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—Pat Love, Ed.D., author, *The Truth About Love*

# Getting It **Right**

## the **First Time**

Creating  
a Healthy  
Marriage



**BARRY & EMILY J. MCCARTHY**

Getting It **Right** the **First Time**



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Creating a Healthy Marriage

***BARRY McCARTHY, Ph.D. and EMILY J. McCARTHY***

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# CHAPTER 1

## What to Do after You Say “I Do”

We have more scientific information about marital processes and outcomes than at any time in history. So why is it so difficult to create a healthy, stable marriage? Human behavior is multi-causal and multidimensional; there are no simple answers. There are no hard-and-fast rules that guarantee a happy, secure marriage. If that is what you are hoping for, you have the wrong book (any book that promises guaranteed marital success is aimed at selling copies, not at being honest or empowering you to create a healthy marriage).

This book provides information, guidelines (not rules), and strategies based on scientific and clinical studies of successful marriages. Unfortunately, there is clearer understanding of what does not work than of what does. One of the frustrations in psychological research is that it is easier to pinpoint problem behavior and predict what will fail than what will succeed. There is *not* “one right way” to be married.

Marriage is the most popular voluntary institution in our culture. Although the United States has one of the highest divorce rates in the world, it also has one of the highest marriage and remarriage rates. A healthy marriage meets needs for intimacy and security better than any other human relationship.

For such a highly valued institution, little attention is paid to developing and maintaining a satisfying, stable marital bond. Love songs, peer discussions, and self-help books emphasize finding the right person to marry. The naive assumption is that once a couple are married, love will overcome all problems. Love is *not* enough. The marital bond of respect, trust, and intimacy must be developed, nurtured, and reinforced. Marriage cannot rest on its laurels. Marriage is an ongoing process: You cannot be complacent after 5, 15, 25, or even 55 years.

Couples come into their marriage from quite different backgrounds and living experiences. Some have known each other for less than a year, others have been a couple for over 5 years; many are cohabitating, others would not think of having intercourse until marriage; most do not have a child, but many have a child from a previous relationship or marriage; for most this is a first marriage for both, but for many one partner had previously been married. Although you need to consider these guidelines from the unique experience of your lives and relationship, newly married couples face very similar challenges.

A wise partner choice is only the first step in creating a satisfying, stable marriage. Those who believe marrying the right person is all there is to marriage are in for a rude

awakening. People think divorce occurs after many years of marriage, the major causes being falling out of love or having an affair. Empirically, that is wrong. More couples divorce in the first 2 years of marriage than at any other time. The median year for marriage to end in divorce is the 7th. After 20 years of marriage the divorce rate is relatively low. Folklore pushes the myth that having a child stabilizes a troubled marriage. In fact, the opposite occurs—the most common time a couple separate is 3 months before or 3 months after the birth of a first child.

The first 2 years are crucial in building a solid marital foundation. The guideline of waiting at least 2 years before the birth of a child provides time to develop a strong, vital marital bond. The most important relationship in a family is the husband-wife bond, which needs at least 2 years to mature.

“Romantic love,” idealization of the partner and relationship, is transformed into mature intimacy and a respectful bond. Idealization changes to realistic acceptance of the spouse for the person he is, with strengths and stellar characteristics, as well as weaknesses and vulnerabilities. At its core, marriage is a respectful, trusting friendship. Emotional and sexual intimacy energize your marital bond and reinforce special feelings. Realistic acceptance means acknowledging weaknesses and problems, but not allowing these to subvert your marriage. There are no perfect people and no perfect marriages. Optimism and commitment are based on mature acceptance and willingness to address problems, not on pretending or idealizing.

### What Do You Know about Marriage?

How much do you really know about marriage? Many people believe it is common sense and they know it all. Are you willing to take a test? Do not worry about performance anxiety—you will not be graded.

#### TRUE-FALSE TEST

1. The honeymoon is a great way to start a marriage, especially sexually.
2. The “honeymoon phase” lasts at least 6 months.
3. The first year of marriage is the happiest
4. Having a baby during the first year results in greater marital stability.
5. If you communicate and love each other, everything will be fine.
6. Couples who establish a good premarital sexual relationship find marital sex requires little additional effort.
7. The biggest problem couples face is dealing with in-laws.
8. Sex is most satisfying during the first year of marriage.
9. Couples find it easy to develop a money management and budgeting system.
10. Avoiding conflicts and patching over disagreements is the best way to maintain marital harmony.
11. Traditional roles for men and women (for example, he mows the lawn and she does the cooking) are most satisfying.
12. When the wife earns more money, couples enjoy a better relationship.
13. Planning a child reduces sexual fun and spontaneity.
14. Same-sex friends give the most honest, best advice about marriage.



15. It is important to guard individuality and avoid interdependence.
16. It is crucial to merge as a couple and give up autonomy.
17. Having a child strengthens a shaky marriage.
18. The male should be the sexual initiator.
19. The couple need not discuss a 2- or 5-year plan, just let their lives evolve.
20. Maintaining individual friends and interests is a threat to the marriage.
21. Seeking couple therapy or attending a relationship workshop is an indication the marriage is in trouble.
22. People from different backgrounds have the most interesting and successful marriages.
23. The birth of a planned, wanted child heralds a time of greater couple intimacy.
24. Most affairs occur after 10 years of marriage.
25. Most divorces occur after 10 years of marriage.

Add the number of *true* answers you checked. This tells you the number of myths you believe about marriage. This was a marital myth test. All the items are false. Do not be embarrassed; the average number checked true is nine. Marital myths are rampant in our culture. “Pop psychology” books, talk shows, and discussions with same-sex friends add to the misinformation and confusion.

Although there has been a great deal of high-quality research and writing about marriage in the past 20 years, myths and confusion still abound. Naively optimistic myths have given way to cynical, jaded myths. Myths die hard. You can benefit from awareness and understanding of what a satisfying, stable marriage requires. Knowledge is power.

### Core Couple Processes

Getting married is only the first step. The 2 major tasks during the first 2 years of marriage are to build a strong marital bond of respect, trust, and intimacy and to develop a comfortable, satisfying marital style. Establishing a mutually satisfying couple style, complementary, conflict-minimizing, best friend, or emotionally expressive, is a foundation for a healthy marriage.

There are four important things you need to do as a couple:

1. Develop a communication pattern in which you empathically listen, make clear requests, and give supportive feedback.
2. Identify conflicts and difficulties, discuss alternatives, problemsolve, and reach viable agreements.
3. Share emotional and sexual intimacy so your bond is nurtured and energized.
4. Enjoy each other, share activities and your lives.

Most couples, even those who have lived together for years or are in a second marriage, find it takes at least 6 months after marriage to develop a couple style. It might sound simple, but it is an individualistic, complex, multidimensional task that takes thought, communication, refinement, and feedback.

Developing a strong marital bond and a functional couple style are crucial tasks. If they are not successfully negotiated, you develop bad habits and destructive patterns of

thinking, communicating, and dealing with problems that can subvert the most hopeful, loving marriage.

The cultural myth holds love is all you need. The scientific evidence is that loving feelings are necessary but are not sufficient. In fact, romantic love seldom lasts more than a year after marriage. Unless idealized romance is replaced by mature intimacy, the relationship degenerates into frustration and disappointment. A classic song, “You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling,” reflects the myth that if love leaves, the relationship must be doomed. Idealized romantic love is better for songs, novels, and movies than for real-life marriages. A satisfying, viable marriage is based on developing and maintaining a bond of respect, trust, and intimacy. Romantic love marriages are exciting but unstable. Marriage cannot live up to romantic fantasies. Marriage is based on a respectful, trusting friendship made special and energized by emotional and sexual intimacy. A marriage based on romantic love is transient and unstable. Mature love is strengthened by respect, trust, intimacy, realistic expectations, and commitment.

### Marital Poisons

Healthy marriage requires that you not only reinforce positive feelings and experiences but avoid traps that poison and destroy your relationship. Be aware of potential marital poisons. The factor most commonly mentioned is lack of communication. In fact, poor communication is not among the top five poisons. The main poisons are (a) losing respect for the spouse, (b) inability to deal with and resolve conflicts, (c) playing the “what if” or comparison game, (d) breaking the trust bond, (e) a sexual dysfunction or conflict. Rather than your hoping or praying your marriage will not experience problems, we urge prevention and early intervention.

Any marriage will be fine as long as everything goes well. The test of a viable marriage is the ability to successfully address differences and conflicts. Deal with differences and problems to ensure they do not turn into a marital poison. If you are disappointed or hurt by something your spouse has said or done, constructively address the issue rather than allowing destructive thoughts and angry feelings to fester. Accepting your spouse for her strengths *and* weaknesses is a sign of genuine respect. When you lose respect for the spouse, your marriage is in major trouble.

Fifty percent of marriages experience sexual problems—whether a dysfunction, extramarital affair, or fertility issue. Deal with this as an acute problem; work together to resolve it. If sex becomes a chronic problem, especially inhibited sexual desire, it turns into a poison that robs the marriage of intimacy and vitality. Couples fall into the guilt-blame trap that reinforces this self-defeating pattern. Address issues as a respectful, intimate team. Even if a conflict or problem cannot be successfully resolved, you can stop its poisonous effects.

### Who We Are and Why We Wrote This Book

Barry and Emily have been married 37 years. We began writing together in 1980; this is our eighth coauthored book.

This has been an enjoyable book to write. In Barry’s work as a clinical psychologist, marriage therapist, and sex therapist, he deals with people whose lives and marriages are experiencing major problems. Prevention truly is the best, cheapest, and most efficacious way to address marital issues. Our hope is that in your reading this book, discussing guidelines, engaging in exercises, being aware of traps, and learning from case studies, your marriage will be stronger and more satisfying.

When we married in 1966 we could have used a book like this. Although we would not have followed all the guidelines—we like to make our own decisions—we would have welcomed the chance to discuss issues and focus on what was relevant for us. This is what we hope you will do with our book.

*Getting It Right the First Time* is not meant to be read as a text-book. Each chapter is self-contained. The material can be read for information and ideas, but it is best used as an interactive learning medium. We encourage you to read together and discuss what is important for you. One technique is to take turns reading aloud, stopping at important points to discuss. Another method is for each person to underline or star the points he feels are relevant. Next the other person reads it, underlining or marking what is important to her. Then discuss issues. We encourage you to engage in exercises that are of interest and feel free to skip those which are not. Try relevant strategies, skills, and coping techniques.

This is a book of ideas, guidelines, and exercises, not a do-it-yourself therapy book. The more information and understanding you have, the better decisions you will make. Knowledge is power. We draw on case studies of clients Barry has treated (identities have been disguised) as well as personal experiences to provide concrete illustrations for concepts. Exercises help you assess and change attitudes, behaviors, and feelings. Exercises offer a specific, individualized approach to creating a satisfying, stable marriage.

A healthy marriage is a major contributor to psychological well-being. Being in a respectful, trusting, intimate marriage brings out the best in each person. Marriage meets needs for intimacy and security better than any other human relationship.

Marriage should not dominate your life or self-esteem. Ideally, a healthy marriage would contribute one-quarter to self-esteem. Self-esteem transcends marital status or even the quality of your marriage.

You deserve a marriage that promotes rather than subverts your psychological well-being. If this is not true for you, we strongly suggest seeking therapy (Appendix A offers suggestions for finding a competent, trusted marriage therapist). People think of marital therapy during a crisis or after they have been married many years. The most effective and cost-beneficial marital therapy is with new couples who have not developed bad habits or chronic problems. Early intervention is most effective when both people are motivated to deal with acute problems and strengthen their marital bond.

Throughout our marriage, we have continued to change as individuals and our relationship has grown. If we had known what we know now, there are a number of things we would have done differently, especially in the first 2 years of marriage. Neither of us grew up with marriages that were good models. We were committed to do better, especially not to engage in the physical violence or intimidating threats that characterized our families of origin. We take pride in having honored our agreement about violence. Avoiding “poisons” is crucial.

During the early years, we wish we had been better able to communicate feelings and requests, had better problem-solving skills, found more equitable ways to reach decisions, and emphasized nondemand pleasuring and intimate sexual experiences. We would have benefited from marital enhancement classes and groups, which are described in Appendix B. Our marriage survived because we were highly motivated to create a successful marital bond. Our bond did grow, although we stumbled on several occasions. Both of us worried (interestingly, about different issues), but neither threatened divorce nor tried to manipulate or intimidate the spouse. We adopted the “best friend” marital style during our second year, which fits us well.

Emily feels the major “glue” of our marriage is taking walks—sometimes we walk for companionship and exercise, often we walk and share thoughts, feelings, plans, and dreams. Sometimes we use walks to talk out differences and conflicts, other times walks are to emotionally connect. Walking and talking is our time to deal with personal and couple feelings. Barry feels a major resource has been our respect for individual styles and goals while continuing to put a high priority on coupleness. Our friends joke that we have the most individualistic marriage they know, while our adult children see us as having a traditional marriage. They complained we were too much of a parental team and did not portray our individuality. Both views are true—we are a close, intimate team and we value autonomy and individuality. Establishing a healthy balance between autonomy and coupleness is a chief task in creating a satisfying, stable marriage.

### Your Marital Commitment

Choosing a spouse and saying “I do” is one of the easier parts of marriage. Marriage is not a movie where “The End” flashes on the screen. The ceremony is just the beginning. Creating a marriage that is satisfying and stable requires thought, time, communication, experimentation, feedback, and realistic expectations. The marital bond of respect, trust, and intimacy must remain vital.

Our favorite metaphor for marriage is a garden (Emily is an avid gardener and Barry contributes sweat equity). You choose a good spot, plant a variety of vegetables, herbs, and flowers, water regularly, diligently weed, pick and prune, enjoy the beauty of your garden, and at the end of the season rototill and prepare for next year. A garden requires thought, attention, and effort while providing food, seasonings, beauty, and the smell of flowers. It is important to choose a spouse whom you respect, trust, and can grow with. Marriage involves shared activities, interests, and values. Your relationship requires attention and nurturing, trust is reinforced, difficulties are addressed and problems solved, you share emotional and sexual intimacy, and individual and couple growth is welcomed. Your marital bond needs to be nurtured and valued if it is to remain vital, satisfying, and secure.

### Closing Thoughts

The best time to work on a marriage is the first 2 years. The best strategy is prevention and the second-best is early intervention. If you build a solid base in the early years, you

inoculate yourself against major problems in the future. It is not that transitions, differences, conflicts, and problems will not occur—they will. Dealing with problems, losses, and conflicts is part of marriage. Develop problem-solving skills, emotional resources, and positive, realistic expectations. Be open to and welcome change. This book with its information, guidelines, exercises, case studies, strategies, and skills will help you create a healthy, satisfying, stable marriage.

## CHAPTER 2

# Strengthening Your Bond: Respect, Trust, and Intimacy

The core of marriage is a respectful, trusting friendship. Emotional and sexual intimacy provides special feelings and energizes your marital bond. The central tasks in the first two years of marriage are to strengthen your marital bond and develop a comfortable, functional couple style. If the marital bond is weak or you do not develop a satisfying couple style, your marriage is vulnerable to dissatisfaction, dysfunction, and divorce.

In most marriage books, communication is given prime billing—especially communicating feelings. “Pop psychology” writers and media gurus promise that good communication guarantees a successful marriage. We believe in and advocate clear and honest communication, but empirical research demonstrates communication is *not* the prime element in a healthy marriage. The core element is developing and maintaining a marital bond of respect, trust, and intimacy. Communication is important but cannot substitute for a solid marital bond.

The core of your marital bond is respect for each other and respecting the marriage you have created. You trust the spouse has your best interest in mind, will honor agreements, and not do anything to intentionally subvert you or the marriage. You can enhance emotional openness and vulnerability while enjoying sexual intimacy. Within this context, the principles of open, clear, and direct communication are of great value. These same communication techniques in the context of a nonrespectful, nontrusting relationship with a gross power imbalance are destructive. For communication to be valuable, you need an equitable power balance, self-respect, respect for your spouse, and a trusting relationship. Otherwise, communication techniques can be used in a dishonest or manipulative manner.

### Respect, Trust, and Intimacy

Respect, trust, and intimacy are the mantra for marriage. Each component is necessary with the whole being more than the parts. We discuss each separately and then examine how to integrate these core elements into your marriage. Although there are differences for each marital style, your bond has to be solid and secure.

*Respect*

Respect is the cornerstone of marriage. Respecting the spouse and accepting him with strengths and weaknesses is the basis for a healthy marriage. Knowing, understanding, and accepting your spouse for the person he is, with stellar as well as problematic characteristics, clashes with the cultural ideal of romantic love. Respect is based on a clear view of your spouse, different from the romantic love approach that idealizes the spouse and places him on a pedestal. Romantic love builds an idealistic, perfectionistic picture. Respect involves being aware of personal characteristics and behaviors that are problematic, rather than pretending they do not exist. Respect involves awareness of the person's positive and negative traits. Knowing your spouse, warts and all, and still being loving and respectful is a powerful personal validation that provides a solid marital foundation. This is very different from the romantic love myth of idealizing your partner and relationship. It is a powerful affirmation of self-worth and marital viability.

Respecting your spouse does not entail unconditional acceptance of her behavior—contrary to the romantic love admonition “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” In a respectful, trusting marriage, you say you are sorry often; that is normal and healthy. Respect does not mean you agree with everything your spouse believes or does. It does mean listening in a respectful, caring manner. Validating your spouse's feelings does not mean you agree with the spouse on content issues. Each person has a right to her or his feelings. Marriages work best when you communicate empathy. You then negotiate changes and agreements based on a positive influence model. This contrasts with noncontingent acceptance on one extreme and intimidation or coercion on the other extreme.

It is crucial to not demean your spouse, especially in front of children, family, or friends. This includes not demeaning your spouse even in your own thoughts. You want to be a supporter, not a critic. When your spouse is experiencing a problem at work, a phobia, or depression—be empathic and supportive, not blaming or condescending. Be aware of and emphasize your spouse's strengths and coping abilities. Help him confront and deal with the problem; denying or pretending does not serve either the person or the marriage. People like us for our strengths and successes. Your spouse loves and respects you with strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. For example, Barry's lack of skill with mechanical and perceptual motor tasks is a major deficit and source of embarrassment. Emily is a friendly, outgoing person who practically hyperventilates when faced with groups of 10 or more in a formal setting. We accept problem areas, realizing some are not changeable. We acknowledge weaknesses without decreasing love or respect. Difficult areas are monitored and addressed. Support your spouse through the change process. Marriage works best when based on a positive influence model that includes both acceptance and change.

Acknowledge problem areas without losing respect for your spouse. When there is a problem that needs to be dealt with, for example, Barry not monitoring his diabetes or Emily ignoring financial issues, these are confronted, discussed (hopefully, in a nonblaming manner), and problem-solved. Do not put down or punish your spouse. Avoid finger pointing or obsessing. Addressing problems helps maintain a sense of positive influence in your marriage. Maintaining an equitable power balance is crucial for personal respect, respect for your spouse, and respect for your marital bond.

A major task in the first 2 years of marriage is to create a viable couple style—whether complementary, conflict minimizing, best friend, or emotionally expressive. Respect your chosen marital style. Respect is a necessary, but certainly not sufficient, basis for a healthy marriage.

### *Trust*

Trust is a crucial component. When people think of trust they focus on extramarital affairs and jealousy. These are important issues but are not the major element in a trusting marriage. The essence of trust is believing your spouse cares about you and has your best interest in mind. Trust involves both functional and emotional components. A trusting marriage includes the positive, reciprocal assumption that your spouse's intention is to promote your well-being and the well-being of the marriage. A trusting marriage means your spouse would not intentionally hurt you nor subvert the marital bond.

Trust is the emotional bedrock for a healthy marriage. Couples dealing with a crisis or chronic stress successfully cope as long as their sense of trust remains intact. Knowing you support and care about each other allows you to deal with crisis and loss. You trusting your spouse will help you deal with the pain and you will survive as a couple.

When the trust bond has been breached, it is difficult, although certainly not impossible, to rebuild. All couples experience negative feelings, hurt, disappointment, conflict, frustration, and anger because of different needs, perceptions, and preferences. That is a normal part of life and marriage. It is not negative feelings, stress, or conflict that disrupts trust. The spouse acting in a disrespectful or destructive manner is what breaks the trust bond. This includes emotional betrayal, personal put-downs, public humiliation, an extramarital affair, lying, or trying to coverup or deny a problem.

If trust is to be rebuilt, both the content issue and the trust process have to be addressed. It does neither of you nor the marriage any good to pretend the breach of trust did not occur. Rebuilding trust is crucial. Restate understandings and agreements and reinforce the importance of trust. Rebuilding your trust bond requires confronting the problem, taking responsibility for the trust breach, offering a genuine apology, and having a clear understanding about the meaning and value of trust in your lives and marriage.

### *Intimacy*

Emotional and sexual intimacy generate special feelings that reinforce your respectful, trusting relationship. Emotional intimacy nurtures your relationship. Sexual intimacy energizes your marital bond. A chief ingredient of emotional intimacy is freely disclosing feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and desires. This includes both positive and negative feelings. Intimacy is highest in best friend couples and lowest in conflict-minimizing couples, but a sense of intimacy is vital for all marriages. Establishing a mutually comfortable level of intimacy is a major marital task.

Marriage manuals would have you believe the more intimacy the better. This is not true. Each couple establish their comfort zone—it is crucial to maintain personal boundaries and autonomy, and not feel overwhelmed by your spouse's feelings and needs. The balance between being an individual and being a couple, between autonomy