Marriage is designed to bring us happiness and joy, and indeed many couples find great joy in their marriage. But why do we sometimes find bitterness, anger, and disappointment in it? And what can we do to change the situation when these deadly emotional acids eat away at the bond between husband and wife?

The answer to the first question may lie both in the nature of mortal beings and in our personal reactions to difficulties that come. As mortals, all of us are flawed, all have blind spots, all make mistakes in judgment at times. These deficiencies take their toll in our intimate relationships; the higher the level of stress, the greater the toll. The way we choose to react to this stress can determine the outcome of our lives.

The answer to the second question—how can we keep marital bonds strong?—is old and well tested, but it can be discovered anew by every couple as the need arises. My experience as a counselor has shown that except in some extreme cases involving infidelity or abuse, the couples who get divorced usually have the very same problems as those who stay together and work things out. The couples who resolve their difficulties share one very valuable quality: commitment. They are committed to God’s plan, to their marriage vows, to their children. The husband and wife share a commitment to heal, strengthen, and protect the relationship with their spouse; they will do whatever it takes, whatever is right, to reach those goals.

A Creative Challenge

Creating a great marriage and family is not easy. In fact, it is probably the most challenging task we will ever be faced with on earth.

Why?

Husbands and wives differ remarkably in their biology, family backgrounds, socializing experiences, hormones, role assignments, attitudes, and maturity levels. Achieving marital unity takes tremendous patience and persistence and a clear vision of what our priorities are in this life. Spousal love is a wonderful gift, but we have to learn to give it fully in order to receive it in full measure.

Learning to give fully is not easy for some, and their struggles can have an impact on those around them.
Our Heavenly Father’s plan to bring about the exaltation of his obedient children will not be frustrated. But because everyone has agency, we may suffer pain inflicted by others—sometimes by those closest to us. When we humble ourselves sufficiently and seek out God’s love, mercy, and inspiration, he will show us a way to resolve the painful situation or give us patience to await his resolution, even though we may have to endure for a time with faith that he will not abandon us.

I don’t believe, however, that God expects us to stay in perpetually abusive relationships—situations in which we or our children are repeatedly traumatized, or where the sins of parents are passed on to mark future generations with deep spiritual and emotional wounds.

Some spouses already bear wounds they received as innocent children. Any of us who suffer from such emotional damage have both the opportunity and the responsibility to be healed so that we don’t offend in our intimate relationships with those we love. Our Father is the source of the grace, love, inspiration, and consolation that bring this healing. When we turn to him, he will provide help in overcoming the past.

**Divorce: No Easy Exit**

Frequently, couples who choose to divorce have solvable problems. But divorce is no easy escape hatch, as some fantasize. Furthermore, individual weaknesses or bad habits do not automatically disappear when two people get a divorce, and these problems, if uncorrected, will show up to plague future relationships when the people remarry.

Rather than being an escape, divorce often means moving from a bad situation to a worse one.

A man I’ll call John* found that his relationship with his former wife was much worse after their divorce. For ten years afterward, he fought with her over the children, who were caught in the middle of a bitter contest of wills. The legal fees were enormous. Everybody lost. Looking back on it later, John commented, “If I had known what lay ahead after the divorce, I know I would have put more effort into trying to save my marriage and resolving our differences. That might have been possible, because my wife did have a number of very positive qualities. My problem was that I was very stubborn; it was a matter of pride for me.”

Pride and unwillingness to change are at the root of many marital problems. Overcoming these weaknesses may be difficult, but it can be done.

Terri,* a mother of six children, was devastated when her husband told her he wanted to end their marriage. They had been married in the temple and were very active in the Church, but he wanted a divorce.

“He says I have a sharp tongue,” she reported tearfully. “He says I’m continually negative and contentious. And it’s true. But that’s all I knew growing up—fighting and conflict. I guess I brought it into our marriage. It’s the only way I know how to relate with people close to me.”

We agreed that if she really wanted her marriage to survive and prosper, she would have to change. She did, but it wasn’t easy to reverse a lifetime of negative influences. In a sense, these habits were...
not Terri’s fault, but she still had the responsibility of breaking the negative cycle. The alternative was to risk losing her husband and damaging her children.

**The Softened Heart**

I have found in thirty years of marriage counseling that learning new communication techniques, going to seminars on relationship skills, or reading all of the best books on the subject really won’t help heal marital wounds unless the individuals involved develop a contrite spirit or feel a softening of the heart. This softening of the heart usually needs to take place in both spouses, even though one may be principally at fault for the problems. While you can never force your spouse to change, you can change. You can choose to love and forgive no matter what else happens. The result will usually be a change in your spouse’s attitude and behavior as well.

For example, Maureen* and her husband loved each other, but somehow they kept provoking and exasperating one another. They each had to be right; it was extremely difficult for either to compromise on anything. Even counseling didn’t seem to help. Finally, Maureen was willing to surrender her own will to her Heavenly Father’s in asking for help with this problem. In her prayers day after day, she promised to do anything her Father required. In a multitude of little ways, she was given direction and inspiration that changed her heart and led to a softening of her husband’s heart as well. It was a slow process, but a remarkable healing took place in their relationship.

Again, we are not required to endlessly endure abusive relationships. But spouses can change—if they wish to. Some of our Father’s greatest miracles, I believe, involve healing wounded relationships.

In Roberta’s* case, her husband of seventeen years said he had fallen in love with someone else. His attitude toward Roberta was cold and rebellious. He had no interest in repentance or change, but he hesitated to get a divorce because of his love for their four children and his fear of losing them. Roberta felt inspired not to give up on him because he possessed many fine, positive qualities. She endured the pain and rejection and refrained from making unkind remarks, living by her faith in an all-loving Father. Eventually, her husband recognized his mistakes, repented, and begged his wife’s forgiveness. It wasn’t easy for either of them, but they believe that the help of the Lord made it possible for them to rebuild their devastated marriage.

When our physical bodies are ill or impaired, we seek medical help. Often, as individuals or couples, we may also need mortal helpers to assist in healing a wounded relationship. Priesthood leaders can play a key role; when repentance from serious transgression is required, their involvement is essential. In some cases, they may also suggest counseling by a professional. It is wise to choose those professional healing people with great care, seeking inspiration, because of the effect they may have on our lives. Certainly we would want to choose someone who respects and upholds the sanctity of marriage and, where possible, someone who has and honors a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Love That Endures**

The love that endures is something more than the early love that fuels courtship. Love during court-
ship is often based on mutual physical and emotional attraction, plus hope and high expectation for the future. But the love that supersedes this must be based on years of trust, responsible behavior, and caring acts. It is strengthened by working through differences and by being willing to grow, mature, and forgive a partner's imperfections as we hope ours will be forgiven. It involves mutual interdependence, as well as a recognition that neither partner will ever arrive at some fully perfected state in this life.

This means that to a certain extent we may simply learn to live with a partner's differences. Ray* and Diane,* for example, are two very different people whose stormy courtship did not dim the great love they had for each other. The conflicts and strains in their marriage have not overshadowed their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and their love for their children. While they have mellowed through the years, their basic natures—including both strengths and weaknesses—have not changed very much. There are still differences that test them severely. But despite their struggles, they both know that they will do whatever they have to do to make things work.

Successful marriages are like that. Both husband and wife are committed to preserving and enhancing their partnership, despite setbacks. When adversity or personal differences create a climate in which bitterness, anger, and despair can thrive, both know where to turn for hope and healing.

The gift of love is one of God's greatest healing gifts. That gift was manifest over and over during the ministry of our Savior on this earth. Compassionately, lovingly, he healed broken and deformed bodies, rebuked fearsome diseases, made the blind to see, brought the dead back to life. He also healed broken lives. And with that same power given by his Father, he will still soften hearts and warm relationships—if we allow it.

**Breaking Down the Barriers**

When a husband and wife are committed to breaking down walls of bitterness and overcoming barriers built on past mistakes, there are some special tools that can help. These tools work better when you ask the Lord in prayer to help you learn how and when to use them.

1. **Use positive affirmation.** Too often our communication within the family is negative. We see mistakes or problems and repeatedly call these to the attention of our spouse (or children), while the good they do goes unnoticed or unrewarded. But we can change the atmosphere in our homes by consistently telling them, at least once a day, how much we appreciate something good they have done. It is a fact that whatever behavior you positively affirm, reward, or reinforce will tend to be repeated. You can never do this too much.

2. **Use “I” messages rather than “you” messages with your partner.** This is much less confrontational and much more healing. Example: “I sure feel hungry” rather than “Why do you always put dinner on late?” Often, “you” messages place blame, eliciting defensiveness and negative responses. “I” messages share important information about the speaker, not the listener, and are thus much more acceptable.

3. **Agree to use time-outs in a discussion when either partner feels threatened, uncomfortable, or on the verge of giving in to temper.** Either partner should be able to call a time-out and take a brief
break (leave the room, take a walk) to calm down or regain control.

4. When you are faced with a difference of opinion in a decision-making situation, try scoring your wants. Example: “On a scale of zero to ten, how badly do you want to go that concert? I’m a two, what are you?” Your spouse may respond, “I’m a three. Sounds like neither one of us is too interested. Maybe we can think of something else to do.” But when my wife is a nine on something and I am a one, I can either give her a gift of love and go along with what she wants, or I can suggest that we table it for discussion later. In the meantime, we can collect more data on the issue, or maybe we will both have a new perspective by then. It’s okay to see things differently, but we may need to give ourselves time and space to work through a resolution on an issue.

5. Make time for fun and play. We need frequent breaks with our partner for renewal, rebonding, and fence mending. All work and no play can kill a good marriage. Fun and play could involve visiting friends; going to movies, plays, or concerts; staying overnight at a romantic spot; walking or jogging; taking a class; or any other good thing that both partners enjoy.

6. Eliminate the negatives. Some people habitually look for the negative; they expect the worst and see the dark side of everything. But dwelling on the negative drives people away from us and kills affection. Instead of looking for the worst in each other, marriage partners need to support and nurture, tackling problems and mistakes in kind, gentle, nonaccusative ways. Improvements come through building on the positive.

7. Be open to change. There may be a better way to do something. Be flexible. This was one of the key factors I found in a study of couples whose marriages are highly successful; they could easily adjust and adapt to new situations and problems.

8. Focus on friendship. Do the things you might want a best friend to do for you. Discuss interesting things with your partner. Be the one your spouse can turn to for consolation and a listening, non-judgmental ear. The years you will have together on earth can be times to enjoy each other and to build a friendship to last for eternity.

9. Focus on your physical appearance, making sure that you always look neat, clean, and attractive. It may seem a small thing, but most partners in marriage appreciate being around someone who looks aesthetically pleasing.

10. If the two of you cannot resolve the contention between you—if nothing seems to work—seek out a counselor to help you through your difficulties. If you had a broken arm, you wouldn’t hesitate to seek out a doctor for treatment, and the health of your marriage could be much more critical, in an eternal perspective, than a broken bone.

While no one of the above suggestions may radically transform a difficult relationship, all taken together can make a tremendous difference. Love is a decision, a commitment to action. It takes hard work and consistent effort to have a loving, positive marriage, but you can make it happen.

Victor B. Cline, “Healing Wounds in Marriage,” Ensign, July 1993, 16