

Change Yourself and Change Your Marriage

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One of the unexpected -- and earliest -- realities of marriage is that your partner is not perfect. You discover that your partner has faults and annoying habits that you would like to change. However, a characteristic of human nature is that it is difficult to change another person, even if such change would be in that person's best interest.

When you become upset or disappointed with your imperfect partner, four things often happen:

1. You blame your partner for your unhappiness. You judge your partner's behavior as wrong, unfair or unjust.
2. You fail to see your contribution to the problem. In many, but not all cases, your attitudes or behaviors have played some role in the occurrence and persistence of the problem.
3. You attempt to get your partner to change his or her behavior.
4. Your partner becomes defensive and resists change.

Consider this example. James and Robyn have been married eight years and have three children, ages two, four, and seven. James comes home and feels overwhelmed by the apparent disorder and confusion. He thinks to himself, "What has Robyn been doing all day? I can't handle this mess everyday." James wants to eat and relax, and he blames his wife for not providing a calm and orderly home. He fails to understand that Robyn is worn out and that he usually does little to help with the house work and kids. Without really seeing beyond his own view, James criticizes his wife and Robyn feels accused of laziness and incompetence. She gets defensive and blames him for not helping her more.

In many conflict situations such as this, little is accomplished because the focus of change is on the spouse. The spouse, however, is not likely to alter his/her habits or personality just because the other spouse desires it. No matter how hard you try to squeeze change out of your partner, he or she will change only when the person wants to change.

But if you can't change your partner, how can you solve the relationship problem? One answer is this: you can effect some change in the relationship if you are willing to CHANGE YOURSELF!

The focus of change becomes you, NOT YOUR PARTNER. Consider the words of Norma Tarazi, an authority on Muslim families:

In most cases [of interpersonal conflict], both people have made some mistakes in dealing with each other. But the other person's mistakes are not your concern. When you want to improve a relationship...you improve yourself and make your behavior the best possible. You cannot force another individual to change and be the way you want...that is up to him or her.... Correct your behavior so the responsibility for this [problem] becomes as little your fault as possible... hoping perhaps that the other person will change, but not demanding it as an outcome of your efforts.

Thus, one way to improve your marriage is to modify your attitudes and your actions. It is a process of turning your attention inward to see what you can do—not what your spouse should do!

The goal is to become a more loving person. The most cherished definition of love (at least in the Western world) is recorded by the Apostle Paul in the 13th chapter of Corinthians in the New Testament. It is a Christian definition; but it is so universal that its almost exact equivalent is used by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Harry Stack Sullivan, a noted American psychiatrist, suggested that the state of love exists when the satisfaction and security of another person becomes as significant to one as one's own satisfaction and security. Scott Peck asserts that love is less a feeling and more a commitment to the growth of another person.

Now note: In all three of these definitions, love is an *action* undertaken to benefit another person. Thus, one of the keys to improving an intimate relationship is to give more and demand less from the partner. **If you want to improve your marriage, you must be willing to improve yourself.** To help you focus inward (at self) instead of outward (at your partner), I present three principles for your consideration.

1. Change your Behavior - First
2. Change your Attitude
3. Change your Heart

Principle 1 Change Yourself First

Dr. Brent Barlow, a professor of marriage and family at Brigham Young University, likened the parable of the mote and the beam, given by the Jewish rabbi Jesus, to marital conflict. The parable states that one should first examine one's own large faults (the beam, a large piece of wood) before you criticize the small faults (the mote, a small speck of sawdust) in your partner.

I have adapted Dr. Barlow's ideas and present three steps to the Change First principle.

1. Exercise patience with your partner's faults and annoying habits. Drop the insistence that he or she must change.
2. Take responsibility to change yourself and improve the relationship. The focus becomes you, not your partner. You change first.
3. Assuming there is good will and love between you and your spouse, your partner may then desire to also change. As you act in loving, forgiving, and benevolent ways, your spouse may reciprocate. Tarazi explained that the other person might improve, perhaps in response to your improvement.

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Reflect on this example of the Change First principle. Beth and Andrew are newly married. Prior to the wedding Beth admired Andrew's carefree, spontaneous, free-spirited approach to living. Now that they are married and expecting a child, she wants her husband to settle down, and get serious with school and work. In gestures and words, Beth criticizes Andrew's lackadaisical lifestyle and wants him to change.

Over several months her anger grows and engenders cold, distant interaction. Eventually, she realizes that her husband is neither lazy nor irresponsible, and she stops the disparagement. She thinks to herself, "What can I do to be a better wife and partner; how can I support and encourage my husband?"

Andrew feels the change immediately; her acceptance and positive attitude lifts his spirit and frees him to pursue his goals and dreams. Over the next year, Andrew is accepted into an architecture program and finds a good job as a draftsman.

To sum up the Change First principle: At times, instead of blaming the partner for your unhappiness, or focusing attention on the spouse's mistakes and imperfections, take the first step to improve things yourself. Decide what you can do and do it. If you are unhappy with the way your spouse treats you, then improve your care and treatment of your spouse. You take the first step, you show more love first!

Principle 2

Change Your Attitude

Several years ago I read a short story entitled, "80 percent I love you, 20 percent I hate you." I've borrowed the idea and created my own version of the story:

A middle-aged man named Steve is reflecting on his marriage of 15 years to his wife Susan. They have three school-aged children. Steve is dissatisfied with Susan, though he admits she has many good qualities; he likes 80 percent of Susan. (1) She is a good cook and homemaker, (2) she shares many of his leisure activities, (3) she manages money wisely, (4) she is helpful to Steve's elderly parents, (5) she is a loving and affectionate sexual partner, (6) she is an excellent parent, (7) she is charitable and helps others, and (8) Susan is usually pleasant, positive, and supportive in her attitude toward him. Yes, there is a lot (80 percent) to like about Susan, but Steve is dissatisfied. There is 20 percent of Susan he dislikes. He believes she doesn't measure up to his ideal in two important ways. (1) She is overweight and doesn't look or dress as attractively as she used to, and (2) she still doesn't like to socialize and go out with his friends and co-workers for dinner, parties, and other activities. As the months pass, Steve continually thinks about the 20 percent that he dislikes and takes for granted the 80 percent that is good. At this time, he begins to notice that his new administrative assistant, Mary, is very nice looking and loves to socialize and party with clients and co-workers. One year later Steve divorces Susan and marries Mary. Two years later Steve is again contemplating his marriage, but this time he is analyzing his likes and dislikes with his new wife Mary. Yes, she is still winsome and attractive, and she loves to party with his friends and co-workers and she has other good qualities, but there are some problems. Mary is a disinterested stepmother, she is critical of many of his personal habits, and she doesn't like to cook so they must eat out most of the time.

One moral of this story is that no partner is perfect. No matter whom you marry, there will be some things you dislike about the person. You may have to learn to live with some of your spouse's minor, irritating habits or behaviors without anger, without resentment. Toleration without rancor is the key to overlooking small faults. (I am assuming, however, that these faults are not morally wrong or evil acts, such as abuse, dishonesty, or infidelity.)

To avoid over-focusing on the spouse's negatives, you can train your mind to focus on the positives. Overlook the few small things (the 20 percent) that you don't like about your spouse and continually remind yourself of the 80 percent that you like. Make it a habit to thank your spouse for the things he or she does well. As you compliment and praise your spouse for strengths, you will be less likely to notice the partner's weaknesses and faults.



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To illustrate the "Change Your Attitude" principle, take the situation of Nancy and Nick. They have been married for 15 years. They have struggled at times with money issues and some differences on parenting, but overall they consider their marriage healthy and strong. Over the years, however, Nancy has noticed that Nick doesn't get around to fixing things around the house. Currently, the kitchen faucet leaks, the weeds in the garden are taller than the corn, and the bedroom is always cold because the large window won't seal tight. She expects her husband to be more like her handyman father. Nancy also thinks that Nick spends too much time fishing and hunting with his brothers.

Over several months her resentment begins to boil over. She thinks to herself, "How can I continue to live with this man who makes my life so miserable?" Nancy sees his behavior as intentional and blames him for her unhappiness. After some **introspection and lots of prayers**, Nancy begins to see that the real problem is with her attitude, not her husband's behaviors.

She says to herself, "Ok, I wish he would learn to fix things, and yes, I'd like him home more on the weekends and not out chasing trout or pheasant, but it's not that bad. Look at all the good things he does. He's a good father; he treats me with kindness and respect; we are not rich but he provides a good

living for us, and he's fun to be with." Her thinking continues, "When I look at the big picture, he is really a great guy and I should consider myself lucky."

During the next few weeks, Nancy consciously attends to the good things about Nick and the bright side of the marriage. She fixes the faucet herself, and she and her friend weed the garden!

To review principle two, Change Your Attitude: be positive and optimistic about your spouse. Focus on the 80 percent you love. Remind yourself often of your partners' good qualities and virtues. Live peaceably with your partner's few minor imperfections, the 20 percent you don't like. Some things may change; accommodations can be negotiated, but don't expect perfection and realize some things may never suit you.

Harold Kushner, a Jewish Rabbi, said it well:

The illusion of perfection in the partner will not last. And that is why the essence of marital love is not romance but forgiveness...Forgiveness as the truest form of love means accepting without bitterness the flaws and imperfection of our partner, and praying that our partner accepts our flaws as well...Mature marital love sees faults clearly and forgives them, understanding that there are no perfect people, and that an imperfect spouse is all that an imperfect person like us can aspire to...If we cannot love imperfect people, if we cannot forgive them for their exasperating faults, we will condemn ourselves to a life of loneliness, because imperfect people are the only kind we will ever find.

Principle 3 **Change Your Heart**

Common approaches used to treat individual or family problems include: (1) education, to teach new skills; (2) therapy, to alter thinking or change behavior; and (3) medicine, to control impulses and/or enhance mood. Each method, alone or in combination, has value and can achieve good results, but is often ineffective. These interventions may be unproductive because the person's heart is not changed. The heart, in this context, refers to one's will, desire, or motivation to be kind, forgiving, patient, loving, gentle, and unselfish. For example, in therapy, you can teach a couple more effective communication skills, but unless the spouses are humble, patient, and forgiving (they experience a change of heart), then the new skills are not likely to be used or used properly.

Thus, there is a fourth approach to mental health often overlooked by secular social scientists—and that is (4) divine intervention, or put more simply: getting help from God. Many family professionals prefer to ignore God and God's influence on human relationships because it is not readily observable or easily measured it is not scientific. Many other social scientists are agnostic or atheistic and hence have neither experience nor interest in religion. Some are simply hostile to religion because it has too often been associated with ignorance, superstition, inflexibility, and dogmatism. Allen E. Bergin, a nationally recognized psychologist, once mused, "Like the entomologist who found a bug he couldn't classify and therefore stepped on it, behavioral scientists have chosen to ignore the world of spiritual reality because their assumptions and methods would not allow it." For most people, however, God is a reality, and many report they have felt God's influence in their lives.

There are many ways that God could influence a marriage. First, a couple's common commitment to God may increase their loyalty and commitment to each other. Muhammad, the Muslim prophet, taught that half of one's religious duty is to love and serve his family. Thus, love of God requires love of spouse.

The Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims, speaks clearly to this issue:

And among the signs of God is this, that He created for you mates, that you might live in tranquility with them; and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. (Sura 30:21).

Second, the religious believer will avoid actions that could hurt and destroy the marriage—such as lying, abuse, or adultery. Many Christians and Jews believe that if you love God, you will obey God's commands. God prohibits many hurtful behaviors and encourages spouses to respect, honor, and serve one another.

A third way that closeness to Deity may improve a marriage is by "softening" the hearts of the marital partners. As previously stated, a "change of heart" means that as one gets closer to God in true and meaningful worship, God's spirit or influence can transform one's will, temperament, attitudes, and desires. As the person moves nearer to God, he or she will become more forgiving, patient, kind, tolerant, and unselfish.

Hate and anger are incompatible with God; thus, as one develops a more meaningful relationship with Deity, the person must shed those attitudes or actions that are in opposition to God's nature and will. A poignant example of the change of heart phenomena is told in the Book of Mormon, one of the sacred scriptures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A prophet named Benjamin is urging his people to believe in God, give up their sins, obey the commandments, and accept Christ as their savior. At the end of his sermon the people exclaim: "The Spirit of the Lord has wrought a mighty change in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually." (Mosiah 5:1)

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Thus, the anger, the contempt, or a disposition to hurt the spouse are all greatly lessened or eliminated by one's emotional/spiritual nearness to God. Or, put more simply, **you cannot love God and hate your spouse**; and conversely, you are more likely to love your spouse if you love God (see the New Testament, First Epistle of John, chapter 4).

In order to further understand the Change of Heart principle, the reader is asked to consider several assumptions:



1. God exists and God can influence human nature and social relationships. God is the Lord of all humanity.
2. Humans have a self-centered nature. We tend to put our own needs, wants, and desires ahead of others, including family members.
3. Selfishness is at the heart of many marital and family problems.
4. A personal, meaningful relationship with God tends to reduce personal selfishness, which in turn improves interpersonal interaction.

Unselfish behavior can also be described as other-centered, prosocial, charitable, or altruistic. Altruism can be considered the opposite of selfishness; it is the selfless concern for others. An altruistic person is as concerned, or at times more concerned, with the happiness and welfare of the family unit, than with her/his own personal comforts, convenience, and preferences.

Such a person gives up (or delays) her/his own immediate wants in favor of doing that which is best for other family members. It does not mean that the person becomes a drudge to others, or that one neglects her/his own legitimate needs. An altruistic person shifts the balance away from “What is best for me?” to “What is best for my family?” If one becomes more altruistic (i.e., less selfish), that person can negotiate family relationships more effectively and fairly. Relationships are often improved when one acts in more altruistic ways.

It appears that God’s spirit or influence can change one’s heart—a selfish, egotistical person can become less so with God’s help. Dr. Terry Warner has given a heartfelt example of this principle. He relates the story of a woman whose husband was emotionally neglectful. The more she pushed him for intimacy, the more he withdrew from her. She believed her anger was caused by her husband’s lack of attention and affection. In her eyes, he was to blame for her emotional suffering. Though she exhibited the outward trappings of religion (i.e., she attended church, prayed and read scriptures), she finally realized she was not really close to God in her thoughts and the intents of her heart. She went through a spiritual awakening, a change of heart, and she stopped the blaming and criticism. She prayed more earnestly and attended more closely to God’s spiritual promptings. As she came to God “with full purpose of heart,” she in turn had a “change of heart” and showed more patience, kindness, and love to her husband. After two months she reported that her husband awoke one morning and said to her, “You know, we find fault too much with each other. I am never going to find fault with you again.” She concluded: “It was as if an icy glass wall between us had melted away. Almost overnight our relationship became warm and sweet. Three years have passed, and still it [the marriage] continues warmer and happier.”

To recapitulate a Change of Heart: If you worship and serve God in true and healthy ways, you may become less selfish. The unselfish person is more likely to build happy and satisfying marital and family relationships; thoughts and actions are more often directed to the welfare of family members rather than upon one’s own personal wants and desires.

In Conclusion

These three principles of change may be useful in your marriage, but they will not cure all problems and complaints. They may work best in marriages without severe conflict or other serious dysfunctions such as mental illness, addiction, abuse, or infidelity. For these more serious problems, family education, therapy, and/or medical treatment may be more effective.

As you consider the merit and usefulness of these ideas, remember that the focus of change is you, your attitudes, and your behaviors. Remember, however, I'm not suggesting that your partner never needs to change or that you must always be the one to give in, to sacrifice, or to take the first healing step. Of course the partner must, at times, change too. But the point is this: the usual way one tries to fix a marital problem is by trying to force the partner to change—and this approach often fails. You cannot easily change your partner, but you can change yourself. Thus, one way to improve your marriage is to take personal responsibility and deliberate action to improve yourself.

You can do three things. You can change your behavior and try to improve your own conduct relative to a specific marital issue. Ask yourself, "What can I do to make this situation better?" Then do it without pressuring your partner to change.



You can change your attitude and focus on your partner's positive qualities and overlook a few irritating behaviors. Be content with all the good things your spouse is and does, and be less troubled by faults or minor bad habits.

And last but not least, you can change your heart if you develop a more true and meaningful relationship to God. You may become less selfish as you draw nearer to God. Your altruistic actions will improve your marriage and your spouse will respond favorably to your selfless service and support.

To conclude, if you want to change your marriage, first ask yourself, "Am I willing to change myself?" "Will I look inward for answers instead of outward for blame?" If you can answer, "Yes" to these questions, then try one of the three principles. Your relationships with your spouse (or even a child, friend, or employer) may improve if you change yourself for the better.

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