



Creating an Intimate Marriage

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

My wife Cathy and I have been married for over 30 years. I truly am a fortunate person. Yet, we describe our marriage as “high-maintenance.” This means we have to constantly work at keeping our marriage healthy. Marriage doesn’t come easy for us. Perhaps you can relate.

Creating intimacy in marriage takes work. It’s easy to blame your spouse for a lack of intimacy. Since he or she is at least as imperfect as you, they are probably an easy target. But, if we really want to develop and maintain intimacy in our marriages, we have to lay aside the “blame” game and focus instead on what you can do to work on the intimacy in your relationship.

Understand that you set the mood, tone, and atmosphere in your marriage.

After reading this sentence some people may disagree with me, because they would blame their spouse or the needs of their children for most of the negativity in their marriage. In most cases, it does take two people, but we are often quick to blame and not willing to work at setting the necessary atmosphere and attitude to create a more intimate marriage. Without sounding like a dreamer, you can change the atmosphere of your marriage almost immediately with A.W.E. (Affection, Warmth, and Encouragement). This is one of the most important lessons I have ever learned for my own marriage.

Far too many times we don’t intentionally set the thermostat of our relationship to a more positive setting. Instead, we let the temperature fluctuate according to what the other person does or doesn’t do. We react to the stresses of life, and the atmosphere can quickly turn negative.

Certainly conflict, anger, and frustration happen in the best of marriages. But, an intimate marriage, one filled with A.W.E. is a decision not to live a life based on circumstances or reactions to your spouse. It is a decision to proactively live a life filled with self-control in which you choose to set an atmosphere that leads your relationship to a healthier spot.

Most people don’t take the time to really examine their inner lives. Many people feel dead on the inside and their relationships are stale, but they continue to function outwardly as if nothing is wrong. Below the surface, though, these ignored problems fester and break out in all sorts of negative ways. Grief that is ignored, for instance, often turns into depression and hopelessness. Hurt that is ignored becomes defensiveness toward our spouse, and the suppressed anger can easily turn into bitterness. These are the tumors of the heart that can adversely affect our marriages.

So, start down the road to a healthier marriage by taking the time to examine your own life. The apostle Paul's advice to Timothy was this: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right, and God will save you and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16 NLT).

To create a more positive atmosphere in your marriage you will need to quit blaming your spouse, kids, parents, mother-in-law, boss, or the dog! They are not responsible for your unhappiness. Sure they may be contributing to your hurt, but unless there is abuse in your life, *you are responsible for how you respond*.

Inject A.W.E. into your marriage.

A – Affection

The basic need of all people is to love and be loved. Your marriage needs affection in order to thrive. You can create an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness through affection. If you are not naturally affectionate, don't fake being overly mushy, but work on it. Couples who hold hands, kiss passionately, and bring gifts like flowers and chocolate to one another are couples who have a much better chance for a healthy relationship. Back rubs work; saying "I love you" in a hundred different ways works; showing tenderness and honoring your spouse works wonders for your relationship. Choose intentionally to focus on bringing affection to your relationship and you will almost certainly see immediate results when you do. Personally, I am amazed at how often Cathy has changed my mood and the atmosphere of our home with a simple gesture of affection.

W – Warmth

Keeping a relationship full of warmth takes a lot of work, self-control and focus. Think back to your dating days. Naturally, there was much more warmth to the relationship back then. Why? *We worked at it and we didn't feel the need to fight out every battle*. Sometimes marriages slip into bad habits, and a lack of warmth is just a bad habit. Too many relationships are trying to function with a constant low-grade anger and negative atmosphere, and this is just like trying to live life to the fullest with an infection and fever.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it is possible to have a "make believe Disneyland" type of marriage. Every marriage takes work and focus. With today's fast-paced life you can find reasons to be angry with our spouse and kids twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but *how is that going to help the situation?* Think warmth.

We all have emotional bank accounts. To have a healthier marriage, we need to make more deposits to our spouse's emotional bank account than withdrawals. We make withdrawals from our spouses account, for example, by nagging, negativity, shaming, rudeness, a critical spirit, never saying you're sorry, telling your spouse that they are never good enough, and heaping guilt on them. By contrast, making deposits our spouses emotional bank account is all about those times when we offer them warmth: saying we're sorry and meaning it, making and keeping our promises, showing kindness and

thoughtfulness, putting their needs ahead of our needs, tenderness, hugs, tone of voice, and having fun together.

E – Encouragement

The only thing that a critical spirit, nagging and negativity can bring to a marriage is lack of intimacy. Many people were raised in homes where “shame-based parenting” was the rule rather than the exception. So, for many, there is a natural tendency to focus on the negative side of life, but that just doesn’t work in relationships. There is incredible power in encouragement and affirmation. Mark Twain once said, “I can live two months on one good compliment.”

Showing encouragement involves being available to your spouse. Your presence in your spouse’s life makes all the difference. It sometimes speaks louder than words. Your availability, both physically and emotionally, says to your spouse that he or she is in a safe relationship. Don’t expect to have a thriving marriage if there is too much hostility and lack of attention paid to your spouse. It just doesn’t work that way.

Find ways to affirm and encourage your spouse. Some people receive encouragement through words, some through presence, some through gifts, some through kind actions. The key to encouraging your spouse in the best way possible is to literally make a study of them to figure out what works for them.

It Begins with You and Me

Creating an intimate marriage isn’t easy. You might even be questioning, “Is it even possible to improve my marriage at this point?” Well, if you believe the answer to that question lies within the “if only my spouse would change” department, then you’ve got it wrong. There is no place this side of heaven where we will be free of pain, problems, frustrations, and negative people. Conflict is inevitable in relationships. But, it is important to remember that there is one person who can make a difference in your marriage atmosphere; one person who can get you started down the road to a more intimate marriage, and that person is... *you*.

(Excerpted and adapted from [Creating an Intimate Marriage](#) by Jim Burns, Ph.D.)