

# Attunement – How Your Marriage Can Be Transformed By An Attentive Ear

## Question

My wife is a difficult woman. We have been married for almost 15 years and instead of getting easier, our relationship is getting more challenging. By now I expected that my wife would have been more in tune with my likes and dislikes, and would have adjusted accordingly. However, every day feels like we are back to square one, and I am getting tired of this silly and very uninspiring routine. It is so much easier to stay at work later and later so I don't have to deal with her constant negative attitude. I am not sure how much more of this undesirable life I can endure. Please share your advice with me so I can help my wife change and start being a more positive person. I thought that marrying a Christian like me would have made my life easier. However, our marriage is no better than our neighbors who don't even go to church. Help! –Michael–Overland Park, Kansas

We are very sorry to hear about your marriage predicament. Marriage was instituted by God to be a blessing, and to provide companionship and support to both men and women (Genesis 2:18, 24). However, the opposite tends to occur in this fast-paced society of ours where husbands and wives pass each other every day like ships in the night.

One of the most prominent concerns in every marriage is managing differences that are often overlooked prior to marriage, but become very obvious once a couple gets into the nuts and bolts of married life. What you have described about your marriage relationship is pretty consistent with what happens in most marriages. The key to turning things around, however, is based on the choices one makes in response to whatever one's spouse is doing or saying. As a Christian man, you know that the Bible states the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23). This means that the husband should be the leader in the home. Being the leader means the husband carries the principal responsibility of the smooth running of the home. Based on what is happening in your marriage, we encourage you to ask yourself how this applies to you. What can you do to address the situation with your wife based on Christ's example with the church? Throughout Scripture, the patience, love, kindness, and forgiveness shown by Christ to a church that doesn't deserve such a response is inescapable, and husbands are commanded to do the same in their homes.

Ephesians 5:25, 28 states: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. . . So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself." Romans 5:8 declares: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us (the church), in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." These pronouncements give clear evidence that Christ's response to us, as sinners, is forgiveness and love, even while we are still in our state of rebellion. And husbands are called to do the same with their wives.

We find it remarkable that social scientific research is in agreement with the Bible on what a husband can do in his relationship with his wife. John Gottman, currently one of the leading marriage researchers in the world, in one of his recent publications\* suggests that women need to feel respected, heard, and connected to the men in their lives, and for this to take place, a man needs to be in tune with his wife, a concept Gottman refers to as attunement.

Essentially, Gottman suggests, a man's relationship with his wife would completely change if he did the following:

- Give her his complete attention when she's talking to him.
- Physically turn toward her when she is speaking to him.
- Show genuine interest in what she is saying by asking questions to make sure he understands what she is saying.
- Listens nondefensively even if he doesn't agree with what she is saying.
- Shows empathy and compassion for what she said.

By doing what the Bible and social science is suggesting above, we believe your relationship with your wife will be transformed into the marriage you desire. After all 1 John 4:18 says: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear. . ." And Mark 10:27 says: ". . .for with God all things are possible."

Ask God to help you love your wife like He loves the church, and trust Him to keep His promises. You will continue in our prayers.

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## **"Why Did I Get Married?"**

My husband and I are very different. I like to vacation at the beach, while he likes camping in the mountains. He is a big meat eater, and I am a vegetarian. He loves to watch television, and I love to read. He is very outgoing, and I am quite an introvert. After one year of marriage I feel worn out and not sure I want to spend another year in this very difficult marriage. I welcome your advice. -Veronica-Tampa, Florida

Thank you for your very brave and direct question. Your situation is far from unique. Our experience is that most married couples we have spoken to during the early stages of their relationship tell us how much they have in common, and can't imagine being with anyone else. Three months into marriage, however, a significant number of these couples say they have so little in common they are not sure why they married their spouse.

The marriage literature confirms what we know from anecdotal experience from working with many premarital and post marital couples. Before marriage, couples are attracted to each other's differences, and after marriage, couples are repelled by the very traits they were attracted to when they first met.

Marriage scholars suggest that when people first meet and find each other attractive, the strong emotional experience is like a literal high. Hormones

such as dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin, which are neurotransmitters, produced by the human body, get dumped into the limbic system of the brain during this "attraction" moment. People feel like they are having a real high. It is this euphoric feeling that often blinds individuals to the differences they have with the person they have "fallen in love with." It allows them to feel that their love can conquer any obstacle in their way. Unfortunately, the literal high produced by these neurotransmitters is not sustainable. And just as the high produced by illegal drugs tends to wear off, this euphoric feeling also tends to wane when confronted by the realities of daily life. Having the responsibility of paying bills, the dirty dishes in the sink, and mowing the lawn with another person, usually makes people who are "in love" confront the stark reality. Life is much more serious than simply having a party.

This moment of reality we call the "what was I thinking stage" opens the eyes of married people. They can clearly see the differences between them and their respective partners. To be sure, if allowed to run its course, this stage of marriage can become a real curse, unless you change your self-talk with the help of professional coaching.

We believe you are experiencing this very stage right now. However, if you are willing, you can turn things around by taking a walk down memory lane, and reminding yourself of all the reasons you fell in love with your spouse. Once you examine the good traits in your spouse that factored into your decision to marry him, you may feel good about your marriage again. You may realize that reasonable people can have different likes and dislikes, and still enjoy spending time together. If you tell yourself you want to try enjoying camping in the mountains, you just might. Human beings are not static. We can be dynamic in our likes and dislikes, and choose to try something we thought we would never do.

As a vegetarian you may never be interested in eating meat, nor is there any reason for you to do so just because your husband does. The point is, nevertheless, that people with different tastes can have great relationships if they choose to live with those differences. They can learn to manage them, especially if the differences are not based on moral values that are non-negotiable.

You must also keep in mind, if you are a Christian, that God is clear about His expectations of marriage, and that it should not be dissolved except for sexual immorality (Matthew 19:3-10).

Please keep in touch and let us know how things work out once you implement what we have suggested. You can also be assured that you and your husband will remain in our prayers. We encourage you to trust God and plan to remain faithful to His Word.

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## **A Message for Families**

Willie and Elaine Oliver talk with Carmela Monk Crawford, editor of Message magazine, the oldest black religious journal in the United States. Mrs Crawford shares why she believes it's one of the best resources available for today's families.

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## **Can This Marriage Be Saved**

The statistics on marriage are troubling; in fact, some researchers suggest that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. But long beforehand there are warning signs. Learn about the warning signs, what to do if you think your marriage is in trouble and how to turn it around. Guests: Ronald & Karen Flowers

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## **Praying Like Crazy for Your Family**

Willie and Elaine Oliver talk with Tamyra Horst, a national speaker and author of the books "Praying Like Crazy for Your Kids" and the follow-up, "Praying Like Crazy for Your Husband." Find out what happened when she did just that and how it changed her life and that of and that of her family.

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## **Living Single**

What is it like to be a single adult these days? What perceptions do people have of single adults? And what do singles wish people – inside and outside communities of faith – understood about their experience? Willie and Elaine Oliver talk with three single adults about the blessings and challenges of Living Single. Guests: Michelle Chin, John Domm, and Grace Brown

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## **Breaking the Cycle of Family Dysfunction**

Do we inherit our behavior from our parents? Can we stop the cycle of dysfunctional behavior or are we destined to become just like our families of origin? Willie and Elaine Oliver talk with Karen and Ron Flowers about the impact our families have on who we are and who we will become.

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## **Impasse!**

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How do two people in a relationship move past a bad argument? do you have any advice to help us resolve conflict, mend a rift, and help our relationship move forward?

## Becky—Sacramento, California

Relationships are challenging. No matter the type of relationship, the fact that we are all different makes disagreements almost inevitable. And this reality easily lends itself to strained relationships since almost everyone believes his or her opinion about what is being discussed is the correct one. Sadly, for many, these stalemates can lead to the disintegration of a relationship, despite the fact that most of these situations can be resolved if the people involved are willing to respectfully listen to each other. Romans 12:18 says: “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” This text alone could transform relationships. However, we seem to have such difficulty applying this message to our daily lives. Here are five ways in which we can use this counsel in all of our relationships to build rather than to destroy them.

**1. Pause and pray.** Stop what you’re doing—talking, arguing, fighting, etc. Take a deep breath, and then take another deep breath (some people may require three or four deep breaths). Pray and ask God to help you calm down, think reasonably, and act rationally.

**2. Play on the same team.** Most conflicts emerge because one or both parties are convinced of their own opinion—to put it plainly, we want to prove to the other person that we are right, and we want to win. You can flip the switch in your brain to a “win-win” attitude. Rather than having a winner and a

loser, you can both win. If one person in the conflict adopts this attitude, it can change the atmosphere and influence the other person to adopt a “win-win” attitude.

**3. Listen. Listen. Listen.** At the heart of most disagreements is misunderstanding that occurs mostly because we are not listening to one another. We all view the world through our own lenses that are colored by our experiences, our values, and our expectations. Conflict arises because the other person has his or her own pair of lenses, which is different than our own. When we interact without taking into consideration our different perspectives, it leads us to judge each other unfairly. The only way to get a deeper understanding about what the other person is saying is to listen to them—their hopes, their dreams, and their stories.

In order to truly listen to another person, we must listen with our eyes, our hearts, and our soul, which allows us to enter their world. It is here that we glean a deeper understanding of their perspective.

**4. Celebrate your differences.** Accept the fact that we are all different and we can use our differences as strengths rather than weaknesses. It doesn't have to be my way or your way; we can create a solution that incorporates ideas from both sides that will be a better way for both parties. This creates a synergy in the relationship that allows it to grow even stronger and to form deeper bonds.



**5. Be thankful.** Thank God for giving you the wisdom, strength, and willingness to resolve and restore your relationship. Thank the other person for their willingness to engage in the process of breaking the stalemate in your relationship. This creates an environment of warmth, support, affirmation, and greater trust in the relationship. Engaging in this positive process will pave the way for resolving inevitable challenges and opportunities in the future.

The reality is that dealing with conflict is an ongoing and sometimes frustrating process in every relationship, but with God on our side, we cannot fail. His power is available to everyone who asks for it. In Matthew 7:7 Jesus says: “Ask, and it will be given to you.” If you ask, you will be able to live at peace with everyone. Commit to being the catalyst for change and the initiator of creative cooperation and watch your relationships grow to new heights.

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## **I Messed Up! Can I Get My Family Back?**

A year ago I confessed to my wife that I had had several affairs during our 10 years of marriage. In the last year I have been totally faithful to my wife, but she still doesn't trust me. We've tried counseling, but my wife has not been able to get over my unfaithfulness, although she says she has

forgiven me. We are now separated, and she wants a divorce. I have been attending a recovery group for addictive behaviors and have come to realize how deeply I've wounded my wife, my children, and even myself. Is there hope for me to get my family back?

John—Chicago, Illinois

As long as there is life, there is hope—"with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27). With that said, it is important for you to understand that an affair, or affairs, are devastating to a marriage and often leave a marriage so fragile it cannot sustain such a heavy blow. It is emotionally confusing for the injured spouse and leaves that person feeling betrayed and abandoned. Your wife is experiencing deep pain, hurt, isolation, guilt, and shame, and feels she can never trust you again.

Marriage experts assert that it takes approximately two years for the injured spouse to grieve the loss of innocence in their marriage and heal from the wounds caused by an affair. Forgiveness does not take away the pain or the consequences of such an injury. Even when wounds heal, scars remain. Once trust has been broken and sexual infidelity leaves an incredibly deep wound, it will take a lifetime of intentional commitment to restore that relationship.

We firmly believe God can heal any marriage, including one that has suffered the damage of many affairs. In our society, including the Christian

community, we have been led to believe that once there is adultery, it's natural or inevitable to get a divorce.

While the Bible allows for divorce when there has been adultery, if both spouses (especially the injured spouse) are willing to work hard, a marriage can be healed and restored. In fact,

not only can a marriage survive, it can thrive. Regardless of why you had affairs, there are usually underlying issues that can contribute to spousal betrayal. Many of these issues may stem from unresolved loss, pain, abuse, or abandonment. When an individual does not deal with past hurts or certain unfulfilled needs from their early years, those issues follow them into future relationships. Many jump into marriage hoping it will solve their problems or relational gaps left from childhood. When those needs aren't met in marriage, many try to get those needs met elsewhere.

You must find a good Christian therapist who can help you sort through and identify the issues that led to your unfaithfulness. Ask the Lord to soften your wife's heart and let her know you are sincerely interested in doing whatever it takes to be a better husband and father. In humility, ask her if she can hold off from filing for a divorce while you try to get help with



your issues. You must not intimidate, force, or threaten her to take you back. Even if there were things you feel she did in your marriage to hurt or humiliate you, you must remain calm and patient with her.

At some point your counselor will most likely ask your wife to attend sessions with you or alone. Your wife should also seek individual counseling, but you should not be the one to tell her. Continue to pray without ceasing, study Scripture, and read some books, or search online to find out how marriage can heal from an affair. God promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." You can expect the process to be painfully slow. However, if you are willing to invest the time and effort, your family may be restored.

Of course, even with all your good intentions, your family may not be restored to what it was before. We still encourage you to go through the process of becoming your best self with the help of your counselor and God. We would also urge you and your wife to work through your marital issues and take steps toward true forgiveness of each other since divorce does not solve problems—it leaves them in a pile so every time you come to that spot you stumble over them. To continue to coparent your children for future health you and your wife would want to work things out to give them a fighting chance in their own future relationships. We are praying for your success!

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## **Other People's Business**



I am really concerned about my sister's parenting style. she allows her teenage daughters to wear clothes that are too mature for them, they are allowed to hang out with boys, and they can stay out as late as they choose. she says that she doesn't want to raise her girls as strictly as we were when we were growing up, and she wants her girls to have the freedom to make their own mistakes. i think she is setting her children up for failure. she thinks I'm too strict with my children. What is the best way to talk to someone about concerns such as these? Where is a healthy place to draw the line between strictness and being lenient in parenting?

Cherise—London, England

Giving advice is always easier than receiving advice. We believe it is best to work on what Stephen Covey calls, in his book *7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, living in your circle of influence. This notion suggests controlling those things within your sphere of control—yourself, your attitude, your words, and your actions.

When you live in your circle of influence you have more sway on those around you than when you attempt to live outside of that circle. So the best time to talk to your sister about your concerns would be when she asks for your advice. Since you and your sister are adults, and both of you are parents, you each have your own parenting style.

Most parenting styles fall along two continuums: (1) warmth and support; (2) control and structure (*Journal of Early Adolescence*, Baumrind, 1991). The best parenting style is one that finds a healthy balance along these two continuums.

There are four parenting styles that can be derived from the structure mentioned above. The authoritarian parent is one who has a lot of structure and little warmth. This parent is usually very controlling, demanding, and unreasonable. Children who have authoritarian parents find their discipline to be punitive, and feel rejected when disciplined. These children tend to be aggressive and uncooperative, and have low self-esteem.

Another parenting style is the permissive parent, who is very warm but provides very little structure or boundaries. This parenting style results in a child who tends to be self-centered, spoiled, and irresponsible.

The neglectful parent, another style of parenting, is neither warm nor supportive, and doesn't provide any structure. This style of parenting is associated with risky behavior in children, adolescents, and teens—such as skipping school and early smoking and drinking. The healthy balance is found in the authoritative parent. This parenting style provides high warmth and high support. Healthy and reasonable boundaries are set for children that are age appropriate. Authoritative parents are very involved, consistent, loving, willing to communicate, and respectful of the child's point of view. These children learn to be self-controlled, secure, and have good self-esteem. Proverbs 22:6 declares: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." As a parent you have the awesome privilege and responsibility of raising God's children on earth. One of the ways in which you can nurture and enhance your parenting skills is by reading books on the topic. We have provided several titles below for you to get started.



Sharing these resources with your sister is a good way to share your concerns with her without adding strain to your relationship. You may even consider starting a parents' book club at your church or local community center to help a larger number of parents. We are praying for your success!