



4 DAYS

TO UNSTICK YOUR
STUCK MARRIAGE

A DEVOTIONAL BASED ON
THE BOOK, *AN IMPOSSIBLE MARRIAGE*

BY LAURIE *and* MATT KRIEG

INTRODUCTION

Maybe you picked up this devotional feeling, “I don’t know if we are ‘stuck,’ necessarily, but every marriage could use a tune-up.

Or perhaps you’re thinking, “Yeah, we’ve been just functioning, not thriving, for a while now. We need some life infused into our marriage.”

Or maybe you were like us on so many weekend mornings, when we found ourselves sitting at our sticky kitchen table, staring blankly at the surface, asking, “What do we do?” Neither of us knew the answer for the other. (I mean, we had the same question . . .)

The words in this devotional are not going to solve that puzzle or offer a money-back guarantee for a marriage tune-up. But when we were as stuck as the honey that was perpetually on our kitchen table, engaging in these 12 actions helped us to go from sitting and feeling hopeless to standing and taking one hopeful step forward.

Three things to note before we begin: First, you are going to hear from both of us. We will either speak as one unit (“us”), or, if we are speaking specifically from our personal perspective, we will use parentheses to tell you who is speaking.

For example, I (Laurie), am an author, a speaker, and a podcaster, and I have been in ministry for the last 10 years. My primary focus is to equip the Church with a gospel-centered approach to marriage and sexuality. I (Matt) am an author, a speaker, and a licensed therapist who specializes in the areas of sexuality, addiction, trauma, and marriage.

Our marriage nearly fell apart about eight years in. At a silent retreat during year eight, I (Laurie) recommitted to God and to our marriage, but I needed something tangible to attach to those ethereal renewed vows. So I created the list you will find in this devotional and chose to do these actions every day for one month. Five years later, many of these actions-turned-habits are still in place, and our marriage (praise God) has never been better.

Although I (Matt) didn’t write this list with Laurie, I followed along with these actions in my own way, and they (along with some good therapy and the grace of

God) were integral to saving our marriage.

A second thing to note before we dive in together is that when we talk about God “unsticking stuck marriages,” we are not talking about abuse. If you are in a verbally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically abusive situation, please seek help immediately. Abuse must be handled with swift, godly justice.

The third and final thing: There is no way these 12 actions would have done anything for our marriage if we hadn’t taken four critical steps first. Otherwise, we simply would have duct taped actions to our hearts.

We—and you—don’t need duct tape; we need genuine, lasting change.

So, what are those first four steps? Welcome to day one.

DAY 1

LET GOD'S LOVE EMPOWER YOU

Read: Ephesians 3

If you have ever made a New Year's resolution because "it seemed good" or joined a group 5K because you were peer-pressured into it, you likely have a story of those commitments lasting between a few days to a couple of weeks. Your brain said, "Fine," but your heart said, "Nah," and your heart won.

Our hearts are the "desire-producers that make us tick."¹ They are the real decision-makers in our lives. For these 12 actions to do anything for your marriage, your heart must energize them.

But we can't simply stare at our hearts and say, "Move!" It won't last. We also cannot stare at our spouses' hearts and say, "Change!" We know how that fight goes . . .

We must start looking away from ourselves and our spouses and instead look upward.

God, we need you. We cannot love ourselves, each other, and our kids, neighbors, or friends without you. We cannot unstick this marriage. Only you can.

For me (Matt), this practically looked like me taking all of my worries, shame, and self-hatred and placing them at Jesus' feet. I imagined it all stuffed into a backpack that I couldn't carry anymore. *I can't do it, Jesus. I hate myself so much.* I had been living with a secret pornography addiction, and I was terrified of what Jesus might say to me—but I was especially afraid of Laurie. *Would she leave me if she knew?*

In my mind, I plopped the backpack of shame at Jesus' feet, and he exchanged it for gold. "Know that I love you," He said to me in that still, small voice. *Know that I love you.* It was so helpful that He didn't simply say, "I love you," but "Know it." I

might have brushed the former off, but the commission to know and receive it? That encouraged me to let His love permeate my heart.

Jesus' love felt odd and undeserved—but isn't that grace? An undeserved gift? That love-soaked grace gift empowered me to take the next steps toward greater union with Laurie.

CONSIDER

Do you know God's love for you right now? No matter how challenging your marriage may be?

We need to know this before we dive into the next steps because God's love is what empowers us. "May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and *power* that comes from God" (Eph. 3:19, emphasis mine).

To receive this power-infused love, we need to open our hearts first. What is in your backpack right now that you need to drop at Jesus' feet? Are you willing to let Him love you? Are you willing to ask Him to empower you with His love so you can love your spouse?

DAY 2

RECOMMIT TO GOD

Read: Jude 1

When I (Laurie) was struggling the most with our marriage, I wasn't just wrestling with our marriage, I was wrestling with my entire relationship with God.

That seems to be the truth of most marriage pain: Marriage issues are not really marriage problems; they are God problems.

I didn't feel God filling my heart with His love, fullness, and power, so I looked elsewhere for that "filled" experience. I didn't have a secret person on the side, I didn't engage porn, I simply had a secret stash of invisible "What if" candies I pulled out and savored every once in a while. *What if I married someone else? What if I found that ex? What if I was free from this?* I might not have been lusting, but I sure was coveting (Exod. 20:17).

All of these "what ifs" piled up into a question I packed into my mental suitcase to take on a silent retreat: *What do I want?* Do I want to leave my marriage? I made a pro-con list. Pro: I could find someone I really liked. Con: I wouldn't want to hurt our kids. Pro: I wouldn't have to keep fighting in and around my marriage. Con: There are some parts about my husband I would actually miss . . . *But it feels natural to me to leave! Can't I?* The book of Jude popped into my head. (Who reads Jude? Me, apparently.)

But you, my dear friends, must remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ predicted. They told you that in the last times there would be scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires. These people are the ones who are creating divisions among you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them. (Jude 17–19)

Okay, so if I follow what is natural to me, will I lose the Spirit in me? I paused. *But what does your Spirit even give me?* It wasn't just my marriage that was on the table, it was my relationship with God. Then, in the next two seconds, I believe God let

me experience a micro-taste of a life devoid of Him—a life of hell. I was freezing, terrified, and felt like I was in a black hole of emptiness.

When the two seconds ended, I was left gasping for breath and convinced of one thing: God’s Spirit is not some sort of Jiminy Cricket saying, “Let your conscience be your guide, kids!” He is the only source of joy, hope, and peace. If I wanted His joy, hope, and peace gifts, then I wanted Him. And if I wanted Him, I needed to surrender to what He wanted for me, and what He wanted was this marriage—this impossible marriage.

Before the silent retreat, I packed a question into my mental suitcase. For the return home, I packed a conviction. “I don’t know how you are going to fix our marriage, Lord,” I prayed. “But I’m all in with you.”

CONSIDER

Are there any secret “What if” candies you have been stashing and savoring when no one sees? Any forms of escapism? What gifts does the Spirit promise you? Are you willing to recommit your life to Him again today, and say, “I don’t know how you are going to heal, unstick, or reinvigorate this marriage, but I am all in with you”?

DAY 3

UNDERSTAND THE METAPHOR OF MARRIAGE

Read: Ephesians 5

Have you ever been to a marriage event, heard a marriage podcast, or read a marriage book where the first one-tenth of it is filled with gender jabs to try and build rapport with the audience?

“Men are dumb—dumb as rocks, amiright?! They just want to watch sports in their man caves, scratch, burp, and have sex,” they joke. “Women? Good grief. So controlling and emotional. And what is with their love of Target, yoga pants, and shiplap?” People laugh, but the jokes don’t end there . . .

“Isn’t it funny how before you get married you want to have sex, but then you put a ring on it, and surprise! At least one of you doesn’t want to have sex, and you don’t know if you actually like this stranger you married! But—too bad for you—God hates divorce, so, you’re stuck!” *Chortle chortle.*

Anyone else think these jokes are unhelpful for unsticking a stuck marriage? When we heard them, they made us ask, “Yeah, why are we married? Why did God make marriage between a man and a woman if most of us tolerate each other at best and hate each other at worst?”

As we wrestled through these frustrations and questions, Ephesians 5 hit us like a truck.

As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one (Eph. 5:31-32).

What is the “great mystery”? That men and women fall in love? No. The great

mystery is that God wants to and will marry us! How different is God from humanity? Ephesians 1 says “he is far above ...” and Isaiah says “he lives in eternity.” However, Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19:6-9 say that God will marry made-from-dust, beloved us.

Male-female marriage is not some sort of cosmic joke or punishment. It is cosmic design. If God calls us to marriage, He is calling us to live a 24/7 gospel picture, showing the world that just as Jesus died to be one with us, we are to die daily to experience increasing oneness with our spouse. If God calls us to marriage, He calls us to live this gospel metaphor.

Maybe we should stop the gender jabs and start celebrating our differences that point to Jesus.

Did you know this metaphor business when you got married? We sure didn't. I mean, we could probably parrot it, but we didn't understand it.

CONSIDER

Today, try to spend some time meditating on God's difference from you, while at the same time considering how He sees and loves you in your humanity. (Psalm 103 could be a good start.) Then consider, “If I was constantly aware that my marriage was a 24/7 living, breathing gospel picture, how would I operate differently?” What is one step you can take today to make your love for your spouse look more like God's love for the world?

DAY 4

CONFESS & RECOMMIT TO YOUR MARRIAGE

Read: Psalm 32; James 5:16; Romans 3:4

My (Laurie's) heart raced as Matt sat across from me at our sticky kitchen table. (Seriously, do our kids just cover it in honey while we sleep?) I didn't want to empty my pockets of all of the invisible *what if* candies I had been hoarding.

I had already confessed to God. I had already recommitted to Him. Now it was time to share with Matt.

Two years earlier...

My (Matt's) heart raced as Laurie slept beside me. "You need to confess to the one that you have wronged," the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. *No! No! Anyone but her. Please. I'll tell a guy friend about the addiction. Anyone else?! Silence. Fine. But only if she wakes up right now.* It was 2:30 a.m. There was no way my deep-sleeping wife would wake up.

I turned to drift off again, but it was as if my arm had a mind of its own. It reached up and over and thwapped Laurie on the back. "Wha—?" she said. I sighed and began to speak.

**

Neither of us wanted to share. Neither of us felt the other could handle it. We both thought the other would reject us permanently, or at least for weeks. But healthy (non-abusive) sad or even angry responses we see on the face of our spouse are not the reason to keep quiet.

God purposely set up marriage to be between two alike but opposite creatures (male and female) to show the world a 24/7, "mysterious" gospel picture of how image bearers (us) will marry the Image (God) (Eph. 5:31–32; Rev. 19:6–9).

God made a covenant to us on the cross, and we made a covenant to each other at the altar. Like we mentioned on day three, we are a living, breathing, 24-7, gospel metaphor. When we look away from our vows and toward what *ifs* (of any variety), what are we “metaphoring”? What picture of God’s love for us are we preaching through our love?

We are telling the world that it’s okay to look away from our covenant with God and toward other gods. The pain we see on our spouse’s face simply reflects the pain we hear in God’s voice when His people look away from Him (Jer. 3:12–13).

We must push through our fear and see that confession—even when it’s painful—does not mark the start of a relationship break. It marks the start of real connection, because there is no more hiding between you.

CONSIDER

Is there anything you need to confess to your spouse? If they are a safe person, what is holding you back? Are you a safe person for your spouse to confess to? (Ask them!) Are you ready to confess and then recommit to your covenant, so the world can see God’s eternal commitment to us?

DAY 5

ACTION 1: DO ALL OF THE “CHEESY” CHRISTIAN STUFF

Read: Psalm 90:14; Lamentations 3:22–23; Matthew 22:37

If you're anything like us, you are not a fan of doing Christian practices just for the sake of doing them. It feels cheesy at best and legalistic at worst. A “quiet time” every morning? *Why?* Going to church on Sundays? *Isn't the Church everywhere?* Playing worship music while cooking? *Is that really what you want to do?*

The older we get, however, the more we recognize God has created us to live with rhythm in our lives. We sleep (or attempt to do so) for about one-third of our lives.² We have to eat regularly. We blink, we breathe, and our hearts pump. There is a consistent drumbeat to our lives, whether we hear it or not.

The problem is not only do we have natural, God-designed rhythms that help us, we also have natural-to-us-because-of-the-Fall unhealthy habits that hurt us. For example, instead of waking up and seeking to receive more of God's empowering love, we often grab our phones first and are instantly assaulted with a barrage of “you're less-than,” “be afraid,” and “give up” messages.

When we make room for a Holy Spirit buffer between us and the world first thing in the morning through Bible and prayer, we can pick up social media and the news afterward, and it doesn't grate on our souls as easily. If we add in that “cheesy” worship music during the afternoon slump, or good journal session before bed? Goodness. We might start seeing good days—even in the midst of a tough marriage season.

This is not legalism; it's lifesaving.

We get that in stressful times, it's easy to let soul-giving habits like these go to the wayside. But it is exactly in the stressful times that we need them the most. Our hearts will thank us, and our marriages can only benefit.

Ready to make a plan?

CONSIDER

What spiritual practices have you done in the past that might have felt forced or cheesy initially but turned out to be life-giving? What new discipline might you want to start now? (Some ideas are intentional prayer, study, celebration, silence, solitude, and worship.)

How are you going to stick with these practices? (An alarm? Accountability? Starting a Bible reading plan with a friend?)

DAY 6

ACTION 2: PRAY SHORT, HONEST PRAYERS FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

Read: John 14

Our most challenging marriage season happened soon after giving birth to our second daughter. After a couple of months of struggling with nursing, I (Laurie) ended up exclusively bottle feeding our baby breast milk.

Do you know what that means? Hours and hours of pumping. Do you know what else it means? Hours and hours to think . . . and to pray, if I was willing.

After experiencing God's love, recommitting to Him, and confessing to Matt, I remember staring at the wedding ring on my finger, thinking, "This is all that is keeping us together. This covenant. This commitment to God and each other. This tiny piece of white gold." (Try not to judge . . .)

I decided to pray. As faithless as this sounds, I didn't know if it would have any effect. But I was willing to try, *darn it*. If I was in this marriage, I might as well see if God could fix it.

Soon, I began to earnestly pray during those hours alone. "Help, Jesus. Help our marriage." These prayers were not long. They were not even emotional. But they were honest and began to bear fruit.

**

For too many nights in that same post-baby, hard marriage season, I (Matt) sighed, rolled over, and asked God to fix *her*. "Make her better so I can have a nice life again." But as the time went on, God took those prayers and sent them right back to me with a question.

"Why did you want her to change, Matt?" *So that I could have a nice life again. So that our physical connection can be better.* "Is that the purpose of why you were created? Is that the purpose of marriage? To have a nice life? To have good sex?"
No...

God clarified the idols (the gods I was actually worshiping) in my mind. I was not praying for Laurie so our marriage could reflect Christ's love for the Church, I was praying to have a nice, comfortable life and good sex. Neither of these goals reflect God's purpose for life or for marriage.

I'm so sorry, God. I genuinely repented. Soon after this confession, I noticed my prayers changed from, "Fix her," to "Change me. I want to want you the most." These new prayers were not long or very emotional, but they were honest and began to bear fruit.

CONSIDER

If you are praying, what is your most common prayer for your marriage? If you're not praying, what is God asking you to pray so you pray in alignment with His will—not just yours (John 14:14)? How can you practically remember to pray for your marriage? (A reminder in your phone, or maybe you're pumping all the time like Laurie was?)

DAY 7

ACTION 3: STARE AT HOPE & ACTION 4:
CHANGE THE QUESTION TO “HOW?”

Read: Luke 17:6; Luke 1:37; Zechariah 4:10

“What percent of hope do you give your marriage?” our friends asked us over a rare meal out without the kids. I (Laurie) looked down at my half-eaten tacos. I love tacos. But pain has a way of squashing even my taco-loving appetite.

“Probably a point six,” I said. Not even a whole percent. Sure, I was in a covenant with Matt and wouldn’t leave, but the hope I had for us actually thriving one day? No. I could not see it yet.

“What about you, Matt?” they asked, their faces clearly concerned.

He sighed. “Five percent.” My heart dropped. I wished his number was higher. Then maybe we could ride his hope-wave to something . . . hopeful. Better. A better marriage than the icy, but functional one we had.

It was soon after this meal that I wrote down these 12 actions and committed to doing them. As I started to write, I felt the ache of our combined hope-ometer: 5.6 percent. I could feel myself spiraling. *5.6? No, I thought. Don’t go to despair. It’s so easy to fall into despair. Stare at what you do have. At least it’s 5.6. It’s not zero.*

“Stare at the percent of hope instead of despair,” I typed into my Notes app. *Don’t hate the .6, don’t resent small beginnings, stare at them, work toward them, and pray into them until they grow.*

Then I thought of a second, related action. I was thinking, “Will God fix our marriage?” But it led me down the same despairing train of thought. I typed again: “Change the question from ‘Will God change our marriage?’ to ‘How will God fix our marriage?’”

These mental shifts away from staring at the impossibilities to staring at hope, and away from asking, “Will God?” to asking, “How will God?” seemed so insignificant, but a jet traveling even half-of-a degree incorrectly will end up in the

wrong place. Point your thoughts at where you want to go (and pray and work hard to get there), and you may just end up where you always wanted to be.

CONSIDER

What percent of hope do you have for your marriage to be a thriving, beautiful picture of God's love for the Church? Do you tend to look at that hopeful percent or the amount missing from it? Do you more often ask the question "Will God fix it?" or "How will God fix it?" Will you invite Him to help you go through today, gripping your hope percent and asking "how"?

DAY 8

ACTION 5: LOOK FOR THE GOOD IN YOU &
ACTION 6: LOOK FOR THE GOOD IN THEM

Read: Romans 12

In a podcast interview we conducted with psychiatrist and shame-expert Dr. Curt Thompson, he said something that made us light up:

To identify a problem in my marriage . . . [and ask] “What’s the problem here?” That’s a completely different question and accesses and turns on a completely different set of neural structures in the brain than [if I ask] the question “What do I want to create here? What do I want to make here?” When I ask the question, “What’s the problem?” though [it’s] subtle, I become more anxious. When I ask the question, “What is the act or artifact of beauty that we want to create?” I have a different emotional response.³

Focusing on the problems in our marriages may actually prevent us from repairing the problems. Focusing on creating in our marriages may actually move us toward the unity we crave

Although we didn’t know the brain science behind it when we started to engage these next steps, it makes sense why they helped. Too often we saw ourselves or the other as “the problem.” Early on, I (Matt) just wanted Laurie to get into counseling to heal her past wounds so my life could be comfortable again.

I (Laurie) got stuck resenting my past wounds and therefore myself. I felt Matt’s push toward therapy, saw myself as the “problem to be fixed,” and shut down. I didn’t want to work on myself because I felt anxious, overwhelmed, and like the condemned problem.

But I also wasn’t a martyr. I saw Matt as the problem, too. After confessing to Matt how I was hoarding all of my metaphorical what if candies (“What if I left?”), I also confessed compiling accompanying evidence. “Matt always does this . . .” “If only he did that . . .” “See? This is why we are not compatible . . .” Instead of storing facts about how Matt is the problem, I began collecting reasons he was an asset to creating a good

marriage.

“Reasons I love Matt,” I titled a new note in my phone. I shared it with him so he could see it. I tried to say it aloud to him and in front of others. “He always makes time for the kids.” “He is so kind.” “He is becoming a hard worker.”

This helped, but I still felt like a problem. I couldn’t control how Matt viewed me (God was working behind the scenes), but I could adjust how I saw myself. Instead of focusing on the problem, I looked for the gifts I could contribute to creating unity in our marriage. “I am a hard worker,” “I am empathetic.” “I am good at bringing the family together.” At first it felt forced, but the more I did it in tandem with letting God’s empowering love fill me, the more Matt and I both began to feel even one percent more hope that God would unstuck this stuck marriage.

CONSIDER

Do you have a default to see yourself or your spouse as more of “the problem”? How can you shift your perspective from seeing either of you as “the problem” to asking, “What can we create”? One way is to consider: What gifts do you bring to the marriage table that contribute to creating a good marriage? What gifts does your spouse bring? Together, what might God want to create through you?

DAY 9

ACTION 7: HUG YOUR SPOUSE AT LEAST ONCE PER DAY

*Read: Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 12:10;
1 Corinthians 13:4–13*

Has one of you ever come home from work grumpy, and it set a sour tone for the rest of the night? Us too. Turns out those first ninety seconds after you walk in the door from being at work is the most important relational touch point that fosters resilient relationships. The other three critical touch points are right when you wake up, when either or both of you leave for work, and right before bed.⁴

It's easy to get lost in the swirl of the day and lose track of each other's heart. If you're anything like us, you lose sight, and you just keep spinning, until weeks down the road when you ask, "Who are you, again?" Reaching toward your spouse during one of these four critical moments can keep you connected until you can have a more meaningful moment of seeing each other.

But how can we make sure these touch points are actually helpful? Some therapists recommend daily, passionate kissing as a critical connector. That's not our style, but a hug, a short kiss, a big smile, or a genuine ask-and-answer of "How are you doing?" on the way in the door or "How can I pray for you?" before heading out is.

But when we do this, we need to remember the reason. We don't hug so we can get something. We don't reach over and see the other because we want to be seen. "I hug you, so that you clean the kitchen." "I share my heart with you, so that I get something later."
wink*wink

If marriage is a gospel metaphor, do we give to God to get stuff? (I mean, I'm sure we do it, but should we?) Does He give to us to get from us? No. That's not a relationship built on selflessness; that's a transaction.

So, too, with our spouses. We want a genuine heart relationship with them, not a scan of our credit card to receive goods. So, as we reach toward them, remember how we do this (God's love empowers us) and why we do it (we are living a metaphor that shows our spouses, kids, and neighbors how God loves them).

So, reach out. Reach over. Connect through whatever feels good and safe to both of you, so that you can tell your spouse and the world how much Jesus is reaching out to us—these four times each day and every moment in between.

CONSIDER

How are you engaging these four daily touch points now? How could you engage them with more intentionality? Ask God to help you to do what feels comfortable and then just a half-step more.

DAY 10

ACTION 8: REACH OUT TO “YOUR PEOPLE”

Read: Proverbs 15:22

Who in your life knows if and when you feel stuck in your marriage? Have you shared the real depth of it? Does anyone know?

It feels absolutely terrifying to share the real grit of our lives—maybe especially about our marriages. We all start with these high hopes and ideals and smiles for the photographer, but as the years tick by, we can slip into ruts or feel impossibly stuck. Who wants to talk about feeling impossibly stuck? We made promises of “forever” and posted all those pictures, but now we can’t figure it out?

If only we could know that everyone feels like this at some point in their marriage. There is no one—no Insta-famous couple, no marriage-book writing married person—who gets through 50-plus years of marriage without some sort of big issue. And if they don’t? They probably aren’t doing it right. If marriage is supposed to shape us to look like Jesus’ love for the Church, nobody starts out looking like Jesus, and sometimes the only way you can look like Him is through a good ol’ fashioned, tough discussion (or fifty) and suffering together.

Sometimes we do reach out to people for help. We sneak out a quiet peep of “Help!” but our voices are too soft or we mess up our words or those we share with simply don’t know how to walk alongside broken people, and we shove our mousy voices back deep inside, whispering “Never again.”

But just because some people stink at suffering well alongside you doesn’t mean everyone does.

We need helpers—friends, mentors, and therapists—and we cannot give up until we find the co-walking helpers who will actually assist.

CONSIDER

It's incredibly hard to make real, heart-friends—no matter what—but we attempted to do so in the midst of our worst marriage season. It was terrifying to invite these semi-strangers in, but we were too desperate to pretend we could do it alone anymore. Praise God, they didn't reject us and walked well alongside us.

Over the years, we have seen we need these pillar people in our lives at all times: a couple of very close friends who know all the grit and glory, a group of close friends with whom we can have fun, too, and some sort of mentor or couple we can look up to who are asking us questions about our marriage. In our suffering seasons? We add in a therapist and a marriage intensive.

Do you have these people in your life? Who would you add to this list? Who would you take away? If you need any of these positions filled, start with prayer: *Lord, we need pillar people in our lives to help us through this. Will you please help us? Please give us wisdom to know who to ask and courage to ask them. Please help them help us live this marriage metaphor even better.*

DAY 11

ACTION 9: EXERCISE MOST DAYS FOR EMOTIONAL, SPIRITUAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Read: 1 Timothy 4:8; 1 Corinthians 6:13

I'm pretty sure people think that I (Laurie) run a few miles every day because I want to work on my physique. I mean, sure, that's a part of it—about 5 percent. The other 95? It's all about that emotional and spiritual health.

There are plenty of studies that connect reduction of anxiety and depression to aerobic exercises such as jogging (hey!), swimming, walking, and dancing. “These improvements in mood are proposed to be caused by exercise-induced increase in blood circulation to the brain and by an influence on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and, thus, on the physiologic reactivity to stress.”⁵

I just tell Matt that I need “to go run to get my intensity out.” He smiles, nods, and helps me to get out the door because he knows how much it helps our whole family.

In our most challenging seasons, I ran more miles than normal, often listening to upbeat Christian (or at least clean) music but sometimes just to the Bible. I'm not some perfect saint, but I learned that if I am moving my body, burning out the stored anxiety, and feeding my soul with at least something positive, if not outright uplifting, it's going to help work out whatever is going on at home. There were many times while on a run I was able to see a fight in a different light or at least work out some of the extraneous, overblown emotions.

However, some of the extra miles I put in were not always added because I wanted to pray/think/burn through an issue at home. Instead, I was avoiding it. *Avoiding him*. When an issue from my past surfaced that I didn't want to process, I found myself running, running, running, serving as a metaphor for what I was doing inside. *I just want to run away*.

**

I (Matt) also had my own physically strengthening ways of coping that could turn into avoidance zones if I let them. For me this was woodworking or organizing something in our home like a closet or the garage. Most often, these activities were great places to work out my body and my soul regarding some issue we were having. However, if I let them, I could turn these safe places into my bunker.

CONSIDER

What is a healthy, holistic practice you engage in that can be a good way to process for you? What is one specific benefit you've gotten out of it? Have you ever seen it turn into escapism? What are signs this practice is shifting from a healthy one into a "bunker," as Matt called it?

If you're willing, ask the Lord if and how you may need to find an activity if you don't have one, and how you can adjust it to ensure it is cultivating your life and marriage to look more like Jesus.

DAY 12

ACTION 10: DON'T LOOK TO YOUR KIDS TO COMPLETE YOU

Read: Proverbs 22:6; Luke 4:8; 2 Peter 2:19

Some married Christians have a story like this: They meet Jesus and say, “You complete me!” Then they meet their spouse and say, “You complete me! (Jesus, too, of course . . .)” But then the honeymoon wears off and they realize their spouse doesn’t actually satisfy them (and Jesus is a bit too intangible), but then comes the baby in the baby carriage. “You complete me!” they say.

This is called idolatry. Idolatry is when we look to creation instead of the Creator to meet the good needs of our hearts. What are those needs? We have ten Core Needs on our list:

Affirmed: Overwhelmingly approved of

Desired: Specially chosen—no pretense necessary

Included: Wanted in this group, team, or partnership; I belong

Loved: Unconditionally accepted

Nurtured: Cared for; held

Purposed: Filled with a sense of profoundly mattering

Rested: Re-centered and reset in mind, body, spirit; includes having fun

Delighted In: Seen as unique and special

Protected: Unafraid; trusting everything is under control

Noticed: Seen inside and out

Ideally, we take those needs to the Need Meeter of our souls. We look not to creation, but *through* creation to the One who made it all.

However, because we were born after the Fall of man, we have natural-to-us defaults to get those needs met in ways that don’t actually satisfy us and don’t glorify

God. We do this with performing, people pleasing, work, alcohol, social media, and . . . our kids.

“Do you notice me? Do you affirm me? Do you love me?” we ask. “Do I feel fulfilled in my life purpose through the way you are achieving?” These pleading questions can skyrocket when we are in marital pain. Our kids are the other humans in the house, and they often want to please us more than our spouses.

But the solution to this idol worship isn't to stop idolizing our kids and start idolizing our spouses again. The solution is to repent of when we first said, “Jesus and *anything* completes me.”

CONSIDER

Which of the Core Needs do you feel resonates with you the most? What are your natural defaults (idols) that you most often turn toward to meet this need? Some of us lean toward idolizing our kids, our spouses, our perfectionism, or our success. If you are willing, confess whatever you have run toward and restart right now. God wants to meet that need in us, and He wants us to look not to creation but through creation to Him—the Need Meeter of our souls.

DAY 13

ACTION 11: DON'T RUN AWAY FROM FIGHTS EMOTIONALLY

Read: Philippians 2:1–11; Matthew 20:25–28

Is your default mode in confrontations/disagreements/fights amazing? Because ours isn't.

For both of us, we tend to want to do what we call the unhelpful three: blame shift (“They are really the cause!”), be defensive (“It makes sense I did it because of this and that happening in my life . . .”), or call out how the other is worse (“You do x, y, z all the time!”).

However, in our best fighting moments, we pull out the helpful three: swallow the first five sentences we want to say, take a deep prayer-breath (“Help, Jesus!”), and try to see through their eyes. *How would I feel if I were in their shoes?* It may take a minute or three to be able to do this, but when we do, we are able to have a calm conversation about whatever is on the table.

The greater issue for both of us, however, is when we engage the helpful three, we notice the other might be . . . well, right. *I don't want them to be right! Because if they are right, then I am . . . wrong.* Being wrong hurts. Being wrong burns a bit. (Smell that? It's your pride cooking.) These vulnerable, “I'm wrong?” moments are exactly when we want to run away emotionally and hide behind the pseudo-safety of the unhelpful three.

But what if we didn't? What if we let our pride burn away? What if we sincerely said things like, “I hear you,” “That must be hard,” “Can you help me to understand,” and the hardest one: “I was wrong; I am sorry”? Anger is often a mask that covers fear or sadness. We have found it is so helpful for connecting our hearts (even while fighting!) when we engage the helpful three, while staying in the more vulnerable emotions of “I feel afraid because . . .” or “I feel sad because . . .”

Now, we are certainly not talking about silently taking emotional or verbal abuse.

We are not encouraging squashing our voices and never sharing our opinions. We are saying that if we are on the wrestling mat, what if, instead of hiding our more vulnerable emotions behind the unhelpful three, we swallow, take a breath, and consider the other person's side?

If marriage is a metaphor, how we fight should look like Jesus, too. He “came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). With His help, we can serve, too, even while disagreeing.

CONSIDER

What is your default in disagreements? The unhelpful three? Or something else? What would practicing the helpful three do? If you're willing, ask the Lord to help you to pause, listen, see their side, and serve like Him—yes, even while fighting.

DAY 14

ACTION 12: GIVE TO OTHERS EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T WANT TO

Read: Matthew 6:1–18; John 17

When we pulled up to the recording studio to record our podcast, the air still felt icy from recently spoken, angry words. Matt put his head on the steering wheel. “Now we have to go record and care about people.”

I looked out the window. *Why can't you just be kind? Why do you have to fight, Laurie?* I paused as I tried to surrender my self-hatred, silence my retorts, and put myself in his shoes. *He's just sad. It's okay if he is sad.* I took a breath. *Help, Jesus.* “Yeah, we do have to. Let's go.”

As we sat down at the microphones, we laughed with our producer. We both liked him and felt his love for us in return. When Matt and I chuckled at the same joke our producer made, we looked at each other out of the corners of our eyes. The icy air between us felt warmer.

We began the interview, and Matt jumped in and asked an insightful question. I looked down, smiling. *He's so smart.* He caught my eye and matched my smile. *Oh yeah, you,* we both seemed to say. We were serving our audience, we were caring for our guest, yes, but in the act of serving, God was drawing us together.

Jesus designed us with the need for purpose, and He prayed this purpose over us before He died.

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” (John 17:20–21)

God wants us to be one so the world will believe in Him. But could the inverse also be true? As we seek to draw people to believe in Him, can we become more unified?

I've experienced this while working in ministry or while on a mission trip. Once-strangers can become best friends as you lean in, sling dirt, and care for others.

If you and your spouse are feeling tired and you feel at a loss, try serving in a fresh way. It seems counterintuitive. It seems like it will only suck you even more dry. But maybe God has other plans for it—to bless you, to encourage you, and to unify you like never before.

CONSIDER

Have you served together lately? What was that experience like? If you are able, try a fresh version of serving together. (For example, if you serve at your church, try serving in a different area.) God just may want to renew your unity through it.

FINAL CONSIDERATION

Well, you did it!

We didn't promise the moon for you when we began this adventure. But we did hope to provide you with some steps to go from sitting and hopeless to perhaps standing together and taking one unifying step forward.

Did you experience this? We'd love to hear about what happened. Email us at [**info@lauriekrieg.com**](mailto:info@lauriekrieg.com) with your "I stuck-to-even-just-one-step" unstuck story.

To hear our entire extremely-stuck to now shockingly loving-our-marriage story, search for Impossible Marriage wherever you get your books.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Helps Word Studies, 2011. <https://biblehub.com/greek/2588.html>
- 2 M.J. Aminoff, F. Boller F, and D.F. Swaab, “We Spend about One-Third of Our Life Either Sleeping or Attempting to Do So,” *Handbook of Clinical Neurology*. 2011, 98:vii. doi: 10.1016/B978-0-444-52006-7.00047-2. PMID: 21056174.
- 3 Curt Thompson, “Shredding Shame in a Pandemic,” *Hole in My Heart Podcast*, Episode 138, Sept 11, 2020
- 4 Gary and Barb Rosberg, “9. Marriage Maintenance Check - Four Points Of Daily Connection,” Bible.org, <https://bible.org/seriespage/9-marriage-maintenance-check-four-points-daily-connection>.
- 5 A. Sharma, V. Madaan, and F.D. Petty, “Exercise for Mental Health.” *Primary Care Companion to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 8, no. 2(2006): 106. <https://doi.org/10.4088/pcc.v08n0208a>.