

# *A Short Course* **in Marriage**

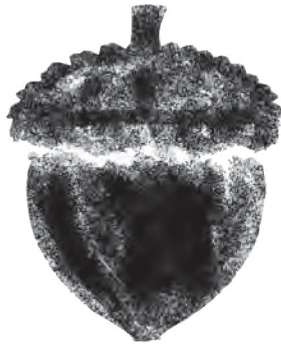
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Moving from  
Frustration  
to Fulfillment

Edward B. Mitchell, D.Min., LMFT  
Sharon L. Thompson, MA, LMFT

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# About This Book

This course contains the wisdom, experience, and skills of two marriage and family therapists with more than 50 years of professional experience between them. The focus of the content of this short course is on *what works*. Few thoughts are truly original. We, the authors, are grateful for the learnings we have gained from clients, teachers, writers and literature, ancient and new.

This course is designed for those couples who are committed to their marriage and wish to address their marriage from the level of tuning up to the level of major overhaul. If you are willing to expand your thinking and awareness about your marriage and willing to work for changes based on your contributions to your marital experience, this course can help you.

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# About the Authors

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# Acknowledgements

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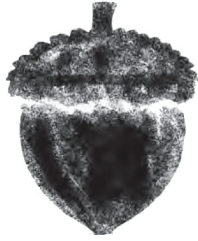
# Preface

The writing of this book came about as a result of our desire to share the experience and wisdom that have resulted from our years as practicing marriage and family therapists. Finding a quality therapy experience for a troubled marriage can be a difficult process in and of itself. Consumers of counseling are often not in a good position to assess the skill and appropriateness of the therapy they receive. Couples seeking counseling are often at the mercy of the helpful intentions of others suggesting a counselor or may be faced with the difficult task of deciphering promotional websites which now abound and espouse the benefits of a practitioner's services.

This book is written in the hope that couples seeking help for their marriage will have a pragmatic guide to what has been found helpful to our clients over the years. Marital counseling can be both emotionally and financially expensive, and couples deserve clarity about what they can expect to receive from a counseling process. Of course the results of any such process depend on the honesty and willingness of the participants to do what is necessary to accomplish their goals. Therefore, it is important that clear goals be set and that their accomplishment be a measure of the value of the help they receive.

In these pages we hope you will find ideas and guidelines that will help you form appropriate expectations and intentions for the development and healing of your marital relationship. By no means does this book contain all the wisdom, skills, and tools necessary for the continuing task of healthy marital life. The intention in this writing is to be a pragmatic and encouraging guide to help marriages thrive.





*We chose the acorn as a symbol and marker for our writing because we see it representing the “nutshells” of wisdom we hope to plant in your world and ours for the betterment and blessing of marriages and families. The acorn is a ubiquitous seed scattered through forests and neighborhoods; seeding new life, feeding present life, and promising to carry life on to future generations.*



# CHAPTER 1

## *Willingness*

“We come to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly.”

—*Sam Keen*

“One advantage of marriage is that, when you fall out of love with him or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until you fall in again.”

—*Judith Viorst*

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*In this chapter you will learn marriage is not about your spouse changing to make life happy and easier for you. Instead, you will learn that willingness to grow in self-awareness and maturity leads to deeper personal integrity and satisfaction. The more we know about ourselves, the better able we are to relate to another person.*

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The topic of love has always had a tendency toward magical thinking. From childhood stories like Cinderella to Hollywood movies, love seems to conquer all, no matter the adversity. While charming and even touching to our childlike hearts, grown-up loving is quite different. Committed love requires a willingness to grow, work, grieve, and take responsibility. Fairy tales most often leave out these things.

## The Role of Willingness in Relationships

Most adults give intellectual assent to the proposition that adult loving involves work and responsibility. But too many adults don't see the need for their own personal growth and maturity for successful loving relationships. When push comes to shove, we tend to assume ourselves to be mature and insightful. We believe, with our childhood years behind, we have grown up. This belief is misleading.

Growing up, maturing, and gaining self-understanding are lifelong processes. Many choose not to participate in these processes and remain children in emotional and relational ways.

These people can be hard to spot, *especially* when they are us. Such people may be professionally accomplished, financially successful, and hold positions of power in society. However, we would see these people very differently if we were married to

*Nothing reveals our level of personal growth and maturity as clearly as participation in a long-term, intimate, committed relationship.*

them. Nothing reveals our level of personal growth and maturity as clearly as participation in a long-term, intimate, committed relationship. This is where we really get naked, in ways we may not have expected. This is where we reveal and expose ourselves as perhaps no one else, even ourselves, has seen before. We cannot hide in marriage, and this is both a burden and a gift.

This is where willingness becomes crucial, willingness not only to work on a relationship, but also to grow in self-awareness and responsibility for who we are and how we act in an intimate relationship. A great temptation that erodes personal willingness is the desire to escape from this responsibility by focusing on the problems and developmental issues of our partner. Countless hours and dollars are wasted in marital therapy because a couple's primary motivation is proving the other to be at fault for their marital dysfunction. This approach never works and only brings greater pain and frustration. Blaming may be an attempt to achieve change without personal risk or effort, or it may be an attempt to avoid the pain and responsibility of self-awareness. Willingness, on the other hand, is the committed intention to both be open to doing something and giving the effort—mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical—to make change happen.

Willingness is clearly connected to commitment; for without commitment to bond and bind us in a relationship, we would more easily succumb to the temptation of blaming our partner and seeking out the next, “better” partner. Ask any experienced marital therapist, and they will tell you how common and unsuccessful this pattern is. The flaw in this mindset is revealed by the increased rate of divorce in second and third marriages. It is better to closely examine our own







ability to exercise our willpower to make it work. Willingness is not about control and forcing an outcome. Willingness is almost the opposite. It's about surrender. Surrender is an ego-disturbing term; it rubs us the wrong way. Our culture and our egos like words such as *victory*, *overcoming*, and *accomplishment*. But these concepts often depend on our willfulness to control ourselves and external factors, and in marriage that means controlling our partner. This doesn't tend to work too well. When we attempt to control another, we sow seeds of resentment that will become weeds in our marital garden.

To understand the inevitable reaction to our attempts to control, try this experiment. Ask your partner, child, or friend to hold out a hand, palm facing you, fingers pointed up. Don't tell them what you're up to; just ask them to try something with you. Then, take your own hand and slowly begin to push the other person's hand back. You will discover that most often the other person will automatically push back. It is an almost involuntary response, a basic instinct. Yet we try to push our partners and relationships, and we are often surprised and disappointed when they push back.

*When we attempt to control another, we sow seeds of resentment that will become weeds in our marital garden.*

Surrender in a relationship between two healthy adults is a necessary ingredient for intimacy and more fulfilling love. It is not a sign of weakness—quite the contrary, it is an indication that one has a strong enough sense of self and well-being that they can allow another to influence them without being reactive. The basis of healthy surrender has its

foundation in trust. Such trust has its strongest foundation in a faith in something larger than ourselves. For Christians this is belief in the loving nature of God as evidenced in the life and words of Jesus. Without such faith and trust, we tend to carry anxiety and vulnerability that lead us to believe we have to take care of ourselves against the harsh world, a threatening world that includes our partner. Such fear overburdens intimate relationships with the responsibilities of self-protection that can only lead to stress and mistrust. Relief from this anxiety will not be found in a marital relationship by itself but in the larger context of a healthy and trusting relationship with God.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. What is your belief about surrendering in an intimate relationship?
2. Identify three occasions where you have surrendered in your relationship.
3. Name three occasions where your partner has surrendered in your relationship.
4. How would you like to develop surrendering in your relationship?

## The Power of Listening

Surrender depends on trust in something bigger than ourselves, bigger than our partner, and bigger than our marriage. It means allowing God and our partner to influence us, and to allow this we must listen, both to our partner and to our God. Without a listening relationship with God, our

vulnerabilities and insecurities will once again seek to define reality, and this allows our fears and anxieties too much power. Learning to listen to God teaches us to have a loving, trusting relationship with our Creator and frames the context in which we relate to all others, including our marital partner.

Such listening to God has to be practiced and become a regular part of our daily experience. The challenges, vicissitudes, and threats of everyday life will drive us to defensiveness unless we

experience a regular relationship with this power, which is able to bring us a sense of well-being in the face of all life presents to us.

By *regular relationship*, we mean one that is practiced and developed on a daily basis,

through prayer, reading, and

quiet time, time when our own thoughts might recede enough to allow us to hear the influence of God in our lives.

*Without a listening relationship with God, our vulnerabilities and insecurities will once again seek to define reality.*

Held in the arms of God, we are better equipped to relate to life and to our partner. We have greater strength to look at who we really are, who we might become, and what is being asked of us in our relationship with God and with our partner.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. What helps you pay attention to your partner when they are talking to you?
2. What tells you your partner is or isn't listening to you?
3. What enables you to sense the presence and guidance of God in your life?

## The Possibilities of Openness

Willingness is strongly related to openness. Openness is dependent on trust and the ability to risk. Partnership is a risk because it requires us to change and grow, to be self-aware and honest. Essentials for a successful and healthy relationship with a partner are found in the very nature of how God has created us. We can accept the way God has created us or we can refuse the deal and essentially become our own god, defining as best we can what life is about and how we will live it. For many of us, this has not worked well, despite our best intentions. Battered and brought to our knees, we have pleaded for a better way, one beyond our own ability to create. From our knees, we have found the basic truth that God is God; we are not. This is the beginning of wisdom and the ability to genuinely listen, to be genuinely willing to change, and to be willing to be willing.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. Identify a time when you have been most open to your partner.
2. What do you think allowed this openness?
3. When have you experienced your partner most open to you?
4. What do you think allowed their openness?

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**It is our willingness to be open, listening to ourselves and to our partner, which best prepares us for the growing and loving tasks of marriage.**

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