

Anxiously Engaged

Supplemental Lesson

Creative Problem Solving

Introduction

The old joke about marriage goes that the bride sighs blissfully to her mother: “Now that we’re getting married, we’ll be at the end of all our problems,” to which the mother responds: “Yes, dear, but which end?”



Problems come in many varieties in circumstances, relationship dynamics, and in other ways.



Elder Joe J. Christensen taught:

“Occasionally we hear something like, ‘Why, we have been married for fifty years, and we have never had a difference of opinion.’ If that is literally the case, then one of the partners is overly dominated by the other or, as someone said, is a stranger to the truth. Any intelligent couple will have differences of opinion. Our challenge is to be sure that we know how to resolve them. That is part of the process of making a good marriage better.” ([General Conference, April, 1995](#))



Having problems in marriage is simply part of marriage. Yet, even given the same number of problems, how couples handle them is what makes all the difference:

Struggling couples get stuck in them and experience more stress:  

Healthier, happier couples work on them and enjoy more peace:  

This lesson will explore understanding potential problems and using the power of creativity to solve them.

Positivity Ratio

While we say that all marriages have problems, we want to be clear that all marriages are also full of goodness. Most marriages have far more goodness than trouble. An important part of solving problems is to keep them in perspective.

GOODNESS	PROBLEMS
----------	----------

If we focus too much on the problems, we miss all that good! There’s a popular design term out there called ‘WYSIWYG’...“What You See Is What You Get” If we spend too much time seeing the problems, they can become the basis of our interactions.

In his marriage research scientifically observing couples, Dr John Gottman has found what he calls the “magic ratio” of positive to negative in couple interactions: 5:1

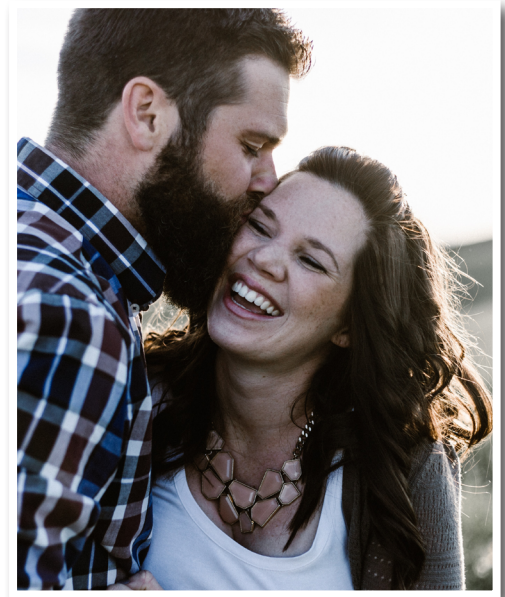
Healthy couples have at least 5 times more positive interactions than they have conflict over problems. Positive interactions include affection, looking for and expressing appreciation of admirable qualities, playfulness, empathy, celebrations, etc.

If the majority of our marriage is good, then we should spend the majority of our energy on the goodness. A foundation to good problem solving is to have a healthy overall ratio of positivity.

Activity #1: Celebrate the Good

Dr Gottman recommends simple exercises similar to this. Take a quick minute to write down 10 things you admire about your spouse and take turns sharing them. Then talk together for a few minutes about the goodness in your relationship:

1. What are some of our strengths together?
2. What are ways we enjoy being together?
3. What are some good things going on in our lives we can celebrate?



Creative Power

With a good foundation of positivity, we are ready to tackle specific problems using our creative power.



Elder Robert D. Hales taught:

"We are thinking, reasoning human beings. We have the ability to identify our needs, to plan, to set goals, and to solve our problems. The characteristics of a creative person can be used to develop solutions for seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We can use originality to overcome opposition. We can develop new ways to help others resolve difficult situations in their lives.

The creative approach is a disciplined approach to meet life's needs. Creative thinking is not a substitute for education, integrity, or living the commandments. Nor is it a shortcut around the challenges of life. Creative thinking can become a process of inspiration that leads us to decisions...May each of us use our creative reasoning to do all in our power to solve our problems and then look to the Lord for the reassuring, peaceful confirmation that we have made the right decision. Surely then our harvest will be plentiful." ([New Era, Feb. 2004](#))

Using Elder Hale's metaphor of harvest, here are some steps to creative problem solving:

1. Prepare the Soil: Identify Change

Be sure you clearly identify what the problem is and what you hope for in a solution. Remember the problem is not either of you as a person, but something the two of you are working on together as a team. Formulate the real question behind the problem. Take time to listen to each other to get to a true understanding of why it is a problem and how you hope it will feel different after change.

2. Gather Seeds: Brainstorm Plenty of Ideas

Here is the creative part. Remember that if you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting. To solve problems, you have to think differently, creatively, "out of box!" A few rules of brainstorming:

- Synergize. Remember that you are a team and both contribute. They say "two heads are better than one" because brainstorming is better when we can build on each other's ideas. Invite the inspiration of the Spirit to help expand your minds.
- All ideas belong to everyone. Once an idea is on the table, it doesn't matter who it came from. When it's time to implement any idea, everyone should own it and give their best to make it work.
- There are no bad ideas in brainstorming. Remember that all ideas contribute to the creative energy, and sometimes the very best ideas are the ones that initially seemed impractical.
- Details can wait. The free-flowing of ideas and energy can get stuck if we stop to debate the details and logistics of any particular idea while brainstorming. There will be time for evaluating ideas later, and for discussing the details of how to implement them.
- Go vertical. Creativity experts differentiate horizontal and vertical creativity. Horizontal creativity is variations on a theme—like 100 things paperclips might hold together (hair, clothing, etc.) Horizontal creativity is like riding a train on a single track. Vertical creativity is like jumping to different tracks. It uses multiple themes—like 100 different ways a paper clip could be used (holding things, opened up to poke things, re-bent into different shapes, linked together as a chain, etc.) When horizontal and vertical creativity work together you can get at the best variation of the best theme. People's tendency, however, is to get stuck in horizontal thinking, especially when they are alone. Work together to go vertical and stretch your creativity for more variety of ideas!
- Go for 10. Often the most obvious (and possibly less useful) ideas come up first. The really creative ones don't come until we have to start stretching. So, don't stop too early—a good guide is to always aim for at least 10 ideas. You might find it's ideas 8, 9, or 10 that have the most potential.



3. Plant the Best Seeds: Choose an Idea and Act

Once you have plenty of creative ideas, it's time to evaluate which seem to best align with your desires for change and fit within your resource and time constraints. Decide in unity which to try. You may need to try a blend of ideas in a compromise that feels right to both of you. Now it's important to talk details and be clear about the specifics of who-when-how in implementing. Make a clear plan and carry it out whole heartedly! Include a timeline of when you'll check back to see if it's working out and a plan to celebrate when it does.

4. Examine and Pray over the Crop: Evaluate Progress

Ask the Lord to bless your efforts. Give the solution idea enough time to grow into real change, but be sure to check back and see if it's satisfactory for everyone. Weed out what doesn't belong or isn't working, and if you need to, go back and plant a different idea.

5. Harvest: Celebrate!

When you see a solution has brought good change, be intentional to celebrate and fuel positivity!

Activity #2: Creative Problem Solve

Bob and Mary are having a little problem: The trash is not making it out to the curb.

Imagine you are Bob and Mary. Go through these 5 steps to find a creative solution.

Or, if you prefer, choose a low-level problem that you are experiencing and that both of you would like to work on. Don't choose something right now that may be a tougher problem. First, practice these skills on something a little easier and less emotional.

1. Prepare the Soil: Identify Change

Why is the trash causing a problem? What feelings might be behind the trash problem?
Are there some important elements of the needed change that could be clarified--when the trash should arrive at the curb, etc?

2. Gather Seeds: Brainstorm Plenty of Ideas

Come up with your most creative solution ideas together, no less than 10! Write them down.

3. Plant the Best Seeds: Choose an Idea and Act

Now evaluate the options and decide together which seem best. Circle the one (or combination of ones) Bob and Mary will try. Then write down:

1. Who-when-how details.
2. A date when Bob and Mary will check back to see if this is working.
3. A creative celebration idea for what Bob and Mary will do when the trash problem feels resolved.

4. Examine the Crop: Evaluate Progress

Imagine how your idea for Bob and Mary is going and discuss potential hazards to success. If you can see some possible trouble, go back and make a new plan with a different idea.

5. Harvest: Celebrate!

Have a real celebration using your idea for Bob and Mary!

THE BOTTOM LINE

While problems will sure be part of your marriage journey, you can be intentional about focusing on goodness and creatively finding solutions together. The creative problem-solving process can strengthen your unity and make problem solving more joyful!

References

[Elder Joe J Christiansen, "Marriage and the Great Plan of Happiness, General Conference, April. 1995](#)

[Elder Robert D. Hales, "Channeling Your Creativity", New Era, Feb. 2004](#)

[John Gottman and Nan Silver, The Seven Principles for making marriage work.](#)