

# THRIVING MARRIAGES

2nd Edition



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An Inspirational and Practical Guide  
to Lasting Happiness

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# Introduction

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## *Introduction to Second Edition*

Since our first publication of *Thriving Marriages*, we have given seminars on its content to over 300,000 people across the United States. Two areas emerged that needed further clarification and elaboration: how to make conflict resolution more effective and how to communicate our needs more clearly. As a result, we have rewritten Chapter 10: Solving Conflicts with Wisdom and Respect. The new chapter simplifies the conflict resolution process focusing on the role of Understanding, Validating and Acting, which we refer to as the UVA response. This type of empathic response allows people to integrate their differences and transform the conflict into an opportunity to grow in their unity. The chapter also includes a new questionnaire which covers the skills required and can be used as a tool to engage in constructive dialogue.

Our new Chapter 10 elaborates on the role of assertiveness in a process defined as "interpersonal coaching" which shows how to communicate more clearly the ways in which we would like to be treated without resorting to using such aversive and ineffective approaches as venting, complaining or criticizing.

The feedback from the participants in our seminars consistently revealed that the other chapters of the book remain relevant, inspirational, practical and effective as they were originally written. Our desire is for you the reader to use this book as a helpful and concrete guide to transform your marriage into a thriving, resilient and compassionate journey of lasting happiness.

For those of you involved in Marriage and Family Life, Religious Education, and Adult Faith Formation ministries, we invite you to include this new edition of *Thriving Marriages* in your curriculum and ministries as well as our different audio formation materials that accompany it and can be found on our website:

[www.ThrivingFamilies.com](http://www.ThrivingFamilies.com).



## *Introduction to First Edition*

How does this book differ from the many others on marriage? It presents a new model of the dynamics of unity for a Christian marriage; a clear methodology to implement it; a way that couples from different Christian denominations and cultural backgrounds can apply it; and finally, a non-technical approach that is relevant, inspirational, practical, and effective.

Most books about marriage present principles, skills, or habits drawn from research as well as a “recipe” for a lasting relationship. They often lack a clear model for a healthy and happy marriage. This book presents a model of Christian marriage that integrates the best psychological findings on successful marriages with a contemporary spirituality of Christian unity. We have written the book as if we were having a conversation with you, avoiding clinical language. The Appendix contains some additional resources about married life.

An anecdote might help present our model. Claire found a card that said on its cover: “There are three important ingredients for a successful relationship.” With great curiosity, she opened the card. Inside, she read, “Unfortunately nobody knows what they are!” We laughed because we could have supplied the list. Our model presents three dynamics of unity in a marriage: empathy, autonomy, and mutuality.

Our methodology reveals a strategy for developing empathy, autonomy, and mutuality. They represent the three basic dimensions of a marriage: your spouse, yourself, and the relationship between the two of you. Empathy allows you to get to know your spouse; autonomy is the gift of self that you bring to the relationship; mutuality is the relationship that emerges from a creative synthesis of

empathy and autonomy. When a couple develops, integrates, and lives these dimensions their marriage becomes a loving and joyful experience of unity in diversity.

First, we present *empathy as intelligent love*. Empathy allows spouses to know and love each other in a meaningful and relevant way. It is the art of welcoming each other into their lives. Empathy does not depend on whether they love each other but whether they feel loved the way that they want to be loved. The more a partner feels understood, accepted, valued and loved, the more likely that he or she will reciprocate. True empathy leads to mutuality, not to codependency. Empathy is a set of skills. We will explore how partners can connect emotionally with each other (chapter 1); how to understand each other's needs (chapter 2); how to respond to those needs intelligently (chapter 3); and we will conclude with a reflection on the soul of empathy (chapter 4).

The second part of the book proposes *autonomy as the gift of a healthy self*. Autonomy means that spouses take adequate care of their individual lives to become the best personal gift for each other. Visualize life as a home with seven rooms: work, family, friends, soul, health, education and community. We will offer strategies to bring harmony to each "room" of your home and achieve balance in life (chapter 5); powerful antidotes for the "toxic" thoughts that distort reality and trigger negative feelings (chapter 6); practical ways to simplify and de-stress life (chapter 7); and conclude with a reflection on the soul of autonomy (chapter 8).

Part 3 presents *mutuality as the joy of unity*. Perfect love is mutual love. Empathy is altruistic love: spouses loving each other unconditionally. Autonomy is maximizing the ability to love. Through mutuality, mature love reaches perfection. The process of mutuality involves the art of communicating with each other (chapter 9); the

ability to solve conflicts with wisdom and respect (chapter 10); the power to forgive and reconcile (chapter 11) and living a spirituality of unity (chapter 12).

The book also contains questionnaires and exercises that identify and fine-tune these skills. We invite spouses to fill them out and to put them into practice. This book can help partners draw a personal blueprint for the marriage they desire. Every marriage is a “work in progress” and applying these exercises and strategies will allow partners to actualize the potential that lies hidden within their relationships. Dedicate one week to applying the skills in each chapter of the book, and in three months you can celebrate abundant new life in your marriage.

This book reflects our unique ecumenical and cross-cultural background. John is Catholic and when we met and married, Claire was an ordained American Baptist minister. John comes from a Hispanic background and Claire comes from an Anglo-American background. Our families of origin differed markedly. Yet, over the years we have applied what we talk about in this book and although we experience the same shortcomings and setbacks as any other couple, we enjoy a thriving marriage. Experience has shown us that our model applies to couples from different Christian denominations and cultural backgrounds.

We believe that you will find this book relevant to your own marriage, whether you are newly married, “empty-nesters” or celebrating a golden anniversary or beyond. We hope that it will inspire and motivate you to practice the strategies that we suggest, and that your marriage will reach a new level of unity, as have countless other couples. The feedback that we receive from the workshops and retreats on marriage and family life that we present across the country underscores the positive

impact of this model on lives and marriages. It has helped couples transform their marriage from mere survival or maintenance into a journey of continuous growth. The simplicity of the vision that we propose and the practicality of its approach can transform your marriage into the one that God wishes for both of you.

Our spiritual integration of the dynamics of unity stems from the Christian perspective that we try to live, but we are convinced that other faith traditions also offer valuable insights on the spirituality of marriage. If you are not a Christian we invite you to select those principles that you find consonant with your beliefs.

This book can be a blueprint for building your marriage day by day. It provides both a unified vision and the essential skills necessary to make that vision a reality. Do not read this book once and put it on a shelf, but keep it handy as a mini-reference of skills that you can practice for the rest of your life.

Part 1

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*E*mpathy: Intelligent Love

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Without a doubt you love your partner, but does your partner feel loved by you the way that he or she wants to be loved? The greater your empathy, the stronger the love that your partner will experience from you. Empathy is called “intelligent love” because it is an eminently thoughtful way for partners to relate to one another. It has three dimensions. The first, connecting emotionally with your partner, is activated when you love with your heart, showing emotional sensitivity towards your partner’s feelings. The second, understanding your partner’s needs, is activated when you love with your mind revealing your insight into your partner’s current needs underneath his or her feelings. And the third, loving your partner intelligently, is activated when you respond to your partner’s needs with concrete and relevant action. This final and most critical step in empathy makes your love visible and real to your partner. Empathy skills will transform you into a sensitive, understanding, and responsive lover and will set a solid foundation for all the other skills that we present in this book.

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# 1. Connecting Emotionally with Your Partner

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When we see couples, we often ask about their “empathy quotient.” One response, especially vivid, stands out. Claire asked a husband: “Please tell me, what makes your wife genuinely happy?” Irritated, he replied: “That’s what I’m paying you for! You tell me what makes her happy because after so many years I still don’t know!” Obviously you do not need to pay a therapist to discover what makes your partner happy, but perhaps you do need to change strategy. Maybe you think that the less upset, or less worried or less depressed that your partner becomes, the happier he or she will be. Experience suggests that this is not so. Happiness is not the absence of something negative but rather the presence of something positive. You can help your partner become happier by providing the positive and meaningful experiences that he or she wants from you.

Three basic skills will increase the emotional connection with your partner: make room for your partner in your heart, become interested in how he or she is feeling,