

## *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*

# Education and Therapy for Couples and Families

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Couples may hesitate to seek help when their marriage hits a rough patch, but a good therapist can bring out the issues in a nonthreatening and skilled way that leads to better understanding of each other. This is No. 20 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

One of the best ways to learn about strong marriages is to spend time with happy couples. So, choose your friends carefully and double-up on dates with couples you respect and admire. Go out together for dinner or a movie. Invite them over to your home. Do something active outdoors with the couple and their kids.

By watching how they interact, you can learn a great deal about creating strengths in your own relationship and family. Of course, you can also learn a lot about *what not to do* from unhappy couples, but frankly, you'll learn a lot more important things from the happy couples. Unhappiness in some ways can be infectious, and, likewise, the happiness couples display toward each other can rub off on you. It's in your best interest to spend time with partners who clearly love and care for each other. We're not saying that you should shun couple friends who are having difficulties in life, but we are saying that you should make sure that you spend a good amount of time with couples who clearly love and honor each other and who can teach you how to be happy, also.

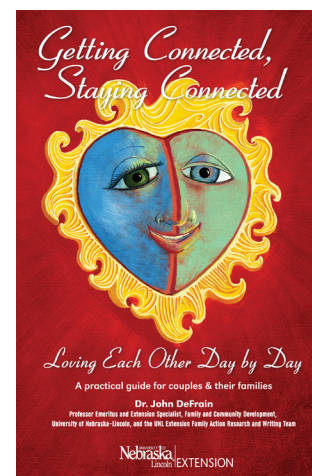
Countless resources in the library and on the Internet can help couples learn how to grow together. There are so many, in fact, that it would be truly impossible to list them all here. If you find this hard to believe, go online and visit Google. Type in "couple relationships" and over 9,000,000 sources are retrieved. Google "marriage" and over 164,000,000 come

up. And Google "parenting" and over 70,000,000 sources are listed.

No, we aren't about to review every book in the library and resource listed on the Internet focusing on marriage and couple relationships. And we need to state very carefully that some of these resources are a lot better than others. Searches on the Internet can find many good things and many worthless things, and clearly, not all the books in the library are worth reading so pick your reading material very carefully.

However, we do have a few favorites we will cite here: David H. Olson and his colleagues in Minnesota have written an excellent book on couple relationships entitled *The Couple Checkup*. The idea is that we take our cars in for a tune-up regularly, and marital relationships also need looking at on occasion. Olson's work over more than three decades has reached literally millions of people around the world.

And, a useful Internet-based resource is the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension website <http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/extension/strongfamilies>. The website has many articles on developing couple and family strengths and tells about the Extension book *Family Treasures*, which has more than 60 fun activities for couples and families aimed at enhancing appreciation and affection, positive communication, commitment, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being



**For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).**

and shared values, and the ability to manage stress and crisis.

Besides written materials, there is also a vast array of face-to-face educational opportunities for couples and families. We highly recommend participation in these kinds of activities, because reading about how to strengthen relationships is *important*, but seeing how this is done with your own eyes is *essential*.

These programs and experiences are often created by nonprofit institutions and organizations, including family service agencies, religious groups, schools, colleges, government organizations, private foundations, and so forth. Family life education programs such as these are usually designed for couples who are doing reasonably well in their life together, and are not in severe distress or crisis. Sometimes, however, couples in crisis do attend these formal educational programs and can get some help from the family life educators and the group. Also, the couple in distress can learn about how to find individualized professional help for just them as a couple.

These activities include couple enrichment programs (for example, several two-hour meetings over a six- or eight-week period). Or an hour-long lecture at a community center, or a weekend marriage encounter program at a resort. There are many different types of programs coming from many different perspectives, including whether you view life from a religious perspective or not. To find something useful to you as a couple, ask trusted friends, colleagues, and family members, and go online. Be sure to shop around, of course.

### **Marital and Family Therapy**

It is amazing to us when we think about it, but even today many couples remain hesitant about seeing a professional when they are not getting along well. They may have fallen into the trap of believing that the situation is hopeless, but it's never hopeless. There is always something that can be done to make the situation better. Or, they may not be aware of how creative professionals can be when working to help to build a strong couple relationship. Maybe they feel ashamed and stupid for being caught up in an unhappy marriage and refuse to consider going for help. Or, they might not understand deep down that anything mentionable in married life is manageable if each partner is willing to listen, to act out of genuine love, and to compromise.

One undisputable fact is that no one performs his or her own brain surgery. Likewise, there are many relationship issues that are extraordinarily complex and difficult to resolve, and outside help is essential if the partnership is to survive. Though a couple can solve most marital problems without outside help, there are many situations in which outside ideas can be very helpful.

Also, husbands and wives often do not speak openly about their feelings with each other, and a good therapist can bring out the issues in a nonthreatening and skilled way that leads to better understanding of each other. As one husband said to his wife in therapy one evening, "I now understand what you're feeling. I wish we would have come to counseling a long time ago. I could have changed." But the problem in this particular case was that he had stubbornly refused to seek help and by the time he did agree to go to the marital therapist, the process had turned into divorce therapy. Over

the years she got so tired of being angry inside because of his stubbornness that she lost all positive feelings for him. "I don't love you anymore," she told him with the therapist as her witness. Divorce proceedings had begun and the counseling they received was to help ensure that they could both still remain good parents in spite of the fact that they would not be married to each other anymore. Even though they would not be married for the rest of their lives, there was still a good chance that they could still be *parents forever* for the good of their children. Some couples are capable of doing this, while others are not.

But no one is capable of doing his own brain surgery, and in a similar fashion, there are many relationship issues that demand a great deal of knowledge, skill, and understanding that we as a couple simply do not have. Creating a happy marriage is so important that it shouldn't be completely left to amateurs.

Here are some common questions that many people have about marital and family therapy:

***What happens in marital counseling?*** Basically, the purpose is to help couples learn to communicate with each other positively and effectively. The counselor sometimes plays the role of referee, helping the partners calm down and really listen to each other. Couples often are so upset that communication has broken down. Sometimes there never was any genuine communication. But a good counselor knows how to smooth the waters and help the couple listen well and talk clearly so that solutions are possible. There is no guarantee that this will happen, but if the pair gets together and both genuinely try to make it work, chances are good.

***Is there something wrong with people who go to a professional counselor?*** In reply to this question, we could ask another question: Is there something wrong with a person who goes to see a doctor after a heart attack? The answer to that question is easy: Of course not. The person is just being smart.

Similarly, a couple who go to a therapist to discuss a difficult marital problem are simply aware that they need outside expertise to help them work together to deal with the challenge they face. This is a wise decision, not a sign of weakness or failure.

***What if one partner is willing to go but the other is not willing?*** Generally speaking, it is easier to work out problems when both partners are engaged and involved in the process. Sometimes one partner simply refuses to participate or argues that, "I don't need a shrink! You're the one that's crazy! You go!" In this case, the individual who wishes to seek professional help should feel free to do so. Oftentimes the advice of the therapist can be helpful for the individual coming in for a consultation.

***What about situations in which violence is possible?*** In some situations it is not wise to involve the other partner in the professional consultation. This is especially true in cases of domestic violence in which there is considerable risk that the violent partner will erupt and do harm to the other. One marital therapist we know told the story of a couple who came in for counseling. The husband had never really listened to his wife — he had always insisted on having his way on everything. The wife finally decided to divorce him and in

the counseling session when he finally listened to her and the impending divorce proceedings became clear, he stormed out of the room. Two days later he walked into a restaurant where his wife was having lunch and shot her.

Marital and family therapy can work wonders for many relationships. In the case of domestic violence, however, the endangered spouse is advised to seek counsel from programs that specialize in dealing with family violence. Similarly, alcohol and other drug abuse problems are often best treated when the non-abusing spouse seeks aid and advice from substance abuse specialists and programs that focus on these issues. Not all marriages can be saved. And, not all marriages should be saved.

***What kind of qualifications should the professional have?*** Licensed marital and family therapists who are certified by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) are specifically trained to deal with relationship problems and work directly with couples and families. Although some psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers have some additional training with couples and families, these tend to be in the minority. To learn more about AAMFT, visit its website at [aamft.org](http://aamft.org).

***How do you find a marital or relationship therapist?*** The AAMFT website has a very handy *Therapist Locator* tool. Simply put in your zip code and check how many miles you are willing to drive (5 miles, 10 miles, 25 miles, 50 miles, and so forth). Or you can search by city and state, or by the last name of the therapist. The *Therapist Locator* then brings up a list of professionals and you can learn about the qualifications of each person. Also, in most localities, marital and family therapists are listed under “Marital and Family Counseling” in the yellow pages. A person also can consult a family service agency or the United Way for suggestions. Finally, there is the traditional strategy that humans have used to find marriage partners down through the years — through recommendations from loved ones, relatives, and friends — and this method can also work for finding a marital therapist.

***What if I don't like the counselor?*** You probably were advised to shop around for a marriage partner and not marry the first one you find. Likewise, the first marriage and family therapist you talk with may not be the right fit for you and your partner. Make this decision together, and make it carefully.

***How about the cost?*** Rates for marital and family therapy can vary widely, from \$75 to \$200 per hour with an average cost of about \$100 per hour. (Remember: to have the oil changed in your car, you might be paying a rate of \$65 per hour or more.) Some therapists and family service agencies offer sliding fee scales so that the service is accessible to lower-income couples and families, and some private insurance programs cover the therapy with a small co-pay. A couple visiting with the counselor about an hour a week for three months might expect to pay \$1,200 at \$100 per hour.

***Does it work?*** The AAMFT, which is the professional organization representing the interests of marriage and family therapists nationally, argues that research has consistently found that marriage and family therapy has proven effective for treating a wide range of mental and emotional disorders

and health problems. Besides treating marital distress and conflict, marital and family therapists also treat adolescent drug abuse, depression, alcoholism, obesity, and dementia in the elderly. A research team in the mid-1990s led by William J. Doherty at the University of Minnesota concluded that marital and family therapy is a rather cost-effective and efficient approach to dealing with a range of emotional and relationship problems in individuals, couples, and families.

Similarly, a 2010 study by Andrew Christensen at UCLA and other colleagues around the U.S. compared traditional and nontraditional approaches to marital and family therapy for troubled married couples. They found substantial positive effects as a result of the therapy. These positive effects proved true even for seriously and chronically distressed couples. However, the researchers also found that going to a therapist is no guarantee the marriage will be saved. Within two years, more than 25 percent of the couples in the study ended up separated or divorced.

At the risk of sounding repetitious, it is very important to be proactive in regard to marriage problems: When things aren't going right, don't be afraid to talk about the situation with your partner and work together toward a solution. Don't wait until it's too late. These problems just don't fix themselves.

## All Things Considered

Getting connected and staying connected is a lifelong process for loving couples. It is also something that needs to happen *every day* of the couple's life together. Couples cannot afford to back-burner their relationship or put it on hold. They cannot afford to borrow excessive time from the relationship so they can succeed in their careers or as parents. The couple relationship is the foundation of the family and, indeed, the foundation for each individual's long-term happiness in life.

Remember: If you are successful in creating together a happy partnership, you will be married longer than you will have a job in life; and you will be married longer than you will have children living with you at home.

Many people realize only too late how easy it is for a loving relationship to slip through their fingers. Then they find themselves starting over with a new partner and a new series of challenges to face. For this reason, it is important to choose one's mate very, very carefully. Don't dive in. Think it through.

And, when you both are in agreement that it is the time to seal your partnership formally, it is essential that both individuals strive each day to make the bond a strong and loving bond.

This is done by paying attention to the fundamental strengths of a loving relationship:

- Expressing *appreciation and affection* for each other every day.
- Developing *positive communication* patterns — open and honest communication without being hurtful toward each other.
- Making a *commitment* to the relationship through thick and thin, and not falling into the trap of believing that the grass automatically will be greener in another relationship.

- Making sure that the couple has *enjoyable time together*, each and every day.
- Developing together a sense of *spiritual well-being and shared values*.
- And, *developing the ability to manage stress and crisis in life effectively*.

Finally, back to our original question: *Where do we go from here?*

If we are wise and skillful in our interactions with each other, as a couple we will continue on through life together and the bond of love will grow even stronger. We will continue to enjoy each other's company — genuinely liking to spend time together — and we will look forward to a future that will satisfy our very human needs for love, affection, and someone who genuinely cares about us.

*We will have succeeded in the lifelong and essential process of getting connected and staying connected.*

**For greater understanding** of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

## Resources

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**This publication has been peer reviewed.**

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**Index: Families  
Family Life**

Issued September 2012

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

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