

Book Review: *Making Marriage Simple*

Making Marriage Simple: 10 Relationship-Saving Truths, by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D. (New York: Harmony Books, 2013)

Each of the ten chapters in this book explores an essential truth gleaned by the authors from decades of working with couples and from their experience in their own marriage to each other. At the end of each chapter, you will find a simple exercise to help you apply the ideas in the chapter to your own relationship. The authors advocate for daily discussion and practice, stating that even a few minutes a day talking about the ideas and sharing with each other your responses to the exercise questions can have an amazing effect. Even if only one person reads and works with the material, new insights and understandings can shift personal dynamics for the better.

The first chapter addresses the basic premise of Harville Hendricks' earlier book, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*. First published in 1988, this book explains the author's conviction that romantic love draws us together with someone who will generate the same feelings and frustrations we experienced with our parents or other primary care-givers in order that we may heal our childhood wounds. Hendricks coined the word IMAGO for this unconscious image of love based on what feels familiar. The second, titled "Incompatibility is Grounds for Marriage," describes how working through our differences helps us each to grow, building both psychological and emotional strength. The authors use the analogy of "The Turtle and the Hailstorm" to illustrate the unproductive dynamic with which most couples struggle, until they learn to moderate their behavior in order to avoid triggering the other to withdraw or to come on stronger.

The third chapter asserts that "Conflict is Growth Trying to Happen" and that often what couples need from each other is something very difficult, by virtue of who they are, for them to give. Growth, then, requires both partners to stretch, to learn new ways of relating and to develop new skills. The fourth chapter goes a step further, describing how couples can become mutual healers by being fully present to each other and by creating a safe space between them where each can drop his or her defenses and be real. Creating that safe space requires eliminating shame, blame, and criticism.

The fifth chapter explains the IMAGO Dialogue process, which provides a framework for talking and listening that builds connection and helps to heal childhood wounds. Dialogue involves "Mirroring," "Validating," and "Empathizing," and it does not require agreement. "In Dialogue, agreement is not the goal. The goal is to take turns and really listen to each other." (p. 71) The sixth chapter describes the effect of negativity on a relationship, labeling it "Invisible Abuse." Even what is intended as "constructive criticism" can result in the receiver feeling attacked, getting defensive, and counterattacking. "The simplest way to turn off negativity is to replace judgment with curiosity," the authors discovered (p. 81), and "The more you focus on the good, the more good there will be to focus on." (p. 86). The seventh chapter asserts that "Negativity is a Wish in Disguise" and carefully describes how to make an effective "Behavior Change Request."

The eighth chapter explores understandings based on brain science, labeling the lower brain, which responds reactively to situations without analyzing what is really going on, the Crocodile. The authors label the higher brain, which has the ability to observe and make decisions, the Owl. Sometimes the lower brain can react so strongly that the higher brain can no longer function. The authors show how to stop the “Crocodile” before it takes over by using the “Owl” to access the situation and explore other ways to think about whatever has happened. The ninth chapter encourages couples to use humor and joy to strengthen and enrich their connection. The tenth chapter describes the benefits of using these tools and applying these concepts to build a stronger, healthier marriage.

In an Afterword titled “The Relationship Revolution,” the authors share their conviction that “Healthy marriages lead to healthy homes, which lead to a healthy society.” (p. 148) This conviction leads them to advocate for a greater emphasis on and involvement in relationship education and marriage-strengthening initiatives. Churches can truly help transform society and prevent many serious problems, such as addiction, teen pregnancy, and poverty, by acknowledging how challenging marriage can be and providing tools and supports for the spiritual path of “...staying put in your relationship and learning how to really love your partner, warts and all.” (p. 141)

Making Marriage Simple provides a powerful introduction to and review of basic principles for developing relationships in which individuals can grow into their full potential. If we accept the authors’ premise that “Ninety percent of our frustrations with our partner come from experiences from our past.” (p. 23), we can help couples spend less time and energy stressing about whether they might have married the wrong person and more on learning to understand themselves and each other and on growing into the kind of persons they are meant to be.

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