

Welcome

Over the years, we have had many people ask us what makes our marriage successful. That was a bit surprising to us at first. Clearly those people weren't present when we were having marital "discussions" about where dirty socks do (and do not) belong.

We aren't perfect, but we love being married to each other, and that seems to show. When people would ask us for advice, we would give a few tips that we had learned over time. Eventually that grew into being asked to teach marriage conferences and retreats in Canada and other countries. Now, we've put this teaching together into a book that we pray will help you and your marriage (or your future marriage, if you're single).

For forty-three years and counting, we have enjoyed a fantastic marriage, and for that we are immensely thankful. We've had our share of hard times, but we've had more than our share of good ones: laughing together, loving each other, raising children, telling dumb jokes and making dumb mistakes (mostly Brian), forgiving and showing mercy (mostly Connie), and in general walking through life like the best friends that we are. We love being married. We hope you catch a glimpse of that through the stories and humor in this book, but even more than that, we hope you receive some practical tips that can take your marriage to a brand-new level of joy and peace.

We believe one component of a happy marriage is working together to help others and give back. While both partners have their own identity and calling in God, marriage brings two people together and creates something even greater as a result.

Our shared calling has included founding a charity in 2006 called Home of Hope that helps thousands of vulnerable children in many nations. All proceeds from this book will go to that work. If you'd like to learn more, please visit [**www.homeofhope.ca**](http://www.homeofhope.ca).

—Brian and Connie



Your Terrific, Tantalizing Future

When we were engaged to be married, many people took it upon themselves to warn us how hard the first year would be. That was not the sort of “encouragement” we really needed, but they probably had good intentions. Either that or they were venting some inner trauma that they should have dealt with in other ways, rather than scaring soon-to-be-newlyweds into thinking that marriage is hard and love dies easily.

We spent the first year waiting for things to get difficult. It simply didn’t happen, though. Marriage was actually wonderful. We really liked being together, and we had a lot of fun. That doesn’t mean it was always easy or that we didn’t have to work at it, but it certainly wasn’t the daily burden or impossible chore that some people had predicted.

We got along amazingly for four years—and then our first child was born. We named her Joy, which was an optimistic choice. In general she was a good baby, but at night her stomach would feel hard as a rock and she would cry more than we thought humanly possible. Almost every night for the first six months, we were up for hours, trying to get her to calm down so we could all sleep. We started to wonder if it was too late to change her name to Grumpy or Fussy because that seemed more appropriate.

As new parents we had no idea what to do. We tried everything, but nothing worked. We took her to the doctor, and he eventually diagnosed her with colic. Colic, in case you don’t know, is defined as frequent, prolonged, intense crying in a healthy infant. That diagnosis did not help at all. That’s like taking your car to a mechanic because it won’t start, and he runs

a few tests and informs you that the problem is that your car won't start. Then he bills you \$400.

When Joy would wake up crying, Brian's usual solution as a new father was to give her more milk. Sometimes that worked, but usually it didn't. One memorable night, she vomited up an entire bottle's worth of milk all over the kitchen floor. From then on, Brian kept a beach towel handy every time he fed her. A little drool cloth was not enough for this baby! We tried many different formulas, but she often couldn't keep them down.

As you can imagine, the sleepless nights, the constant crying, and the worry about our daughter's health affected our marriage quite a bit. There was less intimacy, less closeness, less fun, and definitely less sleep. It was a low point, and it could have had long-term consequences. Thankfully, we figured out how to work through it together. We reminded ourselves that it was just a season, and seasons change, and we were going to make it through.

We continued to believe and pray that Joy would be a joy to us and to others. Finally, we got through those tough months. She started crying less and sleeping more. Today, we're happy to report that Joy is fully living up to her name. She's a joy to the two of us and to countless other people who know her.

That wasn't the last time our marriage faced challenges, of course. All marriages go through ups and downs. No matter how committed two people are to each other, life has a lot of curveballs. That's why it is important to continually work on your marriage: not because marriage is hard, but because life is often hard and love carries you through.

We've seen many happy marriages over the years, but we've also seen some unhappy ones. We've seen a few people force themselves to stay together for the sake of their kids rather than seeking help and working toward a better marriage. The reason we teach so often on marriage—and the reason we wrote this

book—is because we believe God wants couples to enjoy their lives together. The best thing a husband and wife can do is give their children an example of a happy marriage. And that is possible with the help of the Lord! If your marriage is going through tough times, you don't have to pick between two bad options: divorce or gritting your teeth and bearing it. You can find solutions. You can get help. You can discover peace and joy.

Your Marriage Can Be Off the Charts!

How would you say your marriage is doing right now? Maybe it's fantastic. We hope so! Or maybe it's good, but it could improve. Perhaps it's just okay—you're getting by, but it's a long way from where it could be. Or it could be you're really struggling right now, and you're wondering if the crisis zone you are going through is going to be the end of your marriage.

Regardless of where you are at, we want to encourage you to find hope and seek growth. Don't be discouraged with where you are, and don't stop believing for more. Our prayer is that you will find something in this book that will help you right now. Maybe one point that we share with you or one Scripture we refer to will be perfect for your situation, and you will know the next step you need to take.

Brian loves graphs, and when we are teaching on marriage, he often asks everyone to draw a simple graph of the state of their marriage during the years they have been together. He tells them to think back to the time they met, when they fell in love, their first year of marriage, their first baby, other notable events such as sickness or job changes, and so on, up until today. Then

he asks them to draw a dotted line that represents what they want that graph to look like going forward.

If you have a piece of paper handy, why don't you try this exercise right now? Use it to visualize the quality and satisfaction your marriage has experienced over the years. Then ask yourself, is your relationship graph today at the highest point it has ever been? If not, let's get to work on getting a breakthrough. Like the graph of a good stock, we all want to see that line go higher and higher. God included! Your relationship and love for each other can improve and grow.

If your graph is currently at a low point, it might be difficult to visualize a better future. This is where faith comes in. Faith doesn't depend on past performance or present circumstances. It depends on God. Could you have faith that God wants to be a part of your marriage? Do you believe He wants your marriage to be off the charts? Do you think He could help the two of you grow and change? You don't have to do this alone. God is with you.

That doesn't mean that the health of your marriage is up to God and God alone, though. Like any area of life, we have a great deal of freedom to choose how to live, act, respond, think, and decide. That's the reason behind this book, actually. We want to share some of the things we've learned over the years in the hopes that they will help you, too.

It's worth mentioning that this book is not meant to be a checklist for you to evaluate all the things your partner is doing wrong. As you read, pretend you're looking in a mirror, not a magnifying glass. Think about how you could change and grow, then work on those areas. If you need to share some things with your partner, that's great—but do so from a place of humility and shared purpose, not from a place of hurt or judgment.

What Does a Successful Marriage Look Like?

What does it mean to have a “good” marriage? What does success look like? That’s a surprisingly difficult thing to answer! The reason, of course, is that “success” looks different depending on who you are and what season you are experiencing.

When you are newly married, success might look like meshing two lifestyles into one, or traveling to new places together, or learning what sexual fulfillment is like for each partner. Later in life, when your newborn baby is crying nonstop night after night, success might look like sleeping in shifts and simply not biting each other’s heads off. When your kids are a bit older, it might look like figuring out how to divide up the responsibilities of life and supporting each other’s dreams in the process. When you’re an empty nester, it might look like discovering a deeper level of friendship than you ever thought possible.

Our point is this: the last thing we want to do here is tell you how your marriage should look or work. It’s your marriage, after all, just like our marriage is ours. We’re going to share ten general principles or truths that we have found helpful, and we’ll tell a lot of personal stories about how we did or didn’t do things right along the way, but ultimately nobody but you and your spouse get to decide how to live. This book won’t give you magic steps to instantly solve your marriage challenges, but it will give you tools to use for the rest of your life. And that’s far better!

In general, though, what does a successful marriage look like? Here are a few ideas we came up with, in no particular order.

1. A successful marriage means you have a growing marriage.

This might be the most important point in this entire book. No marriage is perfect, which means all marriages can grow. If you discover things that need to change, don't stress out about it. Just work on it. We believe people need to work consistently on their marriage because it is easy to let things drift. Some couples don't do anything to help their marriage and wonder why they have problems.

Anything worth having is worth working for. If you want a beautiful garden, it takes work. But in every garden, there will be weeds. Pick the weeds while they are small! Don't let them grow, take over the garden, and choke out the plants. In the same way, when there are little things that happen in marriage, deal with them. For that matter, if there are big things, deal with them now, too.

Some people think that if they just fall in love, everything will be easy, but if you want an amazing marriage, you will need to work at it.

2. A successful marriage means you enjoy spending time together as best friends.

This doesn't mean you have to be together nonstop or that you don't have other friends. It means that you enjoy being together and that you naturally share things with each other. You aren't just lovers, teammates, or coparents—you are friends.

3. A successful marriage means you face life together.

You are equals and you are on the same team. You might have different responsibilities, careers, personalities, and

giftings, but God's purposes for you are linked. No matter what life brings, you walk through it together.

King David wrote, "Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things he does for me...He fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed like the eagle's!" (Psalm 103:2, 5 NLT). We love how the LORD has filled our life and filled our marriage with good things, and His presence in our marriage fills us with joy. We enjoy the journey of serving God together and fulfilling His destiny for us.

4. A successful marriage means you are both satisfied and happy in the relationship.

You might be going through difficulties or even tragedies in other areas, but in your marriage you are content. Both people's needs are being met, too—not just one of you. We are thankful that we have learned how to recognize and meet each other's needs. It has been one of the things that has most enabled us to enjoy marriage.

As we'll point out again and again, our marriage is not the "ideal" or "perfect" marriage. But we are happy! And that counts for a lot. We believe you can be fulfilled and happy, both personally and as a couple. Our goal here isn't to make your marriage look like ours, but rather to inspire, invite, and challenge you to have the most successful marriage possible. That's what we all want, isn't it? We are all works in progress.

How Not to Keep a Marriage Together

When it comes to marriage problems, people often pin the blame on the wrong things. For example, they fight over finances, so they think having more money would fix their marriage. Or they are tempted to cheat, and they think if their spouse were more attractive, temptation wouldn't be an issue. In cases such as these, however, the problem is usually deeper. Money, beauty, and other superficial things are not the keys to a successful marriage.

A couple who was engaged to be married once asked us to give them premarital counseling. They were both very attractive people on the outside, but the more we spoke to them and shared tips for a successful marriage, the more red flags we saw in their relationship. Their wedding date was just around the corner, but we encouraged them to take time to think about marriage and not to rush into it. They decided to go ahead with their planned date anyway.

After their marriage and honeymoon, I happened to see the husband. I asked him, "How is everything going?"

Sadly, he replied, "Not good at all. We should have listened to you. In the middle of our honeymoon, we started thinking we should get a divorce."

Think about how many Hollywood celebrities, sports figures, and music stars end up in divorce. If money, beauty, fame, power, awards, athleticism, luxury vacations, or gorgeous mansions could guarantee marriage stability, don't you think they would have proven that? Instead, divorce seems to happen across the board: rich or poor, famous or anonymous. However, successful marriages happen across the board, too! For every affair or crumbled marriage that the media takes delight in

trumpeting to the world, there are many others that remain strong.

Our point is not that money, fame, or beauty are bad, but that our marriages can't rely on those things to be successful. Similarly, they are not requirements to be happy or successful! You could be going through financial pressure or facing significant loss or tragedy in some area and have a stronger marriage than ever. Don't look at the difficulties you face as insurmountable obstacles to a good marriage. Instead of allowing them to split you apart, use them to draw closer than ever.

Brian: As a married couple, we have gone through many challenges and trials over the years. One of the biggest occurred within days after we began rescuing abandoned babies through our non-profit organization, Home of Hope. It was December 2010. I had just returned from a trip to Africa, and I was relaxing with one of our grandkids, recovering from jet lag. Suddenly Connie said to me, "Brian, does my face look okay?" I looked over at her, and the left side of her face was sagging! Then she started to lose feeling on the entire left side of her body.

We rushed to the ER and the doctor ran a CAT scan. Then he called me aside and told me things weren't looking good. She had a brain tumor the size of a golf ball and it was putting pressure on her brain. The doctor moved quickly and sent us to the brain surgeon who did an MRI and scheduled Connie for a very serious emergency brain surgery the following morning.

We were shocked, of course. Words can't describe the emotions we felt when we heard the words "tumor" and "brain surgery." We contacted our family and friends around the world, asking for prayer.

The next morning, when the neurosurgeon arrived, he told us that when he woke up that morning, he felt uneasy about operating on Connie that day and wanted to consult with other brain surgeons to get their opinions. That was good news! He rescheduled the operation for the following day. Over the next twenty-four hours we continued to pray, fight, cry, laugh, and do our best to stay strong in faith.

The following day, the neurosurgeon sent Connie for another MRI so he could know precisely how to operate. When the MRI results came back, he was shocked. The golf-ball-sized tumor had reduced to the size of a quarter! Some of the feeling had returned to Connie's left side as well. The neurosurgeon told us this was such a good report that he didn't want to operate. We told him we had been praying hard, and he replied, "Whatever you have been doing is working! Keep doing it."

He allowed Connie to go home but said to return in three weeks. He told us the tumor would probably flare up again, and she would need surgery, so he would schedule the procedure at that time. When it came time to prepare for the third surgery date, however, we discovered the tumor had shrunk to the size of a pea.

Yet again, the surgery was postponed, this time for six months. When that appointment rolled around, though, the MRI showed the tumor had essentially disappeared!

So, after three different surgery dates came and went, Connie was given a clean bill of health. She's been completely fine ever since. It was a challenging season, to be sure, but we saw God's power firsthand.

This challenge and many others prove one thing: God is able to help all of us overcome the hard times that life brings our way. No, things have not always been easy, but we have made a

commitment to face problems together, with God's help; and that has made all the difference. Problems can either pull you together or tear you apart. It all depends on how you choose to respond to the difficulties that come your way. Will you stand at the foot of each mountain and decide to climb it together, or will you stare at it and be resentful of the mountain and your spouse? Every couple faces their share of challenges, both internal and external, but through it all, God is faithful.

Your Terrific, Tantalizing Twosome

Regardless of where you are on the marriage graph, keep improving! The goal is not simply to “not get a divorce”—that’s a very low bar! It’s not to have a ho-hum marriage, an okay marriage, a tolerable marriage, a better-than-average marriage, or even a good marriage.

It’s to have a great marriage. A terrific, tantalizing marriage. The marriage God Himself imagines for you, which is always better than the marriage you could dream up for yourself.

We often read this verse when we teach about marriage and family: “Yet I still belong to you; you are holding my right hand. You will keep on guiding me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny” (Psalm 73:23, 24 NLT). What is the “glorious destiny” God has for your marriage? Can you dream bigger than what you have seen so far in your own life or even what you have seen in marriages around you? Can you have faith that God will lead and guide you into a glorious future?

It’s important to note that God guides us with His counsel, as that passage states. The main source of God’s counsel is the Bible. Both of us love the Bible because we have seen how the wisdom it contains has guided our lives and given us freedom.

We believe the Bible is the solution for every possible problem in any relationship, and as we learn more of the Bible and practice what it teaches, we will experience what God always planned for marriages.

The apostle James reminds us that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 1:17 NIV). That means that we first believe God and then we obey God. Both are important. If you need faith for your marriage, you’ll find it in the Bible. And if you need practical counsel to follow, you’ll find it there, as well! The Bible isn’t a book of dry rules or scary threats. It is a message of love, hope, and wisdom from God to humanity. In his book *All the Promises of the Bible*, author Herbert Lockyer counted 7,487 promises from God. That’s a lot of love, hope, and wisdom!

Jesus said that His purpose is to give us “a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10 NLT). That’s a promise we all need to believe. When you imagine your marriage graph one year from now, is it richer and more satisfying than today? How about in five years? Ten? Twenty-five? In Jesus, life just gets better—and so does marriage!

Action Steps

1. Write out a simple prayer for your marriage. What are you asking for God to do as you read this book?
2. If you haven't done so already, make a graph of your marriage: past, present, and future. Consider asking your spouse to do the same and then comparing notes. Use any differences or low points to spark a meaningful, loving conversation that leans into faith and looks toward the future.