

Revised and Expanded Edition

His Needs, Her Needs

BUILDING AN AFFAIR-PROOF MARRIAGE

Willard F. Harley, Jr.



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Preface

In 1978 I was asked to teach a thirteen-week course on marriage at the church I attended. The topic was: what must a couple do to stay happily married? The Christian Education Director tape-recorded the course for me.

Over the next few years, I used those tapes in my counseling practice to support the advice that I gave couples. One couple volunteered to transcribe the tapes so that I could give them to other couples in written form.

In 1984 that rough transcription made its way into the hands of an employee of the Fleming H. Revell Publishing Company, that person passed it on to the acquisitions editor, and the rest is history. It was published in 1986 with the title *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*.

Within two years of its first printing, it became a bestseller and continues to be one of the most popular books on marriage right up to this year. It's been translated into twenty-two languages and more than three million copies have sold worldwide.

Finding a publisher for this book was the easy part—it almost fell into my lap. The hard part had been finding the answer to the question, what must a couple do to stay happily married?

Learning What Makes Marriages Succeed

When I was nineteen, a married acquaintance in college told me his marriage was in trouble and asked for my advice. The advice I gave did not help—his marriage ended in divorce. But my friend’s marital failure started me thinking. What was wrong with the advice I gave? What makes some marriages succeed, and others, like my friend’s, fail?

It was 1960, and I was about to witness something that few expected—the beginning of the end of the traditional nuclear family in America. Evidence of this social disaster accumulated over the next twenty years. The divorce rate climbed from about 10 percent to over 50 percent, and the percentage of single adults would go from 6.5 percent to 20 percent. While the divorce rate finally stabilized at about 45 percent in 1980, the percentage of single adults has continued to increase right up to the present. It is currently at about 50 percent and climbing because fewer and fewer people are willing to commit themselves to one partner for life.

At the time, I didn’t know that my friend’s marital failure was part of a trend that was about to overwhelm nuclear families. I was unaware of new cultural forces that would threaten marriages as never before. Marriage counselors had it easy prior to that time because people simply didn’t divorce, regardless of how unhappy they were. But now, they were unwilling to tolerate a failed marriage. So if a marriage was to be saved, a counselor had to know what made marriages succeed. At the age of nineteen, I certainly did not have that answer.

Over the next few years, couples continued asking for my advice regarding marriage—especially after I earned a PhD degree in psychology. But I wasn’t any more successful with them than I had been with my friend years earlier.

So I decided to become a marriage “expert.” I enrolled in a two-year internship at a clinic that had one of the best reputations for marital therapy. I read books written by the most prominent marital theorists and practitioners, was supervised by the chairman of the University of Minnesota’s Department of Family Social Science, and learned the latest techniques in helping spouses communicate with respect and understanding. But even after helping couples learn to communicate effectively, I was still unable

to save their marriages. Almost everyone who came to me for help ended up like my college friend—divorced.

In my effort to become a marriage expert, though, I made a crucial discovery. I wasn't the only one failing to help couples. Almost everyone else working with me in the clinic was failing as well! My supervisor was failing, the director of the clinic was failing, and so were the other marriage counselors who worked with me.

And then I made the most astonishing discovery of all. *Most of the marital experts in America were also failing.* It was very difficult to find anyone willing to admit his or her failure, but when I had access to actual cases, I couldn't find any therapist who could prove that the counseling provided was any better than no counseling at all.

Many of these “experts” didn't even know how to make their own marriages work. Many had been divorced themselves—several times.

Marital therapy had the lowest success rate of *any* form of therapy at that time. In one 1965 study I read, less than 25 percent of those surveyed felt that marriage counseling did them any good whatsoever, and a higher percentage felt that it did them more harm than good. It seemed that marriage counseling made couples *more* likely to divorce.

What a challenge! Marriages were breaking up at an unprecedented rate, and no one knew how to help. So I stopped looking for answers from books, clinics, and experts, and started looking for them from those who came to me for answers—couples about to divorce.

I listened to spouses explain to me why they were ready to throw in the towel. I asked them, “What do you think it would take for you to be happily married again?”

The answer that came back to me was almost too simple to believe. Couple after couple explained to me that they married each other because they found each other irresistible—they were in love. But by the time they came to my office, they had lost that feeling for each other. In fact many were finding each other downright repulsive. When I asked them, “What would it take for you to be happily married again?” most couldn't imagine that ever happening. But when I persisted and couples were able to reflect on my question, the answer I heard repeated over and over was, “for us to be in love again.”

If I wanted to save marriages, I would have to learn how to restore the feeling of love.

Discovering How to Restore Romantic Love

My background as a psychologist taught me that learned associations trigger most of our emotional reactions. Whenever something is presented repeatedly with a physically induced emotion, it tends to trigger that emotion all by itself. For example, if someone flashes the color blue and gives you an electric shock and then flashes the color red and gives you a soothing back rub, eventually the color blue will tend to upset you and the color red will tend to relax you.

Applying the same principle to the feeling of love, I theorized that it might be nothing more than a learned association. If someone of the opposite sex were to be present often enough when I was feeling particularly good, the person's presence in general might be enough to trigger an incredibly good feeling—romantic love.

I could not have been more correct in my analysis. I counseled the very next couple to do whatever it took to make each other feel good and avoid doing what made each other feel bad. They were able to restore their romantic love and their marriage was saved.

From that point on, I simply asked each spouse what the other could do that would make him or her the happiest. Whatever it was, that was their first assignment. Of course, not every couple really knew what would make them happy, and not every spouse was willing to do it. So I certainly wasn't successful with every couple.

But as I perfected my understanding of what it was that husbands and wives needed from each other to trigger the feeling of love, and learned how to motivate them to meet whatever need was identified, my rate of success skyrocketed.

Before long, I was helping almost every couple fall in love and thereby avoid divorce. My method proved to be so successful that I left my teaching position and started counseling full-time. As you can imagine, there were more couples wanting help from me than I could possibly counsel. It

was then that I was asked to teach the thirteen-week course in my church: What must a couple do to stay happily married?

Twenty-five Years and Counting

Many have called this book the best book on marriage ever written. If that's true, it's not because I'm such a great writer. The poorest grades I earned in high school and college were in English and creative writing. This book has been successful because it shows couples how to restore and sustain their love for each other. And that's what a couple must do to stay happily married.

This book gets right to the heart of what makes marriages work—the feeling of love. In all my years as a marriage counselor, I've never counseled a couple in love who wanted a divorce. But I've counseled many divorcing couples with excellent communication and problem-solving skills who claim to care for each other.

Don't get me wrong—I'm very much in favor of improving communication and problem solving in marriage. And I'm certainly in favor of caring love. But unless communication and problem solving help trigger the feeling of romantic love, spouses feel cheated in their marriages and often want out.

Romantic love is a litmus test that reveals the right way for couples to demonstrate their caring love for each other. If you're in love, you are caring for each other the right way. If you're not in love, you should learn the right way to show your care. This book will teach you where to put your greatest effort to create and sustain romantic love.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to teach you how to discover, and then learn to meet, each other's most important emotional needs. When you were first married, you assumed that those needs would be met, but for a variety of reasons, you've probably become very disappointed—perhaps disappointed enough to be tempted to let someone else meet your needs.

Usually ignorance contributes to this failure because men and women have great difficulty understanding and appreciating the value of each other's needs. Men tend to try to meet needs that they would value and women do the same. But the needs of men and women are often very different and by wasting effort trying to meet the wrong needs, a couple fails to make each other happy.

Husbands' and wives' needs are so strong that when they're not met in marriage, people are tempted to go outside marriage to satisfy them. And most of the people I've counseled have yielded to the temptation to violate their sacred vow to "forsake all others."

But aside from the risk of an affair, the most important emotional needs of a husband and wife *should be met* by each other for two other reasons. First, marriage is a very special relationship. Promises are made to allow a spouse the *exclusive* right to meet some of these important needs. When they are unmet, that is unfair to the spouse who must go through life without ethical alternatives.

But there is a second reason that I will explain more clearly in the pages of this book: when you meet each other's most important emotional needs, you create and sustain a feeling of love for each other that is essential in a successful marriage. I call that feeling *romantic love* and I want you both to experience it throughout your life together.

There's more to being in love than making each other happy, however. You must also know how to avoid making each other unhappy. That's why I've written a counterpart to this book, *Love Busters: Protecting Your Marriage from Habits That Destroy Romantic Love*. If you know how to make each other happy, but fail to avoid making each other unhappy, your skill and effort will be wasted. Spouses can learn to become each other's source of greatest pleasure when they meet each other's most important emotional needs. But they can also become each other's source of unbearable pain when they don't protect each other from instincts and habits that are common to all of us.

I've also written a workbook that will help guide you through the chapters of *His Needs, Her Needs* and *Love Busters*. It will help you identify the skills you should learn, and then encourage you to practice them until they become habits. This companion book is *Five Steps to Romantic Love: A Workbook for a Healthy Marriage for Readers of Love Busters and His Needs, Her Needs*.

I encourage you and your spouse to read these books together, complete the questionnaires, and answer the questions at the end of each chapter. You might even use two different-colored highlighters as you read, so each of you can let the other know what is most important to you. Keep these books in a place where you can refer to them regularly, because you should be reminded of the lessons they will teach you.

How Affair-Proof Is Your Marriage?

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When a man and woman marry, they share high expectations. They commit themselves to meeting certain intense and intimate needs in each other on an *exclusive* basis. Each agrees to “forsake all others,” giving each other the exclusive right to meet these intimate needs. That does not imply that all needs are to be met by a spouse, but that there are a few basic needs that most of us strictly reserve for the marriage bond. Most people expect their spouse to meet these special needs, since they have agreed not to allow anyone else to meet them.

For example, when a man agrees to an exclusive relationship with his wife, he depends on her to meet his sexual need. If she fulfills this need, he finds in her a continuing source of intense pleasure, and his love grows stronger. However, if his need goes unmet, quite the opposite happens. He begins to associate her with frustration. If the frustration continues, he may decide she “just doesn’t like sex” and he may try to make the best of it. But his strong need for sex remains unfulfilled. His commitment to an exclusive sexual relationship with his wife has left him with the choice of sexual frustration or infidelity. Some men never give in; they manage to make the best of it over the years. But many *do* succumb to

the temptation of an affair. I have talked to hundreds of them in my counseling offices.

Another example is a wife who gives her husband the exclusive right to meet her need for intimate conversation. Whenever they talk together with a depth of honesty and openness not found in conversation with others, she finds him to be the source of her greatest pleasure. But when he refuses to give her the undivided attention she craves, he becomes associated with her greatest frustration. Some women simply go through their married lives frustrated, but others cannot resist the temptation to let someone else meet this important emotional need. And when they do, an affair is the likely outcome.

His Needs Are Not Hers

When a husband and wife come to me for counsel, my first goal is to help them identify their most important emotional needs—what each of them can do for each other to make them happiest and most content. Over the years, I have repeatedly asked the question, “What could your spouse do for you that would make you the happiest?” I’ve been able to classify most of their responses into ten emotional needs—admiration, affection, conversation, domestic support, family commitment, financial support, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment.

Obviously the way to keep a husband and wife happily married is for each of them to meet the needs that are most important to the other. But when I conducted all these interviews, I discovered the reason this is such a difficult assignment. Nearly every time I asked couples to list their needs according to their priority, men listed them one way and women the opposite way. Of the ten basic emotional needs, the five listed as most important by men were usually the five least important for women, and vice versa.

What an insight! No wonder husbands and wives have so much difficulty meeting each other’s needs. They are willing to do for each other what they appreciate the most, but it turns out that their efforts are misdirected because what they appreciate most, their spouses appreciate least!

Pay careful attention to the next point I'm about to make, because it's one of the most misunderstood aspects of my program. Every person is unique. While men *on the average* pick a particular five emotional needs as their most important and women *on the average* pick another five, *any individual* can and does pick any combination of the basic ten. So although I have identified the most important emotional needs of the average man and woman, I don't know the emotional needs of any particular husband and wife. And since I'm in the business of saving individual marriages, not average marriages, you should identify the combinations of needs that are unique to your marriage. That's the reason I have provided a brief summary of the ten basic needs in appendix A of this book and the Emotional Needs Questionnaire in appendix B. These tools will help you identify the most important emotional needs unique to you and your spouse.

Often the failure of husbands and wives to meet each other's emotional needs is simply due to ignorance of each other's needs and not selfish unwillingness to be considerate. By learning to understand yourself and your spouse as totally unique people with particular emotional needs, you can identify your needs and communicate them to each other.

After each other's five most important emotional needs have been identified, the next step is to become an expert in meeting your spouse's needs. That doesn't mean painfully gritting your teeth and making the best of something you hate. One spouse should never suffer to meet the emotional needs of the other. Instead, it means learning how to enjoy meeting emotional needs that are low on your list of priorities. In each chapter of this book, I'll offer suggestions as to how that objective can be achieved.

When spouses fail to meet each other's most important emotional needs, I have seen, strikingly and alarmingly, how they tend to choose the same pattern to satisfy their unmet needs: the extramarital affair. People wander into affairs with astonishing regularity, in spite of whatever strong moral or religious convictions they may hold. Why? When a spouse lacks fulfillment of any of the basic needs, it creates a thirst that must be quenched. If changes do not take place within the marriage to care for that need, the individual will face the powerful temptation to fill it outside of marriage.

If we are to make our marriages affair-proof, we cannot hide our heads in the sand. The spouse who believes his or her partner is "different" and,

despite unmet needs, would never take part in an affair may receive a devastating shock someday. Instead, we need to understand the warning signs that an affair could happen, how such liaisons may begin, and how to strengthen the weak areas of a marriage in the face of such a relationship.

What Is an Affair?

Usually an affair consists of two people who become involved in an extra-marital relationship that combines sexual lovemaking with feelings of deep love. However, it is possible to have an affair that involves only lovemaking or only the feeling of love toward someone outside of marriage. Although these types of affairs may also cause deep problems in marriage, my experience shows that they are more easily dealt with than the relationship that combines sex (usually very passionate sex) with the feeling of love. That relationship threatens the marriage to its core, because the lovers experience deep intimacy, and the affair meets at least one of the five most important emotional needs of the spouse outside the exclusive marital relationship. When one spouse discovers the other has broken the commitment of faithfulness, the marriage is shattered.

How Affairs Usually Start

An affair usually begins as a friendship. Your spouse may know the person who eventually becomes your lover as the husband or wife in a couple you consider “best friends.” Or your lover may be someone you have met at work, church, or a community function.

Conversation draws you together. At first you talk about various topics of interest, but over time you begin to share personal problems with each other. As you spend more time together, you discuss more intimate problems, and eventually the problems you discuss reflect unmet emotional needs. As your friendship deepens, you start giving each other mutual support and encouragement, especially in regard to your unmet needs. Life is difficult. Many people become extremely disillusioned about the way their lives are turning out. When they find someone encouraging and supportive, the attraction toward that person acts as a powerful magnet.

Sooner or later, you find yourself in bed with your encouraging and supportive friend. It just seems to “happen.” You don’t intend to do it, and neither does your friend.

Very often the friendship that grows into an affair is very illogical. A wife will get a look at her husband’s lover and exclaim, “How in the world could he be interested in *her*?” When a husband discovers his wife’s lover, he wonders, “What could she be thinking?”

But the attraction is not logical; it’s emotional. Based on the facts, the relationship stands no chance of succeeding, and very rarely does. What matters at the moment, however, is that the lover has been able to meet an unfulfilled need. He or she is regarded as the most caring person the wayward spouse has ever met, and a reciprocal desire to care for the lover is felt very deeply.

When you become involved in an affair, you and your lover seem to have an unconditional willingness to meet each other’s emotional needs. This mutual desire to bring each other happiness at all costs builds an affair into one of the most satisfying and intimate relationships either of you have ever known. You respond sexually with ease and passion. You feel sure that no one else could ever be as exciting a partner as your new secret lover.

As the intensity of your mutual care and passion increases, you discover that you are caught in a trap of your own making. You lose all sense of judgment as you literally become addicted to each other in a relationship built on fantasy, not reality.

But as I mentioned earlier, the relationship is not logical; it’s emotional. It’s a fantasy. As you and your lover plan where and when to meet for passionate sessions of lovemaking, you leave the realities of everyday living behind.

It Could Happen to You

As I’ve discussed affairs and how they start, I may have offended you, at least a little bit, by using the second-person pronoun. But I used *you* for a specific reason. While most people would deny they could ever get involved in an affair, the hard truth is that, under certain conditions, any of us can fall victim.

It isn’t particularly immoral people who fall into an affair. On the contrary, very normal men and women may get involved through a deceptively

simple process. First, you let someone outside of marriage meet one of your most important emotional needs, say, intimate conversation. You may feel that there's no problem just talking to someone, especially if your own spouse doesn't seem interested in the problems you face.

Next, you find this friend to be particularly concerned for your welfare, and you begin to feel the same way toward your friend. The conversation turns to affection—the expression of care for each other.

From there, you begin to explain to each other what you need most in life, and you both express a desire to meet those needs for each other. The lovemaking that results seems so effortless and so natural that you believe you were made for each other. You think you've found your soul mate.

In some cases the process may take only a few weeks; in other cases it will take many years. But it happens with astonishing regularity. I have seen it happening in the lives of thousands of couples throughout my career. Sadly enough, it seems to make little difference what a person professes by way of religious commitment or moral values.

Often, in my early years as a counselor, I felt dismayed to see people with strong religious and moral commitments becoming involved in extramarital affairs. I am a church member myself, with strong convictions about the Christian faith. How could people who claim to have the same commitments go astray? Did their faith lack power?

But the more I dealt with unfaithful Christian clients and other people with deep moral convictions, the more I understood the power of our basic emotional needs. I came to see my own weaknesses and the strength of my own needs. When I married my wife, Joyce, I determined to be totally committed to her and to my marriage. I have remained true to my vows for the forty-eight years of our marriage, but not because I am some kind of iron-willed paragon of virtue. It's because Joyce and I have been realistic about meeting each other's important emotional needs. And we have never let someone outside of our marriage meet those needs.

In short, your needs keep score. To help you understand how this works, I'd like to introduce you to the Love Bank—an inner scoring device you probably never realized you had.