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RULE ❶

MAKE YOUR SPOUSE A PRIORITY

"IF ONLY I WAS IMPORTANT to my husband," said Susan.

"But he says he loves you."

"Maybe he loves me," she said, "but it sure seems like his job and his friends and his boat and his football games are all a lot more important to him than I am. I feel like I'm at the very bottom of his list."

I hear this sort of complaint over and over when I counsel couples. Most of us take better care of our cars and houses than we do our marriages. Too often, we take one another for granted. We treat our marriages like those annoying pink mechanical bunnies; we pop in a battery and then forget about them, assuming they'll go on forever. But the reality is that if we don't take care of our relationships, they will eventually stop working.

In order to thrive, your marriage must be your number one priority—at the top of your list. And your spouse needs to see this every day. The principle is simple: If your partner doesn't feel she is special to you, sooner or later she'll be tempted to find someone who does make her feel special.

It's not easy to keep marriage at the top of your priority list when there are so many other demands on your time: demanding jobs, demanding children, and other demanding responsibilities. While each has its place in your life, developing a healthy marriage is most important and should be given more attention than your other responsibilities.

When my friend Ralph realized that his long workweeks were causing problems in his marriage, he promised his wife he would spend more time with her. The next day he nervously went to his boss's office to declare that he could no longer work as much overtime because it was not healthy for his marriage.

His boss listened without saying a word. When Ralph finished, his boss smiled, patted Ralph on the back, and said, "You're just the sort of person I respect. You know how to keep your priorities in perspective and you have the guts to take a stand." The next day, Ralph received a significant promotion, a raise in pay, and the promise of no more overtime.

While taking a stand might not give results as positive for you as it did for Ralph, it's sure to improve your marriage.

A healthy marriage benefits others as well. It's the best gift you can give your children, whether those children are three years old or sixty-three. Knowing that their parents are together creates a real feeling of security and stability for children.

On the flip side, balancing the parent role and the marriage role can be difficult. One of the worst mistakes a parent can make is to allow children to take priority over a spouse. While you might think you're simply helping your children, it doesn't work that way. Focusing primarily on the children can threaten your marriage's stability, and when your marriage loses stability, your children will suffer.

When classic-movie star Lauren Bacall discovered she was pregnant, she excitedly broke the news to her husband, actor Humphrey Bogart. He turned away and began to cry.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Aren't you happy?"

"I'm happy, but I'm also very sad," was his reply.

"Why?"

RULE ❶: Make Your Spouse a Priority

“Because once you have a child, I’ll never be as important to you as I am now.”

It’s natural for parents to love their children, but when a spouse places children at the top of his priority list, the other partner often begins to feel resentful toward both the children and the spouse. Don’t allow this to happen in your marriage. Make your marriage strong by letting your spouse know that her needs come first, even before the children’s.

Stop right now and make a mental list of all the ways you can let your spouse know he’s your number one priority. Be creative. Then start today to implement your ideas.

What’s so exciting about doing this is that as you begin to make your spouse a priority, you’ll be showing your love to her—and she’ll start communicating that love back to you. The old saying is true: The more you give, the more you get. And as the love between the two of you begins to flow stronger, you will begin to feel a spark of joy and passion that can reenergize your marriage, making it what you always hoped it would be. And maybe more.

TODAY’S TOOLS

Prayer

Dear God,

Help me to keep life in the proper perspective. Help me to love the one you gave me with all my heart, even when I don’t feel like it. When I get distracted by all that must be done, remind me to take the time and effort to communicate that my partner is my first priority.

Forgive me for all the times I have ignored my spouse—all those times I have let people or things or activities take up time that should have been spent with him.

20 RULES AND TOOLS FOR A GREAT MARRIAGE

Forgive me for all those times I gave my partner only what was left after everybody and everything else had had its share.

Teach me to be more generous and less greedy, more sensitive and less selfish, more focused and less hectic.

Teach me how to show love to my spouse every single day.

Amen

Passage

So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. EPHESIANS 5:33

Practice

- ① Tell your spouse that she is at the top of your list and promise her that you won't let anything push her from that rightful position.
- ② Next time your spouse asks you to do something, do it with no excuse, procrastination, or complaint.
- ③ Ask your spouse how you can pray for him during the day, and then commit to doing it.
- ④ Set the alarm fifteen minutes early so you can cuddle up together and talk about the day ahead before you have to get up.