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5 SIMPLE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR MARRIAGE

*... When You're
Stuck at Home
Together*



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TEAR DOWN EMOTIONAL WALLS

Marriages do not flourish when there are emotional walls between the husband and wife. Walls are built one block at a time. A wife said, “Yesterday he told me I was lazy because I did not replace the trash bag when I took the old one out. That really hurt.” “Did he come back and apologize?” I asked. “No, and he won’t,” she said. An emotional block has just been placed between the two of them. It can be little or big offenses, but each failure that is not dealt with will put another block in the wall. Many couples have built long, thick walls between them. These are the couples that contemplate divorce or

decide to live in the same house as roommates, each living their own life. Walls are not removed with the passing of time. When we are confined to close quarters, the wall makes life much more difficult.

Of course, not all couples have walls between them. However, all couples offend each other from time to time. Sometimes it is intentional and sometimes unintentional, but each offense puts an emotional block between them. There is only one way to remove the block: apology and forgiveness. If they fail to apologize and forgive, the offense becomes the first block in a wall. However, if they genuinely apologize and forgive, there will be no wall. The relationship moves forward in a healthy manner.

I believe that apology and forgiveness are essential for a long-term healthy marriage. I say they are essential because there are no perfect husbands or wives. All of us fail from time to time. One man raised his hand when the speaker asked, “Does anyone know of a perfect husband?” He said, “My wife’s first husband.” My observation is that if there are any perfect husbands, they are deceased, and most of them got perfect after they died. We don’t have to be perfect to have healthy marriages, but we do need to deal effectively with our failures.

So let's talk about apologies and forgiveness. Where do we learn to apologize? Typically from our parents or someone who served as our parents. Little Johnny pushes his sister, and his mother says, "Johnny, don't do that to your sister! Go tell her you are sorry." So Johnny says, "I'm sorry," even if he's not. He is now twenty-four and married. When he offends his wife, what will he say? Likely, "I'm sorry." We discovered in our research that about 10 percent of the population almost never apologizes for anything, and most of them are men. They learned it from their fathers who said, "Real men don't apologize." I say to those men, "Your father may have been a good man, but he had bad information. Real men do apologize. In fact, it is real men who both apologize and forgive."

Because we had different parents, we have different ideas about what it means to apologize. Mary's mother taught her to say, "I was wrong. I should not have done that. I hope you will forgive me." So when her husband Johnny says, "I'm sorry," she does not see that as a sincere apology. What all of us are asking when someone apologizes to us is, "Are they sincere?" If we judge them to be sincere, it is much easier to forgive them. However, we judge sincerity by how they apologize. In our research, we

discovered several ways in which people apologize. One is by expressing regret, often with the words “I’m sorry.” But don’t ever stop with those two words. Tell them what you are sorry for. “I’m sorry that I lost my temper and yelled at you.” And don’t ever use the word “but.” “I’m sorry that I lost my temper and yelled at you, but if you had not . . . then I would not have . . .” Now you are no longer apologizing. You are blaming them for your bad behavior.

Another common way to apologize is to accept responsibility for your behavior. That is what Mary was doing when she admitted: “I was wrong. I should not have done that.” For others, a sincere apology always seeks to make restitution. “What can I do to make this right?” They want to make amends for their behavior. Still others want to hear you express the desire to change your behavior. “I don’t like this about me. I don’t want to keep doing this. I know I did the same thing last month. Can you help me find a way so I won’t do this again?” A wife shared this illustration: “My husband lost his temper with our baby. The baby was crying, and he did everything he knew to do, and the baby continued crying. He lost his temper and started yelling at our baby. I ran into our bedroom sobbing. Ten minutes later, he knocked on the door and

asked if he could come in. He walked in with tears and told me how badly he felt about what he had done and said that he never wanted to do that again. We talked and came up with a simple plan. If he ever felt he was about to lose his temper with one of our children, he would say to me, 'Honey, I'm hot. I've got to take a walk.' I knew what that meant, and I would take over. He would walk around the block and then return and say, 'Okay, I think I'm under control. What can I do to help you?' That was eight years ago, and he has never lost his temper with one of our children since. He has taken several walks, but he has never lost his temper.

One of our problems in offering a meaningful apology is that we judge sincerity by what we think they should be saying. They often are not saying what we want to hear, likely because their parents taught them a different way to apologize. So while you have more time together, this would be a good time to share with each other what you consider to be a sincere apology. You will likely discover why you have felt their apologies of the past have been rather lame. Now you can learn how to express your apology in the future in terms that are more meaningful to your spouse. You can also come to accept the sincerity of

your spouse's apology since you now know that in childhood they learned a different way of expressing apology than you learned.

FORGIVENESS

Apology alone will not remove the emotional barrier created by our offense. There must be a response to an apology. The healthy response is to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice. If you choose not to forgive, then the barrier remains, and your relationship is hindered. Forgiveness means to pardon or to remove the barrier. Forgiveness is expressing the choice to not hold the offense against your spouse. You will not make them pay for this the rest of their life. You will remove the barrier so that your relationship moves forward.

It is important to know that there are some things that forgiveness does not do. Forgiveness does not destroy the memory of the offense. You may have heard people say, "If you have not forgotten, you have not forgiven." That is not true. Everything that has ever happened to us is stored in the human brain, and sometimes even after we have forgiven, the memory comes back to the mind. Nor does

forgiveness remove all of the painful emotions. When the memory returns, often it is accompanied by emotions. Hurt, anger, sorrow, and other emotions may grip us. What do we do with these memories and emotions? I believe we remind ourselves that our spouse has apologized, and we have chosen to forgive them. Therefore, I will not allow the memory and the emotions to control my behavior. I will seek to do something kind and loving for my spouse today. Your loving words or actions will speak deeply to your spouse, and you will feel good about doing something positive in spite of your negative feelings.

Another thing that forgiveness does not do is rebuild trust. She sits in my office with tears as she says, “My husband was sexually unfaithful to me. He broke off the relationship and apologized to me. I have forgiven him and agreed to work on our marriage, but I have to be honest, I do not trust him.” I said, “I am empathetic with that. Forgiveness does not restore trust. Forgiveness opens the door to the possibility that trust can be reborn. Trust is reborn over time as your husband is trustworthy.” My advice to her husband was to allow her full access to his life. He might say to her, “My computer is yours anytime you want to look at it and so is my phone. If I tell you

I am going to the gym, it is fine with me if you want to come by and see if I am where I said I would be. I am through with deceit. I have hurt you deeply, and I do not want to hurt you again. My life is an open book.” If he takes that approach, chances are his wife will come to trust him again. In the meanwhile, they can continue to rebuild their marriage by practicing the five things we are discussing in this book.

I think you can see why I am suggesting that apology and forgiveness are essential to having a long-term healthy marriage. So if you entered this pandemic season with a wall between the two of you, this would be an ideal time to tear the wall down. Make a list of all the things you can remember where you failed your spouse. Then say to them, “I have been thinking about us, and I know I have hurt you in many ways. I feel badly about what I have done. You do not deserve the way I have treated you. I made a list of some of my failures that came to mind, and if you would allow me, I would like to share these and ask if you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I would like to try to make up for all the pain I have caused you. I know I can’t undo these things, but I do want to change the future. I’m also open for you to share anything that I

don't have on this list. I really want to deal with my failures. I want to be the husband/wife you deserve." Such an honest apology may be the first step in tearing down the wall between you. Your spouse may be willing to forgive you. However, they may want some time to think about what you are saying and to process their own emotions and thoughts. Remember, forgiveness is a choice just as apology is a choice. Both are necessary to remove the wall.

Many of you do not have a wall between you. You are dealing with your failures as they occur. Hopefully this chapter will help you understand apology and forgiveness a little better and become even more effective in dealing with your failures. With the stress of the present crisis, you may indeed say and do things that are hurtful. The sooner you apologize and forgive, the more likely you are to also apply the other suggestions you'll see in the following chapters.

If your spouse is someone who seldom (if ever) apologizes, what are you to do? I believe you kindly, lovingly confront them with their offense. You might say, "If I had something that was bothering me, would this be a good time to share it with you?" When they are willing to listen, you can say, "I may be misreading this, but I

would like to share with you something that really hurt me.” Then you proceed to share with them what they said or did that hurt you. Then you might say, “Can you understand why that hurt me? If I am misunderstanding the situation, could you please explain it to me?” This is what I mean by kindly, lovingly confronting your spouse.

Your spouse has a choice of explaining or apologizing for their behavior. Either way, you are now free to remove the emotional barrier and your relationship can move forward. Making every effort to remove the barrier and not allow a wall to be built between you is the path of wisdom. You cannot make your spouse apologize, just as they cannot make you forgive them, but you can lovingly confront. This approach is far more productive than holding the hurt inside and letting the anger build. This leads to an eventual explosion, and then you will be the one who needs to apologize. To have a healthy marriage, you must share with each other when you feel you have been wronged. If the two of you can agree on this approach, you will have taken a huge step forward in revitalizing your marriage.

MAKING IT PRACTICAL

1. If both of you have read this chapter together, have a “sit down” time, and share with each other your concept of a sincere apology. Talk about how you have processed failures in the past and how you might be more effective in the future.
2. Ask each other, “Is there any time in the past when I have hurt you and failed to apologize? If so, I would like to deal with it, because I want us to have a healthy marriage.”
3. Ask each other, “Has something happened recently in the stress of life where I have hurt you? If so, I want to apologize.”
4. Ask each other, “Do you feel that, in the past, I have forgiven you when you apologized?”
5. Ask each other, “What else can we learn from this chapter?”

If your spouse has not read this chapter and is not interested in talking about apology and forgiveness, why not begin by apologizing for your own failures? Perhaps you feel that your spouse is 95 percent of the problem; then apologize for your 5 percent. Your example alerts your spouse that something is going on in your heart and mind. In the past, they may have heard critical, condemning words from you, but now they are hearing you apologize. If you develop a pattern of apology when you say or do something hurtful, you are having a positive influence on your spouse. In time, you may hear them begin to apologize. Don't underestimate the power of influence.

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