

A Course in Marriage

Practical Steps to Transform
Your Relationship
(Incomplete Version)



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This is a work in progress. The author welcomes feedback and suggestions from readers and couples. Please contact Roland Evans through the website:

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Preface

I love being married. Joining my life to that of my spouse, Orienne, was and is the best decision I ever made. As a therapist, my hope is that many other couples have a similar wonderful experience of being together.

I first met my wife-to-be at a college get-together in the fall of 1978. There was a bunch of female students cooing and giggling around the professor's little baby. Most of them looked uncomfortable—worried the infant might vomit or poop its diaper. Then Orienne, only 18 at the time, gently took the baby and snuggled it into her shoulder, totally naturally—and the baby calmed. I knew immediately she was an extraordinary person. We dated soon after and despite my initial hesitations, we have grown closer and more deeply connected as the years have passed.

According to prevailing psychological theories, Orienne and I were destined for difficulties. We were likely to marry someone similar to or opposite of our parents. Both of us experienced far from perfect parenting: my mother was extremely dysfunctional and randomly separated from my father; Orienne's parent's conflicted marriage ended in a messy divorce.

Given this inheritance, it seemed our relationship would struggle. On the contrary, we've been blessed with a long, harmonious and inspiring marriage. We are both headstrong, so we occasionally fight but most arguments pass like a squall on a summer's day. For over 35 years, we have bound our lives together in love, companionship and spiritual communion.

When I look around, I see many couples failing to realize the full benefits of being together. In therapy I hear more than my fair share of painful stories: infidelity, hostile stand-offs, criticism and misunderstanding. But I also see the extraordinary love, courage and dedication couples invest in their relationship. Sometimes, my task in therapy is to help two people separate in the least devastating way. Most often I try to help couples discover a pathway out of their tangled impasse. I have few illusions how hard it is for people to live together—yet I know how uplifting and fulfilling it can be.

This course is an attempt to distill my experiences of being married and working with couples. It is not a simplistic book

because no relationship is simple; no two people need the exact same support and advice. The Course does not provide a magic bullet to fix your broken marriage, fend off divorce or spice up your sex life. True relationship requires consistent loving attention over a long period of time. Growth comes with effort and perseverance.

I offer this book to all couples who love each other and want to be together. I think of these couples as *partnered*, regardless of legal status and gender. There is little doubt the ceremony and status of being married makes a difference to a relationship. However, for the purposes of simplicity, I use the terms married and relationship, spouse and partner interchangeably.

I hope the ideas and exercises provide practical assistance to help you transform your relationship into a blessed union, rich beyond imagination. My best wishes go with you on your journey.

Introduction

Committed relationship, marriage, is often the longest, most complicated and demanding project we will undertake in our lifetime. The container for our hopes and dreams, the source of love and satisfaction, it protects us from feeling lost and alone in this world. Though we know how important our connection to our partner is, we often slip into forgetfulness and neglect this potentially luminous treasure.

While the source of our greatest joys, relationship also evokes our most painful emotional turmoil. It has the mysterious power to move us to the heights of self-sacrifice but also the depths of despair, meanness, and cruelty. Relationship can wound us terribly—and heal us absolutely. The power and purpose of two people sharing their life together extends far beyond what we think and believe.

We begin relationship on a wave of optimism. The euphoria of falling in love, the relief of finding a mate engenders a rosy view of the future. We do not question the purpose of the relationship: we are in love and want to be together. After a stretch of time, the honeymoon feelings dwindle and we come face-to-face with the challenges of living with our partner.

It seems inevitable that couples after a few years of living together, take each other for granted. There are also new sources of frustration and irritation. The pressures of life—money, work, children, family—close in and demand more and more attention. The relationship takes a back seat and gets so familiar we almost forget our spouse is a separate person. We neglect to rise to the challenges that love demands.

Amidst the turbulence of life, the stability of a committed relationship helps us hold everything together. But our need for predictability and safety easily mutates into complacency. Familiarity does not always breed contempt but it does facilitate unawareness—blindness to what is really going on. Without realizing, aspects of our relationship stagnate and become a burden rather than a shared adventure. We forget the fragrant rose of love and feel only the thorns. That is when both partners need to pay attention to regularly recommitting to a loving union.

No real relationship is without difficulties. Disagreements, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings are part and parcel of living together. Fights are normal—even necessary. Friction always happens at the growing point; it is a sign that something is changing or needs to change. We have to rise to the challenge and recognize difficulty as an opportunity to try something different. Our relationship difficulties are incitements to learn and change.

The unavoidable stresses of married life, the harsh words and small rejections are painful, even devastating. Sometimes we do not know how to re-open our hearts. Then, unintentionally, we pull away, a chasm opens and the connection to our partner becomes brittle. If those wounds are not healed, the relationship can slide gradually towards inertia and possible extinction.

Only when conflict and resentments stay unresolved and unresolvable is the relationship under threat. Stuckness in all its forms is the main danger. As long as there is goodwill and willingness to change, a relationship has real potential to progress. As we share all aspects of our lives, however difficult, we keep moving forward.

Sharing and **Growing** are the essence of a healthy relationship. That is the central message of this course: we have to continually renew the relationship through sharing our lives and our selves. When we truly join with our spouse, when we embrace equality and emotional intimacy, the relationship expands and we develop as individuals.

Every viable relationship is a work in progress. There is no final or perfect way it has to be. It requires attention, imagination and willingness to keep progressing on a path towards deeper love and satisfaction. The aim of this course is to provide a guide to create not only satisfying relationships but ones that are positively transformative. We all have confused and distorted ideas of how our union should feel and function. Hopefully, this course offers a more realistic, useful and inspiring vision of how it can be.