

# Fighting for Your Marriage

A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce

Third edition by research authors: Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg

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## Chapter 1: Five Keys for a Great Relationship / PREP in a Nutshell

### I. Introduction

This is a book about helping you restore love, fun, and friendship that once was there or, if your relationship is great now, helping you stay there and continue to grow in your relationship. In this new edition, we focus not only on increasing positive connections and intimacy in your relationship but also on increasing your own self-awareness and your understanding of your partner. The skills and principles in our research-based program presented here work — if you decide to use them in your relationship. This book is based on our program called PREP, which stands for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program.

### A. Five Keys for a Great Marriage

#### 1. Key 1: Decide Don't Slide

This is based on new research on cohabitation and commitment: deciding vs. sliding. The main idea is to understand the importance of deciding about things that matter. Too many people slide through major transitions or life experiences rather than deciding who they are and where they intend to go. What we know is that when something important is at stake, you need to make a decision together, because decisions support a greater commitment to follow through on what has been decided. We are reminding you now that it is much more helpful to be happy that at least one of you is deciding at that time to improve your relationship.

#### 2. Key 2: Do Your Part

It's more important to be the right person than to find the right person. — Shirley P. Glass. One sign of relationship problems, now or in the future, is when you focus on your partner as the source of the problems. To follow our program, you need to decide to work as a team on your relationship. This means that you agree to not fight destructively, to commit yourself to keeping fun and friendship in your relationship, and to make the relationship a safe emotional harbor. Most important, marital teams succeed only when each member does his or her part. When conflict arises, or when you perceive your partner as acting unfairly, you do the most constructive things you can do. You need to hold up your end of the relationship even when you think your partner isn't doing his or her share. The major exception to this guideline is if there is ongoing victimization of one person by another. That may call for strong actions of a different sort than what we focus on here.

What's My Part? 1. Do positive things for your partner and the relationship. Just do it. 2. Decide to let negative or annoying comments bounce off you. 3. Be the best person you can be in your relationship. Take responsibility for your own issues, personal growth, awareness, and mental and physical health.

### **3. Key 3: Make It Safe to Connect**

Here we focus on the importance of making it physically and emotionally safe at home, especially when dealing with conflicts. Positive connections and intimacy thrive when things are safe — when you are confident that you can do your part to control conflicts. So many times partners tell us that being home is like walking on eggshells, saying, “I can’t be myself.” When you have the skills to handle conflicts, you are able to relax, to be yourself, and to open the doors to emotional and physical intimacy. Over thirty years of research with an increasingly diverse population of couples tell us that success in marriage is related not so much to the nature of the differences between two partners as to how the partners handle the differences they have. If you want to have a great relationship, the way you handle differences can matter more than what those differences are.

### **4. Key 4: Open the Doors to Positive Connections**

We’ve learned that the positive connections are what really matter to most couples. We all know that conflicts are inevitable and need to be handled, but people do not get and stay married for the joy of handling conflict together till death do them part. They want to be married for all the great things relationships offer: deep friendship, companionship, spiritual meaning, fun, passion, parenting, and connection with the core values of life. But there is a very important link between what we say about conflict and issues and what we say about fun, friendship, support, spirituality, and sensual connection. We find that people do not really know how to keep the positives alive and well over time.

### **5. Key 5: Nurture Your Commitment**

Provide a cocoon of commitment around your family. Building something meaningful together and hanging on to it are critical. Couples who do the best over the long term do so partly because they have a sense of just that: the long term. Commitment is a major theme in our approach and throughout this book. We’ll look at commitment in terms of sacrifice, forgiveness, protecting priorities, and developing teamwork. But more than anything else, commitment is knowing that you can count on each other to be there for one another and to support and help one another. Set up some rules for how to handle it when they got angry: no name-calling, no pulling away, no swearing. Try to calm down and figure out together what the issue was. M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled*: “Couples cannot resolve in any healthy way the universal issues of marriage: dependency and independence, dominance and submission, freedom and fidelity, for example, without the security of knowing that the act of struggling over these issues will not destroy the relationship.” Throughout this book, we’ll give you many suggestions for how to think about and act on commitment concerns. We will encourage you to develop and nurture a vision for your future together. In order to give your relationship a better chance, do not do or say things that threaten the stability of your relationship. Try not to act in ways that allow the things that bond the two of you together to slip any further away. In other words, do your part to make things go as smoothly and positively as possible. For example, do not threaten the future of your relationship in the midst of a fight. You need a secure base of attachment — safety in commitment — in your marriage for all the rest of the really good things to happen. Behind our focus on the five keys to a healthy relationship we have described here is an emphasis on knowledge based in research, sound theory, and extensive clinical experience. Most other programs and books for couples are neither empirically informed nor empirically tested.

## **B. Risk Factors for Marital Problems**

### 1. General Risk Factors:

- Having a personality tendency to react strongly or defensively to problems and disappointments in life
- Having divorced parents
- Living together prior to marriage
- Being previously divorced, yourself or your partner
- Having children from a previous marriage
- Having different religious backgrounds
- Marrying at a very young age
- Knowing each other for only a short time before marriage
- Experiencing financial hardship
- Experiencing racial, ethnic, religious, and other types of class discrimination

### 2. Dynamic Risk Factors:

- Negative styles of talking and fighting with each other, such as arguments that rapidly become negative, put - downs, and the silent treatment
  - Difficulty communicating well, especially when you disagree
  - Trouble handling disagreements as a team
  - Unrealistic beliefs about marriage
  - Different attitudes about important things
  - A low level of commitment to one another, reflected in such behavior as failing to protect your relationship from others you are attracted to or failing to view your marriage as a long - term investment
  - Not practicing faith together
- In general, higher levels of risk (due to either static or dynamic factors) are tied to greater difficulties in handling problems and negative emotions well.

## **C. Summary:** Now that you better understand how we think, you are ready for the next part of your journey through this book. Do not leave home — or go home — without our travel advice, which can be summarized by five key guidelines:

1. Decide don't slide.
2. Do your part.
3. Make it safe to connect.
4. Open the doors to positive connections.
5. Nurture security in your future together.

## **D. Four Parts of the Book:**

Choose the next stop on your journey. We've organized our themes into 4 major parts:

1. Understanding the Risks on the Road to Lasting Love
2. Teaming Up to Handle Conflict
3. Enjoying Each Other
4. Staying the Course

## **II. Conclusion**

Although reading straight through can make the most sense, feel free to jump to the sections that address the needs you are having in your relationship. Each section includes examples to make our points clear and exercises for you to work through some of the concepts and ideas and to try out the skills and strategies we are teaching. We understand that some of you will be reading this book on your own, working to do your part and take responsibility for changing your own behavior in your relationship. You will find lots of support here. Others will be sharing this book with a partner, working together on reading chapters and doing exercises. You will also find support and encouragement. Singles who are looking to have successful future relationships can learn strategies for doing things right. We hope all readers can take away something meaningful.

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