

Grow Your Marriage Curriculum Leaders Introduction

Why We're Here

We are here because we haven't found any marriage small group curriculum designed for seekers in mind, period. As divorce rates continue to skyrocket and our cultural value of marriage continues to rapidly decline, we can't help but conclude that a small group curriculum focused on improving marriages is a huge need among non-believers and nominal Christians in our community. This curriculum is in the spirit of what Ravi Zacharias says: "We have to enter through the back door of peoples' hearts because the front door is heavily guarded."

General Audience

This curriculum is intentionally focused on reaching non-Christian couples. Our desire is to see this material used as a conduit for further study or openness to a small group or church invitation. We do not plan on making the gospel prominent in a lesson, but rather, opening the door for that possibility at the leader's discretion. The material is designed with the gospel in mind, gradually getting deeper as the weeks progress. Scripture is used sparingly but intentionally, always printed on single sheets rather than requiring the use of a Bible, as we want to assume no prior small group experience or Bible study whatsoever. Nor do we assume that participants have any value for scripture. Our goal is simply to show the relevance the Bible could have to their marriage, and potentially other areas of their lives.

Who This Is For

This study is designed to be used with a broad range of people, but it may not be appropriate for everyone. The target audience is around -7 to -1 on the Engle Scale (see right). This is not a study that will likely woo a hostile atheist, for example. Yet, others who may not fit the target audience are welcome to attend at the leader's discretion. Generally, we imagine these groups will be somewhat homogeneous, friends of the leader and co-leader, with natural relational connection to the group. It is our general feeling that groups consisting of couples in similar life situations (engaged, young marrieds, couples with young children, couples with older children, etc.) will most easily bond and enjoy what the curriculum has to offer.


Who This Isn't For

This curriculum is not designed to be a study for Christians. Nor is it for singles looking for relational advice, gay couples, couples looking for marriage counseling, or couples committed only to co-habitation. However, as always, the group leader has the final say and in some senses must have the discernment to invite those who would benefit most from the group.

Leaders/ Facilitators

Leaders should be experienced facilitators who agree to undergo specific training to lead these marriage studies. Ideally we would have a leading couple and an apprentice, or co-leading couple, who agree to go over the week's material together in advance. Leading couples should also have a good marriage, a basic knowledge of apologetics, be spiritually-minded, and be able and willing to pursue spiritual interest of participants in a one-on-one or couple-on-couple setting outside the group as needed. Additionally, as this group is primarily discussion driven, leaders ought to be comfortable with facilitating discussion rather than lecturing most of the time. This requires active listening and the ability to foster a healthy relational atmosphere.

| MAN'S RESPONSE | |
|----------------|---|
| -8 | Awareness of Supreme Being but no Effective Knowledge of Gospel |
| -7 | Initial Awareness of Gospel |
| -6 | Awareness of Fundamentals of Gospel |
| -5 | Grasp of Implications of Gospel |
| -4 | Positive attitude Toward Gospel |
| -3 | Personal Problem Recognition |
| -2 | DECISION TO ACT |
| -1 | Repentance and Faith in Christ |
| NEW CREATURE | |
| +1 | Post-Decision Evaluation |
| +2 | Incorporation into Body |
| +3 | Conceptual and Behavioural Growth |
| +4 | Communion with God |
| +5 | Stewardship |
| ● | Reproduction |
| ● | Internally (gifts, etc.) |
| ● | Externally (witness, social, action, etc.) |



Follow Up

This group will very likely foster a sense of community and relational depth that many haven't experienced before, so it would be wise for group leaders to prepare for future possibilities/ what's next. Do you agree to do another guided marriage study together? Do you try to graft the group into a church group? Do you simply turn it into a Bible study? Be thinking about what would work best for your group as the weeks progress.

This curriculum is not for reproduction or distribution.

This material is for trained leaders only. As the material here does not include a participants guide, know that the bulk of the discussion rests the leader's preparation. We do include handouts to be used at various points, so it would be best for all leaders/ co-leaders to familiarize themselves with the material prior to the formation of the group.

General Overview

Objective: To help couples develop healthier understanding of themselves and sacrificial love for each other, and to help cultivate interest in & need for God

Size of Group: No more than 12-14 people

Duration: 4 weeks for no more than 2 hours per week

Group Format: These groups tend to be best facilitated with food- perhaps appetizers and wine- to get conversation flowing and for people to be comfortable. We anticipate the material taking 1 to 1.5 hours per week, but session lengths to be around 2 hours to allow for food/ drinks/ arrival/ settling in. Lessons will include short bits of teaching, lots of discussion, some interactive worksheets & media, and action steps.

Lesson Format:

1. Ice breaker
2. Review from previous week
3. Discussion
4. Short teaching & discussion
5. Action steps/ homework

Topics

Week 1: What's love got to do with it? - *Barriers to true love and intimacy*
Week 2: Communication: Honey, are you listening? -
Recognizing and avoiding communication barriers
Week 3: Dealing with Conflict - *Conflict styles & how to fight fair*
Week 4: Forgiveness: Moving Away from Selfishness -
Offering & receiving forgiveness- the cure for selfish relating

Synopsis for Invitations

In order to gather guests to your group, it may be helpful to have nice invitations to pass out to couples in your neighborhood or at work. In our experience, a face to face invitation followed up with a written invitation later is most effective. A sample invitation is included with the curriculum handouts.

Some information you will want to include will be:

- This is a marriage study, designed for all married couples
- This is a wonderful opportunity to strengthen your marriage and get to know other couples in the neighborhood or around the office
- It will be for 4 weeks (include dates)
- Allow 2 hours per week (include times)
- Meeting location & address of home
- Drinks & appetizers will be served
- Topics covered include love, selfishness, communication, conflict, and forgiveness

Preparing for Your Group

Location

By nature, these groups tend to work best in someone's home, usually a group member. When thinking about where you could host your group, try and pick a location with the following elements:

- It should be centrally located to participants
- The home should be able to comfortably host 4-7 couples
- There is a TV/ DVD player in the meeting room

Materials

Here is a checklist of things you may need to bring, prepare, or set up for group each week:

- That week's handouts printed for each participant
- TV/ DVD setup with any applicable DVD for the week
- Snacks & Drinks
- Nametags
- Pens
- The first week, bring an email signup list and a snack signup

Before Each Session

Each week, you will need to monitor group progress and prepare for the following lesson. Plan to spend around 2-3 hours per week in preparation for each session.

- Pray - No truly spiritual work can happen unless it is birthed and bathed in prayer! Pray for conversations, for each group member specifically, and that God would reveal to you any deeper needs of the group.
- Review content for the upcoming week. Spend time really reviewing the material, going over it with your spouse, and practicing teaching the lesson. You should know the material fluently by the time the group convenes and be able to answer any questions.
- Email group members mid-week to remind them to do the homework, where and when the next meeting is, and who is signed up for snack and drinks.
- Be sure to copy off the weekly handouts for each group member.

Frequently Asked Questions

Where is the best place to host the meeting?

Homes that can seat 4-7 couples, are somewhat centrally located, and have a TV & DVD player in the meeting room are ideal.

Why is reviewing the group guidelines important?

The Grow Your Marriage small group guidelines are essential as they get everyone to commit to equal levels of responsibility and activity. Some of the benefits of the group covenant are:

- It will give the group an agreed upon purpose/vision
- It is a road map to get to the destination
- It is a framework for managing potential conflict
- It creates healthy boundaries in which to function
- It eliminates unspoken expectations

What DVD clips can be used in the lessons? Where can I find them?

The *What is Love?* DVD can be purchased for \$3 by contacting Rachel at the Search Office (rachel@searchcol.org / 614.486.5437). It is also available for viewing and download free of charge at: <http://vimeo.com/searchcolumbus/whatislove>

Other suggested video clips are not provided due to copyright law. However, by obtaining the source media personally, you are of course free to use them for the groups.

How should I deal with the couple who gets into an argument during the group?

Help them practice the Active Listening with each other as covered in Week 2. This will help them to better clarify and understand what the other spouse is feeling and thinking. Another option is to put the disagreement in the "Parking Lot" to come back to outside of group.

What is the best way to invite couples to come to the group?

We recommend that you invite participants personally, face to face. If possible, hand them a flyer at that time. Then, we recommend following up with an email or phone call asking them to RSVP. You might say something like this:

"Emily, I wanted to ask you... my husband and I are hosting a 4-week marriage small group at our house. We'll talk about love, conflict, personality differences, forgiveness, things that come up in every marriage. It should be fun, we're planning on having drinks and appetizers every week. We were going to try and start it next Wednesday from 6-8, and I was really hoping you and Jim might be interested. I've enjoyed getting to know you around the office and thought it would be a great way to get to know you both a bit more. Why don't you talk to him and get back to me? Here's a paper with more information you can show him."

What do we do when the four weeks are over, and the group wants to keep meeting?

In our experience, this is a very common situation... a great problem to have! We have a few recommendations:

- Invite involved couples to your home church/ small group
- Begin a Conversation & Cuisine series on marriage & family topics to which you could invite others
- Study Foundations, a Search Ministries study (with workbooks & leader guide) that details the basics of starting a relationship with God and what it means to be a Christian
- Keep meeting, potentially with the idea to graft in other couples along the way, and use a more explicitly Christian study curriculum or apologetics material

How can I purchase this curriculum?

The curriculum is available to purchase by contacting Rachel at Search Ministries (rachel@searchcol.org/ 614.486.5437). It includes the leader's guide and the password to download soft copies of the worksheets and handouts. Physical DVDs of the *What Is Love?* clip and handouts are available to purchase for an extra charge.

4 Distress Responses

Adapted from material by Dr. Jeff Baker. Used with Permission.

Discuss the characteristics of each conflict style below. Take notes about the way each style can be used positively and negatively, selfishly and unselfishly.



Lion: Attack

Lions attack and address conflict in the moment. They are aware of their feelings, are expressive, and are out to win at any cost. They believe their way is the right way.



Possum: Surrender

A possum is repressed and tends to be non-involved in conflict, avoiding it through passivity. By repressing their emotions, they hope the problem will just go away. They smile on the outside and are miserable on the inside. Often known as “nice people.”



Rabbit: Run

Rabbits run away at the first sign of conflict. They don't want to get involved, so they tend to simply withdraw.



Deer in the Headlights: Freeze

A deer in the headlights person is taken off guard by conflict, and as such, tend to respond passively in the moment. They process feelings and thoughts later, deferring conflict until it has been analyzed.

Lion

Lions attack and address conflict in the moment. They are aware of their feelings, are expressive, and are out to win at any cost. They believe their way is the right way.

Positives:

- Deals with problems immediately and head-on
- Points out the “elephants in the room” and expresses truth readily
- Less likely to brood over past events
- Can be very controlled, but insistent

Negatives:

- Often demanding and cynical
- Doesn’t always allow time for others to process
- Tends toward frequent inappropriate anger and emotional extremes

Selfish Manifestations

- Can be aggressive and demanding- “my way or the highway”
- Inflexible in negotiation
- Often attacks other parties/ can be emotionally manipulative

Unselfish Manifestations

- Assertively seeks to understand other points of view
- Seeks quick resolution acceptable to all parties
- Attacks the problem and not the person
- Learns to be flexible & gracious
- Willing to stand up as advocates for a cause

Possum

A possum is repressed and tends to be non-involved in conflict, avoiding it through passivity (playing dead to survive). By repressing their emotions, they hope the problem will just go away. They smile on the outside and are miserable on the inside. Often known as “nice people.”

Positives:

- Tend to be gracious and “take it”- high tolerance to pain
- Often peacemakers
- Don’t exacerbate or incite conflict
- Willing to admit fault
- Very intuitive, can see conflict coming before others can

Negatives:

- Tend to get hurt easily, stuffing hurt & anger down
- Often lie about true feelings to “keep the peace”
- Feels helpless, hopeless, and worthless, often leading to depression

Selfish Manifestations

- Won’t speak truth even when necessary (too afraid of consequences)
- Repressed emotions & dishonesty prevents emotional intimacy
- Harbors bitterness

Unselfish Manifestations

- Willing to compromise & find a win-win
- Willing to express true feelings without fear of other’s reaction
- Learns to speak truth about other’s harmful behaviors when necessary

Rabbit

Rabbits run away at the first sign of conflict. They don’t want to get involved, so they tend to simply withdraw. Withdrawal can be mental (changing the topic), emotional (refusing to talk), or physical.

Positives:

- Often avoids unnecessary emotional turmoil
- Allows other parties to cool down by giving space
- Doesn’t allow others to abuse or mistreat him/her

Negatives:

- Doesn’t address or resolve conflict, avoids reality of serious problems
- Avoidance leads to insecurity in relationships and lack of intimacy
- Often unaware of true emotional response to situation
- Can tend toward self-medicating behavior

Selfish Manifestations

- In denial of problems with self, spouse, or the relationship
- Avoid consequences of other’s or own behavior
- Avoids conflict discussion and resolution as a result

Unselfish Manifestations

- Learns clear boundaries about when to flee and when to confront
- Accepts reality and admits faults with self and others
- Willing to negotiate and resolve grievances

Deer in the Headlights

A deer in the headlights person is taken off guard by conflict, and as such, tend to respond passively in the moment. They process feelings and thoughts later, deferring conflict until it has been analyzed.

Positives:

- Doesn’t react emotionally in the moment, but processes later
- Can appear to be a safe person, a good listener
- Doesn’t retaliate- not retributive

Negatives:

- Tends to ignore serious problems out of fear and anxiety
- Uncomfortable and unsure how to negotiate or address conflict
- Often it doesn’t register they’ve been attacked until later

Selfish Manifestations

- Silent in the moment- often givers of the silent treatment
- Allows fear to take over, stays very guarded- destroys intimacy
- Allows later reflection to breed bitterness and discontent

Unselfish Manifestations

- Learn to communicate and reveal true self to other party
- Willing to negotiate and come to mutual resolution
- Allows later reflection to consider a positive solution

Fighting Fair in Marriage

Adapted with permission from Dr. Paul Meier

Right Now...

- Consider marriage a life-long commitment.
- Always agree to listen to each other's feelings, even if you disagree with their appropriateness.
- Commit yourself to honesty. (Be honest but emotionally controlled- "A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back."- Proverbs 29:11)
- Determine to attempt to love each other unconditionally, each partner resolving all responsibility for resolving conflicts. (The 50/50 concept seldom works.)
- Agree on topics that are "out of bounds"- topics that are too hurtful or have already been discussed.
- Agree to call "foul" when one of you accidentally or purposefully breaks a guideline. (Never counterattack!)
- Agree not to fight when alcohol is involved.
- Agree not to involve your kids in the fight- and let them know once you've resolved it.

Before a "Fair Fight"...

- Consider all factors in a conflict before bringing it up with your spouse.
- Ask yourself: "Am I bringing this up for selfish reasons, or for the good of the marriage?" Consider how you can go into this conflict with an unselfish perspective.
- Confess any personal wrongdoing in the conflict before confronting the other person.
- Allow your partner some time to think about the conflict before discussing it- but don't put it off for too long.
- Aim for conflict resolution, not for a win. Then you both win and remain on the same team.

Homework:

Review the rules for fighting fair in marriage and discuss the areas in which you want to improve. What keeps you from doing that? Together, commit to these guidelines.

During a "Fair Fight"...

- Limit the conflict to the here and now. Never bring up past failures; they should have already been forgiven.
- Limit the discussion to the issue at the center of the conflict; focus on it, not on attacking each other.
- Don't be afraid to call a "time out" and allow time to cool down so you don't say something you don't mean or will regret.
- Don't be disdainful or demeaning toward your spouse.
- Consider sarcasm & cynicism off limits.

Eliminate these phrases from your vocabulary...

- "You never..." or "You always..."
- "I can't." Instead, say "I won't."
- "I'll try." This usually means "I'll make a half-hearted effort but won't quite succeed."
- "You should..." or "You shouldn't..."

Use "I feel..." messages, expressing a personal response to the words or behavior that aroused the conflict. Example: Say "I feel angry toward you for coming home late for dinner without calling me first," not, "You should always call me when you're going to be late for dinner."

Never downgrade your mate's personality or character. "He who belittles his neighbor lacks sense." -Proverbs 11:12

Don't try to read your spouse's mind. If you're not sure what was meant by something said, ask for clarification. Don't voice why you think your spouse does something.

Learn to handle anger appropriately. Anger is not the same thing as hatred or vengeance. It should be constructive, not destructive.