Relationship Resilience: Building a Stronger Marriage

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Resilience is…

- “bouncing back after adversity…problems don’t predict how people will do, something else does.” (Steven Wolin, The Resilient Self, 1993)
Resilience is…

“the ability to recover quickly from any misfortune or challenge.” (Kahn, MacArthur foundation on Successful Aging, 1991)
Resilience is…

- more than stoicism, self-reliance and determination…

- not just inborn strengths, fierce independence, or rugged individualism
Resilience is…

- an interactive and systemic phenomenon
- the product of a complex relationship of inner strengths and outer help
- developed over a lifetime

(Butler, Family Therapy Networker, Mar/April 1997)
Faith & Resilience

- Walk & not be weary – Isaiah 40:31
- External/internal resource – Philippians 4
- Unchanging – Psalm 100
Marriage & Faith

- God-ordained institution
- Parable for Kingdom of Heaven
- Intimacy – God given gift
- Specific instruction given
  Submit – Ephesians 5:21-33
  Love – I Corinthians 13
  Intimacy – Song of Solomon
Resilience Applied to Marriage

- “Risk factors”
  What determinants contribute to dissatisfaction and breakup of a marital union?

- “Protective factors”
  What factors play a role in moderating the effects of risk and promoting marital satisfaction and stability?
Risk Factors for Divorce

The CDC reports that overall, 43 percent of all marriages end in divorce (2002). Other recent studies indicate divorce rates between 40 and 50 percent.

Do Christians fare any better?
Why Marriages Fail...

**Most frequently reported:**
- Poor communication
- Financial problems
- A lack of commitment to the marriage
- A dramatic change in priorities
- Infidelity

**Other frequent reasons given:**
- Failed expectations or unmet needs
- Addictions and substance abuse
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Lack of conflict resolution skills

Southeast Psychological Services
The “Seven Year Itch” Study

• Quality of marriage starts to sink rapidly just after the "I do"

• Continues downward through the first four years

• Quality of marriage plateaus after that first dip

• Declines again during years 8, 9, & 10 (the "seven-year itch" part)

Kurdak, Developmental Psychology, 1999
Southeast Psychological Services
What Did They Expect?

Problem of illusions versus reality

Building relationships with kids and careers, without support systems

Happiness expected, but life is grinding, and marriage is hard work.

Marriage not static

No obvious course to follow

Dramatic changes during a marriage
Patterns Predict Divorce

Greater negativity than positivity during conflict discussion.

The “four horsemen of the apocalypse” (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling).

Recasting the oral history of the marriage in negative terms.

Reduced positive affect during conflict.

(Gottman & Levenson, 1992, and Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992)
"Should We Stay Together?"

- Jeffry H. Larson, chairman of the Family and Marriage Therapy Program, Brigham Young University (2000)
- Offers prospective couples scientifically proven methods for evaluating relationships and improving chances for long-term success
“Should We Stay Together?"

Larson’s model contains 25 predictors that are arranged in personal and relationship contexts, individual traits, and couple traits.

The factors are categorized as:

- **liabilities** (predicting marital dissatisfaction) or
- **assets** (predicting marital satisfaction).
Liabilities

Context
1. Marriage at younger age
2. Unhealthy family-of-origin experiences
3. Parental divorce or chronic marital conflict
4. Parental or friends' disapproval
5. Pressure to marry
6. Little education or career preparation
Liabilities

**Individual traits**
1. High neurotic traits
2. Anxiety
3. Depression
4. Impulsiveness
5. Self-consciousness
6. Vulnerability to stress
7. Anger/hostility
8. Dysfunctional beliefs
Liabilities

**Couple traits**
1. Dissimilarity
2. Short acquaintanceship
3. Premarital sex (especially with multiple partners)
4. Premarital pregnancy
5. Cohabitation
6. Poor communication and conflict-resolution skills
Assets

Context
1. Older age
2. Healthy family-of-origin experiences
3. Happy parental marriage
4. Parental and friends' approval
5. Significant education and career preparation
Assets

**Individual traits**
1. High self-esteem
2. Flexibility
3. Assertiveness
4. Sociability
Assets

Couple traits
1. Similarity
2. Long acquaintanceship
3. Good communication skills
4. Good conflict resolution skills/style
So What?

- Be proactive
- Increase protective factors by focusing on ways to strengthen marital relationship
- The sooner, the better
Strength Exercises

- Work on Communication
- Learn to Resolve Conflicts
- Consider Relationship Strengths & Weaknesses
- Explore Families-of-Origin Issues
- Create “Together” Time
- Develop Individual, Couple & Family Goals
Communication

- We can’t…don’t…won’t…?
  Communication Happens!
- What is Being Communicated & How?
- Sharing Styles:
  - Passive
  - Assertive
  - Aggressive
  - Passive-Aggressive
Communication

- Language of Love (Chapman):
  - Quality Time
  - Words of Affirmation
  - Gifts
  - Acts of Service
  - Physical Touch
Communication Roles

- **Sharing – assertive**
  - Think before you speak
  - Is it a good time?
  - Describe your feelings, “I” statements
  - Give details (don’t overwhelm)
  - Make request & reinforce response

- **Listening – active listening**
  - Focus on other – set self aside
  - Reflect & restate (satellite dish)
  - Seek clarification
  - What must that feel like for him/her?
  - No defending, reacting, preparing
Conflict Resolution

- Set time & place
- Define problem
- How do each contribute to problem
- Brainstorm, list all possible solutions
- Discuss/evaluate solutions
- Agree on one solution to try
- Agree on how each will work on solution
- Set up follow-up meeting & discuss
- Reward contribution toward solution
Strengths & Weaknesses

- Natural for negatives rise to the top
- Be deliberate in identifying your relationship’s strengths & areas in need of growth
- Discuss both strengths & weaknesses
- Benefit from your different perspectives
- Build on strengths to assist growth
Family-of-Origin Issues

- It’s true that you marry your spouse and your spouse’s family
- Styles of relating were modeled
- Frequently unknowingly recreated
- Closeness and flexibility differences most apparent in the early years of marriage
- Explore & discuss differences and choose what to adopt & what to change in your own family
Together Time

- Prioritize your relationship on your family agenda
- Partner before parent
- Balance personal, couple, and family times (all important)
- Schedule date nights, communication sessions, and leisure activity/exercise together
Develop Goals

- Have purpose in your life
- Provide a means to measure growth and progress
- Consider personal, couple, family, and financial goals
- Integrate short- and long-term goals
- Talking about hopes and dreams will often draw you closer
Intimacy

- God’s Gift To Us
- Happens on multiple levels
  - Emotional
  - Physical
  - Spiritual
- Intimacy = Closeness
  - Vulnerability
  - Oneness - “one flesh”
Vive La Difference!

- Recognize and Appreciate Differences
- Feeling/Intuition vs. Fact/Analytic
- Verbal vs. Nonverbal
- Process vs. Fix
- Emotional/Closeness vs. Physical/Visual Trigger
Other Helpful Strategies

- Look for the good in spouse & compliment them
- Offer praise frequently
- Make positive comments outnumber negative or critical comments
- Prioritize your marriage like you were dating
Thank You!