Changing Me, Changing My Marriage  
By Gary Steggell

When Marie* first came in for counseling, she was disheartened and lonely even though she had been married for 15 years, had three beautiful children, and was actively involved in church. Teary-eyed, she described how her husband, Andy, didn’t seem to want to talk to her anymore and didn’t show as much affection toward her as before.

Marie had tried many times to turn Andy around. She had talked, ordered, pleaded, and nagged. She had tried the “silent treatment.” She had asked him to come with her to counseling. He responded by telling her that if there were problems, they were hers, not his. Marie loved Andy and wanted to be happier with him but was at a loss about what else she might do.

What I suggested to Marie surprised her. I told her that while I didn’t know how to help her change Andy, if she would concentrate on changing some things she was doing, she could introduce change into her marriage. This change would be an invitation for Andy to improve their relationship. For her first homework assignment, I asked her to do three things: list some of the ways she didn’t want Andy to change, list things she thought would please Andy, and write down her most common response to one or two situations that most troubled her. Based on what she wrote, we would discuss what she might do to help improve her marriage.

The concept shared with Marie is basic: if you want change in your marriage, change yourself first. You can start today, even if your partner doesn’t start today with you. The Lord directs us to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27; emphasis added). This is especially important when trying to improve marriage relationships.

When Marie returned the following week, we talked about using the following concepts as she decided how to make changes in herself and improve her marriage: do more of what works and less of what doesn’t, set specific goals that can be accomplished this week, and do something different today.

More of What Works

Marie’s first list contained things about Andy that she really did like. During the coming week she decided to make a specific effort to let him know what some of those things were. Since people tend to do those things that others notice and appreciate, this process would help encourage more of what was already working well in their marriage.
I shared with Marie an example of a couple who put this principle into practice. Katie and Ben had been married about three years when they came in for counseling. Although they still loved each other, they no longer felt the same excitement as when they were first married. Most of their time together was spent being critical of each other or bickering over insignificant things. During their second visit with me, they accepted the assignment to show more appreciation for each other during the week to come. When they returned a week later, they were smiling. They enthusiastically described how they had noticed and appreciated many good things each had done for the other and for the family. They were amazed at the number of things they didn’t remember noticing before.

This example helped Marie see how spouses who pay attention to the good things about each other and show more appreciation can make a real difference in their marriage. “Marriage is beautiful when beauty is looked for and cultivated,” President Gordon B. Hinckley has said. “It can be ugly and uncomfortable when one is looking for faults and is blinded to virtue” (Ensign, May 1991, 74).

We then turned to Marie’s second list, which contained things she might do to please Andy. Although she was feeling hurt by his behavior, Marie decided to be kinder in at least one new way during the next week. In order to be most effective, she would need to do this in the spirit of giving to Andy out of her love for him even though it might seem an unearned gift.

In a general conference talk, President Gordon B. Hinckley instructed Church members in the definition and practical application of love between a husband and wife: “I am satisfied that a happy marriage is not so much a matter of romance as it is an anxious concern for the comfort and well-being of one’s companion” (Ensign, May 1991, 73). In marriage that focus of concern naturally leads to actions that keep selfishness in check and strengthen the relationship.

If you want to improve your marriage, encourage more of what is already working. Pay more attention to the good things your partner is doing, and do more of the things that please your spouse. This approach will refocus your attention and energy in a positive direction, and you may be surprised at the change in your own feelings and in your spouse’s attitude and actions.

**Less of What Doesn’t Work**

Marie’s third list was the one she most hoped to find help with. The many exchanges of hurtful behavior had discouraged her from believing that any real change could occur in her marriage. Sometimes the harder a husband or wife tries to make things better, the worse things become. This can happen if a spouse tries to fix the problem by doing more of what already isn’t working.

To illustrate, I shared with Marie the problem that Matthew and Laura struggled with. Matthew thought Laura was too preoccupied with their children’s care and wasn’t paying enough attention to him and to their marriage relationship. At first, he calmly talked to her about it. Laura, already sensing the problem but feeling pressured by her responsibilities as a mother, Primary teacher, school volunteer, and wife, felt worse when Matthew brought it up, even though his words were tactful and sincere.

Not knowing how to find more time and energy to respond to Matthew, and resenting his increased demand for her attention at a time when she wanted greater support from him, Laura withdrew,
leaving the matter unresolved. Matthew, believing Laura was ignoring the problem, complained loudly one night, resorting to sarcasm. Hurt, Laura withdrew from Matthew even more. She began dreading Matthew’s return home from work each night, and the situation worsened until both concluded that their marriage was falling apart. Though Matthew believed he was trying to solve the problem by continuing to confront Laura and demand attention from her, he was only doing more of what didn’t work in the first place.

When I visited with Matthew, I asked him to list specific behaviors that were not bringing the results he so much wanted. Explaining, blaming, shouting, accusing, pleading, and coming home later and later were on his list. He wondered what he could do to break the cycle of unpleasantness. I asked him what kind of homecoming he really wanted from Laura. He thought for a moment, then said he wanted her to be happy to see him and to take a few minutes to talk with him alone each evening without the children.

We talked about other ways he might approach, invite, or encourage Laura to respond to his need. He decided to call her the next day before he left work and ask her if she’d give him 10 minutes alone with her when he arrived home. He explained to Laura that he had a surprise for the children and wanted her help. Intrigued, Laura consented. When he walked in the door, she was there to meet him. He asked her to help put a small treat by each child’s plate at dinner. Laura looked at Matthew and smiled at such a simple but fun idea. Together they plotted this small surprise for the children. It was a turning point.

Try this experiment and see if doing more of what works and less of what doesn’t work brings about some changes in your marriage. As you do so, make any mental adjustment necessary so you can act in harmony with this admonition from the Savior: “See that ye love one another; … cease to find fault one with another. … And above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace” (D&C 88:123–25).

Milestones to Success

Setting goals is an essential step toward change. As goals for improving marriage relationships are met one at a time, they become hope-promoting signposts for couples who might otherwise see reason to despair. Once Marie had given deep thought to her three lists, it was time to discuss some guidelines for effective goal setting. These include setting goals that are specific, focusing on positive behaviors, and describing goals in behavioral or action terms.

• **Set specific goals.** Rebecca and McKay had been married only a few years, but neither one felt very loved. They set a goal to be more affectionate with each other. Rebecca decided to spend more time with McKay, calling him at work to say hello, and holding his hand more. McKay, on the other hand, chose to express his affection by touching, hugging, and kissing Rebecca more often. In spite of their efforts, they were disappointed with the results. Because they had not been more specific with each other in setting their goals, neither recognized the other’s efforts for what they were. They learned that having a vague goal is almost like having no goal at all. Rebecca and McKay then discussed what “increased affection” meant to the other and set their new goals in more specific terms. They agreed that Rebecca would kiss McKay good-bye when he left for work and to greet him the same way when he came home, and McKay would spend at least 10 minutes a day in pleasant con-
conversation with Rebecca. In the next week, both were pleased with what began to happen and felt happier about their marriage.

**Focus on positive behaviors.** When couples are asked what they want to have happen in their marriage, they often describe instead what they don’t want, such as, “She spends money without even telling me” or, “He only complains about how messy the house is.” Complaining or describing what isn’t good about your husband or wife or marriage is not going to help when setting goals for improvement. Those same two complaints, restated as positive goals, could be: “Let’s decide together whenever we want to spend more than 20 dollars” and, “As I come home from work, I will notice three things that my wife did around the house today.”

**Describe your goals in action terms.** Anthony and Jennifer were working on improving their relationship. When I asked Anthony what he could do to please Jennifer, he responded that he could be more kind. Since being kind can be fairly subjective and not readily observable, I asked Anthony for some outward way to recognize that he was being kinder to Jennifer. “What would you be doing if you were more kind? If we were watching a videotape of your efforts to be kind, what would we see?” He answered that he would smile and say thank you more often and offer to help Jennifer regularly. His second answer described actions that could be easily observed by Jennifer.

These three guides for goal setting were very helpful to Marie as she studied her list of things she wanted to tackle. As she began setting specific, measurable goals, we talked about the final step in pursuing change—begin today.

**Do Something Different Today**

Whatever your present marriage relationship, you can do something today that can change things for the better. Many husbands and wives who seek help initially believe that their problems are so bad or have gone on for so long that change is impossible. The sheer magnitude of some marital problems and the extent of needed changes often discourage couples from even starting the process of change.

Yet changing behavior can start with very simple acts. My experience with hundreds of couples and individuals has taught me that even simple solutions can have far-reaching, positive effects and that every couple can do something different today that will improve themselves and their marriage. A kind gesture, an unexpected kiss on the cheek, a thoughtful word of appreciation can have a ripple effect that will invite and encourage goodwill throughout the week. In fact, it is often through some of our simplest actions that some of the greatest changes occur (see 1 Ne. 16:29; D&C 123:16).

Marie set specific goals, then went home and began work immediately on one goal in each of the three areas represented by her lists. Noticing over the next few days that something was different, Andy felt somewhat uncomfortable and wondered what was happening with Marie. He decided to attend therapy sessions with her to see that his point of view was clearly represented. Marie was surprised and pleased that he seemed willing to join her. We met together for several visits, and Marie and Andy began working together to resolve long-standing problems. Their marriage improved. Marie was happier than she had been in many years in spite of many ups and downs. Andy was happier, and they are continuing to work together to resolve their differences and strive toward posi-
While solutions to long-standing problems may initially seem impossible to achieve, we can do something today that will move us along the right path. Cultivating new ways of dealing with seemingly complex issues—instead of ignoring them and hoping they will somehow disappear on their own—can kindle feelings of new hope and create a sense of moving ahead toward better times. The very acts of making lists, setting goals, and doing something different often help dispel discouragement. Then by concentrating on the things we like about our husband or wife, making an effort to do one thing especially for them as a gift of goodwill, and replacing behavior that doesn’t bring desired results with something new, we can begin today to do more of what works. In the process we may find, as President Hinckley has said, that “marriage is beautiful when beauty is looked for and cultivated” (Ensign, May 1991, 74).