



Online 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), a professor of family life at Brigham Young University and Kathryn Pond Sargent (kathryn.pond.sargent@gmail.com), an adjunct faculty member at BYU recruited Tamara Gilliland (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 maintain a healthy, vibrant relationship. To use a phrase by the prominent marriage researcher Scott Stanley, they need to *decide, not slide*.¹

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.

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

The name *Anxiously Engaged* is a (hopefully) clever play on Doctrine & Covenants 58:27-28 and a couple's engaged status. (*"Verily I say, men [and women] should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will."*) However, we also feel that the name speaks to other meanings. 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. (*"If ye are prepared ye shall not fear"* (D&C 38:30) 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. In addition, this Guide is specifically designed to assist you in teaching *Anxiously Engaged* in an online format. The Guide contains six lessons, designed to be given in six 1-hour sessions. 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 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 our "title" scripture 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 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.² We think this program can provide a valuable service for Latter-day Saint engaged couples.

² 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.

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 124 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. (There is also a non-denominational Christian version of *Anxiously Engaged* on our website AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu.)

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 to empower you to offer *Anxiously Engaged* to engaged Latter-day Saints. Offering AE online removes the barrier of geography and therefore makes it simpler and easier for you to facilitate AE no matter where you or couple participants live. Therefore, in addition to recruiting couples in your surrounding area, you can also use other channels such as social media to connect with engaged couples anywhere. However you do it, be an agent anxiously engaged in a good cause.

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 *Anxiously Engaged* as a service and only charge to cover your costs. 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.

Anxiously Engaged

We appreciate your willingness to provide this important service to engaged Latter-day Saint couples. 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!

Anxiously Engaged : Facilitator Tips and Best Practices

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 online facilitator.

What is the best online format to offer *AE*?

- Zoom is the obvious option since most of us have learned how to navigate the basics of Zoom. However, free Zoom accounts are limited to a 40-minute meeting so you will need to get access to a paid Zoom link to have a 60-minute *AE* class session.
- Google Meet is a great Zoom alternative – their free version offers breakout rooms and meetings with up to 100 people with no time limit.

In either Zoom or Google Meet, what features should I know how to navigate?

- You should be able to:
 - Host a meeting
 - Invite participants to a meeting
 - Enable a co-host (if there are two facilitators)
 - Start and end a meeting
 - Perform audio controls –mute yourself and/or participants
 - Change gallery and speaker views for participants
 - Share your screen so participants can see the *AE* slides
 - Form breakout groups
 - Mute participants
 - Navigate the chat
 - Play music

What is the best way to be able to see all *AE* participants at once?

- Make sure that you request that everyone turns on their cameras.
- When you are sharing your screen to show the slides, you can only see a few participant screens. This can make it difficult to “read the room” and respond to participant questions or comments. To overcome this, it is helpful to log into the *AE* class on 2 screens – one screen for teaching and slides via screen share and the other screen to display all the participants. (Make sure to mute the “participant screen” so you don’t have feedback.)

How big should *AE* groups be?

- Since you are offering *AE* via Zoom, you really don’t need to limit the size of the class (unless you feel more comfortable with a smaller-sized group). Still, having at least 4 couples makes for a nice-sized group.

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 any case, make sure that you talk about your qualifications and why you are a family life expert! You should mention your degree, that you are certified in *AE*, and any other relevant experience.

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/or stake relief society president and explain to them what you have to offer. If they are amenable, ask the stake president if you can 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. Do the same with the stake relief society president in a YSA ward relief society stake meeting. It is critical that bishops and relief society presidents have some in-person contact with you so that they can get a sense of who you are and what *AE* is and feel comfortable referring couples to you. After the meeting, make sure to send a follow up email with your contact info to all the bishops and ward relief society presidents.
 - Alternatively, you could make an appointment with each of the YSA bishops and ward relief society presidents 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.
 - Once a year, request to do a “check-in” at their bishop council meeting and stake relief society training meeting to inform new leaders and remind existing leaders about *AE*.

Areas with a YSA ward

- Meet with the YSA bishop and/or relief society president to explain to them 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 and/or stake relief society 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. Additionally, you can advertise on your own social media.

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

- The tone of *AE* is relaxed and informal and your teaching style should reflect this.
- Playing upbeat music before you start and calm music during couple conversations can help establish a comfortable atmosphere.
- Have couples change their displayed Zoom name to show both of their first names.
- Begin with a prayer.

How do I handle “group discussions” online?

- By its very nature, Zoom is not a great forum for discussions—participants must unmute to speak, they tend to wait longer to make a comment and then there is often confusion as participants begin to comment at the same time and then talk over the top of each other.
- Therefore, instead of asking a question to the group such as, “Can someone read this quote?” or “Can anyone think of ways that we can show loyalty to our spouse?” I call on a specific couple, “Madi and Josh, can one of you please read this quote?” or “Madi and Josh, can you think of ways we can show loyalty to our spouse?”
- Keep track of which couples you call on so that you can spread out the participation among couples.
- I generally “warn” couples about this during the first class and ask them to let me know in the chat if they would prefer I didn’t call on them. (Note: no one has ever asked me not to call on them.)
- For short one- or two-word responses (like at the end of Lesson 6), I use the chat box. However, for lengthier responses I avoid it as it tends to take too much time and can be distracting to the group.

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.
- Play calm background music during couple conversations to help 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.

How can I best manage AE's 1-hour time limit?

- Start on time (even if all of the couples haven't logged on) and end on time.
- 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.*

How much should I share my own personal experiences?

- 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.

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 communicate with participants?

- I get participants phone numbers and email addresses before the first class.
- I communicate with couples via text messages to both (if possible) to share information about the class and answer any questions.
- On the morning of each class, I send a reminder text along with the Zoom link for the class.
- In addition, I ask couples to let me know if they are going to be participating from two different locations. If so, I plan to create a breakout room for them to have their couple conversations.
- After each class, I send a follow up email with a reminder of any homework assignments and links to corresponding online lessons.

Miscellaneous best practices:

- Own the AE script and use your own words.
- Use participants names when possible and positively affirm those who comment.
- Feel free to add or change slides, just make sure the slides "match" and are spelled correctly.
- Do a sound and appearance check before your first class – check your lighting, background internet connection, sound and that you look directly into the camera as much as possible.
- AE tends to be taught most often by women. If this is the case in your facilitation, please acknowledge and recognize the underrepresentation of the male perspective in the classes.
- As appropriate, bear your testimony of what you are teaching throughout the lesson, not just at the end of each lesson.



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.

Lesson Outline

Introduction (15 minutes)

- Class background and overview

Becoming One (40 minutes)

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

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into AE class but muted and used to see all the participants.
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (15 minutes)

[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.]

COUPLE DISCUSSION: Expectations for *Anxiously Engaged* (5 minutes)

[Slide 2]

Have each couple ask each other the following question “What is one thing you hope to learn by participating in *Anxiously Engaged*?”

[If you weren’t able to put long-distance couples into their own breakout rooms before class, do so now.]

Call on 2-3 couples to share their answers.

[Slide 3]

Mention the Instagram (@anxiously__engaged), Facebook page (Anxiously Engaged), and the online supplemental lessons at www.AnxiouslyEngaged.byu.edu.

Online Supplemental Lessons:

*Getting a Spiritual Confirmation of the
Decision to Marry*

3

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

Anxiously Engaged Overview (8 minutes)

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

[Slide 4]

***Anxiously Engaged* is designed to be a brief educational intervention to assist engaged Latter-day Saint couples.**

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 class is called *Anxiously Engaged*.

So why the name “Anxiously Engaged?” As was just mentioned, the main themes in the class are *intentionality* and *becoming one*. This scripture 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*, former 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.**

Anxiously Engaged is not an official marriage preparation curriculum approved by the Church, but it is fully consistent with gospel principles. 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.

The Family Proclamation teaches that marriage is “ordained of God” and that the family is “central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”⁴ (Young Women and Young Men’s lessons also hit on the topic of marriage a lot.) 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

⁴ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 1

of the disappointing bumps of early-married life. They also decrease their chances of divorce, especially in the early years of marriage.⁵

[Slide 9]

Share the “decide, don’t slide” principle from Scott Stanley as additional support for marriage preparation.⁶

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.

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

⁵ Stanley, Scott. (2001). Making a case for premarital education. *Family Relations*. 50(3), 272-280.

⁶ Stanley, Scott, slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com

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

Class 2: Effective Communication

Class 3: Marital Sexuality: The mental and emotional aspects

Class 4: Marital Sexuality: The physical and spiritual aspects

Class 5: Equal Partnership and Commitment

Class 6: 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 introduce the idea of becoming one. Next class we will consider becoming one through effective communication. The next two classes focus on becoming one through marital sexuality. The fifth class focuses on becoming one through equal partnership and complete commitment. And then in the sixth (and final class) we will discuss ways you can continually work toward becoming one by nurturing your marriage over the lifespan.

Mention what couples can expect each week (couple conversations and discussion).

This is not a traditional class where you take notes while you listen to me talk. Instead, the focus of *Anxiously Engaged* is on you as a couple applying some healthy marriage principles to your specific relationship.

This will look like the following: I will present a principle to the group and then you will mute yourselves and have a private conversation ("Couple Conversation") to apply this principle to your

relationship. I will give you specific questions to discuss to help guide your conversation.

Depending on the lesson, 25-35% of class time will be spent in couple conversation.

These conversations are meant to help you set patterns for ongoing intentional discussions throughout your marriage. So, these conversations are just the *start* of a lifetime of intentional conversations!

In addition, there will be several “Couple Discussions” where you have an opportunity to chat with each other about some more general ideas and questions. After I give you time to have a “Couple Discussion,” I will call on 1-2 couples to share their thoughts with the group. If you aren’t comfortable with me calling on you in this way, please let me know.

[Slide 12]

Lastly, go over the marriage license discount.

Some states,⁷ discount marriage license fees for couples who invest in premarital education or counseling. Participating in all six hours of *Anxiously Engaged* qualifies you for that discount. Please reach out 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 (40 minutes)

[Slide 13]

[Slide 14]

The Family Proclamation is clear that:

“Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded on the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸

⁷ States that have a discount are: FL, GA, MD, MN, OK, SC, TN, TX, UT, and WV.

⁸ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 7

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 15]

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

*"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**."*⁹

[Slide 16]

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.¹⁰

Our Heavenly Parents will prepare a way for us to accomplish commandments.

Becoming one can be a long journey but our Heavenly Parents don't give us commandments unless a way is prepared for us to accomplish that commandment over time.¹¹ 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!¹²

⁹ Matthew 19:3-6, emphasis added

¹⁰ Gunther, Randi, "'I' to 'We'—Blending Independence With Commitment." 2014. *Psychology Today*.

¹¹ See 1 Nephi 3:7

¹² Williams, Lucille. "From 'me' to 'we': A guide for newlyweds." 2018. *Focus on the Family*.

COUPLE CONVERSATION: Ciardi Poem (8 minutes)

[Slide 17]

Introduce the first Couple Time.

Okay, we are going to jump right into our first Couple Time. I'm going to have you read 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 pillars of an arch meet at the apex it actually creates an upward-thrust counterforce to gravity.

[Slide 18]

[Slide 19]

Invite the couple to read together the on-screen poem and then discuss the questions together.

[Play soft music during this time]

Most Like an Arch This Marriage - John Ciardi

Most like an arch – an entrance which upholds
and shores the stone – crush up the air like lace
Mass made idea, and idea held in place.
A lock in time. Inside half-heaven unfolds.

Most like an arch – *two weaknesses that lean
into a strength. Two fallings become firm.*
Two joined abeyances become a term
naming the fact that teaches fact to mean.

Not quite that? Not much less. World as it is,
what's strong and separate falters. All I do
at piling stone on stone apart from you
is roofless around nothing. Till we kiss

I am no more than upright and unset.
*It is by falling in and in we make
the all-bearing point, for one another's sake,
in faultless failing, raised by our own weight.*

Couple Conversation Questions:

- The poet Ciardi compares a marriage to an arch. What jumps out at you about this?
- How are we as a couple doing with “leaning/falling in?”

ASK: Call on 1-2 specific couples to share what they discussed about comparing an arch to a marriage.

After the couples share their thoughts, summarize: 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 20]

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 21]

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.¹³

This is also taught in more recent scripture:

*"Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and **none else**."*¹⁴

ASK: Ask a specific couple, "What do you think it means to cleave?"

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

[Slide 22]

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. President Spencer W. Kimball said the following about the scriptural words "cleave unto her and none else:"

*"The words **none else** eliminate everyone and everything. 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."*¹⁵

[Slide 23]

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.

¹³ See Genesis 2:24

¹⁴ D&C 42:22, emphasis added

¹⁵ General Conference, October 1962

ASK: Ask a specific couple, “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.

In addition, 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.

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

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 24]

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 25]

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.

In our marriage, we learn private, intimate details about our spouse.

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 26]

Loyalty is the foundation of the invisible fence.

President Hinckley counseled us: *“When you are married, be fiercely loyal one to another.”*¹⁶

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

COUPLE DISCUSSION: Loyalty and Cleaving (7 minutes)

[Slide 27]

Introduce the couple discussion.

Becoming one is reliant on our ability to be loyal to our spouse, so as a couple, please spend a couple of minutes considering the following questions (thinking about relationships in general, not your own relationship.)

In a general sense, what do couples do that shows their loyalty – their cleaving – to each other?

And what do couples do – often unknowingly or unintentionally – that shows a lack of cleaving or loyalty?

Call on 1-2 specific couples to share what they discussed.

[Slide 28]

Summarize the comments made by the couples.

Loyal couples:

- speak kindly about each other.
- keep their commitments to each other

¹⁶ BYU Commencement, April 1995, emphasis added

- are supportive of each other.
- discuss big decisions with each other.
- keep each other's secrets (unless those secrets are dangerous or destructive to either spouse or to the relationship; in that case, please get help.)
- prioritize their relationship.

[Slide 29]

Prioritize We Over Me (3 minutes)

[Slide 30]

Quote from President Kimball.

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

*"Each party must eliminate the 'I' and the 'my' and substitute therefore 'we' and 'our.'"*¹⁷

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 spouse. Think about the arch metaphor: as we become one the two pillars of the arch don't merge to become one pillar. Instead, each of us maintains our own pillar but we become stronger as we "lean in" and "fall in."

¹⁷ Ensign, March 1977

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 CONVERSATION: We Over Me (10 minutes)

[Slide 31]

[Slide 32]

Introduce the Couple Time.

Okay let’s do our last couple time for this class. Spend a moment pondering your own responses to these questions, then you will have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- What struggles do I have with prioritizing we over me?
- How am I effective at prioritizing we over me?
- What are some of the benefits of thinking of we over me?
- What parts of our relationship should we make sure we protect with the “invisible fence?”
- What is one thing that I can do this week that will help give greater priority to “we?”

Conclusion (2 minutes)

[Slide 33]

Elder James E. Faust quote.

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

“Happiness in marriage...can exceed a thousand times any other happiness.”¹⁸

¹⁸ General Conference, October 1977

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.

Homework

[Slide 34]

Prioritizing “we over me”

Choose one way you can prioritize “we over me” and work on it this week.

Follow-up email

Before we meet again, I will send you a follow-up email that has a reminder of your homework and a link to a couple of relevant supplemental online lessons.

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

Next time

[Slide 35]

Introduce the lesson for next class

In our next class we are going to change gears and talk about how effective communication skills can help us “lean in” and “fall in” to become one.

Follow-up email

In the next day or two, send a follow-up email to participants that includes:

- Homework reminder
- Link to the supplemental lesson on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu: *Getting a Spiritual Confirmation to Marry*.



Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 2

Becoming One Through Effective Communication

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.

Lesson Outline

Introduction (2 minutes)

Deep Listening (15 Minutes)

- Deep Listening Skills
- Couple Conversation: Deep Listening

Managing Conflicts (40 minutes)

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

Conclusion (3 Minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into *AE* class but muted and used to see all the participants.
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (2 minutes)

[Slide 1]

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

A brief review of last class and principles related to becoming one.

Last time we met we read a poem that compared an arch to a marriage and introduced the idea of becoming one as a couple. We discussed becoming one through cleaving and spousal pre-eminence, staying loyal to each other by building an invisible fence around certain parts of our relationship and prioritizing “we over me.”

Today we are going to discuss becoming one through effective communication.

[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.

[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.¹⁹

[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 emotionally connect with your partner and understand how they feel. As

¹⁹ 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.

we “listen to understand” rather than just “listening to respond,” research shows that we will have greater satisfaction in our marital relationship.²⁰

Deep listening is 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 to respond, rather than listening to better understand one another.²¹

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

²⁰ Doell, F (2003). “Partners’ listening styles and relationship satisfaction: listening to understand vs. listening to respond.” Graduate thesis. The University of Toronto Psychology Dept.

²¹ Doell, F (2003). “Partners’ listening styles and relationship satisfaction: listening to understand vs. listening to respond.” Graduate thesis. The University of Toronto Psychology Dept.

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.²²

COUPLE CONVERSATION: Deep Listening (10 minutes)

[Slide 9]

[Slide 10]

Introduce the Deep Listening Couple Conversation.

I'm going to have you practice the deep listening skills we just discussed. 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.)

²² 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.

Take about 4 minutes to talk about that – women speak first; men practice deep listening. Then after about 4 minutes, switch roles—men speak and women practice deep listening.

As your partner shares her/his experience, practice deep listening with the skills below. After you have both taken a turn as speaker, discuss together how many of the skills each of you successfully practiced.

[Play soft music during this time]

Summary of the Deep Listening Couple Conversation.

We generally are not innately deep listeners, it takes practice. It can be helpful to *intentionally* practice deep listening skills.

Managing Conflict (40 minutes)

[Slide 11]

[Slide 12]

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 13]

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
- Never use physical or emotional aggression or violence.

Stay on the Same Team (2 minutes)

[Slide 14]

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 15]

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.²³

[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)

[Slide 16]

²³ Sauv , M.-S., P loquin, 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.

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.”²⁴ 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. The Family Proclamation teaches:

[Slide 17]

“Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of ...respect, love, compassion”²⁵

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 softly²⁶ (5 minutes)

[Slide 18]

[Slide 19]

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.²⁷ So, if we start hard, the conflict usually ends badly.

²⁴ Brené Brown. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are*. Page 12.

²⁵ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 7

²⁶ Dr. Gottman has written extensively on “soft start-ups,” Gottman.com

²⁷ 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 20]

Define a soft start-up.

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.

A *hard start-up* is an accusation, an insult or an angry explosion. It tends to use 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 21]

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."*²⁸

[Slide 22]

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.

²⁸ Proverbs 15:1

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

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

[Slide 23]

COUPLE DISCUSSION: Hard Start-Ups v. Soft Start-Ups
(10 minutes)

[Slide 24]

Introduce and explain the purpose of this discussion.

This is an example of a scenario that could cause conflict in a marriage.
Read through the scenario and then answer the questions.

[You will need to choose to use either Scenario 1 **OR** 2, because you won't have time for both. You could also include the scenarios in the follow-up email as a homework assignment.]

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: _____.

Call on a specific couple to share their examples of a hard start-up and soft start-up and then also ask them to share how a soft start-up could be more effective in resolving conflict.

[If needed, example of a hard start-up:

"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."

Example of a soft start-up:

"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?"

[Slide 25]

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: _____.

Call on a specific couple to share their examples of a hard start-up and soft start-up and then also ask them to share how a soft start-up could be more effective in resolving conflict.

[If needed, example of a hard start-up:

"You always put work before me. I'm clearly the last thing on your priority list."

Example of a soft start-up:

"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?"

Summarize

It takes intentional effort to use soft start-ups in our conflict conversations, but they can help us in our journey to become one.

COUPLE CONVERSATION: Soft Starts (5 minutes)

[Slide 26]

[Slide 27]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

You just discussed a theoretical scenario, but now I would like you to talk specifically about your own relationship. Please take a few minutes to talk to each other about the following questions.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- Thinking about the examples we just discussed as a group, how do we feel we are doing with regards to starting and responding softly?
- How do we feel that we could improve?

Avoid contempt (5 minutes)

[Slide 28]

[Slide 29]

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 name calling, attitude of superiority, disgust, etc.²⁹

Share examples of how to *speak* with contempt.

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?”

²⁹ Dr. John Gottman has written extensively on the dangers of contempt in relationships. You can find more information at his website, Gottman.com.

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 30]

Contempt can also lead to stonewalling.³⁰

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.

Contempt and stonewalling harm our relationships.

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)

[Slide 31]

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

³⁰ See Gottman.com

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 32]

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 33]

Here are a few helpful guidelines for effective time-outs:³¹

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

³¹ This "Time-out" skill is borrowed from the *PREP* program.

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.³² 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.³³

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 34]

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 members of the Church are not immune.

Physical aggression is easily recognized.

We all understand physical aggression. It can include striking, kicking, shoving, pulling hair, etc.

Emotional aggression is harder to recognize.

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

³² Robert Levenson's research as referenced in J.M. Gottman and N. Silver's (1999) *The seven principles for making marriage work*

³³ 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.

[Slide 35]

Aggression and violence are dangerous.

The Savior taught that:

“whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger...”³⁴

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.³⁵

[Slide 36]

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.

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.

³⁴ 3 Nephi 12:22

³⁵ 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 37]

Don't ignore warning signs.

Most married couples who experience relationship violence ignored warning signs before they were married. In your follow-up email, I will attach a list of some warning signs that can 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 (3 minutes)

[Slide 38]

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 39]

Keep Christ at the center

I will leave you with this quote from Elder 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.”³⁶

Homework

[Slide 40]

This week.

Decide 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

Next time

[Slide 41]

Inform participants what they can expect for next time.

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.

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

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

³⁶ “Christlike Communications,” Ensign, Nov. 1988, 24

Follow-up email

In the next day or two, send a follow-up email to participants that includes:

- Homework reminder
- Links to supplemental lessons from anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu: *Creative Problem Solving*, *Disclosing Personal Issues* and *Repentance and Forgiveness in Marriage*
- Handout about warning signs of physical and emotional aggression (you will need to copy and create this document from the appendix in the online version of the guidebook on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu).
- A link to ask anonymous questions about marital sexuality (created from Google Forms or free SurveyMonkey account).



Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 3

Becoming One Through Marital Sexuality, Part 1

Preface

This lesson is the first of two lessons about marital sexuality. The purpose of this lesson is to help couples appreciate how marital sexuality can help them in their journey of becoming one. If they haven't already started a conversation about marital sexuality, this lesson can help give them some context and "permission" to begin that ongoing conversation.

If participants have submitted questions about marital sexuality that relate to the mental or emotional aspects of sexuality, make sure to address their questions during the lesson. (If there are questions that relate to the physical or spiritual aspects of sexuality, tell participants you will address those questions in the next lesson.) Many questions will be answered by the material, but if not, refer them to the marital sexuality resources that you will email them in the follow-up email. Ideally, you will be familiar 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.

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Lesson Outline

Introduction (8 minutes)

Mental (30 minutes)

- Barriers and Expanders
- Couple Conversation: Mental Preparation

Emotional (20 minutes)

- Barriers and Expanders
- Couple Discussion: Safety and Trust
- Couple Conversation: Emotional Preparation

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into AE class but muted so you can see all the participants.
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (8 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 becoming one through effective communication.

I hope you were able to practice some 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 can 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 Church 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 don't feel uncomfortable and you are simply feeling excited 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 today, 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]

The Family Proclamation teaches the divinity of marital sexuality.

Our prophets were clear in The Family Proclamation when they said:

"We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed."³⁷

³⁷ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 5

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]

[Slide 5]

I've created this certificate for you as a class. 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 (1 minute)

[Slide 6]

Introduce sexual wholeness.

What we hope you will strive for in your sexual relationship is sexual wholeness. Sexual wholeness encompasses four aspects – mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. Today we will discuss the mental and emotional aspects of sexual wholeness and next class we will discuss the physical and spiritual aspects of sexual wholeness.

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.

Mental (30 minutes)

[Slide 7]

[Slide 8]

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

Research has shown that the most important organ is our *brain*.³⁸ 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.

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.

Mental Barriers (8 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.

³⁸ Fournier, A. B. (2018) "Why the brain is our most important sex organ". *The National Coalition for Sexual Health*.

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 terms "Good Girl Syndrome" and "Good Boy Syndrome" to explain and expound on these feelings.³⁹

[Slide 11]

If you notice these trends, consider seeking help

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 (I will send you a list of resources in a follow-up email) 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.

Think about the kind of things that 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

³⁹ 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.

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.

Mental Expanders (12 minutes)

[Slide 14]

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 15]

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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

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 deeply*, as this is part of being equal partners in a sexual relationship. Conversations can include:

[Slide 16]

- 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 17]

The most frequent questions from members of our faith.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ 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.

The most frequent questions regarding marital sexuality I hear from people have to do with what the Church says is or isn't okay. "What is the Church's stance on _____?"

Oral sex? Vibrators? Lingerie? Sex toys?

What sexual fantasies are okay to explore?

[Slide 18]

Elder Packer quote.

Elder Boyd K. Packer very clearly counseled:

*"We do not, in our counseling, enter the bedrooms of members of the church."*⁴²

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.

The Lord has been clear.

While we often want church leaders to make specific detailed lists about the do's and don'ts of various things, the Lord made clear:

*"These things remain with you to do according to judgment and the directions of the Spirit."*⁴³

[Slide 19]

Guiding principles in sexual decision making⁴⁴ (I'll send in the follow-up email)

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?

⁴² "The Fountain of Life," BYU Stake Fireside, 29 March 1992

⁴³ D&C 62:8

⁴⁴ Taken from *Sexual Wholeness in Marriage*, Busby, Carroll and Leavitt, p. 161

3. Navigating Sexual Differences

[Slide 20]

Sexual differences are a common occurrence in relationships.

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.⁴⁵

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 21]

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.⁴⁶

4. Sexual Intentionality

[Slide 22]

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

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.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ See footnote 42

Things that can get in the way.

We get so busy sometimes—maybe our work 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 23]

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 CONVERSATION: Mental Preparation (10 minutes)

[Slide 24]

[Slide 25]

Introduce this Couple Conversation

Just like our last two classes, 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. It is unlikely that you will be able to discuss all the questions so answer what you can and then continue your conversation another time.

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.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- How did I first learn about sex?
 - What beliefs have I gained about sexuality from home, friends, church, the media, etc.
 - Are there any beliefs that I may need to change or work on?
- What do you think about sexual intentionality and planning times for sex?
- How can we make sure that we have healthy communication about our sexual experiences, preferences, fantasies, boundaries, etc.?
- Discussing our sexuality can sometimes bring to the surface fears, worries, or shame that we have been hiding from ourselves. Am I noticing any new fears or worries about our future sexual relationship?

Emotional (20 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.

Emotional Barriers (4 minutes)

[Slide 27]

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 28]

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.⁴⁷

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 29]

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."⁴⁸

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.

⁴⁷ National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI) website: www.nami.org/FAQ/Mental-Health-Medication-FAQ

⁴⁸ Wismann, M. (2017). 3 reasons sex is affecting your sex drive and what to do about it. *The Gottman Institute*.

Combat stress by talking to your spouse or therapist

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.

Online Supplemental Lesson: *Marriage and Mental Health*

2. Trauma

[Slide 30]

[Slide 31]

Trauma statistics:

Research shows that about 30% of women and 15% of men experience sexual trauma during their lifetime, usually before the age of 30.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

[Slide 32]

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. Remember that your partner didn't choose to experience sexual trauma. Be supportive of and sensitive towards one another and each individual's needs and struggles related to sexual trauma.

⁴⁹ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

⁵⁰ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <https://www.nsvrc.org>

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 33]

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 34]

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.

Emotional Expanders (6 minutes)

[Slide 35]

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 36]

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 37]

Intimacy is more than just sex.

In the Church, 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.

Define intimacy

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.

COUPLE DISCUSSION: Safety and Trust

[Slide 38]

Introduce this couple discussion

Since safety and trust are so important to the health of a relationship, I want you to briefly discuss together how to preserve and build them.

What are some ways that couples can create safety and build trust in their marriages?

What are some ways that couples can harm the sense of safety and trust in their marriages?

Call on a specific couple to share their thoughts about these questions.

If they don't mention the following, be sure to mention them as ways couples can harm the sense of safety and trust in their marriages:

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 39]

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 40]

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.⁵¹ 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 CONVERSATION: Emotional Preparation (10 minutes)

[Slide 41]

[Slide 42]

Introduce this Couple Conversation

This is our final Couple Conversation for today. Spend a moment personally pondering your own responses to these questions and then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple

[Play soft music during this time]

⁵¹ 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.

Couple Conversation Questions:

- Fill in the blank: “I feel emotionally safe with my partner when s/he _____.”
- How do I currently feel about our emotional connection as a couple?
 - Are there any improvements we could make?
- Wedding night anxieties: For many couples, their wedding night will be the first time they experience sex. What anxieties/fears do I have about our first time being together sexually?
- How would I define “emotional infidelity?”
 - How can we help prevent either of us from becoming emotionally unfaithful?

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Start of an on-going conversation about sex in your marriage

I hope we’ve covered some principles that will aid you in your on-going conversation about sex in your marriage.

[Slide 43]

Homework

Choose a resource from the resource list

In your follow-up email, I will attach a list of resources about marital sexuality. This week, choose a book/podcast/talk/article from the resource list and make a plan to read/listen to it together.

[Slide 44]

Next time

Inform participants what they can expect for next time.

Next time we meet we will continue our discussion of sexual wholeness by discussing the physical and spiritual aspects of marital sexuality.

Link to ask anonymous marital sexuality questions

The link to ask anonymous marital sexuality questions is still available if you would like to submit additional questions—especially if you have questions regarding the physical and spiritual aspects of marital sexuality.

Follow-up email

In the next day or two send a follow-up email to participants that includes:

- Homework reminder
- Marital sexuality resource list (you will need to copy and create this document from the appendix in the online version of the guidebook on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu).
- Guiding principles of sexual decision making
- Links to supplemental lessons on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu: *Marriage and Mental Health* and *Repentance and Forgiveness in Marriage*
- A link to ask anonymous questions about marital sexuality (created from Google Forms or free SurveyMonkey account).



Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 4

Becoming One Through Marital Sexuality, Part 2

Preface

This lesson is the second of two lessons about marital sexuality. The purpose of this lesson is to help couples appreciate how marital sexuality can help them in their journey of becoming one. If they haven't already started a conversation about marital sexuality, this lesson can help give them some context and give them "permission" to begin that ongoing conversation.

If participants have submitted questions about marital sexuality that relate to the physical or spiritual aspects of sexuality, 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 that you will email them in the follow-up email. Ideally, you will be familiar 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.

Lesson Outline

Introduction (2 minutes)

Physical (40 minutes)

- Physical sexual response cycle
- Paths to orgasm
- Couple Conversation: Physical Preparation
- Birth control

Spiritual (15 minutes)

- The purpose of sex
- Couple Conversation: Spiritual Preparation

Conclusion (3 minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into *AE* class but muted and used so you can see all the participants
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Review and Check-in

[Slide 1]

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

[Slide 2]

Review sexual wholeness.

Last class we talked about becoming one through marital sexuality and introduced the idea of sexual wholeness. As a reminder, sexual wholeness encompasses four aspects: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. In our last class we focused on the mental and emotional aspects of marital sexuality.

Physical (40 minutes)

[Slide 3]

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

We are now going to move on to the physical aspect of sexual wholeness. This lesson 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.

Importance of understanding and talking openly about our physical bodies.

Since we believe that our physical bodies were designed in the image of our Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, 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 (15 minutes)

[Slide 4]

[Slide 5]

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.

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 breathing and blood pressure/heart rate
- A physical genital response:

Women generally experience this genital response as their vaginal walls begin to swell and then secrete fluid in the vagina. This vaginal fluid serves as natural lubrication to make it easier for the penis to enter the vagina. In addition, women’s breasts become fuller and their nipples can become hardened or erect.

Men experience this genital response as a swelling of the testicles, tightening of the scrotum and an erection of the penis. This erection makes it possible for the penis to enter the vagina.

Arousal (also referred to as “plateau” phase)

During this phase the changes begun in the desire phase are intensified: breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure continue to increase, the vagina continues to secrete fluid and the penis gets harder. In addition, a woman’s clitoris becomes highly sensitive (may even be painful to touch) and the vagina begins to swell from

increased blood flow. Muscle tension for both men and women increase and muscle spasms may begin in the feet, face, and hands.

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

During orgasm, blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing are at their highest. Involuntary muscle contractions occur and there is a sudden, forceful release of sexual tension.

In women, the muscles of the vagina contract and the uterus undergoes involuntary rhythmic contractions.

In men, rhythmic contraction of the muscles at the base of the penis result in the ejaculation of semen.

In addition, oxytocin (the bonding hormone) is released throughout the body of both men and women.

Resolution

In the final phase, the body gradually returns to its pre-sexual response state and swelled and erect body parts return to their previous size. This phase is characterized by a general sense of well-being, increased emotional intimacy, and often fatigue.

While some women are capable of a rapid return to the orgasm phase, men need a recovery time after orgasm called a refractory period, during which they cannot reach orgasm again. The length of the refractory period varies between men but gets longer with age.

Common Cycle Differences for Men and Women

[Slide 6]

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.⁵² 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.”

[Slide 7]

Introduce the Common Cycle Differences Chart

To further explain what kind of differences may occur, let’s look at this chart that discusses common cycle differences for men and women.

⁵² 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.

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. ⁵³
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. ⁵⁴
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.⁵⁵

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

⁵³ Mintz, L. (2014). The Orgasm Gap: Simple Truth and Sexual Solutions. *Psychology Today*.

⁵⁴ See footnote 51

⁵⁵ See Dr. Laura Brotherson’s *Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage*

[Slide 8]

1. Women need to decide to have sex.

For many women, the first step of sexual intimacy is a mental process that involves flipping a mental switch to decide to move toward a sexual experience. Only after flipping this mental switch can her body begin to respond favorably by feeling desire and arousal. Her deciding is influenced by:

- *Agency* - Does she feel like she has a choice? Or does she feel obligated or forced? (Coerced sex violates God's law of agency; the principle of consent still applies after marriage.)
- *Relationship Climate* – What's the quality of the marital relationship? Does she feel trust 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.

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 9]

Introduce this section.

While a deep emotional connection is the goal of sex, orgasm is still an important part of our sexual experience.

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 10]

*"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."*⁵⁶

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 11]

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."*⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Dr. Robert Stahmann, *Becoming One*, p. 18

⁵⁷ Waite, L. & Gallagher, M. (2001). *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier and better off financially*. Crown Publishing.

Sexual Expectations (5 minutes)

[Slide 12]

Introduce the idea of expectations

I'm sure we've all experienced times when our expectations about an event or experience weren't met. Many times we set expectations for ourselves, or others, without realizing it. This can lead to disappointment and conflict.

Unmet expectations can be a primary source of disappointment.

Since unmet expectations can be a source of disappointment, it is important to set realistic expectations for most experiences including our sexual experiences.

Our sexual expectations need to be realistic

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.

[Slide 13]

Introduce the Realistic and Unrealistic Sexual Expectations Chart

Let's look at some unrealistic sexual expectations and the realities behind them on this chart.

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.

[Slide 14]

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 CONVERSATION: Physical Preparation (10 minutes)

[Slide 15]

[Slide 16]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

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, then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- What specific questions do I have about the mechanics of sex?
- What general expectations do I have for our sexual relationship?
- What specific sexual expectations do I have for our wedding night?
- What are we doing together and separately to help us be ready for a healthy sexual relationship?
- Given that a woman's sexual response is more complex than a man's, how can we make sure we are both sexually satisfied?

Birth control (1 minute)

[Slide 17]

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 18]

“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.”⁵⁸

Online Supplemental Lesson: *Birth Control*

Spiritual (15 minutes)

[Slide 19]

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

Research and Church principles both make clear that there is a spiritual dimension to marital sex.⁵⁹ 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.

The Purpose of Sex (5 minutes)

[Slide 20]

[Slide 21]

Sex is meant to unify husband and wife.

Elder Holland has spoken eloquently and powerfully about the spiritual dimension of sex. Let's read together 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,

⁵⁸ Elder Neil L. Anderson, “Children,” 2011

⁵⁹ See Gospel Topics: Chastity and Yonke, D. (2014) *A sacred union*. Bowling Green State University.

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.”⁶⁰

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 our Heavenly Parents have 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 22]

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.⁶¹ 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.

⁶⁰ “Of Souls, Symbols and Sacraments”, BYU Devotional 1988

⁶¹ 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.

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

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 23]

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 members of the church are used to thinking about as spiritual and sacred are those quiet, reflective times we have in sacrament meeting or the temple. 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.⁶²

COUPLE CONVERSATION: Spiritual Preparation (10 minutes)

[Slide 24]

[Slide 25]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

One more time today, spend some time personally pondering your own responses to these questions and then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- How has my faith affected the way I view marital sexuality?
- What are my attitudes about how sexuality and spirituality go together?
- Do I understand the spiritual side of sexuality? If not, how could I increase this understanding?

⁶² Dr. Dean Busby’s SFL 376 class

Conclusion (3 minutes)

[Slide 26]

Dr. John Gottman quote:

“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.”⁶³

Understanding all four dimensions of sexual wholeness will increase your sexual satisfaction.

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.

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. In the follow-up email I will attach 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 27]

This week.

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

⁶³ Gottman, J. (2017). “Building a great sex life is not rocket science”. *The Gottman Institute*.

Next time

[Slide 28]

Inform participants what they can expect for next week.

Next time we will talk about becoming one through equal partnership and commitment.

Follow-up email

In the next day or two, send a follow-up email to participants which includes:

- Elder Holland quote
- Marital sexuality resource list (you will need to copy and create this document from the appendix in the online version of the guidebook on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu).
- Links to supplemental lessons on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu: *Pornography* and *Birth Control*
- Homework reminder



Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 5

Becoming One Through Equal Partnership and Complete Commitment

Preface

This lesson has two goals:

- 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. Nevertheless, divorce can be an upsetting topic for some people, so please be mindful of your participants and their responses.

Lesson Outline

Introduction (2 minutes)

Developing an Equal Partnership (20 minutes)

- Cultural and Doctrinal Misunderstandings
- Decision Making
- Couple Conversation: Equal Partnership

Committing Completely (30 minutes)

- Divorce Research
- Church Teachings on Divorce
- Couple Conversation: Divorce philosophy

Conclusion (3 minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into AE class but muted and used so you can see all the participants.
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Review and Check-in

[Slide 1]

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

Review the previous sessions:

In our first class we learned about becoming one in marriage through prioritizing “*we over me*” and then the next class we focused on becoming one through *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!

In the last two classes we have 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.

[Slide 2]

Introduce the topics for today.

Today we’ll focus on two more important principles for creating oneness in our marriages: *developing an equal partnership* and *committing completely*.

Developing an Equal Partnership (20 minutes)

[Slide 3]

Equal partnership.

In The Family Proclamation we are taught that husbands and wives are:

“obligated to help one another as equal partners.”⁶⁴

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

⁶⁴ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 7

[Slide 4]

President Hinckley often taught about equal partnership.

This was a prominent theme in many of President Gordon B. Hinckley's sermons to the 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."*⁶⁵

[Slide 5]

Research shows benefits to having an equal partnership.⁶⁶

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 and Doctrinal 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 members of the church misunderstanding the roles of men and women in marriage.

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

It's possible that some of us may have observed patterns in our families that led to us holding beliefs that men and women aren't equal. If needed,

⁶⁵ "Personal Worthiness to Exercise the Priesthood," General Conference, April 2002

⁶⁶ 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.

we must overcome these patterns and false traditions to remember that God intends husbands and wives to be true partners.

There are some general cultural traditions (past and current) that don't view women and men as equal.

Historically, women in the United States weren't treated as equal to men under the law. They weren't allowed to own property in their own name (until 1890s), to vote (until 1920), or to open a bank account/credit card or take out a loan without a male co-signer (until 1974). These laws may have changed, but the belief systems behind the laws sometimes have a lasting impact.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve's choice in the Garden of Eden is seen as evidence that women are general morally inferior to men. This belief has been the justification of men's dominance over women for centuries.

Women are not the only ones who have been hurt by cultural traditions. In divorce cases in the United States, courts still presume mothers to be the better parent over fathers. In addition, media often portrays husbands and fathers as incompetent and insignificant.

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ has revolutionary concepts of equal partnership.

Though some of these misunderstandings and harmful traditions are still present today, the core of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ contains revolutionary teachings of equality in marriage.

[Slide 7]

Core teachings of equal partnership in marriage.

- 1 - We have a Mother in Heaven, co-equal with our Father in Heaven. Godhood cannot exist without an equal partnership between men and women.
- 2 - Eve did not sin in the Garden of Eden. She understood the need to partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to know the bitter from the sweet and to progress toward their divine destiny. Adam's subsequent understanding and decision to also partake of the fruit demonstrated a pattern of equal partnership in their marriage.

3 - The government of heaven is family governance, ruled by Father and Mother in equal partnership; we should emulate that pattern in our own families here on earth.

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

Decision Making (5 minutes)

[Slide 8]

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.

Husband and wife must work together to make decisions.

We have counsel from our modern prophets regarding marital decision making:

[Slide 9]

“When a man and woman are sealed in the temple...together they obtain and receive priesthood blessings and power to direct the affairs of their family...They have equal power to receive revelation for their family. When they work together in love and righteousness, their decisions are heaven blessed.”⁶⁷

Presiding at home vs. presiding at church.

In addition, presiding at home has often been misunderstood to be the same as presiding at church. President Boyd K. Packer helps us distinguish:

[Slide 10]

“In the Church there is a distinct line of authority. We serve where called by those who preside over us. In the home it is a partnership

⁶⁷ Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Great love for our Father’s children,” General Conference, April 2019

with husband and wife equally yoked together, sharing in decisions, always working together.”⁶⁸

So, presiding at church is hierarchical while presiding at home is an equal partnership.

COUPLE CONVERSATION: Equal Partnership (10 minutes)

[Slide 11]

[Slide 12]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

I want to give you a chance to consider the principle of equal partnership in your own relationship. You know how this goes. Spend a moment personally pondering your own responses to these questions and then you have about 10 minutes to discuss them as a couple.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- What did I see growing up in my family (and/or with other married couples that I was close to) in terms of an equal partnership?
- Do I hold any beliefs that don't view men and women as equal?
 - If so, how can I work on overcoming those beliefs?
- What is my vision of an equal partnership?
 - What do I want in our marriage? (Both general and specific.)
- Talk through the following scenarios to practice how you might handle a decision as equal partners. You don't need to actually make these decisions but rather think through HOW you will make these decisions.
 - Scenario 1: The car you brought to the marriage has died and you need to purchase a new one. How will the two of us decide on a budget? financing? what kind of car? what features? insurance?
 - Scenario 2: You have a nice job offer in an out-of-state city, but your spouse has another year to go to finish her/his degree. What do you do?

⁶⁸ “The Relief Society,” General Conference, April 1998

Committing Completely (30 minutes)

[Slide 13]

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 14]

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."*⁶⁹

COUPLE DISCUSSION:

Danger of Going into Marriage Half-hearted (5 minutes)

[Slide 15]

Introduce this couple discussion

David Brooks uses the word "dangerous." What could be "dangerous" about going into marriage "half-hearted?" Briefly discuss this and then I'll ask 1-2 couples for their thoughts.

Call on a specific couple to share their thoughts about this question.

⁶⁹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, p. 146

To summarize couples' thoughts, remind them of the symbol of the arch

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

Divorce Research (2 minutes)

[Slide 16]

Introduce topic of divorce

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

*"What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."*⁷⁰

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 17]

[Slide 18]

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).⁷¹

[Slide 19]

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.⁷² Members of the church 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.⁷³

⁷⁰ Matthew 19:6

⁷¹ 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*.

⁷² American Psychological Association, "Marriage and Divorce." <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce-child-custody>

⁷³ See footnote 71

Church Teachings on Divorce (10 minutes)

[Slide 20]

Church teachings on divorce

We have covered a bit of the research side of divorce, now let's focus on what church leaders have shared on this topic.

[Slide 21]

Counsel from President James E. Faust.

President 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.**"⁷⁴*

[Slide 22]

The three wise tests when considering divorce.

Embedded in President 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

⁷⁴ General Conference, "Father Come Home," April 1993, emphasis added

many unhappy couples who choose to stay married report after 5 more years that they are happy.⁷⁵

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.]

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.

Mention the kinds of marital problems that 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.

Seeking help for our marriages is a courageous and wise decision

When our marriage is in trouble, seeking help through marriage counseling can be important. Research shows that marital counseling in the early stages of our marital troubles can be especially helpful.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ 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*.

⁷⁶ Bradbury, T.N. and Bodenmann, G. (2020). Intervention for couples. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 16, 199-223.

Divorce is sometimes a necessity.

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 CONVERSATION: Divorce Philosophy (10 minutes)

[Slide 23]

[Slide 24]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

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.

Thinking about marriage and divorce in general (*not your relationship specifically*), answer these questions one at a time as honestly as you can for yourself and then share your answer with your partner. Then go on to the next question.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

When two people get married, they usually aren't thinking that the marriage will end in divorce. But then hard times arise and sometimes they find themselves thinking either casually or seriously about divorce. However, most people haven't really thought carefully about their philosophy of divorce. When is it justified? How hard and how long should

people try to work things out? This exercise invites you to think more intentionally about these kinds of questions and share them with your partner.

Thinking about marriage and divorce in general (*not your relationship specifically*), answer these questions one at a time as honestly as you can for yourself and then share your answer with your partner. Then go on to the next question.

1. What circumstances do you think could justify divorce?
2. What circumstances do you think do *not* justify divorce
3. If the married couple has children, does that affect your answers in 1 and 2 above? Do the ages of the children matter?

Mention the additional Divorce Philosophy questions

In the follow-up email I will send the complete Divorce Philosophy questions (a total of 8 questions). I invite you to make time to finish going through these questions together this week. As part of your official homework, I invite you to do the last activity suggested in question 8: to prayerfully find a way to “share your commitment in a special way” with your partner this week.

Conclusion (3 minutes)

[Slide 25]

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.⁷⁷ This is true for you on your journey of becoming equal partners and committing completely to one another.

⁷⁷ See 1 Nephi 3:7

[Slide 26]

President Russell M. Nelson reminded us:

“Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship.”⁷⁸

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.

Homework

[Slide 27]

Together, finish the Divorce Philosophy questions and then do the last activity suggested on question 8: prayerfully find a way to “share your commitment in a special way” with your spouse this week.

Next time

[Slide 28]

Inform participants what they can expect for next week.

For our final class we will discuss becoming one by nurturing our marriages over the life span.

Follow-up email

In the next day or two, send a follow-up email to participants which includes:

- Homework reminder
- 8 Divorce Philosophy questions (you will need to copy and create this document from the appendix in the online version of the guidebook on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu).

⁷⁸ General Conference, “Celestial Marriage,” October 2008



Anxiously Engaged, Lesson 6

Becoming One Through Growing Together

Preface

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 (5 minutes)

Investing (15 minutes)

- Gottman's Magic Six Hours
- Couple Conversation: Magic 6 Hours

Learning (15 minutes)

- Marital Support System
- Other Resources
- Couple Conversation: Marital Support System

Serving (10 minutes)

- Couple Conversation: Serving

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Materials

- Facilitator guide

Equipment

- Primary computer for teaching
- (Ideally) a second computer screen also logged into *AE* class but muted and used so you can see all the participants.
- Soft music to play during Couple Conversations

Preparation

- On the day of your scheduled class:
 - text couples a reminder about the class and include the Zoom link.
- Find out if any couples are going to be participating from two different places so that you are prepared to put them into their own breakout room.
 - If possible, create breakout rooms before you start class.

Introduction (5 minutes)

[Slide 1]

Review the previous classes:

In our first class we learned about becoming one in marriage through prioritizing “*we over me*” and then the next class we focused on becoming one through *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!

In the last two middle classes 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.

Our last class focused on becoming one by being *equal partners and committing* completely to each other.

Introduce the topic for the final lesson.

We are going to shift gears for our last class and focus on the idea of nurturing our relationships and growing together as a couple over time.

[Slide 2]

Introduce the term entropy

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 marriages: 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 Hours⁷⁹

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.

⁷⁹ See gottman.com

[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 and it sets the tone for the rest of the evening.

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 relationship.) *Regular expressions of appreciation are one of the strongest predictors of a healthy, loving relationship.*⁸⁰

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.

⁸⁰ See gottman.com

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 and having fun (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

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 CONVERSATION: Magic 6 Hours (5 minutes)

[Slide 7]

[Slide 8]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

Let's try to make these six hours applicable to you and your relationship.
Spend the next 5 minutes going over the questions.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- How can we make time each week for the “Magic 6 Hours”?
- How can we make partings and reunions more special?
- What does a “stress-reducing conversation” look like to me?
 - Do I like to talk about work/school right when I get home?
 - Wait until later?
- What are some ways I could best show love, appreciation and affection to you?
- What are some dates we've been on in the past that you'd like to repeat?
- What are some new date ideas we'd like to try?
- How do we feel about the idea of a “State of the Union” meeting?
 - What do we think about starting that now, before we get married?

Learning (20 min)

[Slide 9]

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 10]

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 11]

Introduce the different kinds of learning.

Let's dive into a couple of different ways couples can learn from others: marital support system and other resources.

Marital Support System (5 minutes)

[Slide 12]

Support systems are an important way to learn from others to strengthen your marriage.

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. 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 Family Proclamation instructs:

“Extended families should lend support when needed.”⁸¹

So it could be appropriate to include members of your extended family in your support system. Other people in your support system could include a bishop, 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.

A good marriage counselor can be part of your marital support system. 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!

⁸¹ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 7

Other Resources (3 minutes)

[Slide 13]

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 by reaching 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, conference talks, BYU devotionals 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.

List of resources.

In your follow-up email, I will attach a list of marital resources. The resources on the list are those that can be useful to you both now and after you are married.

[Slide 14]

An easy resource you can start with.

I want to briefly point BYU's *RELATE Inventory*.

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 normally \$20/person but I have a link for Utah residents to be able to do this for free. I will include the link in the follow-up email.

No matter what resource you use, reflect on how it has benefited your relationship.

Whether you choose to find a discuss your marital support system 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 CONVERSATION: Marital Support System

(5 minutes)

[Slide 15]

[Slide 16]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

Okay, let's take about five minutes to talk as couples about the things we've been discussing as a group.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- What are some ground rules about how we will talk to others about our marriage?
- Who are some people that we could include in our "go-to" marriage-support system?

Serving (10 minutes)

[Slide 17]

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.

[Slide 18]

Remember this scriptural promise:

“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”⁸²

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.⁸³

[Slide 19]

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.⁸⁴ 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.

⁸² Matthew 10:39, Matthew 16:25, D&C 98:13

⁸³ See the work of Erik Erikson

⁸⁴ 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.

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.

Examples of couples you know who together make a difference for others.

Think of the married couples you know who have strengthened those around them.

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 20]

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. This is found in The Family Proclamation:

“responsible citizens everywhere... [are called] to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.”⁸⁵

Simple ways you could be part of promoting and strengthening marriage and family.

You could share some of the resources from *Anxiously Engaged*, be a support to other marriages, organize date night activities, etc.

⁸⁵ The Family: A Proclamation to the World, paragraph 9

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 CONVERSATION: Serving (5 minutes)

[Slide 21]

[Slide 22]

Introduce this Couple Conversation.

For our last Couple Conversation, take a few minutes to dream and scheme about your shared vision for being anxiously engaged in good causes together.

[Play soft music during this time]

Couple Conversation Questions:

- What are some causes we might join to make a difference?
- What are things we especially care about protecting, supporting or improving in our families and community?
- What are some of our personal missions/ministries? How can we support each other in our personal ministries?
- Who are some people we could minister to together?
- How can we answer the call of The Family Proclamation to promote measures that strengthen marriages and families?

Conclusion (10 minutes)

[Slide 23]

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.

[Slide 24]

ASK: For each of you, what has been your “take-away” from *Anxiously Engaged*? Please type it into the chat.

Briefly discuss the group's “take-aways.”

[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. President Howard W. Hunter assured:

“Whatever Jesus lays his hands upon lives. If Jesus lays his hands upon a marriage, it lives.”⁸⁶

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.

⁸⁶ “Reading the scriptures,” General Conference, October 1979

[Slide 27]

Testimonials and referrals.

We would love to have you share your insights with us and our followers! If you are willing, email us a picture of the two of you with a sentence or two about what you learned in *Anxiously Engaged*. 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 have participated in all 6 hours of *Anxiously Engaged* 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.

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!

Follow-up email

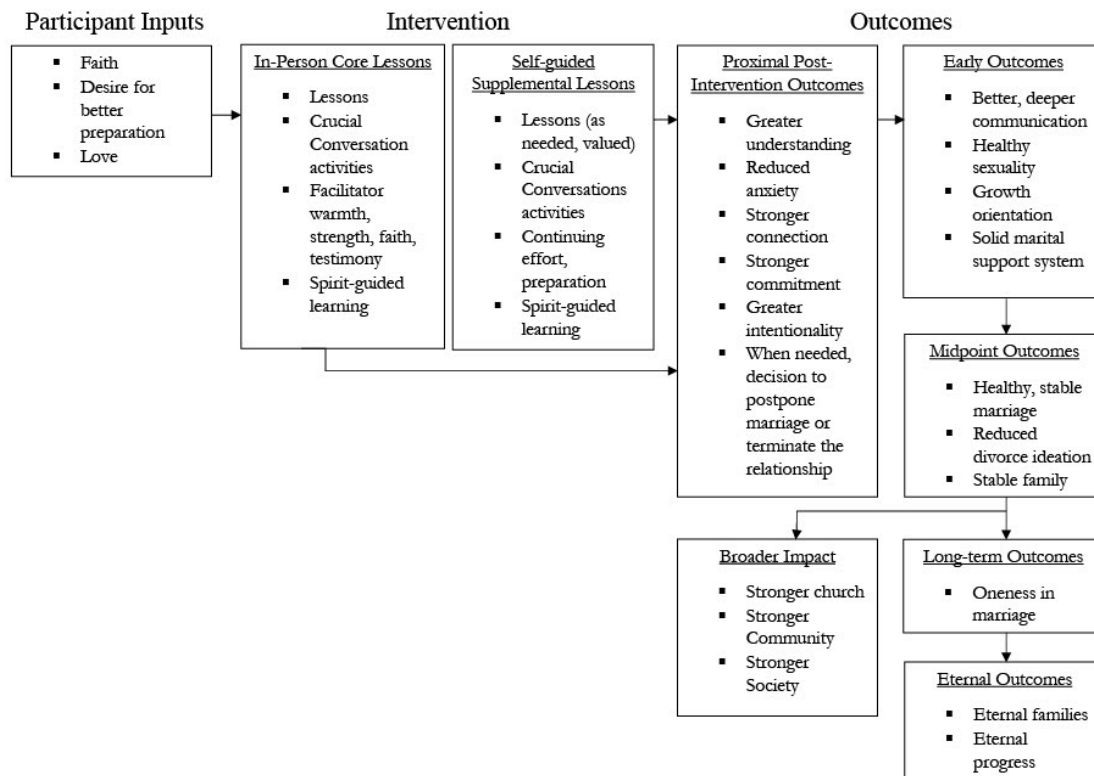
In the next day or two, send a follow-up email to participants which includes:

- Homework reminder
- Links to the first of four supplemental lessons on finances on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu
- Reminder to reach out about marriage license discount code
- Request for a picture and testimonial to use on social media
- Attachments:
 - List of marital resources (you will need to copy and create this document from the appendix in the online version of the guidebook on anxiouslyengaged.byu.edu).
 - Free RELATE inventory code (found on the *AE* Facilitator Portal)



Appendix

Anxiously Engaged Logic Model



Emotional aggression and violence

Most of us know what physical relationship violence looks like—hitting, kicking, shoving, pulling hair—but emotional aggression can be harder to recognize. The following are some indicators that your relationship could involve unhealthy emotional aggression.⁸⁷

If your partner

- says mean things to you
- doesn't let you make decisions
- threatens you
- keeps you away from friends, family and co-workers
- ignores your feelings
- puts you down, insults you and calls you names
- keeps you from sleeping
- does things that make you feel crazy
- tells you and others that you're crazy
- tells you your decisions are bad
- polices your day-to-day routine
- is excessively jealous
- shifts blame and won't take ownership

this is emotional aggression and abuse.

Emotional aggression goes with other forms of abuse but may also happen on its own. If you've ever been told anything like this by your partner:

- "You're so stupid!"
- "Nobody else would ever want you."
- "You look disgusting."
- "You always twist things around."
- "I don't know why I put up with you!"
- "You'll never be good enough to do that."
- "You're crazy!"

this is emotional aggression and abuse.

If you aren't sure if you are experiencing relationship aggression and abuse, that's okay; there are resources to help. It might be helpful to talk through your concerns with a trusted family member or friend. In addition, there are hotlines where you can anonymously talk through your concerns with an experienced professional.

- National domestic violence hotline: (800) 787-3224
- thehotline.org/identify-abuse
- Love is respect: loveisrespect.org

⁸⁷ These indicators are taken from a pamphlet entitled Emotional Abuse Hurts, produced by University of Michigan Health System. Med.umich.edu/abusehurts/abuse_emotional.pdf

Divorce Philosophy questions:

Thinking about marriage and divorce in general (*not your marriage specifically*), answer these questions one at a time as honestly as you can for yourself and then share your answer with your partner. Then go on to the next question.

1. What circumstances do you think could justify divorce?
2. What circumstances do you think do *not* justify divorce?
3. If the married couple has children, does that affect your answers in 1 and 2 above? Do the ages of the children matter?
4. How long do you think a married couple should try to work things out? Does your answer to this question depend on some of the circumstances you wrote about above?
5. What steps do you think people should take before deciding to get divorced? (For instance, get counseling.)
6. Why do you think you have these beliefs? What has shaped your beliefs? (For instance, religious principles, family experiences growing up, friends you have observed going through a divorce, your ideological or political views).
7. If possible, write down a brief summary of your personal philosophy of divorce based on your thinking in this exercise.
8. Take some time for meaningful prayer this week and pray for the ability to commit fully to your spouse and your marriage, through good times and bad. Then create a special time and way to share your commitment with your spouse.

Resources on Marital Sexuality

Books:

- *Sexual wholeness in marriage: An LDS perspective on integrating sexuality and spirituality in our marriages*, Dean M. Busby, Jason S. Carroll, Chelom Leavitt
- *Becoming one: Intimacy in marriage*, Robert F. Stahmann, Wayne R. Young, Julie G. Grover
- *And they were not ashamed: Strengthening marriage through sexual fulfillment*, Laura M. Brotherson
- *The act of marriage*, Tim LaHaye
- *Real intimacy: A couple's guide to healthy, genuine sexuality*, Kristin B. Hodson, Alisha Worthington, Thomas G. Harrison
- *From honeymoon to happily ever after: 23 keys to prepare for a sextraordinary marriage*, Laura M. Brotherson
- *Purity and Passion*, Wendy Watson Nelson
- *A Better Way to Teach Kids about Sex*, Jason S. Carroll, Chelom Leavitt, Dean M. Busby, Laura M. Padilla-Walker)

Websites and podcasts:

- [The Marriage Bed](#)
- [The Sexual Mindfulness Project](#)
- [Jennifer Finlayson-Fife podcast archive](#)
- [The Christian Sex Educator](#)
- [Strengthening Marriage](#)

Articles:

- [Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments](#), Jeffrey R. Holland, BYU Devotional, 1988
- [Love and Marriage](#), Wendy Watson Nelson, Worldwide YSA Devotional, 2017
- [Fulfilling the Sexual Stewardship in Marriage](#), Sean Brotherson, 2012
- ["How I Overcame Sexual Intimacy Problems as an LDS Newlywed"](#) LDS Living, Anon, 2018
- ["Conversations about Intimacy and Sex that can Prepare you for Marriage"](#) Liahona, 2020

Resources to Strengthen Marriages

Books (* = Latter-day Saint target audience)

- *Covenant Hearts*,* Bruce C. Hafen
- *Successful Marriages and Families*,* Alan J. Hawkins, David C. Dollahite, & Thomas W. Draper
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* John M. Gottman & Nan Silver
- *Sexual Wholeness in Marriage*,* Dean M. Busby, Jason S. Carroll, & Chelom E. Leavitt
- *The Marriage Compass*,* Jason S. Carroll
- *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, Blaine J. Fowers
- *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*, The Arbinger Institute
- *Drawing Heaven into Your Marriage*,* H. Wallace Goddard
- *Hold Me Tight*, Sue Johnson
- *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*, William J. Doherty
- *The Priesthood Power of Women*,* Barbara Morgan Gardner

Online resources:

- Websites and podcasts:
 - mormonmarriages.com
 - strengtheningmarriage.com
- Relationship-strengthening classes and resources:
 - ePREP: lovetakeslearning.com
 - Forever Families: foreverfamilies.byu.edu
 - Serving together as a couple: focusonthefamily.com
 - Relate inventory: relatefoundation.com/couples/

BYU Devotionals

- “How Do I Love Thee?” Jeffrey R. Holland, February 15, 2000
- “As I have love you: Agency-based love in dating and marriage,” Jason S. Carroll, April 2, 2019
- “Repentance and forgiveness in marriage,” Richard B. Miller, January 19, 2010

Making decisions about divorce

- “Should I keep trying to work it out? Sacred and secular perspectives on the crossroads of divorce,” Alan J. Hawkins & Tamara A. Fackrell, byustudies.byu.edu

Guidelines for choosing a good marriage counselor:

- “Finding a mental health professional who’s right for you,” Kevin Theriot, churchofjesuschrist.org

