

# **Volunteer Leader Training Guide**

## **Snow on the Roof and a Fire in the Furnace: It's All About Commitment**

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### **Introduction**

As couples age and progress in their marriages, they often fail to keep doing the things that brought them together in the first place. This workshop will present several ways for couples to strengthen or rekindle their love and commitment for one another, thus stoking the fire of marital happiness.

### **Objectives**

- Participants will rediscover the importance of commitment in strong marriages.
- Participants will learn several skills and activities couples can do to strengthen their marriages.
- Participants will learn how to share these marriage strengthening skills and activities with others.

### **Target Audience**

- EHC leaders and members
- Family and friends of EHC members
- Those who have an interest in strengthening their commitment in marriage

### **Advanced Preparation**

- Study the lesson so you are familiar with the marriage strengthening skills and activities you will share.
- Make copies of any handouts you want to create from the leader's guide materials (e.g., any of the points discussed in the **Strengthening Marital Commitment** section make a nice handout) for each person you expect to attend the workshop.

## **Opening Activity (optional)**

### **Alphabetic Introduction**

Each participant is asked to choose a letter of the alphabet. Duplicate letters are permitted. They are then given three minutes to describe themselves using single words beginning only with that letter. You could award a small prize for the person who identifies the most words.

An additional optional stage is to ask participants to write down their chosen words on a sheet of paper with their name at the top and display it on the wall for the duration of the event. Others could be asked later on in the event as to whether the words accurately describe the individual.

## **Commitment Curriculum**

### **Marital Commitment Quotes**

“Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.” –*Thomas Edison*

“Real giving is when you give to your partner not what you want or need but that which your partner wants and needs.” –*Michele Weiner Davis*

“Be presidents of each other’s fan clubs.” –*Tony Heath*

### **Introduction**

Marriage is much more than a legal contract. It is a commitment or promise between two people to faithfully stick with one another through the good times and the bad times. Commitment is a quality of strong, healthy and enduring marriages, and it is a key to any intimate, emotionally satisfying and meaningful relationship. Commitment is the glue that holds marriages together when many stressors try to rip it apart.

Human beings have a need to be a part of secure, stable and long-term relationships. That requires commitment. In strong marriages, couples are committed not only to the welfare of the relationship but also to the growth of one another. Commitment to the marriage is the basis for a husband and wife giving their time and energy to couple-related activities. Couples who have not thought through or are unsure about their commitment to one another will have difficulty staying married, because when the tough times come they may be quick to run the other way.

Commitment is just as important to a successful marriage as communicating and managing conflict well. In fact, recent research shows that 85 percent of divorced couples indicated a lack of commitment to the marriage and to each other as their primary reason for divorce. Thankfully though, there are many ways to strengthen commitment in marriage.

### **Commitment Metaphors to Ponder**

“**Pig-It**” – One morning a chicken and a pig were walking down the street together when they came to a restaurant that had a sign advertising its daily special. The sign read, “Bacon and Egg Breakfast – All You Can Eat.” Upon reading the sign, the chicken began to complain about how difficult it was to lay all those eggs so people could eat them for breakfast. The pig responded, “For me it’s total commitment.”

Amy was a freshman member of her university's gymnastics team. She quickly saw in her teammates different levels of commitment and dedication to their daily workout routine. Those who put forth the most effort in practice seemed to be the ones who were the most successful in competition. Amy decided that she was going to follow the example of her most successful teammates. She worked hard. She did not cut any corners, and she strictly followed the advice and counsel of her coaches. Her motto was to "pig-it," which meant she was totally committed to her workouts and the development of her skills.

Strong marriages need total commitment from both partners, to each other and to the marriage relationship. To "pig-it" means to be totally committed to your marriage and to give it everything it takes to succeed.

**"The Commitment Garden"** – Wallace Goddard, a professor at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service has compared marital commitment to cultivating a garden. He says marriage, like gardening, requires time and patience. There will always be problems and occasionally surprises. If you are not committed to the garden, the young plants you have cultivated may be choked out by weeds, they may wither in the sun or they may be eaten by insects and animals. Gardening requires continual care, and the work never ends. New weeds will always spring up; some grow very quickly. Continual work on and commitment to the garden is the best way to keep the plants strong and healthy. Occasional neglect can usually be corrected, but it requires more effort than if we had been consistently watchful. Prolonged neglect will lead to the plant's demise. If we are unwilling to care for the garden of our marriage and give up on it, we will never have the opportunity to enjoy the fruit that comes during the harvest. The payoff for our labor and the beauty of the garden we create is well worth it.

**"Winter in Minnesota"** – William Doherty, author and professor at the University of Minnesota, compares commitment in long-term marriages to living in Minnesota. He compares getting married to the springtime, when everything is fresh and new. But the winter, or trials of marriage, inevitably come. Sometimes those trials are long, dark and hard to endure. However, those couples who remain committed to one another and endure the winter find each new springtime of their relationship all the more beautiful in contrast to the things they have worked through and overcome together. This is evidenced in recent research indicating that most couples who thought about divorce at some point in their marriage but did not do it and stuck it out, later considered themselves happily married and were glad they did not divorce.

## **Strengthening Marital Commitment**

Here are some ideas on how to build and strengthen your commitment to one another in marriage.

**Put Your Relationship First** – Of all the pressures, responsibilities and commitments you have in life, make your marriage relationship a top priority. In the grand scheme of things, your marriage has the potential to be longer lasting and have a greater impact on society than any other endeavor you may pursue. Here are six ways to put your relationship first and increase your commitment to your partner.

- *Greet One Another* – This is pretty simple, but couples sometimes get lazy about it. When you wake up in the morning acknowledge that your partner is there and alive. When you see each other at the end of the day, greet each other warmly. It's even a good idea to stay connected by calling each other at least once during the day for a brief check on how each other's day is going. Greet each other verbally and physically. Give

your partner a hug, a kiss or a quick shoulder massage when you greet. It is also a good idea to use your partner's name instead of just talking at them. Consistently and warmly greeting one another will help you feel connected.

- *Small Talk* – Small talk is different than the business-type talk we often do in our marriages. Small talk means talking to your partner about what they want to talk about. Your hopes, dreams and goals can be wonderful topics. When couples are dating, they seem to be able to small talk for hours on end. Once couples get married and things get busy, they may not dedicate as much time to small talk. Small talk with your partner every day for 10 to 15 minutes. It works best if you choose the same time every day so you get in the habit of doing it. The idea is to stay connected through enjoyable conversation. If you think you may have trouble identifying something to talk about, the “Ask Me a Question” and “Confused in Colorado” activities listed below are a couple of great ideas to get you started.

#### “Ask Me a Question”

Although you may feel you know your partner very well, you'd be surprised how much more there is to learn. You and your partner each think of one new question every day that you would like to know the answer to. When you and your partner talk, take turns asking each other the questions you have thought of. This should start some great, and occasionally even difficult, conversations. Be creative in developing meaningful questions, and remember that you may not even know the answers about some of your partner's basic preferences (e.g., favorite color, food, pet, time of year, music, movie, date, etc.).

#### “Confused in Colorado” – Dear Abby Game

Choose an advice column from your local newspaper, such as Ann Landers or Dear Abby, and read the question but not the answer aloud to one another. Once you have read the question, take turns giving advice and your reasons for the advice. Do this without criticizing, insulting or making fun of one another. This is a great way to communicate, get to know each other better and understand how your partner may respond in different situations.

- *Praise* – We all love to be praised. It helps us feel valuable and worthwhile. Don't take your partner for granted. Let him or her know how important they are to you. Be genuine and generous in giving praise. We are more committed to people that we like and who like us. Don't let your partner feel they have to find praise and acceptance elsewhere. When you praise your spouse, focus not only on what they do but on who they are inside. It is easy to compliment someone on their appearance or their athletic or academic accomplishments. However, complimenting someone for being courteous, caring or insightful requires a little more thoughtfulness. Show how much you care by making an effort to express appreciation for small, less noticeable things.
- *Have a Purpose* – Know why you are together and married. Love is undoubtedly a part of it, but there is more to it than that. What do you hope to do together? What are you about as a couple? You may want to come up with a family motto. For example, “We are the (fill in the blank with your last name) family and we are all about (fill in the blank).” An example of what might be placed in the blanks is: “We are the Smith family and we are all about being fantastic neighbors!” Having a sense of marital purpose will help you stay committed to the marriage. It also helps children feel like they are part of a family that matters. If they feel a sense of purpose and belonging in the family, they

will be less likely to look for acceptance in negative places outside the family (e.g., gangs). In addition, each family member should know what his/her unique contribution is to the family. This can be accomplished by having everyone in the family take turns saying what they would miss if another family member were no longer a part of their family for some reason. Here is a model to follow: “If \_\_\_\_\_ were not a member of the family, I would miss \_\_\_\_\_.”

- *Do Fun Stuff Together* – It is important for married couples to continue to court and date one another when they are married. Having fun together is a key to commitment. Doing fun stuff does not have to be expensive either. Make one list of things you enjoy doing as a couple that are free (e.g., walks, bike rides, playing in the park, playing board games, etc.). Make another list of things you enjoy doing that are relatively inexpensive (e.g., movies, eating out). Make a final list of things you enjoy doing that are a little more expensive (e.g., vacations, plays or concerts). Keep your lists handy, and you will always have some fun dating ideas to fit your budget.
- *Build and Expand on Memories and Traditions* – When you do fun stuff together as a couple, don’t let the fun end there. It can be a lot of fun to reminisce and talk about fun things you have done together in the past. With the wide availability of digital cameras (or phones), video cameras or even disposable cameras, there is no excuse for not recording family events or happenings. Going back and reviewing visual records or even journal entries of good times together are powerful ways to strengthen marital relationships. It is also a great way to develop family traditions of favorite activities or locations to visit every year because of the memories they bring to mind.

## **Make Your Partner Your Best Friend**

John Gottman, a professor and marriage researcher at the University of Washington, believes that friendship is the key to lasting marriage. Most secure marriages are built on a base of strong friendship that serves as the support for other aspects of the relationship.

Knowing your partner well leads to a strong friendship. Test your knowledge of your partner by answering the following True or False questions that have been adapted from John Gottman’s book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

### *How Well Do You Know Your Partner?*

- I can name my partner’s best friends.
- I know my partner’s favorite type of music.
- I know my partner’s favorite movie.
- I know my partner’s most stressful childhood event.
- I know my partner’s most embarrassing moment.
- I know what my partner would do if he/she won the lottery.
- I know what my partner’s ideal job would be.
- I know my partner’s ideal place to live.
- I know the things that currently cause my partner stress.
- I know the names of the people that have irritated my partner recently.
- I know some of my partner’s life dreams.
- I am very familiar with my partner’s religious beliefs.
- I know my partner’s favorite and least favorite relatives.
- I feel like my partner knows me pretty well.
- I trust my partner.
- My partner trusts me.

If you were able to answer true to more than half of the questions, you know your partner pretty well. If not, take some time to find the answers to these and other important questions about your partner. It will help your friendship and your commitment to your partner to grow. Share the answers on your list with your partner, and enjoy the conversation that will follow.

## **Guard Your Couple Time**

Don't let outside pressures keep you from the most important person and responsibility in your life. Undoubtedly, there will be times when work may require you to be away or work longer hours than you would prefer, but make that the exception rather than the rule. People often say it's not the quantity of time but the quality of the time that is important in building relationships with your partner or your kids. Unfortunately, it's just not possible to build great relationships without spending quantity and quality time with your partner. Just like you cannot neglect a vegetable garden and expect a great harvest, you cannot consistently spend small amounts of time with your partner and hope to harvest a great relationship. Guard your couple time by scheduling blocks of time on certain days to spend with your partner. If it is not scheduled, it becomes easier to let other things creep into that time.

## **Start Connection Rituals**

Rituals are traditions or things that we get in the habit of doing. They usually have some special meaning and significance for us. In a marriage, we should get in the habit of connecting with our partner frequently and in a variety of ways (spiritually, emotionally and physically). Here are just a few ideas of rituals that you and your partner may want to get in the habit of doing in order to stay connected.

- **Share the Glory of Your Marital Story** – John Gottman invites all couples to “share the glory of their marital stories.” Some couples seem to have forgotten why they got married in the first place or why they even liked each other. One of the most powerful ways to strengthen your marriage or to break through the ice of a strained relationship and begin thinking positively about your marriage again is to share the story of how you met, fell in love and decided to get married. Usually, by the time a couple finishes sharing this information with one another, their hearts have softened and they have a renewed desire to preserve and strengthen their relationship. Even if you are not having trouble in your marriage, sharing stories of your love and courtship with one another and with others will help you stay connected and committed to one another.
- **Five-Minute Connections** – Families today are very busy, and couples often have little time to spend with one another. When quantity time is not available, John Gottman recommends making five-minute connections with your partner as often as you can. Here's how.
  - *Cuddle at the most important time of day* – Set the alarm five minutes early and cuddle with your partner in the morning. It will help keep you feeling close all day long.
  - *Before you leave in the morning ask your partner if anything special is going on that day* – This lets your partner know that you are interested in them and care what's going on in their life. If something special is going on for your partner, check in with them during the day or in the evening.
  - *Share what you like about each other* – Do this daily and do it frequently. Look for excuses to praise your partner. Don't take each other for granted. Your partner will know they are loved, and they will be more willing to work through any differences you may have.

- *Do small acts of kindness for one another* – Send your partner a card or e-mail letting them know you love them, bring home a special treat or do a five-minute chore that your partner usually does. The kindness you show to your partner will almost always be returned, and serving your partner will strengthen your marriage bond.
- *Talk about the stresses of your day* – Spend 5 minutes when you get home from work talking with your partner about the stressful things you may have experienced that day. Don't attack your partner with the information; simply share it with him or her. If you get the stress out of the way first, you will be able to enjoy the rest of the evening together.
- **Share Spirituality** – Shared religious or spiritual activities are a wonderful way to grow together as a couple. The way you express your spirituality is up to you, but you may want to consider praying, reading inspirational religious books, attending church services and celebrating religious holidays together.
- **Share Intimacy** – Plan romantic and intimate times with your partner. Spontaneity is great, but planning a date or other romantic event with your partner can be just as much fun as the date itself. It gives you something to look forward to.
- **Happy Anniversary!** – Anniversaries are a big deal. Remember them and make them special. In addition to the day you got married, you can also celebrate the anniversary of your first date or the first time you kissed your partner. Be creative with the anniversaries you celebrate and the ways you celebrate them.

## Set Dating/Marital Boundaries

We are surrounded by rules and laws, most of which are there to protect us. Our marriage relationship should be no exception. We need rules and boundaries to live by and guide us in our marriages – boundaries that will strengthen us and keep us safe. The great thing about marriage is that we get to make the rules and set the boundaries for our relationship together. The easiest way to do this is to sit down with your partner and talk about what's okay and what's not okay in your relationship. Here are some examples of boundaries you may want to have in your relationship.

- Don't flirt with other people.
- Always wear your engagement or wedding ring.
- Don't keep outside relationships with anyone a "secret."
- Don't confide in others about things you dislike in your partner.
- Consult before spending.
- Don't yell.
- Violence is unacceptable.

Together with your partner, make your own list of boundaries that will keep your relationship safe and strong.

## Commitment Exercise

Identify with your partner how you will build and strengthen your commitment to one another in marriage.

In addition to the ideas presented in the **Strengthening Marital Commitment** section of this leader's guide, one additional way to do this is by writing a "marriage commitment

statement.” Most companies and organizations have a mission statement, which is a statement of their purpose, goals and commitments to customers and employees. A marriage commitment statement can follow a format that is similar to a company’s mission statement. You can organize it any way you would like and add anything to it that makes it meaningful to you. It should probably include your purpose as a couple, your marriage goals and a statement of your commitment to one another and the marriage.

Use this statement as a guide throughout your marriage. Put it in a nice frame and hang it in a place where you and your partner will see it frequently. Periodically read it together and re-evaluate your commitment to one another.

## Helpful Resources

- [www.arfamilies.org](http://www.arfamilies.org) – The University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service website for families.
- Gottman, J.M. (1995). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Fireside.
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- Markman, H., S. Stanley and S.L. Blumberg. (2001). *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Stanley, S. (1998). *The Heart of Commitment*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Weiner-Davis, M. (1992). *Divorce Busting*. New York: Fireside.