A Marriage Retreat Sample

Taken from Models for Marriage Enrichment in the Church, compiled by Reuben Herring, Jimmy Hester, Ken Jordan, published by The Family Ministry Department of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Used with permission from LifeWay Christian Resources.

Session One (2 Hours)

Introduction to the Retreat (30 minutes)

Materials:

Poster. Top half: “Marriage is honorable; let us all keep it so . . .” (Heb. 13:4, NEB); Lower half: “Marriage enrichment is any growth or new learning experience that enhances married life.”

Poster listing the four assumptions for the retreat: 1. Everyone is responsible for his or her own learning; 2. Participants will share and do only what they feel comfortable with sharing and doing; 3. Couples will stay through the full allotted time; 4. Each one here is important and has something to share.

Leaders introduce themselves giving primarily marriage and family information.

At the beginning of this marriage enrichment experience, we focus your attention on Hebrews 13:4a from The New English Bible. This half verse is a scriptural mandate for marriage enrichment. Notice that it is positive and refers to the effort required to maintain and nurture a growing marriage. God created the institution of marriage. And marriage, as an institution, is good. The people who populate that institution, that is husband and wives, are human beings with flaws, weaknesses, and a constant need to grow. There is where the need for effort comes in.

The fact that you are here indicates that you want to be faithful stewards of the marriage that God has given you. We compliment you and share with you the fact that we, too, are here to see our good gift grow.

Also on this poster is a definition of marriage enrichment. The word enrichment is a positive word that speaks of growing, learning and enhancing. A marriage enrichment retreat is a structured experience where couples can get away to devote time and energy to helping their marriage grow. It is for couples who believe their marriage is worth the effort it takes to grow together. Marriage enrichment is not for troubled marriages that need a counselor. It won’t hurt, but it certainly can’t promise major solutions to major problems.

There are four assumptions for this event: (Refer to poster.)
1. Everyone is responsible for his or her own learning. Consider this experience a smorgasbord of enrichment from which you can choose what is meaningful to you and leave the rest. We are not here to enrich your marriage; you are responsible for that. We will offer some information and some experiences from which you can enhance your relationship. You can disagree with or reject any part of what we say or do. The retreat is yours.

2. Participants will share and do only what they feel comfortable with sharing and doing. We express our appreciation to those of you whose enthusiasm for this event doesn’t match that of your mate. If at any point during the retreat you are uncomfortable with what you are being asked to do, it is okay for you to simply say, “I pass.” During the course of the sampler we will allow each of you a total of 1,001 passes! If you run out, raise your hand, and we’ll give you more.

3. Couples will stay through the full allotted time. (Define the schedule of sessions.) Is there anyone who will not be here the full time? If anyone must leave, for whatever reason, we ask that you let us know you are leaving. For our group to be effective, we need everyone to remain the entire time.

4. Each one here is important and has something to share. We will be sensitive to your needs, and we ask that you regard your mate as important and what your mate shares with you as important, also.

Are these assumptions okay with everyone?

Get Acquainted and Warm Up (30 minutes)

Materials:

Worksheet: “Sign Here” (one per person), pencils (one per person), poster with definition of affirmation: “Affirmation is treating another person as important and worthwhile.”

To begin our Marriage Enrichment retreat, we will play a game. Mix with the other people here to see how many people you can get signed up on the sheet we are distributing. There will be a time limit. (Hand out worksheet and pencils.)

Each person takes a sheet and a pencil. Wait until we give you the signal to start. While you are waiting, read the instructions on the sheet. Any questions? Begin. (Either wait until one person has notified you that they are finished or call time in 10 minutes.)

Who got all 15 spaces filled? Who got one less than that? Will you read off your items with signatures? (Have the top 3 or 4 read theirs and allow the group to react.)

Now, get with your mate and the two of you find one other couple you don’t know well. Sit with them and talk about your experience with this exercise. (While this is going on, display the poster with this definition: “Affirmation is treating another person as important and worthwhile.”)
Defining Affirmation (30 minutes)

**Materials:** Poster board and felt tip pens.

Each person share in your foursome your answers to the questions, “What are some favorite affirmations you like to receive from others?” Here is a definition of affirmation. (Refer to poster and allow time for foursome activity.)

Each foursome selects the affirmation you would most like to receive and report. (Poll the foursomes and record the answers on a poster up front.) Read Phil. 1:3-11.

This warm greeting and shared prayer exemplifies the fellowship of love that empowered the early church. It also shows Paul’s model for affirmation in relationship. If we study Paul’s letters, we see in each one an opening affirmation. No matter how frustrated he became with his fellow Christians, Paul took the time and effort to also express his affirmation.

So often we assume that affirmation and frustration are to be exclusive of each other; either I withhold my affirmations while I’m angry with my mate, or I withhold my frustration so I can be affirming of my mate. In either case I withhold an important part of my experience of my mate and our relationship.

Paul believed that even when we are angry with each other it is still possible to also appreciate those with whom we are frustrated. For him, therefore, affirmation was an indispensable part of a healthy relationship.

While Paul modeled verbal affirmation well, the richest biblical model for non-verbal as well as verbal affirmation is Jesus.

(Have poster posted up front to record responses given below.)

“What are some ways Jesus affirmed people He met or was close to?”

As we look at the ways Jesus affirmed people, reread those as we have listed in terms of ways mates can affirm each other in marriage. How do you see this applied in marriage? (Discuss responses.)

Experiencing Affirmation (30 minutes)

**Material:** worksheet, “Our House of Affirmation” (one per person), pencils, poster (top half: Phil. 1:3-4, GNB: lower half: “I thank you, God, for my mate because . . .”)  

Each person take a worksheet. You will need a pencil. On this sheet you will see a “house” with four rooms. Take a few minutes by yourself and fill in each room by drawing or writing your recollections of your mate’s behavior called for in each “room.” In a few minutes we will invite you to share these recollections with your mate. You will not be asked to reveal these to anyone else. Any questions? (Allow time for this activity.)

Get with your mate now in what we call a couple exchange. Find a place in the room that can be your space away from others. Arrange your chairs so that you face each other,
knee-to-knee. (Leader couple demonstrate; when all are settled in this fashion, proceed with instruction.)

Take turns sharing from your “house of affirmations.” Describe the incident and show your drawing, and explain why your mate’s behavior was so memorable for you. After each sheet is shared, the listener is to review, in his or her own words, the four “rooms.” Include in your feedback what you remember that made the moments so memorable to your mate. When you both have finished and given your listener’s feedback, we will regroup and ask you to comment on what this experience has meant to you. (Allow time for sharing and feedback. Proceed when all couples have returned.)

- What has this experience meant to you?
- What surprises did you experience in the sharing?
- What does this say about the part affirmation can play in a marriage?

Return to your “house of affirmation” sheet. You notice that your house has an attic. Let this part of your “house” represent the future in your relationship. What is something your mate could do or say (or both) that would be particularly affirming to you? Write or draw your idea into your “attic.” (Allow time for this.)

Get with your mate in a couple exchange. Take turns sharing and feeding back your wishes for affirmation. In your feedback, start your sentence with the words, “What I hear you saying is . . .” (Allow time for this.)

In feeding back what your partner said, you are practicing a simple technique of communication. Try it throughout the rest of this sampler. Whenever your mate has something important to say to you, listen all the way through without interrupting. Then, give your partner’s thoughts back in your own words before thinking about your response.

We invite you now to word a prayer of thanks similar to that of Paul in Philippians 1:3 (GNB), “I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy because of the way in which you have helped me . . . from the very first day.” (Refer to poster.)

Think a moment about what your mate means to you, what you can thank God for. If you need to, make notes to yourself. We will invite you in a moment to share your prayer with your mate. Here is a way you can start your prayer. (Uncover the lower portion of the poster; allow time for completion.)

Find a place for a closing couple exchange with your mate. Share briefly with your mate your thoughts and feelings about the evening; close by sharing in prayer your thankfulness to God for your mate.

When you have finished with this you are free to leave quietly. We will begin again promptly at (time).
Session Two (2 Hours)

Devotional: The Bible on Communication (10 minutes)

Materials: Bible (for leaders) and poster, “Communications is Messaging to be Understood, and Listening to Understand.”

In the first session, we focused upon affirmation and its place in marriage. We start this session focusing upon communication in marriage. Here is a definition of communication. (Refer to poster.)

You can see that there are two parts to communication: the sending and the receiving of messages. Right off, we see that it takes two to communicate, both partners in a marriage wanting communication to work. It takes two for that to happen.

The Bible speaks of the need for effective communication. We call to your attention two passages, Ephesians 4 and Matthew 13. One deals with speaking to be understood, and the other deals with listening to understand. (Read Eph. 4:15-16).

Ephesians 4:15-16 speaks to the church’s need for positive communication among its members for the sake of unity. Without “speaking the truth in love” the different parts of the body would not be coordinated. So also in marriage, communication plays a central part in keeping the relationship healthy and growing. Notice that the attitude of love is important to the communication. Effective communication, even in confrontation, will evidence the love each partner has for the other.

Let’s look at what Matthew 13 says about listening, the other side of communication. (Read Matt. 13:9, 13, 16, and 23.)

Jesus is telling the parable of the sower. At the end he says,: “Listen, then, if you have ears” (v.9, GNB). The disciples ask Him why he speaks in parables, and He answers in verse 13. (Read.)

He is pointing out that whether or not you want to hear determines whether you will hear. It could also be that the enemies of Jesus would not hear because Jesus wasn’t saying what they wanted to hear. In contrast to His commentary upon the deafness of His enemies, Jesus compliments the disciples, in Verse 16. They do hear and they do see. A good listener not only listens for the words but also watches for the meanings and feeling conveyed by facial expressions, body posture, and gestures.

Jesus, in His explanation of the parable of the sower, speaks in Verse 23 of the result of good listening. It bears fruit. There is a positive payoff to good listening: the good feelings that come to both partners when they believe there is an understanding between them.
Exercise: The Stacked Squares (25 minutes)

Materials: worksheet, “Stacked Squares” (one set per couple), two blank 8 ½” x 11” sheets per couple, and pencils.

In order for you to discover a few facts about how communication works, or doesn’t work, we invite you to participate in an exercise. Each couple decide which partner will be the Sender and which will be the Receiver in this activity. (Pause for this determination.)

Arrange yourselves so that you are sitting back-to-back.

Receivers, lift your hand. You will get two blank sheets and a pencil. You are to draw what your mate describes verbally. You cannot turn your head to look over your mate’s shoulders, nor can you ask questions or otherwise speak to your mate.

Senders, lift your hand. On the sheet which you are getting is an arrangement of lines you are to describe to your mate. You cannot show the sheet or make gestures for your mate to see, and you cannot consult your mate’s drawing.

Any questions about what you are to do? When you have finished, you may compare drawings with your mate. Begin. (After it is apparent that all couples have finished, resume instruction.)

For the next part of this exercise, the Sender will send and the Receiver will draw. Take two minutes to discuss with your mate anything you learned that might help you this time. Set up any agreements you need to make your communication more effective.

This time there will be some differences. Turn your chairs to face each other. The Receiver this time may stop the Sender, ask questions, and talk with the partner. The other rules are still the same: the Receiver may not see the diagram, the Sender may not look on the partner’s drawing or gesture. Any questions?

You may compare sheets, both before and after, with your mate when you have finished. In a few minutes we will ask what you have observed about communication. Begin. (After all are finished, proceed with questions.)

What have you observed about communication in the course of this exercise?

Exercise: Guided Listening (30 minutes)

Materials: poster

a. What I hear you saying is ________________.

b. You seem to be feeling ________________ (mad, sad, glad, scared).

c. I felt (emotion)___________ like (perception)___________.

d. I can understand how strongly you feel . . . (feedback feelings.)
In this next exercise we focus more on the other component in effective communication: listening. Again, at the end of this exercise, we will ask what you have observed about the ways you communicate.

Get with your mate, and sit facing one another. One of you is to be the Speaker and the other the Listener. Designate this now.

Speakers, think of something outside your marriage that has caused you feelings; be prepared to share this with your partner. Listener, pay close attention to the Speaker, and indicate your attentiveness with your eyes, head nods, “uh-huhs”.

When we interrupt in two minutes, Listeners be ready to give feedback in your own words, starting with these words (poster, item a). (Allow two minutes, interrupt.)

Stop. Now, Listener give your feedback. Speaker, check the feedback and correct it if there is a need. (Allow time.)

Alright, Speaker, resume your description of your situation that caused your feelings. This time allow yourself to feel the emotions you felt then, without naming them. Listener, as your partner speaks, watch for signs that tell you of feelings. Be prepared to identify them by responding with this statement (poster item b). Speaker, you have one minute. Begin. (Allow one minute; interrupt.)

Listener, give your feedback, focusing on feelings you’ve observed. (Allow time.)

We invite the Speakers to think a moment about some word picture you can use to better convey your feelings to your partner. Here are two examples of word pictures: “I feel sad, like someone who had lost his best friend,” or “I felt mad, like I was a little kid who got to the ice cream counter at school just as the last cup got handed out.” Any questions? Speakers, try this, and Listeners, respond with this statement or its equivalent (poster, item d). Speaker, you have one minute. Begin.

(If there is time, or you can rearrange other agenda items, you may repeat the exercise with partners exchanging roles. This time invite participants to proceed through the entire series without instruction.)

• What have you observed about the part listening plays in effective communication?
• Speakers, how did you experience this kind of listening from your perspective?
• How can this be applied in your marriage, and with what results?

There are two simple steps couples can take that will effectively improve their communication. Step one is for the partner who has something important to talk about to check the availability of your mate. Step two is for the partner being spoken to with an important message to give feedback to your mate, doing so in your own words. Check to see if what you heard is what your mate meant. These two steps will bring improvement to your communication. Try this for the remainder of the retreat.
Needs-Meeting in Marriage (55 minutes)

(This section offers two options. Choose the ones you feel most comfortable using with your group.)

Option One

A. Exercise: Defining Needs (35 minutes)

Materials: five or six large sheets of paper, (23 x 34”), two red felt-tip pens, two black felt-tip pens, masking tape, quarter sheets blank paper 4 ¼” x 5 ½”, two per person), pencils and poster, “What needs do you personally experience that are met in a marriage?”

In The New English Bible, Genesis 2:1 says, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will provide a partner for him.” In this verse we understand that the male-female relationship was created out of human need. We all have the same basic human need: to be important to someone important to us. Therefore, we can say that marriage is created by God as a partnership for needs-meeting.

(Have two separate areas of the room, or separate rooms, set up with two large sheets of paper taped to the wall or two easels facing away from each other if possible, and two felt-tip pens, red and black, in each area.)

To help us become more aware of our partner’s needs, we invite you to get into two groups: wives in this area (in this room), and husbands in that area (in that room.) Wait until we have finished these instructions before moving. Each group will sit facing sheets of paper posted for you. You each will take a quarter sheet of paper and a pencil, and write on one side your answers to this question (refer to poster): “What needs do you personally experience that are typically met in a marriage?”

Your responses will be shared anonymously, so you can be frank in your definitions of your needs. These needs you think of may or may not be currently met in your own marriage – you do not have to identify that. Be specific. Such words as love, security, helpfulness need to be more specifically spelled out in terms of observable behavior. My mate and I will serve as scribes in your groups. Any questions? Now go to your groups.

(At this point have them gather in their groups. Leader husband go with the men, and leader wife go with the women; act as coordinator/spokesperson/scribe. After everyone has finished writing on the quarter sheet, offer more sheets if needed. The following instructions are to be given by the leader in each group.)

Everyone turn your sheets of paper face down. (Take up the slips, shuffle them, then redistribute them until all slips are in the hands of the group members.)

When you get your slip (or slips) look at it and if it happens to be your own, do not say so. Work with it as if someone else had written it.

We will now compile a masterlist of stated needs on our large sheets of paper.

This worksheet prepared by the Kentucky Baptist Convention. For more helpful resources, go to: http://www.kybaptist.org.
(Use a black pen and number each item as it is posted. Be sure there are no repetitions or close similarities among the needs statements posted. To assure this, here is the process. The scribe will call for one item of need from the first group member to the right. All others watch their slips for duplications or similarities. If there is a duplication, simply mark it out. If there is a similarity, share it with the group and combine with the read statement to make one item. The scribe will number each item as it is posted and continue around the group getting one item at a time until all items are covered on the masterlist. At the end of the written items, ask if anyone thinks of an item not yet covered that should be posted. Also, if your group gets finished before the other group, remain quiet so as not to disturb them.)

Now we are going to prioritize our list. Group in threes. Each team of three will have six votes to cast for the three items you agree as a group are the highest priority needs. Cast three votes for the top priority need, two votes for the second priority, and one vote for the third highest. Each group must come to a consensus before voting. Any questions? (Record these votes from each group with the red pen, making hash marks over the statements of need. Next, tally the votes and post No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, etc. in the left margin, in red, showing the order of priority. Bring both masterlists, men’s and women’s, to a central wall space and post side by side.)

Arrange your chairs so you can study these lists together. We will ask each group to explain their list to the other.

(Lead in this, with others contributing at will. Each group asks questions of the other, if needed.)

What do you see that is significant about these two lists?

What does this say about the needs of couples and what they typically do about them?

**B. Lecturette and Exercise: Dialogue about Needs (20 minutes)**

*Materials:* worksheet, “A Dialogue for Meeting Needs” (one per person), pencils, large sheet of paper, felt-tip pen.

Once we become aware of our needs, what do we do then? Some believe we should know our partner’s needs out of our love and sensitivity. To some extent we do know our partner’s needs out of our love and sensitivity, but this involves guessing, without any direct communication.

My best source of information about your needs is you; and I can be more sure of your needs if you will own them and tell me about them as you experience them.

Faithful stewardship of one’s own need means taking responsibility for that need by asking, “Would you be willing to . . .” is a fair, responsible act of stewardship because it keeps the mate from having to guess and lets the mate choose a response. Jesus taught us to ask. (Read Matt. 7:7-11)
Get with your mate where you can see these lists and talk with each other. First, affirm your mate in three ways from these lists. “I appreciate the way you help me with the chores” of “I’m glad you show interest in my job.” (Pick examples from the lists.) Second, select one item from either list to become the occasion for a request you are willing to make of your mate. Each mate takes turns doing this. Any questions? (Allow time for this, giving notice before closure.)

Now we offer you a structure for negotiating to get your needs met. Each person take one of the worksheets, “A Dialogue for Meeting Needs.”

Here are five steps to needs-meeting agreements. We invite you to try this out on a least one of your needs. You may use the need you have just selected for your request or any other need of which you are aware. Review with me the steps on your worksheet.

Step One is for the Initiator. State your need and then define for your mate how you think that need might be met. “My need is for more exclusive time with you; would you be willing to get a sitter for our children so we could go somewhere and be together once a week?”

Step Two is for the Responder. Offer what you are willing to do and ask for what you may need if you act upon your mate’s stated need – if these are relevant. “I am willing to spend the time with you – I would like that – but I need you to get the sitter and help with finding the money. Would you be willing to call a sitter each time?”

Step Three is for the Couple. Explore your options now that you’ve both made your statements. Decide upon the option about which you both feel okay.

Step Four is for each mate to express his or her feelings about the agreement. If there are any negative feelings left over, they need to be owned and dealt with.

Step Five is for the Couple to define at least one payoff (i.e., what will be different for us if this agreement really works.)

Take the remainder of the time, or some of your free time if needed, to seek agreement on both mates’ earlier requests or whatever needs you choose to work with. When you have finished you are free to leave. We ask that you do so quietly. We will reconvene at (time).

Option Two

A. Lecturette (20 minutes)

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will provide a partner for him.”’ Gen. 2:18, NEB). This verse suggests the male-female relationship was created by God in response to human need. We all have the same basic human need: to be important to someone important to us. Therefore, we can conclude that marriage was created by God to be a partnership for needs-meeting.

We enter marriage with needs. Having these met is one thing we want from the relationship. Often these needs are unspoken, even unconscious. Some are legitimate
and reasonable; others are not. We tend to measure our marital satisfaction in terms of needs – fulfillment. Responsible partnership in marriage calls us to communicate our wants and needs to our mate so they do not become a hidden agenda in our relationship.

Faithful stewardship of one’s own needs means taking responsibility for them by asking that they be met in the marriage relationship. It is okay to ask. In fact, Jesus taught us to ask in Matthew 7:7-11. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son ask for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (NIV).

If marriage is to be a partnership of needs-meeting, then both partners need to understand what each is seeking from the marriage. Even though we usually declare we married for love, most of us respond to each other because we are seeking to satisfy some basic needs in our relationship. This is appropriate, for marriage is fundamentally a needs-meeting relationship. Marriage partners should seek to identify with reasonable understanding their own needs and their mate’s needs they hope the marriage will satisfy.

Some believe we should know our partner’s needs out of our love and sensitivity. To some extent, our love and sensitivity will help us know something of our partner’s needs. But without direct communication of needs, this involves guessing, and we may guess wrong. Our best source of information about our partner’s needs are our partners, and we can be more sure of their needs if they will share as they experience the needs. Marriage partners should be sensitive to each other’s needs, appropriately identifying, owning, sharing, and responsibly asking for needs to be met as they arise.

Even in the best marriages, some needs may never be met. This may be because the needs are so exaggerated no one can satisfy them. Some of us have unrealistic expectations. We think marriage should solve all our problems, remove all our insecurities, and provide for us a lifetime of happiness. This it cannot do. Or because of conflicting desires in our own emotional makeup, it may be impossible for some of our needs to be met. Not to make unreasonable demands of marriage is wise.

B. An Exercise in Communicating Needs (35 minutes)
(Have couples participate in a couple exchange using the following three statements. Give adequate time between each one for couples to complete the activities.)

• Identify a need you hoped to have fulfilled in marriage. Be prepared to share with your mate why this need has special significance to you.
• Identify a specific need your partner has been especially effective in meeting; be prepared to affirm your mate for making your marriage a partnership of needs-meeting.
• Identify a need you are willing to ask your mate to help you meet; be prepared to share how you can work together to have your need met.
Conclude your time together with a prayer that you may grow in oneness as you invest time and energy in meeting each other’s needs. After your prayer time, you are dismissed. We will reconvene at (time).
Session Three (2.5 Hours)

Inductive Bible Study (30 minutes)

**Materials:** worksheet, “Galatians 5:22-6:5” (one sheet per person), pencils, felt-tip pen, and a large sheet of paper with this information: Use an asterisk or starburst (*) to signify the light of inspiration, as you experience an insight (“aha!”) in a word, phrase or sentence and apply it to marriage. Use an arrow to signify the target of conviction if you experience a certain word, phrase or sentence speaking to you for change in your part of the marriage, or in your marriage. Use a question mark (?) to signify a question you have about the word, phrase, or sentence as it may apply to you or your marriage. At the bottom of the page, or in the margin, you may note your thoughts as you enter these symbols.

One activity that can be meaningful for couples, especially Christian couples, is inductive Bible study. This activity demonstrates how that can be done in your own marriage.

Each person take a worksheet and a pencil. Take ten minutes to yourself to read and react to the passage printed on this sheet in light of your own marriage. Think and feel about what God’s Word may be saying to you right now.

As you read, take a pencil and not your reactions with one of these three symbols.

(Show the symbols on a large sheet of paper, with an explanation by each.)

Use an asterisk or starburst (*) to signify the light of inspiration, as you experience an insight (“aha!”) in a word, phrase or sentence and apply it to marriage. Use an arrow to signify the target of conviction if you experience a certain word, phrase or sentence speaking to you for change in your part of the marriage, or in your marriage. Use a question mark (?) to signify a question you have about the word, phrase, or sentence as it may apply to you or your marriage. At the bottom of the page, or in the margin, you may note your thoughts as you enter these symbols.

(Allow adequate time, giving notice prior to closure.)

Get with your mate. Take turns sharing your reactions to the Scripture passage and what it is saying to you. Note similarities and differences in reactions. On the back of one of your sheets compose together a statement of what would be different about your marriage if you did something about what you have identified. In a few minutes we will invite you to share some of your experience with this exercise.

(Allow adequate time, giving notice prior to closure.)

Now, if you will, turn your chairs to the front. Share your experience of the last activity. What did this exercise do for you? How do you feel about that? How can you put this to work in your marriage?
**What I Do with Affirmation and Negation (30 minutes)**

Materials, worksheet, “What I Do with Affirmation and Negation,” pencil, poster replica of the worksheet. (Distribute worksheet and pencil)

This exercise is for you to assess, with the help of your mate, what you do with affirmation and its opposite, negation. As you can see by looking across the middle of the sheet, there are four things you can do with affirmation: You can give it, you can take or accept it, you can ask for it, and you can give yourself affirmation. After we have explained how to use the worksheet, you will take turns filling out your sheets by conferring and agreeing on each assessment.

Look at the first column, with the word give in the middle. Above this word there is a multiple-choice sentence beginning with the word I and ending at the top of the column with the ending of the sentence, “affirm my mate.” In between are five choices of words to complete the sentence. Select the term that most accurately describes your giving of affirmation to your mate. Allow your mate to confer with you as you decide. Circle the term you select. Do this on both mates’ sheets.

The lower half of the first column helps you assess your tendency to negate your mate. By negation we mean “any negative behavior implying recognition or refusal to recognize.” Such behavior can include fault-finding, sarcasm, refusal to compliment, derisive remarks, the silent treatment or sulking.

The assessment sentence on giving negation to your mate begins with the word I and ends at the bottom of the column with the words negate my mate. In between are five choices of words to complete this sentence. Select the term that most accurately describes your tendency to negate your mate. Allow your mate to confer with you as you decide. Circle the term you select. Do this on both mates’ sheets.

The second column has to do with taking or accepting affirmation from your mate, whenever it is given. Affirmation, like a gift, is meant to be received, enjoyed, even savored (or soaked up, as it were). Those people who have difficulty with accepting affirmation will disbelieve, fail to recognize, ignore, or even reject outright many of the affirmations they receive. For such people there is a certain discomfort in recognizing such “gifts” as real and genuine. If this is true of you, then you will circle one of the lesser words in the “take” column.

In the lower half of the “take” column you are invited to assess your tendency to let negation of any kind damage your self-regard and make you defensive. Those people who “take negation” often respond by criticism by withdrawing, getting depressed or reaching defensively as if the criticism were a personal attack, when it may not be.

Confer with each other in circling the appropriate words describing your taking behavior.

The third column helps you assess how well you “ask for” affirmation or negation. Fill it out together as you did the other two columns, selecting the most accurate terms to describe your behavior.
Asking for affirmation means being direct and open about it. It does not mean hinting around or fishing for either a compliment or some affection.

The lower part of this column needs explaining. Asking for negation is a non-verbal, indirect behavior that is rarely recognized. People who “ask for it” aren’t usually aware of what they are doing to keep people down on them or ignoring them, so this assessment is difficult unless your mate is willing to be straight with you. Some typical “ask for it” behavior includes being habitually late, forgetting details, defending or justifying mistakes, stubborn defensiveness, and acting tentative. Get your mate to help you with this assessment.

Take time now to confer on this “ask for” column.

The last column is self-explanatory. Giving yourself affirmation means being good to yourself, taking care of yourself, and allowing yourself to feel good (like internal congratulations) when you have done well. When it’s time for a break or some “R and R” you can relax and play, like you deserve it.

On the other hand, negating yourself means being hard on yourself with internal criticism (“I’m so stupid” or “when will I ever learn”) or driving yourself to your own physical and emotional detriment.

The last column represents a real dilemma for Christians. How are we to be faithful stewards of our person by honoring “the image of God” in ourself and yet also deny ourself as independent of God.

Couples really struggle with this when both partners maintain a low estimate of themselves and relate to each other as primarily needy people.

Help each other realistically assess how you treat yourselves. Are there any questions?

One final comment on this worksheet. Look at the way the circled terms show up on your worksheet. There is a pattern there. In most columns, if your affirmations are low, your negations are high in frequency, and vice versa. It is to be expected that energy invested in one is not available for the other.

This leads to a final question. Are you where you want to be in affirmation and negation? Discuss this with your mate. Each mate be responsible for your own awareness of need for change in these four columns. Look only at your own sheet when you talk about the impossible changes.

_Couple Walk and Talk (30 minutes)_

**Materials:** worksheet, “My Experience of this Retreat” (one per person,) and pencils.

This retreat has been intentionally designed with a variety of experiences so that everyone might find something that particularly appeals to them. We invite you to spend some time alone and with your mate pulling together your experience of this retreat.
Each person take a worksheet and pencil. Spend the next few minutes to yourself reacting in writing to each sentence completion. After that time, when your mate is ready, get with your mate, and spend time on a walk together. Using whatever you wish to share from your separate sheets, help yourselves pull together what this experience means to you as a couple. Are there any questions? Be back here on time at (time).

**Celebration with Banners of Praise (60 minutes)**

*Materials:* newsprint or equivalent (15 x 22”, one per couple), crayons (one box of eight per couple).

We will be closing our marriage enrichment retreat with a celebration to God of our marriages. To do this we will offer you the opportunity of raising a banner of praise to God for your marriage. Whether or not you choose to participate, we invite each couple to take a large sheet of paper and crayons. Spend time designing and drawing or writing your banner of praise to God for your marriage. Let your “banner” say something about your relationship about which you are particularly thankful. When everyone is back together you will have the opportunity to volunteer sharing your banner with this group, if your choose. Any questions? See you back here at (time).

(Have ready a low platform for an “altar” of praise upon which each couple can place their banner after sharing. It may be an ottoman, coffee table, end table, piano bench or other suitable piece of furniture that is available.)

One beautiful prayer of the Bible is found in Ephesians 3:14-21. It contains references to family that make it most appropriate for this occasion of praise of God. (Read Eph. 3:14-21)

We invite you now, one couple at a time, to come to the front and share your banner with us in any way you wish. After you have shared, place your banner on this (bench, table, altar, etc.)

You must sense how long to wait to give every couple ample opportunity without giving non-participants too much time to get uncomfortable. (When it is apparent that the last volunteers have shared, have a prayer of dedication.)

To end our retreat, let’s stand in a circle, hold hands, and pray.

Let us pray. “Father, we thank You for the marvelous gift of marriage; for bringing us together, and for keeping us together by your Spirit in all of our days. For each marriage and each family represented here we ask Your loving blessings and nurture, that we all may grow together. Convict us when we are wrong, lift us when we are down, call us forth to Your plan for our lives together so that our marriages may speak of Your love to our children, our friends, and all others who may know us as a couple. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”
SIGN HERE

*Complete no less than five of the activities. Start anywhere on sheet.

1. Find two people who will accept a compliment from you. Give them the compliment, and have them sign here: __________________, __________________.

2. Tell three people something you like about yourself and have them sign here: __________________, __________________, __________________.

3. Find someone with a digital watch, shake their hand, tell them you are glad to see them. Get signature: ____________________________.

4. Find two other people who have birthdays in the same quarter as yours, sing “Happy Birthday” together. Have them sign here: ______________ ______________.

5. Ask two people for a compliment; after they have given and you’ve accepted, have them sign: __________________, __________________.

6. Find three persons whose shoe color matches yours, give them a nod and wink, exchange signatures: __________________, __________________, __________.

7. Find someone with beautiful hair, tell them why you think so, have them sign here: ____________________________.

8. Find someone of the opposite sex other than your mate, join hands and play/sing “Ring-Around-A-Rosy.” Have them sign here: _____________________________.

9. Find someone who married the same month as you, make an awful face, and give them a hearty hug. Have them sign here: _________________________________.

10. Find someone who will agree to buy you a soft drink, have them sign here: _______________________________.

two things I particularly recall you did/said during our marriage that affirmed me or made me feel important to you

one thing you did/said during our dating that affirmed me or made me feel important to you

one thing you did/said during our engagement that affirmed me or made me feel important to you
A DIALOGUE FOR MEETING NEEDS

Step 1: Initiator: "My need is ________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

"Would you be willing to ________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Step 2: Responder: "Here is what I am willing to do ________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

(Optional) "In doing that, I have this need ________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Would you be willing to ________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Step 3: Couple: "Here are the options we can agree upon for meeting these needs: __________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Here is what we will do: ____________________________________________

Step 4: Initiator: "Here is how I feel about our agreement ____________________________

Responder: "Here is how I feel about our agreement ____________________________

Step 5: Couple: "As we think about this agreement working, here are some payoffs for us:
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Date: ____________________________
GALATIANS 5:22-6:5

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

26 Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

1 Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.

2 Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.

3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.

5 For each one shall bear his own load.