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PART 1

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**Understanding  
the Risks  
on the Road to  
Lasting Love**





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# Five Keys for a Great Relationship

*PREP in a Nutshell*



Why are you reading this book? You are in a relationship or want to be, and you want that relationship to be the best it can be, now and in the future. At the deepest level, each of us desires someone to love and someone we can love in return—someone with whom we can share laughter, friendship, work, caring, and support through the good times as well as the hard times in life. People deeply desire this kind of relationship, but we also know that a great many couples don't achieve it. This is a book about helping you restore love, fun, and friendship that once was there or, if your relationship is great now, helping you stay there and continue to grow in your relationship. In this new edition, we focus not only on increasing positive connections and intimacy in your relationship but also on increasing your own self-awareness and your understanding of your partner. That mutual sense of “knowing” is the best gift you can give each other.

All over the world, people from all walks of life imagine and desire a great relationship. Yet we live in times of great cynicism about relationships in general and marriage in particular. Can partners love each other and stay together for the long term? We think so. We're here to tell you that long-lasting, satisfying love is

*All the cynicism of the world cannot smother the fire that burns in each of us for connection at the deepest levels of our heart and soul.*

of the world cannot smother the fire that burns in each of us for connection at the deepest levels of our heart and soul. Wisely directed, that desire can fuel your efforts to build a lasting love together.

What we provide here are simple, effective ways to develop and protect the love and happiness you seek. By *simple*, we mean easy to understand. Simple can be powerful, but simple does not mean easy to do. We want to challenge you to put the kind of investment into your relationship that really makes a difference. The skills and principles in our research-based program presented here work—if you decide to use them in your relationship. We hope you decide to enhance your chances of enjoying a lifetime love.

This new deluxe edition of *Fighting for Your Marriage* is like a travel guide for your journey together. Unlike most travel guides, which talk only about which places to visit, ours spends as much time telling you about key places to watch out for, because they may be dangerous, as it does about the most wonderful places to visit and relax. As you would read a travel guide, you can read this one cover to cover, or you can plan your own journey by reading the chapters that best meet your current needs and goals. In either case, we suggest you finish reading this chapter first, because it highlights the hallmarks of the PREP approach on which this book is based.

## THE PREP JOURNEY

As you know by now, this book is based on our program called PREP, which stands for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program. Over the years, we have used our research and

possible. We like to think of ourselves as relationship optimists. We know that it's possible for couples to create relationships in which they feel both emotionally secure in the present and confident about the future. All the cynicism

experience working with couples to constantly refine, update, and improve what we have to say. To learn about our most recent research findings that have emerged since the publication of our books and how you can take advantage of the newest programs, you can regularly check [PREPinc.com](http://PREPinc.com).

In our most recent work, we have focused on five keys for a great marriage. These keys will help you understand the essence of what we will teach you in our new edition of *Fighting for Your Marriage*:

1. Decide don't slide.
2. Do your part.
3. Make it safe to connect.
4. Open the doors to positive connections.
5. Nurture your commitment.

### **Key 1: Decide Don't Slide**

In our most recent work, coauthor Scott, our colleague Galena Rhoades, and coauthor Howard have been using a powerful new concept, one fueled by research on cohabitation and commitment: deciding vs. sliding®. The main idea is to understand the importance of deciding about things that matter. Too many people slide through major transitions or life experiences rather than deciding who they are and where they intend to go. When you're taking a journey, it's wise to make a clear decision about where you want to go, not to let things slide. Sliding through—just letting things happen—is great in many kinds of circumstances. After all, you don't need to treat every moment in your life as though there were a momentous decision to make. For example, if you like your evening routine together, just letting things slide tonight will likely work out just fine for both of you.

But there are many times in a relationship when you don't want to just let things happen. You need to decide, and decisions take

effort and energy and teamwork. Are you thinking about having children? Are there major transitions coming up in your children's lives? What about how you manage money? Who does what around the home? How do you treat each other when you are upset? What do you do when one person wants to have sex and the other does not? We don't know the answers to these types of questions for the two of you. But what we do know is that when something important is at stake, you need to make a decision together, because decisions support a greater commitment to follow through on what has been decided. So where it matters, decide don't slide.

Here's a friendly warning for you as you start to read this book: don't *slide* into thinking that as a couple you are going to do everything we recommend. We are going to be suggesting so many different ideas, strategies, and skills that no couple is likely to want to do everything we recommend. We encourage you to decide as individuals and as a couple what you will choose to do. You will really like many of our ideas, but perhaps not all. Also keep in mind that even if you like an idea, you should not assume that your partner will like the same one. Sometimes you may feel like saying to your partner, "We learned this skill—why aren't you using it?" and wind up being upset with your partner. We are reminding you now that it is much more helpful to be happy that at least one of you is deciding at that time to improve your relationship.

## Key 2: Do Your Part

*It's more important to be the right person than  
to find the right person.*

—SHIRLEY P. GLASS

One sign of relationship problems, now or in the future, is when you focus on your partner as the source of the problems. Of course your partner plays some role, at least to a degree. However, you have a lot of control over what you can do to help your relationship. In the chapters to come, we will hone in on how you can be

the best partner you can be and how you can do your part to team up with your partner to fight *for* your marriage.

A core theme in PREP is teamwork. To follow our program, you need to decide to work as a team on your relationship. This means that you agree to not fight destructively, to commit yourself to keeping fun and friendship in your relationship, and to make the relationship a safe emotional harbor. Most important, marital teams succeed only when each member does his or her part. We're asking you to think about what you contribute to your marriage, to focus on what you put in rather than on what you get out of the relationship.

As you read on, you will see that we place great responsibility on each partner in a marriage to work on his or her end of the relationship to give it the best chance for lasting and committed love. As just one example, this means that when conflict arises, or when you perceive your partner as acting unfairly, you do the most constructive things you can do. Far too often, when people think their partner is being unfair or is behaving inappropriately, they feel relieved of the responsibility to be the best partner they can be. We're here to tell you, and tell you strongly, that you need to hold up your end of the relationship even when you think your partner isn't doing his or her share. The major exception to this guideline is if there is ongoing victimization of one person by another. That may call for strong actions of a different sort than what we focus on here.

### **What's My Part?**

If you are serious about doing everything you can on your end of the relationship to make it all it can be, here are some examples of simple things you can regularly do to do your part:

- Do positive things for your partner and the relationship. Most people know what to do to please their partner.

*(continued)*

Do you regularly do the things that make a difference? Regardless of your answer, in the next twelve hours, do something small for your partner that you think he or she will like, but without expecting to be noticed or praised. Just do it.

- Decide to let negative or annoying comments bounce off you. If there are ongoing concerns you need to deal with, deal with them at a time when you are both calm and you can get your partner's attention in a constructive way. But, most of the time, let stuff go.
- Be the best person you can be in your relationship. Take responsibility for your own issues, personal growth, awareness, and mental and physical health. Have you ever noticed how much better looking some people become after they go through a divorce? Many people put all kinds of effort into personal improvements when they're "out on the market." Yes, this is a crass way to say it, but it's the truth. We've seen it, and you've seen it. Why not give that kind of effort to taking good care of yourself now? If more people did this, fewer people would end up looking for the next relationship.

One last point before we move on. Many people think they cannot bring their behavior under better control unless they first understand it. Although it can be beneficial to have insights into why you and your partner do some of the things you do (for good or ill), you don't have to have it all figured out to know some of the most important "right things" to do. If you're waiting for more insight and not doing some things that you know would help keep your relationship on track, you are not being wise. Do what you can do now, while you figure out more of what you can do later.

The key is to take personal responsibility to do your part. This will improve not only your relationship but also how you feel.

### **Key 3: Make It Safe to Connect**

One of the major advances in our work since our last edition has been on the importance of safety in healthy relationships. Here we focus on the importance of making it physically and emotionally safe at home, especially when dealing with conflicts. Positive connections and intimacy thrive when things are safe—when you are confident that you can do your part to control conflicts. So many times partners tell us that being home is like walking on eggshells, saying, “I can’t be myself.” When you have the skills to handle conflicts, you are able to relax, to be yourself, and to open the doors to emotional and physical intimacy.

One of our strongest research findings is that how couples handle conflict tells a powerful story about how they will do in the future. Couples who handle their differences and conflicts poorly, with put-downs and hostility and harsh views of one another, are the most likely to develop serious problems.

Because conflicts are a common (and expected) part of relationships, many couples think that it’s their differences and disagreements that cause the greatest problems in their marriage. To be sure, strong differences in backgrounds and viewpoints do make conflicts more likely. But over thirty years of research with an increasingly diverse population of couples tell us that success in marriage is related not so much to the nature of the differences between two partners as to how the partners handle the differences they have. This does not mean that differences don’t matter. They can be part of what draws two people together and also part of what makes it difficult, at times, to get along. But the part of this over which you have the most control is how the two of you

*If you want to have a great relationship, the way you handle differences can matter more than what those differences are.*

handle whatever differences you have. If you want to have a great relationship, the way you handle differences can matter more than what those differences are.

We will spend a good deal of time looking at the ways couples handle conflicts and talking about what you can do to protect your relationship from the patterns that are most destructive. These are the dark alleys we want to help you avoid on your travels. When we say “Make it safe to connect,” we are pointing out that emotional safety is essential to having the kind of deeply connected, loving relationship you seek. In the context of this discussion, we mean safety in terms of how you talk to one another.

In the next chapter we will describe what we call the Communication Danger Signs, common behavior patterns that make it feel very unsafe in relationships. Unsafe to share what you really think. Unsafe to express what you desire. Unsafe to bring up an issue of concern. Unsafe to be yourself with your partner, who is the person with whom, more than anyone else on the planet, you want the greatest safety. So we’ll teach you powerful techniques and ways of thinking that can help the two of you handle the issues in your life and protect the best parts of what you have together.

### **Key 4: Open the Doors to Positive Connections**

Since our last edition, we and many other marital researchers have focused more and more on the positive side of relationships as well as the deeper connections that happy partners share. We’ve learned that the positive connections are what really matter to most couples.

We all know that conflicts are inevitable and need to be handled, but people do not get and stay married for the joy of handling conflict together till death do them part. They want to be married for all the great things relationships offer: deep friendship, companionship, spiritual meaning, fun, passion, parenting, and connection with the core values of life. If you’ll take a moment to look over the table of contents, you’ll see that this is not a book

dealing only with communication and conflict management. We focus throughout the book on the greatest things about lifelong love and commitment, and we have much to say to you about the joy of relationships. You can enrich and deepen your connection together in many ways, and we want to help you. But there is a very important link between what we say about conflict and issues and what we say about fun, friendship, support, spirituality, and sensual connection. We hear a lot about the desire to find a soul mate, the *one*—the person with whom all these positive connections spark and explode. Yet we also find that people do not really know how to keep the positives alive and well over time.

*Don't expect to be your beloved's soul mate before you've been there as your mate's soul unfolds. . . . Soul mates evolve as lovers grow together and coauthor their own relationship story.*

—HOWARD MARKMAN

The positive side of relationships is often mysterious (delightfully so), but there is little mystery to us about the ways in which the forces of attraction (love, fun, passion, friendship) can be destroyed by damaging types of conflict. In a way, these mysterious forces are like alpine flowers that are beautiful and awe inspiring but also vulnerable to being stepped on and crushed through carelessness and thoughtlessness. You must nurture these most wonderful aspects of relating if they are to bloom into their full glory. So as you move forward on your journey, make a commitment to keep fun, friendship, and romance alive and thriving.

## **Key 5: Nurture Your Commitment**

A husband recently shared in his first session that his one goal for therapy and his relationship was to provide a cocoon of commitment around his family. His voice is echoed by countless other partners, and we are listening. Building something meaningful together and hanging on to it are critical. Couples who do the best

over the long term do so partly because they have a sense of just that: the long term.

Commitment is a major theme in our approach and throughout this book. Not only do we devote a chapter to it, but the concept flows through everything we have to share with you. We'll look at commitment in terms of sacrifice, forgiveness, protecting priorities, and developing teamwork. But more than anything else, commitment is knowing that you can count on each other to be there for one another and to support and help one another.

Artis and Pam were in their forties. Both had been married before and divorced. They told us that they "fell in love" at first sight and married quickly, but six months after marrying, they were having trouble. They came in to get some help, saying they were arguing a lot and that they were worried about losing their loving feelings. When they fought, one or both would wonder if they should really be together, and would say so. They began to wonder if they had deceived themselves into thinking they were in love, if maybe they'd only fallen in lust at first sight.

We told them that there is nothing wrong with falling in love quickly. This is one common pathway for couples, and for those couples, it can be a most magical and wonderful experience. (However, it can be very wise to know your partner a good while before marrying.) But even when your love feels like heaven, you still have to learn to live together on earth. And that's where our advice came in. Artis and Pam worked with us to set up some rules for how to handle it when they got angry: no name-calling, no pulling away, no swearing. Further, they would each try to calm down and figure out together what the issue was.

They learned fast. They used the depth of their love as motivation—there was too much at stake not to handle things better. After a while, they were doing much better handling conflicts and disappointments. They were increasingly able to talk safely and openly about their vision for their future together. That was surely different from threatening it, as they had been doing.

Artis and Pam love bike riding. In fact, you could call them hard-core bikers. They started to use biking metaphors to think about their relationship and their goals. For Pam (who above all wanted closeness), the ideal was an image of being on a tandem bike, going to the same place, riding the same path, but each doing his or her own part. For Artis, the image of them riding two separate bikes was more powerful, because he valued a little more autonomy than she did. Nevertheless, they were going on a journey together. They might not be so tightly joined at every moment, nor did they always have to move at the same pace, but they both knew they were traveling together to the same place.

The two of them reached a key turning point, though, when they realized that they really did want their marriage to last forever. They felt they had something very special that needed to be treasured and protected. We suggested that if preserving their marriage was truly their goal, they needed to say to one another that they were together “no matter what.” Partners need this depth of security. The most touching thing was when Artis and Pam came back in one day, both wearing T-shirts they had made with the letters NMW on them—No Matter What.

Deeply knowing that you can count on your partner brings another very important kind of safety to your relationship. Earlier we talked about safety in terms of being able to be open and not fearing damaging conflicts. Here we’re talking about safety that comes from the sense of security and permanence in your relationship. The importance of this second sense of safety is best captured by M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled*: “Couples can not resolve in any healthy way the universal issues of marriage: dependency and independence, dominance and submission, freedom and fidelity, for example, without the security of knowing that the act of struggling over these issues will not destroy the relationship.”

Throughout this book, we’ll give you many suggestions for how to think about and act on commitment concerns. We’ll encourage you to develop and nurture a vision for your future together. This

brings us to a warning we'd like to give those of you who struggle with higher levels of conflict and frustration. In order to give your relationship a better chance, do not do or say things that threaten the stability of your relationship. Try not to act in ways that allow the things that bond the two of you together to slip any further away. In other words, do your part to make things go as smoothly and positively as possible. We'll suggest many more specific strategies, but for now, do what you can to hold the line against further erosion in your relationship. For example, do not threaten the future of your relationship in the midst of a fight. You need a secure base of attachment—safety in commitment—in your marriage for all the rest of the really good things to happen.

## **KEY RISKS TO A LASTING LOVE**

Behind our focus on the five keys to a healthy relationship we have described here is an emphasis on knowledge based in research, sound theory, and extensive clinical experience. Most other programs and books for couples are neither empirically informed nor empirically tested. As noted in the Introduction, PREP and this book are both. If you'd like to read more about this subject and you've not already read the Introduction, please refer back to it. Further, there are many references to important research in the References section (for the seriously curious). Since our last edition, there have been countless studies on relationships, and most support and extend our earlier work on communication, conflict resolution, and commitment. We will share some of the most exciting twists and turns with you in this book.

We now have the benefit of over three decades of research into what factors are most likely to raise the risks of a couple's not doing well. The key to preventing marital distress, divorce, and unhappiness is to reduce the risk factors and to increase the protective factors. Our goal in PREP and in this book is to help you do both. We discuss major risk factors in this section. Protective factors are

all the good things in relationships—friendship, fun, spiritual and religious involvement, and aspects of commitment—and you’ve probably noted that we have chapters on all these. Before we look at the major risk factors, we’d like to tell you what we think is the most common path to marital unhappiness and divorce.

## **How a Marriage Dies (in a Nutshell)**

OK, so that’s not the cheeriest heading in the book. It is the title of a talk Scott started giving to groups years ago that is based on the work we’ve done over the years to better understand marital success and failure. It also includes elements of his theories about how commitment develops and what it does for couples—things we’ll cover more in the chapter on commitment.

What follows is not the kind of humorous talk we’d prefer to give. Instead, the themes are serious. But it does summarize in one swoop the core of our theory of how the average marriage dies. Here it goes:

- You meet. Most couples don’t go further if they never meet. (You knew that, but then again, the Internet allows couples to have relationships and never meet. That may not be a good thing, and it’s not the focus of this book!)
- You are attracted to one another and start to spend time together.
- You like this person, and it’s mutual. Joy. Thrill. Sparks. Warmth. Heat.
- You become a bit anxious about whether or not this person will stay in your life.
- You start to make commitments to one another because commitment reduces anxiety about staying attached. Commitment secures the attachment.
- You get engaged and then you get married.

- Problems come up. They just do, and they will happen to you. Some of the problems are based on things that happen to the two of you in life. Some of the problems are based on differences in how you want or expect to handle things in life, or what you believe is important. For some couples, they are easy problems; for others, they are very difficult and even gut-wrenching—such as having a seriously ill baby.
- Like many (but not all) couples, you have difficulty managing conflicts and problems as they come your way in life. You don't work as a team on the problems you have. Conflicts become more frequent and more intense. The number of times you are together that end up with conflict or disconnection keep going steadily up. You don't communicate well together, and you start to get nastier about it all. Danger ahead.
- As you get busier in life, you begin to spend less and less time together doing things that are fun or relaxing. You have a home to take care of, probably kids that need time and attention; your work begins eating up more time, and money pressures mount.
- Your positive connection suffers. You begin to neglect the parts of life that bonded you together. You spend less time together having fun. You go out infrequently. You don't just sit down together or take walks to talk as friends much anymore, and when you do, it often turns into an argument.
- This is the big turning point. One or both partners begin to associate the presence of the other with pain and stress rather than with support or pleasure. Friendship together becomes a distant memory (if it is remembered at all).
- Security in the future becomes something to threaten in arguments: "Why should I stay with you?" "Maybe we need to get a divorce."
- Now you experience the total erosion of dedication to one another and investment in the relationship. You're forgetting why you went on this journey in the first place.

- In the absence of forces that constrain some couples to stay together (for example, poor alternatives), you divorce, or if you do stay together, you drift into painful distance.

Clearly, we're hoping to help couples stay off this very common path. It leads to a destination that no couple seeks when the partners start out together, but many end there just the same. You don't have to be on this path, and we're here to tell you how to avoid it. If you are already far along on the trip we've described here, we want to tell you some powerful ways to change your course.

### **Risk Factors for Marital Problems**

Many of these risk factors relate to stable, individual characteristics of each partner. You can think of these factors this way: all other things being equal, the more these factors are present in the lives and backgrounds of the marriage partners, the greater the risk to the well-being of that marriage over time. Here is a list of such factors. The list is not exhaustive, but it covers the biggies.

- Having a personality tendency to react strongly or defensively to problems and disappointments in life
- Having divorced parents
- Living together prior to marriage
- Being previously divorced, yourself or your partner
- Having children from a previous marriage
- Having different religious backgrounds
- Marrying at a very young age (for example, at the age of eighteen or nineteen; the average these days is about twenty-five or twenty-six years of age for first marriages)
- Knowing each other for only a short time before marriage
- Experiencing financial hardship
- Experiencing racial, ethnic, religious, and other types of class discrimination

There is something very important about this list that we'd like you to notice: once a couple is married, the partners can do nothing to directly lower any of these risks. In our academic publications, we call these factors *static* because they are relatively unchangeable. Reflecting on these factors can be useful in understanding how much risk the two of you may have, but there is little you can do to change any of these—and certainly not quickly.

In contrast to the static factors shown in the preceding list, there are risk factors that relate more directly to how you treat one another, how you communicate, and how you think about your relationship. We call these *dynamic* risk factors because, although they do increase the risk that a couple won't do well, they can all be changed with some thought and choice and effort.

- Negative styles of talking and fighting with each other, such as arguments that rapidly become negative, put-downs, and the silent treatment
- Difficulty communicating well, especially when you disagree
- Trouble handling disagreements as a team
- Unrealistic beliefs about marriage
- Different attitudes about important things
- A low level of commitment to one another, reflected in such behavior as failing to protect your relationship from others you are attracted to or failing to view your marriage as a long-term investment
- Not practicing faith together

In general, higher levels of risk (due to either static or dynamic factors) are tied to greater difficulties in handling problems and negative emotions well. For example, studies suggest that people whose parents divorced are more likely to come into marriage as adults with communication problems and also a diminished belief or trust that their relationship can work in the long term. In

essence, even the static factors tend to express themselves through the dynamic factors.

All other things being equal, the more static or dynamic risk factors you have, the more likely you are to experience difficulties. But remember, we're relationship optimists. We want to help you face risks head-on and beat the odds. The good news is that research by our colleagues Kim Halford at the University of Queensland in Australia and Ron Rogge at the University of Rochester each suggests that some high-risk couples can benefit greatly from our approach.

Because you can't do much to change the static risk factors, it is wisest to focus your efforts on what you can change—the dynamic factors—and that's what we do throughout this book. (And if you don't have many risk factors, we think we have much to offer you in terms of ways to stay on that path and experience deep love and connection.) We want to help you change in ways that make a difference.

## **MOVING AHEAD ON YOUR JOURNEY**

Now that you better understand how we think, you are ready for the next part of your journey through this book. Do not leave home—or go home—without our travel advice, which can be summarized by five key guidelines:

1. Decide don't slide.
2. Do your part.
3. Make it safe to connect.
4. Open the doors to positive connections.
5. Nurture security in your future together.

Now choose the next stop on your journey. We've organized our themes into four major parts of the book:

1. Understanding the Risks on the Road to Lasting Love
2. Teaming Up to Handle Conflict
3. Enjoying Each Other
4. Staying the Course

Although reading straight through can make the most sense, feel free to jump to the sections that address the needs you are having in your relationship. Each section includes examples to make our points clear and exercises for you to work through some of the concepts and ideas and to try out the skills and strategies we are teaching. We understand that some of you will be reading this book on your own, working to do your part and take responsibility for changing your own behavior in your relationship. You will find lots of support here. Others will be sharing this book with a partner, working together on reading chapters and doing exercises. You will also find support and encouragement. Singles who are looking to have successful future relationships can learn strategies for doing things right. We hope all readers can take away something meaningful.