

STUDY GUIDE for Lasting Marriage: The Owners' Manual

by Harvey Yoder

This guide is designed to encourage high levels of personal involvement and discussion by adult Sunday School and other young adult or couples' groups. Leadership can be provided by any good facilitator, without him or her needing to be a marriage or relationship expert. Participants will learn much from each other about how to create and maintain good relationships, as well as from material in the book and in relevant scripture texts. For weekend retreats or other settings, any combination of chapters or sections of the book can be selected for study, in almost any order desired.

Note: Material in the Appendixes can be downloaded and copied for personal and class use by going to www.flrc.org/lastingmarriage.htm.

GOALS: We will...

- gain valuable insights from the life experiences of other members of our group.
- learn from the down-to-earth wisdom the Bible offers in this important area of our lives.
- become more aware of the need to develop good support networks for our marriages and families.
- benefit from the book's help in preparing for marriage and repairing distressed relationships.
- practice taking more personal responsibility, as in "What changes am *I* making to improve our relationship?" rather than focusing mostly on changes others should make.

INTRODUCTORY SESSION: Foreword and pp. 15-18, Some Operating Instructions

Leader: This section provides an overview of basic themes in the book, and focuses on some of the basic controls necessary to keep relationships stable, safe and well maintained.

Scripture texts: Review Biblical texts on marriage in Appendix A

Opener (these need to be time-limited): Have an assigned couple share briefly the story of their engagement and marriage, and the preparation they had or did *not* have for their life together. (More time will be spent on this theme in Session 4)

1. Have someone read the first paragraphs of John Drescher's Foreword and have the group discuss the statement: "Often more time and effort is spent preparing to walk down the aisle than to walk through the rest of life together." Do you agree or disagree?

Ask, "What formal or other preparation did you have before you began your life together as married couples? Do you think more is needed? Of what kind?"

2. Yoder notes that marriage may not be the best or only choice for everyone, that celibacy can also be an honorable and good choice.

Do you agree or disagree that learning to be a satisfied *single* may be one of the best ways to prepare for being successfully *married*? Why, or why not, might this be the case? Do too many people marry because they can't imagine being happy any other way? How can we better elevate

singleness as being an equally worthy state, noting Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 7 and the priority Jesus seems to give to the Kingdom-of-God-family over the nuclear family?

3. Note the paragraph beginning with *Our higher brain*. Discuss how this marvelous part of our bodies, the part that most distinguishes us from the rest of God's creatures, might have much to do with what it means to be created in God's image. Note that our minds are the origin of all of our actions and emotions, and that even what the Bible refers to our "heart" might best be thought of as what is in the innermost part of our God-given *minds*, our seat of consciousness. While the book's focus, of course, is not about a scientific study of the brain but about two modes of responding and reacting, how might a better understanding of our neocortex and subcortex help us learn better ways of managing our behaviors? Compare brain illustrations on pp. 35 and 122.

SESSION 2: Chapter 1

Leader: The theme of this section is how powerfully we are influenced by the people who are a dominant part of the "at home" years of our lives, and how many of our behaviors and reactions are by rote, based on reactive habits learned in those formative early years.

Scripture text: Psalm 78. Note how much space the Bible gives to the real life experiences of the ordinary people who are our biological and spiritual ancestors, and how (v. 2) these become *parables* we are to learn from, both from the good and the bad in their stories.

Opener: Have two partners (prepared ahead of time) briefly describe their families of origin and how they have affected their marriage.

1. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that most of our behaviors "result from our simply repeating learned patterns from our past"? While this does not excuse bad behavior, might this help in taking others' reactions less personally, as likely being more about them than about us?

2. Review themes in Appendix B. What are some of the habits and beliefs we have learned in our families of origin that reflect our ancestors' values and have shaped our own?

3. Yoder reflects on how the tragedies and sadnesses experienced by his father's family impacted him. What are some of the ongoing affects of your own families' past losses and distresses?

4. Discuss the last paragraph of the chapter. To what extent is our past "always present, always a significant part of our continued story"? What might be the value of each of us interviewing our parents, if still living, as well as other members of our extended families, to learn as much as we can about their history and ours, and to help us shape our future in a more conscious way?

SESSION 3: Chapter 2

Leader: This chapter and chapter 9 focus on a major theme of the book--that many if not most problems in a marriage are not really *marital* in their origin, but result from unresolved personal distresses and misbehaviors we bring with us into our marriage. If you choose to do the “fishbowl” discussion below, you may want to devote the entire session to that.

Scripture text: Review and discuss content of Appendix C.

Opener: Have an individual or couple reflect on which of the “fruit of the Spirit” they wish they could have better cultivated and demonstrated prior to and during their marriage, and the difference this could have made.

1. Have someone read, then have the group discuss, the first two paragraphs in chapter 2. How important is it to “bring an abundant supply of happiness and healthiness with us” when we marry? How do conditions like depression and anxiety negatively affect a relationship?

2. Do a fishbowl discussion exercise, with women forming an inner circle to discuss what they value in a “good man,” and with men in an outer circle simply listening, with no comments or questions allowed except for those written out and handed to the discussion leader. Reverse the arrangement to have men discuss qualities they most appreciate in a good woman. This exercise could be planned for two separate sessions, with time for group conversation after each gender has had a turn being in the discussion circle.

SESSION 4: Chapter 3

Leader: This section focuses on the importance of good preparation for marriage, suggesting that we should offer more help in decision making to young couples even before their engagement.

Scripture text: Read Proverbs 3:1-24 and reflect on the wisdom revealed in this scripture as applied to a people considering marriage.

Opener: Have a couple prepared to share some of their answers to the questions prepared for “To Knot or Not to Knot” panel members in Appendix D.

1. What kind of differences do you feel can bless a relationship, and which ones are likely to test it (see pp. 126-127)? How have you affected by the *minimizer-maximer* or *overfunctioner-underfunctioner* phenomenon in your relationship? (Note that, depending on the issue, you may not always be in the same role).

2. How might this group plan for and help plan for, and lead, a “To Knot or Not to Knot?” session for youth or young adults in your congregation? (This could be offered to teens or young adults whether they are in a dating relationship or not)

3. What kind of “lower-brain-dominated thinking” might have gone into your deciding when or whom to marry? How did elements of the “romantic love myth” (p. 127) affect your decision?

SESSION 5: Chapter 4

Leader: This study focuses on ways couples can get their marriages off to blessed start by planning weddings that better reflect their faith and values.

Scripture texts: Reflect on Romans 12:1-3 and Colossians 3:16-17 and discuss what these texts may have to say about weddings and wedding planning.

Opener: Have a couple describe their wedding and what they most liked about it--as well as what they feel they would plan differently if they were doing it today.

1. How would the alternative kind of wedding described in this chapter be accepted by members of your family and congregational family? Is the trend to ever more elaborate and expensive weddings desirable? Inevitable?
2. Review material in Appendix E. What if anything could or should be done to make your congregation's weddings and wedding receptions more worship-focused and Christ-centered rather than elaborate performances primarily spotlighting the bride and groom?

SESSION 6: Chapter 5

Leader: This session will draw attention to a topic Jesus addresses more often than almost any other, the responsible stewardship of money.

Scripture text: Reflect on material in Appendix F.

Opener: Have two partners share their "money autobiographies" and how their experiences with finances have affected their relationship both positively and negatively.

1. From the introductory material in chapter 5, as well as from your own experiences, what do you feel can make decisions about spending so difficult in a relationship?
2. Which of Jesus' teachings about money (Appendix F) have we most neglected or overlooked? How would our lives change if Jesus were our chief financial and investment advisor?
3. Have the group discuss, and add to, the "practical tips on how to live more simply and justly" on pp. 42-43. Which of these may help most in achieving "more just and joyful living"?
4. Share experiences with creating and following a household budget as advocated in the online resources listed at the end of the chapter.

SESSION 7: Chapter 6

Leader: This will be an opportunity to examine and promote a basic Christian value that is being increasingly questioned and tested in our culture--that of reserving sexual intimacy for marriage.

Scripture texts: Reflect on I Thessalonians 4:1-7 (note various renderings of verse 4), and Ephesians 5:1-18.

Opener: Have a couple share why and how they “waited until marriage” and the affect they feel that has had on their relationship.

1. How does the mindset and practice of chastity undermine the greed-driven and consumer-based mentality of our culture?
2. Because of the intensely bonding affect of sexual intimacy (no one ever forgets their first time), some have suggested that we think of premarital and extramarital sex as forms of premarital or polygamous *marriage*, and that the separations that follow be seen as a form of emotional *divorce*, a hurtful “tearing apart” of relationships. Agree or disagree?
3. How might we help encourage our teens and young adults to commit to celibacy in preparation for a more satisfying and secure future sex life with their one and only? How can we offer help and hope to those who experience the regret of having been sexually active before “leaving and cleaving”? Discuss the possibility of having married couples share their stories with younger members of the congregation, candidly sharing how and why they see “waiting until Christmas” to be a wonderful and exciting choice.

SESSION 8: Chapter 7

Leader: This part of the book introduces practical ways to assure a lasting and satisfying marriage by paying attention to four areas of couple responsibility and growth.

Scripture text: Read James 3:13-18 and discuss the nature of true wisdom as described in this text.

Opener: Have a couple talk about a time in their life when their marriage was saved or strengthened through some timely help and maintenance.

1. Review the Mercedes-Benz story in the beginning of the chapter, then discuss the statement. “...somehow we’ve gotten the idea that the longer we are in a relationship, the less care it will need to keep it alive and thriving.”
2. Review and discuss examples of various maintenance activities on page 52. Invite participants to raise hands or otherwise indicate how many of these simple practices they do on a regular basis.
3. Note the diamond diagram as displayed on page 54 and review the descriptions of each area on page 53. Go to Appendix G, read the introduction and go over the pretest exercise together.

4. For the coming week, encourage each couple to make a conscious effort to spend 80% of their time together in the “Problem-Free Area,” and to keep problems from intruding at those times.

SESSION 9: Chapter 8

Leader: The focus of this study is to help each couple expand and enrich their PFA, in which they make valuable deposits in their “relationship account” and learn to avoid unnecessary withdrawals.

Scripture text: Read Philippians 4:4-9 and discuss how it applies to today’s topic.

Opener: Have participants share what they have done in the past week and/or at other times in their lives to add to their PFA.

1. Reflect on the typical behaviors you observe when you see married couples in a restaurant or other public place as compared to those of dating couples, then discuss the statement, “If we want the good things dating couples have, we have to do what dating couples do.” List these kinds of actions and attitudes to add to those on page 57 (these could be compiled for group members).

2. Discuss the idea that while the PFA may seem to be the easiest aspect of a relationship to maintain, it is also the easiest to neglect, and may be the first thing to go when couples begin to become highly problem-focused. Review and discuss the statement on page 50 that speaks to this.

3. Discuss the list on pages 58-59 having to do with keeping all aspects of lovemaking in the PFA.

4. Assign Appendix H as homework for the next session.

SESSION 10: Chapter 9

Leader: This is a review of material in chapter 2, and another reminder of the single most important thing an individual can do to improve a relationship. Note that the PPA is where each individual has 100% responsibility to bring about positive changes, whereas he or she has no real *ability*, and therefore no direct *responsibility*, for changing the other person (SPA). We do have a full 50% responsibility for what happens in the top and bottom diamonds in the diagram.

Scripture text: Read and review Appendix H (I Corinthians 13).

Opener: Have group members share “one-word prayers” based on their reflections on the inventory in Appendix H (each simply states a single word or short phrase as an expression of need or desire for God’s help and grace). Then discuss the inventory and personal issues it raises.

1. Have someone read aloud the first three paragraphs in the text, then discuss.
2. Steven Covey, in *Seven habits of Highly Effective People*, states that we should never let other people be our problem, and that to the extent they do, *that* becomes the problem (This isn't to say that others don't *have* problems, but that those belong to *them*, and our problem is about how we cope with, deal with or respond to their challenges). How might that be a freeing position to take? What are the disadvantages of being highly focused on our spouse's problems instead of our own?
3. How would you respond to Rabbi Telushkin's question on page 63, and how do you feel about his answer?
4. As homework for the next session, suggest that each person spend an increased amount of time simply *listening* to their partner in the coming week.

SESSION 11: Chapter 10

Leader: This session focusses on an easily overlooked part of good communication, being in an attentive, listening mode at least half of the time, providing support to another person as they talk sense to themselves rather than just trying to talk sense into them.

Scripture texts: Reflect on James 1:19-20, 26 and 3:1-2 as it applies to today's topic.

Opener: Have two people seated in front of the group, one designated as the listener, another as someone sharing some real life problem or concern of theirs for several minutes. The listener will say nothing, but be as attentive as she or he can. Discuss whether the time involved (when the listener was silent) seemed too long, what nonverbal signs of concern were shown, and how some attentive silence might actually be more helpful than responding too quickly with advice.

1. Invite people to share their efforts at doing the assigned homework for this session. Discuss the statement, "Information is the solution only to the extent that ignorance is the problem." What besides information is often most needed, or needed first, when another person has a problem?
2. Invite participants to share their experiences of when listening, and being listened to, have been most helpful. Reflect on the three R's of good listening, and on what good listening is *not*.
3. Discuss ways of withdrawing from arguments, and why heated arguments are usually a waste of time and energy, and do more harm than good.
4. Suggest that couples try having a couples meeting in preparation for the next session, following at least the first four items listed on the "Agenda" in Appendix I.

SESSION 12: Chapter 11

Leader: This session offers practical help for couples engaging in productive problem-solving and thus gaining more problem-free time as a result.

Scripture text: I Corinthians 1:10, II Corinthians 13:11, Phillipians 4:2-3 and other texts encourage fellow church members to work out their differences, and show us how couples need to learn to live peaceably together.

Opener: Have a couple describe what they have learned about making decisions and resolving differences, and what process they use to move from a *problem* to a *plan* both can feel good about.

1. Discuss the two questions in the second paragraph of chapter 11, as well as some of the responses on page 70.
2. Rather than starting with our respective *positions* in the MPA, the text encourages us to start with our *interests*. Identify a typical couple problem or conflict, then discuss what might be some of the similar or overlapping interests each person might have that shape their positions? How might those be the basis for generating a variety of new positions that take into account as many of these interests as possible?
3. What might be the advantage of having regularly scheduled couples' meetings rather than having problems come up repeatedly and at random and without benefit of forethought? And what might be the advantage of writing down agreements rather than just trusting our memories (doesn't mean an agreement is set in concrete, but that it does remain in place until revisited and/or revised).
4. No one plan or approach will work best for every couple, but for those who think the idea of occasional or regularly planned couples' meetings sounds too far out or too awkward, invite suggestions for alternative ways to go about addressing problems in a mature and helpful way rather than engaging in arguments and power struggles--or simply avoiding issues.
5. Encourage couples to regularly practice homework in all areas of the marriage maintenance diagram as outlined in Appendix L.

SESSION 13: Chapter 12

Leader: How can the church offer help to couples in serious marital trouble? This is an important session to focus on maintenance and care when normal kinds of marital first aid aren't enough.

Scripture text: Discuss I Corinthians 12:21-27, especially 26, as it applies to stressed relationships.

Opener: Have a couple describe a particularly difficult time in their marriage, and how they got whatever help they needed to salvage their relationship.

1. What factors keep couples from seeking help early on, before things have deteriorated to the point where they seem hopeless? How can we encourage people to be more free in admitting a need for help?
2. Discuss some of the reasons why separation and divorce may do more to add to peoples' problems than to end them, especially in light some of the points made in the second paragraph on page 77. Do you agree with the inevitability of divorce when there are ongoing patterns of adultery, abuse, addiction and abandonment? How do we provide help for spouses in those instances?
3. Discuss, and add to, some of the signs that a couple might need professional help (pp. 78-79), and discuss the criteria for a good marriage counselor as described in Appendix J.

SESSION 14: Chapter 13

Leader: A strong case can be made that "It takes a whole congregation to maintain a whole and healthy marriage and family." This session focuses on how the church family and the biological family need to support each other rather than to compete for time and involvement.

Scripture text: Reflect on what the church in Acts 2:42- 47 might have been like for families with children, and on Hebrews 10:23-25, which may suggest that we not only meet regularly for worship, but that we also not neglect interacting frequently at other times and in other ways.

Opener: Invite participants to share ways individuals in the church and neighborhoods in which they grew up influenced them in choosing a life of faith and of faithfulness to God.

1. Note points made in the first two paragraphs of the text, and discuss ways having children adds to marital stress and to the need for couples to have a strong network of support.
2. Note Tom Sine's critique of the church on page 82. What needs to change about church life to make it less competitive for a family's time and attention and more complementary to the interests of both the biological and the spiritual family?
3. Note Yoder's description of the affect his extended family and church family had on his growing up years. Might it be true that our most effective means of encouraging our children choose a life of faith might not be through programs or institutions that cost lots of money, like special youth ministries, church camps, church schools and colleges, etc. (as helpful as some of these might be), but through investment in things that may take few dollars but lots of time and commitment--as in spending quality time with our church's children and youth as mentors and family friends?

4. What would you add to a list of helpful things to do (pp. 84-85) to encourage children to grow up choosing a strong commitment to Christ and the church?

SESSION 15: Chapter 14

Leader: When under stress, we typically feel we are in a less statured and empowered position, and so find ourselves behaving more desperately and less effectively as spouses and as co-parents. Being able to operate from a position of abundance and strength rather than from a feeling of emotional scarcity and inadequacy can make a profound difference in all our relationships.

Scripture text: Note references to how believers can experience a healthy, Christlike power and a sense of full stature in passages like Ephesians 1:17-24; 2:4-10; 3:14-21; 4:11-15.

Opener: Have a couple share their own stick figure drawings of how they have seen themselves and each other at various stages and situations in their relationship. Compare to cartoon drawing on page 91!

1. In the world of nature, it is often the creature that feels most afraid and threatened that is the most dangerous, e.g., an elephant tends to be less aggressive than a Rottweiler whose territory you might be entering. In light of that, discuss the opening statement, “The more empowered and secure we feel, the more gently and effectively we can behave”?

2. Someone has observed that while we reach a chronological “coming of age” at 18 or 21, our psychological coming of age may not feel like a secure reality until we are in our forties or even later. Invite persons to share how they have come to experience a comfortable sense of being equal (not identical, and not superior) to other adults, including their parents--or *especially* their parents.

3. Ephesians 6:10-17 promises a kind of spiritual protection that helps us avoid feeling defeated and diminished when we feel we are under spiritual stress or attack. How can we feel protected when others’ hurtful or destructive behaviors create “bad weather” for us, negatively affecting our sense of confidence and well-being?

SESSION 16: Chapter 15

Leader: At every stage of our life we are creating a reservoir of positive or negative memories. The more regularly we invest time and creativity in practices that celebrate kingdom blessings and values, the stronger our influence in promoting faith in our homes and families.

Scripture text: Read and reflect on Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and what it has to say about rituals for passing on faith and values to our children and grandchildren.

Opener: Invite several participants prepared to share memorable faith and relationship building experiences from their childhood.

1. Have a time of open sharing of past family rituals and traditions. Which were meaningful and positive, and which were not, and why?
2. What are some of your current couple and family rituals and traditions? What are some you would like to *add* (see p. 96)?
3. What are some activities we may need to *subtract* from our busy lives? How does our constant exposure to media messages--through television, Ipods, video games, the Internet, and DVD players--get in the way of our creating and maintaining good connections as couples and families? What happens when watching "Friends" replaces our spending time with real friends, when the TV Guide structures much of our free time, when Hollywood becomes the chief story teller for our children and youth, and when we regularly invite entertainers into our homes (via media) that we would not otherwise welcome having around us and our children?

SESSION 17: Chapter 16

Leader: Gerald and Marlene Kaufman and their daughters have written a book called *Freedom Fences: How to Set Limits That Free You to Enjoy Your Marriage and Family* (Herald Press, 1999). Maintaining good behavior boundaries is an absolute must if we want to avoid serious marital distresses and disasters--and experience the security and trust good relationships need.

Scripture text: Ephesians 5:1-16 is a clear statement about the kinds of clear lines that need to be drawn if we are to walk in the kind of agape *love* relationships thrive on (v. 2), walk in the *light* of good openness and accountability (v. 8), and "walk *circumspectly*" (v. 15, KJV) or wisely.

Opener: Have several couples or individuals describe some of the unwritten behavior rules they live by in their practice of fidelity and sexual sobriety in all aspects of their lives.

1. Would it be helpful for congregations to develop more behavior guidelines for its members? Note the example given of Calvary Community (Mennonite) Church, a large urban congregation. How can we provide provide safe and sensible boundaries without resorting to legalism?
2. What are some everyday examples besides those governing highway safety (p. 99) of how good "rules" can be beneficial? How might we celebrate God's relationship-enhancing and life-giving commands as the Bible repeatedly does, especially in Psalm 119 ("O how I love Thy law!")?
3. Review "defensive driving rules" beginning on page 99. Have the group discuss and add to these. Do we need "defensive dating rules" for teens and young adults, or other "defensive living rules" for all of us? What may be some of the negative and tragic results if we fail to do this?

SESSION 18: Chapter 17

Leader: Anger is one of the common emotions people experience when they feel strongly about issues and relationships important to them. Becoming upset is really a sign that at a very basic level another person and /or another's behavior really matter to us. Otherwise we could simply be apathetic or indifferent, and could just withdraw from the person or problem. How can we use anger as form of emotional energy for good instead of harm?

Scripture texts: Reflect on Ephesians 4:25-32 and Matthew 5:21-26. These texts address the sin of harboring anger and resentment against others while recognizing that anger, as a normal human emotion, may not be sinful in and of itself. However, it can easily lead to sin, just as strong sexual arousal may not be evil, but can easily lead to sins with serious negative consequences.

Opener: Invite people to share their own experiences of dealing with emotions that are in the anger family, ranging from mild irritation to outright rage.

1. Discuss the popular notion that anger is some kind of *stored* poison that needs to be vented, no matter what or how. The alternative is seeing anger as feelings of arousal we regularly *generate* due to our unreasonable expectations, our misinterpretations of other's behaviors, our underlying fears and anxieties about perceived threats, and/or our recycling and reliving of past hurts and grievances. How might our feelings of powerlessness and our sense of inadequate stature and protection (chapter 14) contribute to our having anger outbursts?
2. Review brain illustrations on pages 18, 35, and 122 and discuss the role of intense arousal in emergency situations versus operating from that kind of overheated arousal when there are simply ordinary problems to deal with.
3. Review and discuss steps in dealing with anger on page 104. Do these guidelines seem unreasonable or impossible for ordinary humans like ourselves? How do you feel about Rabbi Telushkin's statement preceding that section? And how are we prone to blame others for our anger, and our anger-driven reactions, as in the cartoon on page 105?

SESSION 19: Chapter 18

Leader: In this wrap-up session we reflect on what is at the heart of good relationships--the consistent practice of respect, empathy and acceptance, the avoidance of doing repeated acts of harm (through a lack of self-control and of other fruit of the Spirit), and the practice of positive behaviors that enhance warm feelings of companionship and friendship.

Scripture texts: Reflect on some of the blessing statements in scriptures like I Thessalonians 3:12-13; 5:23-24; II Thessalonians 1:2, 11-12; 2: 16-17; 3:5, 16, 18; and II Corinthians 13:11-14 (NRSV). How can we become spouses and parents who impart blessings instead of "curses" (discouraging, blaming, reacting, put-down statements) to each other and to our children?

Opener: Have participants give examples of how in their relationship they have found joy in “Our friendship never ended” (p. 108).

1. Discuss the relationship pyramid on page 109. What would you add, or underscore, as being of vital importance in maintaining a balanced, healthy and lasting marriage? Invite examples of how these various assets might look--and the difference they might make--in real life relationships.

2. Gerald and Marlene Kaufman’s book, *Monday Marriage: Celebrating the Ordinary* (Herald Press, 2005), has two sections, the first being “Expecting Less” and the second, “Giving More.” How are the modest expectations expressed in the piece “Settling In” different from couples simply taking their relationship for granted, or “settling” for something less than the best?

3. The section “If I Had Forty More Years of Marriage” is a summary of themes in the book, and can be used to invite couples to share what they have gained from the study and/or want to especially apply to the next season of their lives. Emphasize that simply gaining new *insights* seldom brings about lasting change, only developing new *habits* through the repeated practice of new *behaviors*--until those behaviors become new life habits that replace the not-so-healthy ones.

4. Close with a blessing like the one on page 113, or with the words on the “warranty” in back of the book.