



Relationship Superpowers

Unleash Everyday Steps
That Help Marriages Thrive!

BY SHAUNTI FELDHAHN

WELCOME

If you've seen the animated movie *The Incredibles*, you might remember the sinister and cynical line that Mr. Incredible's nemesis "Syndrome" delivers as he divulges his plan to help everyone become a superhero.

"When everyone is super ... *no one will be.*" (Cue maniacal laugh.)

In relationships, Syndrome couldn't be more wrong. Researchers have identified simple superpowers that help us flourish in our lives and relationships. We all have these superpowers. We just have to use them.

How do I know they work? My husband Jeff and I have spent twenty-five years researching men, women, and relationships. We're social researchers, bestselling authors, and speakers—and the information we've included in this e-book is proven to help relationships thrive.

So, fasten your superhero cape, and get ready to leap marriage issues in a single bound. Well, okay, it doesn't *actually* work like that. The "superpowers" in this collection do take intentionality and practice. But if you commit to building them into your marriage, we predict great things ahead for you!

Enjoy!

Shaunti Feldhahn

Shaunti Feldhahn, Ph.D.





Superpower #1

An Attitude of Gratitude

Not long ago, I kept an eye on the social media presence of a few popular leaders. I noticed that many of their posts were short and snappy, making important points, widely shared ... and *filled to overflowing with discontent*.

The posts that were positive and uplifting didn't get many comments or shares. The ones that were outraged, concerned, and pointing out *this is wrong!* were the posts, blogs, or podcasts people clicked on. (That I ... clicked on.)

For most of us, discontentment is a default setting. (Thanks a lot, Eve. We owe it all to you.) Seriously though, if left alone, discontentment becomes part of the wallpaper of our lives.

I can't believe they didn't invite me.

I hate how I look.

This place doesn't pay me nearly enough.

My spouse never wants to watch what I want to watch.

It's all about what we don't have, and we don't even notice it in the background. This affects our relationships, our health, and, if we're Christians, even the view others have of what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Ouch.

We have to get out of the mode of discontentment and into ... well... contentment. It's sort of like changing the factory settings on a smartphone. For me, for example, my phone's default notifications settings cause all sorts of problems. So, I must manually go in and change the settings until it works the way I want it to.

“Contentment is a learned behavior. It is a learned attitude that affects everything else in our lives.”

It’s the lesson the Apostle Paul learned when he wrote, “I have learned how to be content whatever the circumstances.” (Philippians 4:11, NIV)

Contentment is a learned behavior. It is a learned attitude that affects everything else in our lives. And it can be really, really hard to learn sometimes, which brings me to a question:

Why Should We Care?

If learning the attitude of contentment takes so much effort, why should we bother? Sometimes, doesn’t letting ourselves feel miserable lead to feeling better in the end?

A Biblical answer to our question is found in I Timothy, where the Apostle Paul writes, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” Godliness already sounds pretty good! But when paired with contentment, it leads to “great gain.” That original word for gain is used only once in the New Testament, and it means, “the way, the means, or route.” In other words, contentment paves the way to gain—not the other way around.

Go back and read that last sentence again. If we truly grasp this, it will change our entire mindset. Yes, it is important to not stuff our feelings—but we do have to deal with them well.



Science also answers our “why should we care” question. Researchers have long known that discontentment literally makes us sick. For example, regardless of any other demographic or health factors, we are far more likely to catch a virus if we are more discontented or anxious during the prior week. Crazy, right?

And we haven’t even started on the most obvious issue, which is the destructive effect that discontentment has on our relationships. How many arguments, assumptions, and even affairs could be avoided if we approached our relationships with contentment, appreciation, and optimism about how we each might grow?

How We Try to Fix It

So, what do we do? As I wrote in my devotional Find Rest, we often try to address discontentment by changing what led to it. “I’ll be content with my appearance if I lose 15 pounds.” Or, “I’ll be content with my living situation if I can make more money and get out of my tiny studio.”

Yet a funny thing happens on the way to the bigger apartment. Most of us are thrilled momentarily ... and then sink right back into focusing on what we don’t have.

Let’s hop off the hamster wheel of doing and lead with a new way of thinking instead. Let’s adopt an attitude of gratitude. For what we do have. For who our spouse is rather than who he or she isn’t. For the fact that we have a warm and dry apartment, tiny or not!

15 Minutes of Gratitude Can Change Your Mind
Science-backed mental wellness, made simple

Research shows that **practicing gratitude:**

15 minutes a day	5 days a week	6 weeks
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→ Significantly improves mental wellness

Research shows that practicing gratitude for 15 minutes a day, five days a week for at least six weeks improves mental wellness. Other studies have linked expressing gratitude to improved sleep, immunity, mood, wellness, and happiness – and decreased depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and disease. Still other studies suggest that an attitude of gratitude dramatically improves relationships, helps heal personal trauma, and helps prevent burnout.

Gratitude, it turns out, is a superpower.

How to cultivate the attitude of gratitude

Thankfully, the gratitude superpower is not reserved for heroes with capes. Anyone who wants it can cultivate it. Any one (or all) of these evidence-based steps will help you change your attitude for the long term:

1 *Discipline your thoughts.* As the writer of Proverbs warned many thousands of years ago: “Be careful what you think because your thoughts run your life.” (Proverbs 4:23 NCV). When you hear about a gathering and think, *they didn’t invite me*, can you be glad for those who are enjoying the event? Is there potentially a more generous explanation for their action? We can stop and change where our thoughts go—and thus where our emotions go.

2 *Direct a wandering mind.* Similarly, researchers are currently looking into mind-wandering as a source of discontentment. We spend an estimated one-third to one-half of our waking lives with a wandering mind. For some, this leads to what psychologists call “negative rumination” – in other words, your mind wanders to thinking about why the kids never call. Things change when we ruminate on pleasant memories instead. (For more on how and why to do more of this, look up Philippians 4:8, 2 Corinthians 10:5, and Ephesians 4:22-32.)

3 *Praise others.* When we practice praise, we become more grateful. We develop a habit of being on the lookout for good (gratitude) and calling attention to it (praise). Speaking our gratitude out loud is key. Gratitude expressed audibly appears to “wake our brains up.” It creates a cycle in which we crave it more. (This can especially make our spouses come alive. For example, in my *For Women Only* research, we found that a simple “thank you” is a man’s equivalent of “I love you.”)

4 *Look for chances to be kind.* After years of research for our 30-Day Kindness Challenge (and the book *The Kindness Challenge*) we quantified the power of focused kindness toward another person to transform our own attitude. We found three actions anyone can do to transform any relationship. The first is to Say nothing negative about your person for thirty days – either to them or about them to someone else. It is amazing how this changes any unseen tendencies to be discontent. (Discover the other two actions by taking the challenge. It may be the best thing you do this year; we found that 89% of relationships improved.

5 *Use discontentment triggers as opportunities to reset your defaults.* Finally, this one will help you do all of the above. When that old factory setting of discontentment tries to slip back in, look at what triggered it – and use it as a very specific opportunity to reset your defaults. Type these four questions into your phone’s notes or keep them handy (feel free to add your own), and each time you are discontented ask yourself:

- How can this perceived negative help me grow? (e.g. increased patience, dependence, faith)
- How can I be grateful for my life as it is right now?
- How is this situation bigger than me? (e.g. who else is involved, watching, suffering?)
- What aspect of God’s character is this challenge teaching me?

Among those who took the 30-Day Kindness Challenge, 89% percent of relationships improved!



Superpower #2

Curiosity

Conversation around my kitchen table can range from family life to research findings to ... unicorn whales.

Yes, you read that correctly. Listen in to what Jeff said recently over our morning coffee: “I was reading this article about the unicorn whales in the Arctic ...,” he began.

“About what?” I interrupted.

“About narwhals,” he said. “You know, the narwhal? The whale that has that long unicorn horn.”

I think I told him to stop teasing and I returned to what I was reading.

“I’m not messing with you,” he said, pulling up photos. And suddenly I had a dozen questions. How could I get to be in my fifties and only now discover there’s a real-life unicorn whale that weighs 4,000 pounds and has a tusk (actually an elongated tooth!) that juts 10 feet from its head?



***Curiosity is
essential for
creating and
growing great
relationships.***

You might be wondering what this has to do with marriage. Here it is: Curiosity is a superpower. And this little-recognized superpower can change everything in your marriage.

Imagine for a moment that you are on a cruise in the frozen north. Also imagine that, like me, you have no idea that this narwhal creature exists. You're walking the deck, minding your own business, when all of a sudden you see a long horn breach the surface, attached to a giant sea creature!! You'd have a ton of questions:

- Wait! What did I just see?
- What was that thing?
- Was that some kind of tusk or was that just ocean debris?

You'd frantically call over your spouse, friends, or anyone to explain what you thought you saw. Your eyes would stay fixed on the water's surface, hoping for another glimpse. You'd have your phone camera ready. You'd ask a ship steward what on earth that was.

In other words: Because you saw something from under the surface that was visible for a moment, you were instantly curious. That exact same sense of curiosity is essential for creating and growing great relationships.

The problem is, we often lose that curiosity about the under-the-surface things in our spouse (or our kids, or friends ...). If we can recapture it, we have seen in the data that it leads to deepened trust, safety, and intimacy. Here are three steps to get there:



Step #1: Look for what's underneath the surface

How often do we simply not notice that something is going on under the surface? Or something puzzles us... and we shrug and say, "Huh, that's weird" and then go about our day. The things that puzzle us are exactly what we should be curious about.

I was talking to a woman whose husband of 30 years was facing serious health issues. Even though she made enough money to cover their bills, he continued to work tons of overtime. She was worried he was harming his health and couldn't fathom why he was insisting on the extra hours. They had a lot of conflict, but no resolution.

She didn't realize his puzzling behavior was the equivalent of a narwhal horn breaching the surface: an invitation to investigate something below.

She caught a glimpse of it when I shared with her a statistic from the *For Women Only* research: Even if their wives earn more than enough money to support their family's lifestyle, an eye-popping 78% of men still feel it is their job to provide for their family. Providing is often at the core of who they feel they are.

Even if their wives earn enough money to support their family's lifestyle, 78% of men feel it is their job to provide.

Suddenly, this woman realized that tucked underneath her husband's behavior was worry: That he wouldn't be viewed as dependable or successful in the eyes of his wife or community. That he wouldn't be him if he didn't work.

Needless to say, it changed her view of the overtime hours. And that allowed them to explore those under-the-surface emotions and grow closer.

Step #2: Investigate with care

Being curious about weird-but-real ocean creatures can help you win trivia contests, but otherwise the stakes are low. The stakes are higher as you get curious about what's deep in the heart of a spouse—the feelings they have but don't know how to communicate. So, as you are curious, be gentle with your spouse's tender places.

For example, with that “provider” compulsion, our husbands often worry about letting us down. Probing questions could be heard as painful criticism (“Why are you working so much? You're going to make your health even worse.”) instead of appreciation (“I'm so grateful you care about providing for our family.”)



In my research, men have told me they hear the questions better if appreciation comes first. If they just feel the pain, they may keep the deep stuff, well, stuffed.

Or suppose you're a husband whose wife has seemed upset or distant and you can't figure out why. Don't just dismiss it as something you won't be able to figure out. Instead, put on your curiosity hat and gently ask about it. In our *For Men Only* research, the vast majority of women wanted their husband to investigate. It showed sensitivity (he noticed something was wrong), value (she was worth pursuing), and love (he cared enough to ask).

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Step #3: Practice Curiosity Every Day.

This is where curiosity goes from being merely “helpful,” to being a true superpower for relationships. Seriously. Try this for a few weeks and you will see a huge difference. Every day ask yourself, “What is one thing I can learn about my spouse today?” What is she nervous about at work? What is he looking forward to next weekend? What is a dream, worry, annoyance, or delight that happened this week that you were simply unaware of?

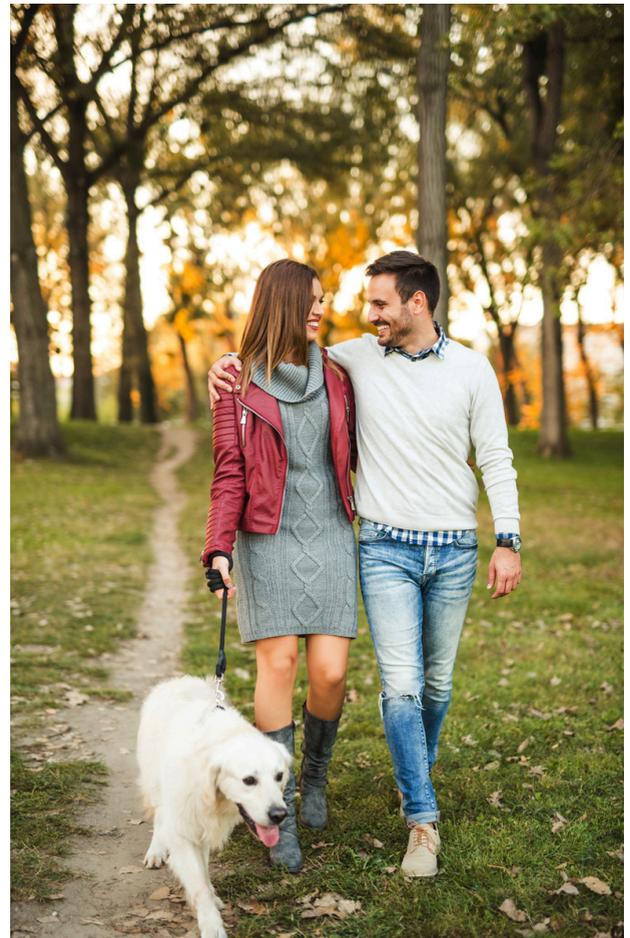
Set out with a sense of curiosity. After all, we will never know all there is to know about our spouse—in part because we are always changing. Think about it: are you the same person your spouse married? Nope! There is always something to learn.

Try genuine, open-ended questions, like:

- *Tell me more about why this matters to you.*
- *I'd love to hear your thoughts about _____.*
- *What was the best part of your day?*
- *If I could do one thing for you today, what would it be?*

Here's another way to be curious: Read together and talk about what you find. Yes, she may read novels and he may like articles about, oh I don't know, ecosystems of the arctic. But reading something together can invite discovery of things you didn't know.

Here's one final bonus tip: In our research for *Secrets of Sex & Marriage*, we found that spouses who report their partners as curious are three times more likely to have sex once a week or more. If you're, ahem, curious to discover how to foster greater intimacy in your marriage, this would be a great book to read together.





Superpower #3

Forgiveness

So far we've looked at attitude and curiosity. Those are great superpowers! And now we're going to turn to cultivating a superpower that strong, healthy relationships cannot thrive without. Yet it's also loaded with pushback and resistance. In fact, it's something we do for others, yet actually sets us free.

It's forgiveness.

It's a bit like a riddle, isn't it? Most of us would say we absolutely, one hundred percent, cross-our-hearts-and-hope-to-die agree that forgiveness is important to us. But when it comes to actually forgiving ... *well, now I'm stepping on some toes.*

Trust me, my toes hurt plenty.

I've had many opportunities to forgive and to seek forgiveness from others, and I haven't always gotten either right. Maybe you haven't either. I've heard heart-wrenching stories from many of you—situations in which even the most generous, loving person would find it challenging to forgive.



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Even in betrayals,
hurts, and hardships,
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forgive.

If I'm not careful, my mind can easily dredge up my own deep hurts. (Of course, my memory is somehow mysteriously blanking on those I have hurt!) My heart can turn to personal betrayals from those I trusted, and care about. Or even professional betrayals from other believers. Every time my mind even wanders near on particular situation from years ago, I find a sense of tightness in my chest.

Guess what that means? I'm still working on forgiveness. Yet even in betrayals, hurts, and hardships, we are commanded to forgive. And yet sometimes, if we're honest, we wonder if forgiveness is worth it.

There are many different reasons to forgive found in both scripture and science. But one reason is very clear: Forgiveness is a superpower for thriving in life and relationships. Since forgiveness is so essential, we'll spend a little more time on this topic—first looking at why it's important, then why we resist forgiveness, and then how to actually forgive.

Why is Forgiveness Such a Superpower?

In this life we are 100% sure to be hurt by others. And without forgiveness, we are also 100% sure to be in a regular state of bitterness and anger. Research finds this is extremely damaging. In fact, some researchers are pushing for regular bitterness to be labeled as an official medical disorder.

Forgiveness is the only action that can set us free and allow us to live a thriving life instead. Our choice to forgive in a difficult situation is a true superpower for every area of life.

Now, let me explicitly state that forgiving someone who has continually or acutely betrayed or abused you is not the same thing as continuing to trust them.

Forgiveness does not require an ongoing relationship. And forgiveness doesn't mean you have to somehow ignore your legitimate hurt or anger; indeed, processing those feelings is vital. But true forgiveness will set you free in your mind and heart even if you must create boundaries, step away from that relationship, or pursue consequences for someone's actions.

So, there is straightforward self-interest in choosing to forgive (and we'll come back to that in a moment). But that is not the only reason to do it.

Forgiveness will set you free in your mind and heart even if you must create boundaries.

Why should we forgive? Because we have been forgiven.

The concept of forgiveness is central to the Christian faith for one very important reason. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the church in the ancient city of Ephesus, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, *just as in Christ God forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:32 NIV, emphasis mine).

Our forgiveness of others is always tied to the fact that we have been radically forgiven for the pain we have caused to others and to God. If we were to dredge up our own mysteriously blank memories about all the ways we really have damaged people - including the people we love the most - we would probably end up in despair. If we were to honestly catalogue the ways we have betrayed the heavenly Father who created us and loves us, we would see how unworthy we are of coming before His throne.

But, God.

The cornerstone of the Christian faith is that Jesus died to pay for that sin. He defeated sin so that each of us could be forgiven for it. If we were to truly grasp how astounding that reality is, I suspect we would never withhold forgiveness. We have all fallen short.

*Forgiving
leads to
better
living.*



The Benefits of Forgiveness

Beyond the command to forgive, we should also be aware of the astounding benefits of doing so! There are so many studies that examine and quantify the positive effects of forgiveness on health and relationships. Here are just a few:

Forgiveness improves our health and overall wellness.

The health impacts of forgiveness are better than any miracle medicine! With forgiveness, there is a lower risk of heart attack, lower depression and anxiety, and lower risk of major psychiatric disorders, among many other positive outcomes. Simply put, forgiving leads to better living. One study found that children who forgive even do better academically! And Johns Hopkins finds forgiveness leads to more satisfaction in life

Forgiveness improves our relationships.

Forgiveness also holds special power in relationships. It's a way of dislodging ourselves from hurt, resentment, or getting even—all of which are relationships killers. It resets a problem that's been imprisoning us. Again, it sets us free.

Perhaps a friend betrayed a confidence, or your spouse humiliated you in public. Those are hard things. We do get to say “ouch.” We can call out the offense. But withholding forgiveness keeps us in a place of being wounded. Over time, that can lead to:

- Staying stuck in a victim mentality
- Feeling superior (I would *never* do what they did)
- Feeling bitter
- Retaliating (I want them to hurt, too)

Forgiveness opens up the opposite possibilities! If navigated with goodwill and reciprocated with steps to restore trust, forgiveness can be a powerful glue that builds intimacy and strengthens a marriage or friendship bond into something much stronger than it was before. Thankfully, we don't have to do this forgiveness thing alone! One researcher looked at studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 1872 and 2010 and found that, statistically, people of faith are much better forgivers. That's the good news. The bad news is, were going to have to overcome some resistance.

Why We Resist Forgiveness

Let's look at some of the reasons we push back on offering forgiveness, even though we know it's something that is close to the heart of God.

Here are the most consistent objections I hear:

- It feels like we are letting the other person off the hook for their behavior.
- It feels like we're at risk of losing a sort of perceived advantage. When we forgive and let go, we instinctively feel we are losing the upper hand.
- Ironically (given the above), we also enjoy having a sort of "victim status." This allows us to relish in attention or justify things we otherwise wouldn't (e.g. I'm just too hurt to forgive.)
- We've been harmed so deeply that we actually want the other person to suffer.

It bears repeating that forgiveness does not diminish grievous hurts. And it doesn't mean ignoring our legitimate pain or anger. But it does keep us from sinking into a pit of bitterness and avoid identifying as a victim for the long run.

Here's what I mean. A dear friend of mine was raped as a teenager and that trauma has led to many emotional consequences for her and her husband. Yet she has worked to forgive her rapist, so she can be set free, even as she has worked to hold the man accountable. Forgiveness helps her approach life from a sense of personal agency, strength, and compassion.

The big picture in all this is that we have a sovereign God who cares about fairness and restoration. He values mercy and justice. And this may be hard to hear in some circumstances, but He loves you and the person who hurt you.

Our job is to forgive and let our God sort all the rest out. As I wrote in my devotional [Find Joy](#), "One who forgives finds freedom. And when we find true forgiveness, we find joy."

So now we turn to the million-dollar question:



How Do We Actually Forgive?

We know why we should forgive, and we've taken aim at some of the justifications we use for not forgiving ... and now we've arrived at the question that plagues each of us at one time or another: How do we do it? How do we forgive?

This could never be fully covered in a small e-book, but the following steps can set us on a path to forgiveness:

Step 1: Pray.

Start by praying for the other person. It's really hard to be mad at someone you're praying for consistently. Pray also that God will enlarge the capability of your heart to forgive. That He'll make the desire of your heart line up with the desire of His heart. That He will make you more like Him.

Step 2: Identify with the wrongdoer.

In his masterful book *Forgive*, my former pastor, the late Tim Keller, described the importance of viewing others in the very human way we view ourselves. He wrote:

“If somebody has lied to you, you tell yourself, ‘She lied because she is just a liar!’ But if you are ever caught in a lie, and someone asks why you lied, you say, ‘Well, yes, but it’s complicated. I didn’t mean ...’ Yes, you did lie, but you are basically a good person. So, while you continue to think of yourself as a three-dimensional, complex human being, you start to think of the person who lied to you as a one-dimensional villain.”

Keller gets at something profound. In most cases, seeing others as humans who are doing the best they can postures us to forgive.

There are cases when the wrongdoer is truly motivated by evil or operating from a mental health diagnosis, and that requires a different perspective. But in most day-to-day situations where forgiveness is needed—the words our parent said to hurt us, the way our colleague slowed down our work project—we will do better to see the person through eyes of compassion and, thus, lower their status from a “villain” to a person. Just like us.

“One who forgives finds freedom. And when we find true forgiveness, we find joy.”

Step 3: Trade negative thoughts for positive ones.

In a previous professional life, I helped someone by sharing an immense amount of my work. I didn't get credit, and this really impacted me. But after an appropriate period of saying “ouch,” I realized it was important to not harbor negative feelings about it. Anytime I heard the person's name from that point on, I thanked God for the good work they were doing and the people who were being impacted. It set me free.

Rather than rehearse our grievances, let's rehearse God's goodness. Hurts and injustices are real, but when we take our eyes off God and put them on our unfair treatment, we actively give that unfair thing the ability to fuel unforgiveness.

Step 4. Take action, if needed, from a place of forgiveness (not unforgiveness).

There may be times we must take action even as we forgive.

Recently, I was talking to an up-and-coming tech consultant. For the past year she has been working with her firm's largest client, who is also the firm's most difficult client. She described the client's team members as regularly doing things like changing her programming without understanding the system, and then blaming her for the system breaking. She is worried about being fired. She is also becoming depressed, not sleeping, and snapping at her husband.

So what does she do? Well, from a professional development perspective she probably has to establish boundaries and start documenting performance—hers and theirs. She may need to walk away from the job for her own health.



But in our conversation, what never occurred to her was that the first thing she had to do was forgive. Otherwise, every other step could be driven by anger, self-justification, and even a need for a convenient place to put the blame for snapping at her husband.

“I need to forgive this client for all the emotional consequences I have suffered this year” is a change in motivation that can help this professional take appropriate actions from a place of strength rather than from bitterness or blame.

Step 5: Make forgiveness a habit.

How do habits form? Consistency. And trust me, there are times when people and situations will call us to develop forgiveness-consistency!

There's a story in the New Testament in which Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive an offense. “Up to seven times?” he asks. But Jesus tells him seventy-seven times. Other translations suggest his wording meant seventy times seven times. I don't think Jesus literally meant to keep count until Peter got to “77 times” or “490 times.” The idea He was expressing is that He forgives over and over (and over) and He wants us to be like Him.

I've had a person in my life for whom 70 x 7 has probably been literal! Maybe you can relate. When that person's name emerges, I pray for them by name. It's instinctual now. A habit.

Friends, cultivating the superpower of forgiveness is a habit worth building. Some injuries may have changed the course of our entire lives and others may simply be personal peeves. But in every case, we can make forgiveness a habit. A habit that is an opportunity to put teeth into our faith. A habit that allows us to take what was hurt, and bring healing instead.





Superpower #4

Vulnerability

Ok, we've got attitude, curiosity, and forgiveness in our relationship arsenal. There's one more superpower to go. This one is more of a superpower than most of us think. It's a willingness to be completely vulnerable in our most important relationships. Research shows that vulnerability is almost a prerequisite for a thriving, close marriage.

Now, some of us will think *of course we need to be vulnerable*—but don't realize we are agreeing in theory but aren't actually vulnerable in practice. Others may think of vulnerability as something optional—it's like a level of the relationship you unlock when you're ready. And there are plenty of people who find the idea of true vulnerability terrifying after experiencing betrayal of trust in childhood, in earlier relationships, or perhaps even in your current marriage relationship.

Regardless of your pattern here's a truth to settle into: Being willing to let your spouse see all of you is one of the most powerful actions for creating a great marriage. Vulnerability is how ordinary couples build extraordinary trust and intimacy. (Although it is also important to note that rebuilding trust after it has been broken will require a somewhat different process that is largely beyond what we can cover here.)

I feel so strongly about this that (similar to forgiveness), I want to take a little bit of extra "ink" to look first at why vulnerability is a superpower before outlining six steps we can take to become more vulnerable.

Why Vulnerability Matters

Vulnerability builds deeper connection

A few decades ago, a group of researchers put together a series of remarkable experiments that created an entirely new stream of thought among counselors and therapists about the importance of vulnerability in relationships. It is now seen as almost a prerequisite for connection.

One study specifically examined vulnerability between a husband and wife. The study followed couples for six weeks, asking each partner every day whether they had shared something personal and how their spouse responded. The researchers found that on days when a spouse opened up and the other responded with warmth and understanding, both felt more intimate and connected that day. But there was an important additional finding: On days when vulnerability didn't happen, closeness didn't grow. Intimacy simply stayed flat. And over time, 'flat' intimacy ends up feeling like no intimacy at all.

Why do I say that? Well, think about someone you know (maybe yourself!) who has said, "It feels like my spouse and I are just roommates; we don't have a true sense of intimacy or closeness." Over months and years, a long string of "flat days" is what quietly leads to a stalled marriage—one that is a polite partnership instead of a deeply bonded union.

According to those landmark studies, a sense that daily intimacy is lacking is highly likely to be because regular vulnerability is lacking as well. Pursuing vulnerability as a solution (which we will tackle in a minute) may require courage, but is also highly likely to rebuild the closeness you're longing for.



Vulnerability is contagious and creates a positive cycle

In the research, it was encouraging to see how vulnerability multiplies and creates an upward cycle. When you open up, you're not just letting someone into your heart, you're also inviting them to do the same. Your disclosure signals, "It's safe here." The research found that this action is contagious, making it more likely for the other person to take that step as well. Which then makes it more likely to be reciprocated ... and on and on in a valuable cycle.

This is important in any close relationship but is especially vital in marriage. Why? Because it means that the decision of one spouse to be vulnerable is likely to lead to both spouses taking the risk to be regularly vulnerable over time. This has immense implications for creating a thriving marriage.

But someone has to start.

Let's say you're a guy wrestling with recurring back pain that has flared again, and you had to drop out of a fitness competition at work. Because you're feeling vulnerable, you don't want to be vulnerable. So, you don't tell your wife. You figure you'll look up some stretches on YouTube and handle it on your own.

Vulnerability may require courage, but it is also likely to rebuild closeness.

But ask yourself: would your wife want to know? After all, think about how you'd feel if your wife finally came to you and told you about something she had been wrestling with but hadn't mentioned before. Maybe she'd been worried for months about whether she was being a good mom to your toddler, and whether she should look for a more flexible job so she could be around more. Wouldn't you want to help her carry that concern, so she didn't have to carry it alone?

In our research for *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages*, we found that one of the factors that led difficult marriages to becoming happy was whether the spouses were willing to set aside their natural desire to protect themselves and be "all in" in every way—not just financially, sexually, and so on, but emotionally as well.

Of course, this absolutely means that when our spouse takes the risk of being vulnerable, that we need to honor that and actually be safe with their disclosures. If vulnerable disclosures in your marriage have been exploited in argument, mocked, shared, or otherwise mishandled, the process for stitching vulnerability and trust back together will need to be a cautious one—and perhaps best with the guidance of a counselor. But God doesn't want suspicion or hopelessness to strangle our relationships. He loves it when we grow.

For women, what increases intimacy is not simply the act of sharing, but receiving validation for it.

The big vulnerability study mentioned earlier found several important statistical differences between men and women. And one of them is something most men would want to know: What makes women feel most emotionally close is when their husband validates their feelings about whatever they are sharing.

In our research with women for our book *For Men Only* we shared the results of our national survey of women that documented the truth of what many men have heard their wives say: “I don’t want you to fix it, I just want you to listen!” (Guys, if you need help on this, you can check out the “listening” chapter in *For Men Only*.)

For men, the act of being vulnerable increases felt intimacy regardless of whether your wife does the same

That marriage vulnerability study also found something remarkable: where women felt more intimacy and closeness if their vulnerability was validated, men felt more intimacy simply through self-revealing disclosure. The husband’s decision to step out and share something sensitive acts like a signal to himself: “I am choosing to trust my wife with this, rather than trying to figure it out on my own like I normally do.” That choice unlocked a sense of closeness whether or not his wife reciprocated.

I once interviewed a husband who had been terrified to admit he was struggling at work. He finally told his wife, expecting disappointment. Instead, she hugged him and said, “We’ll figure this out together.” That moment of acceptance changed things for them; he had a conscious realization that she was safe to share things with. And because of that, he became far more open about his feelings in every area of life.



What makes women feel most emotionally close is when their husband validates their feelings about whatever they are sharing.

How To Become More Vulnerable

So how do we step out and become open and vulnerable? After all, if it's one of the most important moves we can make, it would help to know what it looks like practically! While no magic bullet will work in every situation, here are six steps to build vulnerability into your marriage

Step #1: Be the One to Go First

It is easy to think “Ok, I’ll do this . . . once my spouse does.” But in our research about what created great marriages for *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages* we found someone usually had to go first. And nearly all of the habits that created thriving marriages worked if only one person started doing them. (This principle also holds true for gratitude, curiosity, and forgiveness.)

One of those habits is related to the “vulnerability” topic; the marriages that moved from difficult to delightful made a decision to be “all in” and risk getting their heart hurt without taking steps of self-protection. (This was the case for all but the small number of marriages that were marked by a lack of goodwill and/or abuse, which is beyond the scope of this e-book. If you find yourself in such a situation, the advice here does not apply, so please seek out the help of a professional.)

Opening up can feel like a risk, but it is actually the best risk you can take: Because that one action helps foster greater commitment and deeper intimacy. So be the first to go first.

One important note: If vulnerability has been mishandled in the past, and/or if trust has been violated in some way, it's often best to start small. After a period of healing—and after the person who broke the trust has worked to build it back—it will likely be important to offer grace, take the risk, and start again. Small parts of your heart handled with care can help rebuild the trust essential for offering larger parts of your heart. Get wise advice, keep praying, and give both of you room to grow.

As one counselor friend explained it, “It’s kind of like Jenga. One block (trust) supports another block (vulnerability) and so on, until you have an entire tower. The tower stays strong because it’s set up well, with blocks that strengthen each other. When you start removing blocks—that’s when the tower is at risk of crashing.”



Step #2: Share one vulnerable thing today

What is it that you'd normally hold back from sharing with your spouse—not because you are trying to keep secrets but because you're a bit embarrassed to share it? Guys, maybe you're nervous to reach over and hug your wife and say “Yeah, it's you,” when a song comes on that reminds you of how beautiful she is (even though that would make her swoon). Why? Because that means wearing your heart on your sleeve, and you're not used to doing that!

Or wives, maybe you're equally nervous to praise your man in public (even though there is almost nothing that thrills him more) because you're worried your words might get jumbled and not come out right.

Maybe you don't want to “bother” your spouse. Or you don't think they would care about a challenging work-related matter. Or maybe you're simply worried that your mate will overreact to whatever you share.

Take the risk to share it, as the first step of building closeness.

For example, suppose you're that husband from earlier who has been holding back on mentioning that you had to drop out of the push-up challenge with the guys at work. You are concerned about why your back is hurting again. And you suspect that your wife may get on you about seeing the orthopedist. You'd prefer to try some stretches and figure it out on your own.

But you now realize your wife would want to know. You also read earlier that for men the very act of self-disclosure is likely to increase intimacy regardless of the type of response you get. So, take the risk to share it. Even take the risk to share that you had been holding

back because it feels vulnerable for you. Tell her what you are hoping for in the process. (“I want to tell you about this, but I was holding back because honestly, I think you might keep asking me to go the doctor. And right now I'm hoping you'll be supportive of me starting with some exercises on my own first.”)

Then look for other things you can share in the days and weeks to come. These small disclosures, stacked one on top of another, create a foundation of closeness you can build on every day. Like Jenga. Remember?



Step #3: Respond to Your Spouse's Vulnerability Without Reactivity, 'Fixing,' or Judgment

As you might guess from the example of the husband with the back pain, this one step is where vulnerability either opens the door for intimacy, or slams it firmly shut.

So here are two vital cautions about how to respond to whatever is shared with you—each of which present two opportunities for building closeness.

First, validate and listen, don't fix or dismiss. This is key for everyone. But as you might guess, it's especially a superpower for a man to help his wife feel loved. In our book *For Men Only* we have a whole chapter from our study about what women usually are looking for when they share things, including listening to their feelings, first, without trying to fix. Once you've pulled out the feelings ("I'm so sorry that your boss said that to you in front of the whole team. Did you feel embarrassed...?") and she has felt heard, then you can (carefully) put on your Mr. Fix-It hat. ("Would it help to strategize about what to say when you talk to your boss tomorrow?")

Second, don't allow a knee-jerk reaction that makes your spouse feel judged or pressured. This, too, is key for everyone. But it is especially a superpower for a woman to make her man feel cared for—and for him to feel able to open up the next time.

In our book *For Women Only* we have a whole chapter from our study about what men are looking for when they share things. Ladies, this includes being reassured that you appreciate them and honor their judgment and efforts.

Your openness creates space for your spouse's openness.

This doesn't mean you cannot disagree or share concerns. But when your husband shares that he dropped out of the office push-up challenge because his back has been hurting, respond in much the same way you would want him to: with listening, affirmation, and care. "Thank you for telling me. I know really enjoyed the challenge and I'm so sorry you had to drop out."

Maybe ask how he feels about that, then give him the space to think about it and respond. You may instinctively want to ask him to make a medical appointment even if he is reluctant. But as you avoid reactivity and demonstrate respect for his judgment ("I'd like to wait a few weeks") it will make it more likely that he will be willing to avoid his own reactivity and defensiveness about the issue!

Bottom line, regardless of the topic, regardless of who is saying what, just remember that your openness creates space for your spouse's.

Step #4: Treat Vulnerability as a Skill to Build Rather Than Something That “Just Happens”

You may have read to this point and thought: “But I already am vulnerable with my spouse! I’m not trying to withhold anything.” Or maybe you were privately realizing that you have a tendency toward self-protection and have room to grow. Regardless, acknowledge that the practice of vulnerability is a skill that needs to be built. It’s not just an attitude, like “I’m fine with being open!” And it is not something that “just happens.” Rather, it’s a consistent habit and set of practices.

After all, we don’t think of “money management” or “juggling who drives what kid to what activity” as something that “just happens” in our marriage, right? Those things require attention, communication, and a process. Vulnerability with one another requires the same thing.

You may want to be transparent and open and have never realized that in practice you really aren’t. So, I’d suggest doing two things to build this skill:

First, ask God to show you the ways (and the whys) that you are withholding oneness—or simply not being as transparent as you think. Perhaps you don’t want to share how selfish you feel for being worried about having your elderly parent come live with your family, and what that will mean for your freedom. Or you simply don’t think to mention some “minor” little thing that happened at work or home today that made you really, really happy.

(Vulnerability isn’t just about the negative things!) Maybe you try to avoid your spouse seeing your financial purchases, or you haven’t shared your email or phone password because it just feels “intrusive.”

Of course, vulnerability must never be an excuse for control. But in a relationship of goodwill, sincere oneness cannot happen without ongoing vulnerability. Over time, you can practice letting down the guardrails and getting comfortable with the idea of no secrets.



Secondly, to start building vulnerability as a skill, try a simple exercise. Every day for the next two weeks (over dinner, while driving in the car, or while waiting to pick your child up from football), each of you share one thing from your day that was hard, and one thing that brought you joy. Keep it short and real. Over time, you’ll both get used to noticing things you can share with the other—and you’ll notice the connection deepening.

Step #5: Be vulnerable in minor or amusing things, as a purposeful means of offering intimacy

Self-disclosure doesn't have to be about big fears or worries. It can be about something positive—or even something frivolous. At the risk of completely embarrassing myself I'll provide an example that happened while Jeff and I were traveling to speak at a marriage event. As we headed toward the baggage claim, a song came on the airport playlist. I have heard this song at least twenty times but had only picked up lyrics from part of the chorus. I knew the female artist could NOT be singing what it sounded like she was singing—because it sounded like (don't laugh): “Garden gnome... are you bringing me a message from the other side? Garden gnome, are you telling me I'm on somebody's mind?”

Today, I decided enough was enough and asked ChatGPT ‘what song is that?’ and it answered that the song was “Cardinal” by Kacey Musgraves ... and that there was a whole Reddit thread devoted to people who thought the song was saying “Garden gnome!”

I thought the whole thing was funny—and since I had just been writing these words on the plane, I decided to be vulnerable and share the incident with Jeff. He, of course, found it to be hilarious as well.

He looked the song up on Spotify and we shared a laugh as he listened to it and tried very hard to understand how I could have heard “garden gnome.”

Now, here's the thing: Is that silly, slightly embarrassing moment of connection likely to decrease our intimacy, have no impact on it, or pull us closer together? You may have previously thought something like that would have no impact; but I hope you can now see that what we think of as “frivolous” is actually far, far from it.

All of us want our marriages to grow in intimacy rather than feeling like we're roommates, or completely disconnected. Hopefully it is encouraging to realize that building that intimacy could be as simple as sharing a fear or worry, or opening a door to a silly moment of vulnerability that we might have kept shut before.



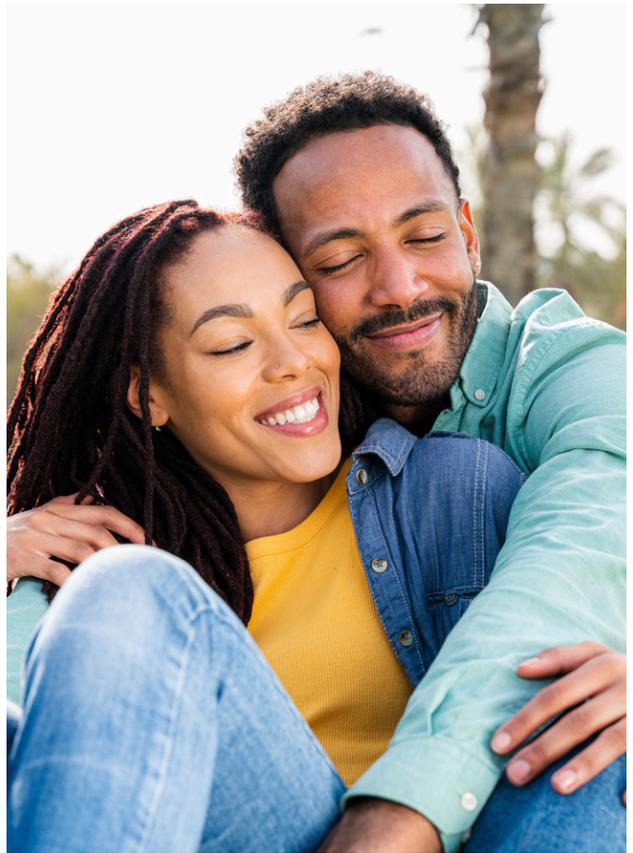
Step #6: Plan for Being Vulnerable Over the Long Term

Remember, you are building a new pattern for the long term, not experimenting with vulnerability once or twice to see if it works. If you have gotten out of the habit of this sort of sharing (or if it wasn't part of your relationship before), don't be surprised if it takes a while to figure out the best process for you.

Also, keep in mind that if intimacy has faded, your spouse may react with surprise or even skepticism about why you're suddenly being more open and sharing. That's okay. Keep pursuing it. It may be a while for the openness to become mutual. But over time, remember that it is indeed highly likely.

Building Intimacy Begins with You

All the ground we've covered takes time, intention, and courage. It's easy to tally the benefits of greater gratitude, curiosity, forgiveness, and vulnerability in our marriages. But we forget to count the cost of not doing these things. In the end, we may default toward grumbling, lack of interest, holding grudges, or keeping our vulnerabilities close to the vest. But in reality, these "defaults" erode intimacy. They too often cause the very problems we're trying to prevent.



After more than two decades of research and nearly 50,000 people surveyed or interviewed, I can say this: intimacy is what we are wanting to build in our relationships. Everyone gets married hoping for closeness and intimacy—a sense that the two really have become one. Readers of faith will recognize that “one-ness” is the description of what God designed marriage to be. (See, for example, Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, and Ephesians 5:31.) We don't have to end up living like roommates.

We can partake in the beautiful sense of closeness and oneness that scripture describes, and gratitude, curiosity, forgiveness, and vulnerability are superpowers that will help us get there.

What superpower will you start with?

THANK YOU

NEXT STEPS

Thank you for reading about four simple superpowers that help relationships thrive! I wish I could talk with every one of you about which superpower you're going to try first.

If you would like to connect with our ministry further, we are here for you.

Jeff and Shaunti share practical, proven steps like the ones found in this e-book at marriage weekends all over the U.S. They would love to come serve your group.

SPEAKING

Shaunti also has written a series of research-based women's devotionals titled *Find Rest*, *Find Joy*, and *Find Hope*, and she leads women's events and retreats themed around these topics.

For information on booking Shaunti to speak, please reach out to Nicole Owens at Nowens@shaunti.com.

RESOURCES

Shaunti.com

[I Wish You Could Hear This](#) podcast

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