

Desperate Marriages: Moving Toward Hope and Healing in Your Relationship,
by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008)

Although the title seems directed at those in serious trouble, this book's insights and suggestions could enhance any relationship. Dr. Chapman bases this work on "Six Principles of Reality Living": 1) I am responsible for my attitude; 2) My attitude affects my actions; 3) I cannot change other people, but I can influence them, especially by understanding the needs that motivate their behavior; 4) Rather than letting my emotions control my behavior, possibly making things worse, I need to choose words and actions more likely to get the results I want; 5) Behavior is motivated by needs; 6) If I understand other people's needs, I can look for better ways to help them meet those needs and meet my own needs as well.

Much of our behavior is driven by universal needs: to love and be loved; to experience freedom and autonomy; to know that our lives matter; to participate in recreation and other renewing activities; and to feel at peace with God. When we understand the goals driving the behavior of others, we can change our thinking about those behaviors and practice loving actions instead. For example, controlling behavior may seem normal to those who grew up with a controlling parent and may be their default behavior when they feel the need to matter. Arguing with them often evolves into a defensive and fruitless attempt to prove who is right. Try a clear empathic and affirming statement ("I understand how important it is to you to get places on time") followed by an expression of your own feelings and needs ("When I'm in the middle of something and suddenly hear you say it's time to go, I feel frustrated and pressured. Would you be willing to give me at least an hour's notice before you want to leave?") Carefully worded requests will more likely be honored than reactive outbursts and demands.

Dr. Chapman teaches couples to communicate in ways that increase understanding and connection. By receiving each other's words as information, not something to be challenged, we can avoid arguments over who is right and who is wrong. By discovering and honoring the unmet needs driving your partner's behavior and by owning and honoring the needs that drive your own, you can reduce conflict and reactivity. After several chapters explaining these concepts, Dr. Chapman applies them to some specific situations: infidelity, domestic violence, depression, and addictions - including pornography. If a couple cannot agree on a strategy for dealing with a problem, he encourages the concerned partner to make and announce his/her own plan ("Next time you use language that upsets me, I am going to walk away to calm myself down. You can let me know when you are ready to continue the conversation without swearing.") It is important, of course, to follow through calmly and consistently, framing such actions as self- and relationship-care, not punishment.

For additional marriage-strengthening resources, visit www.marriagelovepower.net and click on "Best Practice Articles and Recommended Resources," then scroll down through the various sections. See especially documents under "Marriage Education and Enrichment" and "Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition." Or visit www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries and search by title or topic.