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The 4 Habits of *Joy-Filled* Marriages

How 15 Minutes a Day Will Help You Stay in Love

- *Brain Science Hacks that Boost Your* •
Emotional, Spiritual and Physical Connection



EXERCISES FOR HABIT #1:
PLAYING TOGETHER

Think about this: If you are going swimming, are you the kind of person who cautiously steps into the pool by slowly dipping your toes into the water, then placing your feet, ankles, and body into the pool? Or are you someone who simply runs to the edge and fearlessly leaps with a big cannonball splash?

Regardless of your preference, the following exercises will work for any personality—whether your approach to life is bold or more cautious—so have fun and get con-

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nected. However, don't force it. If one of you needs to stop or rest, please honor that request. Play stays fun when we are tender toward weaknesses and we respect limitations. It is important to learn how to let the other person know when you are getting overwhelmed by something and need to pause or stop. Some couples have code words, like "avocado" (I made that one up). But the point is to have signals that keep interactions safe and enjoyable by letting the other person know when you need a break.

Earlier in the book we mentioned the hormone **oxytocin**. Let's take a closer look at this important chemical. Oxytocin is sometimes called "the bonding hormone." When it is present, it *personalizes joy* by telling our brain that *our spouse* is the source of the good stuff. It is like glue that helps us stay attached. Oxytocin makes us feel generous, trusting, and connected with the one we love. This love hormone increases with skin-to-skin contact, so you will notice each exercise includes a variety of ways to physically connect. The exercises may look modest—even rigid—at first glance, but watch the sparks fly when you intentionally interact with the one you love!

How well the exercises go for you comes down to one main factor: the status of your brain's relational circuits.² If your relational brain is awake and alert, you will be able to start some joy. If your relational brain is asleep, the exercises will feel tedious and tiresome. For this reason, each exercise includes steps to activate your rela-

Habit #1: Play Together

tional brain so you get the most out of each interaction. Pausing to feel thankful will warm up your relational brain, so anytime you feel disconnected during an exercise, this step will reboot your relational circuits for maximum joy. And, while the exercises are designed for you to practice in a sequential order, you and your beloved can practice exercises as often as you like and in the order that works best for you. Go, strap on your seat belt and enjoy the ride!

Practice eye smiles 15 MIN

1. Looking at your spouse is one of the best ways for your brain to build joy while voice tone is a close second. This means seeing your spouse and hearing your spouse's voice can be invigorating—as long as joy is the emotion you are amplifying! The muscles around the eyes are where spontaneous joy shows up, not the mouth. **Eye smiles** are what happen when we are glad to be together and our eyes “light up” seeing the one we love.

Eye smiles engage the brain's joy center and nonverbal communication happens at a rapid rate, so you want to 1) start out feeling relational when you begin this exercise, and 2) look away for rest at the right times when you feel like you are no longer growing joy. Don't force it! This

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interaction is meant to be an interactive joy and rest sequence, not a stare-down contest. As soon as you feel the joy is no longer growing by looking at your spouse, it is time to look away for a few seconds and disengage to rest. Rest is a normal response, so be sure to rest as needed. Return to the eye smiles as soon as you feel ready and it looks like your partner is ready.

Joy can bring up a variety of reactions, so don't be surprised if different emotions come up while you practice, from tears to laughter. If this exercise is uncomfortable for you, you may want to experiment with playing music in the background as you practice this skill. Try both high-energy and low-energy music to see what you prefer.

NOTE: Try this exercise several times in different ways and see which methods connect with you the best—a little practice goes a long way!

2. While cuddling, reminisce about one of your favorite memories with your spouse. 🕒 **5 MIN**
3. Next, play some music you both enjoy, then sit across from each other knee to knee while you hold hands. Without using words, look into each other's eyes with a warm smile (connect), then look away (rest) and take a breather whenever you need one. The goal here is to connect, then rest again and again for two minutes. 🕒 **2 MIN**

Habit #1: Play Together

4. When finished, hold hands or cuddle while you discuss how this exercise felt for you. What did you notice? 🕒 3 MIN
5. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 5 MIN

Date Night 🕒 15 MIN

1. Plan a special date night doing something fun you both enjoy. As part of your evening, be sure to include the following exercise:
Reminisce some of the highlights from your wedding day and honeymoon. What do you remember about your special day that made you smile? Try to come up with as many fun moments as you can remember. 🕒 7 MIN
NOTE: If for some reason your wedding day does not invoke fun feelings, then think about a vacation together or another memory that is meaningful for both of you.
2. At the end of your time, hold hands or cuddle, then share what was fun about this special outing. Highlight three things you enjoy about your partner's heart and character. 🕒 5 MIN
Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 3 MIN

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Get Relational ⌚ 15 MIN

1. While holding hands or cuddling, spend several minutes telling each other the qualities you enjoy about your partner. Be sure to look into your lover's eyes and try to include moments you observed these qualities in action. ⌚ 5 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I really like how generous and thoughtful you are. Just today you surprised me with my favorite bag of coffee beans that you know I love!*

2. Notice how you feel when giving and receiving appreciation. Talk about what you notice as you practiced the previous step. ⌚ 3 MIN
3. Take some time kissing like you did when you were first married. ⌚ 2 MIN

HINT: *You may want to brush your teeth first if you had onions or garlic for lunch.*

4. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 5 MIN

Just between Us ⌚ 15 MIN

1. You will want some privacy for this exercise. (You can wear your birthday suit if you like.) While lying in bed holding each other, start by sharing some highlights from your day. ⌚ 3 MIN

NOTE: *Avoid talking about anything upsetting.*


Habit #1: Play Together

2. Spend some time caressing each other while you share stories about your favorite intimate moments together. Include specifics about what made these times meaningful for you.

 3 MIN

3. Next, take some time to cuddle and quiet without caressing while you both place a hand on your partner's chest to feel his or her heartbeat.

 3 MIN

4. Now, continue the caressing for another several minutes followed by cuddling while you take turns listening to each other's heartbeat.  3 MIN
Then enjoy some relational sexual intimacy that brings you both smiles and satisfaction. (Take as much time as you need for this step!)

5. Have some time to rest, then close by expressing appreciation to your spouse about what you enjoy about his/her heart, mind, and body.

 3 MIN



EXERCISES FOR HABIT #2:

LISTEN FOR EMOTION

Welcome to the second round of exercises. In this section, you and your spouse train your brain's ability to perceive,

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read, and listen for emotions. With practice, you can learn to activate your relational circuits so you keep relationships bigger than emotions, pain, and problems. A big part of training the relational brain to listen for emotions involves a skill known as **mindsight**, which you can think of as your relationship reader. You use mindsight to “read” and interpret the other person’s body language, voice tone, and facial expressions. When mindsight is accurate, you see and understand the mind and heart of your partner. For example, when you say, “You look tired. Do you need to rest?” your spouse feels seen and understood. This skill creates intimacy, connection, and much-needed resilience to help process negative emotions.

When mindsight is faulty or “leaky,” then unprocessed pain from our past leaks into the present, which disrupts our ability to see, hear, and understand our partner.² One spouse may overreact from a word, voice tone, or behavior that reminds him/her of something painful from the past. At this point, we no longer clearly gauge what is happening inside our partner’s mind, so we misread what is said and misunderstand our partner. This broken “relationship reader” creates pain and leads to conflict and miscommunication.

This heartache is avoidable! One way we can correct this unhelpful pattern is to share nonverbal stories where we must rely on our emotional brain to “read” our partner and then predict how he or she will respond to better help

Habit #2: Listen for Emotion

our partner understand what we are trying to convey.

The following exercises aim to enhance our brain's relationship reader. Our body is the canvas for our emotional brain. Like a work of art, our body tells a story about our emotional well-being. Paying attention to our muscle tension and breathing can tell us if big emotions are present or even sneaking up on us. We will practice the one-two punch of validation and comfort to re-pattern our brain to better read emotions.

Happy and Sad 🕒 15 MIN

1. While holding hands, share three things from your day that made you happy, then highlight one thing that made you sad. Include how your body felt in the happy and the sad. 🕒 3 MIN
For example, *I was glad when my coworker helped me on a project and this felt refreshing and "lighter" in my body.*
2. Next, your partner will express the emotional content from what you said, including his/her observations. (You can take one item at a time if this works better.) 🕒 3 MIN

HAPPY EXAMPLE: *When you were glad your coworker helped you today, this felt refreshing and you felt lighter. I even noticed a smile appear on your face while you were sharing.*

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SAD EXAMPLE: *When you observed the person yelling at her young daughter in the grocery store today, you felt very unhappy and your body felt heavy. I noticed your energy level dropped and your tone of voice sounded sad while you were telling me this story.*

3. Switch roles. 🕒 **6 MIN**
4. Discuss how you feel after practicing this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 **3 MIN**

Joy Reminiscing 🕒 **15 MIN**

1. Think of a joyful memory with your spouse from the previous year. 🕒 **2 MIN**
2. Before telling your story, write a few notes on the following details: 🕒 **1 MIN**
My body: *What was I feeling in my body?*
My emotions: *What emotions were present?*
3. While holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, briefly tell your stories and include the above details. 🕒 **6 MIN**
4. When finished, take turns highlighting and validating the emotional content from the story your partner shared. 🕒 **3 MIN**

EXAMPLE: *Our weekend getaway to the beach was a special time for you as you were feeling encouraged. Our time together helped you rest*

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and relax so your body felt peaceful and your shoulders were no longer tense.

5. Discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 3 MIN

Mirroring My Mate 🕒 15 MIN

1. Think about a moment from your day when you felt peaceful, then think of another moment when peace was absent. These examples should be short and simple. 🕒 2 MIN

2. Once you have two examples in mind, briefly review:

My body: *What was my body feeling?*

My emotions: *What emotions were present?*

🕒 2 MIN

Here are two examples:

Peace: *While enjoying my cup of coffee this morning, I felt joyful, calm, and peaceful.*

No Peace: *Driving to work, I was stuck in traffic. At that point I felt anxious and restless; my stomach twisted into tight knots.*

3. Now, take turns telling your stories including body sensations and emotions. Listener, once your spouse finishes telling one story, tell the story back to him or her nonverbally (using your body gestures, facial expressions and

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acting-out movements) based on what you observed and heard. Do this for both stories. (This step improves mindsight.) 🕒 **8 MIN**

REMINDER: *The elements of a nonverbal story include eye contact, facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity.*

4. When you both finish your stories, discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with some quiet cuddling and resting together.

🕒 **3 MIN**

A Few of My Favorite Things 🕒 **15 MIN**

1. Take turns sharing a *favorite activity* you enjoyed growing up. Include reasons why this activity was so meaningful for you and a special memory associated with this activity. 🕒 **3 MIN**

EXAMPLE: *I used to ride my bicycle all around my neighborhood and this was special for me because I would enjoy the wind on my face. I remember having my paper route and how fun it was to deliver newspapers . . .*

2. After each person shares his or her *favorite activity*, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this was to him or her.

🕒 **2 MIN**

EXAMPLE: *I can tell you really enjoyed riding your bike when you were younger and delivering*

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newspapers. Feeling the wind on your face was very freeing for you . . .

3. Now take turns sharing your *favorite food* along with reasons why this food is a favorite. Include a special memory associated with this food.

 **3 MIN**

4. After each person shares his or her favorite food, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this food is to him or her.

 **2 MIN**

5. Next, take turns sharing one of your favorite songs. Include why this song is important to you and any special memories associated with this song.

 **3 MIN**

NOTE: You can insert a favorite movie, book, or Scripture verse here instead of a song if you like.

6. After each person shares his or her favorite song, validate emotions and highlight how important this song is for him or her.

 **1 MIN**

7. Close with a moment of quiet cuddling and resting together.

 **1 MIN**

You will find no shortage of opportunities to listen for emotions in your interactions with the one you love. God created us with emotions because, simply, we are made in God's image, and God has emotions! Emotions are not bad; they are signals alerting us that something needs

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to be addressed. Marcus and I want to encourage you to continue the validation and comfort with your spouse as opportunities arise. Practice happy and sad on a daily basis, and watch what happens with your joy levels! The dinner hour tends to be an ideal window to practice this exercise, as you can review your day and connect with your loved ones. Sharpen your brain's ability to notice and listen for emotions by expressing what was satisfying from your day as well as noticing and expressing what was not satisfying. Your brain and your marriage bond will thank you!

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EXERCISES FOR HABIT #3: APPRECIATE DAILY

Welcome to the third round of exercises. If your marriage was a cellphone, these exercises would be the booster that increases your joy signal.

Appreciation transforms your marriage by training your brain to focus on and amplify the good things in your environment, life, and relationships. The lack of appreciation leads to discontentment, criticism, and resentment. Appreciation activates the relational engine in your brain so that you can be your best relational self with your beloved.

Activating an “appreciation fil ” in the brain not only turns on our relational circuits, it allows our brain the opportunity to release “feel good” chemicals with the hormones dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin—as well as endorphins, which make us feel alive. Our brain responds as though *we are living the moment all over again* when we “pull up,” activate, and remember an appreciation memory. We amplify joy as we remember, feel, and share the special moment with our beloved. Also, we boost oxytocin levels when we *add touch into the*

Habit #3: Appreciate Daily

equation, so here is an opportunity to open a joy file and reap the reward.

Triple Your Joy 🕒 15 MIN

Here is your opportunity to practice the exercise that transformed my marriage and led to some really good sleep.

1. While holding hands or cuddling, take turns practicing the following steps. Be sure you both practice the first step before moving on. Include *daily examples* for each appreciation step if possible.

Appreciation from my day: Share three highlights from your day.

Appreciation for my beloved: Share three things you appreciate about your spouse.

Appreciation for God (or your topic of choice): Share three things you appreciate about this topic. 🕒 10 MIN

2. Discuss what you notice after practicing appreciation. 🕒 3 MIN
3. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 2 MIN

Remember the Joy 🕒 15 MIN

1. Take some time to cuddle or hold hands and reminisce about special trips and shared mo-

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ments together over the course of your married life. Be sure to include:

Your thoughts and feelings at the time.

The factors that made these moments special for you. 🕒 **8 MIN**

2. Express some qualities you enjoy about your spouse so your spouse can hear. 🕒 **4 MIN**
3. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 **3 MIN**

Go out for Joy 🕒 **15 MIN**

Go out and do something fun that is relational and interactive. This needs to be an activity you both enjoy, and you need to be able to see and hear your spouse. You can go bowling, have a picnic, eat dinner at a new restaurant, go ice-skating, go bird watching, take an evening stroll through the park, go hiking, visit a flower nursery, sit at a coffee shop, etc.

During your outing, do all that you can to enjoy each other's presence, hold hands as much as possible, smile, laugh, and have fun.

1. Make it a point to review historic joy moments while planning future joy opportunities.

Historic joy is reviewing special moments where you felt loved and cared for by your spouse.

Habit #3: Appreciate Daily

EXAMPLE: *When you brought me coffee this morning while I was running late, I felt loved and cared for.*

Future joy is thinking of and planning ways to continue increasing relational joy in your marriage.

EXAMPLE: *I would like us to end our days by sharing appreciation and to have a date night every other week.* 🕒 8 MIN

2. Discuss what was special about this exercise, then close your evening with quiet cuddling and resting. 🕒 7 MIN

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**EXERCISES FOR HABIT #4:
NURTURE A RHYTHM**

Welcome to the fourth and final round of exercises. Finding a good rhythm for our marriage comes down to two simple ingredients: *attention* and *timing*. Just like the eye smiles exercise teaches us, there is a time for connection and a time to rest. Knowing what time it is and paying attention to the fluctuating needs in your marriage will establish security and increase marriage joy.

Alternating joy and rest requires a rhythm where we stay attentive to ever-changing needs and respond at the

Habit #4: Nurture a Rhythm

right times. This is the rhythm we learn early on because, initially, caregivers and loved ones recognized when it was time for food, play, connection, or rest. In a healthy environment, the resources and the responses were there at just the right time in the right amount. This process established an unshakable security within us, a firm foundation we build on throughout our lifetime.

Unfortunately, the painful absence of timely attention and response to our needs during childhood instills fear and insecurity that leaves us feeling inadequate and uncertain. A disjointed rhythm develops, and our joy and rest sequence falls out of sync. As a result, we may avoid rest states later in life or develop dangerously low levels of joy. This deficiency makes us vulnerable to artificial nonrelational means of compensating.

The following exercises focus on restoring an enjoyable rhythm that merges high-energy joy with low-energy rest.

Rest and Joy 15 MIN

Joy grows better after rest. The inability to quiet is one of the greatest threats to your emotional and mental health. The lack of rest pokes a hole in the “joy balloon” of marriage. For this exercise, you and your partner will first calm your bodies and minds, then shift to joy. You can play calming music in the background if you prefer.

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1. Get comfortable so you do not need to support any part of your body. You can lie down on the floor or a couch. 🕒 1 MIN
2. Scan your body and see where you feel tense or stiff. 🕒 1 MIN
3. Take some deep breaths from your belly, then tighten your whole body. Begin to relax, starting with your face, then neck, shoulders, back, hands, arms, stomach, buttocks, legs, feet, and finally, toes. Try several rounds of this body quieting sequence. 🕒 2 MIN
4. After some time spent tightening and releasing your muscles, scan your body again to see what you notice. 🕒 1 MIN
5. Share with your partner what you are feeling. 🕒 1 MIN
6. Position yourselves so your knees are touching, and hold hands. Briefly share three things you feel thankful for today. 🕒 4 MIN
7. Next, while still holding hands, practice the eye smiles exercise from chapter 4. 🕒 2 MIN
8. Discuss what you notice after trying these steps, and close with quiet cuddling and resting. 🕒 3 MIN

Habit #4: Nurture a Rhythm

Finding Your Marriage Flavor 15 MIN

1. Start by sharing highlights from your day. Once you feel relational, discuss the following topics.

What we like: What do you like about your marriage? How does this make you feel? (*This is not a time to use the word “but” or stir up what annoys you about your marriage.*)

EXAMPLE: *I like that we value quality time. It makes me feel encouraged thinking about how we protect opportunities to connect with each other and the people we love.*

Who we are: Talk about the unique flavor in your marriage. What important qualities are present in your marriage? What specific qualities are meaningful for you?

EXAMPLE: *I like that we are people who value relationships, and we prioritize time with each other and with friends.*

Looking back: When the day comes and you are at the end of your life, what things would you like said about how you valued your marriage? What would you like to be able to say about how you cultivated and tended your marriage? In other words, what kind of marriage legacy do you want to have?

EXAMPLE: *I want to say that I finished well and I loved my spouse with all my heart. I want my*

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loved ones to recognize that I deeply valued my marriage. 🕒 9 MIN

2. Practice the eye smiles exercise for a joy and rest sequence. Remember to look away when you feel the joy is no longer growing. 🕒 3 MIN

Note: *You can play music if you like.*

3. Discuss what you noticed about this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting.

🕒 3 MIN

APPENDIX 1

More “Play Together” Exercises

Expressing Your Joy 🕒 15 MIN

The brain processes nonverbal cues faster than words. This is why, “It’s not *what* you said, it’s *how* you said it!” carries so much weight in conversation. As I say in my book *Transforming Fellowship*,

Eye contact, facial expressions, voice tone (prosody), posture, gestures, timing and intensity all contribute to the interactive dance we know as communication. . . . Our body is the canvas to express our thoughts, feelings, desires, fears and our most prized memories. . . . When working together, our brain and body tell a story that shows up on our face and in our voice.¹

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For this exercise, you first engage the nonverbal brain in order to activate joy in your relationship.

1. While cuddling or holding hands, individually think about the first time you met your spouse. What was happening? What were you thinking and feeling? 🕒 **2 MIN**
2. Now, take turns nonverbally “telling” the story about the time you first met your spouse. Using your face, body, motions, and gestures, convey what was happening in the story including what you were thinking and feeling. Be creative and have fun. 🕒 **4 MIN**
3. When you finish your nonverbal story, tell the story again using words while you demonstrate it. 🕒 **6 MIN**
4. Once you both finish telling your stories, spend some time cuddling or holding hands, then discuss what you enjoyed about this exercise. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 **3 MIN**

Get More Relational 🕒 **15 MIN**

1. Take turns massaging each other. You can start with your partner’s neck, shoulders, arms, hands, back, etc. While you massage your partner, emphasize the qualities you enjoy about your partner so he or she can hear. 🕒 **10 MIN**

More “Play Together” Exercises

HINT: *You may want to set a timer so each person receives the same amount of time.*

2. Share how this exercise felt for you. 🕒 2 MIN
3. Practice several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 3 MIN

Interactive Adventure 🕒 15 MIN

For this exercise, you and your spouse need to do something fun that engages your body and your relational brain.

1. Try an activity that is both fun and interactive, such as flying a kite, throwing a Frisbee, playing ping-pong or hacky-sack, painting or drawing, giving piggyback rides, riding bicycles, walking a trail, or playing miniature golf or charades. 🕒 12 MIN

NOTE: *The goal here is to have fun and smile, not win.*

2. At the end of the activity, spend some time cuddling or holding hands and discuss what you enjoyed about this interaction. 🕒 3 MIN

APPENDIX 2

More “Listen for Emotion” Exercises

Satisfaction from My Week 15 MIN

Learning satisfaction is an important childhood maturity skill that, when present, anchors our marriages and when absent, adds unnecessary friction and tension. When couples know what satisfies, they keep joy levels high and minimize marriage discontentment. When our brain notices what is satisfying from our interactions, we are more likely to notice emotions that are present in each other and ourselves.

1. Take turns remembering three to five things that were satisfying and fulfilling as well as three to five things that were not very satisfying

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from your week. You can write your lists down or type them on your phone. 🕒 3 MIN

SATISFYING EXAMPLES:

It was satisfying to enjoy such beautiful weather this week.

It was satisfying to watch a movie last night with my entire family.

Going out to lunch with my coworkers for a birthday celebration was enjoyable. The interactions were deeply satisfying.

NOT-SO-SATISFYING EXAMPLES:

It was not satisfying when my dog chewed my shoe on Monday.

I did not enjoy running out of milk this morning for my cereal.

It was not satisfying when my teenage son left the house without saying goodbye last night.

2. When your lists are complete, one of you read your satisfying list. 🕒 1 MIN
3. After reading the satisfying list, the listener validates the emotions that were present. 🕒 1 MIN
4. Next, the reader shares the not-so-satisfying list, and the listener validates emotions that were expressed. 🕒 2 MIN
5. Before moving on, take a moment of rest while you cuddle. 🕒 2 MIN
6. Switch roles, and follow the same sequence. 🕒 4 MIN

More “Listen for Emotion” Exercises

7. Briefly discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 2 MIN

Validation and Comfort 🕒 15 MIN

Validation looks at how big the negative emotion is in your partner, and you say what you see and hear. We stay tender toward each other’s weaknesses. As Marcus said earlier, the caution here is not to try and fix our spouse; rather, join him or her in the feelings.

Validation = *I see you are bothered about this problem. This is very upsetting for you!*

Comfort = *I am glad I can be here with you.*

What can you find in this situation to feel thankful for?

1. Start by sharing a few highlights from your day. This step warms up your brain’s relational circuits. 🕒 2 MIN
2. Next, pick a recent situation that was difficult or intimidating for you, but keep it at a moderate level of emotion so it’s not too intense. Take turns sharing your story with your spouse.

🕒 2 MIN

EXAMPLE: *My boss at work ignored me today when I tried to talk with her about my concern. I felt hurt and minimized.*

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3. When you hear your spouse share the situation, respond by validating the emotion (say what you see and hear), then offer comfort, highlighting something to appreciate in the midst of the emotions. 🕒 1 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I can see this really bothered you. I would be hurt by this as well! (Validation) I am glad you shared this with me. Thankfully, Mike was there to encourage you afterwards. What else can you think of to appreciate? (Comfort)*

4. When you both finish, talk about how this exercise felt for you. 🕒 2 MIN
5. Now it is time to shift gears with a bit of joy. Take 30 seconds to remember the highlights from your day, then sit across from each other knee to knee while you hold hands. Without using words, practice eye smiles. Look at each other with warm smiles, joy, and love, then look away to rest. (You can play music if you like.) 🕒 3 MIN
6. Next, take turns sharing three qualities you admire in your spouse. 🕒 3 MIN
7. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 2 MIN

More “Listen for Emotion” Exercises

Increasing My Marriage Intelligence 🕒 15 MIN

Validation and comfort help us feel seen, understood, and connected. One of the common reasons VCR fails is because we do not recognize a specific emotion in our spouse. We then do not first validate his or her feelings. Continue to bolster your brain’s ability to recognize emotions in your spouse.

1. Briefly share what you are thankful for today.

🕒 2 MIN

2. Next, take turns nonverbally conveying what you feel when you encounter each of the following emotions (see list below). Think about what is happening in your body when you feel each emotion. Use eye contact, facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity to fully convey your emotion and, as always, have some fun! *NOTE: You may want to stand in order to get your body involved in this exercise.* 🕒 7 MIN

Joy: *I am glad to be with you!*

Sadness: *I lost something that brings me joy.*

Anxiety: *I fear I may not find joy as I look into the future.*

Despair: *I feel like joy is impossible for me. I lack the time and resources to fix a problem that keeps robbing my joy.*

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Shame: *I feel like hiding because I am not bringing you joy.*

Anger: *I want something to stop because it is robbing my joy.*


Disgust: *I want to get away from that which is not life-giving and threatening my joy.*

3. After you both finish your examples, discuss what you noticed from this exercise. Include the following topics:

What emotions tend to be hardest for you to personally navigate?

What emotions are harder for you to recognize and stay connected with in your spouse?

 2 MIN

4. Share with your spouse what you enjoy about his/her face while you hold hands. When you finish, practice the eye smiles exercise.  3 MIN
5. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together.

 1 MIN

APPENDIX 3

More “Appreciate Daily” Exercises


Food and Joy 15 MIN


During your wedding reception, you probably fed your new spouse a piece of cake. Some of you were feisty and smeared it on your beloved’s face. Either way, wide smiles surely donned your faces. This exercise focuses on the feeding part of the fun—not so much the smearing! Meals are one of the best times to build joy. Eating together provides a golden opportunity to share the gift of your attention and connect with your mate. We now turn our sights to using this wonderful food and joy combination to spark smiles.

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1. Start by sharing a few highlights from your day. This warms up your brain's relational circuits.

 **3 MIN**

2. Take turns feeding each other a meal, snack, or dessert. Yes, this may feel awkward, but have fun and laugh. While you feed each other, express what you enjoy about each other, including how you feel your spouse “feeds you” spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, and relationally.  **8 MIN**


3. Once you finish this interaction, talk about what you noticed from the experience.  **2 MIN**

4. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together.

 **2 MIN**

Write Your Joy  **15 MIN**

As Marcus said earlier, composing a love letter can be a meaningful activity that you will cherish for years to come. This heartfelt exchange provides an opportunity to express your heart and share your love the old-fashioned way. You will need paper and pen for this exercise.

1. Take a moment to think about what you love about your spouse, then write your spouse a love letter. While this doesn't have to be volumes of books, it does need to be longer than three sentences. Take the necessary time to complete this task.  **6 MIN**

More “Appreciate Daily” Exercises

2. When finished, take turns reading your love letter to your spouse. 🕒 6 MIN
3. Discuss what you enjoyed about this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting. 🕒 3 MIN

Run for Joy 🕒 15 MIN

Our nervous system cycles between high energy and low energy states. Some of us tend to be high-energy responders who prefer activity, motion, and movement. We pursue activities that get our adrenaline pumping. Some of us are low-energy responders who prefer restful and soothing activities. We like our quiet time with a cup of tea and soft music. It helps to identify the preferences of our nervous system so we can plan activities that best match the needs and styles in our marriage.

One way to better gauge and identify our preferences is by looking at our response to feeling shame. Low-energy responders tend to *beat themselves up* when they feel ashamed: “I can’t do anything right! I am such a fool!” High-energy responders, however, tend to *beat other people up* when they feel shame: “You can’t do anything right! You are such a fool!” While we may relate to both reactions, we all

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tend to lean toward one style. Low-energy responders can be quick to blame themselves while high-energy responders can be quick to blame other people. Now let's practice the exercise to see what best fits you and your spouse.

1. Discuss your preferences to see if you lean more toward high-energy activities such as walks, runs, bike rides, hiking, and fast-paced exercise, or low-energy activities such as sitting in a quiet place with soft music, playing chess, or reading a book. For example, if you had the option of choosing an early morning walk or sitting in a chair watching the sunset, which would you prefer? 🕒 3 MIN
2. Put your thoughts to the test with the following experiment. Take a few minutes to try a high-energy activity such as doing jumping jacks, stretching exercises, sit-ups, walking, or riding bikes around your neighborhood. While you move, discuss some of your favorite shared memories such as vacations, trips, birthdays, holidays, etc. 🕒 4 MIN
3. Next, make yourselves comfortable on a couch or a recliner while you play soft music in the background. Continue to reminisce more of your favorite shared memories. These interactions do not need to be long. 🕒 4 MIN

More “Appreciate Daily” Exercises

4. Discuss this exercise and share what you notice. How can you use this information in your marriage? 🕒 2 MIN
5. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together.
🕒 2 MIN

APPENDIX 4

More “Nurture a Rhythm” Exercises

Resting and Kissing 🕒 15 MIN

Shortening the window of time between moments of shared joy requires us to notice that joy and rest are needed, and then practice strategic rhythms to increase the joy.

1. Make yourselves comfortable and spend some time resting as you cuddle.

NOTE: Keep this nonverbal to enhance the bonding experience. You can set a timer if you like.

🕒 3 MIN

2. Holding hands and looking at each other, take turns telling your spouse the qualities you first observed in him or her that made you fall in

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love. Include examples where you saw these qualities in action. 🕒 5 MIN

3. Next, position yourselves knee to knee and hold hands. Practice eye smiles for a joy and rest sequence. Remember to look away at the right times when you feel the joy is no longer growing.

NOTE: *You can play music if you like.* 🕒 3 MIN

4. Kiss each other like you mean it, then discuss what you notice from this joy and rest sequence.

🕒 2 MIN

5. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together.

🕒 2 MIN

More Bedroom Joy 🕒 15 MIN

You will want some privacy for this exercise.

1. While lying in bed holding each other, practice the following sequence.

First, use quiet, soothing touch to comfort and relax your spouse while you tell your spouse what you enjoy about his or her character and personality.

Next, use high-energy stimulating touch to arouse your spouse while you share what you like about his or her body.

Now return to rest using soothing touch while you share the ways your spouse makes you feel loved and valued.

More “Nurture a Rhythm” Exercises

Use high-energy, stimulating touch to arouse your spouse while you affirm your love and desire for your beloved. 🕒 9 MIN

(As much time as you need!) Enjoy relational intimacy that makes you both smile.

2. Share appreciation or pray, thanking God for your partner, so your partner can hear. 🕒 3 MIN
3. Spend some time resting together with quiet cuddling. 🕒 3 MIN

Using Your Joy Senses 🕒 15 MIN

We now practice an exercise designed to maximize marriage joy using your five senses.


1. **Sight:** You see because your eyes translate light into images the brain can process via the optic nerve. Sit across from each other while you hold hands. Tell your beloved what you like about him or her as you peer into your beloved’s eyes. Include qualities you can see as you look at your spouse. 🕒 2 MIN
2. **Sound:** Through a complex series of steps, your outer and inner ear work together to funnel sound waves that turn into vibrations that your cochlear nerve receives and then sends to the brain for processing. Hold each other and take turns placing your head on your spouse’s chest. With your eyes closed, listen to your spouse as

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he or she tells you the things you do that make him or her feel loved, special, and appreciated.

 **3 MIN**

3. **Smell:** Nerve receptors located in your nasal cavity pick up chemicals in the air which trigger a response that sends information to the brain for processing via the olfactory nerve. Smell is one of the fastest ways to trigger an old memory. While cuddling and holding each other, lean into each other's necks and take several moments to quietly rest as you breathe in the scent of your spouse. When finished, share how his or her familiar smell brings you comfort.

NOTE: You may want to be sure this step doesn't happen after a sweaty workout, so take the appropriate steps to keep joy levels high.  **3 MIN**

4. **Taste:** Thanks to small bumps on your tongue called papillae, chemicals from the food you eat go to your taste buds, which stimulate special cells that activate receptors and signals. These signals are then sent for processing. Close your eyes and tenderly kiss your spouse, then share what you enjoy about kissing your beloved.

NOTE: As a friendly reminder, Marcus and I suggest you avoid a meal containing onions and garlic before you practice this step.  **3 MIN**

5. **Touch:** Your skin has three layers, and receptor

More “Nurture a Rhythm” Exercises

cells embedded in these layers send signals to the brain for evaluation. Some areas of the body have more and different kinds of receptors, so certain areas of your beloved’s body are more sensitive than other areas. Touch your beloved’s face and body and describe what you feel. Enhance this step by closing your eyes.

NOTE: If you feel adventurous, alternate touch that calms your spouse with touch that excites your spouse. 🕒 3 MIN

6. Discuss whether you prefer one sense over another as you cuddle together. 🕒 1 MIN

Fun with Friends 🕒 15 MIN

Here is a chance to have fun while you share some joy with your friends. Creating a narrative (telling a story) helps your brain add more value to something important to you and it gives your brain the opportunity to spread joy.

Go on a date with another couple. Tell some stories, share what you learned from this book, and invite them to try one of the four habits: Appreciate Daily.

1. Before practicing, highlight the effect on your marriage from learning the material and trying the four habits. As an example, you may want

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to share your favorite exercises from the book and explain why these were helpful for you.

 **5 MIN**


2. Give your friends the opportunity to enjoy the power of appreciation by doing the following exercise during your time together. Follow the steps below, and be sure each person has the chance to contribute.

Share three highlights from your week.

Share three qualities you enjoy about your spouse.

Share three characteristics you appreciate in the other couple.

Share what you notice after you practice this appreciation exercise.

For homework in the comfort of your own home, talk with your spouse about what you enjoyed from your date night, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together.  **10 MIN**

Congratulations on the completion of your exercises! You have worked hard to get here. Marcus and I encourage you to continue practicing the exercises and insert the habits into your daily life and routine. Discuss pitfalls you predict that lie ahead as you begin to walk this out. Schedule time in your day and week for joyful connection. Protect your time before bed to discuss the

More “Nurture a Rhythm” Exercises

day and address any problems *before* you climb into bed so your bedroom remains a haven for joy and rest. Marcus and I celebrate your success and pray that joy will blossom in your marriage.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. For more information on how joy functions as the brain's ideal fuel, see Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership: 4 Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy, and Engagement in the People You Lead* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016).
2. This story has been adapted from one in E. James Wilder et al., *Joy Starts Here: The Transformation Zone* (East Peoria, IL: Shepherd's House, 2013), 24–25.
3. This quote came from a personal email to the author.

CHAPTER 1—SHRINK YOUR JOY GAP

1. Dopamine is the hormone that makes you feel happy. However, the rush only lasts as long as the hormone is active, and it doesn't do much to help you form attachments because it can be produced by all sorts of experiences. Oxytocin is sometimes called “the love hormone” because it makes you feel connected and glad to be together. It is primarily activated by contact with one particular person, thus helping us bond to that person.

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CHAPTER 2-THE BRAIN SCIENCE BEHIND JOY

1. Attachment theory has essentially become the cornerstone of childhood development theory. For an excellent overview of the role of attachment, trauma, and maturity development, we recommend *The Life Model* which was developed at Shepherd's House Counseling Center in Van Nuys, California, under the guidance of Dr. Jim Wilder.
2. Yale Divinity School has started an annual conference on the theology of joy. *Psychology Today* magazine is filled with articles on the subject, e.g., Emma M. Seppälä, "The Science behind the Joy of Sharing Joy," *Psychology Today*, July 15, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/feeling-it/201307/the-science-behind-the-joy-sharing-joy>.
3. The brain magnet refers to the nucleus accumbens, the thalamus, and the neurocircuitry that connects your limbic system to the brain. The nucleus accumbens is the pain and pleasure center of the brain. It feels a rush with connection to someone we love. However, it can also feel like you are going to die when it doesn't get what it wants.
4. This part of your brain is called the right orbital prefrontal cortex and is located just behind your right eye.
5. See Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership: 4 Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy, and Engagement in the People You Lead* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016) for a complete explanation of these four uncommon habits.
6. Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching Your Past Invading the Present and What to Do about It* (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2011).
7. For a more complete overview, see Warner and Wilder, *Rare Leadership* or Chris Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018) on nineteen relational skills that are anchored in brain science.

CHAPTER 3-WHY JOY CAN BE SO HARD TO FIND

1. For more information on master marriages and disaster marriages, visit <http://gottman.com>.

Notes

CHAPTER 4-HABIT #1: PLAY TOGETHER

1. This couple has written a book on marriage and ministry. See Tom and Sandi Blaylock, *Marriage on Mission: How Strengthening Your Marriage Multiplies Your Missional Impact* (n.p.: Missional Challenge, 2016).
2. We explained relational circuits in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 5-HABIT #2: LISTEN FOR EMOTION

1. The Smalley Institute website advertises this DVD set as “the bestselling relationship video series of all time!” It was originally released as a VHS series called “Hidden Keys to Loving Relationships” in 1993 by Gary Smalley Seminars, Inc.
2. Unprocessed pain often comes from implicit memories. For more about this process, see Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself*. You can learn more about mindsight with the work of Dr. Daniel Siegel who first came up with the term “mindsight” to describe our ability to perceive another person’s mind. <http://drdansiegel.com>.

CHAPTER 6-HABIT #3: APPRECIATE DAILY

1. Prathik Kini, Joel Wong, Sydney McInnis, Nicole Gabana, Joshua W. Brown, “In the News: Gratitude,” <https://www.indiana.edu/~irf/home/in-the-news/>.
2. Dr. Christian Jarrett, “How Expressing Gratitude Might Change Your Brain,” January 12, 2016, <https://www.aol.com/article/2016/01/12/how-expressing-gratitude-might-change-your-brain/21295708/>.

CHAPTER 7-HABIT #4: NURTURE A RHYTHM

1. According to both the 2013 and 2016 World Happiness Report, Denmark was the world’s happiest country. Oliver Smith, “Denmark Regains Title of ‘World’s Happiest Country,’” March 16, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/denmark-regains-title-of-happiest-country/>.
2. “Denmark has the best work-life balance in Europe,” <http://studyindenmark.dk/news/denmark-has-the-best-work-life-balance-in-europe>.

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3. Marie Helweg-Larsen, “Why Denmark Dominates the World Happiness Report Rankings Year after Year,” March 20, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-denmark-dominates-the-world-happiness-report-rankings-year-after-year-93542>.

APPENDIX 1

1. Chris Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 140–41.