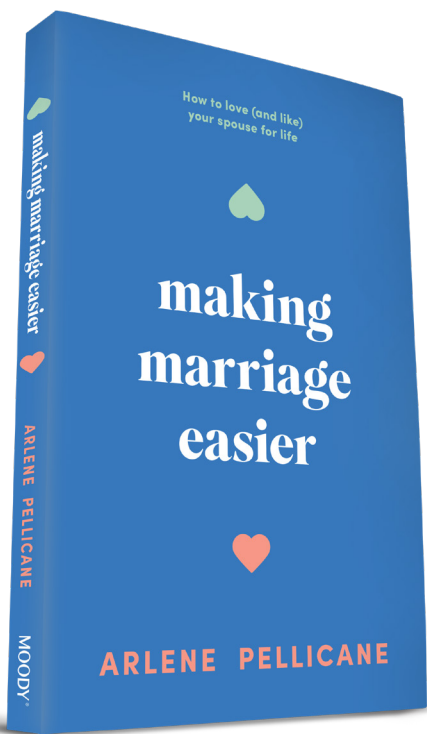




**A joyous summons to love (and like) your spouse for a lifetime.**

After twenty-five years of marriage, Arlene has stories and biblical wisdom to share. Full of real life that will make you laugh, this book addresses common threats to marriage and four key decisions for a clear path forward.

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## DECISION #1



# play by the rules



**Pre-decide what you will and won't do.  
Don't follow feelings; follow the commands of God.**

# The Power Hour

The only way into our first apartment was straight up four flights of stairs in hot, sticky Dallas. Carrying groceries was a bear, but I didn't care. I was a starry-eyed newlywed, and this was our love nest.

We were in that honeymoon stage where we didn't want to be with anyone else but each other. Do you remember that stage? After we met in graduate school and married in Virginia Beach, we moved to Texas for James's first job with a nonprofit. I immediately loved being a wife, except I didn't know how to cook. Just in time, I found a man who could solve all my dinner dilemmas—George Foreman! I figured the George Foreman grill could make mouth-watering meals quickly in my home just like I saw on television. Simply put the chicken inside the grill, close the top, and allow the patented sloped design and nonstick coating to do the rest! All the hassle of complicated meal prep and clean-up avoided. I whipped out my credit card so fast and bought that grill. With my new secret culinary weapon, I was ready to rock the dinner, and party like it was 1999 (because it was 1999).

My first meal using the grill would be chicken, rice, and broccoli. As I took out two chicken breasts from the packaging, James bounced into the kitchen. "There's a guy I passed on the way up. He's just moving in, why don't we invite him over for dinner?"

There was no way I was having a last-minute guest for dinner. First, last-minute is not how I roll. I'm a planner and spontaneity freaks me out. Second, I only had *two* chicken breasts. Third, our apartment didn't have a legit table and was in no condition for entertaining. Lastly, this was the maiden voyage of the George Foreman grill and I didn't want anything to mess it up.

I explained all of this to James with perfect clarity and apologized that we would not be able to extend a dinner invitation to our new neighbor. I returned to carefully placing the chicken on the grill. About five minutes later, James waltzed into the kitchen with a mischievous look on his face and announced, "Our new neighbor Walter will be up for dinner in a few minutes!"

I was furious and simultaneously thrown into emergency mode. My new wife circuits were overheating! I had to set the card table for three now, and didn't I clearly say he couldn't come for dinner? After slamming the cabinet door for effect, the doorbell rang. It was Walter.

During dinner, I did my best to be courteous to Walter (who was eating *my* chicken although it wasn't his fault). He was an innocent bystander who bumped into my husband, the overly friendly neighbor. Right after Walter left, my smile immediately turned into a scowl. I stomped into the kitchen. How could my sweet, darling, new husband invite someone for dinner after I had vehemently said no?

He did sincerely apologize that night, and thankfully that was the only time he ever went against my will with a dinner guest. Don't worry; we have entertained many friends and I've been able to plan, have enough chicken, and graduate to a real deal grill. We haven't had any more awkward "Walter" meal moments, but we have eaten tons of food together since living in that first apartment. Using

**Eating together  
every day has  
been the secret  
sauce in our  
marriage.**

conservative numbers over twenty-five years of marriage and counting, we have enjoyed more than 10,000 meals together. This daily time of connecting over a meal is our power hour. Eating together every day has been the secret sauce in our marriage.

## **Isn't That Legalistic or Unrealistic?**

Maybe you question the validity of eating meals together. What about different work schedules? Should you have to wait for each other to have dinner? Can't you eat whenever you want? If you make eating together mandatory, doesn't that lead to legalism and ruin romance? Does it have to be one hour?

James and I never sat down with a calendar and said, "These are the meals we are going to have together." We didn't sign a contract that read, "I will not put a fork into my mouth for dinner unless my spouse is present, so help me God." We simply embraced the principle and practice that when it's mealtime, we will sit and eat together whenever possible. Eating dinner together every day has become the norm, a daily rhythm in our marriage. When one of us has to work, or we have to skip because of a child's activity, it feels weird. We have scheduled our lives to usually be home by dinner. The family dinner pulls every member of the family. Naturally, we're hungry and need to fill our bellies, but we also need to fill our hearts by being together.

Maybe you and your spouse have completely different schedules. Instead of dinner, eating breakfast or meeting for lunch together would work better. You don't have to spend one hour together, but ideally having an unrushed meal lends to better conversations (and includes time for whoever didn't cook to clean the kitchen if you're at home). If you're in a stage where sharing a meal seems impossible, why not start with drinking your morning coffee for the first ten minutes of the day together?

When you don't share meals together regularly, it's easy to lose touch

with your spouse. You're more in touch with your to-do list. We can value efficiency (I can't spare the time!) or entertainment (I'd rather watch my favorite show!), but is efficiency or entertainment more important to you than spending time with your spouse?

If you have children, researchers have found eating family meals together improves your kids' academic performance, increases their confidence, improves cardiovascular health, and reduces the risk of substance abuse, depression, teen pregnancy, and obesity. Those are huge benefits of just eating together. Research also shows that shared meals are good for adults. Eating with others, particularly family, is associated with healthier eating and better moods. On the flip side, eating alone is associated with an increased likelihood of skipping meals and the downstream effects of eating junk food, having less energy, and poorer nutritional health.<sup>1</sup>

## **A Word About Playing by the Rules**

Let's pretend marriage is a game, but not like football which has a definite beginning and end and a specific way to score points. Simon Sinek, author of *The Infinite Game*, talks about marriage as an example of an infinite game where the objective is not to win but to keep playing. How do you keep on the playing field of marriage for life—not grudgingly, but happily? James and I have played by certain rules which have enabled us not to despair or doubt on this journey called marriage. In this first section of the book, I'll show you our playbook with basic rules that have made being married far easier for us.

When you hear the word *rules*, you might think of restrictions instead of freedom. To you, rules sound oppressive and burdensome. If you want to think about these instead as “guiding principles,” be my guest. In my book, rules are cool. When I was in kindergarten, I had rules like this posted in my classroom:

**The objective of marriage is not to win but to keep playing.**



Listen when your teacher is talking.  
Take turns and share.  
Keep your hands to yourself.  
Raise your hand to speak.  
Do not leave the classroom without permission.  
Be kind and honest.

Talk to any teacher today and you'll quickly learn these rules aren't being followed by most kindergartners. The absence of rules doesn't lead to freedom—it leads to chaos. On the other hand, if you taught in a classroom where most of the kids were following these rules, you can imagine what a beautiful experience that would be. No more need for early retirement because teaching would be infinitely easier.

What if your marriage could be infinitely easier by following good rules? Choosing good rules is very important because bad rules aren't going to help your marriage one bit. Neither is a legalistic attitude. Jesus regularly rebuked the Pharisees for their legalism. The Pharisees had developed a burdensome system of 613 laws—365 negative commands and 248 positive laws.<sup>2</sup> This legalistic spirit is not what I am referring to when I talk about rules.

Eating together every day has been a rule that has kept our marriage running smoothly all these years. The family dinner hour may seem like a relic of the past, something couples used to do in the era of black-and-white television. It's a relic that needs to be restored—just think of how a daily meal with loved ones could cure our present-day loneliness epidemic.

If you're not in the habit of eating together every day, how do you begin? In his book *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown writes,

Routine is one of the most powerful tools for removing obstacles. Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower

us. But if we create a routine that enshrines the essentials, we will begin to execute them on autopilot. . . . We won't have to expend precious energy every day prioritizing everything. We must simply expend a small amount of initial energy to create the routine, and then all that is left to do is follow it.<sup>3</sup>

James and I don't have to think about having dinner every day. It happens automatically. Remember, we've had 10,000 shared meals and counting since our wedding in 1999. We have mastered eating (and so can you!).

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## **LIFE LESSON LEARNED**

- ♥ Eat together every day.

## **MAKE IT EASIER**

- ♥ Eat together whenever possible; aim for at least one meal a day.
- ♥ According to research, family meals are protective and beneficial for couples and children, physically and mentally.
- ♥ Your marriage can be infinitely easier by creating good rules and forming routines around them.

## **ASK YOUR SPOUSE**

- ♥ How many meals do we eat together in a week?
- ♥ Do you think eating meals together is important? Why or why not?
- ♥ Is there anything that needs to change in our schedule so we can eat together at home?

## **LET'S PRAY**

Lord, we know You walked, talked, and ate with Your disciples. You ate with people and got to know them. Help us to make time in our busy lives to eat together. Show us how to make healthy changes in our home around mealtimes. Give us our daily bread—we ask for nourishment for our marriage today. Holy Spirit, speak to us as we read this book. We trust You to provide what we need. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

# Have You Considered Electrolysis?

Unlike some husbands who run quiet and deep, I don't have to wonder what James is thinking because he is usually more than happy to tell me. When we were dating, I experienced the sheer power of his candor on a lovely romantic evening. We were sitting by the water's edge in Virginia Beach. Holding hands, gazing into his chocolate brown eyes, I couldn't be happier.

James, on the other hand, was nervous. "There's something I want to ask you," he said hesitantly. "But I'm not sure how to say it."

I wondered if he was going to propose. I was hoping he would have a better lead-in than this. Like a woman in love, I said softly, "You can tell me *anything*." What he said next was a shock.

"Arlene, have you ever thought of electrolysis?"

My mind was spinning. *Electrolysis? What part of my body needs it? How much does it cost? Does it hurt?*

Undeterred by my silence, he ventured ahead courageously. "You have a few hairs above your lip, and just a few sessions of electrolysis will take that right off."

I was shocked, and had no idea how to continue the conversation.

I wanted to run home and hide my furry mustache as fast as possible. All I could think was, *I have hair on my lip and he's staring at it!* After an awkward few minutes, I sighed and said, "Look at the time! I've got to get home and do some homework." It was the best excuse I could think of to

escape the embarrassing subject of facial hair.

**It was a test  
early in our  
relationship:  
Was it really  
safe to bring up  
anything with  
each other?**

When I got home, I ran to the bathroom and pressed my face close to the mirror, closely examining my upper lip. My dark lip hairs had gone unnoticed for years, but with this new revelation, I suddenly saw a bushy mustache! There was no internet back then, so I grabbed the Yellow Pages (that was a giant printed alphabetical business directory in case you're not

familiar). I looked up the E's . . . education . . . electrician . . . electrolysis!

I learned electrolysis consists of inserting a hair-like thin metal device into the hair follicle and zapping it with a small amount of electricity. It didn't sound pleasant at all, but neither was walking around with a mustache that my boyfriend didn't like. I booked an appointment. My first round of zapping was fifty dollars and after four treatments, my lip was completely hair-free.

Losing the hair on my lip didn't just improve my appearance; it shot my relational capital with James through the stratosphere. He couldn't believe I didn't get mad at him when he broached the touchy subject. Then he couldn't believe it when I went to electrolysis without any additional encouragement from him. It was a test early in our relationship: Was it really safe to bring up anything with each other (even facial hair)?

## **Keep the Dragons Small**

There is a children's book that Dr. Jordan Peterson uses to illustrate the importance of being able to talk about anything and using precise language.

In the children's book *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon* by Jack Kent, a little boy named Billy Bixbee finds a small dragon, about the size of a kitten, in his room one morning. In this story, the dragon is real. Billy immediately tells his mom about it, but she says with great conviction, "There's no such thing as a dragon!" The more the dragon isn't believed, the bigger it grows. The ginormous dragon ends up running off with the house. Even then, the mom insists dragons don't exist. Billy, who is now convinced otherwise, says, "There is a dragon, Mom." This acknowledgment shrinks the dragon right back to the size of a cat.

When we don't acknowledge things as they are, when we sweep things under the rug, when we're afraid to open up about past mistakes, or bring up sticky topics including facial hair, those issues just get bigger and bigger like the dragon in the story. Jordan Peterson writes,

Moment by moment, it's easier to keep the peace. But in the background, in Billy Bixbee's house, and in all that are like it, the dragon grows. One day it bursts forth, in a form that no one can ignore. It lifts the very household from its foundations.<sup>1</sup>

When couples leave things unspoken, it creates an environment where doubt, disappointment, and resentment can grow. Imagine the wife who's just clipped coupons to stretch their paycheck and finds out her husband bought costly tickets to a football game. She's agitated—her husband can see that, and asks, "What's wrong?" She instantly thinks of the time and effort it will take to talk about the budget and their differing viewpoints about spending and saving. She can't handle the

**When couples leave things unspoken, it creates an environment where doubt, disappointment, and resentment can grow.**

hassle at that moment. But instead of saying, “Can we talk about this later today?” she says, “Never mind.”

If that scenario happens over and over, the dragon grows in silence. For many husbands and wives, finances are a taboo topic. Here are other topics that can become unmentionables:

Sex

Pornography

Opposite-sex friends

Video gaming

Phone use

Unhealthy weight

Spiritual compatibility

Politics

In-laws and extended family

Death

In the movie *Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, Tom Hanks portrays the one and only Mr. Rogers. In a scene about death where family members are awkwardly silent, Mr. Rogers breaks the ice by saying, “Anything mentionable is manageable.” *Anything mentionable is manageable.* It’s the unmentionables that will turn into flame-breathing dragons in your mind. But once you name the thing—“We need to have a talk about how much money a month we’ll spend on entertainment”—the dragon shrinks back to the size of a cat.

Whenever I share my electrolysis story, I get the same reaction—an audible gasp that says, “Oh no, he didn’t!” Women can’t believe he had the gall to mention my facial hair and men can’t believe he had the nerve. After we were engaged, James asked me, “Do you know why I asked you about electrolysis?” I supposed he didn’t want a furry kiss. He said, “That

was an awkward conversation and I felt like a jerk for bringing it up. But I thought, if I can't bring up facial hair, how are we going to talk about much bigger things like where to live or how many kids to have?" He was considering if we were marriage material and the electrolysis question was a test of the relationship. He needed to know it was okay to bring up the taboo topics of life and live to see another day.

Now that you're married, it's important for your spouse to feel like you are a safe space to say anything. It's funny because safe spaces on college campuses are meant to shield students from opposing views and things that might upset them. But in a marriage, a safe space is when you can say anything—even something painful, awkward, juvenile, or controversial—and it's okay. This is not about mistreatment, it's about honesty. Hard conversations have the best chance of succeeding when prepared by prayer and presented with humility.

If you see something rearing up its ugly head in your marriage, don't ignore it. Like the mom in the children's story, you can pretend it's not there but that will only cause the issue to grow under the carpet. Denial and deterrence may work nicely as short-term solutions, but they won't work long-term. Dragons must be acknowledged and addressed before they can shrink.

Let me add what this rule is not. This chapter is not a permission slip to go on a taboo subject tirade and say things like, "Honey, your mother-in-law is driving me mad, you have really got to stick with an exercise program, and your phone use is excessive and I'm tired of it!" When exposing dragons, use tact, kindness, and wisdom (more on that in chapter 6). There's no need to be *brutally* honest, just honest. Consider if you would talk to a friend in the same way you're talking with your spouse. Use that same courtesy and care. Private conversations can be much ruder than public ones. You can play a game when you're talking in private with your spouse. Pretend you're talking and a marriage counselor is listening. How would that change your tone, body language, or word



choice? You actually do have a Wonderful Counselor listening in to all your conversations: the Holy Spirit.

If you're not sure how to bring up a taboo topic in your marriage, just ask yourself, how would Mr. Rogers bring this up? Chances are, you would never feel like he was attacking you. You would feel like he was sitting right beside you in his red sweater, gently taking the sting out of life's unmentionables.

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## LIFE LESSON LEARNED

- ♥ You can say anything.

## MAKE IT EASIER

- ♥ There are no taboo topics in marriage. Create a safe space where your spouse really could bring up anything that was troubling him or her.
- ♥ "Anything mentionable is manageable."
- ♥ Use courtesy and care when bringing up tough topics.

## ASK YOUR SPOUSE

- ♥ Do you feel like it's safe to talk to me about anything?
- ♥ Is there anything you would like to talk about now or in the near future?

## LET'S PRAY

Lord, Philippians 4 tells me not to worry about anything but to pray about everything instead, so I give You my worries. I ask You to show me anything that is hidden that needs to be addressed in my marriage. Show me how to talk to my spouse about [what is concerning me today]. Bind us together in Your love. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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