

Marriage 202: More Ways to Improve Your Marriage

By: Autumn Schulze, MA, LMFT

So, you worked your way through Marriage 201: More Ways to Improve Your Marriage. Congratulations! What did you think? If you really took the time to cultivate the three skills it outlined, then you probably found it challenging yet rewarding! If so, then the exercises below will provide more of the same. These techniques have the power to radically transform a marriage, but they require a healthy dose of humility and emotional discipline. This work requires you be willing to take a long, hard look at yourself, be the first one to make a change, and foster an attitude of acceptance. Each of these techniques requires a significant investment of time and emotional energy to master, so be patient with yourself and give the work the time it requires.

- 4. Deal with your own issues.** We all carry emotional issues into our marriages – unhealthy habits, unrealistic expectations, immaturity, selfishness, and our own idiosyncratic hang-ups. If you want a healthier marriage, be willing to take a brutally honest look at what emotional baggage you carted into the marriage and take steps to unpack those bags for good! This work can be accomplished in any number of different ways - through contemplation and self-analysis, prayer, deep conversations with trusted friends, attending classes or seminars about relevant issues, meeting with a pastor or other spiritual leader who's gifted in pastoral counseling, or seeking out spiritual guidance from a trained spiritual director. And, if at any point you feel stuck, consider seeking out individual counseling for yourself. A professional counselor can be very adept at knowing the right questions to ask and helping an individual work through their own resistance to digging deep into the dark recesses of their own heart.
- 5. Guard your heart and monitor your thought life.** Rome wasn't built in a day. And, likewise, no marriage was ever undone in a day. Infidelity and divorce are tragedies whose foundations are laid long before the actual deeds are done. The Bible puts it this way, "14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:14-15). The decline of a marriage starts with negative thoughts and unwholesome fantasies. And, the problem isn't even the random thought that flits through your mind, but what you do with it. When destructive thoughts are given airtime and entertained in our minds, then they grow – and eventually they influence how we feel and what we believe to be true. If you want to protect your marriage from infidelity and divorce, then you must immediately reject any thoughts about infidelity and divorce and work to find healthier ways to meet the emotional needs that likely prompted these wayward thoughts in the first place. Are you feeling lonely and unloved in your marriage? Then, how can you expand your support network of family relationships and platonic same-sex friendships in order to help make up for the love and support you're not getting from your

- spouse? Are many of the people with whom you spend time either recently divorced or inclined to speak harshly and critically of their own spouses? If so, their negativity about marriage is bound to rub off on you.
6. **Learn to accept your partner for who they are and stop trying to change them.** I see it time and time again with couples – they are initially attracted to one another’s differences, the ways in which they complement one another and make each other better. But, over time, the differences are no longer seen as assets, but as liabilities – at best irritations and at worst disunities that threaten to unravel the very fabric of a marriage. Undoubtedly, your spouse has some very legitimate bad habits and character flaws that could stand to be changed. But, these are changes that they must make for themselves – no one can force them to change or produce the change for them. If you want to see your partner change, then be willing to address your own issues and change yourself. Be open to constructive (and even not-so-constructive) criticism from them, without needing to immediately dish back some of the same. Focus on becoming the kind of spouse you’d like to have, without expecting them to reciprocate. In the best-case scenario, the absence of your criticism and negativity will make it safe for your spouse to be vulnerable and do some of their own self-improvement. In the worst-case scenario, your spouse never changes, but you still end up being more the person you’ve always wanted to be! Remember, too, the power of positive thinking. A thousand times a day we are forced to interpret the actions of others and the nuances of our interactions with them. It is our choice whether to interpret them through the lens of negativity and criticism or through the lens of positivity and extending the benefit of the doubt. Choosing the latter costs us nothing and helps us to love and accept our spouses for who they are.
7. **Focus on the ways in which your spouse *does* show you love and pleases you.** Just because our spouses don’t love us in some of the ways we most deeply crave, doesn’t mean they don’t love us. It just means that, for the time being, they are unable or unwilling to love us in *these* ways. This has more to do with their weakness and brokenness as people, than with our lovability or the value they place on us. And remember, we all tend to try and love others in the ways in which we prefer to be loved. It is a fine art, to develop the ability to read how another person prefers to be loved and then love them in that way. If you would like more detailed help in this area, I suggest reading “The Five Love Languages” by Gary Chapman.

[Autumn Schulze, MA, LMFT](#) is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Indianapolis, IN. She has specialized training in Emotion-Focused Therapy for couples and has extensive experience working with children and families. Her passion is to help distressed individuals and couples find the emotional and relational healing God intends for them. Her desire is to see more and more households restored to health and happiness. Contact [Autumn Schulze](#) to discuss your situation with her.