15-Minute Marriage Makeover

Refresh Your Relationship, Add Sizzle to Your Sex Life & Be Happier in Just Minutes a Day

Dustin Riechmann
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By: Dustin Riechmann from Engaged Marriage
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15 Minute Marriage Makeover
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Disclaimer

This book is intended to provide useful advice and fun exercises to help good marriages be even better. It is not a substitute for professional counseling or therapy. The author is not a licensed professional in marriage or family counseling or therapy, and the advice contained herein should be considered educational only and applied at your own risk.

Aside from all this legal stuff, enjoy your spouse and enjoy the book!
What is a Marriage Makeover?
It’s not about repairing a torn marriage, but refreshing a good marriage to be the best it can be.

-Dustin

Dedicated to the love of my life, Bethany. Thank you for your patience & crazy-good support. Loves.
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I'm not sure where I first heard the advice that would change my marriage and my life forever. At some point a few years ago, someone told me that investing just 15 minutes each day in a passion would allow anyone to achieve greatness.

I heard the words and retained them in the back of my head, but I didn't take action. It wasn't until months later that I would realize just how profound this idea would be for me and my family. While facing an incredibly hectic life full of two careers, small children, community involvement, church activities, a load of debt and no plans to reverse the downward spiral into constant stress and busyness, my wife Bethany and I found ourselves deep in a state of feeling overwhelmed. This was not what we had envisioned for our life together when we got married several years earlier, but it seemed like this was what life as a young family had to be for us.

It was at this low point that we were asked to attend a marriage retreat through our church. While we honestly didn't think we had time to take an entire weekend away amidst all the chaos, we finally decided that we would make it happen. This was the catalyst for what turned out be a life-changing decision.

Faced with the realization that our Dream Marriage was never going to happen unless we took action, we committed to do better. It was at this time that I remembered the advice about investing in a passion, and I realized that the most important relationship in my life needed some real attention.
From that day forward, we committed to spending 15 minutes each day free from distractions to work on our marriage and take proactive steps toward getting our life in order. We didn’t have a Marriage Makeover book to guide us, but we found ourselves working through all of the big issues that were weighing us down.

And it worked. Our marriage is not perfect, but our life is so much more fulfilling, intimate and happy since we worked through our “do-it-yourself” marriage makeover.

After writing and interacting with many busy couples on my Engaged Marriage blog over the past 18 months, it became clear that our struggles were not unique. Almost every couple faces these same constraints, and I decided to put together a concise plan for others to follow in refreshing their relationship.

I’m so happy that you’ve decided to share this journey with your spouse, and I know that you’ll have a stronger and more love-filled marriage for life after you invest 28 days to improve your communication, romance, sex life and finances together.

Congratulations on being proactive and standing up for your spouse and your family!

**How to Use This Book**

The 15-Minute Marriage Makeover is broken into 28 unique days that each contain a lesson that applies to your life, a short *Couple Time* Task that you’ll complete together, and stories from the personal experiences that my wife and I have shared throughout the good, the bad and the ugly days of our journey from busyness to contentment.

The best way to use to this book is to complete each day in order, which will guide you through all four of the pillars of a thriving marriage. However, if you want to focus on a given area, you are welcome to skip to that
particular chapter. Regardless of which path you choose, please complete Day One, as it’s a foundational exercise to find the all-important 15 minutes each day.

The four pillars covered in each weeklong chapter include:

1. Communication that Counts
2. Real Romance for Real Busy Couples
3. Better Sex and Deeper Intimacy
4. Control Your Finances...Together

For each of these topics, the daily lessons are broken into seven days so you will complete them over the course of a week. The first day focuses on a time management topic related to that pillar, days two through six are mini-lessons with 15-minute *Couple Time* Tasks, and day seven is the culminating event for the week requiring a longer (but always fun) time spent together.

Although you can match them to your busy schedule, most couples will find it’s best to start each week on Sunday. This will put the longer last lesson on Saturday when you likely have more flexibility to spend more time together.

Let’s get started!
Chapter 2  
**Week 1: Communication that Counts**

Communication is the core of any relationship, and it’s especially vital to communicate well within your marriage. Remember how much you used to talk early in your relationship and how much you enjoyed it?

Well get ready because you’re about to revisit the power of high-quality communication and rekindle your passion for one another in the process. In Week One, we’ll find our 15 minutes of *Couple Time*, make it truly quality time, and learn what it means to Take the Lead in our marriage. By the end of this week, you’ll likely feel closer to your husband or wife than you have in years.
Day 1: Find Your 15 Minutes

With all of the craziness we face each day, it can sure feel like there just isn’t any time available to devote specifically to our spouse. We have careers to build, households to maintain, charitable causes to help and maybe even young children to raise. And then there’s that whole sleep thing...

It’s not that we don’t care about our marriage or love to spend quality time with our husband or wife. We just simply don’t have any time!

Well, time may certainly be tight, but you may be surprised how little time is really necessary to make a big impact on the quality of your relationship.

Today’s Lesson

15 minutes. What can you do in such a short time?

How about connect deeply with your spouse, take your marriage to a new level of fulfillment and get out of a relationship rut? More specifically, in the next 28 days, you will enhance your communication, rekindle the romantic spark between you, improve your intimacy and sex life, and get your financial lives rolling on a path to success.

And all you have to do to start is find 15 minutes each day to make it happen.

Today’s Couple Time Task

To kick things off, our first task is simply to figure out where you will find your 15 minutes of Couple Time every day. If you are super-busy, your first thought may be that this is just not possible.
What if you found out that you had to spend 15 minutes each day getting a medical treatment that you needed to survive? Less dramatically, what if you could voluntarily give this time to help your spouse achieve a great deal of happiness? Or give yourself a feeling of real contentment and joy? You can find the time. After all, we are literally only talking about 1% of your day here!

To get you started, here are some areas where you might be able to cut back a bit:

- Watch less television (this should do it for most of us)
- Cut out 15 minutes of mindless web surfing (this should take care of the rest of us)
- Check Facebook less often
- Focus better at work so you can leave a bit earlier
- Only check your email twice per day
- Cut down on video games
- Exercise at home instead of driving to the gym
- Put the kids to bed 15 minutes early
- Wake up 15 minutes early
- Quit reading Engaged Marriage - this is an absolute last resort and is not recommended!

For us, finding our 15 minutes was a matter of using our time more effectively and making our conversation a top priority. Each evening, after we get the kids to bed, we turn off the T.V. and sit together on the couch to talk. After our quiet Couple Time, we get back to the busyness, the to-do lists and the multi-tasking like a good, young family!

If something is important to you, you will find the time to address it. I’m confident that your spouse and marriage are a top priority in your life, and they certainly deserve your time.

So please go ahead and identify some areas where you can cut back just a bit to find that precious time for your spouse each day. Make a commitment to each other that for the next 28 days, your husband or wife gets 15 minutes of your time each day without exception.

I promise that you won’t regret it.
Today’s Tips

✓ Plan ahead at least a week in advance and put your 15 minutes of Couple Time in your calendars.

✓ Remain flexible because life will get in the way some days. You may need to switch your Couple Time from evening to morning (or vice-versa) occasionally or even complete some lessons over the phone if travel is an issue.

✓ It may seem difficult to block out distractions and focus solely on your spouse for 15 full minutes during your first few days. Don’t worry, it will get easier to put your multi-tasking tendencies aside after you start to see the benefits of your quality time together.
Day 2: Just Talk

Our attention is constantly strained nowadays with information bombarding us from all directions and from multiple sources. It’s not unusual for many of us to hold conversations while checking email and eating, all with the television on in the background.

Unfortunately, our interactions with our spouse are no exception, and it can be a real struggle to focus during our conversations and really listen to what they say.

It takes some effort, but we can all be better communicators by being proactive and narrowing our focus to what’s most important at the moment.

Today’s Lesson

We talk to our spouse every day and never give it a second thought. It’s just part of our daily routine, and the reality is that we probably don’t remember half of the words that we spoke in their direction. The conversations just weren’t all that important or noteworthy.

When you sit down without distractions and have a meaningful conversation with your wife or husband, you may find it a little bit awkward. This is the person you share a bed with, but when was the last time you looked into their eyes and had an intimate conversation for 15 minutes without interruptions?

Today’s Couple Time Task

Just talk to each other for 15 minutes today.

How’s that for a simple task to ease into this challenge? Well, we aren’t talking about the kind of interactions you’ve probably had for the last 28 days. Today, we will be having a truly engaged conversation.

You can choose any topic to talk about. If nothing compelling comes to mind, I would suggest you share with each other why you chose to pick up this book and commit to this challenge.

As you interact, please make sure you do the following:
Avoid interruptions to the best of your ability. The kids should be in bed or away from the house, and your cell phones should be in another room.

Turn off all distractions. The T.V. must be off, no magazines should be lying nearby and don’t even think about having a computer within your eyesight.

Speak freely and share what’s really on your mind.

Listen better than you’ve listened in years.

**Hearing is not the same as listening.** When you listen, you’ll not only physically hear your spouse’s words, but you’ll remember them and feel their impact.

Face each other and maintain eye contact as much as you comfortably can.

Hold hands

As mentioned above, it may feel a bit awkward to communicate in this way if you haven’t had an intimate conversation for a while. I know this took some getting used to for my wife and me, and it’s still not easy to maintain focus and **really be present** for 15 minutes some days.

Today’s lesson is intended to help you break the ice a bit and also work on your listening skills. This distraction-free, intimate environment will be key to getting the most out of today’s conversation as well as the next 26 daily challenges.

**Today’s Tips**

- Pick a time that allows you to avoid interruptions
- Choose a location for your talk that keeps distractions at bay
- Clear your mind and always remember that you have 99% of your day to worry about the things that are less important than your marriage
- Enjoy this quiet time with your husband or wife!
Day 3: A Little Affirmation Goes a Long Way

Life can feel pretty thankless some days. We spend our time running from task to task and meeting all of our daily obligations as best we can. After a while, all of the energy we spend starts to get taken for granted, and we can even get a little bitter that no one seems to notice.

Of course, we would never choose to let our wife or husband feel this way. We really do appreciate all that they do for our family, and we would be lost without them in most cases.

Well, it’s time to let them know.

Today’s Lesson

In marriage, it can be so easy to overlook the "little things" we do each day. After all, we typically spend every day with our spouse, and every household develops a routine where the husband and wife take on certain roles and obligations.

For us, this means that I always mow the yard, and my wife always does the laundry. Trash night is all me, while getting our middle daughter’s hair under control each morning is the work of my wife’s magic hands.

I’m sure you have similar routines in your home. So when was the last time you said thank you to your spouse for "meeting their obligations" around the house?

Sometimes we get so busy and preoccupied with all of the craziness in our lives, we can even take the special "extra" things for granted. It’s not that we don’t appreciate it, we just don’t think about expressing our thanks.

And that’s not good for anyone. Not only does our spouse need support, but there’s no better way to get them to repeat their kindness than through positive reinforcement.

If you want your wife or husband to do something extra special again, just tell them how awesome they are for doing it the first time!
Today’s Couple Time Task

During your 15 minutes today, tell your spouse three little things that they did today that you enjoyed. Then think of one “bigger” thing they did within the last year that still just warms your heart, and let them know how much it means to you.

I can guarantee that your spouse will feel great hearing this affirmation, plus you’ll become more aware and appreciative of the blessings in your marriage. That’s what I call a win-win!

And the best part is that this is so simple. This could be as easy as saying thank you for an encouraging text message or sharing how cool you thought it was that they spent time playing with the kids outside while you prepared dinner in a quiet kitchen.

For some of us, a “big” affirmation could be the time she encouraged you to go play golf with your friends one afternoon with no guilt trip to follow. Or the morning he let you sleep in while he took care of the kids and kept them away from your bedroom. A little affirmation really does go a long way!

Beyond Today

I would strongly encourage you to make these affirmations a part of your daily routine as much as possible. Each evening, just pick one good thing that your husband or wife did that day and tell them that you liked it. How is that for simple romance?

My wife and I often use these little "thank yous" as a way to start our 15 minutes of Couple Time each evening. This has been fantastic for our relationship.

I continue to learn more about the little things she enjoys, and she notices the good stuff I do better. And the nice part is that this works both ways, so this little romantic treat makes us both better spouses.

And even us super busy couples can pull this off!
Today’s Tips

✓ Don’t over-think today’s task. You may be surprised how happy your spouse will be when you acknowledge even the smallest daily effort.

✓ Really listen to the affirmations that your spouse offers up. You should find out what “acts of service” mean the most to them.

✓ Once you know what little things really knock your spouse’s socks off, you’ll know where you can make a bit more effort to really impress them!
Day 4: FIGHTS Happen—Make It Count!

Every couple fights. Of course, some fight more than others (and more “passionately”), but even the best of marriages will include disagreements and emotional exchanges.

So, you know you’re going to fight occasionally, yet you want to have a great marriage. What is a happy couple to do?

Make it count!

Today’s Lesson

If you wait until the heat of the moment before you ever discuss the “rules of engagement” for your marital discord, you’re setting your marriage up for some hurtful and counterproductive arguments.

Why not take a proactive approach and talk about the rules for fighting fair now while you’re both calm and enjoying each other’s company?

Remember, when an argument arises, your goal is to resolve the issue at-hand and not to hurt your loved one. A healthy and marriage-oriented style of conflict resolution strives for two winners through compromise and understanding. If your actions are not conducive to resolving the issue at hand, then you are not fighting fair.

Today’s Couple Time Task

Spend your time today establishing the ground rules for future fights. Of course, you know each other better than anyone, so you should know what behaviors and actions should be off-limits to make your disagreements productive. Just don’t fight over it!

If you’re not sure where to start, I’d suggest you follow the same simple rules that my wife and I have found successful over the years. The best part is that they make an easy-to-remember acronym: FIGHTS!
Face Each Other. Look into each other’s eyes when you have a disagreement. Not only does this help to diffuse your anger, it keeps you both engaged in the conversation and avoids hit-and-run tactics.

Ignore Distractions. Focus only on solving the problem at hand and avoid raising side issues.

Guard Your Tongue. Avoid ridiculing and name-calling. Once name-calling starts, the discussion degrades to defensiveness.

Hold the History. “You always”, “why can’t you ever”, and “you never” are examples of history. And history doesn’t belong in your arguments.

Touch. Hold hands. We are more willing to be reasonable and caring than to win at all costs when we hold hands.

Stay in There. Finish the fight, and don’t run off or go to bed with unresolved anger. The issue will just fester.

Finally, you must be open to compromise. You can walk hand-in-hand without always seeing eye-to-eye.

If you and your spouse take these rules to heart during a calm time, you can set healthy ground rules for conflict resolution that will serve you well in your marriage.

When my wife and I argue and come to realize that we’re out of bounds and not following the “fighting fair guidelines,” one of us often says “we’re not fighting fair” and we look at each other and laugh. Then we get back to actually working to resolve the real issue.

Today’s Tips

✓ It can feel awkward and a bit silly to talk about fighting at a time when you’re not angry. However, this is one of the most productive discussions you can have for your marriage.

✓ For more information on healthy conflict resolution skills and negative patterns you need to avoid at all costs, please take a minute to read a post called “What’s the Secret to a Happy Marriage?”
Day 5: A Honey-Do List That Matters

When you know someone for a long time and you feel close enough to pledge the rest of your life to them, you can start to expect that they can read your mind. After all, you finish each other’s sentences, you generally seem to be on the same wavelength in your thinking, and you are connected enough to actually make it to Day 5 of this challenge.

Likewise, it’s really easy to fall into patterns in your daily life that don’t require you to think a whole lot about what your spouse might need from you. Besides, if your communication is good, then shouldn’t your spouse just tell you when they need something?

Well yes, but things are rarely that simple, are they?

Today’s Lesson

We can talk to our spouse about anything. We discuss finances, career issues, romance, sex and a host of other important issues...or at least we will as part of this challenge.

So why is it so easy to let the little things that we want our spouse to do for us go unsaid while they fester inside us?

I can tell you from much experience that I really can’t read my wife’s mind, as much as I’d like to have that superpower (I think). However, if she takes the time to tell me that she would really appreciate it if I could do something specific, I jump at the chance to show her how much I care.

Now, I realize that sometimes it’s great to have our spouse just do something without being asked. I think we can all relate to the age-old discussion of the husband pleading, “How was I supposed to know you wanted me to do that?” with the wife’s quick response, “You should just know.”

Well, today’s your chance to share some specific things that you’d love for your spouse to do more often (or at all). That way, you’ll have a list to look back at whenever you’d like to make your husband or wife’s day with a special act of service.
Today’s Couple Time Task

For today’s 15 minutes, take turns telling each other little things that you’d like your husband or wife to do more often. Write down what your spouse says so you don’t forget.

Don’t be bashful but also don’t be resentful or accusatory with your sharing. This should be a fun exchange, and hopefully you’ll both have a few “aha” moments where you discover something new (or long forgotten) that your spouse enjoys.

If you have a hard time coming up with your “honey-do list that matters,” try using these ideas to get you going:

- Help me with specific household chores (the classic)
- Send me flowers for no reason
- Take the kids out of the house so I can have some “me” time
- Surprise me in the morning with sex
- Make me breakfast in bed
- Gas the car up before you bring it home
- Have dinner ready when I arrive home
- Give the kids baths while I put my feet up and relax for a few minutes
- Wear something sexy to bed
- Encourage me to have a girl’s night out or some time with the guys
- Plan our next date night so we don’t have to argue about what we want to do
- Surprise me in the evening with sex

Again, it’s important that you use this as an opportunity to talk about what you’d enjoy in the future. This is not about the past...that’s called nagging!

And don’t get defensive if you feel like you are already doing something that gets brought up. If your spouse is mentioning it, then chances are you could be doing a better job with it.

When my wife started sharing with me the little things that she’d enjoy, I was quite surprised by some of the items. They seemed like no big deal to
me, and that was part of the problem. I didn’t even know some of the tasks existed, yet she’d been taking care of them for our entire marriage!

Likewise, she didn’t realize how frustrated some things made me on a regular basis. Now, when she takes the time to fill up the car with gas, I don’t have to worry about being late the next morning because I had to stop at the gas station on the way to an important meeting. That full fuel gauge makes me smile.

The little things really can make a big difference in your day.

**Today’s Tips**

- Keep this going in the future, so you always have a great list of things that will make your spouse happy.
- If you ever think, “I wish she’d...” speak up and get it added to her list.
- Randomly pick things off of your list and do them at unexpected times...talk about romantic!
- As you gain some experience, try to branch out and come up with your own original ideas to try without being asked. Yes, your superpowers may develop over time.
Day 6: I Love You Enough to Apologize... and Forgive.

How many times each day do you say “I’m sorry” to those you encounter?

It’s probably more than you realize:

✴ “Oh, I’m sorry. Let me move that.” to the lady trying to get by your shopping cart at the grocery store.
✴ “Sorry I forgot you needed that report today.” to a co-worker.
✴ “I’m sorry you fell down, sweetie. Let me kiss your boo-boo.” to your crying toddler.

We throw around “I’m sorry” very casually, and we rarely give it a second thought.

Now, when is the last time you gave a heartfelt apology and received real forgiveness from the one you harmed?

This is what reconciliation is all about, and today’s task will let us experience the power of this process.

Today’s Lesson

We all hurt the ones we love.

In some cases, this can be an overt action that results in deeply broken trust. However, in most cases, it’s an ongoing and seemingly innocent string of actions that causes pain for the one we love the most.

You may think that you have nothing to apologize for and that your spouse hasn’t done a thing to require your forgiveness. Well, I am only aware of one perfect person, and I don’t think He was married.

To help you examine your conscience a bit and recognize where you may be hurting your spouse without even realizing it, let’s look at the two major areas where women and men, respectively, most often fall short: Control and Irresponsibility.
For most women, issues around Control create many of their hurtful actions. While there are certainly exceptions, women often exert the most control in a marriage, especially in areas like household management and child-rearing.

Whether you realize it or not, correcting your husband’s parenting skills in front of the children or forgoing his opinions on household matters can be quite harmful and hurtful.

Now these two examples may not apply in your marriage, so let’s talk for a moment about the biggest area of feminine control in most cases: Sex! In most relationships, it’s the woman who decides if and when a couple will have sex.

Is it right to hold a “gatekeeper” attitude toward one of God’s greatest gifts in your marriage?

Well, there’s a reason that most women have taken this approach in their relationships, and it’s because men tend to be Irresponsible. Again, I bet you can find some great examples of this in your household.

There are probably household duties that would go uncompleted if it was up to the husband. Does your wife seem controlling about preparing meals for your children…or does she have to take control because you’re not responsible enough to feed them properly?

Does your wife control the social calendar in your house and tell you what you’ll be doing with your time? Well, do you know whose birthday party is this weekend and are you going to go buy a suitable gift for him?

And yes, when a woman bears sole responsibility for family planning (i.e., birth control) or there’s no effort made to create an intimate environment in your marriage, then her tendency to be controlling of your sex life is going to take hold.

These patterns of control and irresponsibility go hand-in-hand, and of course these roles are reversed all the time. Men control and women are irresponsible, too.
The point here is not to focus on your spouse’s shortcomings. It’s to open your eyes to recognize areas in your relationship where you have come up short and been hurtful with your actions...or your inactions.

I’m sure you can think of at least a few.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

You’ve had a chance to hear a few examples of areas where we often come up short in our roles as husbands and wives. Now, take a moment to think of three specific things you’ve done to harm your spouse since you first got married.

The husband should look the wife in the eye and share each of the three items you’d like to apologize for along with the reason why you are sorry. Explain to her what you intend to do better moving forward to avoid hurting her further. End your apology with the question, “Will you forgive me?”

Assuming she is ready to forgive, the wife should respond with, “I forgive you for...” and repeat back the three items. Then simply repeat this process with the wife’s apology and the husband’s forgiveness.

This process has the potential be quite powerful provided you take it seriously and apologize sincerely.

My wife and I completed a similar exercise on a marriage retreat a little while back. When I first heard the instructions, I rolled my eyes and thought that this was a bit silly. I have never cheated on my wife or done anything seriously wrong, so I figured it was a waste of time for us.

Well, I’ll just tell you that this lesson wouldn’t be included here if my mind wasn’t changed during the exchange that followed. We shared some emotional dialogue, and our marriage has been improved as a result.

I hope you find a similar experience through the power of reconciliation.
Today’s Tips

✓ Remember, this exercise is about you focusing on what you’ve done wrong. Do not criticize your spouse and start an argument.

✓ With the above in mind, feel free to ask your spouse about areas where you may have hurt them without realizing it.

✓ In other words, don’t criticize your spouse unless they ask.

✓ If you have deep-seated anger, hurt or resentment due to a major breach of trust, please seek the guidance of a professional counselor.

✓ Use today’s time as an opportunity to find ways you can be a better spouse moving forward!
Day 7: We’re Outta Here!

Well, you’ve arrived at the end of your first week of this challenge! Are you feeling closer to your spouse and finding it easier to enjoy quality conversations together?

For many of you, it’s Saturday, which means that today’s task gets to break the “15-minute” rule and require some extra Couple Time together. I think you can handle this one, though!

Today’s Lesson

How often do you and your spouse enjoy date nights?

For many of us, it’s really easy to let these times slip from being a priority, especially when kids (and babysitters) become part of the equation. In later lessons, you’ll discover some fantastic ways to enjoy a date night (or day) at home.

However, for Day 7, I’d really encourage you to get out of the house and enjoy an evening together.

This is your time to celebrate the completion of your first week toward a more Engaged Marriage.

It’s also time to put into practice a simple, but really powerful, idea I learned from my friends Tony and Alisa DiLorenzo in their wonderful book Stripped Down: 13 Keys to Unlocking Intimacy in Your Marriage.

This “rule” is called Take the Lead. It simply means that one spouse has to take the lead in planning the date. One spouse decides where you will eat, what you will do for entertainment and perhaps even what you’ll both wear for your night out.

I don’t know about you, but my wife and I have wasted so much time over the years by being indecisive about what we want to eat for dinner or what we’ll do on those precious nights out of the house.

“I don’t know, what do you want to do? I don’t know what do you want to do?” Before you know it,
you’ve wasted an hour that could have been spent enjoying each other’s company.

Today’s Couple Time Task

Today’s task is simple: **get out of the house this evening and enjoy a date night together.** Talk about your experience over the past week and what you hope to gain for your marriage by sticking to your 15 minutes together each day over the final three weeks.

And for this date, **the husband must Take the Lead** and do all of the planning for your night out. This certainly doesn’t need to be anything elaborate or take the whole evening. A simple dinner at a nearby restaurant would be great.

Gentlemen, this evening’s in your hands. Show that bride of yours that you still know how to show her a good time!

Today’s Tips

✓ I hope you find Take the Lead as helpful as we have and decide to make it a regular part of your date nights.

✓ If you just can’t get out of the house tonight, don’t sweat it. Make some time for each other to talk and share a dessert after the kids go bed. The husband can go buy the dessert.

✓ If you are looking for an awesome read and useful information on improving the intimacy in your relationship, I highly recommend you pick up a copy of **Stripped Down** (they even have an audio version).
Chapter 3

Week 2: Real Romance for Real Busy Couples

Romance is truly the fuel that energizes the intimacy in your marriage. Unfortunately, it’s also often the first thing to go when life gets busy, but it doesn’t have to be that way. In fact, it’s essential that romance is intentionally infused into your relationship to keep you lovers and not just roommates.

That’s what Week Two of our challenge is all about. During the next seven days, we’ll learn how to keep romance a sacred part of our busy schedules through simple, powerful activities that we share with our spouse every day through play, relaxation and a little planned time together. By the end of this week, you can expect to rekindle that passion that you shared during your dating days.
Day 8: Defend Your Couple Time From The Intruders!

How many times have you started a new healthy routine like working out regularly, eating better, praying daily or getting up early?

How many of those routines are you still using today?

It’s tough to stick with a time commitment even when you know it’s awesome for you. You do great for a week or two, and that 30-minute run outside each morning seems like a piece of cake. You’re feeling great and starting to make some real progress, but then...

Life Happens. You have a rough week at work, your kid gets sick and it snows.

Before you know it, that time you set aside to better yourself and do the things that you know are good for you seems to disappear. You end up right back in your same old routine, and a fit lifestyle doesn’t seem like it’s in the cards for you.

The same “intruders” will attack your Couple Time as well, and you need to be prepared to defend against them. After all, it’s this small amount of time that feeds your intimacy and sets the course for rekindling the romance between you and your spouse.

Today’s Lesson

For a week, you’ve hopefully been able to carve out 15 minutes each day for each other. This is an awesome achievement in the busy lives that you lead!

However, the real quality in romance (and all other areas of your married lives together) comes about when we use this time consistently over the long haul. And I can tell you from experience that this is the real challenge.
I am obviously a big believer in this 15-minute solution, and it’s been fantastic for our marriage. Yet, we struggle to maintain it over time, too. So, what do we do when life pushes us off-course? We get back on track, refocus on our priorities, and give our time unconditionally once again.

Life is not perfect, and neither is marriage, but both can be improved dramatically with perseverance and a clear focus on what’s really important to us.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

Today, I’d like you to simply talk about all the things that have put pressure on your time over the past week. And you can share the “intruders” that you anticipate in the next three weeks.

Today’s task is all about planning ahead and putting up your defenses to preserve your Couple Time. Here are some tips that we have found most effective in ensuring that we maintain our time commitment to each other each day:

- **Know your priorities and act on them** - It starts with your mindset and the statement to your spouse that he/she really is the most important thing in your crazy-busy life.

- **Set healthy boundaries** - You must put boundaries on the other activities in your life to provide the structure needed to preserve Couple Time each day.

- You may really enjoy your work, your television shows or your blog (tell me about it), but you must put caps on the time you expend on them if you want your spouse to trust your stated priorities.

- **Find the right time for you** - Each couple is different, so you really need to discuss this plan and find a time in your day when you can best avoid interruptions and distractions. For us, this is right after we put our kids to bed and before we do anything else.

- For others, this could be first thing in the morning, or it could even be by phone if your spouse is traveling or stationed overseas. Romance shouldn’t end just because you can’t be in the same room.
Set a time and make it part of your daily life - Once you establish a time, you need to treat it like an important appointment that cannot be missed except for emergencies. You can DVR the baseball game and the dishes will wait for 15 minutes.

Just like an exercise program, it's the little slip-ups that will ruin your progress and knock you off-track. Remember that.

Turn off and turn away distractions - Turn off the TV, put your cell phone in the other room and put that magazine on the table away. This is your Couple Time and you can't approach it with a distracted mind and expect to have a meaningful experience with your spouse.

You really need to focus and be present for your wife or husband. You have the other 99% of your day to be distracted!

Be accountable to each other - This is the most valuable tool in your defense arsenal! If your wife tells you she's just too tired to talk tonight or your husband says you need to wait until the game ends, tell them that's not acceptable to you.

Your spouse is your accountability partner, and they need to bust you whenever you try to push aside your 15 minutes.

If you want to reap the awesome romantic benefits that your Couple Time holds for your marriage, I cannot tell you how important it is that you defend your sacred time each day.

When you do slip up, don't throw your hands up and say it's not working. Talk about it, and work together to find a solution to make it a priority. That's what an Engaged Marriage is all about.
Today’s Tips

✓ If you didn’t do so as part of Lesson #1, go ahead and put your 15 minutes of *Couple Time* in your calendars.

✓ Like an exercise program, a daily commitment to your spouse becomes easier as you see some progress. While our past week was spent on the important topic of Communication, I’m betting you’ll both enjoy this week’s daily Romance tasks a bit more.

✓ By the way, all of the references to exercise in this lesson were no coincidence. I’m a big believer that **personal wellness and fitness can do wonders for your relationship.**

✓ For more info on that topic, please check out a project I’m proud to be part of at [Fit Marriage](https://fitmarriage.com).
Day 9: Simple Romance—Pick Your Pleasure

Has your spouse ever told you that you aren’t as romantic as you used to be? Or have you felt that way about your relationship?

I completely understand, and I think we can all get a bit complacent after we’ve been together for a while. More than that, though, I think many couples simply feel too busy for romance.

Personally, I used to spend a lot more time writing love notes, planning surprises and creating special dates back in the early days of our relationship. I really enjoyed being the hero and impressing my (now) wife, and she loved being on the receiving end of these romantic gestures.

After more than nine years of marriage and our many new roles in life (especially as parents to three young children), there are definitely “dry patches” in our marriage where our lack of time, busyness and fatigue lull us into a state where romance goes on the back burner.

Are we really too busy to show our spouse that they mean more to us now than back in those early days when romance seemed to flow so much more freely between us?

Today’s Lesson

Today’s lesson is all about breaking through these excuses and bringing the romance back using a novel approach: Simplicity.

When you think back to your fondest memories together as a couple, I’ll bet that some of your favorite moments revolved around the simple things in life.

Sure, the “big events” (vacations, buying your first home, having children, etc.) will naturally be front of mind, but what are the times when you felt the closest as a couple?

We often get overwhelmed by the idea that we need to be more romantic, and we just can’t seem to find the time to plan a big, grand event to show how much we care. Or we pull off “the big one” and then fail to keep the romance flowing over time.
The great news is that there’s no need to pull off a big production to have a big romantic impact.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

Today, we’re going to share some simple fun together and see if we can’t find some pure romance during our *Couple Time*.

Please take a look at the list below of simple romantic activities that you can do together as a couple. Pick one that suits you and do it during your 15 minutes today.

And, of course, you can take a little more time if you have it to really enjoy this playful, romantic and sometimes sexy time together.

- Go to the park and push each other on the swings
- Look through photo albums together and share your best memories
- Do what she likes for the night
- Do what he likes for the night
- Make out on the couch
- Go for a walk and hold hands
- Wake up early to watch the sunrise & drink coffee
- Give each other a quick massage
- Lay in the backyard and look at the stars
- Snuggle on the couch and watch a favorite TV show
- Have a glass of wine on the back deck
- Listen to music you enjoyed while you were dating
- Have a backyard picnic
- Read your wife’s favorite book to her
- Enjoy a bath...together

Obviously, this is only a small sampling of the many simple, romantic things you can do together when you’re short on time and energy. What will you do today to create a good, old-fashioned romantic memory together?
Today’s Tips

✓ Remember, today is one of those days to take it easy and just enjoy each other’s company. Don’t stress about what you’ll do together... you can always just chill out and talk.

✓ If you can’t decide what to do, then today is the wife’s turn to Take the Lead and choose for you both.

✓ Don’t let this become a one-time event. Simple romance should be a regular part of your Engaged Marriage!
Day 10: I Knew I Loved You When...

When’s the last time you wrote your spouse a love letter?

There really are few activities that offer the immediate and meaningful impact of writing a romantic love letter to your spouse. It makes your spouse feel special, and it expresses your emotions in a format that creates a very personal keepsake.

If you’re like me, the idea of writing a romantic letter to a loved one brings back memories of my high school days. I wrote a lot of late night “notes” or love letters during my teenage years, and I actually got pretty good at it. At least that’s what my girlfriend (and fortunately now my wife) tells me.

Today’s Lesson

So, why don’t we write more romantic letters after we get married?

We know they’ll be appreciated and score us major points with our spouse. It doesn’t take long to do, it’s free and it’s a simple way to add some fun and romance to your marriage.

Well, practically speaking, you could just tell your spouse how you feel, and I’m sure it would be well received. However, I really believe that you should take a few minutes to put your thoughts in writing.

First of all, writing something down requires that you really think about it, and it helps you retain it for later. However, the real power behind a love letter is the impact it will have on your spouse.

Spoken words are fleeting and easy to mishear or forget. There is a real power in written words, and a nice letter creates a lasting keepsake.

Let’s try it so you can see for yourself.

Today’s Couple Time Task

You guessed it. Today, you’re going to write a short letter to your spouse.

Although the topic isn’t all that important, I suggest that you each write down your recollection of
when you knew you loved your eventual spouse. That should be simple enough, right?

If you’re an old pro at love letter writing, then you can dive right in and write up your masterpiece. However, if you’d like a little guidance, here is a simple “5R” process I like to share to make the letter-writing process a breeze for anyone.

1. Relax
When it comes to writing a love letter, there is no pressure and no need to be verbose or intellectual. A simple and heartfelt approach is the way to go. Think about those high school notes, and try to be that pure and straightforward with your writing style.

2. Reflect
Here’s some great news. The toughest part of writing a great letter is finding a few quiet minutes to simply sit and think about your spouse and your memories together.

And you have your Couple Time today to do just that!

3. Rough It Out
If you haven’t written much in a while, or even if you have, it’s really helpful to jot down your raw thoughts. When you are thinking through the theme of your letter, just quickly write down the phrases that come to mind. This will allow your creativity to flow more than you’d expect, and it will help you get your thoughts straight.

All you have to do is arrange these phrases, throw in a few words to connect them, and you will have the workings of an awesome romantic letter.

4. Write...with Your Hand!
In today’s electronic world, it’s tough to imagine writing a letter by hand. The thought actually makes my hand cramp a bit. But trust me, a handwritten romantic letter will be super impressive!

The medium you choose to write on is really not important aside from helping to set the mood you’re trying to create. It could be construction paper, a yellow pad or some fancy foil-embossed paper. Seriously, anything can work.
Now, if your handwriting is truly illegible, you may be forced to type out your thoughts (or you can read them aloud as suggested below). In that case, you should go for some nice paper and a cool font to add a personal touch.

5. Recite
Here’s where your romantic letter goes to the next level. Read it aloud to your spouse.

My wife and I wrote several letters to one another as part of a marriage retreat we attended, and that was nice. However, the real magic came in the delivery when we read our thoughts to each other. You won’t believe how much better your feelings come through in this way.

I have used this approach on several occasions and read several letters written by readers, and the letters were pretty good. In all honesty, though, the writing quality of the letter doesn’t matter.

Your spouse will love every letter you write as long as they are sincere, heartfelt and actually given!

Today’s Tips

✓ Love letters are traditionally a guy-to-gal exchange, but we men like to hear from our wives, too. So ladies, please open up and share your thoughts with your man!

✓ Once you’ve got one letter under your belt, you’ll be primed to share more. It’s worth the effort.

✓ For future letters, try something creative with the delivery to form a lasting memory. Mail the letter or hide it someplace where it will be found at an unexpected time. Have it delivered to your spouse’s work along with a single rose or a cool picture of you having a good time together.

✓ Have fun with this!
Day 11: Honey, I Did It!

Back in our dating days, it was super easy to be romantic, right? Life was probably more carefree than it is currently, and there was plenty of time to be creative and sweep your girlfriend off her feet or make your man feel special.

While this may be true, we have something going for us in the romance department now that we’re married that you may not have considered. It’s way easier to be impressive!

Today’s Lesson

In the craziness of married life, a simple act of service or a little extra effort can go a long way towards showing our spouse how much we love them. When your lifestyle becomes a bit routine, it’s actually pretty easy to break out of the rut and let your inner-Casanova shine through.

In Day 9, we looked at some simple activities that you could do together as a couple to spice up the romance in your marriage. Today, we’ll be focusing on ways to serve our spouse to show them how much we care.

So, how will you know just what to do to make your husband or wife feel special?

If you’ve been following along, the hard part is already done for you! Just look back to the “Honey-Do List That Matters” that you created on Day 5, and you should have several fun and romantic ideas to choose from.

If you skipped straight to the romance section of this challenge, you may have to trust your instincts on this one. I’m sure if you go back and look at some of the suggestions in Day 5, you’ll find at least one that will impress your spouse.

Today’s Couple Time Task

Today’s task doesn’t need to be confined to a Couple Time exchange. In fact, if you can surprise your spouse a bit, that would be ideal.

However, simply exchanging your acts of service to each other during your 15 minutes together will
certainly do the trick as well. And there’s definitely no harm in doing more than one throughout the day.

Your task today is simple:

**Pick one of the things your spouse expressed a desire for on Day 5 and do it!**

I’m confident that you’ll see the benefits of this simple act, and don’t be surprised if your spouse feels loved and appreciated through even the smallest good deed.

After all, when you’re busy and married, it’s amazing how sexy clean dishes or a hot breakfast can make you feel!

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**Today’s Tips**

✓ Be sure to tell your spouse how much you appreciate what they did for you today. Positive reinforcement is the key to keeping it going in the future!

✓ Performing an act of service because it’s on a list and part of an *awesome* marriage makeover challenge is great, but truly random acts of kindness are particularly fantastic...so keep it going.

✓ Don’t throw away that Honey-Do List. Try to add to it every week as inspiration strikes you.
Day 12: Play!

When was the last time you played?

If you have children, you probably spend some playtime with them most days. You might play golf with your friends or play Angry Birds on your iPhone. If you’re lucky, maybe you have occasional game nights with other couples where you can keep your Trivial Pursuit or Scene It! skills sharp.

But how often do you spend “playtime” with your husband or do something with your wife just because it’s fun?

Today’s Lesson

Life is so busy that we can start to push the time for play out of our closest relationship. Playtime with the kids is mandatory and recreational time with our friends is usually retained. However, when it comes to our spouse, it is so easy to lose the simple, pure time for fun together in favor of “more important” duties.

The truth is that few things can feed your marriage and refuel your romance better than a little time spent playing together.

And like most of the best things in life, playtime with your spouse is simple, cheap and easy!

Today’s Couple Time Task

Our Couple Time today will be spent simply having some fun together. Please take a look at the list below to get some ideas for a playful activity that you can do together. Pick one that suits you, do it and smile.

✴ Play a board game
✴ Go roller skating
✴ Play a video game
✴ Dance
✴ Play a card game
✴ Go to the park and play
✴ Play Guitar Hero (one of our favorites)
✴ Have a water gun fight
Play miniature golf
Visit an arcade
Wrestle
Create an art project together
Play 21 questions
Go bowling
Race go-carts
Play Truth or Dare
Play some Nintendo Wii (clothing optional)

When it comes to having simple fun with your best friend, the possibilities are really endless. So, what will you do today to enjoy a little playtime together?

Today’s Tips
✓ This is not a time for competition or trash talking! Trust me on this one.
✓ If you can’t decide what to do, then today is the husband’s turn to Take the Lead and choose for you both.
✓ You can definitely include your kids or friends in many of these activities (though clothing is recommended for those Wii games), but be sure to spend playtime alone as a couple on a regular basis.
Day 13: Relax

If your life is anything like ours, you probably feel overstretched and short on time. When you have a spare moment, your mind immediately starts running through your mental to-do list to determine what you should focus on next.

There is always another task that requires our immediate attention. There are always dishes to do, bills to pay, floors to vacuum, work to attend to and projects around the house waiting to be completed.

The fact is that you will never complete the to-do list in your busy life. It's endless, and even if you ticked off every item on this mental checklist, you would immediately think of more tasks that need your attention.

This is no way to live to your life, and it is definitely no way to support your Engaged Marriage.

Today’s Lesson

If we allow it, our lives will fill up with seemingly urgent activities that aren’t actually all that important. It is up to us as married couples to set our priorities and establish healthy boundaries on our time.

One of the most important (and most overlooked) uses of our time is relaxation.

When we relax, our minds and bodies are given some room to breathe. Even brief periods of relaxation can have a dramatic impact on our mindset and well-being. And when we get away from the frantic running checklist mentality, we open ourselves up to enjoy the truly important things in life.

If you want to improve your marriage and experience the joy your spouse has to offer, then you need to spend a little time relaxing together.

Now, how easy is that advice?
Today’s Couple Time Task

I know this will be difficult, but you will be spending your 15 minutes today relaxing. I bet you already know how to relax, but it may be more challenging than you think to actually get that perpetual to-do list out of your mind.

To help you truly set aside those thoughts of busyness, pick one of the following activities and enjoy some down time together during your Couple Time today:

✴ Take a leisurely walk
✴ Lay together and read
✴ Take a nap
✴ Build a campfire in the backyard and enjoy it
✴ Just lay in each other’s arms
✴ Take a bath (together or separately)

My wife and I have found that romance truly thrives in quiet times. We love to talk, and talking certainly qualifies as a relaxing activity if the setting and topic are right, but we are able to connect deeply by simply being together in silence.

Our lives are filled with noise, electronics, advertisements, distractions, responsibilities and stress. Do a major favor for your relationship and spend some time in silence enjoying each other’s company.

Take 15 minutes to just relax and enjoy your marriage.
Today’s Tips

✓ Don’t underestimate the importance of your setting when it comes to relaxation. If possible, find a secluded area in your home or take your *Couple Time* outside. In a later lesson, we’ll be taking action to create a sanctuary in your house for just such an occasion.

✓ Remember this is time for relaxation, so don’t talk about work, kids or other responsibilities. And definitely avoid any contact with cell phones or computers!

✓ Have you noticed how many of the activities during Romance week are **simple and enjoyable**? This is truly an area where you can thrive with just a little effort.
Day 14: Enjoy a Date Night (or Day) In

I haven’t met a married couple yet who doesn’t enjoy sharing a romantic date night. Ideally, we would have a night out every week and make it an untouchable date on our calendar.

Unfortunately, there’s that whole “real life” thing that gets in the way. We are all busy, and it’s unrealistic for most of us to go out on the town whenever we’d like.

Of course, this is especially true once we add those leg shackles blessings we call children. Not only is it hard to find the time to get away, but the costs of babysitting can make it impractical...especially if you are following a budget and working to achieve financial freedom for your family.

Today’s Lesson

Today’s lesson is all about getting around those obstacles and spending the romantic time you deserve with your spouse anyway!

When you can’t get out of the house or you just prefer a simple night alone, an “in-house” date night is in order.

A romantic night spent with your spouse doesn’t require extra money. More importantly, it doesn’t require a lot of time, which is an even more precious commodity for many of us.

So, just what can you do together at home to spark the romance and fuel your passion for one another despite your busy schedule?

Today’s Couple Time Task

For today’s task, you simply need to enjoy a date night at home. I’d suggest that the wife Take the Lead in planning this evening (please see Day 7 if you don’t know what this means).

Here are some of our favorite at-home date ideas along with some suggested by members of the Engaged Marriage community:
Watch a movie & eat popcorn
Snuggle on the couch & listen to music
Cook a nice meal together
Exchange foot rubs/back rubs
A "campfire" in the backyard or deck (chiminea)
Play! (see Day 12 for a list of ideas)
Enjoy a glass of wine (or five)
Spend time naked in a hot tub (hot tub optional)
Cheesecake over candlelight
Sit outside and enjoy the quiet
Just talk about anything besides the kids or work
Play a game together
Have Sex!

I am positive that you can find something you enjoy on this list. Have fun on your date night!

Today’s Tips
✓ Date “Night” isn’t reserved only for evening activities. If your schedules or preferences are more accommodating of a daytime get-together, check out this post on Date Days for some great ideas.
✓ This is a “7th Day” activity, so definitely don’t limit your date to 15 minutes!
✓ I hope this exercise opens your mind to lots of fun, romantic activities you can enjoy when you can’t get away from home. Try to enjoy Date Nights as often as you can, and surprise each other by taking the lead and planning something at unexpected times.
A healthy and fulfilling sex life is definitely central to a happy, God-centered marriage. True sexual intimacy is not all about your time between the sheets, although that’s important too!

If you’d like to have more and better sex, and a deeper intimacy in all areas of your marriage, you’re going to love Week Three. Over the next seven days, we’ll take some time each day to find the time for better sex, understand what drives our sexuality, and openly discuss what we can do to take our relationship to the next level. When we’re done with this week, you may very well feel more sexually excited and united than you have in years.
Day 15: Finding Time for Sex

Have you encountered times in your marriage where one or both of you wanted to have sex, but there just wasn’t time or energy for it?

I know that we used to face this realization way too often in our own marriage. We would exchange some “indications” earlier in the day that we were looking forward to an intimate evening.

However, after a longer-than-usual time spent getting the kids to go to sleep, we would remember the need to straighten up the house for guests the next day or a work deadline would surface that needed immediate attention. Before we knew it, one of us was busy working on a project while the other had fallen asleep on the couch. At this point, it’s often easier to just say, “Let’s try again tomorrow. Good night.”

Today’s Lesson

So, how can we avoid this recurring problem where we feel there’s no time to have a quality sexual relationship with our spouse?

The simple answer is that we must make sex a priority in our marriage. Obviously, this is easier said than done, but there are practical ways to make it happen. It all starts with our mindset.

I want you to imagine for a moment that you know that your spouse is not going to be alive tomorrow night. Tonight is literally your last night together on Earth, and you know that both God and your spouse desperately want your last night together to be spent making love and sharing a deep intimacy with one another.

Now, do you have time for sex tonight?

Obviously, this is an extreme example, but the point is that we cannot treat sex with our spouse like another chore on our to-do list for the day. We cannot say that we’ll have sex as soon as the
“important” stuff like the dishes, laundry and baseball game are out of the way.

We’ll dig deeper into why sex is important to each of you in tomorrow’s lesson, but suffice it to say that a healthy sex life is the center of a healthy, thriving marriage. And when you treat sex like just another chore, it becomes just another chore.

And that is not okay.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

Today, I’d like you to talk openly and honestly about where each of you sees sex fitting into your lives in terms of priorities. Discuss both where it sits in your own mind and *where you observe it* to sit in your partner’s mind.

Please be forewarned that there’s a very good chance that your personal perception will not be your spouse’s reality when it comes to this sensitive topic. Do not get into a fight about who is right or wrong, but instead treat your partner’s thoughts as the truth. After all, when it comes to your sex life, it’s truly their perception that matters.

Spend a few minutes talking about how you can make improved intimacy (including sex) a higher priority in your daily lives.

- When are some times when you could be intimate instead of doing other mundane things around the house?
- Where are some areas that you could improve in your overall intimacy, including those areas that don’t directly involve sex?
- What has been holding you back, and what can your spouse do to ease your burdens and help you desire more intimacy?

Finally, I’d encourage you to spend this evening pretending like it is your last evening together on Earth.
Today’s Tips

✓ Do not fall into the trap of using your *Couple Time* today to argue or point blame at each other. This is your time to be constructive and work together to improve the intimacy in your marriage.

✓ While sex is the culmination of physical intimacy, keep in mind that intimacy should be alive and well in many areas of your marriage.

✓ Some examples of intimacy outside of sex include recreational time spent together, physical activity together, spiritual intimacy, emotional connectedness and even financial intimacy.

✓ For a full workbook aimed at improving all areas of intimacy in your marriage, I’d encourage you to check out a great book called *Stripped Down*. 
Day 16: Why Is Sex So Important to You?

If you are like many couples, the discussions you had in Day 15 likely raised some interesting questions about your sex life. If you hadn’t talked openly about your sex life, there’s a good chance you found some discrepancies in your desired frequency and where sex fits into your personal priority list.

Even if your discussion simply confirmed that you’re a perfect sexual match in all ways, there is still a lot of benefit in exploring today’s topic. And you may want to look into some treatment for your habitual lying problem.

When is the last time you asked your spouse what sex really means to them?

Today’s Lesson

While there are exceptions to every rule, there’s a good chance a husband and wife will have different feelings about sex and what makes it important to them. In fact, it seems that our feelings toward sex are largely related to...well, our sexuality.

Generally speaking, men need to have sex to feel close to their mate, while women need to feel close to their mate to have sex.

Very funny, God.

Again, there are obviously marriages where these motivations aren’t the case, but for most of us, this sexual paradox is a very real part of our nature. And if you ignore it, or misunderstand it, you could be setting up your marriage for some real strife.

It is vitally important that you understand your spouse’s thoughts and feelings around sexual intimacy.

If your wife views sex as a confirmation of your closeness, don’t you see why she needs intimacy and romance throughout the day before she’s really interested in getting together physically?

And if you really understand that your husband needs sex as a means to feel connected and close to you, doesn’t it help you understand why he can...
feel outright rejected when you roll over and tell him “no” after a long day?

Today’s Couple Time Task

Today’s time is going to be spent simply talking about this topic. In the best way you can, go ahead and verbalize for your spouse what sex means to you and what makes it important to you. Talk about your ideal frequency for sex in your marriage.

Do not judge your spouse’s feelings on this subject. It may drive you crazy that she says she just doesn’t feel “sexy” some nights even though you can’t look at her without being turned on. And you may not understand how he can come home after “ignoring” you all day and feel like it’s high time for some passionate sex.

Men are different than women, particularly with regards to our motivations for sexual intimacy. You cannot change that, but you need to be willing to work with this “insider” knowledge for the benefit of your marriage.

One issue that is sure to arise during this conversation is the idea of control. For years, my wife would dictate the time, place and frequency of our sexual relationship, and this tendency to control the sexual aspect of a marriage is pretty typical for women.

Likewise, you may find that your husband tends to be irresponsible when it comes to sex. He may put all of the family planning responsibilities on your shoulders and not do his part to ensure that the environment (physically and emotionally) is prepared for your intimate time together. Again, I have been guilty of this in our marriage.

We are going to address these issues more in the days to come, but for now you should simply be aware that these are major constraints in many marriages. You’re not alone if you find you struggle at times with the issues of control and irresponsibility in your relationship, and particularly in your sex life.
Today's Tips

✓ Again, this is a sensitive topic and you need to be careful not to fall into the trap of using your Couple Time today to point blame at each other. This is your time to learn more about your spouse and improve the intimacy in your marriage.

✓ While your spouse isn’t likely to change based on a single 15-minute conversation, you can certainly take this opportunity to shift your own perspective.

✓ Next time he initiates sex, think about what it means to him before you immediately throw up your Stop sign. Consider how close she feels to you at the end of the day, and work at closing any perceived gaps in your daily intimacy.
Day 17: A Fresh Look at Family Planning

When is the last time you sat down and talked about your chosen form of birth control, or lack thereof? Do you know your spouse’s current thoughts on how many children they desire and whether options such as adoption, fertility treatments or sterilization are on their mind?

The fact is that a fear of pregnancy or anxiety of fertility difficulties can put a real strain on your sex life and your entire marriage.

In many marriages, the topic of family planning takes on a form of “set it and forget it.” You find something that works for you both, and you simply go with it without taking any time to reopen the subject for further discussion.

Today’s Lesson

The lack of communication around this topic can stem from a discomfort in bringing it up, a lack of knowledge of other options or simple apathy when you have a “system” in place that seems to be meeting your needs.

In some cases, that good ole masculine irresponsibility or feminine control that we talked about on Day 16 could be the reason you never talk about it. Regardless of the reasons, we’re going to pull back the curtain today and explore this tricky topic together with an open mind and heart.

In most marriages (though not all), there is a consistent understanding about whether or not there is a desire for more children. That side of the equation typically gets discussed pretty openly and consistently. If you find yourself in a situation where one spouse somehow feels too intimidated or scared to share how they really feel about children, then I’d suggest you seek a professional counselor to address what may be a deeper core issue at hand.

For most of us, the communication breakdown occurs around the specifics of how we’d like to either encourage or prevent adding children to our family.

If you are open to new children, have you discussed what you’ll do if you cannot conceive naturally?
Will you try fertility treatments? Are you open to adoption? These are vitally important topics that can break down a marriage when they’re not discussed openly (preferably prior to marriage).

If you are not ready for kids or you’ve decided you are done having children, there are equally important discussions to have on a regular basis. What will you do if you get pregnant? What do you both think about your birth control options? Will one of you choose sterilization at some point in your life, and do you understand the physical and emotional health implications of that big decision?

Again, it is essential that you bring these topics to light and confirm how your spouse really feels. My wife and I used artificial birth control in the early years of our marriage, as we felt it was our only option since we weren’t ready for children.

Well, at one point, we both realized that it wasn’t right for us from a variety of standpoints, including our intimacy, our health, our environmental concerns and, above all for us, our faith. Our long journey toward Natural Family Planning is well chronicled on Engaged Marriage if you are interested in learning more about that option.

Although I do feel a need to spread awareness on the subject given our deep struggles and the positive impact it’s had on our marriage, the point of today’s lesson is not to convert you to NFP. I simply want to encourage you to open up and talk about your family planning options from a fresh perspective.

Find out if your husband really enjoys wearing a condom or if your wife has any worries about the health impacts of her birth control pills. Does she know you expect her to get her tubes tied after your second child? Is he really cool with the idea of adopting a baby from overseas if you aren’t pregnant by the end of the year?

These are life-altering decisions that deserve an intimate conversation between husband and wife.
Today’s Couple Time Talk

While it may be a bit uncomfortable for some couples, today’s task is quite simple. Just spend your 15 minutes answering these questions together to see if you’re on the same page:

✴ Are you open to having (more) children?
✴ If you want more kids, what will you do if you cannot conceive naturally?
✴ Will you try fertility treatments?
✴ Are you open to adoption?
✴ Will you be satisfied with your family life if you just cannot add (more) children to the mix?
✴ If you’re not planning on having more kids, what will you do if you get pregnant?
✴ What do you both think about your birth control options, and is your current choice likely to be okay for the rest of your life?
✴ Will one of you choose sterilization at some point in your life?
✴ Do you understand the health impacts of your chosen birth control?

✴ Have you talked about all of your family planning options?

Even if you think you’ve communicated openly on the subject of family planning, there’s a good chance you will encounter a topic where you disagree or you’ve simply never thought to discuss it. Use this opportunity to find out how your spouse really feels.

Today’s Tips

✓ Family planning can be (and should be) an in-depth topic in your marriage that certainly warrants more than 15 minutes of consideration. You should view today’s task as a primer for future conversations.

✓ Be open-minded about your options and don’t jump to any conclusions before you do the appropriate research to understand the risks, benefits and effectiveness of different family planning options.

✓ Our journey from contraception to Natural Family Planning helped my wife and I realize just how difficult it can be to get good answers
to the tough questions around this subject. If you need help in this area, please feel free to contact me, and I'll do my best to get you the resources you need to make the best decision for your own marriage.
Day 18: I Want Your Sex(uality)

When’s the last time you thought much about your spouse’s sexuality? Not sex, but their sexuality.

I’m talking masculinity and femininity here. Male and female. Man and woman.

After all, it’s the inherent attraction between masculinity and femininity that has brought us together in marriage. It is the basis for sexual attraction, and it’s what makes us fit together and complement our spouses both physically and emotionally.

At its core, sexuality is the reason we are able to leave our individual families and become “one” as a married couple.

Obviously, sex itself is based in the attraction we feel to the opposite sex. That’s the only way we are used to thinking about it within the context of marriage, and for many of us it limits the way we view our spouse since we think our attraction is based only on a desire for physical sex.

But this whole sexuality thing goes way beyond that and offers something deeper if we take a few minutes to understand it better...

Today’s Lesson

Take a moment to think about what you admire(d) about your grandfather if you were fortunate enough to see him grow into old age. For me, it was the strong paternal spirit that remained until he passed away. It was the fact that he liked fishing and playing cards with the guys, and he could fix my bike. And it was the way he still provided for my grandmother and looked over her with a protective spirit. In a word, it was his enduring masculinity.

My grandma loved to cook and give hugs. She was a petite lady who supported my grandfather in a caring way even when he didn’t deserve it. And she retained a strong, but feminine, spirit until the day that she died. You could see her femininity in the glow of her eyes.
If you have children, you are likely to see these masculine and feminine qualities from a very early age, and it can be fascinating. Boys are boys, and girls are girls, inherently.

**So, why does this matter for your marriage?**

Well, when you are able to see your spouse’s sexuality more clearly, it literally helps you understand and appreciate them much better. And this can definitely lead to a better sex life (yes, that kind).

Men and women are different. They just are. It’s built into our brain structures, our physical build and our hormones. Men prefer to communicate their emotions through action (sex, building stuff, punching inanimate objects). Women prefer to talk and be held close.

Men inherently have shorter attention spans and are quicker to jump to action with decisiveness. Women like to ask for directions first. Men tend to make decisions based on facts and previous experience. Women rely more heavily on emotional responses and empathy.

Does any of this sound familiar in *your* marriage?

Obviously, there are exceptions because all men have a limited number of feminine traits, and the same holds true for the ladies. But, in general, guys are masculine and women are feminine no matter how much society would like to try to convince us otherwise.

The sooner you realize that this is just the nature of things and affirm those sexual traits in your spouse rather than fight against them, the sooner you can start to build a better sex life and a better marriage.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

I hope that the examples and discussion above have given you a clear understanding of the traits that we can attribute to our own sexuality. During today’s *Couple Time*, we are simply going to *let our spouse know what we love about their femininity or their masculinity*. 

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62 15-Minute Marriage Makeover
We live in a time when men are told to be more emotional and sensitive, and women are encouraged to be decisive and strong. While there is merit in this advice at times, it’s important to celebrate the inherent qualities that God gave us when he made us man and woman.

When we really appreciate those core, unique qualities that make us so sexually attractive to our spouse, we’re better equipped to express a deep spiritual connection through sex. And when we feel loved and attractive for our inherent qualities, we’re more open to an active and meaningful sex life.

Give it a try...affirm your spouse sexually today!

**Today’s Tips**

✓ Use the awareness you have of your spouse’s sexuality outside of the bedroom, too. Being aware of their natural tendencies as a man or woman can help you communicate better and offer quicker forgiveness when they don’t do things your way.

✓ If you are a Christian, always keep in mind that we are called as married couples to be examples of Christ’s love for his Church. Again, there’s a reason that Christ is called the bridegroom (masculine) and his Church is his bride (feminine).

✓ Always remember that sex as a married couple is a renewal of your wedding vows. **God wants you to have great sex!**
Day 19: Let’s Get Naked

When you think about being naked with your spouse, what does it bring to mind?

Sex? Awkwardness? That crazy weekend in Cancun?

Even though there is nothing more natural and unifying than being naked with our husband or wife, most of us have a hard time with the idea of being together in the nude without simultaneously having sex.

In fact, some couples wouldn’t dare “expose” themselves to each other if it’s not dark and their nakedness isn’t contained under several layers of blankets.

Today, we’re going to help you get past these insecurities and spend some powerfully simple time loving each other.

Today’s Lesson

At its core, marriage is the culmination of love and commitment between a man and a woman. As our lives grow in complexity, we can sometimes lose sight of this and add a lot of undue stress and pressure on our relationship.

When you take the opportunity to strip away all of the noise, distractions and outside influences, it becomes much easier to feel the raw love and sexual attraction that exists between you and your spouse.

And even though it’s a bit symbolic, it’s also important to remove the barrier of clothing in this exercise so we can be at our most intimate and vulnerable. Use today’s time together to connect in a simple and very meaningful way.

Connect through touch without any distractions.
Today’s Couple Time Task

This is going to be the simplest day of our entire challenge. But it will also be really uncomfortable for some of you.

**For 15 minutes, simply lay together naked in bed** (or wherever you choose). That’s it.

During this time, you can just embrace in silence and enjoy the warmth of your partner’s body. You can talk if you’d like, or you can pray together if you want a particularly meaningful and powerful experience.

The only thing you can’t do is have sex...at least not for your 15 minutes of “naked Couple Time.”

After that, I’ll leave you on your own!

Today’s Tips

✓ Be sure to enjoy your time together in a quiet environment free from the distractions of television, radio or screaming children.

✓ If you find you enjoy this time together, I’d encourage you to make it a regular part of your lives. Plan a weekly or even daily break from the pressures of life to enjoy each other for some naked *Couple Time*.

✓ Remember, no sex during this time!
Day 20: Retreat!

When was the last time you and your spouse blocked out an entire weekend just for yourselves without the distractions of kids, family, work or social activities?

Have you ever taken two solid days to focus exclusively on your marriage and the unique relationship that you share?

I can tell you from personal experience that there may be no better way to ramp up your intimacy and light a fire under your sex life than sharing the connection provided by a quality marriage retreat.

Today’s Lesson

Marriage retreats come in many shapes, sizes and locations, but they generally include focused time spent together working on your relationship. In most cases, retreats occur over a weekend, although single-day and weeklong retreats are available as well depending on your needs.

Aside from simply getting away from all of the distractions at home (which is huge), a retreat program will present new ideas and make you rethink some old ones. You will usually share some time with other couples, but the focus is squarely on your spouse during most of your time away together.

Marriage retreats are often sponsored by churches, in which case they may have a spiritual component. This can add a particularly powerful aspect to the experience if you are a person of faith. However, secular retreats are available as well if that’s your preference.

When my wife and I were invited to attend our first retreat, I was skeptical and thought it sounded like the waste of a good weekend. After all, our marriage was doing well, and I’m not a big fan of sitting around all day waxing philosophic and singing *Kumbaya* in the basement of a church somewhere.

Well, I have to tell you that our experiences that weekend completely changed my perspective!
We shared our deepest desires for our lives, we unearthed deep-seated goals and passions that we hadn’t considered for years, and we shared some intimate moments together that brought us both to tears.

From the perspective of someone who rarely cries for any reason, it was the tears that surprised me the most. There were healing tears from old wounds, regrets and reconciliation. But there were many more tears of joy and honest thankfulness for the life that we have shared.

I had truly never appreciated my wife and our marriage more in all of our years together. And the impact on our sex life was profound not just in frequency but also in the quality of our connection and passion for one another.

So, use your time today to find a marriage retreat in your area and commit to a weekend focused on enhancing your intimacy. Get it scheduled, put down the required payment and add it to your calendars today.

If you’re not sure where to look to find a marriage retreat, I would suggest tapping into your social network. If you attend a church, this will typically be your best connection to a retreat that matches your faith and values.

If not, you can ask friends if they’ve had any experiences with retreats or post the question on Facebook. As a last (but still very useful) resort, you can also do a Google search for “Marriage Retreats in [your state or city]” and you’ll see a wide variety of opportunities.

Today’s Couple Time Task

Obviously, you aren’t going to be able to actually attend a retreat during your Couple Time today. But you can make plans to attend a marriage retreat during an upcoming weekend!

Today’s Tips

✓ Don’t procrastinate in scheduling your retreat weekend. You need to get this on your calendars today, so all of those “more important” things don’t cause you to put it off indefinitely.
✓ By making the commitment to spending just a weekend focused on each other, you are putting yourself above the vast majority of married couples. Trust me, you’ll be rewarded with a new level of intimacy and focus.

✓ Once you’ve experienced a retreat, especially if you find a setting that’s a great fit for you as a couple, you’ll likely want to return. I’d highly encourage you to make a retreat at least once each year and get it scheduled well in advance.
Day 21: Make Your Bedroom a Sanctuary

Would you ever use the word sanctuary to describe your bedroom? Well, considering it’s the place where you rest, make love and share your most intimate time with your spouse, maybe you should take steps to make it a place of peace and comfort.

For most couples, their bedroom is just an extension of the busyness and frantic pace in the rest of the house. The nightstands are full of books, loose change and probably a few toys left over from the kids.

There may be clothes on the floor, movie cases on the dresser and clutter on every available flat surface. And, for most of us, there’s a big television and maybe even the glow of a computer shining from the corner of the room.

This is not the setting you want when you desire to be intimate and escape the outside world together.

Today’s Lesson

For most couples, one of the best parts of a romantic vacation is the chance to be together in a nice hotel room. The hotel is comfortable and quiet but, best of all, it is free from clutter and reminders of the pressures we face in our daily lives. It’s a great environment for stress-free living and great sex!

While you probably can’t add a balcony and a beach outside your bedroom, you can capture the serenity and romantic atmosphere that you may have enjoyed during your last vacation.

It’s really easy to get started, and you don’t have to spend a dime to make a noticeable difference in your love-making environment. Of course, you may want to invest more time and money into making your bedroom a true sanctuary, and I think you’ll find that this investment will pay dividends in the quality of your intimacy.
Today’s Couple Time Task

Since it’s the end of “Sex Week,” you should hopefully have some extra time for today’s task. However, even if you only have 15 minutes, you can get a great start in your sanctuary-building adventures.

Use this initial time to create a plan for how you’ll convert your bedroom into that vacation-like setting you can hide away in. Then take some action.

As a first step, I’d encourage you to spend some time together simply looking around your bedroom. Make note of anything that obviously needs to go to make the environment more inviting and cozy, and discuss changes that you’d both like to see either immediately or with a little extra investment.

For most couples, the initial and most dramatic change will come from decluttering the space. This means you need to get rid of a lot of “stuff” or at least move it to another part of the house.

- Clear off those nightstands
- Pick up the laundry
- Get the kids’ stuff out of your room
- Eliminate photos that aren’t romantic (you don’t need to stare at a picture of your grandma or son when you are being intimate with your spouse)
- Go through your closet and dressers, and give away all of the clothes you never wear that are taking up so much space
- Make your space clean, minimal and inviting!

Next, if you have electronics in your bedroom, you should really discuss getting them out of there. While I understand the appeal of having a television in your room, it can be a major distraction in both your sex life and your sleep. The same goes for computers, which really must be kept away from your sanctuary.

A small radio is fine, but make sure you’re using it to add some romantic tunes and not listen to the baseball game.
Finally, take a look at what you could do to invest in your space and add a more romantic ambience. Here are some ideas that you should consider to give your bedroom some extra mojo:

- Candles
- Aromatherapy
- Plenty of pillows
- Light dimmer switches
- Wall sconces
- Ceiling fan
- High-quality bedding
- Nice window treatments
- New paint in a serene color scheme
- Art and photos that enhance the romance

As you can see, most of these items are inexpensive and quick to implement. Even if you decide to do a major overhaul with new paint and window treatments, or even a new bed, I think you’ll find that the payoff in improved intimacy proves to be well worth it.

**Today’s Tips**

- Don’t get overwhelmed and make this a huge project that requires putting off. Take the time you have today to take the first step, no matter how small.
- Do not make this a “wife-only” decision. You should both have input on the changes and not fall into the old trap of control and irresponsibility.
- If you get stuck, take turns picking one small thing to change. Make it a friendly competition to see who can de-clutter the most creatively.
- Have fun with this!
Chapter 5

Week 4: Control Your Finances...Together

The issue of money and managing our finances can bring such joy and such pain to our married lives. Sadly, money problems are the number one cause of divorce in America, and financial stress can be a particular struggle for young families and those with lots of debt. Yet, with the right attention and planning, we can achieve financial freedom that brings an enormous sense of peace and deep intimacy to our marriages.

In Week Four of our marriage makeover, we are going to tackle our money management head-on and set the course for financial success in ways you probably haven’t even considered. Over the next week, we’ll decide how to use our God-given time and talents to increase our security and our sense of fulfillment, and we’ll set a plan in action to ensure success with our family’s finances. It’s time to get intimately familiar with our money so we can enjoy a new level of intimacy in our relationship.
Day 22: You Need A TIME Budget

When it comes down to it, time is our most valuable currency. It’s cliché to say “time is money,” but it really is true in a way. After all, when you waste time, you give up an opportunity to actually earn more money by working for pay.

However, time is actually much more important than a simple conversion to dollars. While money comes and goes, time only goes. Once you use up an hour of your life watching Jersey Shore, that hour is never coming back. It’s simply gone.

It can’t be exchanged for fifty bucks, for a surprise dinner for your wife or a backyard game of catch with your son. It can’t be traded for better fitness, a nice nap or some time snuggling on the couch with your husband.

We never know how much time we’ve got over the course of our life, but we do have a pretty good idea that we have 24 hours today. And hopefully another 24 tomorrow.

So, how do you want to spend those next 24 hours?

Today’s Lesson

As we enter “Finances Week” here in the challenge, our attention and conversations will turn to issues related to money and lifestyle.

Before we get there, though, it’s critical that we spend a few of our precious minutes understanding how we use our time...and how we may like to use it better. After all, how you choose to spend your time is directly related to how you earn, spend, save, give and invest your money.

The Time Budget

The key to being more intentional with our time is actually the same approach that’s needed to be proactive with our finances. It requires getting a solid understanding of how you spend your time now and then planning for how you’d like to spend your time in the future.

You guessed it, you need a time budget.
(By the way, we’ll work on getting that all-important money budget in place in just a few days. I know you’re excited.)

To start, you need to track how you currently spend your time. While this doesn’t have to be super-detailed, it does need to be based on what you are actually doing and not what you think you’re doing with your time each day.

Every half hour or so, jot down what you did during the previous 30 minutes. Were you really working on a sales report at work, or were you checking Facebook? Don’t worry, this journal is for your eyes only.

How long should you track your time? Personally, I like to look at my time in weeklong blocks. While activities can change quite a lot day-to-day, things are pretty consistent over the course of a week.

Like a financial budget, I would typically recommend that you go ahead for a week and track your current habits before trying to plan out how you’d like to spend your time. This gives you a full picture of what activities need to be accommodated in your schedule (or dropped).

However, I want you to get to the good stuff and have a powerful exercise to complete with your spouse today, so let’s go ahead and create a rough time budget for the next week.

You can always refine this later after you track your lifestyle for a week and realize you forgot important things like eating.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

Let’s create a rough time budget for the next week. Unless you are joined at the hip, you should each develop your own personal time budget. I would suggest that you prepare these on your own and then compare notes during your 15-minute conversation.

If you’ve already got a time budget, then use this Couple Time to revisit it with your spouse and see where it may need some tweaking. Does it still reflect your priorities and have you been following it?
To start, you should realize that you actually have **168 hours** available to you each and every week. It sure doesn’t feel that way sometimes, but we all have this same amount of time to start with.

Next, brainstorm the major areas where you need to spend time each week. Go ahead and jot these down in a vertical column. Here are some typical “needs” for many of us:

- Sleep
- Eat
- Bathe
- Work
- *Couple Time*
- Essential household tasks

Okay, now we’ll make a (probably longer) list of “wants” for all of the things you’d like to do with your time over the next seven days. Here are some ideas:

- Date night
- Play time with the kids
- Church
- Exercise
- Community Service
- Surf the internet
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, email, etc.)
- Read
- Watch television
- Visit family
- Recreation
- Anything else you “want” to do

Now, go ahead and put down an estimate of the number of hours you need/want to spend on each activity over the course of a week. Some activities (like church) may be limited to one or two days per week, while others (like sleep) will happen every day.
Add up your hours. If you have less than 168 hours accounted for, then you actually have free time that you are probably wasting here and there and never realizing. Congratulations!

You should assign all of those “free” hours to something, even if they are simply noted as “free time” that you can spend however you’d like. You may decide you’d like to work on that project you’ve been putting off or take your kids for a hike each week. **The whole point is using your time intentionally the way you desire.**

If you actually have more than 168 hours documented, then you are either overestimating your commitments or you are simply going to have to eliminate some “wants” to get your life back in balance.

In either case, you’ll be able to refine the time you actually need for each area after you go through your personal “time audit” over the next week.

Once you have a good handle on what your real time requirements are, you’re ready to set up an actual time budget to reference in the future. Take that list of activities and hours and assign them out over the course of a 168-hour week.

I set mine up using a Google Calendar, but a sheet of paper for each day of the week works just fine, too. I still reference mine when I start to feel frazzled and overwhelmed by what seems like a lack of time.

What are the chances that your week will line up perfectly with your time budget? Probably zero. Life is unpredictable, and each week brings new circumstances. The same is true with financial budgeting, but the point is to have a baseline so you can adjust and roll with life’s punches.

The intent of the time budget is not to stick to it at all costs and live your life according to a schedule. The key is to actually **think about how you are spending your time and then do something about it.**

Personally, developing my own time budget has had a dramatic impact on my life. I used to think that
my days were full (overfull even) and that I had no time for anything else. When I decided to take stock of how I spent my time, I realized just how much of my life I was wasting on things I didn’t even care about.

Since then, I’ve had another child, created Engaged Marriage, Fit Marriage and other online projects, wrote this book, taken leadership roles in my church and other community service organizations, taken up regular exercise and advanced in my career. Through all of this, my marriage and family relationships have grown much stronger and deeper.

I still waste time, but I am accomplishing much more with the life that God has granted me. And it all started with a conversation with my wife and some scribbled notes about how I wanted to spend my time.

Go scribble down your own plan. Go happen to life.

Today’s Tips

✓ Today’s quick-and-dirty time budget should be an overview and a tool for a great conversation about how you spend your time as a couple. It may take more than 15 minutes, but it’s time well spent.

✓ Be honest with yourself. If you know you love talking on the phone with friends or golfing each week, account for that time. Denial won’t get you anywhere.

✓ Take baby steps. If you currently spend 20 hours per week watching television and consider it a waste, you probably don’t want to quit cold turkey. Cut out a few hours each week and replace it with time doing something you value higher.

✓ Don’t try to multitask. If you think you can have “family time” and “Internet time” concurrently, you’re fooling yourself and making it impossible to achieve either with integrity.

✓ Try to reserve a little time each week to tackle a big goal or dream that you’ve felt too busy to
consider previously. Even a few minutes per day really adds up. For example, if you write a half a page each day, you could complete a novel by this time next year!
Day 23: What Is Your Dream Lifestyle?

Have you ever daydreamed about how you really want your life to look?

It's easy to say, “My ideal lifestyle is sitting on a beach drinking margaritas.” But I doubt that would give most people an enjoyable and fulfilling life for the long term.

Maybe you are one of those lucky couples who already has the lifestyle that you’ve always desired, but for most people, there are probably at least a few things that could be changed for the better.

Today, you and your spouse are going to think more in-depth about it and talk about your individual and collective lifestyle desires.

Today’s Lesson

Every couple’s situation is unique, but we should all have an idea of where our lives are now as well as where they are headed.

It’s easy for us to get stuck in a rut where life just seems to pass us by, where we simply let things happen to us as they come. However, a much better alternative, especially if your dream lifestyle is to become a reality, is to **actively take steps to make things happen when you want them to**.

That’s what being *proactive* is all about.

Think about your everyday life right now. What do you enjoy about it? What do you *not* enjoy?

(By the way, saying that you just don’t enjoy working is not a valid answer – we’ll get to the issue of work and career in another lesson to help you out in that area).

Maybe life is a bit too stressful and you would like it to be less so. What is causing that stress in your life? What things in your life can be changed or removed in order to lessen that stress?

Perhaps it means you need to be involved in fewer activities, or more. Maybe your children are over-committed. It could be that you need to get serious about paying off debt so you can get that weight off
your shoulders. Should one of you be moving toward a different career, or a plan to stay at home with your children?

The answers are obviously going to be different for every couple, but **you’ll never find them if you don’t first ask the questions**.

If you want to achieve your dream lifestyle, you’ll definitely need to address your finances and plan your money accordingly. However, **you can’t take aim at your ideal lifestyle if you don’t first define what it looks like as a target**.

### Today’s Couple Time Task

Spend your 15 minutes today discussing what you think of your current lifestyle and how you would like it to change now and in the future. Basically, do your best to answer this question:

**What does success look like for your marriage and family?**

If you don’t take the time to think about what you are aiming for, you’ll never be able to achieve success. Once you’re able to define success, you’ll be ready to move ahead and set your priorities toward getting there.

Be sure to listen carefully to what your spouse has to say. It’s very possible that **their idea of a dream lifestyle may be different than what you thought**.

I can still remember when my wife and I did this exercise as part of our first marriage retreat. I had **no idea** that her thoughts toward her career had changed significantly over the previous few years, and she never thought her “idealistic plan” was possible, so she never brought it up.

It took this proactive conversation to set us on a path that allowed her to make the changes in her job that made her (and our family) the happiest.
This “little chat” literally changed the course of our family’s future!

When you’re trying to define success, it may be helpful to think about some previous goals that you and/or your spouse have that have not yet been accomplished. If they’re important to you, get it on the table now so you can be aware of it and plan accordingly.

The most important idea I can leave you with today is to **have specific targets in mind for your dream lifestyle**. You cannot just let life happen to you, or you’ll never get to where you want to be.

You have to **make things happen**. Be as clear as possible about your vision for your dream lifestyle, and we’ll pick up tomorrow by setting some goals aimed at getting you there.

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**Today’s Tips**

- ✓ A dream lifestyle isn’t about getting rich and then doing nothing. It’s about the things you want to accomplish and enjoy doing on a regular basis.

- ✓ Your idea of success doesn’t need to be extravagant – if that means you want to spend more time with your family, then find a way to do it.

- ✓ Finding your dream lifestyle doesn’t have to be stressful – in fact, it should be a part of removing stress from your life!

- ✓ Make sure your idea of success is specific. If it is too vague, you will not know how to get there or when you’ve arrived.
Day 24: Looking Ahead and Liking It

Now that you and your spouse have a better idea of what your ideal lifestyle looks like, you need to figure out how to get there. This is where goal setting comes in.

Obviously, you cannot predict the future, and you can’t plan today for all of the variables that life inevitably throws your way. However, you can definitely choose some specific actions that will improve your financial situation and move you closer toward the lifestyle that you desire for your family.

We’ll know what actions to take by setting some specific financial goals to strive towards.

Today’s Lesson

In order to set useful goals that can actually be accomplished, they need to SMART. You may have heard of SMART goals before, but if not here is the meaning behind this genius acronym:

- **S** – **S**pecific
- **M** – **M**easurable
- **A** – **A**ttainable
- **R** – **R**ealistic
- **T** – **T**imely

So in order for your goals to be SMART, they must meet all five of those criteria.

A goal needs to be **Specific**, so that you know what you are aiming for. It needs to **Measurable** so that you know when have reached the goal. **Attainable** means that you can actually reach the goal. Along the same lines, being **Realistic** means that it won’t completely break you when going for the goal. And finally, a **Timely** goal is one that has a specific timeframe attached to it.

In terms of setting goals today, we are thinking about financial goals. What can you improve about your finances? What needs to change with your money in order to reach the dream lifestyle that you and your spouse discussed yesterday?
Should you look for ways to cut your expenses so that you can more quickly reach the goals that are really important to you? On the other hand, can you find ways to increase your income (more on that when we talk about your career)? If you can do both, that is even better!

Every couple’s finances are a little different, but there are always some recurring topics that come up.

For example, it could be that you have a little debt (or maybe a lot), and you desperately want to eliminate those monthly payments. Perhaps you are short on emergency savings, or you haven’t saved any money for your retirement years.

If your ideal lifestyle involves owning your own business, you may have near-term goals of getting it started on the side and earning a specific monthly income. Or maybe your dream involves generating enough revenue from home rentals to fund an important charity, so you know you need to get started with real estate investing.

Your situation is unique, but there will nearly always be financial goals that need to be met in order for you to achieve the lifestyle you desire.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

During your *Couple Time* today, go ahead and **set one specific financial goal that you would like to reach within one year and one goal that you’ll achieve within ten years.**

Your short-term goal could be anything from saving a specific amount of money for a nice vacation (say $5,000) next year, or getting a particular debt paid off. It could be a career move or an education milestone that will increase your income.

Then look out to the future and decide on a SMART financial goal that you would like to target for ten years from now. Perhaps you will want your mortgage paid off at that point or you’ll be relocating to a new part of the country as part of a location independence you’ve achieved in your career.
Whatever the case may be, make it a goal that you both want so that you can work on it together.

When you are both on the same page, it makes managing your finances so much easier. And this time spent reflecting on what you want from life and setting up specific milestones to achieve it together can (and should) be a very unifying experience.

**Today’s Tips**

✓ Set goals that you can reach together.

✓ Remember that worthwhile goals need to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART).

✓ If your life is very transitional (new family, new marriage, new career, etc.), don’t let this exercise overwhelm you.

✓ These goals *will change* over time, and you can simply readjust as your life evolves. *It’s important to have a plan, even if it is likely to get modified along the way.*
In order to stay profitable, businesses must budget and track their income and expenses on a daily, monthly and yearly basis. As a couple, you should think of your household as your own small business, tracking both your income and expenses.

I can tell you that deciding to use a budget and working on it together was absolutely one of the best things that happened for our marriage. The open communication and sense of control that came with following a budget strengthened our marriage and improved many aspects of our intimacy.

You need a budget for reasons that go well beyond money.

**Today’s Lesson**

Simply put, a budget is a tool that helps you plan how you’re going to use your income, on purpose and proactively. Although the word “budget” may seem like a dirty word to some people, it really shouldn’t be.

It’s important to keep in mind that a budget is intended to be a guide and a planning tool. This means you are not a slave to the budget. In fact, a budget that is not flexible is not a good budget!

Budgeting does not have to be complicated either. Whether you and your spouse use a simple pad of paper, an excel spreadsheet, or some other computer software doesn’t matter.

**The important thing is to have a plan** on how you are going to spend your hard earned money and that you agree on it as a couple. This is essential in helping you reach the goals you have been discussing over the last few days.

After all, having goals is great, but you need a plan to get there. Your family budget is the key to that plan.

While a pen and paper will get the job done, I will say that there is one particular budgeting solution
that I prefer and recommend to busy couples. It is simply called You Need a Budget or “YNAB” for short. I wrote a thorough review that you can read right here, but let’s go over the basics because they apply to all forms of household budgeting.

YNAB’s philosophy is explained by four simple rules:

Rule 1: Give Every Dollar a Job
Rule 2: Save for a Rainy Day
Rule 3: Roll With the Punches
Rule 4: Stop Living Paycheck to Paycheck

Let’s break those down a little. Rule number one says to give every dollar a job. In other words, you are going to tell every single dollar that you earn how it is going to be spent. As mentioned above, that does not mean it can’t change, but it gives you a plan and puts you in control of your money.

Second, you are going to save for a rainy day. What’s a rainy day? It’s when larger expenses come along. Instead of needing to find $600 in one month when your car insurance comes due, you break it out into smaller chunks and save $100 for six months. When the bill comes due, you are good to go!

Rolling with the punches means that when “life” happens and you overspend, things will be okay. It might be a little uncomfortable the next month, but you’ll get through it. How? YNAB “automagically” adjusts when you go over on your budget. It reduces the amount of money available to you in the next month by how much you went over in the current month.

Last but not least, your final goal should be to stop living paycheck to paycheck. That means no more spending your money as soon as you receive it and operating a payday at a time with your finances.

I cannot emphasize how transformative this last principle is. Since we began using YNAB, my wife and I have never had to worry about when we were going to be paid. There has always been enough cash in the bank because we were living on last month’s income.
Rule number one (give every dollar a job) is especially key when setting up any budget (whether YNAB or not). You need to tell your money what it is going to be used for and do so ahead of time. That way, when it’s time to spend, you know the money is there and you can enjoy it without worry.

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

During your 15 minutes today, discuss how you can go about implementing a budget *together*. In most marriages, there is one spouse who takes charge of the project from the standpoint of administration, which is totally fine as long as you both have input in the process.

At a minimum, you should leave your *Couple Time* today with a clear idea of who will be taking the lead in putting the budget together, when it will be ready for you to review together and what tools you’ll be using to help. Set a time to review your budget together on a weekly basis.

If you already have a budget or if you have the time to create your first one today, go ahead and review this month’s income and expenses. Go through each line together and decide if you’re comfortable with your current spending and where you should make adjustments.

You will want to create a new budget each month, and you should always review and approve your budget together. This will ensure you are both on the same page and build some accountability to each other.

Doing a budget together and working as one to better your family’s financial future should be a very unifying experience. When you make this a regular part of your marriage, you’ll find that arguments over money are much less common, if they happen at all.

By completing this task, you’ve made a huge investment in your relationship and set yourself up to achieve financial peace.
Today’s Tips

✓ Budgeting doesn’t have to be complicated. Do what works for you and your spouse.

✓ Listen to each other’s ideas and opinions. Communicating about your budget is key.

✓ Don’t criticize your spouse’s spending habits today. This is a time to be constructive and work together to decide how you’ll spend your money moving forward.

✓ Remember that the idea is for both of you to be on the same page, otherwise there is no point in budgeting.

✓ It’s important to keep good records throughout the month so you can track how well you are staying in-line with your budget. Electronic tools like YNAB really help make this easy because they let you import your bank transactions directly instead of keeping track of receipts.

✓ If you need more help and inspiration with your finances and the topic of budgeting, I highly recommend you check out Dave Ramsey’s book “The Total Money Makeover.”
Day 26: An In-Home Career Fair

A common theme among personal finance “gurus” is the idea that your career and your ability to earn an income is your most valuable asset. The thing is, they’re right!

Unless you happen to have a trust fund or got lucky with the lottery, it’s vital that you do everything you can to ensure your ability to earn an income that meets your family’s financial goals.

Today’s Lesson

Oftentimes, we can get a bit lackadaisical when it comes to our careers and allow ourselves to get stuck in a rut. It’s so easy to just go through our daily routine and never give a second thought toward making a change.

The problem is that this situation not only lacks fulfillment, but it leaves us vulnerable to circumstances that can put us in a position of not being able to adequately provide for our family.

In light of today’s economic climate, it’s even more vital to be growing your career, as jobs are more competitive and less secure than in years gone by.

Just as with your Dream Lifestyle, the key is to have a plan for your career. You can’t just let your career “happen” and hope that things turn out for the best. By taking some proactive steps now, you can develop your skills to improve your job prospects and increase your income over time.

And I bet that sounds like a nice plan for the future.

Today’s Couple Time Task

During your 15 minutes today, talk about what the future of your careers looks like and where you want to lead them. This applies to both of you, even if one spouse is currently at home since you never know how your situation may change in the future.
How long will you continue in your current career?

What would you like to achieve with your work both in financial terms as well as your impact on your family and the world?

How will your current and future career plans help you achieve the Dream Lifestyle you described in Day 23?

You may find that one spouse wants to cut back on their hours in order to have more time for other things at home. Or perhaps you’d like to travel more or accelerate your climb up the corporate ladder. Maybe you’d like to start your own business and leave the 9-to-5 behind for good.

Whatever you decide about your careers, it’s time to start the planning process to get where you want to go. It starts with a simple discussion about your vision and passions.

It was our own in-home career fair that set my wife and me on a path toward achieving a major goal in our Dream Lifestyle. After taking the time to openly discuss our desires, we decided to start planning to make the changes needed to allow my wife to be a stay-at-home Mom to our three kids.

It took us 15 months to make it happen, but today we enjoy this wonderful benefit for our family every single day. And it all started with an honest, open 15-minute discussion about what we both wanted from our life together.

**Today’s Tips**

- Improving your career does not have to be a time-consuming task. Identify just one specific area you can improve each month and the benefits will be enormous.

- If it matches your aspirations, take an action towards advancement by taking an online class, getting a certification, taking the first step toward establishing your own business or simply being intentional about networking.

- Don’t discount the value of self-education. Read one book per month that applies to your desired career path, and you’ll surpass the
vast majority of people in your knowledge and abilities.

✓ Use this opportunity to take control of your career so your career doesn’t control you and your family.
Day 27: Give It Away, Give It Away, Give It Away (Now)!

It’s easy to get caught up in always focusing on yourself when thinking about money. While you obviously need to be attentive to the needs of your family, it’s also very important to give back.

In fact, a focus on helping others can have an amazingly positive impact on your marriage.

If you’re reading this on your computer right now, you are wealthier than the vast majority of the world’s population. Many people actually struggle through every day just to find enough to eat and couldn’t relate to the concept of disposable income.

This isn’t a statement to make you feel guilty. On the contrary, I simply want to emphasize how lucky and blessed we are to have finances to manage. When we realize all that we have, it makes it much easier to be charitable with our time, our talent and our treasure.

When you see the difference that you can make in the lives of others, it enhances your own well-being. And if you are charitable alongside your spouse, it can definitely deepen the connection between you.

Today’s Lesson

Do you and your spouse give to any specific cause? If not, I am going to challenge you to do so today.

People who give are much more likely to be successful financially. In fact, givers not only enjoy more financial success, but they are happier overall.

A study done by a professor at BYU found that people who give to charities are 43 percent more likely to say they are very happy as compared to those who do not give regularly. Giving provides you and your spouse the satisfaction that you are doing something to help others and using your life together for a greater purpose.

The bottom line is that giving is a vital part of your financial success, and the development of
giving hearts by you and your husband or wife will enhance your marriage. In fact, you can’t afford *not* to give!

**Today’s Couple Time Task**

During your *Couple Time* today, discuss a few charities, churches or other organizations that you feel called to support. It can be anything that’s a cause that you both believe in helping.

If you don’t feel that you can dedicate a lot of money to a cause, you can also think about giving some of your time or talents. Perhaps there is a local food pantry, service organization or similar group that needs volunteers. There is certainly no shortage of need.

What can you and your spouse do *together* to improve the lives of others?

**Commit to doing something, even if it seems small to you**, and get started today. Not only will you be helping others, but you’ll bond with your spouse in a very special way and feel great in the process.

**Today’s Tips**

- Don’t feel bad if you can’t give a lot at this point. Just focus on giving what you can for now and, as your finances improve, you can work on increasing your charitable works.
- Dedicate yourselves to supporting the charity of your choice for a specific amount of time like six months or a year. By making this commitment, giving will become a core part of your financial plan for life.
- Remember: give and you shall receive...in more ways than you can imagine.
Day 28: Get Out of the House!

You’ve spent the last week working together to get your finances in order, set goals for your future and help those in need. Now it’s time to enjoy the fruits of your labor a bit more directly!

The activities you’ve shared to improve your time management, earning, budgeting and giving have been fantastic and very meaningful for your marriage. However, it’s important to recognize that another essential function of money is for FUN.

Today’s Lesson

It’s easy to feel guilty for spending money, especially when you know you have other obligations and all those plans for the future. Of course, it’s wise to be purposeful in our spending and use our money wisely.

But being purposeful doesn’t mean that we can’t enjoy the money that we earn. In fact, our finances don’t serve us well if we simply accumulate money or bring it in to pass it along directly to others with nothing to show for it.

While it’s good to save money, that does not mean it should never be spent.

One of the best investments you can make can’t happen inside of a 401(k) account or by purchasing the newest gadget. When we purposefully spend some of our money on experiences rather than things, we can create intimate memories that will last for a lifetime.

And that will yield a high return for your marriage for the long term.

Today’s Couple Time Task

In a busy marriage, there are few things more exciting and effective than experiencing a change of scenery together.

So, today’s task is to get away from home for a night and really enjoy each other. Go attend a show and stay at a nice hotel, or relax at a nice bed and breakfast.
This is the culmination of the last 28 days spent working together to improve your marriage and your life together. You’ve done more for your relationship in the last four weeks than most couples will ever experience, and you’ve laid the groundwork for a truly Engaged Marriage for a lifetime.

Go enjoy an awesome night out and celebrate all that you’ve achieved in your Marriage Makeover...together!

Today’s Tips

✓ No tips required....just have an awesome night together!
Congratulations on completing your 15-Minute Marriage Makeover!

It’s been quite a journey exploring the four pillars of a happy marriage. Together, you’ve learned how to have communication that counts, real romance every day, better sex and a deeper level of intimacy, and control of your finances. You have set a plan in action for an awesome marriage now and for a lifetime.

I trust that you’ve connected deeply and come to enjoy your time together in new and refreshing ways. You’ve experienced the progress that can be made when you are proactive, even if only for 15 minutes per day.

It’s been a fantastic and powerful 28 days, but this is only the beginning of your life together. I strongly encourage you to maintain your commitment to sharing 15 minutes of Couple Time every day. You now have the tools and insights to continue to grow your intimacy in new ways, and you’ve experienced first-hand just how much can be accomplished by devoting just 1% of your day completely to your spouse.

I also encourage you to use your special experience together to reach out and help others improve their relationships in a profound way. This can be as simple as being a supportive friend, helping at a marriage retreat or sharing the power of a Marriage Makeover with another busy couple.
If you’ve enjoyed your experience, please share this gift with your friends and loved ones by encouraging them to start their journey at www.15MinuteMarriageMakeover.com.

May your marriage be blessed every day,

Dustin
About the Author

My name is Dustin, and I'm basically just a normal guy with a passion for marriage, family and life. I am an engineer by trade, and I try to be a good husband to Bethany and a mostly patient Dad to our three great kids.

My wife and I have been blessed to spend more than five years helping young couples through marriage preparation workshops and by facilitating marriage retreats through our church, and we never cease to be amazed by the energy we receive as a couple through this mission.

When I'm not at work, helping at church or hanging out with my family, you’ll find me doing my best to provide practical advice for busy couples looking to get more from life at Engaged Marriage. I’d love to hear from you on Twitter and over at our Facebook page.

As if that’s not enough, I also love sharing my passion for fitness to help busy couples get in shape and rock their marriages in the process over at Fit Marriage and through our podcast The Fit Marriage Show. If you’d like to get fit in a way that fits your family’s hectic schedule, please check out our Thrive90 Fitness program, grab some free training programs or visit us on Facebook.

Thank you once again for sharing these last 28 days with me. I’m truly honored to help you make the most of your marriage. I look forward to hearing from you.