

Anxiously Engaged

Supplemental Lesson

Understanding Family-of-Origin Influences in Your Marriage

(We are grateful to Kendall Sargent for her original work on this lesson.)

Introduction

Everyone has a family. These families take on many different forms, shapes, and sizes. Due to the fact that each of us has only one family, we tend to believe all families think, feel, and act the same way we do.

Family of Origin

The thoughts and behaviors we developed in our family of origin can impact every part of the way we interact in our own marriages – our new families-of-procreation – such as how we communicate, our understanding of equal partnership in marriage, and our attitudes about rearing children.

Whether we are aware of it or not, **we have preconceived ideas and expectations** about marriage and family life that we inherit from our families of origin. We bring these ideas and expectations – good and bad, helpful and unhelpful – into our new families.



Remember in the Garden of Eden, God brought Eve to Adam to be his wife and Adam exclaimed:

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh” (Moses 3:24).



Marriage involves forming our own family, separate from our family of origin.

We should prioritize the marital relationship, which can require some physical, mental, and emotional distance from our family of origin (even when our families were filled with love and goodness).

We are human, and it is natural and inevitable that we bring our past into the present as we try to build our future together in marriage.

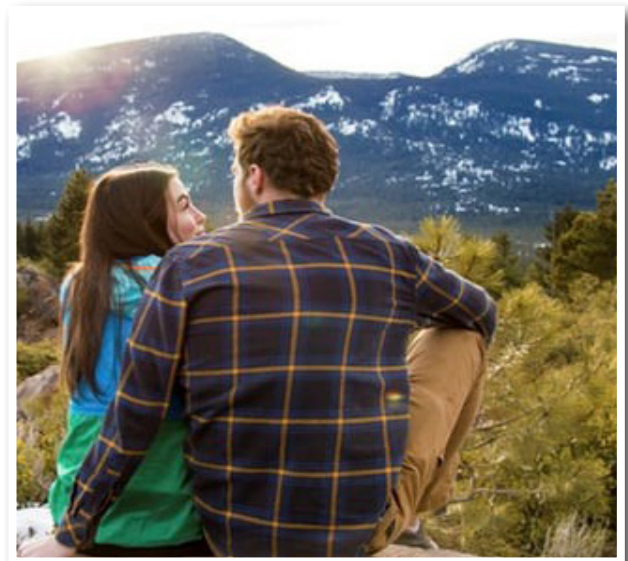
The purpose of this lesson, then, is to

1. **Become more aware** of the ideas and expectations from our families of origin
2. **Be more intentional** about what we bring into our marriages so that we can decide together as equal partners what our futures will be.

Research shows that family-of-origin influences have a significant effect on marriages.

Family-of-origin influences our:

- Thoughts
- Attitudes
- Beliefs
- Behaviors (specifically, behaviors we learned from our families that shape how we think and behave in our marriages).



Intentionally or Unintentionally

For instance, maybe your father was not very involved in children's lives and you think this is just the way things are. Your parents probably have tried to pass down certain things intentionally, like daily prayer, the importance of education, or treating people with respect.



Many family-of-origin patterns are passed down unintentionally, such as disrespectful or even hostile ways of communicating, prioritizing other things over family relationships, or unrealistic expectations.

What about the effects of difficult experiences?

Sometimes we bring the lingering effects of difficult or traumatic experiences growing up into our marriage. Maybe you experienced the hard breakup of your parents' relationship or experienced some abuse personally. When these experiences affect your marital relationship, it is important to be able to surface them and talk about them.

Let's practice surfacing issues from our past and talking about them in the present so that you can be more intentional about them in the future. Start with an ordinary issue that all families face: mealtime. Then practice on a few common and potentially more serious issues. The following activity will guide you.

Activity #1: Seeing the Past in the Present

1. Each of you take 5 minutes and think about some beliefs, attitudes, behaviors or some unique experiences from your family of origin that likely influences who you are.

Some could seem pretty trivial – how to fold laundry, load the dishwasher, or mow the lawn – or others could seem more important – how important family home evening is to you, how you celebrate Christmas or some could be very important – how financial decisions are made, the importance of religious activity, or some abuse that you experienced growing up.

2. **Write down about 10 things** that you think your family of origin could influence how you will do things in your marriage. **Include both minor and major issues.**
3. **Start practicing talking about your past with a more minor issue.** Both you and your fiancé take about 5 minutes and talk about responsibility for food preparation and dishes in your home growing up. Even though this may seem like a pretty small issue, practice your best listening and communication skills that you learned in the core Anxiously Engaged lessons.
4. Next, each of you think of something from your family of origin that you think will have a positive influence on your marriage. Each of you take about 5 minutes to talk about that positive influence.
5. **Now, practice with an issue that could be “heavier.”**

On your list you probably wrote down something about your parents’ relationship. Each of you take about 5 minutes to talk about your parents’ relationship and how that influences you now.



Remember to use your best listening and communication skills. Don’t spend time right now on how you might plan to deal with this past influence. At the end of this exercise, you will have a chance to make some intentional, specific plans.

Note on expectations:

Seeing healthy relationship patterns growing up tend to lead us to positive expectations for our own marriage. In contrast, seeing unhealthy relationship patterns tends to lead to negative expectations and can even create fear and lack of confidence about our own marriage.

Note on divorce:

On average, adult children of divorced parents have higher divorce rates than children whose parents are still married. Of course, that doesn’t mean you are going to get divorced just because your parents did. But some children of divorce struggle more with commitment in dating and marriage. Other children of divorce are strongly motivated not to follow in their parents’ footsteps and make intentional changes and needed sacrifices. Anyone can have a loving and lasting marriage.

***The key is to be intentional in your attitudes and behaviors, especially when your risks are higher.**

Note on parental relationships:

When a child’s relationship with both parents is warm and supportive, it is easier for him or her to be open and trusting in romantic relationships as an adult. Parent-child relationships also strongly influence your self-worth and self-confidence. If your relationship with one or both of your parents was difficult, you may need to work harder at building an open and trusting relationship with your spouse.

Note on childhood abuse:

Traumatic childhood experiences, like abuse, can have lingering effects on a person's sense of self-worth, confidence, and self-efficacy (how much control you feel you have in your life). The key to dealing with past trauma is that we have to come to terms with this part of our background and make sure we aren't allowing the past to control how we react and feel in the present. If you feel comfortable, it can be valuable to talk to your fiancé about your experience so that she or he can better understand how it might affect you now.

In addition to seeking healing from the Atonement of Jesus Christ, professional counseling can be a useful tool to help you heal. Consider investing in some premarital counseling – on your own or as a couple – with a professional counselor to help with healing from an experience of abuse.

6. Finally, each of you take one other issue from your list that you would like to talk about with your fiancé. Each of you take about 5 minutes. Again, practice your best listening and communication skills.

The patterns, behaviors, and attitudes we learned in our families of origin can have positive, healthy influences but can also have negative, detrimental influences on our future marriages and families.

Being Intentional about the Future

Coming to terms with the inherent influences from our family of origin can be a difficult process, especially when the patterns have been established over several generations.

Transitional characters are people who choose to leave in their past those unhealthy values and behaviors in order to have a stronger marriage and family in the future.

Transitional characters can alter the entire course of posterity for the better.

LDS family therapist Carlfred Broderick explained the following about transitional characters:

*“...the most noteworthy examples are those individuals who grow up in an abusive, emotionally destructive environment and who somehow find a way to metabolize the poison and refuse to pass it on to their children. They break the mold. They refute the observation that abused children become abusive parents, that the children of alcoholics become alcoholic adults, that ‘the sins of the fathers are visited upon the heads of children to the third and fourth generation.’ Their contribution to humanity is to **filter the destructiveness out of their own lineage** so that the generations downstream will have a supportive foundation upon which to build productive lives.”*

Example of transitional characters

Tom was raised in a divorced home with an alcoholic father who was emotionally and physically abusive. Tom's grandfather also struggled with alcoholism. Tom's older brother Scott promised that he would not follow in their father's footsteps. Nevertheless, Scott turned to alcohol to cope with his relationship problems. Tom, on the other hand, decided not to take even a sip of alcohol for fear of one drink leading to an unhealthy addiction. He worked every day after school to save up money so he would be able to pay his way and graduate from college. Tom met and married a woman named Maren. Together they decided that, in addition to Tom's abstinence from alcohol, they would sacrifice, go to therapy, and do whatever it took to keep their marriage together. Tom and Maren's children grew up in a household of acceptance, understanding, and charity. Tom served as a transitional character in his family and his choices affected his children and future generations.

Activity #2: Intentional Transitions

1. Each of you take a few minutes to discuss a transitional character that you know, either from your own or extended family or from another family. (Or, maybe you can think of a fictional character from a movie or book.)
2. Explain what you have learned from that person about the power of changing future generations.
Note: We usually think of transitional characters as coming from very difficult family circumstances and changing that for the next generation. But even those who are blessed to come from very healthy families usually see things that they would like to change in their own marriages and families. So, we can all be transitional characters in large or small ways.
3. Think back on your conversations in this lesson about things in your past that are likely to influence you going forward.
4. Each of you pick one important influence that you want to focus on and make a change for the better.
5. Take about 5-10 minutes each discussing your choice and making a specific goal and concrete plan to be a transitional character, small or large. Practice your best listening and communication skills.
6. Write down your goals and plans someplace where you will regularly revisit what you decided.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The key is to understand our past then be intentional about what you keep and what you leave behind. A newlywed couple leaves their family of origin and cleaves to each other to create a new family with its own culture.

