

5 Easy Steps You Can Take RIGHT NOW to Improve Your Marriage



We are Certified Life Coaches Craig and Michelle Perra, and our passion is empowering you to create the relationship you've always wanted—and the one you deserve. Are you bored with your spouse? Do you struggle to communicate effectively with one another? Are you disconnected from your partner? Do you feel stuck in an unhealthy habit cycle with your spouse day after day? Do you wish you could recapture the closeness you had when you first met? Are you turning to pornography instead of intimacy with your partner? We can help.

Many traditional models, like couples therapy, just don't work for some people. Couples counseling didn't work for us—at least not as well as it could have. There were a number of times when we were ready to pack it in. We tried everything, but so much of this work focused on the past, which just caused us more problems. We kept going over well-covered, painful ground. We never learned to move forward. We never had an action-oriented, results-driven plan that showed us a path to bring closeness back into our marriage. We had to find our way ourselves. The good news is that you don't have to! You can follow our lead.

We help individuals and couples in 14 countries all over the world find happiness and love. One thing we have learned from our own lives and from working with others is that you must take action every day.

That's what this short book is about: ACTION. It's about actually doing something to improve your plight. In these pages we share dozens of powerful tips, teachings, and exercises that you can use right now to improve your marriage immediately.

Like everything else in life, a great relationship takes work. Many of us believe that a successful partnership should be easy and shouldn't require a lot of effort. This way of thinking is simply wrong. It doesn't make sense in any other area of our lives—from working at our jobs to raising our children to pursuing our creative endeavors—and it doesn't make sense here.

Great relationships are created, and then sustained. We can offer lots of easy steps, all of which require only a little time and effort, toward creating the relationship and life you want. That's what we focus on in this book: simple things you can do right now to bring more love into your life.

Keep your mind open as you read these pages. We promise there will be a little voice in your head saying, *This will never work* or *These tips are too simple and easy* or *This won't help me* or *My partner will never do these stupid exercises*. Don't listen. That voice got you to where you are today. If you don't believe our plan will work, it won't. Just give it a try.

If you incorporate these steps into your daily life, you will create new and healthy habits. They may seem like simple practices, but they are not. Real change often begins when you take things that seem obvious and incorporate them completely in your life while creating a new perspective on your relationship. It is so important to actively create that change. Take action and move forward!

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Step 1

Learn to understand and respect your partner's point of view.

We are all creatures of habit. You may not be aware that so much of your life is spent unconsciously reacting and repeating the stories from your past—over and over again. Your habits, both positive and negative, are having a significant impact on your relationship.

The first place to start is to openly bring awareness to what is going on in your relationship. It is important to accept that there are three sides to every story: your side, your partner's side, and the truth. The truth generally lies somewhere in the middle of both your sides. There is always another perspective. Everything you see, smell, touch, taste, and hear is filtered through your own built-in system that started to program itself when you were in the womb. Keep in mind that much of your perspective is subjective.

Stop the “I’m right and you’re wrong” approach to dealing with conflict, and instead try to see the reality in all sides. This is crucial to moving forward and creating the relationship you’ve always wanted.

If your partner is frustrated with a certain part of your relationship but you feel like it’s totally fine, it is particularly important for you to see the reality from all angles. Just because something is okay with you doesn’t mean it’s okay for your spouse. For example, you may not think it’s a problem if you have two glasses of wine every night. This helps you unwind and relax. But if your spouse is uncomfortable with your habit, you owe it him to listen. Try to understand his perspective and be willing to see where you can help meet your his needs. Maybe you can cut out wine entirely for a night or two every week, and perhaps this in turn will lead your spouse to admit that nightly drinking, however small, reminds him of his alcoholic mother. Together you can learn and grow.

When you can begin to approach life without having to be right but instead striving to understand your partner's perspective and recognizing that it is equal to your own, you can embrace how to listen with an open mind. Once you begin looking at the different ways of looking at a situation, you can begin to come up with effective solutions. Your defensiveness will disappear, and you will begin to work together to come to a solution instead of constantly fighting to defend your point.

Next time you get into a discussion or a disagreement with your partner, listen. Really hear with an open mind what he or she is trying to get you to understand. The other point of view may not be “right,” but if you try to see the situation through the lens of that reality, then you can begin to change the direction your discussion will take.

Exercise

Replay a recent discussion or disagreement from four perspectives:

1. I'm Right
2. You're Right
3. We Are Both Right.
4. We are Both Wrong.

Do this exercise alone and with your partner. Remember to keep an open mind. If you want to improve your relationship, you need to understand and accept that both parties have a valid point of view. Once you can see that each perspective has meaning you can alter your approach in communicating. It's important for each and every one of us to be heard.

Understanding the truth in both sides of the discussion is crucial to relationship growth. Once you can change your need to be right, your arguments can transform into productive discussions where you can both get what you need and begin to make positive change to your relationship.

Step 2

Communicate what you want.

Great job taking on Step 1. Now it's time to use your new perspective, understanding, and empathy to talk with your partner differently and more effectively. You need to communicate what you want.

This step seems so obvious! We all want to communicate better and have a greater feeling of connection when we talk to our partner. But wanting to improve communication is the easy part. Making actual changes is more challenging.

Next time you initiate a discussion with your partner, think about these questions:

1. What do you really want to accomplish in this discussion?
2. Is your current approach getting you closer to what you want?
3. Using Step 1, what do you think your partner wants from this discussion?
4. How could you approach this discussion differently to get what you want?

For example, imagine you want your partner to spend more weekend time outside with your kids. He prefers to read or play video games. You feel he is isolating himself and neglecting his relationship with your children. He feels he is entitled to spend his free time as he pleases. You have spent the past several months pleading, cajoling, threatening, arguing, and giving him the silent treatment, but nothing has changed. Your answers to the above questions might look like this:

1. What do you really want to accomplish in this discussion?

I want my spouse to take our children outside for several hours each weekend. I need some time alone, and I think it's good for them to get fresh air and exercise and spend some special time together.

2. Is your current approach getting you closer to what you want?

No. We are both angry and feel isolated.

3. Using Step 1, what do you think your partner wants from this discussion?

I think my spouse feels that he works hard during the week and should be able to do what he wants to relax on the weekends. I think he resents when I tell him what to do and I know that when I give him the silent treatment or argue with him, he gives it back twice as hard.

4. How could you approach this discussion differently to get what you want?

I could explain to my partner why I want him to play with our children outside, and ask him why he is reluctant to do so. I could also offer to go with them so that we have family time, which would be nice as well. I could lower my expectations and be satisfied if he takes them outside for just one hour, instead of several, or if they simply walk around the block instead of spending the whole afternoon at the park. Compromise on my end will go along way since he does need down time on the weekends.

If you actively redefine what it means to *win* an argument, you and your partner can take a crucial step in getting closer. Once you can see that winning the argument is really getting what you want, not making your point over and over at an increasing volume or putting down your spouse, you can approach discussions so much differently.

Here are some communication tips that help create discussions, rather than arguments:

- Use “I feel” language instead of “You do” language. (“You just aren’t interested in whether our children stay active,” or “You don’t ever do anything with them!”)
- Refrain from shaming and blaming (“You’re so lazy!” “You’re the reason they’re watching so much TV!”)
- Avoid using the words “always” or “never” when describing what you are feeling. (“You always ignore me when I tell you what I want” “You never get outside anymore and you’re starting to get fat”)
- Let the other person talk without interrupting, and listen. Don’t prepare your response—you’ll get your turn. Just listen.
- When it’s your turn, acknowledge what your spouse said (“I understand that you need quiet time after a hectic workweek”) and then offer your thoughts and opinions while respecting the other’s perspective (“I think you can still have quiet time while getting some fresh air and encouraging our kids to enjoy play time outside”).
- Respect your partner’s words and feelings, and try to support what the other person is saying. Empathy toward another person allows you to see it from their

perspective and then offer a different solution or compromise that supports both of you. (“I know you work hard and are tired. What if I let you sleep in one day on the weekend?”)

Exercise:

Try this exercise to help you begin to communicate in an open way:

I feel _____ when you _____ because it makes me feel _____.

I would like you to do more _____ because it makes me feel _____.

I need more _____ because it helps me to feel _____.

An emotional need I have at this time in my life is _____.

Shifting your perspective and actively changing the way you communicate can be one of the most effective tools in creating a happier life together. You are actively creating an amazing partnership!

Step 3

Be accountable for the negative patterns, habits, and energy you bring to the relationship.

It is important to own and acknowledge the history and emotional baggage you bring to your relationship. We all have to work on ourselves. No one is perfect, and everyone has patterns and habits—some positive and some negative. Tell your partner which behaviors you are working to improve. Most of us are very quick to tell our partner what he or she is doing wrong, but talking about our own faults is hard! But when you can admit to your negative behavior, your partner will often become increasingly willing to do the same. And that brings you closer to getting what you want.

Some negative habits are actually a reaction to your partner's behaviors. You aren't getting what you want or need, so you reactively create behaviors and patterns that satisfy that need. Here is a quick example:

Your partner's porn use has escalated. You feel hurt and insecure that's he's objectifying younger women and that he's not present in the bedroom. You are having sex less frequently, and the sex you are having feels disconnected. He's also always clutching his smartphone, and it drives you crazy and makes you feel even less connected. You begin to resent the phone, and every time he's on it you get triggered and either act aggressively toward him or you stew and grow resentful, which comes out later.

Your partner has a job that requires him to be connected, so he looks at his phone often. Every time you get angry and snap, he gets defensive and retreats further. Remember our new definition of winning an argument: getting what you want. What do you really want here? You want a deeper and connected love, yet you snap and yell every time he picks up the phone. This reaction is inconsistent with what you truly want.

Look past the surface-level problems and focus on what you really want. Ask yourself if your actions are consistent with your goals. If they are not, change them. In this example, you need to open up a dialogue with your partner about the real issues and how you are really feeling. It's not about the phone; it's about the porn. Talk about how you really feel.

When these reactive behaviors are negative, you can find yourself in a never-ending habit cycle. You react to his phone use the same way every time, over and over again. It is important for you to be aware of and account for when this happens.

Until you become accountable for the habits and energy you contribute to the relationship, your patterns will keep repeating. Being aware and accountable for these unhealthy habits allows you to begin breaking down the walls and creating real change. It also enables you to begin creating new habits through fresh awareness and accountability. You can then actively create habits that work with, not against, your partner.

Exercise:

Take some time over the next week to observe your patterns. Look at your interactions with your partner and note the way you communicate with each other. Then answer the following questions. Be sure to write down your answers, which will help you see patterns and analyze them in a more effective way.

- What needs are you trying to meet?
- How are you currently meeting those needs—in a healthy, productive way or a more unhealthy way?
- What habits or patterns have you created in order to meet those needs?
- What is your partner doing to feed into and/or maintain this habit cycle?
- What are you doing to feed into and/or maintain this habit cycle?

Open your mind to the perspective of “three sides to every story” in Step 1, and see where you can improve. Look at this as information, not ammunition. The more you understand yourself and your partner, the more you can actively begin to create healthy change. Without the right information you cannot make productive change. Remember that this exercise is not about who is right and who is wrong—it’s about getting what you want and learning about the energy and patterns that you are responsible for.

Allow your partner to voice his or her frustration without feeling defensive, and own up to these negative patterns. Doing so allows your partner to feel heard and respected. It is also powerful when you can own what you do wrong. Respond with a strong “Yes, I do that, and I need to change it,” not “Yes, I do that and I am a loser” or “No, I would never do that; you’re crazy.” If you are able to own your part, you are much more likely to get your partner to own his or her negative behaviors as well.

* What negative habits do you fall into when communicating with your partner?

* How can you change those habits just by changing your perspective on “being right”?

Step 4

Emphasize the positive aspects of your relationship.

What does your partner do that makes you feel loved? Most of us tend to focus on what is wrong in our relationships, but when you emphasize what is good and what makes you happy, your partner is more likely to respond to the things you would both like to improve on.

Positivity breeds more positivity. Tell your partner when he or she does something that makes you feel good. Do not assume your partner knows what you like and what you want, and avoid dropping hints rather than communicating directly. If you want something, it is best to be clear and descriptive—in a positive way. Let your partner know exactly when he or she takes action that makes you happy or helps you feel loved. And if there is something you want, be specific about it while maintaining your positive attitude.

Exercise:

1. Make a list of 10 things your partner does that make you feel loved.
2. Make a list of several things your partner used to do that you would love to have more of now.

This is a great way to foster communication, learn how to express your needs, and give your partner real examples of what he or she is doing right. Be open to your partner's perspective. Remember, this is information, not ammunition. This is a way to learn more about your partner, your relationship, and yourself. Share your lists together and talk about it. Here are some things to think about and discuss:

- Is there anything you think you do that your partner just isn't receiving?
- Why is he or she unable to receive it?
- Is there anything that your partner is doing that you may just not be able to receive?
- Why you unable to be open to it?

Be open to the possibility that you are doing something that isn't effective for your partner. We all receive and connect in different ways, so be willing to consider to a new

approach. You might show your love by doing the laundry, but your partner might prefer that you leave it for him and spend half an hour talking when he gets home.

- Think about how you can give the same thing, but in a language that your partner connects with. Accept that your way is not the only way, and be open to trying new approaches.
- Use this as a way to open up honest communication and focus on bringing in more of the positive. This is a great step toward creating greater intimacy.

After you talk about your lists, make sure you carry this exercise through in your daily life. When your partner does something that makes you feel loved, let him or her know. Do this right in that moment. Don't wait until later, and don't assume that he or she already knows. For example:

If your partner makes you coffee every day, don't just take the cup and grunt your thanks. Try something like, "Thank you, sweetie! I love it when you make my coffee in the morning. It makes me feel cared for, and I appreciate that."

If you have to address something negative or ask your partner to do more of something or behave differently, remember to emphasize some positive first. Starting with the negative can put your partner on the defensive and then they aren't able to hear what you are saying objectively. And that doesn't help you get closer to what you want.

Let's say your partner hardly ever helps with the evening chores. Here is a way to bring up a discussion in a positive and productive way: "I appreciate how hard you work, and you do a great job when I need you to help out with the kids. I really appreciate that. I do need a little more help at night, though. I want to share with you where I am at when you come home and how overwhelmed I feel at night. I also want to understand what you need so we can come to a healthy compromise that supports us both."

Bringing some positive points into the discussion helps your partner feel less attacked and opens up the dialogue for more productive discussions. Everyone thrives on positive reinforcement, and this step will attract more of that.

Step 5

Make time for each other.

It is so important for couples to make time for one another, but it is also so easy to neglect this step. We often hear people say “We don’t have time” or “Life got too crazy,” but these are excuses. You get out of your relationship what you put into it.

It’s way too easy to let distractions get in the way of connecting with the person you love. We all prioritize lots of different things—kids, activities, friends, work, texting, TV. We even manage to carve out a few minutes for Facebook. If you can find time for this many things, you can prioritize your relationship on a daily basis.

Make extra effort every day to give your partner the three As: **ATTENTION**, **APPRECIATION**, and **AFFECTION**. Prioritize the three As like you do other things in your life. Put them in your calendar, set reminders on your phone, and create simple daily habits that promote this habit every day. **Every day.** You don’t always have to plan elaborate date nights. Making time for each other can be as simple as taking a few moments to talk about your day, calling in the afternoon just to say hi, having date night in the house after the kids go to bed, meeting at a coffee shop for a 20-minute break...you get the idea. The important thing is to make this a daily habit.

- **Attention:** Be attentive to your partner. Look at your spouse when he or she is talking, let your partner know he or she is important to you, and give compliments often. Put down your phone or turn off the computer when your partner is talking to you. Giving your partner undivided attention shows that he or she is important to you.
- **Appreciation:** This goes back to Step 4 and emphasizing the positive. Let your partner know every day how much you appreciate the things he or she does and the person he or she is. Never assume your partner knows this already. Repeat yourself! Humans thrive on positivity, and being appreciative is key to creating more positive in your life.
- **Affection:** We all crave affection. Physical affection feels good, soothes our soul, and helps us feel a secure bond with each other. Sometime all it takes is something simple.

Here are a few examples to help you start giving lots of affection:

- Give your partner a full-body loving hug in the morning, after work, and before bed. Hugging feels good.
- Hold hands, even just for a minute.
- Gently put your hand on your spouse's arm while he or she is talking.
- Give your partner a loving (and sometimes HOT) kiss when you haven't seen each other all day.
- Pat your spouse on the butt as you walk by.
- When watching TV, get physical in some way—massage shoulders, brush hair, cuddle, give a foot run, etc.

Exercise:

1. Make a list of actions you can take every day to show your partner more attention, appreciation, and affection. Aim for five actions for each category.
2. Create an action plan of when, where, and how you will take these actions every day. Make it a daily goal.
3. Write down five examples for every category that YOU would like more of from your partner.

Both of you should do this exercise, then share your lists with each other. Be open to what your partner needs and commit to providing it. And if you still think you don't have time, here is a great, easy way to make time for each other.

Here is a way to connect even with our busy schedules! We can always find one spare minute!

Date Minute

Do you have a minute? Then you can do this every day! Stop what you are doing, be present in the moment with your partner, and do something carefree and fun for one minute. You can do it with the kids around or while you are cooking or cleaning. The important thing is that you do Date Minute every day. Here are just a few examples of things you can do during your Date Minute:

- Dance—silly or slow (it doesn't matter as long as you are together)
- Stare into each other's eyes
- Face each other and match your breaths—in together, out together
- Hug
- Kiss
- Massage each other's feet
- Have a pillow fight

Date minute is a great way to reconnect every day, even when your busy schedules don't allow for much. Start focusing on solutions, not excuses. Try Date Minute every day for a week!

I want to congratulate you on taking these steps. Change NEVER happens unless we do something about it. So take a moment and celebrate the first step to creating a happier relationship. You've made a choice to take action—celebrate that fact and know that with some work you can create the relationship you truly want.



These tools are very simple but can have a profound effect on your life and your relationship. We encourage you to think about these tips each and every day. Create your own healthy habits in your life by using these tools. Every great relationship starts with an open mind and a desire to grow.

It's so important to take positive action in your life. That's why we offer powerful coaching programs for men, women & couples to help create a GREAT LIFE. If you need more help, call us at **916-259-1232** or email Michelle at michelle@theconnectioncoaches.com or Craig at craig@theconnectioncoaches.com.

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