

Love and Marriage

Lesson 8: Solvable Problems

Questions & Objectives

- The Bible gives us certain life principles, which include living peaceably and treating others well. This includes our spouse.
- Learn and discuss the 5 steps for solving Solvable Problems.
- Understand Repair Attempts – how to make and receive them.

Lesson

Principles for Life

*Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.
– Romans 12:18 (NLT)*

Making efforts to live peaceably with all needs to begin at home.

In many ways, solving “Solvable Problems” boils down to what Jesus said:

*In everything, then, do to others as you would have them do to you.
For this is the essence of the Law and the Prophets.
– Matthew 7:12*

This is not a principle of salvation, but a principle of _____.

FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT.

What does this mean?



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The Five Steps

There are five steps for helping resolve conflict and solve problems:

1. Soften your _____.
2. Learn to make and receive _____.
3. _____ yourself and each other
4. Compromise.
5. Process _____ so they don't linger.

REFLECTION If it's the case that these are things we would do when dealing with a guest or a colleague, why is it at times more difficult to do for my spouse?

Step 1: Soften Your Start-Up

A harsh start-up can often begin the cycle of the four horsemen:

¹A soft answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger.

²The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly,
But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.

Proverbs 15:1-2 (NKJV)

Dr. Gottman's team found that the wife is more likely than a husband to bring up a touchy issue and push to resolve it.

Does this resonate? Why do you think this is?

BRINGING UP TOUCHY SUBJECTS IS NECESSARY, BUT THERE CAN BE DRAMATIC DIFFERENCES IN HOW THEY'RE BROUGHT UP.



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Harsh vs. Soft Start-Ups

A **Harsh Start-Up** usually begins with _____ – either in the words or the tone.

Soft Start-Ups must be _____ of criticism or contempt, but they don't necessarily need overly diplomatic.

For many men, hearing their wife acknowledge a shared responsibility is like manna from heaven and prevents tensions from escalating.

The best Soft Start-Ups have four key parts:

1. "I share some _____ for this."
2. Here's how I _____
3. About a _____ situation, and...
4. Here's what I _____
 - a. This should be a **positive** need.

A HARSH START-UP MAY BE A RESULT OF NOT FEELING HEARD OR RESPONDED TO CONSISTENTLY.

REFLECTION How does Philippians 2:1-11 help us lead with empathy and a servanthood mindset? In what ways does this help to combat harsh start-ups? How can I best initiate soft start-ups, as a husband/wife?

Step 2: Make & Receive Repair Attempts

What's a repair attempt?



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Sins Against Each Other

- Matthew 18:15-18 – template for how to deal with someone who sins against us.
- Matthew 5:23-24 – template for what to do when we sin against someone else.

God's Plan is Reconciliation

- 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 tells us that we have been entrusted with the Ministry of Reconciliation – God reconciling the world to Him, through Christ, for whom we are ambassadors.

REFLECTION How can we be an effective minister of reconciliation if we ourselves are not reconciled?

He Who has Ears to Hear

Even if things are difficult in your marriage, you can begin to start hearing each other's repair attempts:

1. Assume _____ intent.
2. Focus on the attempted/intended communication, and when they may be asking to put on the _____.
3. Remember: requests may be wrapped in _____ emotions.

Consider "formalizing" repair requests with your spouse: agree upon a "safe phrase" which pauses the conversation until a better time.

- **NOTE:** When your partner announces a repair attempt, your job is simply to accept it and view the interruption as a bid to make things better.

Step 3: Soothe Yourself (and Each Other)

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.

³He restores my soul;

Psalm 23:2-3a



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Conflict discussions can be beneficial. If your marriage is experiencing a more turbulent time, though, these can lead in the opposite direction and trigger flooding.

What is “flooding?”

To combat flooding, it's imperative you take a break that lasts at least _____ minutes.

- Don't nurse your anger or rehearse comebacks and counterarguments.

WATCH

[Nate Bargatze: Laundry](#)

(Credit: misterjonsable; RidMasterJoke)

- Rather, engage in something soothing and distracting:
 - Music, a walk, reading, exercising.
 - _____ can be the most difficult, but also the most effective.

Step 4: Compromise

Can two walk together without agreeing where to go?
Amos 3:3

Compromise is about _____ with your spouse to find ways to accommodate each other.

Remember the **Problem of the Lemon**: First discuss both of your needs/desires. With clear communication, you may both get to have what you want!

Men tend to be less willing to accept their partner's _____.

Women tend to be less willing to accept their partner's _____.

Step 5: Dealing with Emotional Injuries

⁵[Love] keeps no account of wrongs... ⁷It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:5b, 7



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Deep wounds may require or benefit from professional assistance.

Often, with “solvable problems,” lingering emotional injury is less about _____ you were fighting about, and more about _____ you were fighting about it. Find the appropriate time and setting to talk through this, based on the steps in the supplemental material.

Wrap-Up

- The undergirding principle in marriage is the same that Jesus gave us: to treat one another as we would be treated; and to seek to live peaceably.
- A soft start-up can help prevent discussions from escalating.
- We need to learn to hear and make repair attempts.
- Compromise is the art of negotiating with your spouse; win-wins can be found, especially if both partners clearly articulate their needs and desires.

Follow-Through

Meditate

Matthew 7:7-13

Consider

How can I better follow the “Golden Rule” and treat my spouse as I would be treated?

When is the best time to talk with my spouse about our Solvable Problems? Would it help to put certain things in place first (childcare, a neutral setting, etc.)?

Act

- Take 5-10 minutes each day this week to earnestly pray for your spouse, their struggles, their well-being, and their best.



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- Practice Soft Start-Ups with small issues. Listen for conversational repair attempts from your spouse – and receive them.



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Supplemental Materials

From The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, John Gottman, 2015

Soft Start-Ups Guide

1. Complain but don't blame. Remember: "I feel..."; about what?...; and "I need..."

Let's assume that you're angry because your spouse insisted on adopting a dog despite your reservations. He swore up and down that he'd clean up after the dog, but now you're finding poop all over the yard. It's certainly okay to complain. You could say something like, "Hey, there's poop all over the backyard. We agreed you'd clean up after Banjo. I'm really upset about this. Would you please clean it up?"

While this is confrontational, it's not an attack. You're simply complaining about a particular situation, not your partner's personality or character.

What's not okay is to say something like, "Hey, there's poop all over the backyard. This is all your fault. I just knew you'd be irresponsible about that dog. I should have never trusted you about it in the first place."

However justified you may feel in blaming your spouse, the bottom line is that this approach is not productive. Even if it does lead your partner to clean up the yard, it also leads to increased tension, resentment, defensiveness, and so on.

2. Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You."

"I" statements have been a staple of interpersonal psychology ever since the mid-1960s when Thomas Gordon noted that phrases starting with "I" were usually less likely to be critical and to make the listener defensive than statements starting with "You." Here's the difference:

"You are not listening to me," versus "I would like it if you'd listen to me."

"You're careless with money," versus "I want us to save more money."

"You just don't care about me," versus "I'm feeling neglected."

Clearly, the "I" statements above are gentler than their "You" counterparts. Of course, it's possible to twist this general rule and come up with accusatory "I" statements like, "I think you're selfish" that are hardly gentle. So the point is not to start talking to your spouse in some stilted psychobabble. Just keep in mind that if your words focus on how you feel rather than on accusing your spouse, your discussion will be far more successful.

3. Describe what is happening. Don't evaluate or judge.

Instead of accusing or blaming, just communicate what you see. Instead of, "you never watch the baby," say, "I seem to be the only one chasing after Charlie today."



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Again, this will help you prevent your spouse from feeling attacked and waging a defense, rather than really considering your point.

4. Be clear about your positive need.

Don't expect your partner to be a mind reader. Instead of, "You left the kitchen a total mess," say, "I'd appreciate it if you would clean your stuff off the kitchen table."

Instead of, "Would you take care of the baby for once?" say, "Please change Emma's diaper and give her a bottle."

5. Be polite.

Add phrases such as, "Please" and "I would appreciate it if..."

6. Be appreciative.

If your partner has handled this situation better in the past, then couch your request with an appreciation of what your partner did back then and how much you miss that now.

Instead of, "You never have time for me anymore," say, "Remember how we used to go out every Saturday night? I loved spending so much time alone with you. And it felt so good knowing that you wanted to be with me, too. Let's start doing that again."

7. Don't store things up.

It's hard to be gentle when you're ready to burst with recriminations. So don't wait too long before bringing up an issue – otherwise it will just escalate in your mind. As the Bible says (Ephesians 4:26), "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

Processing a Previous Emotional Injury

As you work through this exercise, remember that all experience is subjective. There is no God-camera that has recorded the ultimate Truth of what happened between you. Each of your perceptions is equally valid. So your aim isn't to persuade or to debate whose perceptions were more accurate. Instead, your goal is to gain greater understanding of each other's subjective reality and of how the issue was handled. That's how you process past emotional injuries.

STEP 1: Choose a specific incident to work through.

Select a conflict that you both feel you can now discuss with some emotional distance. For the purpose of this exercise, imagine that you are sitting in the balcony of a theater during the intermission, discussing what happened during Act One—except that Act One was the unfortunate incident and you were the actors on stage.



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STEP 2: Decide who will speak first.

For this exercise, you will take turns being speaker and listener, Don't switch roles until the speaker is finished talking, When you're the listener, sit back and take in what your partner has to say *without interrupting*.

STEP 3: Say out loud what you were feeling then.

When you are the speaker, list aloud all of the feelings you had to any degree during the argument or regrettable incident, (See the list below for help.) Do not discuss why you had these emotions. When you are the listener, don't comment on your partner's emotions.

DURING THAT ARGUMENT I FELT:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Abandoned | Like leaving |
| Afraid | Like my opinions didn't matter |
| Alienated | Like you didn't even like me |
| Angry | Lonely |
| Ashamed | Misunderstood |
| Both of us were partly right | Morally justified |
| Criticized | Out of control |
| Depressed | Overwhelmed with emotion |
| Defensive | Powerless |
| Disapproving | Remorseful |
| Disgusted | Righteously indignant |
| Disloyal | Sad |
| Exhausted | Shocked |
| Flooded | Stubborn |
| Foolish | Stupid |
| Frustrated | Taken for granted |
| Guilty | Tense |
| Hopeless | Tired |
| Hungry | Ugly |
| Hurt | Unappreciated |
| I had no idea what I was feeling | Unloved |
| I had no influence | Unsafe |
| I was right and you were wrong | Worried |
| Like an innocent victim | Other (write down any additional emotions you had) |

STEP 4: Share your subjective reality and what you needed.

Now let your partner know why you think you had those feelings at the time. In talking about your reality, be like a reporter. Avoid attack, blame, or criticism. Don't in any way attribute intentions or motivations to your partner. Only discuss yourself. Use "I statements" ("I heard you say . . .") not "You statements" ("You said Also, tell your partner what you think you might have needed at the time of the incident. For example, if in Step 1



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you said you felt that your opinions didn't matter, perhaps, in retrospect, what you needed was to hear your partner say your opinions were valued. Or, if you felt sad, perhaps you needed to feel comforted.

Here are some examples of common needs people might express during this exercise:

IN RETROSPECT:

1. I needed to feel like you were listening.
2. I needed to feel like you were being patient with me.
3. I needed to feel like you wouldn't overreact.
4. I needed you to tell me you loved me.
5. I needed a break from talking.
6. I needed to feel like you validated my point of view, even a little bit.
7. I needed to feel like you respected me.
8. I needed to feel I had your support and empathy.

STEP 5: Identify and explore your triggers.

So often our negative reactions during an argument are rooted in those "enduring vulnerabilities" — issues or responses that we are, perhaps, overly sensitive to. As you rewind the videotape of your own memories, stop at a place when you felt some of the same emotions as you did during the argument you're now processing. It might be a time in your childhood or in a past relationship. For example, some people are particularly anxious about being abandoned by a loved one because a child their parents were unreliable. By becoming more aware of your triggers, and your partner's, you can better avoid unduly upsetting each other when you're having a disagreement. It's important to tell your partner the story of these enduring vulnerabilities so that he or she understands why you have particular triggers.

When you are the listener, respond to your partner with understanding and empathy. Summarize what you heard in a sentence, such as: "I can see what that's a big trigger for you. Hearing the story of that trigger helps me understand you better. And I get why these are enduring vulnerabilities for you."

STEP 6: Acknowledge your role in what happened.

After you've discussed each other's answers in the steps above, I hope come to see that we are all complicated creatures whose actions and reactions are governed by a wide array of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories. It's natural to believe that your partner was solely responsible for the fight, but that is erroneous thinking.



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To break this pattern, you both need to admit some role (however slight at first) in creating the conflict.

The first (and easiest) step is to describe what your state of mind may have been like at the time of the regrettable incident—that is, what may have set you up for the reaction you had. Try to recall which of the following were true for you and circle all that apply:

- I had been very stressed and irritable.
- I hadn't expressed much appreciation toward you.
- I had been overly sensitive.
- I had been overly critical.
- I hadn't shared very much of my inner world.
- I was depressed.
- I wasn't being a very good listener.
- I was feeling a bit like a martyr.
- I had needed to be alone.
- I had been preoccupied.
- I had not wanted to take care of anybody.
- I had not had much confidence in myself.
- I had been running on empty
- I had felt taken for granted
- I had not been emotionally available,
- I had taken you for granted,
- I had not made time for good things between us.
- Other

Next, tell your partner what you want to apologize for. Begin by telling your partner what your specific regrets are and what you see as your contributions to the event. Then clearly apologize to your partner. Saying you're sorry is magical in a relationship. Examples:

I WANT TO APOLOGIZE AND I AM SORRY THAT:

1. I overreacted.
2. I was really grumpy.
3. I was defensive.
4. I was so negative.
5. I attacked you.
6. I didn't listen to you.
7. I wasn't respectful.
8. I was unreasonable.
9. Other



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Finally, the partner accepts the apology. (The speaker can then respond with "Thank you.") If the partner finds it hard to fully accept the apology, this indicates more work needs to be done on the exercise.

STEP 7: Looking Ahead: Constructive Plans.

Take turns each answering these two questions:

1. What's one thing I can do to avoid having this kind of regrettable incident or argument again?
2. What's one thing my partner can do to avoid having this kind of regrettable incident or argument again? (Be as agreeable as possible to the plans suggested by your partner.)

When you have mastered the general problem-solving skills outlined in this chapter, you'll discover that many of your problems find their own solutions. Once you get past the barriers that have prevented clear communication, difficulties are much easier to resolve.

But remember: These remedies work only for problems that can be solved. If compromise still seems like a distant goal to you, then the problem you are grappling with may not be solvable, [but rather perpetual].

