

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

HELP!

**MY SPOUSE
AND I ARE
DRIFTING
APART**

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Foreword

Has the spark gone out in your marriage? Are hugging, kissing, and sexual intimacy relics of the ancient past? Could your marriage be characterized by the title of the old Righteous Brothers song, “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’ ”? If so, you’ve picked up the right book. If your *spouse* gave this book to you to read, resist the urge to get defensive—instead, be thankful that he or she cares enough about your relationship to work on it.

My friend Mitch Temple, the director of Focus on the Family’s marriage department, has designed this easy-to-read book for every couple who longs to regain the “lovin’ feelin’ ” they once shared. Mitch is a marriage and family therapist who has worked

with hundreds of couples—some of whom were convinced that their marriage was dead. Many of those marriages not only survived—today they are thriving with a renewed sense of healthy intimacy.

In this book, Mitch will help you assess the current state of your marriage and teach you practical strategies that can get your relationship back on track. He'll also help you understand that you're not alone, and that every marriage experiences a normal ebb and flow in the level of closeness and romantic passion.

I pray that God will grant you the strength and courage to persevere in your marriage, and that He will use this book to revive and rejuvenate your relationship!

Dr. Bill Maier

Vice President, Psychologist in Residence
Focus on the Family

Introduction

Shawn and Katie met during college and were immediately attracted to each other. Friendship quickly blossomed into romance. The young couple spent every waking hour together. They shared dreams and fears. They trusted each other, and they grew in intimacy. Each focused on being the person that made the other complete. There was no doubt about it, Shawn and Katie wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.

But within the first few years of marriage, “life” began to happen. Shawn’s career as a consultant became more demanding. His boss decided that Shawn needed to be on the road three to five nights a week. Katie’s career as a marketing

manager took off. Late nights, travel, and overtime took their toll on the couple's ability to spend time together. Church activities, extended family, and new hobbies also stole precious time from their relationship. Sexual encounters became rare. Resentment began to set in on both sides because neither had time for the other. Stress moved into their lives, and arguments intensified. Blame was tossed back and forth. Communication occurred only when it was necessary to maintain the business of daily life.

Before they knew it, the closeness they'd once felt was gone. They missed one another but couldn't seem to find the time or energy to reconnect.



Bart and Tammy were the proud parents of twins. They had prepared for the twins

in all the normal ways: saving money; decorating the nursery; buying strollers, cribs, diapers, and bottles. But there was one factor they hadn't prepared for: the strain on their marriage. Like many young couples, they believed that having kids would bring them closer together. They hadn't anticipated sleepless nights, never-ending crying and nonstop demands from the twins, illnesses, and little or no time for cuddling, talking, or even sex.

Their marriage took the blows week by week. Soon Bart was frustrated and angry because he was—at best—third place in Tammy's time and affection. Tammy was frustrated and resentful because it seemed selfish for Bart to want more from her than she could give. She felt she had nothing left after caring for two infants day after day. The couple grew further and further apart.



Charles and Debbie were reaching the “happy time” of their marriage. At least, that’s what everyone told them. Their two boys were away at college. Charles’s career was on coast, and Debbie had retired from clerking at the county courthouse. Suddenly, they had more time on their hands than they had experienced in over 20 years. The problem was that they no longer felt close to each other. For the past 20 years, the couple had put all their energy into their careers and their two boys—both good investments of time and energy. But now they realized that they had neglected their marriage.

The silence in the house was deafening because their children were gone and they had forgotten how to talk to each other. Sure, they talked about everyday

business, but not about the kind of things that foster intimacy. Further, they had no shared interests, nothing they enjoyed doing together. They had become business partners, not lovers. The emptiness of their nest only magnified the division between them. Despite living in the same house, they felt very far from each other.



Many young couples, as well as many older ones, can identify with the three scenarios I've just mentioned. Most of us can relate to experiencing feelings of loneliness and pain at some point in our marriage. After our children were born, I remember how alone I felt. I kept trying to tough it out by telling myself that this time was for the kids. But once the pain reached a certain level, I knew something

had to change. My wife, Rhonda, and I realized that the loneliness and disconnection we both felt were natural for couples with small children, but it didn't feel good. It wasn't the kind of marriage that either of us wanted.

The fact that you've picked up this book indicates that you, too, realize your marriage needs work, and you're concerned enough to learn what you need to do to get things back on track. By recognizing the problem and committing to take action, you've taken that first important step toward bringing your marriage back together.

The truth is that it's natural for couples to grow apart. The level of intimacy in marriage often fluctuates throughout various seasons of life. Things such as stress, careers, physical and mental ill-

ness, crisis, and children can cause the level of closeness to increase or decrease. The question is: Once you've grown apart, can intimacy be restored? The answer, without reservation, is yes! Generations of successful marriages have proved that you can restore closeness once it is gone. All marriages experience lost intimacy at one point or another. The key is to restore it once it falters.

Throughout this short book, we'll talk about the need for closeness in marriages, and we'll delve deeper into what real intimacy looks like. Together we'll look at those things that can rob your relationship of intimacy, and in doing so, I'll help you evaluate the root of why you feel that you and your spouse are drifting apart. And most important, I'll explain how to restore intimacy in your marriage.

Take heart. Your marriage *can* get back on track. Intimacy *can* be restored. It takes time and effort, but the results are worth it.



Part
One

**The
Basic Need
for Intimacy**

Marriage is a complex system engineered to foster closeness. It is not designed to foster independence. This doesn't mean that those of us who are married should lose our identity as individuals, or that we should be completely dependent on our spouses. It simply means that marriage is designed to cultivate unity, oneness, and intimacy. Just as the body needs oxygen to remain healthy and survive, a marriage needs intimacy to thrive and last.

Some systems, such as communities or neighborhoods, can exist with minimal interaction between the people who live there. I know of people who have lived in the same subdivision for more than 20 years but know little about the people next door. While that may work for communities, marriages cannot be

successful if spouses decide to simply coexist. Marriages like these are reduced to business partnerships, consisting of people who simply do what has to be done. Couples in this state often stay together for the sake of the kids, financial reasons, or because of strong spiritual beliefs. Yet the satisfaction level is very low. The husband and wife no longer find happiness and fulfillment within each other. Sexual interactions are rare.

Pain and resentment can flow like a rushing river in such marriages. There is no loneliness like that of a marriage that has grown cold. The tension, silence, and distance seem to be amplified with every passing moment.

Maybe that is exactly how you feel at this moment.

What Is Intimacy?

Just the word *intimacy* raises all kinds of confusing thoughts for many people. Some of us search desperately for intimacy, settling for the slightest semblance of closeness. Others avoid intimacy as they would germs. Others have been influenced by Hollywood's depiction of intimacy—the kind that manifests itself in wildly romantic fantasies. And still others have reduced their understanding of intimacy simply to “sex.” But that doesn't change the fact that every person—male and female—needs to feel wanted and connected. We have been designed to be in close relationship with others.

Real intimacy is much more than a feeling that comes from showing the right kind of affection, sharing deep

thoughts, or even having passionate sex. Bonds can be formed through each of these actions and emotions, but intimacy involves more. True intimacy is the genuine closeness and connection that brings and holds couples together—emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically. It's an ongoing connection, a oneness that occurs over time. True intimacy involves experiencing life together—happy times, triumphs, and victories, but also times of deep grief, tragedies, and trials.

Love and intimacy are deeply connected. You can't have one without the other. You and your spouse may say that you love each other, but the truth is that love cannot be sustained without closeness. Intimacy involves becoming a trusted, dependable friend. Spouses must experience life together in such a way

that they know they can depend on each other to do whatever it takes to meet each other's needs, including being willing to defend and even die for each other.

But what is love? Is it just a feeling? Is it just a bunch of romantic actions? The greatest definition of love is found in the Bible. Genuine love involves being patient and kind with each other, not being rude, selfish, or demanding to have your way. Real love means forgiving when it's hard, and then letting go instead of keeping a record of past mistakes (1 Corinthians 13). Love involves both the right kinds of emotions and the right kinds of actions. When couples abide by these practices, they can experience incredible closeness and intimacy in marriage. And if the right actions and emotions produce closeness, surely the opposite behavior will cause detachment.

The Truth About Marriage

Dr. David Olson, a leading marriage researcher, has based his research on working with thousands of couples. Of the many discoveries he's made, one of the most revealing is that the level of closeness a couple feels in marriage, even the most healthy marriages, changes with circumstances and time.

When a couple is first married, they are very connected, typically overly connected. (Think back to Shawn and Katie in the introduction.) Couples like this don't have a great deal of structure in their lives and typically spend all their free time together.

But as time passes, more structure is needed to compensate for careers and other activities, especially if the couple has children. (Bart and Tammy would fall into this category.) They are typically not

as emotionally connected as before, but still close. Then, as life continues for the couple, things like financial difficulties, adolescent problems, illnesses, and stress all play major roles in how much intimacy a couple may retain.¹

The same is true for empty nesters. Though most couples at this stage in life were probably very close at one time, over the years the majority of their energy was probably invested in raising kids and other demands, with little time spent on each other. Often when the children leave home, the silence and emptiness underline the fact that the couple is emotionally disconnected.

During times like the ones we've just mentioned, when couples seem furthest apart, they may begin to believe that their marriage has become something that is no longer good. But the truth is that no

matter where the intimacy level is, marriage is still important. Even tired, sick, disconnected marriages are important enough to rebuild, repurpose, and restore. We all need reminding of that fact, especially when the spark has gone.

Perhaps you feel that the spark in your marriage has gone out. Consider this: Research shows that not only is there a behavioral component (action element) to intimacy in marriage, but actions are also tied to chemicals in the brain. When couples are dating, and even throughout the honeymoon stage, dopamine is produced at greater levels in the brain. Dopamine is one of the main chemicals responsible for strong feelings of passion and excitement. That's why dating couples and newlyweds often feel such a "high."

However, these high levels of excite-

ment-producing chemicals begin to diminish over time. In fact, some experts suggest that if dopamine levels remained elevated for longer periods of time, they would eventually kill us. In other words, euphoric feelings are not meant to last forever.²

The studies go on to show that high levels of dopamine are naturally replaced with another chemical called oxytocin, which is often referred to as the “bonding” chemical. It is the same chemical found at high levels while a mother is nursing her baby. Research suggests that couples who spend time together, touch each other, hug, hold hands, affirm, and serve each other have high levels of this chemical. Oxytocin seems to help substantiate and complement deep intimacy and bonding in couples.³

So while the lost passion and closeness

in your marriage *can* be restored to a healthy, mutually satisfying level, the level of passion you experienced while “falling in love” may be somewhat less now than before. But that’s okay.

Society and the media are not always helpful in this regard. For years, society embraced marriage as one of the most important institutions on earth. But now the culture seems to say that if you no longer feel close to your spouse, or if you are unhappy and your needs are not being met, then your marriage has failed and you should move on to someone who can fulfill your needs.

In spite of this shift in how our culture views marriage, research still verifies what society held true for years—marriage really is a good thing. Studies have shown that married couples often enjoy a healthier lifestyle and live longer because

they tend to take better care of themselves, exercise more, and avoid risky or harmful behaviors more than single or divorced people do. They also usually enjoy more sexual satisfaction than couples who only cohabit. Additionally, married couples are able to pool their resources and typically enjoy higher economic success than singles. Research also shows that children thrive best in homes with both a mother and a father.⁴

The bottom line is that no matter what our culture says or how you may feel about your marriage right now, it's worth saving. Healthy changes *can* occur. Don't give up hope.

Hooked on a Feeling

Strife, stress, shattered expectations, and broken trust have a unique way of wounding hope-filled dreams and emotions, but

we must remember that feelings can lead us in unhealthy directions.

In Colorado, where we live, it's very easy to get lost while driving. The streets and roads were not laid down to accommodate the incredible growth we've experienced. So for the first two to three months after moving here, I was lost most of the time.

I realized quickly that it's risky to rely on "hunches." The problem is that most streets around here don't end up where you expect or feel that they should. Because of the mountainous terrain, certain roads may twist and turn until you are miles from where you want to be. I spent multiple hours of frustrated driving trying to find my way because I felt, or assumed, that "this was the way to go."

After a couple of months, a friend pointed out that relying on assumptions

around here will get you lost every time. He taught me a great tactic to find my bearings: I was told to simply look for the mountains; they're always west of where you are. So if I'm ever lost, I can test my feelings with a marker—the mountains. If I'm heading away from the mountains, I know I'm heading east, no matter what my hunches tell me.

The same is true with emotions in marriage. They may tell you that you married the wrong person, that you will never restore the spark you once had in your marriage, that you are no longer in love, or that you will never be able to trust your spouse again after he or she has hurt you so deeply.

But the truth is that both marriage and love are about much more than how you feel or whether you are happy. Understand that there will be good days

and bad days. It's unrealistic to expect to feel happy and loving all the time.

Remember that marriage is a commitment. When your feelings tell you that your marriage isn't worth the effort, think back to those vows you made to your spouse on your wedding day. Commitment means honoring our vows to each other when we don't feel like it, when we lose hope, when it's no longer exciting, when we are hurt, when we argue, and even when our spouse doesn't do his or her part.

For example, if I relied only on my feelings as a parent, I would have thrown in the towel years ago. At times, my teens have hurt me, ignored everything I taught them, and willfully rebelled. But I'm committed to them. I've never thought about giving up my role as a parent or giving up on my children.

I know that good times and hard times are both part of the parenting journey.

Please understand that while feelings are important and shouldn't be ignored, they can at times lead you away from truth. Even if your spouse has hurt you deeply, the truth is that it's possible for love and trust to be restored.

But neither should we be naive: Restoring intimacy is not going to happen simply by wishing or hoping it will. Like a body that is out of shape and weak, a marriage has to be fed properly and exercised in order to experience intimacy. You have to make changes in attitude, perceptions, and actions in order for intimacy to return.

I like the story of a farmer and his wife who were riding down a prairie road in their old Ford pickup. The farmer was driving and his wife was sitting on the

passenger side on the bench seat. Eventually the wife broke the silence and asked, “Hon, why don’t we sit together in this truck like we used to?” The farmer thought a minute or two and finally answered, “Well, I ain’t moved.”

In working with couples who are experiencing loss of intimacy, I often tell this story and ask, “Who has moved?” In other words, what were the things that you once did that you are no longer doing? What traditions, habits, words, and expressions have you stopped using? Or what attitudes and actions have you adopted that are unhealthy and harmful to the other person? Often the answer is that both individuals have moved. Maybe you have simply stopped doing things or saying things because you felt they were no longer necessary, but in reality, they are vital to the health of your marriage.



We've seen that intimacy in marriage fluctuates with time and changing life circumstances, and that feelings can come and go. Stress is another factor that affects the level of intimacy in a marriage. Our next section will look specifically at stress in marriage and what you can do about it.

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