“When a couple have commenced a marriage based upon reasonable standards,” President Spencer W. Kimball has said, “no combination of power can destroy that marriage except the power within either or both of the spouses themselves; and they must assume the responsibility generally. Other people and agencies may influence for good or bad; financial, social, political, and other situations may seem to have a bearing. But the marriage depends first and always on the two spouses, who can always make their marriage successful and happy if they are determined, unselfish, and righteous.” (Marriage and Divorce, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976, p. 17.)

Local ecclesiastical leaders often call upon LDS Social Services to assist in counseling couples. The Ensign interviews Val D. MacMurray, twice a bishop, and currently assistant commissioner for LDS Social Services responsible for research and staff development and a marriage and family therapist.

Ensign (E): One of the major areas in which Latter-day Saint couples continually seek encouragement and ideas from their bishop is how to resolve disagreements productively within a gospel framework. As you have worked with couples and families, would you say that it is essential in most marriages to have the ability to handle differences?

MacMurray (M): Absolutely. As a bishop I counseled with about three hundred couples, and I saw a good cross section there. Most of these couples felt happy about their marriages. But all marriages—happy or otherwise—have the need to manage different viewpoints, different feelings, in a manner that is helpful rather than destructive to the relationship. Actually, one of the greatest blessings to any marriage is the opportunity to share and obtain different viewpoints and different feelings on some matters. Couples can acquire interpersonal skills and turn their differences into opportunities.

E: Are there really people who have problem-free marriages?

M: It’s possible—but not common. Partners who have such a marriage may be extraordinarily mature.

E: Yet, on the other side, isn’t it rather negative to believe that nearly all marriages likely have some types of challenges?

M: Not at all! In fact, think how depressing it would be to think that your marriage was the only one in the whole world that had challenges—and lots of people do add guilt to their difficulties by
thinking that way. Of course, differences should not be viewed as the foundation of marriage, but it’s important to realize that they exist as part of our earthly experience, and their very existence provides a potential richness and depth to the relationship.

The real issue is not that there are challenges—but knowing how to deal with them. Our similarities and differences can draw us into enormously compelling relationships with ourselves and our loved ones. Elder Neal A. Maxwell points out that “because the home is so crucial, it will be the source of our greatest failures as well as our greatest joys.” (Ensign, Feb. 1972, p. 7.) Latter-day Saints usually talk about the home’s potential for joy. One of the best safeguards against the home’s equally great potential for failure is recognizing that challenges can occur, and learning how to work together to manage them in Christlike ways.

E: Kind of like a fire drill?

M: Exactly. And even though we’re talking about differences in marriage, let’s keep clearly in mind that the average marriage is not a negative experience. Most couples are happier married—even with their challenges—than they would be if they were to become single again. It’s vital to remember that the principle of progress applies here as it does everywhere else: first, we have to keep applying the basic gospel principles of righteous living; second, learn new skills or relearn skills we’ve neglected; and third, keep working toward a marriage that gets better and better.

E: Can you give us an example of what you mean?

M: Yes. I remember a woman who had been married nearly eighteen years and had five children. When she saw me, she was emotionally exhausted and said, “He seems completely different from me, and at times I think we both wonder if we really love each other. At other times, we seem good for each other partly because we are different. My marriage has been frustrating—almost always hard. Besides the emotional differences, there’s money, coping with the demands of five children, music lessons, the vacuum cleaner. … You know.” Fortunately, I was able to assure her that I did. The point is this: This couple was not on the verge of a divorce, yet some people foolishly think of divorce when they sense these feelings or find themselves in this kind of malaise. From all I could tell, they were living gospel principles. They attended the temple fairly regularly, fulfilled Church assignments, and were quite mature. They were just having to cope with normal differences and frustrations.

E: What you’re saying, then, is that a certain amount of tension and frustration is normal and can be present from time to time even in “good” relationships?

M: Of course! As I understand it, when the Lord wants to refine us, he doesn’t do it with milk and honey, in easy, painless ways. He does it by requiring us to seek the Spirit, to work through our problems, to discover answers. Problem-solving has a very constructive role to play in marriage—it compels us to develop effective ways of handling differences. And through managing differences, we can grow closer to each other and to God.

E: That’s certainly a positive way to look at disagreements.
M: As a bishop and a therapist, I saw it happen time and again—learning to resolve difficulties matured marriages and individuals. I suspect that whatever challenges make divorce appealing to some people the first time will also break up a second or third marriage as well if those individuals never face and maturely resolve their differences. Consequently, in cases where this assessment is true, the advantages of sticking with a “difficult” marriage are obvious. Another advantage is that appropriately handling disagreements can make you more resilient, more open to change, less threatened by challenges to yourself, to your relationships, or to the family. Furthermore, actually tackling a challenge and doing something about it generates an immense amount of energy and builds confidence. Those are all great advantages.

We find that as couples work through their difficulties they develop and strengthen their marriage. On the other hand, I think we’ve all seen couples whose relationship is overloaded with conflict, where one or both partners feel so destructive about each other or have fallen into such bad reaction patterns that the relationship has already dissolved. This does not mean it cannot be rebuilt—but for the moment, the couple may have done great damage to their relationship. Certainly, I think we’d agree that some kinds of behavior do terrible damage to a marriage and cannot be condoned—adultery, physical violence, incest, emotional violence. If both partners are willing to work hard on it, even those wounds can be healed through the power of Christ’s atonement as they become more receptive to the Spirit of the Lord through repentance and obedience and as they learn better ways of relating to each other.

We also know of situations where couples, though still married, have been almost completely withdrawn from each other for years—where there simply isn’t a marriage in any meaningful sense of the word. But with real effort and love on their part, they learn new skills and regain the love for each other that brought them to marry in the first place. Couples in this category should really consider trying “marriage” before they consider any other alternative.

E: That seems a helpful way of looking at it.

M: What this means is that the potential for challenges in marriage exists, but that real peace in marriage can come as husbands and wives implement gospel principles and develop the skills to resolve differences when conflicts arise.

E: Where do you advise people to start?

M: Usually we try to get them to stop trying to change each other—then to work on changing themselves. Of course, this means that both people have to make that same commitment.

E: How do you actually get a person to stop trying to change his or her partner?

M: A Latter-day Saint counselor, Carlfred Broderick, suggests that couples give each other “emotional space” by laying off the negative messages that they send and by giving each other more positive messages. (See Couples: How to Confront Problems and Maintain Loving Relationships, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979, chapter 1.) When a person doesn’t feel “boxed in” by disapproval and demands, he’s not so likely to fight back or run away. Another expert suggests the establishment of “caring days” as a way of building commitment in a marriage before tackling real conflicts. On
Each of the spouses lists positive, specific, “small” deeds that can be done at least once a day that the partner could do to show caring. These shouldn’t be deeds that have been the basis for a recent disagreement; for instance, “Please ask me how I spent my day” instead of “don’t ignore me so much.” (Richard Stuart, Helping Couples Change: A Social Learning Approach to Marital Therapy, New York: The Guildford Press, 1980, chapter 6.)

E: These are preliminary techniques for solving the problem?

M: They’re preliminary exercises for helping people feel that their relationship is valuable and worth working on. Often, simply being nicer to each other will actually eliminate many aspects of disagreements. Generally, however, it makes it easier for the couple to trust each other. Consequently, these skills are ways of implementing gospel principles of love, commitment, faith, and trust. It goes without saying, of course, that living the gospel can prevent a lot of problems from ever developing. But living the Word of Wisdom, for example, doesn’t mean that you have the skills to have a loving conversation.

E: Would some people say it’s insincere to act lovingly—giving emotional space or having a caring day—if you don’t feel loving right then toward your spouse?

M: Well, it’s that old principle again: If we do the will of the Savior, we will know whether the doctrine is true. (See John 7:17.) All of us need to learn new ways of thinking and we need to learn new ways of behaving. Usually we change both of them at the same time. That brings up a very big point. It is very important that people believe that they can and should change. One woman who was being counseled had what she called an “unbearable” marriage, but announced that she was willing to endure in “quiet desperation.” Well, that kind of “nobility” is really a cover-up; she was in effect avoiding learning how to manage and overcome the difficulties. Of course, the husband in this instance needed to learn how his behavior was negatively affecting his marriage relationship. But she needed to start doing something about the problem rather than simply “enduring” it.

E: Once a couple has spent enough time in confirming that their relationship is important and that they’re willing to work on it, what do you suggest?

M: There are two attitudes or ways of thinking that will help each of us act better. Let me describe them; then I’d like to suggest four things we can do that will help us keep those attitudes in perspective.

The first attitude is learn to accept some tension. In our modern cultures, we think that pain of any sort is wrong—whether it be boredom, confusion, sorrow, tension, discomfort, or temptation. Consequently, many people today resort to drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex in a futile attempt to escape tension. The truth is that some tension is inevitable and we can learn to live even with fairly high levels without being damaged. In fact, one of the signs of a mature person is the ability to handle tension and ambiguity.

I like the story Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone tells of LeBaron Russell Briggs, Harvard dean, who asked a student why he hadn’t done an assignment. The student said it was because he didn’t feel very well. “Mr. Smith,” said the dean, “I think in time you may perhaps find that most of the work in the...
world is done by people who aren’t feeling very well.” (New Era, Nov. 1977, p. 9.)

And we’re not just talking about emotional tensions. A couple in the 1980s is obviously going to have to withstand tensions of higher inflation and other economic challenges.

E: What’s the second attitude?

M: As married partners we need to feel comfortable with the notion, “I’m not yet perfect and you’re not yet perfect, but we’re both still trying.” We need to allow each other a chance to improve, to progress. All of us need to rely on our Father in Heaven and the Savior’s atonement. I think for us to demand instant perfection of our partner isn’t Christlike. It is Christlike for us to seriously work to improve and perfect ourselves and to also lovingly assist our partner when and how we can—but to do it at their invitation and compassionately, as outlined in D&C 121.

E: With those two attitudes in mind, what are the four skills or behaviors that you’d recommend couples develop?

M: The first is to renew our energy. It is difficult to forgive seventy times seven when we’re angry or exhausted. I relearn again and again not to try and talk about differences when I’m either too angry or too tired.

E: What do you mean by renewing energy?

M: Doing something that makes you feel relaxed, happy, and at peace with yourself. For some people it means taking time to read, or to make cookies, or to do something for someone. The list could be endless. Just figure out what works for you, and do it.

E: And the second skill?

M: Pray alone and together. Prayer can bring revelation in the form of ideas. Sometimes problem-solving is that divinely simple. Of course all difficulties aren’t instantly resolved by a few prayers. But prayer can change our attitudes and help us become more willing to work with each other.

A couple I know says that prayer eases tensions in a miraculous way. “All of the problems aren’t necessarily solved when we get up off our knees,” they say, “but when you pray, you invite the Lord into your life and humble yourselves by recognizing your need for help.” My wife and I have found that asking the Lord specifically to help us use the skills we have and to learn new ones really makes a difference in how successful we are.

E: In other words, an initial benefit from prayer can be better feelings about each other or about the difficulty, which, in turn, can help us find ways of working through the difficulty.

M: That’s right. Prayer brings many possibilities—one of which is peace. At least, that’s been my experience. And although a feeling of peace doesn’t by itself eliminate most challenges, it can help us work together better, or endure the problems better, or recognize that we don’t need to solve them immediately. Peace can also give us the emotional room to find other answers. Some matters simply
take time to work out.

E: And the third skill?

M: Serve. President Spencer W. Kimball has given us profoundly wise counsel on this subject. He says, “There is great security in spirituality, and we cannot have spirituality without service! … So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds! … In the midst of the miracle of serving, there is the promise of Jesus, that by losing ourselves, we find ourselves. (See Matt. 10:39.) Not only do we ‘find’ ourselves in terms of acknowledging guidance in our lives, but the more we serve our fellowmen in appropriate ways, the more substance there is to our souls. … Indeed, it is easier to ‘find’ ourselves because there is so much more of us to find!” (Ensign, Dec. 1974, pp. 5, 2.)

E: How would you apply these suggestions to marriage?

M: Those “small deeds” President Kimball talks about are the same loving, caring acts that we’ve already discussed. But let’s take warning. It’s possible for a husband to take his turn at the dishes in such a put-upon way that it communicates anger, not love. The principles discussed in Doctrine and Covenants 121 have far-reaching implications, including application in marriage. Our service needs to follow its suggestions: persuasion rather than coercion, long-suffering rather than impatience, gentleness and meekness rather than harshness and arrogance, love unfeigned rather than insincerity, kindness and knowledge (and sometimes getting enough knowledge to do the right thing in a relationship takes a lot of hard work), reproof only under the influence of the Holy Ghost and always with an increase of love so that faithfulness—or commitment to the relationship—is “stronger than the cords of death.” (See D&C 121:41–44.)

E: And the fourth skill?

M: I’m not sure it’s a skill, exactly, but that’s what I’m calling it. Look for helpful ideas among the happy marriages you know. Now, we need to watch this one. A lot of marriages present such a peaceful surface that we might think, “They never have any disagreements. What’s wrong with our marriage?” That’s not going to help us. What we need as a model is a marriage that knows how to resolve difficulties—in other words, we all need to see how others productively implement basic gospel principles, skills, and attitudes to solve their challenges together.

I think those who have read Edward and Andrew Kimball’s splendid biography of President Kimball (Spencer W. Kimball, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979) and the follow-up volume, Camilla, by Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980) have felt increased love for President and Sister Kimball and increased confidence in their own ability to deal with challenges. Through faith in Christ, President and Sister Kimball made a solid marriage despite economic strains, time demands elsewhere, and health problems—problems that are certainly not foreign to any of us.

E: Any other skills?
M: One of the most important is open communication. Let me say something about what we mean by open. Some groups in society advocate spilling whatever’s on your mind. We do not. We are with those who suggest “measured honesty,” so that we share important feelings but in an atmosphere of love and support rather than hostility, using self-discipline and sincerity in expression.

E: What are the essentials of good communication?

M: You’ve printed many articles that have dealt with important aspects of communication. To summarize: learn to listen, be specific and reasonable in your requests, use positive and corrective feedback, clarify what you mean as you give messages, and learn to ask questions.

E: What about outside help if the couple tries all this but can’t progress as fast as they would like?

M: Outside help may be needed if there’s a problem that keeps coming up again and again in the relationship, or if there’s some kind of prolonged crisis putting pressure on the family, or if one of the partners is having a lingering problem—such as depression or failure to feel secure or worthy. Outside help usually comes from parents or priesthood leaders. Sometimes professional help is needed. However, whatever the help, remember that we can always turn to our Heavenly Father for help.

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