

Guidance for Leaders

Starting a group

What is a group?

The ideal group is four or five couples, with one of these couples leading (that's you). The sessions are designed to stimulate study and discussion of a topic with relevant Scripture. Couples learn principles and are encouraged to take specific actions to apply them to their lives. Individuals are asked not to talk about anything in the group that might embarrass their partner (there is a Couple Time between sessions for the personal things).

Couples may have been married for one year or many, or they may be remarried following the death of or divorce from a partner. Being at a similar stage of relationship/ages can be helpful for sharing (eg young marrieds/30s and 40s, older couples and the retired). However, those married only a short while will also benefit from the experience of others, so be flexible in the mix of the group.

Together is designed for married couples but is suitable for engaged couples too. For more information about leading a group of engaged couples (including appropriate alternative questions) go to www.togetherinmarriage.com

Together doesn't assume in-depth understanding of the Bible. It is suitable for Christians (whatever their spiritual maturity) and non-Christians (providing they are open to the Bible). Note that someone who has been a Christian for many years and who is familiar with the Bible may not be living a life that is consistently in line with the Bible.

What a group isn't

- Couples' counselling
- Group counselling
- Teaching from the 'front'
- Telling people how to live their lives
- Only food, fun and casual chat

Tips on inviting couples

Talk to couples face to face – people like to be invited personally. You can give them an invitation for information so they can think and pray about it. Remember to write your contact details in the invite and DO follow up couples by phoning them

to find out their decision. Invitations which you can print off and complete can be downloaded from www.togetherinmarriage.com

Invite couples to an Introductory Session (which includes a nice supper) after which they can decide if they want to continue. It is worthwhile mentioning that *Together* is designed to help couples who want to invest in their relationships and make a good marriage better.

It's often better to talk to the women first because they are usually quite keen.

Men can be very hesitant. **It's important to put to rest any fears they might have.** If appropriate, make it clear what the group is not. Reassure them that they will **not** be required to talk about their own relationship in the group. The group will involve learning together ... and it will be fun! Ask the husbands if they would consider coming as a 'gift' to their wives.

When and where to meet

When to meet?

It's up to you and the group to decide. Invite everyone along for the introductory meeting and ask couples to bring along diaries to fix the dates of all the sessions if they decide to continue. **It is recommended you meet every two weeks.** Remember people will need adequate space between group meetings to have their Couple Time (more on that later).

Where to meet?

The best place is in someone's home where everyone can sit together, because it's more informal and friendly. Rotating homes works well (but be sensitive if some in your group have very little space – it may be better to stay in one venue but rotate the 'hospitality'). A church venue or other meeting place is OK as long as there is privacy.

Hospitality

It's a good idea to share a meal together, especially at the first introductory meeting. This helps to break the ice and get to know each other. At the first introductory meeting you might want the evening to be a bit special with candles on the table. You might also start Sessions 1-9 with a meal or at least some refreshments, as this is an important part of relationship building. It can be a simple supper or coffee and biscuits/pudding. (Don't be too elaborate.) We recommend that the lead couple provide refreshments at first and then involve others.

The danger of offering hospitality is that it can often use up your study time. Your meal should finish at least 1 hr 40 mins before people are expecting to leave.

Structure of Leader's Notes

For each session the Leader's Notes are divided into three parts:

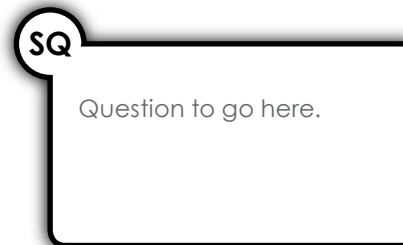
1. **Leader's Information.** Helps you to prepare ahead of time. Each session is positioned (tells you how it fits into the whole of *Together*), the objectives are set out and the 'flow' of the session is outlined with timings. There are also things you need to do a few days before your group meeting and some general notes to help you.
2. **Session Notes.** This is in effect a copy of what the group participants have in their books with time guidelines and comments for leaders superimposed. The Session Notes are designed to be used by the leader couple as they lead the group discussion. We suggest that you make any notes you require to help you lead in this part of your Leader's Guide.
3. **Supplementary Information.** Important details to help you to prepare and address issues, and you may wish to use it as the basis for any notes you decide to make in the Session Notes. In some cases we provide pre-prepared answers or statements which leaders can read out to help with time management. Supplementary Information for each session is at the back of the Leader's Guide.

Contact details

If you have any questions, feedback or require further information please go to the website at www.togetherinmarriage.com where there is lots of extra information and support available free.

Key for abbreviations and symbols in Session Notes

- SI** Supplementary Information is available for this question.
- SQ** Supplementary Questions (optional) to help conversation to flow or dig deeper.



Instructions for the leader.
Not to be read aloud.



Shows you how much time we suggest you spend on this question or part of the session.

Time check

Insert target time above
(start time plus 75 mins)

Fill in this box during your preparation time. The time-check box will be an indicator of where you should be at a certain time (time measured from start time). In this case you should be at this point in the study 75 minutes after you started.

Leader's Notes for Sessions

Introductory Session

Positioning the Session

The Introductory Session is designed to give couples a feel for what *Together* is all about. At the end of the session, you will ask couples to commit to the remaining nine sessions (if they haven't already done so) and, if appropriate, you will order a participant's workbook for each group member.

If you haven't purchased participants' books then you will need a participants' Introductory Session for every person, which you can download and print off from the website at www.togetherinmarriage.com. If couples have already committed to the full nine sessions, then order and give out participants' workbooks before or at the Introductory Session.

Objectives of this Session

- To give couples a chance to relax, have fun and get to know one another.
- To consider what it takes to build a strong and flourishing marriage.
- To decide as a group whether to do the next nine sessions (unless they have already committed).

The Flow of the Group Session

The session is divided into four parts and takes 100 mins.

	Subject matter	Time (mins)
Introductions	Time to get to know each other.	20
Group questions	Some questions which will get the group thinking about marriage.	55
Prepare for Couple Time	Time to note down one's thoughts at this point.	10
Moving on	Couples schedule their Couple Time. Agree the future of the group. Schedule further meetings. Close.	15

Preparation (during the days before the group meeting) Notes for the Group Session

	Activity	Tick box
1	Read through the Notes (both the Group Session and Couple Time). Make your own notes as you wish throughout. Ensure you have the materials you'll need.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Ask everybody to bring their diaries.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	The session involves sharing information about you. You might want to agree with your partner what stories you share!	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Pray privately for every individual in your group before the group meets.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	If you are planning to share hospitality or a meal as a group before the group discussion, then we suggest that you talk about timings with the host/hostess beforehand to ensure that the group will be ready to start the group discussion on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Have some spare pens/pencils handy for the preparation for Couple Time.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Think through how to handle the process of deciding on the future of the group.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Download a 'contact details' sheet and a 'meeting schedule' (free) from the website, to be filled in at the end of the session by all those continuing to meet.	<input type="checkbox"/>

- This is an introductory meeting so try to ensure it is **relaxed and fun**.
- There is no Supplementary Information for this session.
- **Try to start and finish on time.** Manage your time carefully and try not to get 'stuck' on any particular question. You might say, 'Let's move on to the next question', and then read it out. Suggested timings are given to help you keep on track. You could ask your partner to help you to keep to time.
- Whether you choose to have a short opening or closing prayer is up to you and will depend on the kind of people in your group. If there are non-Christians in the group, it might be better to leave out open prayer at this stage. The goal is to **introduce prayer in such a way that it grows more significant through these nine sessions**, so that meaningful prayer aloud as a group is appropriate toward the end of the 'course', if not before.
- If people don't know each other you might want to consider name badges/labels with individuals' first names. If they do know one another well you may wish to cut down on the introductions part of the evening.
- **Make sure you are familiar with how this session works so you can briefly explain to the group what to expect.**
- **Ensure you have a clear understanding of how future sessions fit together so that you help couples understand what to expect (see page 6).**



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

READ out the first paragraph.

ASK someone to read out the 'ground rules'.

What will you say to the group? Agree it with your partner beforehand.

introductory session

9

20 MINS

There are no right or wrong answers. These questions are designed to get discussion going and people thinking about marriage. There should be plenty of time for these questions.

ASK someone to read these paragraphs out loud and someone else to read the Foundation Principle.

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.

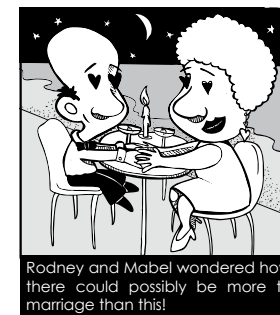
1. What attracted you to your partner when you first met?
2. Name a couple who model a good marriage to you (could be relatives, friends, or you could describe a media couple or TV characters). What is it about the relationship that you like?
3. How do (or how did) your parents influence your view of 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?**



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making the most of marriage?

EXPLAIN to your group that throughout the study there are Foundation Principles which are key learning points for each session.

As soon as the reading is done, move straight into preparing for Couple Time. You may need pens/pencils handy!

EXPLAIN that throughout the study there are opportunities to prepare for Couple Time – the time couples spend alone between group meetings discussing and applying what they have learned to their own marriages. Explain how Couple Time preparation works:

Ask everyone to spend 5 mins filling in the box **without conferring** with their partner.

- If there are any remarried couples, sensitively draw their attention to the **optional additional** questions at the end of some of the Couple Times.
- Tell parents that there are also **optional additional** questions for parents at the end of a few of the Couple Times (but not this one).

When everyone has filled in their boxes, explain that couples should come to the next group meeting prepared to **share one brief insight or encouragement from their Couple Time discussion**. Suggest they agree something they are willing to share with the rest of the group.

Opportunity to prepare for Couple Time

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

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.

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).

- One thing that particularly attracts me to my partner right now is ...
- 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 ...
- What are a few words which would describe how I feel about my marriage now?
- In what way do I want to see this Together group and our 'Couple Times' benefit our relationship?

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

READ out the notes and explain how *Together* will work.

- You may want to discuss how timings could work for your group.
- Give people a chance to ask questions.

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

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making the most of marriage?

ADDRESS the ‘Shall we continue meeting?’ question. If appropriate, put meeting dates in diaries and/or fill in a ‘meeting schedule’ (from the website).

If fewer than four couples (including you) want to continue, be prepared to contact others about *Together*, explaining the concept, showing an example of a session etc in order to secure one or two more couples for the group.

Encourage couples to put a date in their diaries NOW for their Couple Time.

ENCOURAGE couples to do the Introductory Reading before the next session (takes only 5–10 mins). Show them where it is in a workbook to avoid misunderstandings of what they should read. The group will get much more out of the discussion if everyone does this reading.

ASK couples who are continuing to meet to fill in their phone numbers and email addresses on the ‘group contact details’ sheet (from the website).

If you haven’t already got them, **ORDER** the participants’ workbooks required for your group. Give them out at the next meeting, or before if you can.

Congratulations – you’ve just finished leading your first group discussion!

... 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

Time check

Write target finish time here:

Supplementary Information

The following supplementary information is there to give you background knowledge and to help you answer questions raised by the group. It isn't intended to give leaders all the 'right' answers so they teach their group. However, in some sessions there are pre-prepared answers (shown in a distinctive font) which you can read out if you are short of time and want to move through that question quickly.

Supplementary Information for Session 1

Part A (page 31)

- Things that you could mention if they don't come up in discussion:
 - Good communication requires our time, energy and focused attention. You could ask for some practical suggestions to help Chris and Carol manage their time and energy to help improve communication in their relationship.
 - Patterns of behaviour can become bad habits. To change requires willingness and an effort from **both** sides.
 - If we don't share who we really are, our relationship can be shallow and it may suffer. We can end up feeling lonely and isolated, and even drift apart.
 - Good listening shows that we value others. This is something that can be learned. **Refer to Together Notes: Poor Listening/Good Listening** on the website for more on listening – encourage couples to look at it as part of their Couple Time by giving them each a copy.

Part B (page 33)

- Things you could mention if they don't come up in discussion:
 - Being '**other-centred**', putting the needs of our partner before our own, eg listening first, carrying each other's burdens or problems.
 - Demonstrating that we **value our partner**. Not interrupting or making light of something that is important to the other. Making time to talk, removing distractions like TV so that we can concentrate on each other.
 - Dealing with disagreements**, rather than letting them fester.
 - Complete openness and trust**. Not hiding things from each other – no lies or secrets. Each is transparent.
 - Praying together**. Non-Christians may do some or all of the above, but they probably wouldn't pray together.
- Hopefully the diagram is self-explanatory. If not, the notes below will help. Then discuss Chris and Carol.

Level of communication	Notes and examples...
1. Cliché	Superficial, allowing a person to remain at a 'safe' distance eg greetings and comments that express no opinions or feelings, such as 'Hi, how are you?' or talking about the weather!
2. Fact	Exchange of facts, gossip or analysis of information can hold others at arm's length eg sports results or TV soaps.
3. Opinion	Involves sharing what a person thinks – ideas and opinions which reveal a little more of the real person, eg 'I'm concerned about all the rubbish on the TV these days and the effect it's having on young people's minds.'
4. Emotion	Involves conveying one's feelings – hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, dreams, failures, stresses, burdens, discouragements etc, eg 'I'm feeling more and more worried about my job.' Saying 'I am concerned about ...' is not showing emotion. It expresses an opinion. Expressing emotion means using a 'feelings' word.
5. Transparency	No-barriers communication. Means sharing one's heart and emotions as a way of life eg 'I'm feeling really stressed about work and when you ignore me and watch TV instead it makes me feel like you don't really care ...'

- Consider:
 - It shows we value the other person**. When we listen to others we are showing them we value them. ('I'm interested in you and I value you and your views.')
 - Listening assists the **deepening of relationships**.
- Consider:
 - It means complete openness and trust in the way we communicate; we are not supposed to be hiding things from each other; we have nothing to be ashamed about.
 - We usually 'hide' because we fear making ourselves vulnerable, being ridiculed, getting hurt or being punished for something 'wrong' that we may have done – or because of some 'weakness' that might be revealed.

sin  shame, blame and fear  hiding

Part C (page 35)

- As we grow in our relationship with God, we change, and the way we communicate changes too. This takes time! Consider the following:

