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Growing a Marriage Garden

Looking at the wedding picture, she thought bitterly that that had been the happiest day of her life. She and Peter looked so happy in the picture, excited to begin their lives together and share the bliss that was marriage. Unfortunately, their happiness had gone downhill from there. Peter had gone out after their last screaming match and probably wouldn't be home for at least an hour.

Beth sighed and went outside to water her plants. They were the one bright spot in her life. As she filled the watering can, she mentally reviewed the fight. She couldn't easily identify the spark that had ignited it. Over the past two years of their marriage, they had engaged in increasingly regular shouted battles. There were so few things that she remembered about why she fell in love with Peter in the first place. Though, she and Peter had dated for two years and had a six-month engagement, she now felt like she didn't know him. She thought she had known him as much as anyone did and loved him, so they got married.

Beth started soaking her precious flowers carefully and started a conversation with her petunias about her husband.

"He is so self-centered," she muttered. "He doesn't even seem to notice how hard I work to save money. He only notices to complain when I spend more than a few dollars, even though he regularly buys frivolous things." Beth continued to mumble aloud her husband-related frustrations, getting increasingly heated.

"Good afternoon." The intrusion of a human voice startled Beth out of her disgruntled musings. She looked behind her to see her neighbor peeking over the fence and blushed deeply.

"Sorry for startling you, but I couldn't help hearing what you were saying while I was weeding, and I didn't want to overhear something I shouldn't," Beth's neighbor said with a smile.

"Oh, it's okay, Jane," Beth replied wryly. "I shouldn't be talking to myself anyway."

"Sometimes thoughts and feelings just need to be expressed," Jane said. "I find

that I talk to myself more often than I would like to admit.”

“Sorry to bother you.” Beth started to turn back to her flowers when Jane stopped her.

“Oh it’s okay I was about ready to take a break anyway and check on Emma. Hey, I’ve got some cold lemonade; why don’t you come over and we’ll have some.”

Beth hesitated, feeling the need to be with her plants to work out her frustrations. She opened her mouth to decline the invitation and found herself accepting. Still wondering at why she was going to visit with her neighbor, Beth went through the gate and followed Jane into her kitchen.

“Just have a seat and I’ll get that lemonade.” Jane set down the baby monitor and started opening her cupboards to get glasses out while Beth sat down at the kitchen table. The phone rang and Jane picked it up. Beth couldn’t help but hear half of the conversation.

“Hello...How’s my handsome husband? ...Good. I’ve just been weeding and invited Beth over for some lemonade. How is work going? ...Good....Okay. I love you too.”

“What did Jim want?” Beth asked when Jane ended the phone call.

“Nothing in particular. He calls me everyday just to say hi.” Jane smiled and brought the lemonade over to the table.

“Really?” Beth asked incredulously. “Every day?”

“We miss a few here and there but almost every day,” Jane replied, still smiling. “It brightens my day and his and helps us stay connected and in love.”

“You seem to really love your husband. How long have you been married?”

“We have been married for five of the best years of my life.”

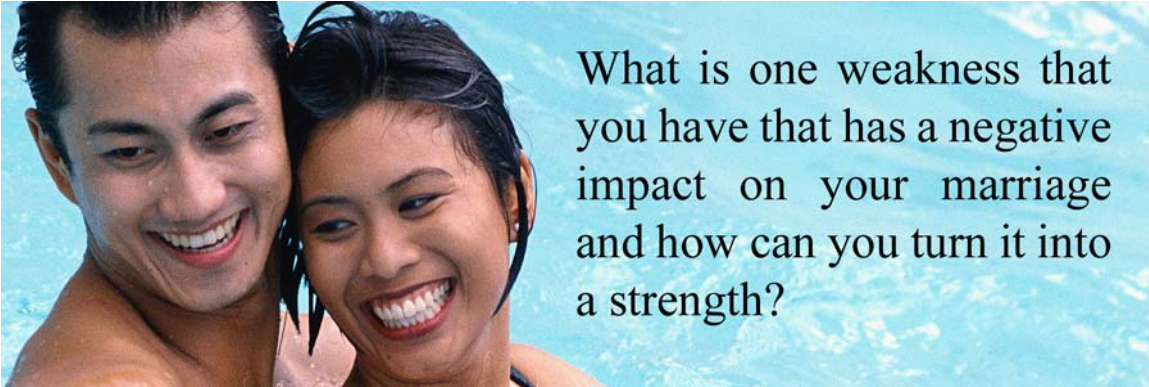
“Wow,” Beth said softly. Jane looked at her with concern, and a wrinkle appeared on her forehead. She opened her mouth, hesitated, and then released her breath. She paused again, then seemed to gather up her courage.

“Beth, I couldn’t help overhearing a few of your comments while you were watering,” Jane started gently. “I don’t mean to intrude but is everything okay between you and Peter?” When Beth didn’t respond, Jane continued. “Every couple has disagreements; we’re all human. But I get the feeling that you aren’t very happy in your marriage. Is there anything you want to talk about? I’m told I’m a pretty good listener.” The silence stretched out then tears started to well in Beth’s eyes.

“I have to talk to someone,” she blurted out. “Whenever I say anything to Peter



Why are we so willing to spend time and energy planning for a vacation yet are reluctant to create a plan to strengthen our marriage?



about what he is doing that bothers me, he just yells back at me.” Jane reached over to the kitchen counter to get some tissues and silently handed one to Beth. “He is such a frustrating, self-centered egotist. He thinks that everything he does is perfect and that I am worth nothing. He never asks my opinion of anything or takes me out anymore. He treats me like a door mat. We keep fighting more and more about everything. We have such different ideas that we never should have gotten married. His family is so irksome and frustrating, and he defends them. He never sees that something might be different from the way he does things.” With every sentence, Beth grew more upset and her voice slowly got louder. The baby monitor on the kitchen counter lit up, and a few whimpers interrupted Beth’s tirade. “Oh, Jane, I’m so sorry I forgot about your baby sleeping,” Beth said in a softer voice, “I should go.”

“Nonsense, it’s about time for her to be up anyway,” Jane replied. “If you promise not to go anywhere, I’ll go get her.” Beth promised, and Jane soon returned with a sleepy eight-month-old.

“I’m sorry I woke her up,” Beth began apologizing again. “I didn’t mean to get so loud or burden you with my struggles.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jane urged. “She normally gets up about this time anyway.” Jane made a face at Emma who smiled and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. “See, she’s fine.”

After watching Jane interact with Emma for a few minutes, Beth hesitatingly asked, “Is she why you and Jim are so happy?” Jane looked up surprised and then her glance softened with understanding.

“Yes and no,” she replied. “Yes, she definitely contributes to our overall happiness though at times she tries our patience considerably. However, Jim and I were happy before we had her. He is a wonderful man, and we love being with each other.”

“Maybe I just picked the wrong man,” Beth said almost to herself.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Jane said. “I watched you when you first moved in; you were both so happy and in love.”

“Well, we fight more than we enjoy each other’s company now. Something isn’t working out.” Beth sighed and put her forehead in her hand. “We’ve even contemplated divorce though neither of us wants to admit we have failed at marriage.”

“I don’t think it is nearly time to call it quits,” Jane protested. “Every marriage has a few problems, but they can be fixed.”

“You don’t have problems.”

“Yes, we do,” Jane said with a chuckle. “We just work hard to make our marriage happy by working through our problems.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Beth asked. “I don’t even know what the problem is. The only thing I can think of is that I don’t really love him anymore.” She grabbed another tissue and stared at the table, ready to catch her tears as they rolled down her cheeks.

“Watching you now,” Jane said softly, “I’m pretty sure you still love him.”

“What good is that going to do me if all I keep doing is learning how to hate him,” Beth protested.

Jane put Emma on the floor with a teething ring and gently put her hand over Beth’s. “There are many things that you can do to improve your marriage. One of the things that has helped Jim and me to have a happy marriage is to talk out our differences.”

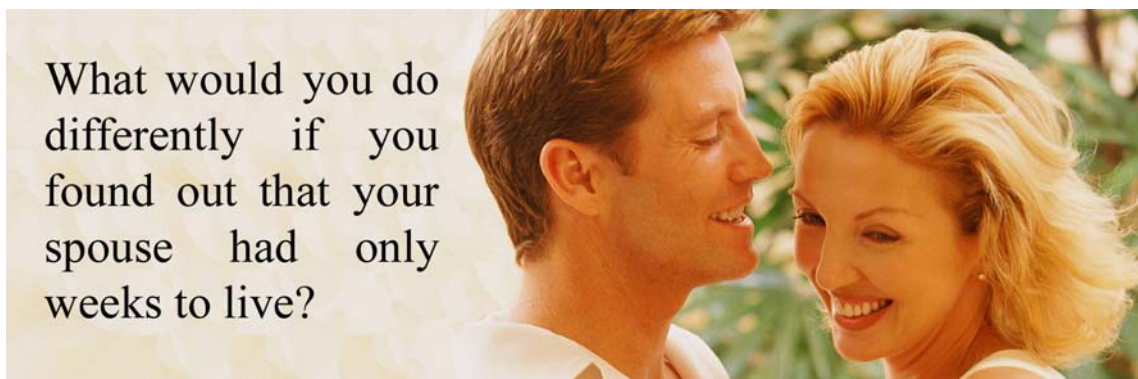
“But when I do that, the only thing that happens is we have a big fight,” Beth countered.

“I’m talking about communication not arguing. Talking through differences doesn’t mean you have to raise your voices or yell at each other. When Jim and I get into an argument, we don’t get anything accomplished but hurt feelings until we calm down and discuss the problem evenly, without raised voices. Occasionally we let things get too heated and we need a cooling off period away from each other before we can discuss the problem.” Jane paused and Beth looked up.

“We do that,” Beth began. “We fight, then take a break but if we go back to the subject we just start fighting again, so I’ve stopped bringing up painful subjects. Unfortunately, everything from money to family get-togethers has become a painful subject.” Beth dabbed her eyes and continued, “We don’t talk anymore except to fight. There don’t seem to be any happy subjects to discuss. Everything he does bothers me.” Jane squeezed Beth’s hand in sympathy then took a careful breath.

“I got into a situation similar to that with Jim once. I just had to remind myself that I loved him and resolve to talk over our differences calmly. There are a lot of moments even during the discussion that I had to pause, take a deep breath, and count to ten to keep my cool. As silly as counting to ten may sound, it’s worked for me.”

“But I just feel like I dislike Peter even more after every argument. How can I go back and try and discuss something with him if I’m having trouble loving him anymore.”





Why are we willing to invest so much time and money into our wedding yet are reluctant to invest time and money into helping our marriage last a lifetime?

“Well, it sounds like you need to rekindle your love. When Jim and I are going through a rough patch or I find myself getting complacent in my love for him, I do something special for him to show him and myself that I really do love him.” A slobbery teething ring skittered across the floor accompanied by a shriek from Emma demanding its return. Jane smiled, retrieved the toy and went to the sink to rinse it off. “She really knows how to interrupt important conversations.”

The corners of Beth’s mouth twitched up for a moment. “What are some of the things that you do?”

“Oh, anything and everything,” Jane said as she returned the clean toy to Emma and sat back at the table. “I’ve made a romantic candlelight dinner for him with his favorite dish; I’ve made lists of reasons why I love him, both to remind me and later to give to him.” Jane refilled their lemonade glasses and continued. “I think the most important thing to keep in mind while you’re doing something is that you need to either open lines of communication or keep open those that you have. Constant, open, loving communication is the only reason Jim and I have been able to remain happy and keep our marriage intact.” Jane interrupted herself to snatch a dried leaf away from Emma just as she was about to put it in her mouth. As Jane put Emma in her high chair with a snack, Beth thought about what had been said. She felt a glimmer of hope that maybe her marriage wasn’t destined for failure. It might just work out if she and Peter could learn how to communicate. Looking back over the time they dated, she realized that they hadn’t had too many serious discussions about life or their goals. Afraid she might get discouraged, she looked up at Jane.

“I don’t think Peter and I really know how to communicate. Do you think we could learn?” Beth asked hope flickering in her eyes.

“Everyone can learn how to communicate. It can take a lot of effort; it can take a lot of willpower, but it can be done.” Jane looked at the resolve entering Beth’s eyes and posture and continued. “From what you have told me, both you and Peter want this marriage to work. I think if you talk to him softly about things and refrain from any blame-placing or name-calling, you might be surprised at the results.” As Beth sat quietly absorbing what Jane had said, she seemed to come to a decision.

“I think I will give it a shot,” she decided aloud.

“Good for you,” Jane encouraged. “If there is any support or help I can give, let me know.”

“Actually,” Beth hesitated, “I’m not sure I know how to just talk about something without sparking an argument.”

“Well, just as much as it takes two people to fight it also takes two people cooperating to discuss something. But,” Jane countered, “there are some things that you can do to try and facilitate a discussion.”

“What?” Beth asked.

“First of all, make sure that you remain calm and don’t get upset at something Peter says. Also try to avoid verbally attacking him. It will put him on the defensive and you won’t be able to get as much done.” Jane smiled encouragingly. “The best person to talk with about your marital difficulties is your husband because he is the only one who can fix anything.” Beth was starting to look a little overwhelmed, so Jane hurried to continue. “No attempt will be perfect. Even if there are a few setbacks, stay motivated; things will get better.”

“Well, I’d better be getting back home and make something for dinner.” Beth pushed back her chair and stood up. “Thanks for giving me advice,” she said awkwardly.

“What are friends for,” Jane replied. She stood up and hugged Beth. “If you ever need someone to motivate you to keep working on your marriage, I’m here.”

“Thanks,” Beth said and smiled. “You’ve given me hope that my marriage isn’t over.” After goodbyes were said, Beth crossed back over into her yard and walked up the steps to her door. She saw Peter’s car was back and took a deep breath. She pushed open the door and saw Peter sitting dejectedly on the couch.

“Hi,” Beth said softly.

“I’m done,” Peter replied. “I can’t take all this fighting anymore.”

“Are you saying you want out of the marriage?” Beth asked, fear entering her heart.

“I guess,” Peter said. “We’ve failed, haven’t we? Isn’t that what you want?”

“No,” Beth said, and continued with growing conviction. “I don’t want out. I want to give our marriage another try. I think we can make it work if we are willing to give it another shot.” She paused as Peter looked up at her. She took a deep breath and continued, “I realized today I still love you and want to make this marriage work.” The silence stretched out and a look of astonishment appeared on Peter’s face.

“You still love me?” Peter questioned softly.

“Yes.”



Who benefits
when you hold
on to anger?



“But what about all our differences and all the fights we have,” Peter countered. “Do you really think this marriage can work?”

“I don’t know, but I’d like to try. It’s going to take a lot of work.” Beth looked at him. “I know we fight a lot, but we don’t ever really resolve any of our differences. You...” Beth stopped, remembered what Jane had said about not attacking, and tried to rethink what she would say. “I know I have faults and need to work harder at this marriage, but I need help from you too.” Beth took a tentative step toward Peter. “I’d like to learn how to talk with you not just fight with you. Would you be willing to give our marriage another try?”

“Yeah,” Peter slowly replied. “Let’s work on it.” He looked at Beth with an emotion showing in his eyes she hadn’t seen for a while. “I think I still love you too.”

Beth set the freshly dusted picture back on the shelf next to the other pictures. She smiled as she thought of the occasion for the picture. She and Peter had gone on a vacation to celebrate their fourth wedding anniversary. With how happy she was now, it was sometimes hard to remember that just over two years ago her marriage had been on the verge of disintegration. Peter had agreed to give their marriage another try, and they had worked hard on keeping their communication open and healthy. They had struggled with being able to stay calm during discussions and had consulted a marriage counselor. After awhile they were able to communicate their hopes and dreams as well as calmly discuss their differences. They still had differences and occasionally their discussions became heated, but overall their communication had improved immensely. Their marriage was healthy and strong, and they were both happier than they had ever been.

Beth heard the timer go off, and she hurried to pull Peter’s favorite dinner from the oven. As she put the finishing touches on the table, she heard his car pull up. She was lighting the candles as a bouquet of flowers preceded her husband through the door. He stopped short at the sight of the candlelit dinner she had prepared and then smiled.

“I love you, Beth.”

“I love you too, Peter.”

Ounce of Prevention Worksheet

There is a story about a farmer who plowed his fields but never planted them. Reading this story and not implementing what you learned will get you the same result as the farmer who plowed but never planted.

In the beginning of each of our relationships we start out with a beautiful marriage garden. The flowers smell sweet and love is definitely in the air. If a weed appears we immediately get rid of it. It seems as if the garden just flourishes on its own with little if any effort on our part.

In reality the garden is flourishing because of all the time and effort we spend nurturing our relationship, combined with a heavy dose of hormones. As time goes by, we find that the other areas of our lives we have been neglecting scream for our time and attention. Slowly our efforts in our marriage gardens start to drop off.

Weeds begin to appear, flowers are no longer blooming as magnificently, the sweet aroma of love seems to have dissipated and many are left to wonder if they made a mistake or if the garden was ever as magnificent as they remembered. Even worse is when they imagine that they could create a better garden with someone else.

The truth is if you want a lifelong beautiful marriage garden it is going to take consistent time and effort on your part to grow and maintain it. The easy times you remember in the beginning of the relationship were actually due to a drug induced euphoria that our bodies produced to help us fall in love. The hormones that created this state diminish over time and are usually no longer being produced as intensely within 1-2 years. However you can still experience that intense natural high with your spouse but you have to put the time and effort in to release the hormones in higher quantities.

It is far easier to grow and maintain a garden if you spend time each day caring for it. If you wait too long the weeds will seem to have overgrown the garden and the task of restoring the garden to its former beauty may seem too overwhelming. In reality almost any couple can successfully restore their garden and create a garden even more magnificent than ever before. But it takes consistent TIME and EFFORT.

The best time to start taking care of your marriage garden is today. Plant some small flowers by doing small acts of kindness for your spouse. Water the soil by expressing your appreciation for what your spouse has done for you today or in the past. Pull some weeds by forgiving your spouse for things that have been said or done recently. The most critical thing you can do is look at your marriage garden and find the areas where you have depositing the poison of selfishness. Nothing will kill a marriage garden faster than the toxic poison called selfishness. The antidote to selfishness is service so replace those areas with a healthy dose of service.

A lifelong beautiful marriage garden doesn't just happen on its own. If you want it, MAKE IT HAPPEN. Don't wait for your spouse to start helping. Eventually he or she will join you in your efforts. Be patient, get started and you will start to experience the fruits of your efforts.

Make a list of the specific things you will do this week to spend time and effort growing and maintaining your marriage garden.