, would you be willing to.....?"

NOTES:

Session 3 Cont'd: Conflict and Fight

3) Tame your Feelings!

- Reactive impulsive feelings are the number one fight starter. "Be angry but sin not" means feeling something, but learning what it means, and figuring out the problem... rather than just launching into an attack.

4) Ask Questions....Invite Questions (Assumptions Kill)

- Rather than just assuming that "look" from your spouse was poison or their chilly mood is about you, ask them!! "When you said, "Oh...meatloaf again," did that mean you don't appreciate my cooking for you? It felt that way, and I needed to check." (This also creates kind accountability to the person who actually was being jerky!)

5) Whether your spouse is open to resolving a conflict or not, you still have power.

- The next person who speaks holds all the power in the interaction. Learn loving, truth-telling ways to address your spouse if they are cutting or critical or distant and unrepentant. Regardless of where they are, your reaction can still be powerful, loving and effective. Remember the baby mobile!!

6) Keep this list nearby.

- When the next fight starts, grab it!! It will help you move to the more mature parts of your brain and solve a conflict rather than starting a fight!!

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Session 3 Cont'd: Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1)** Talk together from a Birdseye view about what happens in your fusses. Maybe even talk about a recent fight from a birdseye perspective. "You said this...I felt that...So I did xyz." The more we practice this outside of the context of a conflict, the better we will be at staying sane during the actual fight!!
- 2)** Reflect on why you think it's hard for us to just hear and care about our other's hurts instead of defending and wanting to be heard ourselves? Discuss together.
- 3)** Talk together about planning a strategy for how best to take a time-out when things get heated...then a strategy for how to come back together later. Come up with what you can say that announce a need for time-out.
- 4)** Reflect on what your volatile triggers are and why they are so sensitive for you. "When she points out that I'm wrong, I blow up. I wonder what's up with that!?" Discuss together.

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