

Healthy Individuals Create Healthy Marriages

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[Strengthening Your Marriage](#)



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Standing in the kitchen, I heard the text notification on my phone. When I read the message from my friend, my heart dropped. We had both walked through hard seasons in our marriages. Mine survived — it appeared from the message that hers would not. Tears formed, and I just wanted to cry.

The "old Jill" in me started up the stairs to cry in private. The "new Jill" stopped and thought of another option.

My husband, Mark, and I had been pursuing relational health in our marriage, requiring that both of us get serious about our emotional health as individuals. I had recently come to understand that my tendency to hide my pain had been causing my husband to feel I didn't need him. I was discovering that sharing my pain and allowing him to comfort me was not only healthy for me, but it was healthy for our marriage.

So I mustered my courage, walked into the room where Mark was reading, showed him the text I'd received and then crawled into his lap and cried. He later said that that moment together was one of the most powerful moments he'd ever experienced in our 32 years of married life.

Healthy individuals make a healthy marriage

A thriving marriage is made of two thriving individuals building a relationship together. That would explain why the health of our marriages is ultimately determined by our individual health. We often talk about the importance of physical fitness, but we also need to be diligent about spiritual, emotional and mental fitness.

The Christian life is all about maturity, and marriage offers a wonderful environment for maturity to develop. If we will embrace the feedback we receive, get serious about our personal contribution to the relationship and pursue health in all areas of our lives, then our marriages will have plenty of opportunity to mature.

But where do we start? By making one right choice at a time. You and I have growth opportunities presented to us every day — we simply need to learn to recognize them and make wise self-care choices along the way.

Healthy individuals require self-care

Emotional health improves when we understand our emotional makeup and tend to our emotional needs. For instance, I am an introvert who refuels by being alone. My husband is an extrovert who refuels by being with people. I've had to learn to carve out alone times for myself, and Mark has had to learn not to take my need for space as a personal rejection. In the same way, Mark has learned to embrace his need to be with people, and I've learned to occasionally accompany him to a social gathering when I'd rather be home reading a book. We're learning to understand ourselves, and each other, in hopes of successfully blending our distinct personalities.

As married couples, we can actively pursue emotional health as we address individual heart issues such as bitterness, unforgiveness, blame, lust, idolatry, pride, control and self-sufficiency. These sins tend to creep into our lives and too often we defend our right to hold on to them. Acknowledging sin for what it is, confessing it to God and then making a U-turn (repentance) to head in a different direction are important aspects of being healthy.

Another important part of emotional health in married life has to do with evaluating the positives and negatives of our families of origin. As husbands and wives, we each need to consider what we may have inadvertently carried into our marriage. Mark's family handled conflict with rage and anger, while my family never seemed to have any conflict. Both family scenarios failed to teach healthy

conflict resolution skills, so Mark and I had to "go to school" on handling conflict in a healthy way. Our learning process included reading books on the subject, attending marriage conferences and seeking out a Christian counselor to help us do the hard work of changing our conflict and communication habits.

Mental health determines how we think, feel and act as we cope with everyday life. Philippians 4:8 reminds us that we need to pay attention to what we feed our mind: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Reading, listening to teaching (podcasts, sermons, conferences), pursuing positive friendships and engaging in stimulating conversations can all be important parts of mental *and* marital health.

Mental health greatly affects relationships. When we work to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5), we are working to have a healthy mental process that will ultimately benefit our relationship with our husband or wife.

Mark had a traumatic childhood that has required him to work hard to find healing. Because he has struggled with depression for much of his life, I recognize that when he tends to his [depression](#) then he's also tending to our marriage. I'm grateful he's been willing to pursue counseling that required digging deep so he could trade the hurts of the past for the hope of the future.

When we pursue mental health, it helps us unpack the personal baggage that we inadvertently bring to marriage. Mark's traumatic childhood not only robbed him of joy but also caused all kinds of challenges in our marriage. As both of us have worked to "unpack our baggage" and become mentally and emotionally healthy as individuals, our marriage has benefited as conflict has decreased, communication has improved and joy and intimacy have increased.

Physical health develops when we [take care of the body](#) God has given us. [1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#) tells us that our body is a temple with which we are to glorify God. In light of the fact that God designed us with the need to feed, move, hydrate and rest our bodies, we have to ask ourselves how well we're doing with each of those responsibilities.

Most of us have no problem feeding our body. The challenge is in feeding it healthy food choices. It's best if we keep fresh fruit and vegetables on hand for meals and snacks, opt for lean meats, limit sweets to special occasions, select

water or tea over soda and limit our intake of artificial sweeteners. These small dietary adjustments can help feed our bodies the healthy foods they need.

Exercise is a very important part of taking care of our bodies, too. Aerobic exercise not only burns calories, but it keeps the heart healthy and strong. Taking a brisk walk with our spouse after dinner each night can strengthen our body *and* our marriage. Strength training burns calories, increases metabolism, increases bone density, strengthens muscles and improves balance. Throw in some push-ups and sit-ups after the walk and we'll be headed in the right direction — together.

Drinking 8 ounces of water eight times a day will help to keep energy up and the body functioning well. Throw in a slice of lemon, lime, orange or even cucumber, to add flavor so everyone is more likely to drink the water they need.

Finally, our bodies are designed to regenerate during sleep. Sleep is for the body like a reboot is for a computer. Just going to sleep 30 minutes earlier than usual can make a difference in self-care. Another important part of resting is relaxing and replacing work with play. Whether it's sitting on the porch swing watching the sun set, playing tag with the kids, laughing with friends or taking some much-needed vacation time, stepping away from the busy pace of life is an important part of caring for our individual selves — and ultimately caring for our marriages.

Physical health provides so many marital benefits! Several years ago I chose to lose some weight. I was amazed at how much more comfortable I was with sexual intimacy after getting healthy. In addition to improving the physical attraction we have for one another, caring for our bodies also gives us the energy we need for family relationships and everyday activities.

Spiritual health weaves itself into our physical, emotional and mental health, and there are many practices that can help to strengthen us spiritually. Bible reading often reminds us to take care of our body, to address issues of the heart and to be intentional about the direction of our thoughts. Prayer keeps us talking with God and puts our anxious thoughts in His competent hands. Hebrews 10:24-25 reminds us that spiritual health also grows when we spend time with other believers: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." Attending church, being part of a small group or meeting a friend who encourages us in our faith are all valuable elements of tending to our spiritual health. Reading Christian books, magazines and blogs and listening to Christian podcasts and teaching are also practical ways to pursue spiritual health.

Both Mark and I were uncomfortable praying together when we first got married, but we knew it was important to our well-being. It took time to get comfortable with that kind of [spiritual intimacy](#), but we committed to working at it, and we've found that prayer needs to be so much more than just an afterthought — both in our personal lives *and* in our marital life.

We need to keep in mind that God can use marriage to make us more like Jesus every day. As we mature and pursue spiritual health, we weed out selfishness and increase forgiveness. We serve one another more freely. We accept accountability. We offer grace and love sacrificially. A marriage that is marked by love, forgiveness, grace, service and sacrifice is a marriage that is likely to thrive even in the hard times.

Self-care is not selfish

Whether working out at the gym, getting enough sleep, pursuing counseling or reading the Bible, couples who do individual care ultimately do marital care because both husbands and wives grow stronger and healthier overall. And common sense suggests that healthy relationships emerge when healthy people come together in healthy, positive ways.

So, self-care is not selfish. It's an important part of being a healthy individual and having a healthy marriage. No matter how long we've been married, we can continue to grow in our understanding of our spouse, our God and ourselves. I'm grateful that even after 32 years of marriage, I can still recognize growth opportunities that not only help me to be a better me, but they help us to be a better "us."

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