

Fighting *for* Your Marriage

*A Deluxe Revised Edition of
the Classic Best Seller for
Enhancing Marriage and
Preventing Divorce*

THIRD EDITION

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Introduction

In early 2009, our editor, Alan Rinzler, called and said, “It’s been quite a while since our last edition of *Fighting for Your Marriage*. We want to keep the book up-to-date. What’s new and exciting?” Our answer was, “Quite a bit,” as we are in the midst of a tidal wave of changes in the couples field. Alan asked us to consider bringing out a new edition.

That resulted in the new book in your hands. This is the third edition of the book we first published in 1994 and substantially revised in 2001. It includes a DVD to help you get the most out of the book; updates, revisions, and new content in every chapter; and a completely new chapter on mutual support in long-term relationships. We have focused even more on keeping the positive connections alive and continued our commitment to research-based strategies and communication and conflict resolution skills. Finally, to reflect our increasing focus on the positive connections in relationships, we have added quotes from the inspirational book edited by Jan Levine and Howard (coauthor), *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*

*To love is to behold—to fall fully open to the amazing wonders of
another human soul.*

—JANICE R. LEVINE

This book is based on PREP[®], which stands for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program. PREP is based on over thirty years of research at the University of Denver, as well as research conducted by other universities around the world.

We conduct PREP workshops frequently across the United States and internationally, using specific steps and exercises to teach couples the skills and attitudes associated with good relationships. Because of its roots in solid research and its straightforward approach, PREP has also received a great deal of attention from and is used by professionals in marital counseling, marriage educators, and social policymakers at federal, state and local levels. We estimate that we have trained over 14,500 professionals and reached over five hundred thousand couples in twelve countries and in all branches of the U.S. military.



Most people want a happy marriage that lasts a lifetime, but we know that many couples don't stay together. Although the divorce rate has come down quite a bit in the United States since its all-time high in 1981 (and continues to slowly decline), it is still alarmingly high. The current projection is that among young couples marrying for the first time today, about 40 to 50 percent of them will eventually divorce. Aside from those who divorce, many other couples wind up staying together through many years of unhappiness.

We believe that most divorces and most marital unhappiness can be prevented. The partner who most wants the divorce often says, "We fell out of love" or "We've grown apart" or "We fight too much." All of these issues can be remedied if both partners want to do so.

This book will help you achieve your goal of a fulfilling, lasting, happy, and healthy marriage. It will teach you ways that you can act on your desire to build and sustain a great relationship.

WHY A NEW EDITION

The first and second editions of the book were very well received among couples and professionals alike. We are very pleased that both editions have become best-sellers in the marriage field. Considering that, you may ask, “Why change what’s working?”

Well, a lot has happened in the nine years since we wrote our last edition. From 9/11 and the fall of Baghdad to the election of our first African American president—the world is in a very different place. In the introduction to our second edition, we mentioned some of the technological changes that occurred between 1994 and 2001. Now there are all kinds of new social phenomena and technological developments, the most significant being the many new social interactive technologies: Internet dating sites, Facebook, MySpace, blogging, Twitter, BlackBerries, and iPhones, to name a few. This explosion of new technology has influenced all aspects of relationships. For example, an estimated 20 percent of couples who married in 2006 and 2007 met online.

In addition, due in part to the Internet, there has been a massive increase of information available about relationships. It has become what psychologist William James might describe as a “buzzing, blooming confusion” when it comes to trying to get help for your relationship. Just go to your favorite search engine and type in any question about relationships. You’ll get countless sites to go to for answers. But how do you know what information to trust?

In this third edition of *Fighting for Your Marriage*, we have continued our commitment to science by refining our work based on the latest research. We believe this gives our approach a very strong basis that you can trust.

This book will help you

- Enhance your chances of relationship and marital success
- Understand up-to-date research-based information on relationships

- Fix a marriage that is not going well
- Bridge the emotional distance that you may feel has come between you and your spouse because you feel you are “falling out of love”
- Decide if it’s worthwhile to stay together or to be together

Underlying the changes in this book are major forces that continue to shape our work:

1. The increasing prevalence of negotiation-based marriage
2. The significance of divorce and single parenting
3. New research on marriage and relationships
4. Improvements in our strategies for success in marriage

There are many major forces at play that have affected marriage as an institution and couples in their relationships, and that have increased the level of concern many have about where all the changes are headed. These trends and changes have continued, if not accelerated, in the last nine years since we published our last edition.

The Shift to Negotiation-Based Marriage

In the six-plus decades since the end of World War II, our society has seen marriages change from relationships in which virtually nothing was negotiable to ones in which virtually everything is negotiable. This trend has been particularly noticeable during the 2000s as marriage rates have declined and expectations for love-based, happy marriages have increased. The massive changes in people’s expectations for marriage have led to a very different kind of marriage for most couples. Today, marriages require more skill in communication, conflict management, and negotiation between

partners than ever before, because there is less that is automatically accepted and more that needs to be decided.

The Impact of Technology

There is also much more to negotiate, with many new challenges coming from some of the technological changes we mentioned earlier. Instead of just fighting about money or how frequently to have sex, couples are also fighting about time spent on Facebook or whether it's OK to send a text during a romantic dinner or bring a laptop on a getaway weekend.

What this shift in marriage has meant is that couples are now more greatly affected by their ability to handle conflicts and differences. For couples who have wonderful skills in conflict management and problem solving, that's not a big deal. Your goal is to keep up the good work over time as you encounter more challenges. For the vast number of couples who don't know the skills and principles that will help them work through issues and problems, the increased challenges and need to negotiate both common and uncommon issues mean more conflict, more unhappiness, and higher risk for divorce. We have refined our strategies for helping couples manage the dark and difficult side of their relationships with more skill and confidence.

The Role of Unrealistic Expectations

Part of the negotiations have to do with the higher expectations couples now have for the positive sides of their relationships. They expect their partners to be their best friends, their soul mates. So when negative things happen, couples have to realize that even best friends can have conflict and work through differences successfully without threatening the success of the relationship.

In response to this societal shift in expectations, we have expanded our thinking about how important it is to separate handling the negatives from increasing the positives. Both are critical



for long-term relationship success. We have to help people realize that passionate romance and feeling deeply in love 24/7 are a lot to expect in a week when the kids are sick, the car is acting up, and you are uncertain about having a job in the months ahead. At the same time, we need to help people learn to protect and restore fun, friendship, and support as a way of keeping love alive. To simply be more in love is not the only path we suggest you follow. Ironically, that may be the path on which you are least likely to find happiness. Building on our increased emphasis on protecting and preserving positive interactions in our last edition, here we add some new ideas on ways to help couples keep the positive connections strong.

Divorce and Single Parenting

There continues to be a high level of social acceptability (and low legal barriers) to getting a divorce. No-fault divorce laws, now the norm in most counties in the United States, generally require only one person to want to get a divorce for a divorce to happen. When

both parties agree, there is typically a six-month period from filing to the actual divorce.

This is not all bad. On the positive side, that means people can put more emphasis on their personal choices in the role of building *and keeping* a great marriage. For some, it can make leaving abusive relationships easier. That's surely a good thing.

On the negative side, with fewer economic, legal, and moral barriers to divorce, more people choose this option—even when faced with difficulties that many couples could overcome with the right kind of effort. And by *overcoming*, we don't just mean that a couple merely survives their problems, but rather that they can learn how to thrive in the relationship.

Despite the near universality of the desire for a single long-term marriage, it appears that in response to the high divorce rate and other bad news, more people are thinking that the pain of divorce can be prevented by avoiding what leads to divorce: marriage. Although it may not seem like a huge change to you, current projections are that about 85 percent of Americans will eventually marry, down from about 95 percent in the past. These numbers have moved far more rapidly in the same direction in most European countries. In general, the trend in industrialized nations is toward far more divorce, less marital happiness, and less marriage in general.

In addition to the high divorce rates, there has also been a vast increase in the number of children born to people who are not married in the first place. This has been one of the greatest changes in family structure in industrialized societies over the past four decades. In the United States, for example, the percentage of children born to mothers out of wedlock has increased from 6 percent in 1960, to 32 percent in 2000, to 40 percent in 2005.

This is a sweeping, unprecedented change over a relatively short period of time in human history. We can't emphasize strongly enough that there are many single parents doing a wonderful job of raising their children. Nevertheless, the increase in

out-of-wedlock births as well as the high divorce rate have led to more children at an increased risk for economic disadvantage, a lack of father involvement, or both.

It is increasingly clear that children do best when they are raised in stable homes by two parents who love each other, handle conflict well, and provide a base of commitment that brings stability to the lives of those children. The good news is that we can teach people to handle negative emotions in a constructive way. These skills are the focus of Parts One and Two of our book.

Concerns about many of these issues led to one federal and many state Healthy Marriage initiatives and several large-scale national studies on marriage education. The first and biggest state-level marriage initiative was the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI), which started in 2002 and continues to date. Building in part on the success of the OMI, a federal Healthy Fatherhood and Marriage Initiative was funded in 2006, which provided \$93,000,000 to fund grants offering a variety of community-based services to fathers and couples. The federal initiative also created a National Healthy Marriage Resource Center and a Center for Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. Four large-scale evaluation studies of the effects of relationship and marriage education were also launched. Information about all these exciting projects is available at the Administration for Children and Families Web site (www.acf.hhs.gov).

New Research on Marriage and Relationships

The techniques and strategies in this book are based on solid, up-to-date research in the field of marriage—not on “pop-psych” speculation. What’s the difference? Our work is both empirically informed and empirically tested. By *empirically informed*, we mean that we take great advantage of a wide range of research findings from many respected scientists in developing our suggestions and in explaining them to you. This will be clear to you as you read



on. By *empirically tested*, we mean that we (and colleagues) have conducted a number of studies looking at the effectiveness of this approach—especially with premarital couples who are starting out happy and wanting to stay that way.

There are exciting advances in our field of marital research, particularly in studying the deeper positive connections to be found in relationships. Historically, the field of marital research has seen two other major themes. The first area of focus was on marital satisfaction, the second on communication. Let's look briefly at these three themes in general; the specifics will follow in the rest of our book.

Satisfaction

When coauthor Howard Markman started his career researching couples over thirty years ago, the main focus in the field was marital happiness (also called satisfaction and adjustment)—simply put, who's happy in marriage and who's not. This was important because couples' happiness is closely related to how marriages fare over time. If you think about it, however, you can see that

knowing more about happiness does not lead to very specific strategies for staying happy. If it did, we could stop writing this book now and just conclude with this advice: “Don’t worry; be happy.” That would not really tell you very much about *how* to make that happiness happen or last (but it would be a very short book!).

One of the most exciting new lines of research in the area of marital satisfaction is being conducted by our team, including one of our students, Erica Ragan, who has found that how happy each partner is with his or her life before marriage predicts how happy the partners are in their marriage up to five years later. On the basis of these findings and others like it, we have focused more on how each partner can do his or her part to be happy and therefore create a happy marriage.

Communication

The next big theme in marital research was communication. This kind of research exploded on the scene in the mid-1970s with the advent of relatively affordable reel-to-reel videotape recorders. This technology was a real advance that allowed researchers to do something they hadn’t been able to do before: record couples as they talked. That was important because if you can record something, you can watch it over and over. And if you can watch it over and over, you can start to detect key patterns in how couples talk and how couples fight. As Yogi Berra, the famous New York Yankees catcher, put it, “You can see a lot just by watching” (and this has been one of Howard’s mottos for many decades). In the early days, it took up to twenty-four hours to code one hour of videotape!

It would be hard to overstate how important this wave of research became to the field. Such pioneers as Robert Weiss, Jerry Patterson, Clifford Notarius, Kurt Hahlweg, John Gottman and Howard began to generate an astounding number of fascinating findings. This kind of research has played a major role in the development of our approach to helping couples build strong and happy marriages. Many of our core techniques come directly

from studies that show how damaging some kinds of negative interaction can be and what is different in the communication of couples who do well over time.

Although the focus on communication is hardly new in the marital field, there are many new studies about how couples communicate that we incorporate in this revision. For example, the most important studies have been focusing on the role of positive communication and have used new research tasks, such as having couples talk to each other as friends and asking partners to be supportive of one another. Further, in our own research, we videotape the same couples' communication every year (in some cases, for up to twelve years consecutively after marriage!). We have found that happy couples show lower levels of negative communication over time than unhappy couples during the first five years of marriage. Couples who are unhappy show increases of negative communication over time compared to happy couples. Negative communication involves all of our Communication Danger Signs discussed in Chapter Two, and we provide new ideas on how both to bring up issues and to respond when issues are brought to your attention.

The Deeper Positive Connections in Relationships

One of the major findings in the field is that the negatives in relationships are far more hurtful than the positives are beneficial. In this new edition, we focus much more attention on how to accentuate the positives and work on defeating the power of the negatives.

Much of our work in this area is fueled by the growing emphasis in our field on the deeper positive connections in relationships, reflected by advances in research and conceptual advances in such areas as commitment, positive bonding, support, forgiveness, sacrifice, attachment, the importance of community connections, and spiritual intimacy in marriage (drawing on the cutting-edge work of coauthor Scott Stanley and colleagues Steven Beach from

the University of Georgia and Frank Fincham from Florida State University).

HOW PREP WORKS

Historically, most of the formal research on PREP has been conducted with couples in the transition to marriage. More recently, we have expanded our research and our services to married couples in a variety of life stages, dealing with a variety of issues. We are finding that the concepts and principles are just as applicable for happy or unhappy couples, for those who are going to marry or who have been married for fifty years. Our studies (and others) show that characteristics of couples even prior to marriage are strongly related to the likelihood of divorce, which means that for many couples, the seeds of divorce are present prior to marriage. This does not mean that we researchers are very good at predicting exactly which couples won't make it, but we have gotten pretty good at identifying the factors that greatly increase the odds of divorce.

Aside from our studies on the prediction of marital distress and divorce, our research strongly suggests that couples can learn skills, complete exercises, and enhance ways of thinking that increase their odds of success. There have been more than ten evaluation studies of PREP conducted by our own team and others. A review of all the findings is far beyond the scope of the book; however, references are available in the References section of this book and on our PREPinc.com Web site.

Research on PREP

The key findings on PREP are that couples can learn the communication and conflict management skills taught in this book and maintain use of the skills up to thirteen years later, according

to at least one study. In our newest studies, we have more diversity in terms of couples and issues, and we are using the strongest research designs (studies where couples or individuals are randomly assigned to receive a version of PREP or not receive any intervention). In some of these studies, we find that couples in PREP versus those in control conditions have lower rates of relationship breakup and divorce, and in some studies, lower rates of relationship aggression; in some studies, PREP couples have higher levels of positive connections and positive bonding, which includes fun, friendship, and sensuality. In our most recent randomized clinical trial, working with the U.S. Army, PREP couples had a divorce rate of about 2 percent one year later, as compared to 6 percent for the control group, a statistically significant difference.

One example of the evidence that PREP is an effective tool for fighting marital distress and preventing marital problems is that PREP is the only relationship and marriage education program in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. Thus PREP is considered to be the worldwide leader in relationship and marriage education, and PREP is the most evaluated and tested program in the field.

There have been several new studies of PREP using Internet-based technology and with new populations. These studies show similarly promising results, and we are expecting this positive trend to continue in future research.

It is important to note that some of the beneficial effects of a program like PREP appear to be clear as long as four or five years after the training. This does not mean that every couple benefits or that every couple can reduce their risk of divorce. In this field, we need to know far more about which kinds of couples get the greatest benefit from which kinds of materials. Also, no matter what the program or material, the beneficial effects probably weaken over time. Therefore, it is important for any couple who

benefits from this material to review those things that seem to help their relationship most.

If you would like to read more of the academic descriptions of our work, you can refer to the References in the back of this book or go to our Web site (PREPinc.com). For those of you interested in this kind of material, it can help you understand why our approach is so helpful to so many couples.

The Variety of Couples Using PREP

We now work with couples across socioeconomic lines, with foster and adoptive parents, in middle and high school settings, and with men and women in military settings. We have developed programs for couples with one member in prison as well. We hold training workshops for mental health professionals, clergy, health care workers, and lay persons in the United States and in many other countries. Many of these people use our materials to conduct workshops for couples or in counseling individually with couples.

We are also proud of training hundreds of chaplains and social workers in all the branches of the U.S. armed forces, so that they can make use of the straightforward strategies of PREP to help the marriages of the active-duty personnel of the services. This work has been particularly gratifying to us: the nature of military work places many stresses on families, and we are proud to help protect and strengthen the marriages of people who serve our country.

A number of new PREP curricula are geared to specific groups of couples and settings, such as those in the transition to parenthood, those dealing with financial issues, empty nest couples, adoptive and foster parents, and couples in the armed forces. The development and marketing of a wide variety of materials that couples can use to learn the concepts we teach has also been a priority. These include videos and audiotapes for couples and a host of materials for those who present PREP workshops.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

We believe that the recipe for a great relationship includes a cup of love, a cup of commitment, several tablespoons of compatibility of interests, a cup-and-a-half of skill in handling conflicts, and a pinch of magic. We are convinced that you can learn how to build and protect a great relationship if you are motivated to do so. We'll introduce a number of very effective skills for handling conflict and disagreements. We'll also suggest strategies for building and maintaining friendship, fun, commitment, social support, spiritual intimacy, and physical intimacy—all that really great stuff that bonds you together. With each skill or principle we discuss, we'll also tell you about the underlying theory and research so that you understand why it may work for you. You will find that these techniques are not really difficult to understand, but *they will take some investment of time and energy to master*. We believe in making things simple, but simple is not always easy. You have to put in the effort to reap the rewards.

You can learn how to build and protect a great relationship if you are motivated to do so.

One way to invest in your relationship is to think about and discuss the talking points and to complete the exercises at the end of each chapter. The exercises are particularly important because they are carefully designed to help you learn the key concepts and strategies.

MOVING AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

Our society has come to a point where many people are divorced, know many people who are divorced, or are surrounded by some pretty unhappy married couples. Yet young people today still highly value marriage, think that being married for life is a worthy goal, and want to be *happily* married. What they lack, however, is

confidence that a happy marriage is an achievable goal. In fact, it looks more like an impossible dream to many of them. It might be fine for Don Quixote to dream the impossible dream, but in reality, most people don't get all that excited about dreams that they believe just cannot happen.

On the positive side, you probably know couples who have done well over many years—meaning they have stayed together and stayed happy. They've found a way to preserve their special bond through all the ups and downs of life. Who have your role models been regarding marriage and family relationships? Depending on whom you spend time with, you may have either concluded “Yes, it can be done” or “No way—hardly anyone makes this deal work out well.”

If you are an optimist about relationships—especially marriage—what we have to offer you in this book can give legs to your optimism. We find it's not enough simply to be optimistic; optimism needs to be paired with specific plans and action, or it's just a good feeling.

Likewise, if you are pessimistic about relationships and marriage, we think you've come to the right place. Our primary goal in writing this book is to teach you the most powerful strategies we know for helping you build confidence in your relationship. In our research, we have found that confidence in marriage is related to such factors as commitment to your partner, friendship with your partner, fewer nasty arguments with your partner, and having fun with your partner. If you take a moment to look at the table of contents, you'll find those to be among the core themes of this book.

In short, we want to help you build confidence based on increased competence. Although we make no guarantees, we believe that if you work through the ideas presented here and adapt those that seem to help you the most, you will significantly increase your chances of not only staying together but also experiencing the greater joys of a life together.