

In Marriage, Little Things Make The Big Difference

By Shaunti Feldhahn

If you work with marriages, you probably look out over your congregation – or across the counseling table – and wish you could do something to give hope to confused or discouraged couples. Well, here's some good news. I've found that one of the most effective things you can do is also the most simple: to knock down the subtle but widespread myth that marriage is utterly complicated and that most problems require serious, long-term intervention to solve. As I've interviewed and surveyed more than 12,000 men and women over ten years, it is clear that most people subconsciously feel that having a good marriage, or fixing a troubled one, requires a Ph.D. in psychology with a minor in mind-reading.

When things are going great, this belief is dormant; but the moment a couple faces trouble it looms all too large. It becomes easy for them to feel helpless and confused in the face of it. That sneaky little belief, in fact, predisposes people to give up all too quickly because the (usually inaccurate) idea that they have years of intensive therapy and struggle ahead --with no certain outcome-- is exhausting and overwhelming.

But our research has found the opposite trend is true! The last three years, as I've been studying what happy couples do differently, for my latest research project and book ([*The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages*](#)), it was clear that having a great marriage or healing a broken one is usually dependent on the little things, not the big ones!

Hundreds of marriage therapists have confirmed this. Most marriage breakdowns are not caused by what you might call the deep, systemic big-ticket problems—for example, by one spouse being a blackout alcoholic or having been sexually abused as a child. Those problems do happen and it is tragic when they do, but they aren't the *majority* of cases.

Instead, most husbands and wives deeply care about each other (more than 99% in our survey) and are trying very hard – but they don't realize that they are trying hard in the wrong areas, so they aren't making the other person feel cared for in the way they think they are. Or they don't realize they are doing something that is hurting their spouse. Or they are holding on to hurt and unforgiveness instead of looking at the very real positives in their spouse. The hurt feelings spiral, as each person starts believing that the other person "just doesn't care," and they subconsciously begin to see everything in that light. All too soon, things seem dark; they helplessly feel like they are at the bottom of a deep pit and they don't know how to get out.

Imagine the relief for these people to have someone open a brightly-lit door at the bottom of the dark pit and show them that it isn't actually a pit, and don't have to climb out! Yes, they may have to change some actions and habits of thought, learn some key things about their

mate's unseen needs and insecurities, or be completely one-sided for a while if their spouse has "checked out." But in most cases (although sadly not all) some small day-to-day actions will in the end make a huge difference.

A list and discussion of the highest-leverage actions will take more room than we have here (I'll be posting a series of [short articles and videos](#) on my [blog](#) each week; you can [sign up for the feed](#) if you're interested), but here are three little actions that you can start a troubled couple on that are, statistically, particularly high-leverage:

1. Tell her to look for things for which she can say "thank you." Emerson Eggerichs has it right: where women most doubt they are loved, men most doubt that they are respected. [The Surprising Secrets for Highly Happy Marriages](#) research was clear that her sincere appreciation for the little day-to-day things he does ("thank you for mowing the lawn even though it was so hot outside") makes him feel, down deep, she cares about me, and that helps solve (or prevent) bigger problems.
2. Tell him to reassure her that "we're okay" when they are having an argument (especially if he has to pull away to process) – and to show "you're mine" affection when they aren't. Because most women have a subconscious *would he choose me all over again?* insecurity, some painful feelings are triggered in conflict, particularly if he pulls away. Saying "I need to process, but we're okay" reassures her at a deep level. And doing things like taking her hand or putting his arm around her in church builds the daily certainty that he would choose her all over again, which helps prevent that insecurity trigger in the first place.
3. When hurt, tell each spouse to look for a more generous explanation and act as if that is the real one – because it probably is. One of the most important things the "highly happy" spouses did differently was that they refused to believe the worst of their mate's intentions. If someone thinks "He knew how that would make me feel, and he said it anyway", that translates to "he doesn't care": and it's downhill from there. But in truth more than 99 percent of people deeply care about their spouse – and a huge reason why some couples are struggling is that one or both partners *doesn't believe it*. If they change their assumption to "I know he loves me; he must not have known how that would make me feel", everything about their response – and the pattern of their marriage – will be different.

Yes, some marriages face big problems that are extremely complex to solve, but those thankfully are rare. In most troubled marriages, whatever their issues actually are, a couple needs to see that they can accomplish a great deal with a few simple changes; and that gives them the hope that having a good marriage might not be so hard and complicated after all.

Shaunti Feldhahn is a social researcher, popular speaker and the best-selling author of such groundbreaking research-based books as *For Women Only*, *For Men Only* and – her most recent research project – [The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages](#). At Catalyst Dallas in April 2014, she will lead a [lab](#) that every marriage champion needs to attend, debunking a host of damaging myths about marriage and divorce, based on a 7-year investigative research study for her upcoming book *The Good News About Marriage*.