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# Facilitator Guide





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## Introduction

### Background

In 2019, Alan and Lisa Hawkins and Kathryn and Steve Sargent were having dinner together when the following topic surfaced: marriage preparation in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We discussed the fact that, while our faith excels at teaching the importance of marriage, we haven’t necessarily helped individuals and couples effectively prepare for marriage itself. While couples invest hours and hours in planning a wedding that is over in one day, they often neglect crucial preparation for a marriage that they hope will last for time and all eternity. While several other faiths require couples to complete a certain number of premarital education hours, our faith has no such requirements or recommendations. It seemed to us that for a relationship so important that it is “ordained of God,” we could do better in helping prepare couples for marriage. (Confession: None of us can brag about how effective our marital preparation was!). This dinner conversation was the genesis of *Anxiously Engaged*.

Alan Hawkins and Kathryn Sargent decided to make their dinner discussion a reality. Alan Hawkins ([hawkinsa@byu.edu](mailto:hawkinsa@byu.edu)), a professor of family life at Brigham Young University and Kathryn Pond Sargent ([kathryn.pond.sargent@gmail.com](mailto:kathryn.pond.sargent@gmail.com)), an adjunct faculty member at BYU recruited Tamara Gilliland ([tamaragilliland@gmail.com](mailto:tamaragilliland@gmail.com)), a passionate family life educator who has a master’s degree from BYU and together they developed *Anxiously Engaged*.

### Purpose

*Anxiously Engaged* is a brief educational program designed to help engaged couples who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints increase their understanding of the marriage commitment they are making and strengthen the foundation of their relationship.

There are two primary themes in *Anxiously Engaged*:

**1 – Intentionally preparing for marriage.** Couples need to be less casual and more *intentional* about their preparation for marriage and their ongoing efforts to

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maintain a healthy, vibrant relationship. To use a phrase by the prominent marriage researcher Scott Stanley, they need to *decide, not slide*.<sup>1</sup>

**2 – Working toward becoming one.** “They twain shall be one flesh” (Moses 3:24) is how Adam succinctly articulated the purpose of marriage in scripture. *Anxiously Engaged* helps couples explore the meaning of this important principle in greater depth and to develop skills to intentionally facilitate this life-long process of becoming one.

When couples prepare effectively, they will be less anxious about what lies ahead. “If ye are prepared ye shall not fear” (D&C 38:30). One thing we know about young people today is that (compared to previous generations) they are more anxious, generally, and they are more worried about being able to develop a healthy, happy marriage, specifically. Effective preparation will significantly decrease their anxiety about married life and increase their chances of forming a healthier, happier and stable marriage. It will also help them avoid some of the disappointing and discouraging potholes and pitfalls of early married life and reduce their chances of divorce. But anxious has another meaning beyond uneasiness or distress; it also can mean eagerness. So, on a more positive note, we hope *Anxiously Engaged* will give couples greater confidence so that they will be even more eager and optimistically excited about the divine path of marriage that they have begun to walk.

## **Design/Layout**

This Facilitator’s Guide supports educators who have been officially trained to conduct this program in their communities. The Guide contains five lessons, designed to be given in three 2-hour sessions, for a total of six program hours. The lessons cover core topics for engaged Latter-day Saint couples. The program has religious content as well as research-based, secular content that we believe aligns well with religious principles. *Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be offered over a three-week period in a small group setting. However, online delivery can be effective, and may make it possible to reach more couples.

*Anxiously Engaged* covers only some of the “essentials” and there is a lot more content that could be covered. However, we think asking couples to commit to more than six hours risks having some decide not to participate. For couples who want to do additional preparation, we have developed several supplemental lessons that are available on our website: <http://AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu> (to be used either before or after the wedding).

*Anxiously Engaged* is not an official marriage preparation curriculum approved by the Church. Yet we are taught in the Doctrine & Covenants to be engaged in good causes of our own free will: “*Verily I say, men [and women] should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in*

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/>.

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*them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men [and women] do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.*" (D&C 58:27-28, emphasis added) In addition, Elder M. Russell Ballard reinforced for us that the unofficial efforts of experts in various topics should be valued.<sup>2</sup> We think this program can provide a valuable service for Latter-day Saint engaged couples.

When designing a program, it's always a good idea to be clear about how program inputs lead to program outputs or the changes you are hoping to create. Page 117 in the Appendix depicts the "logic model" for *Anxiously Engaged*.

## **Audience**

The *Anxiously Engaged* curriculum is primarily designed for couples who are marrying for the first time. In the United States, nearly half of all marriages involve one or both partners who were previously married. While *Anxiously Engaged* contains many elements and principles that apply to both first and second marriages, remarriages often involve many unique and complex issues not faced by first marriages. We are currently working on adapting the *Anxiously Engaged* curriculum for remarrying Latter-day Saint couples (*Anxiously Engaged, Again*). Until this curriculum is complete, we recommend that instructors refer remarrying couples to community educational programs specifically designed for remarrying couples and stepfamilies (e.g., *Smart Steps*: <https://extension.usu.edu/hru/courses/smart-steps-for-stepfamilies>), and encourage remarrying couples to invest in further preparation. We will notify AE instructors when an adapted curriculum is available and we will encourage you to offer separate programs for remarrying couples, as needed. Additionally, while the curriculum is designed specifically with Latter-day Saint couples in mind, other religious couples also may enjoy and benefit from the program.

## **Reach**

But how can we get this service to the many couples who could benefit from it? That's where you come in. We want you to be a proactive resource wherever you go to offer *Anxiously Engaged* to engaged Latter-day Saints. How you do this is up to you. For instance, you can let your local church leaders know about AE and invite them to encourage engaged couples to participate. Or, you can recruit couples through other channels, such as social media. Frankly, as you start providing this valuable service, word will spread, and your reputation will draw interested couples to you. However you do it, be an agent anxiously engaged in a good cause.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Russell Ballard, "The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century," address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake City, 26 February 2016.

Once you have been officially trained, you are authorized to use this curriculum in whatever ways you feel are best. We ask, however, that you provide it as a service and only charge to cover the cost of expenses such as copying materials and refreshments. You are welcome to contact Dr. Hawkins or the other program authors with questions you may have about offering *Anxiously Engaged*. In fact, we encourage you to contact us and give us feedback about your experience with the program. We will use that feedback to keep developing and improving the curriculum. And we will regularly update the curriculum based on the most recent research and inspired words of Church leaders. We will contact trained facilitators when there have been significant updates to the curriculum, and we will post the new materials on the website where they can be downloaded for free.

We appreciate your willingness to provide this important service to engaged Latter-day Saint couples in your area. Please reach out to us if you have any questions, comments or concerns about *Anxiously Engaged* as we are always striving to make it more effective. May the Lord bless you in your efforts!

*\*This introduction was originally written with Latter-day Saint couples in mind. If you choose to offer this to non-Latter-day Saint Christian groups, please adapt the above principles to your particular situation.*

## Facilitator Tips

It's nice to have a great curriculum, but that's only half of the challenge. There are a lot of other elements that go into effective teaching. Here are some thoughts and tips to help you be an effective facilitator.

How big should *AE* groups be?

- As *AE* is based around couple conversations and group discussions, groups should be small—four to six couples is ideal, but groups can work with as few as three couples.
- If enrollment gets bigger than about eight couples, consider breaking into two groups or offering *AE* more often.

Where can I teach *AE*?

- Because it is designed to be taught in small groups, *AE* can be taught in a number of locations—in a family room in a home, a backyard or an apartment clubhouse. *AE* can be taught in a church or seminary/institute classroom, but participants have commented how much they prefer a less formal and more “homey” environment.
- The location should have room for the participants to gather, room for couples to spread out during couple conversations and a screen for the PowerPoint slides.
- As an example, I teach *AE* groups in our basement family room and I use our TV screen to cast the *AE* slides. During couple conversations, couples then spread out into different areas of our basement.

Who can teach *AE*?

- *Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be taught by Family Life Educators who have a background in marital relationships and who are trained in the program.
- *AE* can be taught by one instructor, but it can be beneficial to have both a man and a woman teach *AE* together—ideally a married couple, although this is not required. It is good for *AE* students to see the modeling of a healthy marriage.
- If you are married and *AE* trained, you could train your spouse to teach with you. Additionally, you could train a married, opposite-gender co-facilitator.
- Unmarried individuals can train and offer *AE*. In these situations, we encourage you to have a married, opposite-gender co-facilitator.

\*These tips about recruiting couples were originally written within the context of the ward/stake Latter-day Saint structure. If you choose to offer this to non-Latter-day Saint Christian groups, please adapt these tips to your particular situation.

How do I “recruit” couples to participate in *AE*?

- Areas with a Young Single Adult (YSA) stake
  - If you live in an area with a YSA stake, you will likely have a steady stream of newly engaged couples that would benefit from *AE*. If this is your situation, make an appointment with the YSA stake president and explain to him what you have to offer. If he is amenable, ask to take 10 minutes at a YSA bishops’ training to meet the bishops and give them an overview of *AE*, answer their questions and then request that bishops send engaged couples to you. It is critical that bishops have some in-person contact with you so that they can get a sense of who you are and what *AE* is so they will feel comfortable referring couples to you. After the meeting, make sure to send a follow up email to all of the bishops with your contact info.
  - Alternatively, you could make an appointment with each of the YSA bishops for a more personalized explanation of *AE*.
  - Finally, and generally least effective, you could send an email to all of the YSA bishops explaining what you have to offer. Because bishops receive so many church-related emails, *AE* information is likely to get buried with all of their other administrative communication. An in-person contact will yield far better results.
    - An example of a “YSA bishop’s email” is included in the appendix.

Areas with a YSA ward

- Meet with the YSA bishop to explain to him what you have to offer and discuss the need for *AE* in your area.
- If there isn’t a YSA ward in your area, it could be helpful to meet with the stake president to see how many engagements generally take place in the stake each year.

Institute

- Institute is often another place to “advertise.”
- If there isn’t a “Preparing for Eternal Marriage” institute class already being offered, volunteer to teach one and then recruit students who are engaged.

Word of mouth

- Previous *AE* participants are often the most effective advertising.

Social media

- Advertise your *AE* classes through our Instagram @anxiously\_\_engaged.

At what stage of their engagement should couples participate in *AE*?



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- Invite couples to participate in *AE* sooner rather than later. Taking *AE* sooner allows for more time to learn and practice the principles and skills taught. Try to avoid having couples participate in *Anxiously Engaged* just a few weeks before their wedding (although participating later in their engagement is still better than not participating at all). Research suggests that about 10-15 percent of couples who participate in marriage preparation decide not to marry. But the closer the wedding day, the harder it is for them to make this decision, even if it is needed.

How do I establish a good connection with *AE* participants?

- It is helpful to establish some kind of personal connection with the couples before they start *Anxiously Engaged*.
- For example, before I start a new *AE* group, I set up a 10-15-minute FaceTime/Zoom with each couple to ask about each of them as individuals, their story as a couple and to give them a chance discuss their questions, concerns and hopes for *Anxiously Engaged*.
  - Connecting with couples ahead of time often makes a big difference in how committed they are to attending and how willing they are to participate in *AE*, share ideas, etc.

How can I help participants feel comfortable at *AE*?

- Having *AE* in an informal/relaxed environment seems to help couples feel more open and willing to participate.
- A few other small things also seem to help with the “atmosphere:” make sure the room smells good, play soft background music as couples arrive, greet participants by name and informally introduce couples to each other as they arrive. If possible, try to help couples find some kind of connection with each other (“I think you may be getting married the same day” or “I think you two might have gone to the same high school.”)
- Consider providing stick-on name tags for each participant, especially the first week.
- Begin with a prayer.
- Bring bottles of water for each participant and a little snack for them to eat to keep their blood sugar up—something small and easy-to-eat but inexpensive. For example, I have a fridge in my basement where I teach and I keep it stocked with water bottles and ice cream bars and popsicles that participants feel free to snack on throughout *AE*.
- Strive to keep the atmosphere relaxed and informal to encourage participation and conversation.

How do I cover the expenses incurred by *AE*?

- *Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be a service not a money maker. That said, to cover the costs of materials and snacks, you can charge the couples a nominal fee (about \$20) or ask the YSA ward or stake to reimburse you for your expenses.

How can I help make couple conversations effective?

- Couple conversations are the very heart of *AE* and should be a primary focus of each session.

- Make sure that couples have a private location they can move to during couple conversations. For example, in my basement couples move to sit on the stairs, our guest bedroom, the small playroom under the stairs (a favorite spot), the “ping pong” area, etc. It doesn’t need to be fancy just so long as couples have a bit of privacy
- If possible, play background music so couples feel more comfortable talking about sensitive subjects.
- Remind couples to look over the questions on their own first, and then discuss their answers with each other.
- Time management for couple conversations can be a little tricky: some couples hurry through their questions and others have a hard time pulling themselves away from their

conversations. To make things easier and so you don’t have to be the “time police,” tell them how much time they have and then set a timer.

- During couple conversations, try to be far enough away that couples don’t feel like you are eavesdropping on their conversations. (I generally set a timer on my phone and go upstairs during couple conversations.)

How can I best manage AE’s two-hour time limit?

- Flexibility is the key idea.
- Start on time (even if all of the couples aren’t there) and end on time. If couples want to stay after and chat with you or their fellow classmates that’s fine, but two hours was the commitment (a big one for some) and couples tend to disengage after the time is up.
- Depending on the chattiness of the group, it may be difficult to cover all of the material in each lesson. You may need to reign in the discussion to keep things on track. There is a delicate balance between good discussion and derailment.
- Given the potential time constraints, you decide what principles you think are the most important and what can be cut if time gets short. That said, *couple conversations are the core of Anxiously Engaged and should be given priority and not cut.*
- Try to get all participants involved in discussions and try not to have one individual dominate the discussions. Sometimes when this is happening, you can direct a question specifically at someone else.

How much should I share? How much should participants share?

- As facilitators, we have our own experiences that are often relevant to class discussions. While our authenticity and transparency in sharing our stories can make a class feel more real and comfortable, sharing too many anecdotal experiences can take the focus away from the couples in our group. There is a fine balance between being authentic and oversharing. Be mindful of this balance.
- A similar balance applies to class participants. Group discussion and sharing personal experiences can really enhance the learning process; but oversharing can make some people uncomfortable. Private couple conversations are the premium time, so we don’t want extensive oversharing in the group to diminish that time.

Is it okay to refer participants to specific pre-marital therapists?

- During the regular curriculum, you will bring up the idea of seeking extra help with a trained therapist. Since most participants won't be familiar with the pre-marital counselors in the area, it could be helpful to have a list of counselors you would recommend to participants who inquire. Don't try to be a therapist yourself. Stay in your role as an instructor/facilitator.
- If you are a trained therapist and are willing to take on class participants as clients, that's fine. But don't push yourself on participants. Also, make sure to clearly separate your roles as an *AE* facilitator and a therapist.

What's the best way to follow up with participants between classes?

- Get participants email addresses either before or during the first class.
- After each class, send a follow up email with a reminder of any homework assignments and links to corresponding online lessons.
- In the email, also ask for feedback about what you covered, how it was covered it, questions, etc.
- [Templates for follow-up emails are included in the appendix.](#)

What is the best way to address sensitive questions about sexual intimacy?

- Set up a way for participants to anonymously submit questions about marital sexuality and then work the answers into the lesson. For example, I created a one question anonymous "survey" using a free app (SurveyMonkey.com) and I use the same survey over and over. In the follow-up email after the first class, I include a link to the survey and participants can then easily ask questions about marital sexuality.
- You can answer many questions with basic information and explanations about how things generally are for newlywed couples. In addition, the *Anxiously Engaged* marital sexuality lesson includes some good resources for reliable information. Try to be familiar with these sources so that you can recommend specific ones in response to their questions.

What's the best way to follow-up with participants after the class?

- At the end of the last class, invite participants to complete the 5-7minute program evaluation survey. They can do so anonymously or attach their name.
- Ask them their thoughts about doing a "booster-shot class" in the next year. Consider offering a 6-months booster session in which you invite the couples back for a "tune-up."

What's the best way to keep YSA leaders "in the loop" with *Anxiously Engaged*?

- From time to time, report back to any stake or ward leaders who are encouraging engaged couples to participate in *Anxiously Engaged* (and/or to any others who are

referring couples to you). Let them know how many are coming and summarize the feedback they are giving you.

This *Anxiously Engaged Facilitator Guide* has been adapted for non-Latter-day Saint Christian groups. In addition, there are slides and a workbook that have also been adapted to a Christian audience.



# Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 1

## Becoming One in Marriage

### Preface

The first part of this lesson is your chance to set the tone for a great *Anxiously Engaged* experience. The goal is to help couples feel comfortable and excited about preparing for their marriage. After couples get a chance to meet each other, you will give an overview of the sessions and introduce the two primary themes of *Anxiously Engaged*:

- 1 - Intentionally preparing for marriage
- 2 - Working toward becoming one

The second part of this lesson focuses on couples leaning all the way in to become one in marriage. As we cleave to each other and prioritize our relationship with our spouse over our other relationships, we will begin the process of becoming one.

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## Lesson Outline

### Introduction (15 minutes)

- Icebreaker activity
- Class background and overview

### Becoming One (30 minutes)

- Becoming One
- Couple Time: Ciardi Poem
- Cleaving and Spousal Pre-eminence
- The Invisible Fence
- We over Me
- Couple Time: We over Me

### Conclusion (2 minutes)

## Materials

- Facilitator guide
- Participant workbooks
- Name tags and markers, if desired
- Pens/pencils for note taking

## Equipment

- Laptop and screen to show slides
- Soft music to play during “Couple Time”

## Introduction (7 minutes)

[This lesson should be about 45 minutes to give extra time for Lesson 2]

[Slide 1]

**Welcome participants to *Anxiously Engaged* and start with a prayer.**

**Give a brief (1 minute) introduction of yourself.**

[Include your credentials for facilitating *Anxiously Engaged* and your passion for helping couples prepare for marriage. Also, share one area in which you could have been better prepared for marriage. Emphasize that you really are there to help them.]

**ACTIVITY: Icebreaking Intros (5 minutes)**

[Slide 2]

**Invite them to introduce themselves and answer the question, “What is one thing you hope to learn by participating in *Anxiously Engaged*?”**

[Slide 3]

**Mention the Instagram (@anxiously\_\_engaged), Facebook page (Anxiously Engaged), and the online supplemental lessons at [www.AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu](http://www.AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu).**

### Online Supplemental Lessons:

*Getting a Spiritual Confirmation of the Decision to Marry*  
*The Soulmate Trap*

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<sup>3</sup> Relevant supplemental lessons will appear in this format. Briefly mention them when they are shown.

[Pass out workbooks]

**Explain the purpose of the workbooks and encourage participants to take notes.**

You will be using these workbooks throughout the duration of the next few weeks. Please remember to bring them back with you! There is space inside for you to take notes as well.

## *Anxiously Engaged Overview* (8 minutes)

[Move fairly quickly through this overview to conserve time for the lessons.]

[Slide 4]

***Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be a brief educational intervention to assist engaged couples of faith.**

**Introduce the two main themes of *Anxiously Engaged*.**

**1 - Intentionally preparing for marriage**

**2 - Working toward becoming one**

The two main themes, or goals, of *Anxiously Engaged* are to help couples intentionally prepare for marriage and to help couples begin working toward becoming one. I hope that as you engage in the principles we discuss, your understanding of the marriage commitment will increase, and the foundations of your relationship will be strengthened.

**Why the workshop is called *Anxiously Engaged*.**

So why the name “Anxiously Engaged?” As was just mentioned, the main themes in the workshop are *intentionality* and *becoming one*. This scripture from sacred text of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints inspired the name because the designers felt it encompassed both those themes.

[Slide 5]

**Share and expound on Doctrine and Covenants 58: 27-28.**

*“Verily I say, men [and women] should be ***anxiously engaged*** in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are*



*agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men [and women] do good they shall in nowise lose their reward."*

While it is a nice play on words, hopefully this scripture also inspires you as you continue preparing for your marriage.

[Slide 6]

**Introduce the creators of *Anxiously Engaged* to bring credibility.**

So, who are the individuals behind all of this? These lessons were

designed by *Dr. Alan Hawkins*, a professor of Family Life at Brigham Young University and a national expert on healthy marriage along with *Kathryn Pond Sargent*, an adjunct faculty member at BYU who has also taught Institute marriage preparation for many years and *Tamara Gilliland*, who has a master's degree in Family Sciences from BYU and has been involved in family life education efforts for more than two decades.

## Faith-based and Research-based

[Slide 7]

***Anxiously Engaged* weaves together faith-based and research-based ideas.**

Truth comes from both faith-based and research-based sources and when these two sources are woven together it can be especially powerful. The principles we discuss may be familiar, but it can be valuable to have the shared experience of applying these principles to your particular relationship.

**Both faith and research emphasize the importance of preparing for marriage.**

As an example of faith and research working together, both sources emphasize the importance of preparing for marriage.

**Introduce the faith-based principles that encourage marriage preparation.**

People of faith believe that marriage is ordained of God and that it is an essential part of his plan for his children. Since marriage is so important, it is vital to not only spend hours preparing for your wedding but also preparing for your marriage.

[Slide 8]

**Introduce the research behind marriage preparation.**

Research shows that when couples intentionally prepare for marriage, they increase their chances of forming healthy, happy marriages and avoid some of the disappointing bumps of early-married life. They also decrease their chances of divorce, especially in the early years of marriage.<sup>4</sup>

[Slide 9]

**Share the “decide, don’t slide” principle from Scott Stanley as additional support for marriage preparation.<sup>5</sup>**

Marriage expert Scott Stanley teaches the “Decide, don’t slide” principle or the idea that couples should intentionally prepare for their future rather than just letting things happen when they happen. Talking about important decisions *now* will help reduce confusion, disappointment, and conflict *later*. Simply by choosing to attend *Anxiously Engaged*, you are already “deciding, not sliding.” Way to go!

**A final reason to take marriage preparation classes is to surface “red flags.”**

Another way that marriage preparation reduces the chances of divorce is helping couples identify when they are not well prepared for marriage. This could include surfacing some “red flags” that indicate a troubled marriage unless major changes are made. Sometimes couples who participate in marriage preparation decide that they need to postpone the wedding to work on some problems or even call off the marriage. While I hope this isn’t what happens to any of you, it’s okay if it does. One purpose of marriage preparation is to make sure that you are making a good decision to marry.

## *Anxiously Engaged* Format

[Slide 10]

**Go over the logistical format of *Anxiously Engaged* and the reasoning behind that decision.**

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley, Scott. (2001). Making a case for premarital education. *Family Relations*. 50(3), 272-280.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley, Scott, [slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com](http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com)

*Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be six hours long, offered in two-hour sessions over three weeks. [If not offered in this format, insert the alternate format.] Offering it this way allows you a few weeks to concentrate on learning the material, talking together about important topics, and practicing new skills.

Of course, 6 hours is much too short of a time to discuss everything that would be valuable to cover. But the designers recognize that engaged couples are very busy and some have pretty short engagement periods. So, they kept the core lessons to a crucial minimum (again, there are supplemental lessons).

[Slide 11]

**Briefly go over the core lessons:**

**Class 1: Becoming One and Effective Communication**

**Class 2: Marital Sexuality**

**Class 3: Equal Partnership, Commitment and Growing Together**

As mentioned, becoming one is a strong theme woven throughout *Anxiously Engaged* and we'll explore how to become one through each of the lesson topics.

Today we will cover the basics of becoming one and discuss some communication skills. Next week we will discuss marital sexuality. In the final lesson you will work on your own plan for how to keep growing your oneness over time and progressing in your relationship as you reach beyond yourselves to do good in the world together.

**Mention what couples can expect each week (couple times, group discussions).**

The emphasis in this workshop will be on couple conversation rather than me as the facilitator presenting lengthy lessons. I will teach some basic principles but I will give you time in class to talk to each other about what you are learning and how to be more intentional and united going forward.

[Slide 12]

**Lastly, go over the marriage license discount.**

Some states,<sup>6</sup> including Utah, discount marriage license fees for couples who invest in premarital education or counseling. Participating in *Anxiously Engaged* qualifies you for that discount. Please come talk to me after the last class and I will help you get that figured out.

**ASK:** Any questions before we get going with the first lesson?

## Becoming One (30 minutes)

[Slide 13]

[Slide 14]

**ASK:** If you could capture the key to a healthy, happy, strong marriage in just **ONE** word, what would it be?

These are all great words! Here's another that incorporates all of them:  
**Jesus.**

Why? He embodies every good thing and He is the way for us to fulfill the plan of happiness, where marriage is central.

[Slide 15]

True happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when marriages are founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

**Jesus Christ is the foundation of a successful marriage.**

We know that marriage is ordained of God and that it is central to God's plan for our spiritual growth and joy. Christ wants us to succeed in our marriages and He will strengthen us in our efforts. He can help us through any trials, conflicts or doubts that come our way. So, if you feel overwhelmed by the principles we cover and feel like it's impossible, please remember that Jesus is cheering for you.

[Slide 16]

**Jesus taught that husbands and wives should be "one flesh."**

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<sup>6</sup> States that have a discount are: FL, GA, MD, MN, OK, SC, TN, TX, UT, and WV.

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*“For this cause shall a man [or woman] leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife; and they twain shall be **one flesh**. Wherefore they are no more twain, but **one flesh**.”<sup>7</sup>*

[Slide 17]

**Shifting from “me” to “we.”**

Working to become “one flesh” can be a significant change in perspective.

Research shows that learning to blend two lives into one—shifting from thinking about me to thinking about we—is one of the concerns of many engaged couples.<sup>8</sup>

**God will prepare a way for us to accomplish commandments.**

Becoming one can be a long journey but God doesn’t give us commandments unless a way is prepared for us to accomplish that commandment over time.<sup>9</sup> Jesus isn’t going to teach us about becoming one unless it’s possible.

**Becoming one is worth the challenge.**

The goodness and joy that comes from a lifetime of striving to become completely united is worth the challenge!<sup>10</sup>

**Couple Time: Ciardi Poem** (5 minutes)

[Slide 18]

**Introduce the first Couple Time on page 5.**

Okay, we are going to jump right into our first Couple Time. This is a poem written by a man named John Ciardi [[“Chee-AR-dee”](#)].

**ASK: Does anyone know why an architectural arch is so strong?**

Architects and builders know that an arch – formed by two pillars curving into a seamless whole – is many times stronger than the common right-angle structure of separate posts and a crossbeam because when the two

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 19:3-6, emphasis added

<sup>8</sup> Gunther, Randi, “‘I’ to ‘We’—Blending Independence With Commitment.” 2014. *Psychology Today*.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Nephi 3:7

<sup>10</sup> Williams, Lucille. “From ‘me’ to ‘we’: A guide for newlyweds.” 2018. *Focus on the Family*.

pillars of an arch meet at the apex it actually creates an upward-thrust counterforce to gravity.

**Invite the couple to discuss the questions on page 5 together.**

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK: Any thoughts about what you discussed on comparing an arch to a marriage?**

Just as two pillars in an arch fuse together to create greater strength, a woman and man, truly committed and united, become stronger and better when they “lean” and “fall” all the way in to become one in marriage.

[Slide 19]

**Introduce the principles of how couples become one: cleaving, spousal pre-eminence, invisible fence and we over me.**

Now that we have spent some time learning and discussing the importance of becoming one, we are going to go over the following principles related to becoming one: cleaving and spousal pre-eminence, the invisible fence and prioritizing we over me.

## Cleaving and Spousal Pre-eminence (5 minutes)

[Slide 20]

**Introduce cleaving to the participants.**

One of the very first principles that God taught to Adam and Eve is that they should cleave to each other.

*“Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and **none else**.”<sup>11</sup>*

**ASK: What do you think it means to cleave?**

Cleaving means that we are actively and completely devoted and loyal to our spouse.

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<sup>11</sup> D&C 42:22, emphasis added

[Slide 21]

**Spousal pre-eminence.**

The idea of cleaving is inseparably connected to the principle of *spousal pre-eminence*—that our relationship with our spouse comes before all other relationships in our life. One religious leader, Spencer W. Kimball said:

*"[Upon marriage] the spouse then becomes preeminent in the life of the husband and wife, and neither social life nor occupational life nor political life nor any other interest nor person nor thing shall ever take precedence over the companion spouse."<sup>12</sup>*

**ASK: Why would these two principles be important?**

Our relationship with our spouse is likely much newer than the long-standing relationships we've had with our family and friends. Therefore, it can be easy to slide back into pre-existing comfortable patterns that put other relationships before our spouse. However, when we practice spousal pre-eminence our spouse becomes more important than our parents, grandparents, children, friends, etc.

[Slide 22]

**We must be intentional in putting our marriage first.**

Putting our marriage first is especially important in the early years of a new marriage as we are establishing patterns for the way we interact with not only our spouse but the other people in our lives.

**ASK: What are some potential barriers to putting our marriage first?**

The expectations of parents, other family members and friends can be hard to navigate—they may want you to be as available to them as you've been in the past and may express hurt when you aren't.

**Cleaving and spousal pre-eminence are part of our journey to become one.**

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<sup>12</sup> General Conference, October 1962

As we work to cleave and to make our marriage relationship the primary relationship in our lives, our trust in each other increases and we move closer to becoming one.

## Invisible Fence (5 minutes)

[Slide 23]

### **The invisible fence.**

One way we can safeguard the trust we have given each other is by building an “invisible fence” around the sacred ground of inner-married life.

[Slide 24]

### **Define what an invisible fence is.**

An invisible fence is a boundary we create around our marriage to protect the sacred and intimate parts of our relationship.

### **ASK: What kind of things might be considered intimate?**

When we are married we know about the funny things our partners do in their sleep, their odd hygiene rituals or habits, their sexual fantasies and preferences. We know about these private behaviors and characteristics because our spouse has been vulnerable enough to share his/her soul with us.

### **These intimacies are sacred ground and we must protect them.**

We need to create a pattern of an “invisible fence” around these parts of our marriage. Therefore, we shouldn’t have conversations that start like, “My husband would kill me if he knew I was telling you this but....” or “Don’t tell my wife I told you this but....”

[Slide 25]

### **Loyalty is the foundation of the invisible fence.**

One religious leader, Gordon B. Hinckley counseled us: *“When you are married, be fiercely loyal one to another.”*<sup>13</sup>

[Consider sharing an anecdote on the benefit of the invisible fence]

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<sup>13</sup> BYU Commencement, April 1995, emphasis added



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## ACTIVITY: Group Discussion of Loyalty (5 minutes)

[Slide 26]

### **Introduce the group discussion.**

Becoming one is reliant on our ability to be loyal to our spouse, so for the next few minutes we will discuss ways to increase that relationship.

**ASK:** With regards to spousal pre-eminence, what do we do that really shows our loyalty – our cleaving – to our spouse?

**ASK:** And what do we do – often unknowingly or unintentionally – that shows a lack of cleaving or loyalty?

## Prioritize We Over Me (3 minutes)

[Slide 27]

### **Quote from Spencer W. Kimball.**

For our last principle on becoming one, let's start with this quote from Spencer W. Kimball:

*"Each party must eliminate the 'I' and the 'my' and substitute therefore 'we' and 'our.'"*<sup>14</sup>

### **Moving from "I to we" can be tricky.**

Moving from "I to we" is easy to say but it can be hard to do. But research shows that a true sense of "we-ness" can be more satisfying and enriching than "me-ness."

### **Selflessness can be scary.**

This kind of selflessness can be scary, especially in cultures like ours that place individual identities and desires at the pinnacle of human experience.

### **We keep our "i-identity" but it becomes less important than our "we-identity."**

It's not that we lose our individual "i-identity," but it becomes less important to us than the "we-identity" we create over time with our

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<sup>14</sup> Ensign, March 1977

spouse. Think about the arch metaphor—we become stronger as we “lean in” and “fall in.”

**We must intentionally prioritize we over me.**

Prioritizing “we over me” takes *intentional* selflessness and sacrifice, and it takes practice. That said, the reward is becoming one.

**Couple Time: We Over Me** (5 minutes)

[Slide 28]

**Introduce the Couple Time on page 7.**

Okay let’s do our last couple time for this section. Take a few minutes to talk to each other about the questions found on page 7. Spend a moment pondering your own response to these questions, then you will have about 5 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Any thoughts about what you discussed as couples?

**Conclusion** (2 minutes)

[Slide 29]

**James E. Faust quote.**

Let’s wrap up this section with a quote from a religious leader, James E. Faust:

*“Happiness in marriage...can exceed a thousand times any other happiness.”<sup>15</sup>*

**Becoming one is key to happiness in marriage.**

Becoming one is a key to the happiness Elder Faust describes. Building that unity is a process that lasts far beyond the first year of marriage, but it is worth the effort.

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<sup>15</sup> General Conference, October 1977

## Transition

[Slide 30]

**Introduce the next lesson and invite them to take a short break.**

After a brief break, we are going to change gears and talk about how more effective communication skills can help us “lean in” and “fall in” to become one.



## Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 2 Becoming One Through Effective Communication

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### Preface

The goal of this lesson is to help couples understand some basic communication skills to aid them in their journey to becoming one. The first part of this lesson focuses on learning to deeply listen to our partner to increase our understanding of what our partner is communicating. The second part of the lesson focuses on skills to help us navigate natural relationship conflict, while maintaining our focus on becoming one. As we work to avoid negative relationship patterns by being both courageous and considerate in our communication, conflict can actually help us draw closer together as a couple.

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## Lesson Outline

Introduction (5 minutes)

Deep Listening (15 Minutes)

- Deep Listening Skills
- Couple Time: Deep Listening

Managing Conflicts (43 minutes)

- Same Team
- Courageous and Considerate
- Start softly
- Hard v. Soft Start activity
- Couple Time: Soft starts
- Contempt
- Time-outs
- Violence

Conclusion (5 Minutes)

## Materials

- Facilitator guide
- Participant workbooks
- Pens/pencils for note taking

## Equipment

- Laptop and screen to show slides

- Soft music to play during “Couple Time”

## Introduction (5 minutes)

[Slide 1]

[Slide 2]

**Effective communication is the *most important tool* in a relationship tool kit.**

We use communication for almost everything in our efforts to become one in marriage—to connect to God, to get to know our spouse, to express love, to make decisions together. Even the bonding power of sexuality requires good communication. Because of this, effective communication is the most important tool in a relationship.

**Communication involves happy and sad conversations.**

Much of our communication is joyful: telling each other our hopes and dreams, sharing about our day-to-day experiences, counseling together to create well-coordinated efforts as we minister and labor together. But some communication can be challenging: navigating differences in perspective and needs, expressing hurt, resolving conflict.

[Slide 3]

**Communicating is often complicated.**

Communicating well seems like it should be easy, but it simply is not. Sharing both the good and the bad can become difficult. We are two different individuals who come with our own communication “script” and communication “background” and these differing backgrounds and scripts can sometimes create misunderstandings.

**ASK: Does anybody have an experience about a time when they struggled to communicate with another person?**

[Share your own if no one offers anything]

[Slide 4]

**Share the benefits of healthy communication.**

While communicating can be hard, learning how to effectively communicate has many benefits. Healthy communication creates the kind of connection that builds security, emotional safety and an

opportunity for more meaningful, loving relationships.<sup>16</sup>

[Slide 5]

**Explain the importance of practicing effective communication and transition to the next part of the lesson.**

All of this requires practice, though it isn't always natural. So, for the rest of our time, we will discuss some essentials for meaningful communication and we will practice some effective skills – like deep listening and conflict management.

You will have several opportunities over the next few weeks to practice your effective communication skills in class and at home.

Again, we recognize that some principles we discuss may not be new, but it can be valuable to have the shared experience of putting words to ideas you can refer to in the future.

## Deep Listening (15 minutes)

[Slide 6]

**The most fundamental skill in effective communication is *deep listening*.**

One of the most important skills to develop (and probably the most difficult) is to deeply listen to your partner. The goal of deep listening is to

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<sup>16</sup> Markman, H. J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Ragan, E. P., & Whitton, S. W. (2010). The premarital communication roots of marital distress and divorce: The first five years of marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(3), 289–298.

emotionally connect with your partner and understand how they feel. As we “listen to understand” rather than just “listening to respond,” research shows that we will have greater satisfaction in our marital relationship.<sup>17</sup>

**ASK: Why is listening so difficult?**

Too often our minds are occupied with thoughts that distract us from really hearing what is being said. For example, how often do you listen to a great song, but realize after a while that you have no idea

what the message in the lyrics is? In addition, most of us are programmed to listen in order to respond, rather than listening to better understand one another.<sup>18</sup>

[Slide 7]

**Transition to explaining the deep listening skills.**

It takes *intentional* effort and practice to become a deep listener, to really focus on what our partner is saying and feeling. So, let’s talk about some deep listening skills that we can use when we are trying to have an important conversation.

## Deep Listening Skills (3 minutes)

[Slide 8]

**1. Turn on your silent mode.**

- Eliminate all distractions- phone, TV, etc.
- In class or in a meeting, we turn on “do not disturb” so we aren’t distracted or distracting to others. When we listen we should do the same thing.
- Later it will be your turn to be the speaker. Now, it’s your job to be the listener.

**2. Be a focused listener.**

- Make sure it’s a good time to talk. If it isn’t, schedule a time that is.

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<sup>17</sup> Doell, F (2003). “Partners’ listening styles and relationship satisfaction: listening to understand vs. listening to respond.” Graduate thesis. The University of Toronto Psychology Dept.

<sup>18</sup> Doell, F (2003). “Partners’ listening styles and relationship satisfaction: listening to understand vs. listening to respond.” Graduate thesis. The University of Toronto Psychology Dept.

- Physically turn toward our partner. Make frequent eye contact. Sometimes reach out to make contact.

**3. Be an active listener.**

- Listen well enough that we can repeat back what our partner has said. Occasionally ask clarifying questions, if needed.
- It takes effort to stay 100% engaged. It is actually pretty surprising how much we tune out when we think we are listening.

**4. Be a patient listener.**

- Give your partner time to express him/herself. Generally, don't interrupt unless your partner asks you to respond.
- We aren't very efficient speakers, so we have to be patient. This is especially true if one of us processes by verbalizing our thoughts.

**5. Be an empathic listener.**

- Listen not just to the words (hard enough) but also to her/his feelings and for the meaning behind their words.
- Suspend evaluation and judgment while you are listening. Express understanding and empathy.

**6. For the speaker: don't go on and on.**

- Pause regularly to allow your partner to reflect back, express support, ask for clarification, etc.
- Regularly rotate speaker and listener roles so that each person has a chance to speak.<sup>19</sup>

## COUPLE TIME: Deep Listening (10 minutes)

[Slide 9]

**Introduce the Deep Listening Couple Time on page 10.**

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<sup>19</sup> This "Speaker-Listener" technique is borrowed from the *Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP)*, by Drs. Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Galena Kline Rhoades, at the University of Denver.



Page 10 has a worksheet with all of the deep listening skills we just discussed. It may feel a bit goofy, but when your partner has finished talking, check off the listening skills you practiced.

Each of you think of a time you were really excited about something (an achievement at work, an interesting school project, a family or roommate experience, a funny story from when you were younger, etc.) Take about 4-5 minutes to talk about that.

Women speak first; men practice deep listening. Then, we'll switch roles and the women will practice deep listening.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK: Thoughts about that activity? What did you learn?**

Even though it feels goofy, it can be helpful to *intentionally* think through whether or not we are actually listening deeply.

## Managing Conflict (43 minutes)

[Slide 10]

[Slide 11]

**Introduce conflict and spend a minute or two emphasizing and normalizing that all couples have conflicts.**

As much as we love each other, we inevitably have times when we don't agree on decisions, feel hurt or frustrated by each other, or we just feel challenged by life. All couples have these conflicts and it is a normal part of relationships. In fact, conflict can provide us with an opportunity to be truly responsive and selfless toward each other. *Having conflict is not the problem.* The problem comes when we don't handle conflict well and then we harm our relationship.

[Slide 12]

**Briefly transition to and introduce the conflict management topics.**

The good news is that there are a few really basic things we can learn to be *intentional* about managing conflict well. We are going to spend the next

part of the lesson discussing some principles and skills to apply during conflict: Stay on the same team, be courageous and considerate, start softly, avoid contempt, use time-outs when needed and never use physical or emotional aggression or violence.

## Stay on the Same Team (2 minutes)

[Slide 13]

**Couples should remind each other during conflicts that they are on the same team.**

The overall key during conflict is to remember that the two of you are on the *same team*, working together to resolve the conflict. It is the two of you

against the conflict, not the conflict coming between you. You can say something like, “It feels like we aren’t on the same team right now. I want to be on the same team.”

[Slide 14]

**Share research on the benefits of working together through conflicts.**

Research has shown that couples who work together to overcome hardships feel more empathetic towards each other and more united in their relationship. In addition, they tend to feel more secure about their partner’s love for them.<sup>20</sup>

[Consider sharing a short anecdote from a time when using this principle helped]

**Tie this principle back to the themes of the class.**

Remember that an arch is stronger than a separate beam. We can “lean in” and “fall in” by focusing on our purpose of becoming one instead of on any particular conflict. Remembering to stay on the same team provides us with an opportunity to *intentionally* work on *becoming one*.

## Be Courageous and Considerate (3 minutes)

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<sup>20</sup> Sauvé, M.-S., Péloquin, K., & Brassard, A. (2020). Moving forward together, stronger, and closer: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of marital benefits in infertile couples. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 25(10–11), 1532–1542.

[Slide 15]

**It's important that our spouse understands our concerns and how we feel.**

One definition of courage is to “speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.”<sup>21</sup> Part of *intentionally becoming one* is being willing to “tell all one’s heart,” especially when it comes to hard things, and then working to find solutions. It doesn’t help to ignore or hide things in our relationship— it just makes it harder to resolve conflicts when we aren’t real and open.

**It's also important to genuinely share feelings without being combative.**

We need to always honor the greatness of our spouse and share concerns in ways that respect that greatness. We also need to honor their feelings

and be compassionate by expressing our own feelings with sensitivity to theirs.

[Slide 16]

Marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of respect, love and compassion.

**Learning to be vulnerable is a huge trust exercise.**

Trust your love; trust that your spouse can handle your honest and authentic self. Just remember, being authentic doesn’t mean you have license to blurt out hurtful words or do hurtful things. We can be both authentic and kind.

**Start softly** (5 minutes)<sup>22</sup>

[Slide 17]

[Slide 18]

**Being able to share a concern softly increases a couple’s chances of maintaining oneness.**

Another important skill for managing conflict is to start softly. Research shows that how we start a conflict is one of the strongest predictors of how the conflict will end.<sup>23</sup> So, if we start hard, the conflict usually ends badly.

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<sup>21</sup> Brené Brown. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are*. Page 12.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Gottman has written extensively on “soft start-ups,” Gottman.com

<sup>23</sup> Carrere S., Gottman, JM “Predicting divorce among newlyweds from the first three minutes of a marital conflict discussion” *Family Process*, 1999 Fall; 38(3):293 – 301.

[Slide 19]

**Define a soft start-up/sharing a concern.**

A *soft start-up* is respectful, compassionate and focused on oneness even if it's emotional. It's more specific, using "I-statements" to communicate "what I experienced" and "how I felt" with an invitation to solve the problem (e.g., "I feel exhausted. Could you do the dishes today?"). It is quieter, gentler, calmer. The intent is not to sting, just to surface a concern.

**Define a hard start-up/sharing a criticism.**

A *hard start-up* is an accusation, an insult or an angry explosion. It almost always uses criticism, taking the problem and generalizing it harshly to "you always" or "you never." (e.g., "You never do the dishes after dinner. Why is it always my job?"). It is usually loud and emotionally intense. The intent is to sting.

[Slide 20]

**How we respond to a conflict start-up also matters.**

The scriptures say:

*"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."*<sup>24</sup>

[Slide 21]

**No matter how the conflict begins, we can choose to use a soft response.**

Whether our partner shares a concern with a hard or soft start-up, we can use our agency to be *intentional* about responding softly.

**Define what a soft response is.**

A *soft response* is respectful, compassionate and focused on maintaining (or regaining) our oneness and sense of being on the same team. It validates feelings instead of escalating emotional intensity with counter attacks. It also works toward solutions without defensiveness.

**Remind participants of the importance of forgiveness if a mistake is made.**

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<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 15:1

When we make a mistake and criticize our partner with a hard start, it is best to apologize, receive forgiveness and try to minimize harm to the relationship

Online Supplemental Lesson:  
*Repentance and Forgiveness*

**ACTIVITY: Hard Start-Ups v. Soft Start-Ups and Soft Responses** (10 minutes)

[Slide 22]

**Introduce and explain the purpose of this activity.**

Let's talk through some examples of scenarios that could lead to conflict to see the difference between a hard and soft start-up and how soft responses work.

[It is likely that you will only have time to do either Scenario 1 or 2, not both. You could also include the scenarios in the follow-up email as a homework assignment.]

[Slide 23]

**Scenario 1:**

Spouse A is working on the budget and sees a lot of unanticipated expenses on the credit card that wrecked the monthly budget. The expenses are charges at local restaurants – probably for lunches – from Spouse B. Spouse A knew about one of the lunches but is surprised to see several more. Spouse A says:

\_\_\_\_\_.

**ASK:** What might be an example of a **hard start-up** in this situation?

"I don't even know why we bother making a budget since you never pay any attention to it. You always spend money however you want."

Why might this be ineffective and problematic?

**ASK:** What might be an example of a **soft response** in this situation?

“Sounds like you are frustrated about money. I’m sorry. Can you help me understand what happened?”

How might this help the conversation?

**ASK:** What might be an example of a **soft start-up** in this situation?

“So, I got the credit card statement today and I’m feeling pretty worried about some restaurant charges on the statement that I wasn’t expecting. Can you help me understand these expenses?”

Why might this be more effective?

**ASK:** What might be an example of a **soft response** in this situation?

“I can see how that would worry you. I’m sorry, I guess that wrecked the budget we planned. I could have mentioned sooner that I had lunch meetings for work. Can we talk about what to do for those?”

How does this help with oneness?

[Slide 24]

### **Scenario 2:**

After a pretty stressful week, Spouse A is expecting a romantic date night that has been planned for a week. At the last minute, Spouse B calls to say that she/he has to finish a deadline at work and won’t be able to go on the date. Although this isn’t the first time this has happened, the deadline is real. There is tension later that night when Spouse B finally gets home. Spouse A says: \_\_\_\_\_.

**ASK:** What might be a **hard start-up** in this situation?

“You always put work before me. I’m clearly the last thing on your priority list.”

**ASK:** What might be a **soft response** here?

“I can understand why you would feel that way. I’m sorry. Can I share some ideas of how I want to better show you are a priority to me?”

**ASK:** What might be a **soft start-up** in this situation?

“I’m so sad that we didn’t get to go out tonight. It feels like work has been getting in the way of our date nights. Can we make a strategy for navigating this differently?”

**ASK:** What might be a **soft response** here?

“I would really love to. I’m so sorry for disappointing you.”

## COUPLE TIME: Soft Starts (5 minutes)

[Slide 25]

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 11.**

Take a few minutes to talk to each other about the following questions on page 11 in your workbook.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Any thoughts on what you discussed about using soft starts and responses?

## Avoid contempt (3 minutes)

[Slide 26]

[Slide 27]

**Contempt is even more dangerous to relationships than criticism and hard start-ups.**

Hard start-ups and criticism can be dangerous, but contempt is even worse for our relationships.

**Define contempt.**

Famous marriage researcher, Dr. John Gottman, describes contempt as eye rolling, name calling, attitude of superiority, disgust, etc.<sup>25</sup>

**Share examples of how to *speak* with contempt.**

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<sup>25</sup> Dr. John Gottman has written extensively on the dangers of contempt in relationships. You can find more information at his website, [Gottman.com](http://Gottman.com).

From a couple with on-going fight about timeliness:

“Look, I learned how to tell time when I was five years old. When are you ever going to learn?”

From a couple with a recurring fight about sex:

“We haven’t had sex in weeks. Maybe you’re too busy flirting with that guy at work? Why don’t you just marry him instead?”

**Share examples of how to *act* with contempt.**

Most of us probably think that we would never communicate contempt. But contempt is not just words, so it’s easier to communicate it than you may think. We can communicate contempt when we:

- Turn away from our spouse [illustrate this]
- Walk out of the room
- Scoff and/or roll our eyes when our spouse talks

[Slide 28]

**Contempt can also lead to stonewalling.<sup>26</sup>**

Dr. Gottman also teaches that contempt can lead to *stonewalling*—or refusing to engage at all. We stonewall when we walk away from our partner, give the silent treatment or both.

**ASK: How might contempt/stonewalling harm your relationship?**

Contempt is hurtful because it communicates to our partner that he/she isn’t even worth engaging with. Contempt and stonewalling can also cause hopelessness— feeling that the relationship hole we have created is so great there is no way out. Hopelessness is toxic to any relationship.

**Do all you can to avoid using contempt**

Like we just discussed, this type of communication is incredibly harmful. Do all you can to avoid it. We will discuss an important skill next that couples can use if they fear they are on the verge of using contempt.

Take a time-out when needed (5 minutes)

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<sup>26</sup> See Gottman.com



[Slide 29]

**Taking a time-out is one effective way to manage conflict when we feel like we are going to say or do something hurtful.**

If you notice that you are getting close to using criticism or acting with contempt, it can be a good idea to take a time-out.

**Think of a team time-out**

When basketball players aren't playing well as a team, a coach often calls a time out to give team members a chance to calm down and re-group. This principle can also work in our relationships.

[Slide 30]

**The purpose of a time-out is to *calm down* and *become rational*, not to avoid resolving the conflict.**

Conflicts can bring up a lot of emotions. And talking about them can intensify those emotions and cause us to feel emotionally flooded. Taking a short break from the conflict can help us calm down and self-regulate so that we can more effectively resolve the conflict. This is not a way to avoid resolving the conflict.

[Slide 31]

**Here are a few helpful guidelines for effective time-outs:<sup>27</sup>**

**1. You have to call a time-out for yourself.**

It doesn't work to call a time-out for your partner.

You can say: "I'm feeling overwhelmed right now and I can't think straight. Can we take a time-out and get back to this when I'm feeling more clear-minded?" It is helpful to make a rule that when someone asks for a time-out, the other must agree.

**2. Ask for a specific amount of time.**

Take 20-30 minutes, then re-engage. (Some serious conflicts need longer).

Be clear: "I need to calm down. Let's take a break and talk again in about 20

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<sup>27</sup> This "Time-out" skill is borrowed from the *PREP* program.

minutes.” It is important to set a time so that the conflict doesn’t get put to the side.

### **3. Separate and calm down.**

Research shows that men (on average) take significantly longer to calm down than women. So, women, be understanding of this.<sup>28</sup> When you separate, don’t ruminate and replay the conflict in your mind. Instead, distract yourself: go for a walk, read a book, listen to music. Prayer at beginning or end of time-out can be especially helpful. Research shows that for religious couples, prayer can bring calm and empathy.<sup>29</sup>

### **4. When calm and rational, come back together.**

Re-engage in a healthier way by using your best communication skills. If it’s still not working well, it’s okay to call another time-out, maybe until the next day. It’s okay to go to bed angry sometimes. Just commit to re-engage tomorrow when you are both calmer.

## **Never use physical or emotional aggression or violence**

(5 minutes)

[Slide 32]

### **Explain the importance of bringing up this topic.**

The last subject we will discuss may seem obvious, but we are going to mention it anyway. Never use physical, emotional, or verbal aggression or violence. Unfortunately, this happens way too often in our society, and religious couple are not immune.

### **ASK: What are some examples of physical aggression?**

Physical aggression can include striking, kicking, shoving, pulling hair, etc.

### **ASK: Now, what are some examples of emotional aggression?**

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Levenson’s research as referenced in J.M. Gottman and N. Silver’s (1999) *The seven principles for making marriage work*

<sup>29</sup> Butler, M. H., Stout, J. A., & Gardner, B. C. (2002). Prayer as a conflict resolution ritual: Clinical implications of religious couples’ report of relationship softening, healing perspective, and change responsibility. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 30, 19-37.

Emotional aggression can be harder to recognize but includes cruel and derogatory insults, threats, deception, playing mind-games, and especially controlling and pushy behavior.

**Aggression and violence are dangerous.**

**The science behind anger.**

It's dangerous because when we get really upset blood flows away from the frontal cortex in the brain that controls reason and judgement and flows to the basal part of the brain that controls our basic instincts and raw emotions, especially anger and fear.<sup>30</sup>

[Slide 33]

**When our lower brain is in charge, we do things we regret.**

When our lower brain is controlling our thoughts, speech and behavior, we think, say and do things we regret.

**Even couples on their best behavior can make mistakes.**

Couples are often on their best behavior during engagement, but even engaged couples make mistakes and revert to physical or emotional aggression.

[Slide 34]

**Pay attention to how mistakes are resolved.**

Of course, we won't always handle conflict effectively, especially in the beginning as we are establishing good patterns. But it should never get ugly and aggressive. If it does, that's a warning sign. Pay attention to how a mistake is resolved.

**Good signs:**

Your partner (or you) feels true remorse, asks for forgiveness and doesn't make the mistake again. That said, even when things are going in an encouraging direction, it may be wise to push back the wedding date to make sure the behavior isn't repeated.

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<sup>30</sup> See the National Institute of Health research on this subject: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles>

**Dangerous sign:**

*It happens again.* If this is the case, there may be a chronic problem of seeing aggression/violence as an acceptable method of getting one's way. It is highly unlikely that things will change without intensive counseling. You should be VERY cautious about marrying until this chronic problem has been resolved with the help of a professional counselor.

[Slide 35]

**Don't ignore warning signs (list on page 12 in the workbook).**

Most married couples who experience relationship violence ignored warning signs before they were married. Page 12 in your workbook lists some warning signs to help us recognize physical and emotional aggression in our relationships.

**If you are experiencing violence, get help.**

It's a bummer to talk about violence in relationships but it is too common—and too toxic—to ignore. If you are experiencing violence, please get some help.

## Conclusion (5 minutes)

[Slide 36]

**Effective communication is the key to overcoming marital conflict.**

Obviously, there is much more to discuss about effective communication but we better wrap up. Effective communication really *is* the most important tool we have in our relationship tool kit. So many issues can be overcome as we learn to listen deeply and communicate more authentically.

[Slide 37]

**Keep Christ at the center**

I will leave you with this quote from L. Lionel Kendrick, as I feel it is a great summary of what we covered today.

*“Christlike communications are expressed in tones of love rather than loudness. They are intended to be helpful rather than hurtful. They tend to bind us together rather than to drive us apart. They tend to build rather than to belittle.”<sup>31</sup>*

## Homework

[Slide 38]

### **This week.**

Do the one thing you decided to do to “prioritize we over me” this week. In addition, on your way home, try to decide on one specific communication skill (listening deeper, staying on the same team, starting softly) you can work on this week to help you work toward *becoming one*.

### Online Supplemental Lessons:

*Creative Problem Solving*

*Disclosing Personal Issues*

## Preview

[Slide 39]

### **Inform participants what they can expect for next week.**

In the next session we will discuss ways to prepare for marital sexuality. Sexual intimacy is an important way to develop a sense of oneness in our marriage and also one of those things we need to communicate about effectively.

[Make sure you have all participant emails so that you can send a follow-up email.]

### **Invite participants to submit questions about sexual intimacy to an online form.**

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<sup>31</sup> “Christlike Communications,” Ensign, Nov. 1988, 24

In the follow-up email I will include a link to a “survey” I’ve created that will allow you to anonymously ask sexual intimacy questions. Respond with your questions and I will do my best to answer them when we meet.

**Conclude and close with a prayer.**

Have a great week!



## Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 3

# Becoming One Through Marital Sexuality

### Preface

In this lesson, you will be a little more instructive in your presentation. Experience has shown that in lessons about sex, open-group participation can sometimes cause things to go in unhelpful and inappropriate directions. Be aware of this possibility and be a bit more directive and assertive in this lesson to make sure the lesson stays on track. Also, be sensitive to participants who may be very new to using some of the vocabulary terms in this lesson.

If participants have submitted questions about marital sexuality (see end of lesson 2), make sure to address their questions during the lesson. Many questions will be answered by the material, but if not, refer them to the marital sexuality resources on page 25 in the workbook. Ideally, you will be familiar

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enough with the resources that you can direct them to a specific resource that may help them with their question(s). Be careful not to set yourself up as a sex expert if you are not.

There is a lot of information and material in this lesson and it is unlikely that you will be able to cover all of it. In order to be as helpful as possible to participants, use the questions they've submitted to help you decide how to use your time during the lessons.

## Lesson Outline

Introduction (10 minutes)

Mental (30 minutes)

- Myths
- Barriers and Expanders
- Couple Time: Mental Preparation

Emotional (20 minutes)

- Myths
- Barriers and Expanders
- Safety/Trust activity
- Couple Time: Emotional Preparation

[BREAK]

Physical (40 minutes)

- Myths
- Physical Sexual Response Cycle
- Paths to Orgasm
- Couple Time: Physical Preparation
- Birth Control

Spiritual (12 minutes)

- Myths
- The Purpose of Sex
- Couple Time: Spiritual Preparation

Conclusion (3 minutes)



## Materials

- Facilitator guide
- Participant workbooks
- Permission-to-Talk-About-Sex Certificates (you can create these from a free site like postermyswall.com or template.net)
- Pens/pencils for note taking

## Equipment

- Laptop and large screen for showing slides
- Soft music to use during “Couple Time”

## Introduction (10 minutes)

### Review and Check-in (2 minutes)

[Slide 1]

**Welcome participants to *Anxiously Engaged* and start with a prayer.**

**Review last week’s lesson topics.**

Last week we talked about two things: the journey of becoming one and effective communication.

**ASK: How did your homework go? Did you get the chance to use any of the communication skills we discussed—deep listening, soft starts, etc.?**

**Introduce the topic for today’s lesson.**

Today we will talk more about becoming one. One of the most powerful ways we are able to become one is by enjoying the divine gift of marital sexuality.

**The information presented is the developers’ best understanding of healthy marital sexuality.**

The developers of *Anxiously Engaged* have worked hard to understand what many faith leaders have taught (and not taught) about marital

sexuality, alongside what the research has to say. The information I present today is their best understanding of that. You may not agree with everything I say and that is okay. The important part is that this information gives you a foundation to talk together and be *intentional* as you begin your sexual relationship.

**Explain the terminology you will be using.**

As I talk, I will try to use clear and helpful terminology. There are many ways that people refer to sex, like “intimacy” or “making love” or maybe some less refined terms. You can decide together which terms you will use. I will simply use the terms sex and sexuality during this lesson.

Potential Discomfort (2 minutes)

[Slide 2]

**Acknowledge that today’s lesson might be uncomfortable.**

Before we start, let’s discuss potential discomfort. Let’s talk about how this lesson topic *might* make you feel.

**List the sources of potential discomfort.**

Here are some reasons you may feel uncomfortable with this material:

- Maybe sex was a taboo subject in your home while growing up and so just talking about it feels awkward.
- Maybe you were taught that talking about anything sex-related before you are actually married is bad.
- Maybe you have already been involved in sexual activity.

Or maybe you are feeling really excited about this lesson to learn some important things that will bless your marriage.

**Help them feel validated in whatever they are feeling.**

It is okay to feel any and all of these feelings.

**Invite them to reflect on why they feel the way they do so they can work on building a positive view of sexuality.**

If you do feel uncomfortable, make a mental note of it and see if you can pinpoint why you feel that way. I encourage you to be in tune with your

mind and your body, so you can begin to build a positive and whole relationship with sexuality in marriage, wherever you are right now.

## Permission to Talk About Sex (2 minutes)

[Slide 3]

### **Marital sexuality is divinely appointed.**

Sexuality is a divinely appointed means to more than creating life for new babies; it is a powerful God-given process for creating oneness in married life, and a stewardship He has given us to use wisely.

### **Talking about sex is an important part of being a wise steward.**

Not only is it okay to talk about sexuality, it's actually a very important part of being wise stewards over this powerful process.

[Slide 4]

[Handout: Give participants "Permission to talk about sex" certificates]

I've created these certificates so that whatever your past experience, you now have certified permission to talk about sex!

### **There will be many opportunities today for couples to talk together.**

You will have plenty of opportunities today to take advantage of this certificate.

### **Alert participants that these conversations may heighten their arousal.**

That said, please be aware that talking about marital sexuality with your future sexual partner may heighten your arousal so you may need to be a bit more vigilant in setting physical boundaries. Nevertheless, preparing for marital sexuality is an important subject and worth the extra vigilance!

## Sexual Wholeness (3 minutes)

[Slide 5]

### **Introduce sexual wholeness.**

What we hope you will strive for in your sexual relationship is sexual wholeness. Sexual wholeness encompasses four aspects, which we will spend our time today talking about. These aspects are (1) mental, (2) emotional, (3) physical and (4) spiritual.

**These aspects are all connected and impacted by the others.**

Each of these aspects is important and they work together to make sex the divine gift and joyful part of our marriage that it was designed to be.

**Satan has distorted the real purpose and meaning of sex.**

Because sex is such an important part of God's plan of happiness for his children, Satan has worked really hard to confuse and distort our ideas and

understandings about the meaning and purpose of sex for us as individuals and couples. This has resulted in a lot of unhelpful and often harmful attitudes and behaviors

**Each section today will address these distortions.**

In each section of this lesson, we will bring out these myths, and work on busting them to help you better understand the role that sexual wholeness plays in your personal and couple plan of happiness.

## Mental (30 minutes)

[Slide 6]

[Slide 7]

**ASK: Can anyone tell me what the most important sex organ is?**

Research has shown that the most important organ is our *brain*.<sup>32</sup> Our brains have a lot more to do with our capacity to enjoy sex and give sexual pleasure than our other obvious body parts. The brain is what controls our emotions, our attraction, our arousal, our drive and our pleasure. It has a powerful say in what we experience sexually as a couple.

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<sup>32</sup> Fournier, A. B. (2018) "Why the brain is our most important sex organ". *The National Coalition for Sexual Health*.

**The mental aspect of sexual wholeness focuses on the way our brain impacts our sexual relationship.**

When we are talking about the mental aspect of sexual wholeness, we are focusing on the ways that our brain shapes our ideas and understandings about sex. This impact can be positive and negative. The goal is to maximize the positive power of our brain in sex and minimize its problematic power.

## Myth-Busting (1 minute)

[Slide 8]

**Myths about the mental aspect of sexual wholeness.**

Here is our first set of myths, or a few incorrect things you may have heard about the mental aspect of sex:

- 
- My past and/or current beliefs about sex won't affect our actual sexual intimacy.
- Because we are so in love, we won't have to talk about our sexual relationship, we will just understand each other's needs and wants.
- Sex will be spontaneous; my spouse and I don't have to plan for it.

## Mental Barriers (10 minutes)

[Slide 9]

**Introduce the mental barriers to sexual wholeness.**

First, let's talk about some of the problems that we can encounter in our sexual relationships due to the power of our brains.

### 1. *Incorrect Beliefs*

[Slide 10]

**Incorrect beliefs about sex inhibit our ability to enjoy our sexual relationship.**

Sometimes we have *incorrect beliefs*. If you have inaccurate beliefs about sex, this can make it difficult for you to be able to enjoy this important aspect of your marriage.

**We can develop incorrect beliefs through how we are taught/spoken to about sex.**

Many times, these beliefs come from the way our parents talked (or didn't talk) about sexuality, what our friends said in school, what youth leaders taught in church, what we saw in the movies or on the internet or what sexual experiences we may have had in the past.

[Share examples of how these beliefs can be taught.]

For example, sometimes in their efforts to help us make good choices, our parents and leaders may have inadvertently conveyed the message that "sex is bad."

**These kinds of beliefs can lead to feelings of guilt.**

If you have absorbed this idea, it's possible that you may feel guilty about being interested in sex, enjoying sex or just sex in general. Laura M.

Brotherson has penned the term "Good Girl Syndrome" to explain and expound on these feelings.<sup>33</sup>

[Slide 11]

**If you notice these trends, consider getting help (resource list on page 25 of the workbook).**

Be aware that you might need to do some extra work together to overcome any deeply ingrained incorrect beliefs you may have. That extra work may involve reading books or articles (there is a resource list on page 25 in your workbook) or meeting with a therapist separately and/or together.

## *2. Distractions*

[Slide 12]

**The most common way our brains disrupt our sexual experiences is through distractions.**

**ASK: What kind of things tend to distract you?**

Distractions can come in multiple different forms. It could be a messy house, upcoming homework assignments or anticipating a knock on the

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<sup>33</sup> Brotherson, L. M., (2011). And they were not ashamed: Strengthening marriage through sexual fulfillment.

door. Distractions can be tangible (phones, TV, children) or just in our minds (work deadline, financial stress).

[Slide 13]

**Distractions tend to affect women more than men due to how each organizes things in their brains.**

Distractions affect both genders, but men and women's brains tend to organize things differently. Men's brains tend to have a compartmentalized life approach that keeps different parts of their lives in separate "boxes" — work box, parenting box, church calling box, sex box, etc. Women tend to have a less compartmentalized approach and a more holistic life approach.

So, while men may be able to easily move from box to box, it may be more difficult for women. This can make it harder for women to

reduce mental distractions to make time for sex.

**Tip for women: set aside time for sex.**

Ladies, as you are thinking about your husband during the day, try to visualize and imagine a time that is set aside specifically for your sexual relationship. In this "set-aside time," everything else is (temporarily) on hold and the two of you can just focus on being together. When your set-aside time is up, you can then deal with your very real distractions. This takes practice but can be very helpful in reducing mental distractions.

**General tip: try to practice mindfulness.**

Practicing mindfulness, or keeping your thoughts present on your experience, is a great way to minimize becoming distracted during sex.

**Taking the time to reduce distractions before sex will greatly benefit you and your partner's experience.**

Just remember, doing what you can before engaging sexually to reduce the number of distractions that may come up during sex can really help you enjoy things more in the moment.

### *3. Negative Thoughts*

[Slide 14]

**Where aspects of sexual wholeness intersect.**

Our last mental barrier is an example of one of those ways that the various aspects of sexual wholeness are inseparable. The mental and emotional aspects are especially intertwined. Our thoughts influence and are influenced by our emotional state, and in turn the relationship climate for sexuality.

**Negative thoughts about sex, our spouse or even life can significantly impact our sexual experience.**

There will be times when we might have negative thoughts about sex (not wanting to engage, feeling guilty), about our spouse and even just about life. Negative thinking about any of those can be a barrier to engaging whole-ly in your sexual relationship.

**Occasional negative thoughts are normal.**

This isn't to say that you aren't allowed to have negative thoughts. We are all human and are going to have bad days. If you are having a bad day, communicate that to your spouse and consider saving sex for another day. If you are just having a bad moment, an obvious antidote is to try turning our negative thoughts around by replacing them with positivity and gratitude.

**Persistent negative thoughts may require more help.**

If negative thoughts persist, you may need to do more thorough work, possibly with a therapist. Don't be ashamed if this happens to be the case.

**ASK:** Are there any questions about these mental barriers before we move on?

**Mental Expanders** (10 minutes)

[Slide 15]

**Introduce the mental expanders for sexual wholeness.**

We just talked about the ways our brain can be a barrier to the mental aspect of sexual wholeness, now let's talk about how it can expand our relationship.



## 1. Sexual Communication

[Slide 16]

**Communicating about our sexual relationship increases couples' sexual satisfaction.**

Being able to discuss and communicate about all aspects of our sexual relationship with our spouse can greatly increase our sexual satisfaction.<sup>34</sup>

**Many couples feel comfortable talking about everything, except sex.**

Some couples who can communicate about everything else in their relationship sometimes struggle to talk about their sexual relationship.<sup>35</sup>

**There are multiple areas that couples should be sure to talk about together regarding their sexual relationship.**

In marriage, couples should be having frequent conversations about their sexual relationship. Both spouses need to be clearly speaking and *listening*, as this is part of being equal partners in a sexual relationship. Conversations can include:

[Slide 17]

- Communicating during sex about what does and doesn't feel good.
- Talking between sexual experiences about how often you are having sex and who is initiating sex.
- Making decisions together about what is and isn't okay in your sexual relationship.

**There are conversations you can have now to become comfortable.**

It's a good idea to start now to keep our sexual communication open and clear and we will begin practicing that in a Couple Time in a few minutes.

## 2. Sexual Decision Making

[Slide 18]

**Couples need to make decision regarding their sexual experiences.**

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<sup>34</sup> Jones, A.C., Robinson, W.D., & Seedall, R.B. (2018). The role of sexual communication in couples' sexual outcomes. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 44(4), 606-623.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, A.C., Robinson, W.D., & Seedall, R.B. (2018). The role of sexual communication in couples' sexual outcomes. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 44(4), 606-623.

Just because you are married doesn't necessarily mean that the two of you will agree on what should be included in your sexual experiences as a couple. For example, you may have differing opinions on issues such as the use of sex toys, vibrators, what sexual fantasies are okay to explore and many others.

[Slide 19]

**Sexual decisions need to be made between the couple and God.**

These decisions are made between husband and wife and God. In our marital sexuality, we need to be wise stewards and use our agency to make choices about what we will and will not do.

[Slide 20]

**Guiding principles in sexual decision making:<sup>36</sup>**

That being said, there are some guiding principles you can use when making decisions about the boundaries of your sexual relationship.

- Does this strengthen our relationship with each other and with God?
- Do we both agree about this aspect of our sexuality?
- Does this reflect a positive and healthy attitude about sexuality?
- Does this nurture the sexual needs of my spouse and myself?

**Don't be hesitant to include prayer in your decision-making process.**

Pray about your sexual stewardship. It may seem strange to pray about your sex life, but remember that sex has divine origin. As we are prayerful, we will be better able to decide what things align with our spiritual impressions and relationship desires.

### *3. Navigating Sexual Differences*

[Slide 21]

**Sexual differences are a common occurrence in relationships.**

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<sup>36</sup> Taken from *Sexual Wholeness in Marriage*, Busby, Carroll and Leavitt, p. 161

No two individuals want the same thing all the time. The same is true in a couple's sexual relationship. At times these differences can be a cause of conflict.

**It is common that one spouse wants sex more frequently than the other.**

As an example, in most marriages, one spouse wants sex more frequently than the other (higher desire spouse and lower desire spouse.) While we tend to think of the husband as the higher desire spouse, in 20 percent of marriages the wife is the higher desire spouse.<sup>37</sup>

**We can communicate to navigate these differences.**

It is essential to have healthy communication so that both of you express yourself clearly and listen to each other to help navigate these

differences. It doesn't help to ignore differences, as that only tends to make the issue more significant.

[Slide 22]

**Focus on the needs of your partner.**

As both partners strive to focus on the other's needs, they are better able to listen to each other, work through their differences and find sexual fulfillment.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Sexual Intentionality

[Slide 23]

**The more intentional couples are with their sexual relationship, the less stressful this area of their life becomes.**

Earlier we mentioned the myth of *spontaneity*. It might sound a little strange to you, but even newlyweds can sometimes struggle to make time and space for sexual intimacy. Life is busy, and if you aren't planning sex into the schedule, it can become very infrequent.

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<sup>37</sup> Mark, K. P., & Murray, S. H. (2012). Gender differences in desire discrepancy as a predictor of sexual and relationship satisfaction in a college sample of heterosexual romantic relationships. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 38(2), 198–215.

<sup>38</sup> See footnote 42

**Things that can get in the way.**

We get so busy sometimes—maybe schedules don't match up well, maybe someone is a morning person and the other a night person and on and on. We also get pretty tired and fatigue can make sex difficult.

**Marriage therapists often recommend planning time for sex.**

When couples struggle with infrequent sex, marital therapists often help these couples intentionally plan time for sexual intimacy. Generally, when something is important to us, we make plans. We are *intentional* about it rather than just hoping it happens.

[Slide 24]

**ASK: What benefits could you see to planning time for sex?**

[Consider sharing your own anecdote, or use the story below]

**Story:** One couple – this is a real story – was struggling with this. They had two small children and busy lives and not too surprisingly were struggling to find the time to be together sexually. They were so exhausted at the end of the day that the desire part of sex was missing even though there was real love. But one night, they had the courage to express to each other their sense of loss and disappointment. And rather than just get more frustrated, they decided to be more intentional rather than just wait until life got easier. So, they decided – and some of you will think this is crazy – that on Friday nights they would get the kids to bed on time and then they too would head directly to bed. But because they were so tired, they decided that they would go to sleep and set their alarm clock for 2:00 in the morning. At that time, they awoke less tired to a quiet house. They made love and then fell back asleep. They said that they think this really saved their marriage through a hard time.

**Planning time for sex is another way of being intentional in your marriage.**

The point [of the story] is that they valued their marriage and their sexual intimacy too much to just let it slide during a busy and hard time of their lives. They were *intentional* about the divine gift of marital intimacy with its power to unite their souls.

**Planning time for sex can help you both look forward to being together.**

When you plan a sexual experience, you have the added benefit of the anticipation of being together. Not only is it fun to look forward to sex, knowing you will be engaging sexually can help you more easily transition into a sexual experience.

**Planning time for sex can help couples navigate sexual differences.**

Planning time for sex can also help the higher desire spouse and the lower desire spouse feel more comfortable about the frequency of their sexual experiences.

**COUPLE TIME: Mental Preparation** (10 minutes)

[Slide 25]

**Explain how Couple Time will work this week.**

Throughout each of these sections today, I will be giving you time as couples to think and talk about some important questions about sex. These questions will require some deep thinking and vulnerable discussion between partners. I encourage you to use the healthy communication skills you learned in our first lesson.

**Be a safe space for your partner to share with you his or her fears, worries and hopes.**

Developing a habit of supporting each other *now* will help you as you work together to become one. Remember to be a safe space for your partner as he or she shares these intimate details with you.

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 16.**

Now, spend a moment personally pondering your own responses to these questions about mental preparation on page 16, then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time and invite couples to move to a private area]

**ASK: Would anyone like to share anything they discussed?**

## Emotional (21 minutes)

[Slide 26]

**The emotional aspect of sexual wholeness focuses on our personal emotional state and relationship climate.**

We've just talked about the mental aspects of marital sexuality, so let's talk now about the emotional aspects of sex. The categories of mental and emotional may seem to be similar, but while the mental aspect focuses on our ideas and understandings about sex, the emotional aspect focuses on our personal emotional state and relationship climate.

## Myth-busting (1 minute)

[Slide 27]

**Myths about the emotional aspect of sexual wholeness.**

Here are a few myths about the emotional aspect of sexuality:

- Previous sexual abuse or trauma means I won't be able to enjoy sex in marriage.
- Sex equals intimacy.
- Sex is purely physical; it doesn't really affect me emotionally.
- Orgasm is the primary goal of sex.

## Emotional Barriers (6 minutes)

[Slide 28]

**Introduce the emotional barriers to sexual wholeness.**

As with the mental aspect, we want to maximize the positive power of emotions in our sexuality and minimize their problematic power. Here are some emotional issues that can be difficult.

### *1. Stress/Mental Health*

[Slide 29]

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**Being stressed or struggling with mental health can impact a couple's ability to enjoy sex.**

Stress can affect our bodies in a wide variety of ways, and it can definitely impact our ability to function in our relationships, *including* our ability to enjoy sex with our spouse. Struggling with mental illnesses like depression and anxiety on top of everyday stress can further decrease our ability to enjoy sex.

**Stress/mental health problems can also affect an individual's ability to become/stay aroused.<sup>39</sup>**

Both of these can also affect our ability to become or stay aroused. If you discover this to be an issue, consider taking a step back and evaluating how stressed you are. If you have been diagnosed with a mental health issue, consider talking with your health provider.

[Slide 30]

**As sex expert and therapist Maj Wismann puts it:**

"Stress and sex drive do not mix. You simply cannot have a head full of 120 worries while also having great sex."<sup>40</sup>

**Certain mental health medications can impact sex drive.**

Additionally, some medications that are taken for treatment for mental health can have an impact on sex drive.

**Combat stress by talking to your spouse or therapist, or having sex!**

One way to reduce the stress in our lives is to talk about it. Communicate to your spouse about the stresses in your lives and work to support and lift each other. It is also a good idea to meet with your doctor or therapist (together or separately) to address concerns either of you have. Alternatively, remember that sex can be a great way to relieve stress!

Online Supplemental Lesson:  
*Marriage and Mental Health*

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<sup>39</sup> National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI) website: [www.nami.org/FAQ/Mental-Health-Medication-FAQ](http://www.nami.org/FAQ/Mental-Health-Medication-FAQ)

<sup>40</sup> Wismann, M. (2017). 3 reasons sex is affecting your sex drive and what to do about it. *The Gottman Institute*.

## 2. Trauma

[Slide 31]

[Slide 32]

### **Trauma statistics:**

Research shows that about 30% of women and 15% of men experience sexual trauma during their lifetime, usually before the age of 30.<sup>41</sup>

### **Trauma, particularly sex- or abuse-related trauma, can have an impact on our ability to engage sexually.**

When we have experienced sexual trauma it can impact our ability to engage sexually. Those who have experienced trauma may rehearse the

sexual trauma, feel a lack of control during sexual experiences, feel guilt or shame about a sexual response or have a general negativity about sex.<sup>42</sup>

[Slide 33]

### **Be mindful and supportive if your partner has past trauma.**

If you or your partner have experienced sex or abuse-related trauma, be mindful that the beginning of your sexual relationship may be slower than you might have expected. Be supportive of and sensitive towards one another and each individual's needs and struggles related to sexual trauma.

### **There is hope and help available.**

Recognize that sexual trauma may impact your ability to engage sexually but overcoming trauma is possible. If you have experienced sexual trauma and have not yet worked through it, please make the time and effort to do that now. Reach out to the Lord and a therapist for help as needed.

## 3. Negative Relationship Climate

[Slide 34]

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<sup>41</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

<sup>42</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <https://www.nsvrc.org>



**Experiencing a negative relationship climate can limit your ability to fully enjoy your sexual relationship.**

If you are experiencing a negative relationship climate, you can have a difficult time giving yourselves wholly to each other in sexual ways.

[Slide 35]

**Explain what a negative relationship climate looks like.**

A negative relationship climate is one that is filled with anger, mistrust, contention, disappointment, and hurt or other negative feelings.

**Multiple areas of your sexual relationship are affected by a negative relationship.**

When this kind of negative climate surrounds us, our sexual desire, communication and even physical response are inhibited.

**Be cautious if you decide to have sex in this state.**

Having sex when your relationship is in this kind of environment is something that should be carefully considered. Sometimes trying to connect physically through sexuality can help heal relationship distresses we are working on. However, trying to engage sexually when there are unaddressed relationship concerns can also intensify negative emotions and conflict.

**Use conflict resolution skills to help bring back peace.**

Keep working on your conflict resolution skills and learning better ways to address the issues disrupting your relationship peace. Get outside help if you are getting stuck.

**ASK:** Are there any questions about these emotional barriers before we move on?

**Emotional Expanders** (4 minutes)

[Slide 36]

**Introduce the emotional expanders of sexual wholeness.**

Now let's talk about things that expand our emotional openness to sexuality.

### *1. Intimacy, Trust and Safety*

[Slide 37]

**Building intimacy, trust and safety increases your ability to feel like one in your sexual relationship.**

The three barriers we just discussed are all related in that they can hinder a couple's ability to form strong emotional connections. But we can expand our emotional connections through intimacy, trust and safety.

[Slide 38]

**Intimacy is more than just sex.**

In faith communities, one of the most common ways that individuals and leaders refer to sex is "marital intimacy." But it's important to know that

intimacy isn't just about sex. You can be intimate physically or sexually, but you can also be intimate emotionally or spiritually. Intimacy should be an important part of *every* aspect of our marriage relationship.

**ASK: How would you describe or define intimacy?**

[Make sure the following is included if no one covers it]

Intimacy indicates a closeness, a deeper knowledge of someone, and trust between partners. This trust and safety in your relationship is critical to the

health of your marriage, not just your physical relationship with one another.

**ACTIVITY: Group Discussion of Safety/Trust** (3 minutes)

[Slide 39]

**Introduce this group discussion.**

Since safety and trust are so important to the health of a relationship, we are going to spend a few minutes discussing how to preserve and build them.

**ASK: What are some ways that we can create safety and build trust in our marriages?**

**ASK: What are some ways that we can harm the sense of safety and trust in our marriages?**

[If no one offers these suggestions, make sure to add them]

Being sexually unfaithful

One of the most destructive ways we harm a sense of safety and trust is by being sexually unfaithful. Creating that sense of safety is an important reason why God has commanded that we be faithful, that we cleave to our spouse and no one else.

Being emotionally unfaithful

In addition, emotional infidelity (having an emotionally intimate relationship with someone outside our marriage) can also be incredibly damaging to the sense of trust in our marriage.

Viewing pornography

Many spouses feel that indulging in pornography is a violation of that trust, as we should invest all of our sexual desires in our spouse.

Online Supplemental Lesson:  
*Pornography*

## *2. The Real Goal*

[Slide 40]

**Different couples may have different reasons they have sex.**

Couples have sex for different reasons and these reasons can change from couple to couple, and from experience to experience. This evolution is one of the ways we create our own unique sexual relationship.

**No matter the reason, the goal should be the same.**

Regardless of the reason for sex, the goal for every couple should be the same.

[Slide 41]

**The goal of sex is a *strong connection*.**

The goal should be to form a strong emotional connection with your spouse. Sexual intimacy is a powerful time to connect and feel like you are one.

**If the goal is orgasm, the experience can be less satisfying.**

Many people are under the impression that orgasm is the primary goal of sex. And, while orgasm is an important part of our sexual experience, research actually shows that when orgasm is our only focus in a sexual experience, the experience is less satisfying, *especially* for women.<sup>43</sup> Since

most women don't orgasm every sexual experience, a focus on orgasm can lead to feelings of disappointment or failure. This happens for men, as well.

**With connection as the goal, both spouses can be more satisfied more often, thus increasing their trust and intimacy.**

If a deep emotional connection is your *focus* as a couple, your sexual experiences will likely be more satisfying and more meaningful. When we have sex with our spouse, we are engaging in a physical experience to help us connect deeper emotionally to one another, to trust each other more and to increase the intimacy in our marriage.

## COUPLE TIME: Emotional Preparation (10 minutes)

[Slide 42]

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 17.**

While you discuss these vulnerable topics, remember that trust and safety are the goal here. But if you need to skip a question, that's okay; go ahead and say that. Spend a moment personally pondering your own responses to

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<sup>43</sup> Meston, C. M., Levin, R. J., Sipski, M. L., Hull, E., Heiman, J. R. (2004). Women's orgasm. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 15:174–257.

these questions on page 17, then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Would anyone like to share anything they discussed?

## Transition

[Slide 43]

**Invite participants to take a short break.**

You now have time for a break before we finish the rest of the lesson today.

## Physical (40 minutes)

[Slide 44]

**The physical aspect of sexual wholeness focuses on the logistical and visible parts of the sexual experience.**

Welcome back. We are now going to move on to the physical aspect of sexual wholeness. This will be the part of the lesson that gets into some of the more logistical aspects of sex. That being said, it's important to remember that physical pleasure impacts and is impacted by the mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of sexuality. For this section we don't have the "barriers" and "expanders" like the last two, so it is going to be a little bit different in that regard, but we will still start with the myths.

## Myth-busting (2 minute)

[Slide 45]

**Myths about the physical aspect of sexual wholeness.**

As promised, here are a few myths on the physical aspect of sexuality:

- Sex is dirty.
- Sex has to look/sound/feel a certain way.
- Sex has to be different or steamy/exciting every time.
- Sex is only about what happens in the bedroom.
- Sex is all about me and my satisfaction.
- The sexual relationship makes or breaks the marriage.
- Marriage kills sex.
- You have to have great bodies in order to have great sex.
- Women's sexuality is not as important or relevant as men's.

### **Transition to the next section.**

Since we believe that our physical bodies were designed in the image of God, it's important to be able to understand and talk openly about the anatomy of the body for both genders. We're going to go over some basics and then talk about sexual expectations.

## Physical Sexual Response Cycle (10 minutes)

[Slide 46]

**The sexual response cycle is a way to visualize the journey our bodies take during sexual experiences.**

For most people, the sexual response cycle is one way to visualize or talk about the journey our bodies go through during sexual experiences.

[Slide 47]

**The four parts of the cycle are desire, arousal orgasm, and resolution.**

The sexual response cycle involves at least four parts: desire, arousal, orgasm, and resolution.

### **Desire (also referred to as "excitement" phase)**

This phase includes two parts:

- An escalation of blood pressure/heart rate
- A physical genital response: Women experience vaginal lubrication and men experience penis erection.

**Arousal (also referred to as “plateau” phase)**

During this phase there is an increased blood flow to the genitals, and muscle tension/spasms in the extremities may occur.

**Orgasm (the shortest phase, also referred to as the “climax”)**

During orgasm, involuntary muscle contractions occur that release the built up sexual tension. In addition, oxytocin (the bonding hormone) is released throughout the body. For men, this is the ejaculation of semen in a series of rhythmic contractions. For women, this is a series of involuntary rhythmic contractions in the genital area.

**Resolution**

In the final phase, the body gradually returns to its pre-sexual response state.

*Common Cycle Differences for Men and Women*

[Slide 48]

**Men and women experience the sexual response cycle differently.**

While both men and women go through the same stages of this cycle, the cycle is typically experienced differently by men and women. And these cycle differences are not always true for every couple and can change over time.

**There is a lot of variation in the cycle, especially for women.**

Recent research by BYU professors clarifies that there is a good deal of variation in the sexual response cycle, especially for women.<sup>44</sup> In other words, there are several different paths or cycles that are associated with sexual satisfaction so it may be unhelpful to think of just one path or cycle as “normal.”

**Introduce the chart on page 20 of the workbook.**

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<sup>44</sup> Leavitt, C. E., Leonhardt, N. D., & Busby, D. M. (2019). Different ways to get there: Evidence for a variable female sexual response cycle. *Journal of Sex Research*, 56, 899-912.

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To further explain what kind of differences may occur, there is a chart on page 20 of your workbook we are going to go over.

Common Cycle Differences for Men and Women	
Men	Women
Men usually jump from desire to arousal quickly and continue to go through the cycle at a fairly fast pace.	Women can take (up to 10x) longer to start having a physical genital response, and the buildup through arousal tends to be slower. <sup>45</sup>
Before the age of 50, most men can reliably orgasm every time, and usually orgasm just once per sexual experience.	Only about 40% of women orgasm “almost always.” However, when women orgasm, they are capable of orgasming multiple times in a row. <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mintz, L. (2014). The Orgasm Gap: Simple Truth and Sexual Solutions. *Psychology Today*.

<sup>46</sup> See footnote 51



A man's resolution phase after an orgasm tends to be quick.	A woman's resolution phase tends to be slow, leaving her in a heightened state of arousal after orgasm.
Men usually feel a desire for sex as a <i>first step</i> , which acts as a catalyst to having a sexual experience.	Women usually experience sexual desire <i>after</i> a few other steps.

**Spend additional time discussing the last point.**

Let's talk a little more about this last one.

**Research suggests that women often need extra preparation before experiencing sexual desire.<sup>47</sup>**

Some marriage specialists suggest at least three steps women may need before they experience sexual desire:

[Slide 49]

**1. Women need to decide to have sex.**

For many women, sex is a decision. They have to be mentally willing to move forward toward desire and arousal, and deciding is influenced by:

- *Agency* - Does she feel like she has a choice? Or does she feel obligated or forced?
- *Relationship Climate* – What's the status of the marital relationship and emotional connection?
- *Sexual Values* - Does she believe that her sexual experience matters?

**2. Women need an emotional connection.**

Even after a woman has decided to have sex, she needs an emotional connection for that particular sexual experience to help her transition, relax, and warm up to sex.

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<sup>47</sup> See Dr. Laura Brotherson's *Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage*

### **3. Women need more non-sexual touch.**

Women need some degree of physical stimulation before they actually feel “desire” for sex. Non-sexual touching (touching places other than genitalia) is important for arousal buildup. (This is sometimes referred to as “foreplay.”) Non-sexual touching helps women move through desire and arousal, though still at a slower pace than men.

### **Men need to be willing to slow down.**

One of the most important takeaways husbands can have is understanding the need to slow down their own desire and arousal, so their wife can feel desire with them. Slowing down will also aid in their wife’s ability to reach orgasm, which we will discuss next.

## **Different paths to orgasm (10 minutes)**

[Slide 50]

### **Introduce this section.**

While a deep emotional connection is the goal of sex, orgasm is still

an important part of our sexual experience and women tend to have a more complex path to orgasm than men.

### **Show and explain the purpose of the diagrams on page 22 of the workbook.**

Page 22 shows diagrams of male and female genitalia. These are included because it is important to understand our own body as well as our spouse’s. It’s another part of physically preparing for sexual intimacy. I also think it is awe-inspiring—our bodies are amazing! It helps me appreciate our loving God who created us.

### **Men’s path to orgasm is generally consistent.**

As we’ve already mentioned, men tend to have a straightforward path to orgasm. All that is required is stimulation of the penis, and they will reliably orgasm.

### **Women have a more complicated path to orgasm.**

Women, on the other hand, tend to have a more meandering path to orgasm. Part of this is due to the cycle differences we discussed earlier. But it also involves differences in anatomy.

### **The science behind genitalia development.**

To better explain these differences, I am going to go over our fetal development. As a baby is developing in the womb, it goes through an initial phase before it manifests as male or female. During this initial phase, a cell mass develops that eventually becomes the baby's sexual organs. For a female baby, that cell mass develops into the clitoris and for a male baby, that cell mass develops into the penis. But the developmental foundation is exactly the same!

### **Understanding this development helps us understand more about the purpose of these organs.**

Since the penis and the clitoris develop from the same clump of cells, they have the same number of nerve endings on their respective tips. But unlike the penis that has multiple functions, the clitoris has no other purpose except to provide physical pleasure for women. It is a reminder to me that God created women to experience sexual pleasure!

### **The clitoris is the principal center of a woman's sexual experience.**

Since a woman's sexual sensations are principally centered in the clitoris, it plays a critical role in sexual arousal and orgasm for women.

[Slide 51]

*"...the clitoris has the same number of nerve endings as does the penis but is only one-tenth the size...the walls of the vagina [are] not endowed with sensitive nerve endings."*<sup>48</sup>

[Slide 52]

*"For the woman, the key to orgasmic success is the clitoris. Every orgasm that occurs in a woman is clitoral. Women are unable to climax without direct or indirect stimulation of the clitoris."*<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tim and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage*, p. 11

<sup>49</sup> Dr. Robert Stahmann, *Becoming One*, p. 18

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**Learning how to successfully stimulate a wife's clitoris is an essential part of physical sexual fulfillment for married couples.**

It is essential that a wife is very communicative with her husband and that a husband is very responsive to his wife. Husbands need to be willing to listen to their wives so that they are not causing pain instead of pleasure.

Because nerve endings are clustered in such a small area, the clitoris can be extremely sensitive—so be gentle! It can take a lot of communication and some time to figure out, and it's different for every couple. Patience is key, especially when remembering that a wife's full arousal can take up to 10x longer than the husband's.

[Slide 53]

**Learning to focus on your spouse's sexual pleasure is another way to become one.**

Focusing on our spouse's sexual pleasure is a great part of the journey to becoming one as a married couple. Selflessness in sexuality can:

*"literally double your sexual pleasure: You get satisfaction not only from your own sexual response but from your partner's as well...love and concern for one's partner shifts the focus away from the self in a sexual relationship and toward the other to bring sexual satisfaction to both men and women."*<sup>50</sup>

**Sexual Expectations** (6 minutes)

[Slide 54]

**ASK: Who here has experienced a time when their expectation about an event/experience/etc. wasn't met?**

Many times we set expectations for ourselves, or others, without realizing it. This can lead to disappointment and conflict.

**Unmet expectations are a primary source of disappointment.**

Since unmet expectations are a source of disappointment, it is important to set realistic expectations throughout our lives.

**Our sexual expectations need to be realistic (page 23 in workbook).**

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<sup>50</sup> Waite, L. & Gallagher, M. (2001). The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier and better off financially. *Crown Publishing*.

The expectations we have about sex can come from what we were taught at home or in church, from friends or from “experts,” in books, television or online. We often compare our sexual experiences with the sexual expectations we build from those sources. Let’s look at some unrealistic sexual expectations and the realities behind them on page 23 in your workbook.

Realistic and Unrealistic “Sexual Expectations”	
Unrealistic	Realistic
Sex is elegant and right after sex you get to just lie in the soft, clean sheets together.	Sex sometimes gets sweaty, and both individuals and the bedding get a bit sticky with bodily lubrication and ejaculation, not to mention if you choose to use extra oils, lubrications, lotions or if the woman is on her period. Sex may be a little messy.

If we do things right, we'll both orgasm.	Orgasm is complicated and impacted by emotional, mental, spiritual and physiological factors.
We'll both orgasm at the same time.	Maybe, but not very often.
We'll both want sex at the same time.	Differences in sex drives can make it hard to want sex at the same time. There is usually one partner who wants sex more frequently. Additionally, some individuals have a higher sex drive in the morning, others at night.

**ASK:** Are there other sexual expectations you want to mention?

[Slide 55]

**It is important to discuss your sexual expectations together to be intentional and create oneness.**

Discussing and creating your sexual expectations is an important part of being intentional and becoming one. You will find greater satisfaction if you create your expectations *together* instead of consulting sources outside your marriage. That's not to say that you shouldn't seek professional help sometimes for challenges you are experiencing, but when setting *your* sexual expectations, be together.

**Your sexual expectations are what make your relationship unique.**

Marital sexuality looks different from couple to couple, day to day and year to year. But that's one thing that makes sexual intimacy so fun in marriage—you get to keep on creating your own unique sexual experiences.

**COUPLE TIME: Physical Preparation** (10 minutes)

[Slide 56]

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 18.**

Since discussing these expectations is so important, you will have some time now to do that. As before, spend a moment personally pondering your

own responses to these questions on page 18, then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Does anyone have any thoughts or insights they would like to share?

## Birth control (1 minute)

[Slide 57]

**Make sure to discuss birth control options together.**

One final thing that deserves a mention here is birth control. Obviously, one of the physical aspects of sex is the possibility of creating human life. We won't get into a deeper discussion, but it is an important thing to learn about and discuss together as a couple.

[Slide 58]

*"When to have a child and how many children to have are private decisions to be made between a husband and wife and the Lord."<sup>51</sup>*

Online Supplemental Lesson:  
*Birth Control*

## Spiritual (12 minutes)

[Slide 59]

**The spiritual aspect of sexual wholeness focuses on your beliefs surrounding the purpose of sex.**

Research and faith principles both make clear that there is a spiritual dimension to marital sex.<sup>52</sup> This will be our shortest section, but that doesn't diminish its importance. The spiritual aspect of sexual wholeness focuses on what your beliefs are surrounding the purpose of sex.

## Myth-Busting (1 minute)

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<sup>51</sup> Elder Neil L. Anderson, "Children," 2011

<sup>52</sup> See Gospel Topics: Chastity and Yonke, D. (2014) *A sacred union*. Bowling Green State University.

[Slide 60]

**Myths about the spiritual aspect of sexual wholeness.**

Here are some myths regarding the spiritual aspect of sexual wholeness:

- Sex is just a biological thing.
- Sex is primarily for procreation.
- Sex is primarily for personal pleasure.
- Sex is a spiritual thing and shouldn't be distorted by feelings of pleasure and fun.

**The Purpose of Sex** (6 minutes)

[Slide 61]

**Two contrasting views of the purpose of sex.**

Some of you may have heard that *sex is primarily for procreation* and that the physical pleasure we get from sex is not part of God's plan. And from the other end of the spectrum, from a worldly standpoint, it's easy to get the message that *sex is only about physical pleasure* and there is no spiritual or moral aspect at all. Both of these views are inaccurate and incomplete. Sex is intended to be a means to create life and enjoy each other physically, but there is more to its purpose than that.

[Slide 62]

**Sex is meant to unify husband and wife (page 24 in workbook).**

One religious leader, Jeffrey R. Holland has spoken eloquently and powerfully about the spiritual dimension of sex. Let's read together on page 24 some of what he has said:

"I submit to you that *you will never be more like God at any other time in this life than when you are expressing that particular power (sexual intimacy)*. Such an act of love between a man and a woman is—or certainly was ordained to be—a symbol of total union: union of their hearts, their hopes, their lives, their love, their family, their future, their everything...such a total, virtually unbreakable union, such an unyielding commitment between a man and a woman, can only come with the proximity and permanence afforded in a



marriage covenant, with the union of *all* that they possess—their very hearts and minds, all their days and all their dreams. . . . And the external symbol of that union, the physical manifestation of what is a far deeper spiritual and metaphysical bonding, is the physical blending that is part of—indeed, a most beautiful and gratifying expression of—that larger, more complete union of eternal purpose and promise.”<sup>53</sup>

**Sexual intimacy is intended to symbolize the complete union of husband and wife.**

Like Elder Holland says, sexual intimacy is intended to symbolize a total union of husband and wife. This purpose has divine origins as God has commanded us to become one.

**Understanding this purpose is a way of learning to sanctify sex in our marriages.**

As couples understand and accept this as the purpose of sex, they are learning to sanctify sexual intimacy in marriage. To sanctify something means to make something holy or to consecrate something as holy and divine.

[Slide 63]

**Believing in the divinity of this purpose has numerous marital benefits.**

Research has found that a stronger sense of the sanctity of sex is associated with greater frequency of sex, greater sexual satisfaction, and greater marital satisfaction.<sup>54</sup> Those who begin their marriages with this sanctified perception of sex are much better able to prevent the deterioration of sexual and marital satisfaction over time than those who do not have this perception at the beginning of their marriage.

**Viewing sex as sacred, sanctified or spiritual may feel strange.**

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<sup>53</sup> “Of Souls, Symbols and Sacraments”, BYU Devotional 1988

<sup>54</sup> Leonhardt, N. D., Busby, D. M., & Willoughby, B. J. (2020). Sex guilt or sanctification? The indirect role of religiosity on sexual satisfaction. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 12(2), 213–222.

Many couples have expressed confusion as to how they are supposed to sanctify their sexual experience. They have asked how such a physical experience can be spiritual.

[Slide 64]

**The spiritual side of sex is similar to a “runner’s high.”**

One BYU professor taught that there are different ways to experience spiritual moments. What we as people of faith are used to thinking about as spiritual and sacred are those quiet, reflective times we have in prayer or in church. However, that isn’t going to be what our sexual experiences are going to feel like. Sex is a physical activity. So, spirituality related with sex is going to be more like what runners feel after finishing a race — the “runner’s high.” Energy will be high, your heart will be racing, and you will have feelings of elation. This is a physical reaction to a spiritual experience.<sup>55</sup>

## COUPLE TIME: Spiritual Preparation (5 minutes)

[Slide 65]

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 19.**

Let’s take just a few minutes to talk with each other about our own ideas about the spiritual nature of sex. One more time, spend a moment

personally pondering your own responses to these questions on page 19, then you have about 5 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Would anyone like to share anything they discussed?

## Conclusion (3 minutes)

[Slide 66]

**Dr. John Gottman quote:**

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<sup>55</sup> Dr. Dean Busby’s SFL 376 class

“Great sex is not rocket science. By being good friends, by being affectionate..., and by talking openly about sex, couples can build a thriving relationship inside and outside of the bedroom.”<sup>56</sup>

**Understanding all four aspects of sexual wholeness will increase your sexual satisfaction.**

I would love to keep going, but hopefully this has been a good start to helping you understand the different aspects of sexual wholeness. I hope you have been inspired to develop the habit now of talking about your sexual relationship throughout your marriage. The more you strive to understand sexual wholeness, the greater sexual and marital satisfaction you will have.

**Plan to intentionally work on your sexual relationship during your first year of marriage (references on page 25 of workbook).**

I strongly recommend that you plan to intentionally work on your sexual relationship during the first year of your marriage. Don't just let things slide. There are things to learn and lots to talk about together. Page 25 has a list of some great resources available to help newlyweds really strengthen their sexual relationship. In addition, there are the online supplemental lessons we have already mentioned that may be helpful.

## Homework

[Slide 67]

**This week.**

This week, choose a book/podcast/talk/article from the resource list and make a plan to read/listen to it together.

## Preview

[Slide 68]

**Inform participants what they can expect for next week.**

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<sup>56</sup> Gottman, J. (2017). “Building a great sex life is not rocket science”. *The Gottman Institute*.

Next time we will talk about becoming one through equal partnership and commitment, and we will discuss some things we can do as newlyweds and beyond to intentionally nurture our relationship.

**Conclude and close with prayer.**

Have a great week!



## Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 4 Becoming One Through Equal Partnership and Complete Commitment

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### Preface

This lesson has two goals:

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1 - To help participants see how equal partnership in marriage is essential in creating oneness in marriage.

2 - To help couples understand that leaning all the way into their marriage—committing completely—helps move them closer to becoming one.

As part of the complete commitment section, couples will have an opportunity to share with each other their philosophy of divorce. While this may seem an unusual focus for marriage preparation, thinking through and communicating about divorce can help couples be more intentional about committing to each other and their marriage.

## Lesson Outline

Introduction (5 minutes)

Developing an Equal Partnership (20 minutes)

- Cultural Misunderstandings
- Decision Making
- Couple Time: Equal Partnership

Committing Completely (25 minutes)

- Divorce Research
- Faith Teachings on Divorce
- Couple Time: Divorce philosophy

Conclusion (3 minutes)

## Materials

- Facilitator guide
- Participant workbooks
- Pens/pencils for note taking

## Equipment

- Laptop and large screen for showing slides
- Soft music to use during “Couple Time”

## Introduction (5 minutes)

### Review and Check-in

[Slide 1]

**Welcome participants to *Anxiously Engaged* and start with a prayer.**

#### **Review the first session:**

In our first week we learned about becoming one in marriage through prioritizing “we” over “me” and learning *communication* skills. These take a lifetime of learning but it’s helpful to have a goal that we are working towards. Hopefully you have been intentionally practicing your healthy communication skills!

**Review the second session:**

Last week we discussed becoming one through *marital sexuality*. The divine gift of marital sexuality is one of the most powerful ways that we create a sense of oneness in our marriage.

**ASK:** How did your homework go? Did anyone read a particularly helpful resource?

[Slide 2]

**Introduce the topics for today.**

We'll start today by talking about two more important principles for creating oneness in our marriages: *developing an equal partnership* and *committing completely*. Then in the last hour we'll discuss how we can *grow* in our relationships over time.

## Developing an Equal Partnership (20 minutes)

[Slide 3]

**Equal partnership.**

Like the pillars of an arch, a marriage is strongest when each side is equal.

[Slide 4]

**Gordon B. Hinckley often taught about equal partnership.**

This was a prominent theme in many of Gordon B. Hinckley's sermons as a leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For instance, he said:

*"In the marriage companionship there is neither inferiority nor superiority. The woman does not walk ahead of the man; neither does the man walk ahead of the woman. They walk side by side as a son and daughter of God on an eternal journey."*<sup>57</sup>

[Slide 5]

**Research shows benefits to having an equal partnership.<sup>58</sup>**

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<sup>57</sup> "Personal Worthiness to Exercise the Priesthood," General Conference, April 2002

<sup>58</sup> Wilcox, W. B. & Nock, S. L. (2006). "What's Love Got to Do with It? Equality, Equity, Commitment and Women's Marital Quality." *Social Forces*, 84(3), 1321–1345.



In addition to these prophetic teachings, research shows these added benefits of equal partnership marriages:

- Happier relationships
- Greater marital satisfaction
- Better individual well-being
- Less depression (especially among women)
- More effective co-parenting
- Better functioning children
- Less verbal aggression and physical violence
- More sexual satisfaction

## Cultural Misunderstandings (5 minutes)

[Slide 6]

**Some in our day have been led to believe that women are not equal to men.**

Unfortunately, despite these teachings, some cultural traditions and teachings have led to Christians misunderstanding the role of women in marriage.

**ASK: Can you think of some general cultural traditions (current and historical) that don't view women and men as equal?**

- Women as lesser-than and lacking basic legal rights – voting, owning property, opening a bank account without a male co-signer
- Veneration of physical strength and stature
- Money = power
- Poor family-of-origin patterns
- Hierarchy—whenever there is two of something, one must be better
- Genesis 3:16: Adam should “rule over” Eve (a more accurate translation of the original Hebrew is “rule *with*” Eve.)
- In divorce custody rulings, mothers are often considered to be the default primary caregivers of children.

**If needed, we must overcome these false traditions.**

Although many of these laws and traditions are no longer practiced, the belief systems that instituted them sometimes remain. If needed, we must overcome these false traditions to remember that God intends husbands and wives to be true partners.

**Our family of origin may have negatively impacted our understanding of equal partnership.**

It's also possible that some of us may have observed patterns in our families that have led to us holding beliefs that men and women aren't equal. If needed, we must work to overcome these patterns as God intends husbands and wives to be true partners.

**Understanding the correct teachings of equality can help couples form a true sense of oneness in their marriage.**

## Decision Making (5 minutes)

### [Slide 7]

**Marital decision making is easier when a marriage is founded on equal partnership.**

Equal partnership manifests itself in many ways. For example, we need to be equal and united as we counsel and labor together. One of the most

important ways we need to be equal partners is in how we make decisions together.

### [Slide 8]

[A husband and wife] “have equal power to receive revelation for their family. When they work together in love and righteousness, their decisions are heaven blessed.”<sup>59</sup>

## COUPLE TIME: Equal Partnership (10 minutes)

### [Slide 9]

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<sup>59</sup> Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Great love for our Father’s children,” General Conference, April 2019

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 28.**

You know how this goes. Spend a moment personally pondering your own responses to these questions on page 28, then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Would anyone like to share anything they discussed?

## Committing Completely (25 minutes)

[Slide 10]

**Being able to commit completely to each other is a powerful act of becoming one.**

In this part of the lesson, we are going to go over ways that couples can further grow in their commitment to each other. To become one takes time and involves overcoming the challenges of fusing two individual lives into one (me to we). It takes decades, not just years, to approach this kind of union.

[Slide 11]

**Marriage can't be entered in half-heartedly.**

New York Times columnist and author, David Brooks, has written about the importance of commitment to marriage:

*"Marriage is the sort of thing where it's safer to go all in, and it's dangerous to go in half-hearted. At the far end, when done well, you see people enjoying the deepest steady joy you can find on this earth."*<sup>60</sup>

**ASK:** What could be dangerous about going into marriage "half-heartedly?"

Think again of the arch as a symbol of marriage—to achieve the greatest strength, couples have to lean completely in.

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<sup>60</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, p. 146

## Divorce Research (2 minutes)

[Slide 12]

**Divorce isn't something that God wishes for us.**

I'll preface this section by sharing a teaching from Jesus:

[Slide 13]

*"What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."*<sup>61</sup>

Obviously, God doesn't wish for our marriage to end in divorce, but that doesn't automatically mean that we are saved from the possibility of divorce.

[Slide 14]

**The number one reason for divorce is lack of commitment.**

Research tells us that the number one reason divorced individuals give for their divorce is lack of commitment (of one or both partners).<sup>62</sup>

[Slide 15]

**Research on divorce statistics.**

In most societies today, the specter of divorce looms large. While divorce rates in the United States are high – about 40% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages – some countries have even higher breakup rates.<sup>63</sup> Religious couples are not exempt from these numbers. While divorce is lower among well-educated couples and couples who share religious values, it is still high enough to be scary.<sup>64</sup>

## Faith Teachings on Divorce (10 minutes)

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<sup>61</sup> Matthew 19:6

<sup>62</sup> Scott, S. B., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Allen, E. S., & Markman, H. J. (2013). "Reasons for divorce and recollections of premarital intervention: Implications for improving relationship education" *Couple Family Psychology*.

<sup>63</sup> American Psychological Association, "Marriage and Divorce." <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce-child-custody>

<sup>64</sup> See footnote 71

[Slide 16]

**Introduce this topic.**

We have covered the research side of divorce, now we want to focus on what religious leaders have shared on this topic.

[Slide 17]

**Most religious leaders understand there may be a “legitimate cause for divorce.”**

One religious leader, Gordon B. Hinckley emphasized:

*“There may be now and again a legitimate cause for divorce. I am not one to say that it is never justified. But I say without hesitation that this plague among us, which seems to be growing everywhere, is not of God.”<sup>65</sup>*

[Slide 18]

**Counsel from James E. Faust.**

One religious leader, James E. Faust provided some of the clearest counsel on this sensitive and consequential question of how to deal with thoughts of divorce:

*“What, then, might be ‘just cause’ for breaking the covenants of marriage? Over a lifetime of dealing with human problems, I have struggled to understand what might be considered ‘just cause’ for breaking of covenants. I confess I do not claim the wisdom nor authority to definitively state what is ‘just cause.’ Only the parties to the marriage can determine this. . . . In my opinion, ‘just cause’ should be nothing less serious than a **prolonged and apparently irredeemable relationship which is destructive of a person’s dignity as a human being.**”<sup>66</sup>*

[Slide 19]

**The three wise tests when considering divorce.**

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<sup>65</sup> General Conference, “What God Hath Joined Together, April 1991

<sup>66</sup> General Conference, “Father Come Home,” April 1993, emphasis added

Embedded in Faust's counsel are three wise tests for when we find ourselves considering a divorce.

**Length of marital difficulties.**

Most marriages go through cycles of happy and hard times. Sometimes there are external stresses that make marriages hard. Other times our personal weaknesses, immaturities, and underdeveloped relationship skills divide our hearts. *It is wise, then, to be patient and give ourselves time to mature and grow and allow our marriages time to improve rather than abandon them quickly when they are hurting.* Research has shown that many unhappy couples who choose to stay married report after 5 more years that they are happy.<sup>67</sup>

**An “apparently irredeemable” relationship.**

“Irredeemable” is a strong word that means “not able to be saved, improved, or corrected.” This is a condition that takes longer to get to in a relationship than many people might believe. Until our relationship strongly demonstrates no hope for repair, we must work as hard as we can to mend and heal our marriages.

[We decided against including concrete examples since irredeemability is rather subjective.]

[Slide 20]

**Another religious leader, Dallin H. Oaks explained:**

*“Under the law of the Lord, a marriage, like a human life, is a precious living thing. If our bodies are sick, we seek to heal them. We do not give up. While there is any prospect of life, we seek healing again and again. The same should be true of our marriages, and if we seek Him, the Lord will help us and heal us. . . . Of course, there can be times when one spouse falls short and the other is wounded and feels pain. When that happens, the one who is wronged should balance current disappointments against the good of the past and the brighter prospects of the future.”<sup>68</sup>*

[Slide 21]

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<sup>67</sup> Waite, L. J., Browning, D., Doherty, W. J., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y., & Stanley, S. M. (2002). Does divorce make people happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriage. *The Institute of American Values*.

<sup>68</sup> General Conference, “Divorce,” April 2007

**Destructive of our dignity as a child of God.**

We are not required to sacrifice our dignity as a child of God to remain in a destructive marriage. However, this can be hard to discern.

**ASK: What kinds of marital problems could be destructive of our dignity as a child of God?**

Abuse, adultery, addictions, and mental and physical abandonment put spouses at high risk for losing a sense of human dignity. Chronic selfishness, demeaning words and actions, and over-controlling behavior can also wear our souls down over time.

**Usually, it is a combination of all three tests that justifies divorce.**

It is often the combination of all three of these wise tests that justifies divorce—not necessarily just one of them by itself.

[Slide 22]

**Divorce is sometimes a necessity.**

Oaks also recognized that sometimes a marital relationship cannot be revived, and so, divorce may be the only course left:

*“When a marriage is dead and beyond hope of resuscitation, it is needful to have a means to end it.”<sup>69</sup>*

Here is one way to summarize the right attitude: Divorce should never be an option, but sometimes it is a necessity.

**Also important: not all divorces are personal decisions.**

One last thing: for many, divorce is not a personal choice; they are acted upon rather than acting for themselves. One spouse might be committed and willing to repair the marriage, but the other spouse is not. When this occurs, divorce is outside of the more committed spouse’s control.

**COUPLE TIME: Divorce Philosophy (10 minutes)**

[Slide 23]

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<sup>69</sup> General Conference, “Divorce,” April 2007

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 29.**

Now that we have spent some time covering the importance of commitment in relation to divorce, you will have the chance to privately discuss your own divorce philosophy. Thinking through your philosophy about divorce and communicating it with your partner, can help you be more intentional about deeply committing to each other and your marriage.

Take about 5 minutes individually to write your answers to the first 3 questions on page 29. Then take another 5 minutes to share your responses with your partner. Save the remaining questions to do as part of your homework. Remember to use your best listening and communication skills as you talk.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK: Does anyone have any thoughts they would like to share?**

I hope you will make the time to finish going through this worksheet both on your own and with each other. As part of your official homework, I invite you to do the last activity on this handout, to prayerfully find a way to “share your commitment in a special way” with your spouse this week.

## Conclusion (3 minutes)

[Slide 24]

**The Lord will help you as you strive for an equal partnership and remain committed to each other.**

Remember, if the Lord commands us to do something, He will provide a way for us to keep that commandment.<sup>70</sup> This is true for you on your journey of becoming equal partners and committing completely to one another.

[Slide 25]

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<sup>70</sup> See 1 Nephi 3:7



**The President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russell M. Nelson reminded us:**

*“Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship.”<sup>71</sup>*

**That happiness comes as you continue intentionally working on becoming one.**

That happiness comes as two hearts, minds, and lives become one, like two pillars leaning into each other to become an arch. This cannot be achieved magically by simply exchanging rings and vows. It is a long and challenging journey of intentional effort and commitment.

## Transition

[Slide 26]

**Invite participants to take a break, and preview the next topic.**

After a brief break, we will talk more about nurturing our marriages.

[Biology Break]



## Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 5 Becoming One Through Growing Together

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## Preface

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<sup>71</sup> General Conference, “Celestial Marriage,” October 2008

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The goal of this lesson is to help couples recognize the importance of intentionally nurturing their marriages. You will discuss specific nurturing tools in three areas:

- 1 - Investing - the nurturing we as spouses give to each other and our relationship.
- 2 - Learning - the nurturing others give to us as we reach out to those around us to continue to learn and grow.
- 3 - Serving- the nurturing we as a couple give to others as we strengthen our unity by teaming up to be a force for good outside our marriage.

You will also “graduate” participants and encourage them to stay anxiously engaged as they intentionally work toward becoming one in their marriages.

## Lesson Outline

Introduction (3 minutes)

Investing (15 minutes)

- Gottman’s Magic Six Hours
- Couple Time: Magic 6 Hours

Learning (20 minutes)

- Mentors
- Marital Support System
- Other Resources
- Seeking Outside Help Together
- Couple Time: Mentors

Serving (10 minutes)

- Couple Time: Serving

Conclusion (10 minutes)

## Materials

- Facilitator guide
- Participant workbooks
- Pens/pencils for note taking
- Refrigerator magnets as a “Certificate of Completion” (template on p. 124)

## Equipment

- Laptop and large screen for showing slides
- Soft music to use during “Couple Time”

## Introduction (3 minutes)

[Slide 1]

**Introduce the topic for the final lesson.**

We are going to shift gears for our last section and focus on the idea of nurturing our relationships and growing together as a couple over time.

[Slide 2]

**ASK: Has anyone heard of the term “entropy?” If so, what is it?**

*Entropy* is the natural tendency of a physical system to lose energy and coherence over time. In other words, if order isn’t intentionally maintained with inputs of energy, disorder will naturally happen.

[Example] Think about your current home. If you (or your roommates, family members, etc.) don't spend energy keeping up on the daily household tasks — doing dishes, taking out the garbage, sweeping, vacuuming, etc. — it gets to be messy pretty fast.

So, a cluttered and dirty home is the *natural* state of things *unless* we consistently and intentionally prevent the messiness. Our marriages are like that too; they will naturally lose energy and unity over time *unless* we consistently and *intentionally* nurture them.

[Slide 3]

**There are a few different kinds of nurturing that are good for our marriages.**

We are going to discuss today three ways we can nurture our marriage: investing, learning and serving.

## Investing (15 minutes)

[Slide 4]

**Investing in our marriage can help make our marriage be successful.**

Investing is one of the first things we can do to help our marriage avoid losing its energy.

### **Define investing.**

Investing is what we as spouses do within our marriage to nurture and care for each other and our relationship.

**Successful couples are intentional with the time they spend together.**

As we've discussed before, Dr. John Gottman is a well-known relationship researcher and therapist who has devoted his career to figuring out why some marriages continue to improve over time, and some do not. All of his work and research shows that successful couples intentionally devote time to their marriage that unsuccessful couples do not.

## Gottman's Magic Six Hours (8 minutes)

[Slide 5]

**Introduce Gottman's Magic Six Hours<sup>72</sup>**

Dr. Gottman has built a little program to help couples give time and energy to their marriages. He calls it the “Magic 6 Hours.” He isn’t saying that successful couples just share the same space and breathe the same air for an extra six hours each week; instead, couples spend those six hours each week intentionally nurturing their marriages.

[Slide 6]

**The “Magic 6 Hours” have six elements:**

**1 - Partings** (2-ish minutes per weekday = 10 minutes per week)

Couples should say goodbye before they leave each other in the morning and find out *one thing that is happening in their partner's life that day* – lunch plans, important meeting, etc.

**2 - Reunions** (20-ish minutes per day = 1 hour, 40 minutes per week)

Couples should greet each other with a *hug and kiss that lasts at least 6 seconds* – yes, 6 seconds, not 5 seconds. So, this means that our greetings are more than just a peck on the cheek and a side hug. This creates a physiological reaction in our bodies.

In addition, couples should have a *stress-reducing conversation* that lasts about 20 minutes (e.g., don't talk about the argument you had the night before!). This conversation is meant as a *time of reconnection* before getting lost in the rest of the day's happenings.

**3 - Admiration and Appreciation** (5-ish minutes per day = 35 minutes per week)

Spend at least five minutes each day *communicating genuine appreciation* for your spouse. Try to be a little creative and not always say the same, “thanks for doing the dishes.” It is important that we directly express our admiration and appreciation for our partner and not just assume he or she already knows it. (Our admiration and appreciation don't necessarily have to be about something that happened that day but can include our whole

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<sup>72</sup> See gottman.com

relationship.) *Regular expressions of appreciation are one of the strongest predictors of a healthy, loving relationship.*<sup>73</sup>

**4 - Affection** (5-ish minutes per day = 35 minutes per week)

Couples should be showing each other physical affection daily. Not only does it feel good in the moment, physical affection releases oxytocin in our brains which increases feelings of connection. Physical affection also helps us express desire for our spouse.

**5 - Weekly Date** (2-ish hours per week)

Successful couples devote about two hours per week spending one-on-one time together on a date. Prioritize dates that allow for talking together as friends (not just talking about relationship difficulties). Couples should also try to mix up what they do on their weekly dates and not just do the same routine week after week. Trying to figure out a weekly date can become more complicated over time as schedules become busier and kids are added to the family, but it is incredibly important to intentionally make time for weekly dates.

**6 - State of the Union Meeting** (1 hour per week)

Finally, couples should spend about an hour a week counseling together about how they are doing in their marriage and how they are doing in their

shared efforts. This includes doing a *relationship check-in* (What went right this week? What went wrong? What are our plans for the upcoming week? Long-term future plans? How is our communication? How are things going sexually? How are we prioritizing “we over me?”) It should also include time to address any *relationship concerns* and to express *partner appreciation*.

Online Supplemental Lesson:  
*Couple Council*

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<sup>73</sup> See gottman.com

**Creating time to invest in your relationship is another way of intentionally growing together.**

Don't worry so much about the exact hours or minutes of these 6 hours; it's more about the attitude of intentionality and making sure we are giving regular attention to our most important relationship. If we invest in our relationship every week, it can go a long way toward intentionally growing together as a couple.

**COUPLE TIME: Magic 6 Hours** (5 minutes)

[Slide 7]

**Introduce this Couple Time on page 34.**

Let's try to make these six hours applicable to you and your relationship. Spend the next 5 minutes going over the questions on page 34 together.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Does anyone have any thoughts on the Magic 6 Hours they want to share?

## Learning (20 min)

[Slide 8]

**Introduce "learning" to the participants.**

*Learning* is the nurturing others give to us as we reach out to those around us to continue to learn and grow.

**Utilizing those around us by learning from them helps us improve our relationship skills.**

Learning from people outside our marriage is a way to intentionally improve our relationship perspectives and skills. We can draw strength from couples whose marriages we admire and/or from marriage experts

who can help teach us important relationship skills. This isn't just for times when we are struggling. As we consistently and intentionally learn from others throughout our marriage, it can strengthen our relationship.

**It is completely appropriate to ask for help from others.**

Part of being intentional in our marriage is not just suffering by ourselves but *seeking help when we need it*. If our issues and concerns feel too big for the two of us to handle, or we just feel like we need some perspective, then it's important for us to draw strength and learning from outside.

[Slide 9]

**When handled properly, seeking outside help does not break the loyalty you have built.**

In our first lesson, we talked about “cleaving,” being “fiercely loyal” to each other and the importance of the “invisible fence.” I want to make it clear that this fierce loyalty *does not* mean that we can't reach out to others in appropriate ways to get some perspective and help on our journey.

**There are healthy ways to reach out to others.**

It is important to remember the principles from the first lesson when we consider asking others for help or perspective.

[Slide 10]

**ASK: What are some *good* ways we can reach out *together* for support? And what are principles that can guide how we do this?**

[Allow a few moments for suggestions, then summarize, making some of the following points.]

- We can share in a general way how we struggle with an issue and want to improve.
- We can find out how other couples we trust handle certain issues, asking for their perspectives without sharing intimate details of our struggles.
- We can share without blaming or “outing” our spouse.
- We can use “we” rather than “he” or “she.”
- We can decide together as a couple what is okay to share and not share.



[Slide 11]

**Introduce the different kinds of learning.**

Now that we have learned ways to maintain our spousal loyalty when reaching out for help, we are going to dive into three different ways couples can learn from others.

**Mentors** (3 minutes)

[Slide 12]

[Slide 13]

**ASK: Who have been your mentors, in any area of life?**

This could be mission presidents, teachers, sport coaches, youth leaders, etc.

**ASK: How have mentors been a valuable resource for you?**

**Mentors are meant to help you improve and be the best person possible.**

Similar to how past mentors have helped you, I want to encourage you all to find a “marriage mentor” as you start your marriage journey. Just like mentors are intended to help you improve and be the best person, a marriage mentor is meant to help your marriage be the best possible.

[Consider sharing a personal experience with having your own marriage mentor.]

[Slide 14]

**Marriage mentors are intended to help your marriage flourish and avoid pitfalls that others have fallen into.**

Marriage mentors are there to help your marriage start off on the right course, and then stay on the right course. Conversations you could have now include —asking their advice about being engaged, being newlyweds, etc. Conversations down the road could involve asking what they do to keep the “spark” alive. Essentially they are a preventative resource option, there to help you avoid pitfalls others have fallen into.

**Together decide on a mentor couple and then reach out to them.**

Think of a few more experienced married couples whose marriages you both admire. You could “propose” to one of these couples and ask them to

be your “marriage mentors.” If they agree to mentor you, you could start conversations now. If you start your conversation with them now, it will make future marriage “check-ins” and chats about marriage much more natural.

## Marital Support System (2 minutes)

[Slide 15]

**Support systems are an important way to learn from others to strengthen your marriage.**

In addition to mentors, it can be helpful to have a “go-to” network of people— or support system— you both agree would be okay to talk to when you need marital counsel and advice.

**A marital support system is less formal than a marriage mentor.**

While your marriage mentor is meant as a means to hopefully prevent major pitfalls, there will still be times when crises arise and the two of you need help. The marital support system is intended to be the group of people you can reach out to when challenges occur.

**Your support system can have a variety of people.**

The people in your network could also include a bishop or pastor, close friends, a therapist, etc. Anyone the two of you feel could support you in a time of need.

**Marriages impact, and are impacted by, the people around them.**

No marriage is “an island” — every marriage influences, and is influenced by, the strength of the community around it. You can probably think of ways you have been impacted by strong marriages. On the other hand, you may also have been impacted by unhappy marriages or marriages that have failed. In other words, those around us are stakeholders in our marriage and they can therefore be a resource to us as we strive to strengthen our marriage.

**You both need to agree on who to include in your support system.**

Your list can be long or short but both of you need to agree to the people on your list.

**Choosing a good marriage counselor (page 37 of workbook).**

There is a list on page 37 for articles on choosing a good marriage counselor. I know that it may be hard to seek that kind of help but getting professional counseling is a wise and courageous choice when we are stuck or hurting. Just make sure your counselor is as committed to your marriage as you are!

**Other Resources** (5 minutes)

[Slide 16]

**You can learn and be strengthened from other resources as well.**

Not everyone is comfortable talking to other people about their concerns, and that's okay. While I would encourage you to learn to reach out to others, we can also learn from other, less personal resources.

**There are a variety of resources to utilize.**

You can gain knowledge in a variety of ways. There are all kinds of research-based and faith-based books, podcasts, blogs, and other resources that have valuable information and advice; reading/listening to them together is a great way to learn and grow together as a couple.

**There is a list of resources on page 38.**

On page 38 in your workbook we've put together a list of some resources that can be useful to you both now and after you are married.

[Slide 17]

**Two valuable and easy resources you can start with.**

I want to briefly point out two of the resources on your list. One is Dr. Gottman's *Marriage Minute* emails, and one is BYU's *RELATE Inventory*.

### **Marriage Minute**

For the *Marriage Minute* emails, all you need to do is go to the website and sign up for their free emails. Then, twice a week the Gottman Institute sends quick tips on how to improve your marriage.

### **RELATE Inventory**

The *RELATE Inventory* was developed by BYU professors based on sound research, studying the predictors of marital success and it has been thoroughly researched for its effectiveness. Each of you individually answer hundreds of online questions about yourself, your relationship and your expectations for your relationship. Your individual answers are then merged and a profile is created that shows your strengths as a couple as well as issues that could be potential challenges for the two of you. The cost is \$20/person.

### **No matter what resource you use, reflect on how it has benefited your relationship.**

Whether you choose to find a marriage mentor or simply listen to a podcast, take a few minutes to talk with each other about how the information/experience can help your marriage. You may find that different resources are helpful for different issues or questions. Those can also

change over time. This is yet another way you are intentionally forming your own unique relationship.

### **COUPLE TIME: Mentors** (5 minutes)

[Slide 18]

#### **Introduce the Mentors Couple Time on page 35.**

Okay, let's take a few minutes to talk as couples about the things we've been discussing as a group. There are guiding questions on page 35.

[Plays soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Does anyone have any thoughts on what they discussed?

## Serving (10 minutes)

[Slide 19]

### **Introduce “serving” to participants.**

Our last topic, *serving*, is how we as a couple nurture others and strengthen our unity by teaming up to be a force for good outside our marriage.

### **The scriptures teach the benefits of serving.**

Remember this scriptural promise:

[Slide 20]

*“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”<sup>74</sup>*

### **This applies not only to individuals, but also to marriages.**

### **Researchers use the term “generativity” to support this principle.**

Research supports this truth. Some scholars use the concept “generativity” to talk about how healthy humans find ultimate meaning and fulfillment when they nurture others and make a difference in the world.<sup>75</sup>

[Slide 21]

### **Couple generativity increases couple identity and strength.**

Researchers have also found that “couple generativity” – the ways that couples work together to nurture others, including their children, or to contribute to their communities – supports couple identity and strength.<sup>76</sup> This is an important part of becoming one.

### **Strong couples find that being a “team for good” is one of the most fulfilling parts of marriage.**

As couples work together and support one another in serving others, they share valuable experiences, learn about each other’s strengths, and feel the power of their joint purpose.

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<sup>74</sup> Matthew 10:39, Matthew 16:25, D&C 98:13

<sup>75</sup> See the work of Erik Erikson

<sup>76</sup> Bertoni, A. M. M., Paris, M., & Iafrate, R. (2012). Beyond satisfaction: Generativity as a new outcome of couple functioning. *Marriage Psychological Implications, Social Expectations, And Role Of Sexuality*. 115-131.

**ASK:** What are some examples of couples you know who together make a difference for others? What kind of strength do you see in their marriages through this?

[Consider sharing your own example or share one of the examples below.]

A simple example: A couple whose home is “the go-to place” for their children’s friends can make a difference in the lives of those who gather there.

[Slide 22]

A grander example: During the gathering restrictions of the 2020 pandemic, one couple decided to donate the catered wedding food they had already paid for to a homeless shelter *and* spent time on their wedding day serving it up together.

**Being engaged in service can include small things.**

Like we have been taught at church, being “anxiously engaged” in a good cause doesn’t have to be something big. The important principle here is to do things *as a couple* to serve others.

**One way to serve as a couple is by strengthening other families.**

One unique example is helping strengthen other families.

**ASK:** What are some ways that you could be promote and strengthen marriage and family?

Sharing some of the resources from *Anxiously Engaged*, being a support to other marriages (like being marriage mentors), organizing date night activities, etc.

**Intentionally doing service is an integral part of becoming one in your marriage.**

Whatever good you do together, I hope you will include efforts that strengthen other marriages and families. I also recommend being *intentional every week* to discuss your efforts and make service an integral part of becoming one and growing together.

**COUPLE TIME: Serving** (5 minutes)

[Slide 23]

**Introduce this Serving Couple Time on page 36.**

In the time we have left today, take some time as a couple to dream and scheme about your shared vision for being anxiously engaged in good causes together. Use the questions on page 36 to get started.

[Play soft music during this time]

**ASK:** Would any of you be willing to share any of your plans?

## Conclusion (5 minutes)

[Slide 24]

**Congratulate participants on finishing *Anxiously Engaged*.**

You did it - congratulations on finishing! I hope I've helped start you on the path of intentionally working on your relationship. But this is only the start; our program is ending, but yours is just beginning.

[Give them a refrigerator magnet as a kind of "certificate of completion."]

Here is a visual reminder of the three ways we've talked about growing your relationship every week throughout your marriage: Investing, Learning and Serving.

**ASK:** For each of you, what has been your "take-away" from *Anxiously Engaged*?

[Slide 25]

**Remember that God is your greatest resource.**

Marriage is ordained of God and that means God wants to bless your union and help you to become one. God will be the greatest marital resource to help you lean all the way into your marriage arch and create the wonderful relationship you want! Always remember as you continue to learn that you have access to the power you need to live what you learn through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. One religious leader, Howard W. Hunter assured:

*"Whatever Jesus lays his hands upon lives. If Jesus lays his hands upon a marriage, it lives."*<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "Reading the scriptures," General Conference, October 1979

## Final Wrap-Ups

[Slide 26]

### **Anxiously Engaged website and social media.**

I know I showed you these on week one, but here's another reminder that there are a lot of supplemental lessons on our website that you can use now and after you marry. You can also follow us at on Instagram (@anxiously\_\_engaged) or Facebook (Anxiously Engaged) for reminders about principles we've discussed and to receive new tips on intentionally strengthening your marriage.

[Slide 27]

### **Testimonials and referrals.**

We would love to have you share your insights with us and our followers! If you are interested, email us a picture of the two of you with a sentence or two about what you learned. Additionally, if you know any couples who are engaged (or soon will be) send them my way!

[Slide 28]

### **Marriage license discount**

One last thing, if you are interested in receiving a discount on your marriage license, reach out to me either via text or email and I will get that done for you.

## Homework

[Slide 29]

### **This week.**

Remember this week to do the "share your commitment in a special way" activity. Finally, decide on the next step of your "marriage program" (choose a mentor, find a therapist, do a supplemental lesson from the *Anxiously Engaged* website, etc.).



## Online Supplemental Lessons:

*Family of Origin*

*Shared Financial Stewardship*

[Slide 30]

**Share a final thought with the participants and wish them all the best.**

Just be sure to make a plan and *stay anxiously engaged* on the path of intentionally working on your marriage! I pray God's endless blessings on you and wish you all the best!

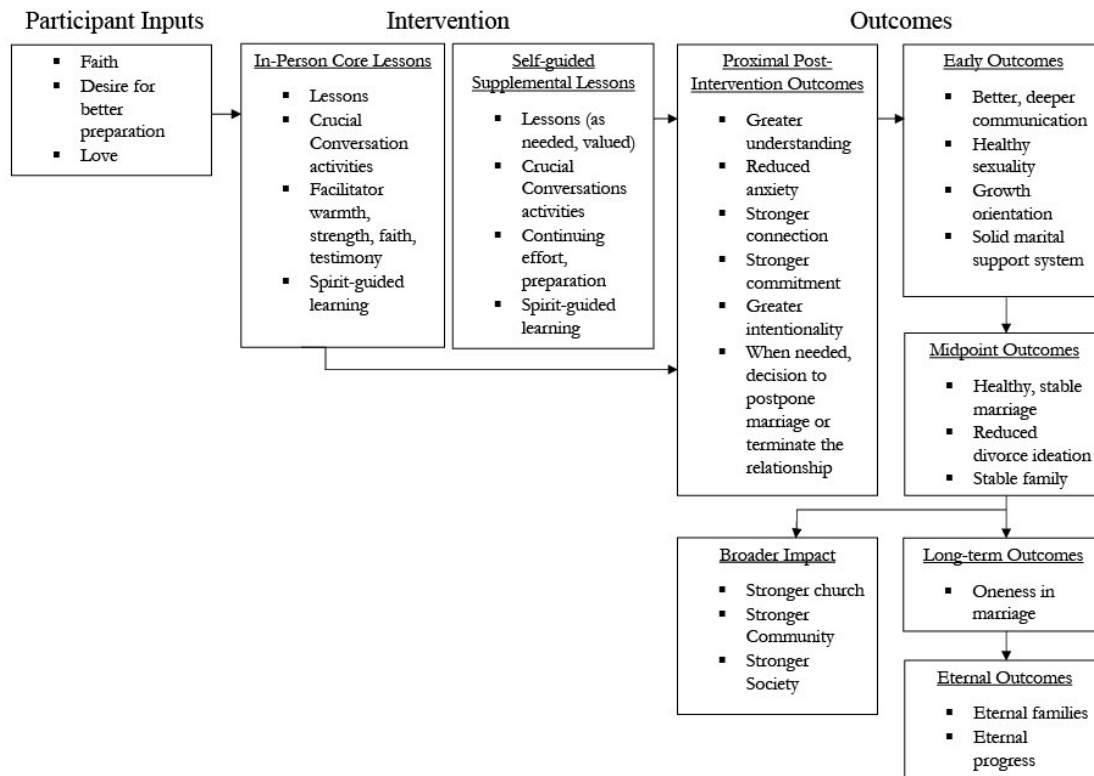
**Conclude and close with a prayer.**

[Thank *you* for helping this set of couples!]



## Appendix

### *Anxiously Engaged* Logic Model



## Sample Emails

To YSA bishops

Hello!

[\[Introduce yourself.\]](#)

My name is Kathryn Pond Sargent and I live in the Fruit Heights stake. President Jensen gave me his blessing to reach out to you regarding how I might be helpful to your ward members.

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[Give some of your background and explain why you are passionate about preparing young people for marriage.]

For the past 23 years I have been adjunct faculty in BYU's School of Family Life where I have taught classes on marriage and family relationships. In addition, I am a stake-called Institute teacher and I teach a "Preparing for an Eternal Marriage" class on Tuesday nights. My conversations with my single and married BYU and Institute students and my own single and married children and their friends have taught me that many of our young people feel inadequately prepared for marriage. Our faith seems to excel at teaching the *importance* of marriage, but we do very little to specifically *prepare* our young single adults with the skills necessary for successful marriages. I think we could do better.

[Introduce the idea of premarital education.]

To this end, a group from BYU has created a free marriage preparation course entitled *Anxiously Engaged* that is specific to Latter-day Saint engaged couples. Research shows that participating in premarital education increases a couple's chances of forming healthy, happy relationships and decreases their chances of divorce, especially in the first five years of marriage.

[Explain the details of AE.]

*Anxiously Engaged* weaves together religious principles, prophetic counsel and research-based ideas to help couples start building a sense of oneness. The format is three, 2-hour sessions for a total of 6 hours. In the class, we discuss Becoming One, Effective Communication, Marital Sexuality, Equal Partnership, Committing Completely and Nurturing our Marital Relationships. The emphasis of each class is on couple conversations—we teach a principle and then have the couple immediately talk to each other about how that principle can be applied in their specific relationship. As there is no way we can cover all of the many issues related to marriage, there is also a website ([AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu](http://AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu)) with online lessons about additional marital issues such as pornography, finances and mental health.

[Explain their potential role and how they can help refer couples to AE.]

So, here is where you as bishops come into the picture—can you please send engaged couples my direction? In a perfect world, we would think about marriage prep the same way we think about temple prep—when single adults decide to receive their endowment, their bishop

connects them with the temple prep teachers. Similarly, when you find out a couple is engaged, you would connect them with the marriage prep teacher. While I recognize that engaged couples tend to be very busy, planning for their marriage (not just planning for their wedding and celebration) seems like a good use of their time.

[Explain logistics.]

*Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be informal and small (4-6 couples) and I teach the classes in my home. I anticipate teaching *Anxiously Engaged* on an as-needed basis and I'm available to teach as soon as I have a group that is ready. Therefore, please feel free to give my contact information to any

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engaged couples you learn about in the future. Or you can send me their contact information and I will reach out to them.

From a gospel perspective, marriage is at the very center of the Plan of Salvation. From an earthly perspective, I think we all recognize that our families, wards and communities function better when successful marriages are at their center. It is my hope to help couples start on a path of intentionally working on and strengthening their marriages.

If you have any questions for me, please call, text or email me. I look forward to working with your engaged young single adults.

Best,

Your name

Email

Phone number

After Class 1

Hello!

So great to be with all of you yesterday to introduce the principle of becoming one, along with discussing effective communication.

**Online supplemental lessons:**

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Here is the link to the supplemental lesson I mentioned in class:

- **Creative problem solving**

**Homework reminder:**

- What is one thing you can do this week to give greater priority to “we over me?”
- Choose one specific communication skill (starting soft, listening deep, same-team principle, etc.) to work on this week.

**Link to ask anonymous sexual intimacy questions:**

We are discussing marital intimacy next time and I want to make sure I cover what is most helpful/important to you. In anticipation of this, I have created the "survey" below that will allow you to anonymously ask sexual intimacy questions. Respond with your questions and I will do my best to answer them when we meet.

Thank you so much for your insights and thoughts today. If you have any feedback about what was/wasn't helpful in our class, please share it with me so I can make *Anxiously Engaged* better. I am ALWAYS open to your thoughts and suggestions, so please reach out.

Have a fantastic week and I'll see you next time.

**After Class 2**

Hello-

So fun to be with you yesterday to discuss healthy marital sexuality and the four aspects of sexual wholeness.

**Online supplemental lessons:**

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Here are the links to the supplemental lessons I mentioned in class:

- **Pornography**
- **Birth Control**
- **Repentance and Forgiveness in Marriage**

**Homework reminder:**

- Together, choose one podcast/article/book from the resources list and read or listen to it together.

Thank you so much for your insights and thoughts yesterday. Again, if you have any feedback about what was/wasn't helpful in our class, please share it with me so I can make *Anxiously Engaged* better. I am ALWAYS open to your thoughts and suggestions, so please reach out.

Have a fabulous week and I'll see you next week!

After Class 3

Hello-

So fun to be with you yesterday to discuss equal partnership and growing together!

**Online supplemental lessons:**

I mentioned a related online lesson, here is the link:

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- **Couple councils**

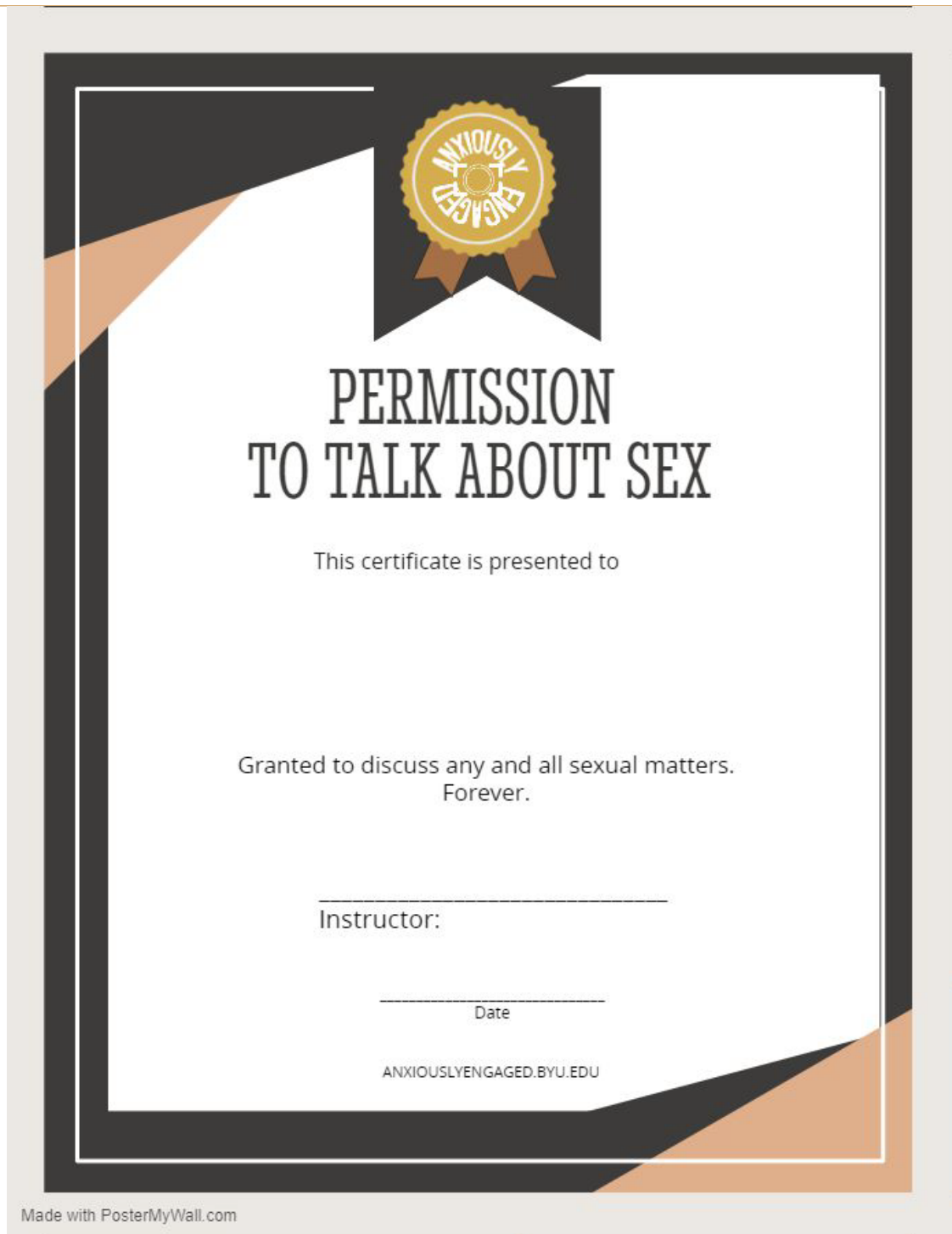
**Homework reminder:**

- Finish and discuss your “Philosophy of divorce” handout.
- Do the “share your commitment in a special way” activity.
- Decide on the next step of **your** “marriage program:”
  - Choose a mentor, find a therapist, do a supplemental lesson from the *Anxiously Engaged* website, etc.
- Make a plan and stay *anxiously engaged* in intentionally working on your marriage!

I have loved spending time with all of you the past couple of weeks. I wish you the very best in your marriages and future!

Sample “Permission to Talk About Sex” Certificate





Template for Refrigerator Magnets



## **Grow Your Marriage Every Week**

### **Invest**

#### Gottman's Magic 6 Hours

- Partings
- Reunions
- Admiration and appreciation
- Affection
- Weekly date
- State of the union

### **Learn**

### **Serve**

Utah Marriage License Discount

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Online link: [https://weber.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_50VsHjmLokDjf2R](https://weber.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_50VsHjmLokDjf2R)  
Password: StrongerMarriageUtah

Once you are logged in, answer the form's questions. You need the participants' names, email addresses, zip codes (in Utah). (When I don't have a zip code, I just use mine.) When completed, it will send them a link to a certificate.