

**UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE, FAMILY,
AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

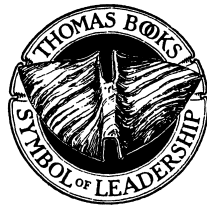
Jerry D. Lehman, Ed.D., is professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina Upstate, where he has been a teacher, counselor, mentor, and friend to students for over thirty years. He and his wife, Faye, are parents of two daughters, Lynn and Leigh, both of whom were instrumental in nurturing this project along. Leigh allowed dad to escape for some quiet writing time to her place in Florida during a sabbatical and Lynn was helpful, especially with computer problems—even buying dad a new laptop when his old one crashed.

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By

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*Dedicated to my wife, Faye,
and my daughters, Lynn and Leigh—
they each taught me in their own way
what many of the words in this book really mean.*

PREFACE

The idea for this book took shape in the recesses of my mind soon after I started teaching a course on marriage, family, and intimate relationships. There were many topics I wanted to share with my students—topics that I felt would be relevant to their experience. I believed then and still believe today that there is no knowledge more important to the personal lives of students than knowledge about why intimate relationships succeed and fail. As the idea for this book went from thought, to pen, to paper, my enthusiasm never wavered. And as I wrote, I assigned the material as readings in my course. It was then that I realized that students also shared my enthusiasm for the course and the material. One student commented on how relevant the course was to her life. Another noted how pleased he was that the course had encouraged him to think about family and relationship issues in a new way; still another hoped that she could use her learning to improve her marriage.

Thus, the comments of students reinforced my thinking and my writing and it became something of a mission to introduce this material to interested students. And since they continued to sign up for the course, I continued to explore with them the emerging knowledge that makes up the field of relationship science. I feel very fortunate that I have had the opportunity to introduce students to the work of researchers, theorists, and therapists who have contributed to our knowledge base concerning marriage, family, and relationship issues. The work of these scholars' spans a number of different disciplines and is significant because it has the potential to impact lives in many positive ways. This book was written because of the significant work of these individuals; without their research, knowledge, and insight, there would be no book.

If you are a student using this book, my hope is that you will find this material as fascinating and exciting as I have. A Study Guide and other resources are available at www.understandingrelationships.net for assisting you in learning and understanding this material. As you read and discuss the book's content, I also hope that you will find ways to enhance your family life and intimate relationships. Much has been written about the breakdown of the family in our culture today. Many believe that the problems of crime,

drugs, poor performance in education, and many of the other woes we see around us have their roots in the family. If this is so, how do we address these problems? The answer I believe is—one family and one relationship at a time. What Barbara Bush said in the 1990s is still pertinent today, “What happens in your house makes more difference than what happens in the White House.”

If you are an instructor teaching a relationship course, I hope this material will allow you to shape a meaningful learning experience for your students. You will note that the content of this book is not as encyclopedic as many other texts; I have attempted to focus on issues and topics that are more family and relationship specific. This has allowed me to write about some topics in greater detail and I believe this depth allows students to better relate the material to their lives. Those of us who teach family and relationship courses usually want to go beyond just imparting knowledge; we want to help our students improve their family and intimate relationships. This is a noble but daunting challenge. If you have found ways that have worked for you in accomplishing this task, I would welcome hearing from you at jlehman@uscupstate.edu. In addition, if you use or are thinking about using this book in a course you teach, information about instructional resources is available at www.understandingrelationships.net.

I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Dr. Karen Macrae, who read portions of this manuscript and gave me valuable feedback. Also, this book would not have been possible without the support of the professionals at Charles C Thomas. I would like to thank them for their valuable help and assistance.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

- My Students' Experiences
 - Some Conclusions at the Beginning
 - Tools that Successful Couples Use
 - A Marriage and Family Story
 - My Hope for the Reader
 - The Content
-

It is 8:45 a.m., just fifteen minutes before a new semester begins. I am about to meet my marriage, family, and intimate relationship class for the first time. The class roll indicates that the class is full. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors from many areas across our campus have enrolled. As I make my way toward the classroom, I wonder why students have chosen to take a class on relationships. Of course, there are many reasons: the course is being taught at a convenient time, a friend had taken the course and recommended it, the course will count as elective credit, or perhaps they want to better understand intimate relationships in their lives. I know that relationships are central to students' lives—their satisfaction and happiness are often closely related to the well-being of their relationships.

MY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

First classes are usually difficult. Instructors struggle with how to be interesting, yet at the same time communicate necessary information about the course. I frequently ask students to write questions that they have about relationships or specific relationship problems. If they are allowed to do this anonymously, they usually share quite candidly. If this class is like others, students will have a variety of questions and problems to share. In the past the following comments have been typical.

- I have been married for six months. So far it has been wonderful. We are still in a kind of honeymoon stage and the newness of our intimacy and sharing is still fresh. But how can we keep it this way? When I look at my parents' marriage, I don't see happiness. How can I keep my marriage from becoming like their marriage?
- My boyfriend and I are living together or, as they say, cohabiting. We both thought that it would be a good idea. But now I'm not too sure! I seem to be giving more than I am getting in return. My expectations of what it would be like living together have not panned out. Were my expectations too high? Should I settle for less than I envisioned or say that the experience taught me that we are not right for each other?
- I am in the first serious relationship of my life. It feels good to be so close to another person. But I am fast losing my ability to think rationally. Yet when I do try to think about "us," I realize that we are very different, so different it's scary. Should I be concerned about these differences or will they make our relationship more exciting and keep us from being bored? I have seen so many married couples who seem to be bored with each other.
- My girlfriend and I argue constantly. Sometimes I wonder what we see in each other. But we cannot seem to break up. When we have tried, I can't get her off my mind and she says she feels the same way about me. So we get back together and before long we are arguing again. Do marriages between two people like us ever work out?
- I am thinking about filing for divorce. I have been married 12 years, have two children, and am married to a workaholic husband. He provides well but is never home and rarely helps with the children. I don't know what happened to our relationship. It seems like we woke up one morning and what we had was gone. Could we get our relationship back? I hate thinking about rearing the children by myself, but that looks like what may happen.
- Sometimes I wonder what's wrong with me. I am living with a man who has a violent temper and tries to control my every move. He is extremely jealous and believes that I have been unfaithful to him. He has not actually hit me, but I'm afraid that he might. Why did I fall for a man like this? Is there any chance he might change?
- I am shy and can't seem to meet anybody. My roommate and I are so different; she never meets a stranger and is out with friends all the time. I am not comfortable with having anyone too close to me. I'm not even sure I ever want to get married, but then it's depressing to think I might be alone all my life. Is there any hope for someone like me?
- My daughter is fourteen and right now we are having a lot of problems with her. She is threatening to run away if we don't let her do what she

wants. She has gotten in with a bad group at school and they have more influence with her than her dad and I do. We argue constantly with her about her room, her friends, her tattoos, her music, and just about everything else. I am really worried. We don't know what to do; certainly what we are doing is not working. Help!

- I have a beautiful marriage and a wonderful family. I realize how fortunate I am to have a loving husband and two healthy, happy daughters. We do a lot of things together as a family and I just hope that we are spared major problems down the road. We have strong religious beliefs and I think this has drawn us closer as a family.
- We have just had our first child. She has a difficult temperament and cries constantly. We have lost more sleep in the last month than I would have thought possible. We asked the doctor whether this would ever end. He recommended a book about children who cry a lot and are difficult. When are we going to find time to read a book?
- My father and mother never married so I never really knew my father very well. My mother was a single mother struggling with all of the problems that single mother's experience. She did the best she could under the circumstances, but it was hard for her and for me. I feel that I have somehow been cheated. I would daydream that my father would come and take me away and love me so all the hurt would go away. What I am wondering is this: how will the absence of a father affect me? Will I always be distrustful of men like I now seem to be? I desperately want a relationship, but at the same time, I am suspicious of every male's intent.

Of course, answers to questions like these do not come easily. However, throughout the semester, the course material and class discussion will address many of their concerns.

SOME CONCLUSIONS AT THE BEGINNING

I believe that there are things that students interested in relationships should know even before beginning their study. These things are not earth shattering; many of my students have probably already drawn these conclusions on their own.

- Humans have a need to love and be loved. We seek out companionship with others. And there is something special and deeply satisfying about an intimate love relationship.
- Yet close loving relationships, while highly rewarding and satisfying, can also be the source of great pain. Some of our greatest joys and

heartaches take place in the family since it is in marriages and families where we love most deeply and run the risk of experiencing the greatest heartaches.

- No matter how hard partners try, no intimate family relationship is perfect. All couples will experience problems, as will parents and children and siblings with siblings. Expect problems occasionally and don't conclude that your marriage and family cannot make it because problems exist. According to William Doherty (2001), a prominent family life educator and therapist, married couples do not share their marital experiences with other married couples and therefore do not realize that many of the problems encountered in marriage are common to all marriages. Couples talk to each other about shopping, sports, the latest TV program, or the accomplishments of their children, but marriage is often a taboo topic. In sidestepping discussions about their marriages, couples isolate themselves from information and support that could be helpful as they navigate through their marital waters.
- The romantic love that was so wonderful in the beginning of your relationship will not be enough to sustain a marriage over time. The strong passionate feelings will fade. Then the couple will need certain skills in communication and conflict resolution, as well as a deep friendship and commitment if they are to sustain a strong marriage. It is after romantic love diminishes that a couple discovers if their relationship has the qualities that are necessary for a lasting, stable, happy marriage.
- Expect highs and lows in your close relationships and family life. That bundle of joy you brought home from the hospital will become that infant who constantly needs attention, that child who has a will of his/her own, and that adolescent that you may hardly recognize. That intimate talk that you shared with your spouse in the early days of your relationship may be replaced by gaps of silence as you struggle to find things to talk about other than the children.
- You will see traits in your partner that you previously overlooked. Some of what you see may be very satisfying while other things may be quite upsetting. For example, a wife may find that her husband is much more helpful or unhelpful around the house than she thought he would be. Or she may find that he is more of a workaholic than she realized. A husband may find that his wife is good with the children, but with her work and child responsibilities she finds very little time for her husband. Or he may find that her talkative nature is an irritant to his desire for solitude or that her emotionality makes him uncomfortable. And traits may appear that were not present before marriage—a drinking problem, a severe depression, migraine headaches, a nasty temper, or an inability to break away from the family of origin. Such are the realities of mar-

riage and family life. It is like a journey down a winding road with unexpected joys and hazards along the way.

TOOLS THAT SUCCESSFUL COUPLES USE

Does this mean that a satisfying marriage and family life is impossible? Certainly not! Many couples and families cherish the good times and weather the storms of bad times as they negotiate their journey. Families often become stronger as they look back on their shared experiences together. They come to realize that marriage and family life changes and evolves. They learn to be flexible and take a long-term view. While an experience may seem tragic today, in time it will be woven into the fabric of life to create a complex mosaic involving both negative and positive experiences. But sustaining a happy marriage and family life is not easy; if it were, there would be far fewer divorces. So as you experience the highs and lows of marriage and family life, perhaps you should develop what Parrott and Parrott (2001) refer to as the tools that couples in good marriages use: ownership, hope, empathy, forgiveness, and commitment.

Ownership. Problems in families and relationships are not just due to the other person. Marriage counselors constantly hear that it is the other person's fault; if s/he would only change, then things would improve. The husband blames the wife, the wife blames the husband, and they get nowhere in solving their problems. Couple and family relationships are systems. Marriage partners and family members respond to each other as they each create their environment; they interact as if life were a dance—your move is followed by your partner's move which is followed by your move and so on. Therefore, it is not who is wrong or who is to blame; it is how the dance you are both engaged in and responsible for contributes to your problems. When couples take this viewpoint, they stop blaming each other and start examining their own role in the dysfunctional dance; then it becomes possible for each partner to take responsibility for what is happening in the marriage.

Hope. Research shows the benefits of an optimistic attitude; hope is a characteristic of such an attitude. When individuals begin to lose hope, fear sets in as they imagine the worst. When couples keep an optimistic attitude and their fears in check, they stay hopeful; when their fears rise, their hope diminishes. Parrott and Parrott are not suggesting that some bad marriages should not be abandoned. Rather, they are suggesting that many marriages and families that have experienced hard times have been saved and thrive today because partners have not given up hope.

Empathy. Empathy is the ability to see things from another's perspective, to understand from another's point of view without blaming or criticizing.

Therapists often tell partners that the differences they have are usually disagreements about preferences and points of view. If partners can understand and respect the dreams and circumstances upon which their partner's perspective is based, this understanding can help soothe anger and frustration. Get good at this type of understanding because research (Gottman, 1999) shows that 69 percent of the problems couples face are perpetual problems—problems that cannot be resolved. Yet, if couples can continue to discuss the hopes and dreams upon which their differences are based, they are more likely to respect their partner's position.

Forgiveness. Partners need to be willing to forgive and ask for forgiveness because in a marriage, both partners do things that hurt each other. Some slights are minor and may even fall under the category of honest mistakes. If so, apologize, forgive, and move on. However, some transgressions are major and hurt so deeply that rebuilding the relationship is difficult. Lost trust is regained slowly over time. If you care about your relationship, don't subject it to things that do great harm. Do as happily married couples do: limit your mistakes, be quick to apologize and willing to forgive.

Commitment. No marriage would last without commitment. The level of a couple's commitment will determine the length of their marriage. What does your "I do" mean in terms of commitment? Those who have been happily married for many years take commitment seriously; they have confronted just as many obstacles to happiness as most other couples, but they remain committed to each other and to their marriage.

A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STORY

Couples who stay married often have heroic stories to tell. Their stories are often like the stories of happiness found, then lost, and then found again since they experience the highs and lows that are typical of marriage. The case of Troy and Dot Howard is an example.

Troy and Dot met in college, dated for a year, and were married soon after they both graduated. They were very much in love and thought they would sail through life successfully meeting whatever challenges came their way. Before the birth of their first child, they defined themselves as happily married. Their first child, Todd, was temperamentally difficult; he cried much of the time during the first year. They became very child focused, doing almost anything that would bring on a happy mood or cause the crying to cease. Because they had always wanted two children they had Ben when Todd was two. Ben had some health problems during those first months and Troy and Dot spent most of their time worrying about test results, doctor's visits, and tending to Ben's