

# EFFECTIVE MARRIAGE COUNSELING

The *His Needs, Her Needs* Guide  
to Helping Couples

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PART 1

# THEORY

*The Harley Model for Marital Satisfaction*

# 1

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## A Simple and Effective Model

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Throughout recorded history, scientists have tried to understand our universe—and everything in it—by creating models that predict future events. They assume that they understand the present correctly if they are able to accurately predict the future. Predictability is, and has always been, an essential ingredient of a good scientific model, and the model that best predicts the future is the model that's generally recognized as superior.

But there's a second rule scientists use in creating models: the simpler the better. If two models both predict the future accurately, but one requires fewer assumptions, the simpler one wins.

One of the most cited applications of this rule can be found in models of planetary motion. In the second century AD, Ptolemy created a model of planetary motion in which the Earth was the center of the solar system. Fifteen centuries later, Copernicus put forth a system where the sun was the center. Amazingly enough, both models accurately predicted planetary motion, but Ptolemy used more assumptions and much more complex mathematical formulas than those used by Copernicus.

Today we can observe the Earth rotating around the sun from satellites, but in the days of Copernicus, it was the simplicity of his model that convinced scientists that it was the best.

## The Science of Marital Satisfaction

I've spent most of my adult lifetime trying to understand marital satisfaction. What must a couple do to be happily married? And what are the fewest assumptions necessary to accurately predict that outcome? In other words, what is the simplest model I could find to successfully predict marital satisfaction?

I had a special advantage over most other scientists studying the same topic. I was experiencing marital satisfaction. My wife, Joyce, and I have been happily married for more than forty-seven years. Furthermore, my parents were also happily married, as were Joyce's parents. What had all of us done to make our marriages successful? And what was the simplest way to express it?

All scientists begin with assumptions based on observation and common sense, and that's where I started as well. I began with assumptions used by my father, who was also a psychologist and marriage counselor.

My father counseled couples directly from the Bible, using various texts to encourage them to love each other sacrificially and unconditionally. He thought that his sacrificial and unconditional love for my mother is what made their marriage successful, and that assumption was one of the foundations of his counseling model.

Commitment in marriage was another basic ingredient for a successful marriage, according to my father. Once married, a couple was forever married from God's perspective. If a couple was committed to each other for life, my father believed, their marriage would be more successful.

My father's approach to marriage counseling might have helped some couples to improve their marriages in the 40s and 50s. But it was 1960 when I had my first marriage counseling experience. I was only nineteen and not yet married, but a friend in college wanted my advice. He had been married for only a few months, and it was not

going well. So just as my father had done with so many couples, I stressed commitment, unconditional love, and personal sacrifice as the basic elements of a successful marriage.

By the end of the year, my friend was divorced.

## Changing Times

I was about to witness a change in our culture that would threaten the nuclear family for decades to come. The value of selflessness was being replaced by selfishness. The “Me Generation” had been born.

My efforts to convince couples that they should learn selflessness and be committed to each other for life didn’t work. In almost every couple I counseled, there was at least one spouse who felt that selflessness and commitment made no sense at all. That spouse wanted out. And in most cases, the other spouse wasn’t in the mood to be selfless or committed after being the victim of neglect, abuse, infidelity, and other indignities. Even the pastor of my church, whose wife had an affair with the choir director, wouldn’t follow my advice to “return evil with good.” He heaped abuse on his wife until she finally divorced him.

But couples’ lack of motivation to be selfless wasn’t the only problem. In the course of my counseling, I was able to come across a few people who really did try to be selfless and committed to their marriage, and even then it didn’t always work. The unconditional love of a neglected wife usually left her permanently neglected. The forgiving husband of an unfaithful wife was often the victim of yet another affair. And abused spouses experienced increased danger of abuse when they tried to respond with selfless love.

I was baffled. I couldn’t motivate most couples to do the right thing, but even those I *did* motivate didn’t have an improved relationship. Since I concluded I was not cut out for the job, I stopped offering marital advice for a while.

After I had earned a PhD in psychology in 1967 and become a college professor, couples kept asking me to help them with their marriages. I wanted to but I knew my skills and assumptions were inadequate. So I decided to become formally trained in the most successful method of marital therapy I could find.

The model I used was very popular at the time and still is. It was based on the assumption that marital satisfaction grew from effective conflict resolution. If a couple would learn to resolve their conflicts the right way, their marriages would be successful.

So I was trained to teach couples communication skills. They would learn to listen to each other and to respect each other's opinions. Eventually their discussions would lead to common ground and their conflicts would be resolved. This model fit the perspective of a selfish generation, because it focused attention on learning how to get what you want in marriage.

And some couples *were* helped by this technique. But even as I became increasingly successful in helping couples communicate effectively, I also witnessed incontrovertible evidence that good communication in marriage was *not* the magic bullet. Some of the couples I counseled learned to communicate better than Joyce and I ever would, but they still ended up divorced. In fact the clinic director, who created the program and taught me how to counsel this way, was divorced by his wife shortly after I completed my internship.

By this time, Joyce and I had been happily married for thirteen years. During those years I had completed a PhD program, we had two children, we had moved ten times, and Joyce's father had died unexpectedly. Yet through it all, we were still in love. What kept our marriage successful when others were failing at an unprecedented rate in 1975?

## Changing the Model

There were several assumptions I could have made regarding the reasons for my marital success. We were committed to each other for life, we loved each other unconditionally, and we were willing to sacrifice our happiness for each other. We also communicated well. But my counseling experience had taught me that these conditions didn't necessarily guarantee success. So what else might it be? And how could I use this information to save marriages?

I went right to the source of the problem—couples who were in trouble—and I asked them questions. Why were they divorcing? And what would it take to turn their marriages around?



I was looking for something beyond their lack of commitment, their lack of willingness to sacrifice, and their poor communication skills. And eventually I found it. Time and time again they told me that the reason they were divorcing was they had lost their feeling of love for each other. Couple after couple said they were unwilling to remain in a loveless marriage. I would ask, “If you were in love again, would you reconsider?” Most said they might but they didn’t believe anything could restore their love.

Here was a perspective I hadn’t considered. I had assumed that the feeling of love that Joyce and I had for each other (which I later called “romantic love”) was the *result* of our commitment and sacrificial love. Could it be the *cause*? Were we committed *because* we were in love? Were we willing to sacrifice *because* of our feelings toward each other?

There was an easy way to test this hypothesis. I could teach couples how to fall in love with each other. If romantic love was the cause of a successful marriage, when a marriage counselor taught a couple to fall in love, the marriage would become fulfilling. The couple would then report having a renewed commitment and willingness to sacrifice for each other.

A search of the current literature and consultation with many marital therapists provided no encouragement for my new model. Loss of romantic love had never been seriously considered as a cause for divorce. In fact literally every professional therapist I consulted told me that romantic love could not survive in marriage. They told me that it would last only a few months, maybe as long as three years into a marriage at best. So if a couple wanted a successful marriage, they would have to accept the loss of love as being natural and inevitable. To assume anything else was an illusion, they believed.

Well then, what was wrong with Joyce and me? We’d been married thirteen years and *we* were still in love. Had we set a world record? Not possible, since my parents were also still in love, and they’d been married more than thirty-five years. When professional therapists told me romantic love could not be sustained, I knew they were wrong.

To make a long story short, over a period of two years, I learned how to create the feeling of love in couples who had lost that feeling.

I even designed a test to measure romantic love and have been using that test ever since. My history of failure as a marriage counselor turned into a future of success.

I've written this book to explain how you can also save marriages by helping couples create and sustain their love for each other. Whether you are a student taking a course in marital therapy, a marital therapist, a clergyman who counsels troubled couples, or simply a concerned layman who knows a couple who is about to divorce, I want to show you how you can be just as successful as I've been. In the rest of this book, I'll explain the model I've developed and will describe some of the techniques that derive from this model.

My lifetime goal has been to save as many marriages as I can. For this reason I want to help you learn to use a model that's both the simplest and most effective for predicting marital satisfaction, one that's proven to be successful when it's followed, and one that will show you how to help couples fall in love and stay in love.