

Introductory Session: Making the most of marriage?

Introductory Reading

This session introduces the *Together* study and considers what it takes to build a strong and flourishing marriage. The session will give you a 'taster' for this group study and at the end of the evening you can decide whether you wish to continue.

Ground rules

There are three simple ground rules to ensure the session is an enjoyable time of learning together:

1. Respect each other – Don't share anything that would embarrass your partner or others in the group.
2. Maintain personal boundaries – You can pass on any question you don't want to answer.
3. Be confidential – Whatever is said in the group stays in the group.

Introductions

All parts are optional.

A. Go around and introduce yourselves. Include:

- Number of years married
- Number/ages of any children
- Hobby/sport/special interest or, a little known fact about yourself

B. Go around again with each couple briefly telling either a funny story or something with fond memories about one of the following:¹

- When and where you met.
- A particular date when you first knew each other.
- A honeymoon experience or something from the early years of your marriage.

Discussion questions

Pick three or four to discuss as a group.

1. What attracted you to your partner when you first met?
2. Name a couple who model a good marriage to you (could be relatives, friends, or you could describe a media couple or TV characters). What is it about the relationship that you like?
3. How do (or how did) your parents influence your view of marriage?
4. What is marriage?
5. What are some of the things that make marriage difficult in today's society?
6. What makes a strong and flourishing marriage?

A vision for marriage

Everyone seems to have their own idea about marriage today. So why marriage? What's it all about anyway?

It is clear from the Bible that marriage is designed by God and He has a 'vision' for it. His vision gives marriage a purpose and an exciting, practical plan to make it work. When we appreciate how special this relationship is, we will defend it and invest in it. *Together* is a series of nine studies for small groups of couples in all stages of life and circumstances. It unpacks God's plan for marriage and addresses some common 'real life' marriage issues.

Any marriage – whether good or bad – has an impact on the wider community. **We've all noticed the ripple effects of a marriage that's been torn apart. What about the ripple effects of one that is truly alive and kicking?**



No 'group therapy' or embarrassing revelations. Just the opportunity to get together, perhaps over a relaxing meal and **discover more for your relationship and find a renewed vision for your marriage ... together!**

Foundation Principle:

A flourishing marriage is one in which both partners have a shared vision and are committed to spending time learning and growing together.

Opportunity to prepare for
Couple Time

My thoughts at this point ...

Take a moment by *yourself* to think about how the things you have discussed relate to your marriage, so you can talk about it in your Couple Time (after this group meeting).

- i. One thing that particularly attracts me to my partner right now is ...

- ii. What was my vision or mental picture of marriage when we first got married? (Tick any ideas below or write your own.)
 - I want it to be 'happily ever after'
 - This will work as long as ...
 - Two children and a dog
 - When we're married I can change him/her
 - We'll stick it, whatever happens 'till death do us part'
 - I want our marriage to be better than my parents' marriage
 - Other ...

- iii. What are a few words which would describe how I feel about my marriage now?

- iv. In what way do I want to see this *Together* group and our 'Couple Times' benefit our relationship?

A good marriage is the closest thing on earth to the realization of a practical, enduring, and loving coexistence between people. It is a sign, a spiritual and social and political example, of depths of love and patience and forgiveness that are unknown in other spheres of life.

Mike Mason,
The Mystery of Marriage

In your Couple Time be prepared to talk about your answers and what you can do to make the most of your Together experience.

What is *Together* and what do we do?

This is not a typical marriage enrichment course nor just a Bible study on the topic of marriage. Rather, it attempts to help couples lay a lasting spiritual foundation and includes elements of discipleship.² Many practical marriage issues are covered as well with a focus on couples taking specific action 'steps'. Each topic is anchored in biblical principles.

Together is structured as follows:

- You will begin each evening with an **informal time of hospitality** (eg 7–8 pm)
- Following on is the **Group Session** of 100 minutes (eg 8.00–9.40 pm) which is designed to stimulate discussion on the topic and Scripture.
- A **Couple Time** of 60 minutes is completed privately at a time between the group meetings to discuss and apply what is relevant to your marriage.
- There is no written preparation for group meetings but you are asked to complete the **Introductory Reading** (5–10 minutes) to prepare for the topic before you come.
- We recommend that you **meet every two weeks**, with flexibility for holiday periods.

Session	Title
1	Growing even closer through our communication
2	Finding unity through God's purpose and plan for marriage
3	Expressing love through emotional intimacy
4	Facing life's relationship challenges with God
5	Handling our feelings constructively
6	Living positively with our differences
7	Deepening our physical and spiritual intimacy
8	Fitting together as husbands and wives
9	Leaving a legacy that will last forever

... And finally

Shall we continue meeting? Some things to discuss:

- One venue or rotate?
- Include a meal or not? (bring & share; rotating hosts ...?)
- Childcare needs?
- Putting all nine sessions in the diary ...
- Confirming start and finish times.

Arrange a Couple Time. Make time for each other after this session for your Couple Time, to talk through and apply what is relevant to your lives.

Why not agree a date now and note it here:

Marriage is the alliance of two people, one of whom never remembers birthdays and the other who never forgets them.

Ogden Nash

Couple Time

As you talk to each other remember the dos and don'ts of listening:

Don't

- Interrupt.
- Be distracted.
- Criticise or blame – instead say how you feel.
- Give unwanted advice.
- Change the subject.

Do

- Listen actively – give your full attention.
- Be sensitive to one another as you share your thoughts and feelings ... this is important.
- Speak the truth in love.
- Try to understand – from time to time check your understanding by 'feeding back' to your partner what you think he/she has said.
- Be ready to apologise for any attitudes or behaviour that has caused your partner to feel marginalised or misunderstood.

If you didn't have time to complete the Couple Time preparation box during your group meeting then take a few minutes to fill it in now before you talk to your partner. As you talk, consider elaborating upon what you wrote or ticked in the box. Also talk about any insights you gained from the group discussion. There are optional additional questions at the end for couples who are remarried (turn to page 16).

My thoughts at this point ...

Take turns explaining your answers for **i, ii, iii** and **iv**

Following on from your answers to question **iv** identify some personal goals or areas you want to grow in your marriage. Try to be specific, eg communicate more openly, understand my partner better and how I can show him/her love, talk more openly about my feelings, manage my temper better, liven up our sex life! (NB you won't be asked to share these goals with anyone in the group.) Write down at least three goals.

Personal goals

At the next group meeting you will be asked to share one insight or encouragement that has resulted from the Introductory Session or your Couple Time discussion. Agree with your partner the insight/encouragement to be shared with the group.

My insight:

Before you come to the next group meeting please complete the Introductory Reading for Session 1: **Growing even closer through our communication** (pages 19–20). It will set you up well for the group meeting and only takes approximately five minutes to read. Most of us would like to be better at communicating. How do we communicate in ways that lead to greater understanding and grow a closer relationship?

For remarried couples

(optional additional questions)

For couples where either one or both partners have previously been married or in a long-term relationship.³

- i. In what ways has your previous relationship, or the previous relationship of your partner, affected your expectations of this marriage?

- ii. Is there anything that you fear might affect this marriage, which may (or may not) have happened in your previous marriage, or that of your partner?

- iii. Agree on one thing you could do **to support your partner** as you face any challenges together.

Identify a personal action point for you as an individual (a specific way to follow through with an action from any insights you gained from the discussion with your partner).

Personal action point:

NOTES

1. Adapted from 'Getting to Know You' Session 1, *Building Your Marriage*, Group Publishing Copyright © 2000 Dennis Rainey. Used with permission.
2. A Christian disciple is someone who follows Jesus, literally a lifelong learner of His ways.
3. Questions adapted from 'Expectations in Remarriage' Session 1, *Making Your Remarriage Last*, Group Publishing Copyright © 2001 Jim Keller. Used with permission.