

FAMILYLIFE®
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homebuilders
COUPLES SERIES®

protecting your first responder marriage

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PROTECTING YOUR FIRST-RESPONDER MARRIAGE

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Written by Chuck Douglas

FAMILYLIFE®

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.*

PSALM 127:1

The HomeBuilders Couples Series®

Building Your Marriage to Last
Improving Communication in Your Marriage
Resolving Conflict in Your Marriage
Mastering Money in Your Marriage
Building Teamwork in Your Marriage
Growing Together in Christ
Building Up Your Spouse
Managing Pressure in Your Marriage

The HomeBuilders Parenting Series®

Improving Your Parenting
Establishing Effective Discipline for Your Children
Guiding Your Teenagers
Raising Children of Faith

welcome to homebuilders

Marriage should be enjoyed, not endured. It is meant to be a vibrant relationship between two people who love each other with passion, commitment, understanding, and grace. So secure is the bond God desires between a husband and a wife that He uses it to illustrate the magnitude of Christ's love for the church (Ephesians 5:25–33).

Do you have that kind of love in your marriage?

Relationships often fade over time as people drift apart—but only if the relationship is left unattended. We have a choice in the matter; our marriages don't have to grow dull. Perhaps we just need to give them some attention.

That's the purpose behind the HomeBuilders Couples Series—to provide you a way to give your marriage the attention it needs and deserves. This is a biblically based small-group study because, in the Bible, God has given the blueprint for building a loving and secure marriage. His plan is designed to enable a man and a woman to grow together in a mutually satisfying relationship and then to reach out to others with the love of Christ. Ignoring God's plan may lead to isolation and, in far too many cases, the breakup of the home.

Whether your marriage needs a complete makeover or just a few small adjustments, we encourage you to consult God's design. Although written nearly two thousand years ago, Scripture still speaks clearly and powerfully about the conflicts and challenges men and women face.

Do we really need to be part of a group? Couldn't we just go through this study as a couple?

While you could work through the study as a couple, you would miss the opportunity to connect with friends and to learn from one another's experiences. You will find that the questions in each session not only help you grow closer to your spouse, but they also create an environment of warmth and fellowship with other couples as you study together.

What does it take to lead a HomeBuilders group?

Leading a group is much easier than you may think, because the leader is simply a facilitator who guides the participants through the discussion questions. You are not teaching the material but

are helping the couples discover and apply biblical truths. The special dynamic of a HomeBuilders group is that couples teach themselves.

The study guide you're holding has all the information and guidance you need to participate in or lead a HomeBuilders group. You'll find leader's notes in the back of the guide, and additional helps are posted online at FamilyLife.com/Resources.

What is the typical schedule?

Most studies in the HomeBuilders Couples Series are six- to eight-weeks long, indicated by the number of sessions in the guide. The sessions are designed to take sixty minutes in the group with a project for the couples to complete between sessions.

Isn't it risky to talk about your marriage in a group?

The group setting should be enjoyable and informative—and nonthreatening. **THREE SIMPLE GROUND RULES** will help ensure that everyone feels comfortable and gets the most out of the experience

1. Share nothing that will embarrass your spouse.
2. You may pass on any question you do not want to answer.
3. If possible, as a couple complete the HomeBuilders project between group sessions.

What other help does FamilyLife offer?

Our list of marriage and family resources continues to grow. Visit FamilyLife.com to learn more about our:

- Weekend to Remember® getaway, The Art of Marriage®, and other events;
- slate of radio broadcasts, including the nationally syndicated *FamilyLife Today*®, *Real FamilyLife with Dennis Rainey*®, and *FamilyLife This Week*®;
- multimedia resources for small groups, churches, and community networking;
- interactive products for parents, couples, small-group leaders, and one-to-one mentors; and
- assortment of blogs, forums, and other online connections.

about the author

Chuck Douglas joined the Oklahoma City Police Department in 1990 and served in Uniform Patrol throughout his career there. He and his wife, Melissa, met in 1991 and married in 1992, not having any idea that God had a specific plan for marriage. Chuck's work on night shift as a police officer added to the normal stress of any marriage, and after just three and a half years, the couple separated with plans to divorce. With almost no hope for reconciliation, they attended a FamilyLife Weekend to Remember® getaway, and God miraculously restored their marriage. They became actively involved in volunteer ministry using FamilyLife's HomeBuilders Couples Series®, and have shared their testimony on *FamilyLife Today* radio broadcasts and continue to do so at speaking events. God used the Douglasses' experience to quicken their desire to join FamilyLife full time. They now serve as regional developers for the mid-South United States. Chuck and Melissa have four children.

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on protecting your first-responder marriage

This study was born out of my experience as an Oklahoma City police officer. When Melissa and I married in 1992, we had no idea what hurdles lay before us. I had already been a police officer for two years and my attitude was: *She knew what she was getting into when she married me, so she'd better get used to it.*

Working nights and weekends did not bother me. In fact, I enjoyed the fast pace and lifestyle that came with it. However, one day we both looked up and realized that something was missing in our marriage: a relationship. We didn't have one. So we separated with plans to get a divorce. After our separation, I realized that it wasn't just a relationship between a husband and wife that was missing, it was a relationship with God that was absent from our lives as well.

There were no conferences for "first-responder marriages" when Melissa and I got married. (The term "first responder" identifies those working in the police, fire, and EMS field, as well as any other profession in which men and women voluntarily expose themselves to danger to keep the rest of us safe.) There were no handbooks or detailed instructions available that would give us a solution. There simply wasn't anything out there that addressed the unique issues we were facing.

It wasn't until we found God's plan for marriage at a FamilyLife Weekend to Remember getaway that we realized there *was* a solution to what we were going through. That solution is a personal relationship with God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

You'll notice as you work through this study that the Bible is referenced and used as the final authority on matters regarding life and conduct. I'm convinced that there is no way to true peace and fulfillment in a marriage apart from God's plan, which is outlined in the Scriptures and is the foundation upon which this study is built.

If, after you have gone through this study, you still have questions about your relationship with God, please contact our staff at FamilyLife. In the meantime, let me encourage you to let down any barriers that may be between you and your spouse, and be sensitive to how God may be communicating with you as you grow closer together through this study.

May God bless you on your journey!

—Chuck Douglas

1

Your Marriage *Is Different*

warm-up

Introduce yourself to the group, and briefly share:

- How you and your spouse first met
- How long you've been married

Share where you work and what led you to choose your job as a police officer, firefighter, or emergency medical worker.

blueprints

Oneness in Marriage

1. Think back to before you were married. Consider what you would have written if someone had asked you to list your expectations of what married life would be like. What are some terms that you would have used to describe your “ideal” marriage?

2. Throughout this HomeBuilders study we will look at different passages of the Bible to learn about God's blueprints for how to make a marriage stronger. In Matthew 19:4–6, Jesus referred to part of God's original plan for marriage:

He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Here Jesus tells us that when a couple is married they become "one flesh." This means more than the physical union; it is a joining of two souls. They are no longer two individuals operating separately, but rather they have developed one mind, one body, one common purpose. This is what we call *oneness*. A successful marriage is one where husband and wife build oneness in their relationship—where they work to become closer and more unified. This is likely an ideal about marriage you would've had going into your relationship.

3. As you look back over your marriage, describe some of the best times you've had that resulted in oneness.

4. Even though every married couple faces threats to oneness, we can also have hope for a fulfilling relationship when we base our marriage on God's blueprints. What do the following passages tell you about finding hope in God and His Word?

- Psalm 23:1–3

- Psalm 119:105–107

- Psalm 121:1–2

Case Study

Scott joined the police department a year after he and Sherrie were married. For the last few years he has worked the night shift, 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Scott and Sherrie live next door to Ray and Julie. Both couples have two children; the older ones attend grade school together and the younger ones are toddlers. Ray works downtown at a large bank. Sherrie was excited when Scott first became a police officer. But lately she's wondered how their family might be different if he had a "normal" job.

Sherrie notices that Ray comes home every weekday by 6:00 p.m. She sees him and Julie out in their backyard, playing with their kids on summer evenings and on weekends. Scott is usually in bed asleep on Saturday afternoons because he has to go to work that night. Since his days off are Tuesday and Wednesday, Sherrie and Scott rarely get to enjoy a weekend the way Ray and Julie do. What's more, they always have to celebrate birthdays and holidays around Scott's days off. He has worked on Christmas Day for several years, and couldn't get time off for their last two anniversaries.

Sherrie has also noticed some changes in Scott. He doesn't seem like the same man she married. Scott was always an outgoing, expressive person—someone who loved to talk. During their engagement and through their first year of marriage, he always seemed to open up with Sherrie and talk with her as though they were best friends. But the longer he's been a police officer, the more distant Scott becomes. She knows that Scott's job bothers him at times because he's irritable and snaps at her and the kids for no reason. However, when she asks him if everything is all right, he just tells her to stop making a big deal out of nothing and clams up.

This isn't what Sherrie had in mind for her life. She wonders if things will ever be "normal" for her and her family.

Read the case study aloud. After reading, answer the questions that follow.

5. Do you think it's fair for Sherrie to compare her marriage to Ray and Julie's? Why, or why not?

6. In what ways can you relate to Scott and Sherrie?

7. First responder: How have you seen the stress of your work affect you while you're off the job?

8. First-responder spouse: How have you seen the stress of your spouse's work affect him or her while off the job?

The first-responder marriage is unique because of the special challenges you face on the job. But in the end you have the same choices as any married couple—whether to allow these pressures to drive you apart or bring you together. In the next few sessions, we will look more closely at choices you can make to build oneness in your relationship.



homebuilders principle: To face the unique pressures of a first-responder marriage, couples must decide whether they are going to move toward oneness or isolation in their relationship.

make a date

Set a time for you and your spouse to complete the HomeBuilders project together before the next group meeting. You will be asked at the next session to share an insight or experience from the project.

date _____ time _____

location _____

homebuilders project

On Your Own

Answer the following questions:

1. Using a scale of 1 to 10, how different do you feel your first-responder marriage is from “normal” marriages?

Not different at all

Totally different

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Knowing that no marriage is perfect, what are some specific challenges your marriage has endured that might not have arisen if you had a different occupation?
3. Identify specific areas in which you feel that you and your spouse have grown as a result of your first-responder job.
4. What one area can you improve in to help bring more oneness into your marriage?

With Your Spouse

1. Discuss your responses to the questions you answered on your own.
2. Close your time in prayer. Ask God to bless your time together as a couple and in the group sessions. Pray that He will strengthen your marriage as a result of participating in this study.

Remember to take your calendar to the next session for Make a Date.

2

Making Your Marriage a Priority

warm-up

Secrets

Pair up with another person in the group who is not your spouse. (Men should pair with men and women with women.) Now tell this person about something that happened to you in the last two days that you've not yet shared with your spouse. This could be anything—something that happened at home, at work, while running errands, etc. When you're finished, return to your seat, but don't tell your spouse what you shared.

Project Report

If you completed the HomeBuilders project from the first session, share one thing you learned.

blueprints

Close Bonds

1. Besides your spouse, who are your two or three closest friends?

2. What is the bond that holds these friendships together?
3. How is it helpful to your marriage for your spouse to have good friends?
4. For many first responders, the closest friendships they will ever have will be with coworkers. This may not be the case with everyone, but it is common. What is it about the lifestyle of a first responder that lends itself to such close bonds with coworkers?

First Priority

In our first session we talked about our need to make choices to build oneness in our marriage. In this session we'll continue this discussion, and we'll start by looking more closely at God's plan for marriage. When we look at the Bible, we see that marriage was considered a special relationship from the beginning.

Take a few moments and read from the Creation account in Genesis 2:18-25:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with

5. When you look at this passage, what clues do you find about the importance God places on the marriage relationship?
6. Just as Adam was alone and isolated before God gave him a companion, marriage unites two people who were previously alone. Describe some things you like about married life compared to life as a single.
7. When a husband and wife truly give their marriage relationship the priority it deserves, how should this commitment affect the way they treat each other?



homebuilders principle: While friendships are important for anyone, the most important human relationship for a married first responder is with his or her spouse.

8. Earlier we discussed the strong friendships that easily form between first responders. In what ways can these bonds sometimes hurt the relationship you have with your spouse?

9. Earlier, your spouse told someone else in the group about something that happened in the last couple of days—something you have not yet heard. How has it felt to not know what your spouse shared with that person? This exercise illustrates how your spouse might feel if you prioritize other relationships above friendship with him or her.

make a date

Set a time for you and your spouse to complete the HomeBuilders project together before the next group meeting. You will be asked at the next session to share an insight or experience from the project.

date _____ time _____

location _____

homebuilders project

On Your Own

Answer the following questions:

1. Look back over the questions that were discussed during the group session. What did you learn that has been the most meaningful or helpful to you?
2. As honestly as you can, give a number to the order of priority you have given the following areas of your life during this last year. Give each item a number corresponding to how you have actually done, not how you wish you had done.

_____ Work
_____ Leisure time
_____ Relationship with God/spiritual issues
_____ Relationship with kids
_____ Marriage

3. Now, using the same scale, where do think your priorities need to be concerning the following items?

_____ Work
_____ Leisure time
_____ Relationship with God/spiritual issues
_____ Relationship with kids
_____ Marriage

4. What specific challenges do you face in giving your relationship the priority it deserves?

5. Making your marriage your top priority means making a consistent effort to spend time together, to focus on each other, to meet each other's needs. What changes could you make to your lifestyle in order to give higher priority to your marriage?

With Your Spouse

1. Discuss your responses to the questions you answered on your own.
2. Agree on one action step you will take as a couple to make your relationship a greater priority. Write your action step here:
3. Close in prayer, asking God to help you keep your priorities in order as a family.

Remember to take your calendar to the next session for Make a Date.

3

Improving Communication

warm-up

Tell the group about something you've accomplished on the job that you are proud of. (Note: This question applies to everyone, whether or not you work as a first responder, and whether or not you work outside the home.)

What do you like about your job? (Again, this applies to everyone.)

Project Report

Share the action step you and your spouse agreed upon in the HomeBuilders project from last session.

blueprints

1. As a first responder, what type of communication skills do you need to do your job well?

2. Choose one of the following to share with the group:

- A difficult or dangerous situation you faced that required accurate communication with your coworkers to get the help you needed
- A situation in which poor communication made your job more difficult or hazardous

Communicating in Marriage

The examples you've just given show that as a first responder if you can't communicate well, you can't do your job effectively. When you speak calmly and clearly, it is no problem for your coworkers to understand you. Communication is just as vital in marriage, but it can be a difficult issue for many first responders.

Case Study

Steve is a seven-year veteran of the fire department. He has worked on the rescue squad for the last four years as a paramedic. In the course of his job he has seen more than his share of injury and death.

Two months ago Steve went on a “trouble unknown” call and ended up dealing with a three-year-old boy who had been accidentally shot by his older brother. He worked feverishly and desperately to save the boy—who was the same age as his own son—but the wound was too serious and he died on the way to the hospital. Even though he's been trained to not let things at work get to him, Steve has been unable to shake the images from that day.

Steve hasn't told his wife, Barbara, about the experience. He doesn't think that he needs to or that he should. (Wasn't he told by his superiors that he shouldn't “take the job home”?) Steve isn't aware of the pain and weariness he's carrying.

Barbara knew something had happened to Steve. For years he had said little about what he did on the job. But after that day, he acted more sullen, frustrated, and angry than usual.

Finally, she learned about the young boy's death from the wife of another firefighter. She wondered if she should ask Steve about the experience, but she knew he would only withdraw further within himself. She acted as if everything was normal, but felt even more isolated from Steve.

Read the case study aloud. After reading, answer the questions that follow.

3. Spouses: In what ways can you relate to what Barbara is experiencing?

4. Why do you think Steve is so reluctant to talk about his experiences on the job?

One sign of isolation in a relationship is that the husband and wife do not talk or open up to each other as they once did. If we truly desire to build oneness in marriage, we need to make a commitment to break down any barriers that hinder our communication.



homebuilders principle: Open communication is a key foundation for oneness in a first-responder marriage.

Three Commitments for Improving Communication

Commitment #1: Create a safe environment for opening up.

5. James 1:19b tells us, “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” How would following this advice help to open up the lines of communication in your home?

Commitment #2: Stop withholding information.

Often, first responders have trouble communicating well with their spouses, not only in job-related issues, but in other areas of life as well. For someone who has been married to a first responder for a number of years, this habit may be transferred, so that now neither of you routinely share your thoughts with the other. While the Bible tells us to make an effort to listen to each other, sometimes we're guilty of the opposite: not talking enough.

One way of breaking down this barrier is to become aware of the things you could say to each other that you hold back. These don't have to be serious topics. An example of this could be when you notice your wife looking particularly attractive one day and you neglect to tell her. For wives, you may see your husband out working in the yard, and for a moment you stop and consider how grateful you are for his work around the house, yet you don't tell him.

6. Think of one or two compliments that you could share with your spouse (for example, something your spouse has done well in the last week or a particular way your spouse helped you). Jot this down to share with each other during your HomeBuilders project this week.

Commitment #3: Work together to resolve conflict.

Since conflict is common to relationships, it is important to learn how to work through it.

7. Each person responds differently to conflict. How do you normally act when you have conflict with someone? (For example, do you withdraw, become angry, go on the attack, or act as if nothing happened?)

8. Ephesians 4:26 tells us, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Is it possible to let conflict go unresolved and still achieve oneness in your marriage? Why or why not?

9. What practical advice can you find in the following passages about resolving conflict? How can you apply these truths in your relationship?

- Ephesians 4:32

- 1 Peter 3:8–9

make a date

Set a time for you and your spouse to complete the HomeBuilders project together before the next group meeting. You will be asked at the next session to share an insight or experience from the project.

date _____ time _____

location _____

homebuilders project

On Your Own

Answer the following questions:

1. Look back over the questions that were discussed during the group session. What did you learn that has been the most meaningful or helpful to you?
2. Think of a situation in your marriage when a lack of communication resulted in further distance between you and your spouse.

What happened? How did you respond?

How could you have responded more appropriately, or in a manner that would have resulted in greater oneness rather than isolation?

3. Name one or two hindrances that keep you from opening up more with your spouse. What steps can you take to overcome them?

4. Choose one of the following scenarios to discuss with your spouse. Tell about what you experienced and how you felt during the experience.
 - A particularly difficult day at work
 - A specific incident you faced and had trouble dealing with
 - A life-and-death situation you personally faced

With Your Spouse

1. Discuss your responses to the questions you answered on your own.
2. Decide on one practical step you can take to improve communication in your relationship. Write that step here:
3. Close your time by praying together. Ask God to give you the strength to make any needed changes that will increase oneness in your marriage.

Remember to take your calendar to the next session for Make a Date.

4 Shifting from “Society Guardian” to Family Member

warm-up

Choose two of the following questions; share your answers with the group.

- What qualities in your spouse first attracted you when you began dating?
- As you have lived together in marriage, what have you learned about your differences?
- In what ways do you operate better as a team than you would as individuals?

Project Report

Share one thing you learned from the HomeBuilders project from last session.

blueprints

False Identity

In a sense, the emergency service field is much like a family environment. Most first responders are united by a common set of circumstances and challenges that are unique to the profession. In many ways the work atmosphere has its own culture.

One result is that it becomes easy for first responders to view themselves primarily in their role as a “society guardian.” This is where many base their sense of identity and self-worth. At

some point, however, they need to be able to let go of the job so that they can truly be effective in a more important role—a family member. There are three important steps to shifting from society guardian to family member.

Step #1: Realize how much you need your family—and how much they need you.

1. Read Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. What insights regarding the value of teamwork in marriage do you draw from this passage?
2. When God brings two people together, part of His plan is that they would complete each other—meet each other’s needs. Describe some of the ways that your spouse has helped you grow and mature.
3. Read Proverbs 4:1–6. What does this passage say to you about how and why your children need you?

Step #2: Adjust your relational style when you leave the job.

4. When you encounter people from the general public, in the course of your work, how do you interact with them? (How do you talk to them? How do you expect them to respond to you?)

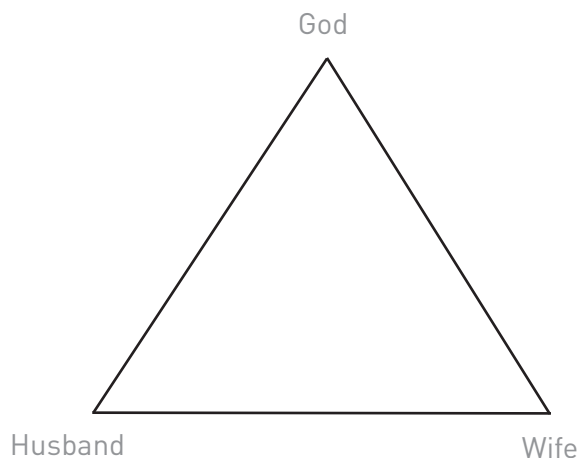
5. How can this style of relating to people spill over into how you relate to your spouse and children? If possible, give an example from your own experience.

6. What can we learn in the following passage about how we should treat others, including our spouse and children?

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
(Colossians 3:12–14)

Step #3: Bring God into your marriage.

Earlier we read in Ecclesiastes 4:12, "A threefold cord is not quickly broken." When God is the first and primary strand of a marriage, He can draw a husband and wife closer to each other, as they draw closer to Him.



We were created to have fellowship with God, but many have never understood how to establish this relationship. If you have never become a follower of Christ, be sure to read “Our Problems, God’s Answers” (page 36). If you are already a follower of Christ, a tremendous opportunity awaits you—greater oneness in marriage.

7. What things can a couple do to seek God together?

8. Describe how your participation in this study has improved the spiritual bond between you and your spouse.

9. How can you encourage each other, as husband and wife, to pursue a stronger relationship with God?

make a date

Set a time for you and your spouse to complete the HomeBuilders project together before the next group meeting. You will be asked at the next session to share an insight or experience from the project.

date _____ time _____

location _____

On Your Own

Answer the following questions.

- The following chart will help you learn more about the differences between you and your spouse, and how those differences help you complete each other. Put an X on the number that best describes you on each quality or trait. Circle the number that best describes your spouse.

Disciplined	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Impulsive
Stubborn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Flexible
Aggressive/Assertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Compliant/Passive
Infatuated Love	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Realistic Love
Task-Oriented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	People-Oriented
Pessimistic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Optimistic
Outgoing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Withdrawn
High Expectations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Low Expectations
About Marriage											About Marriage
Sympathetic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Insensitive
Decisive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Indecisive
Tense	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Relaxed
Spendthrift	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Scrooge
Emotionally Open	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Emotionally Closed
Good Self-Image	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Poor Self-Image
Critical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Gracious
Growing Spiritually	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Spiritually Stagnant
Heart for God	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Lukewarm to God
Idealistic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Realistic
Openly Affectionate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Reserved with Affection

With Your Spouse

1. Review the chart you filled out on your own and compare your answers.
2. In what areas did you most agree on this chart? In what areas did you most disagree?
3. What does this chart tell you about how God has brought you together to make you stronger as a team?
4. Share some memories of times when God used the strength of one of you to help, complete, or encourage the other.
5. Close your time in prayer, thanking God for how He uses each of you to complete the other.

where do you go from here?

We hope that you have benefited from this study in the HomeBuilders Couples Series and that your marriage and family will continue to grow as you submit to Jesus Christ and build according to His blueprints. We also hope that you will reach out to strengthen other marriages in your local church and community. Your influence is needed.

A favorite World War II story illustrates this point clearly.

The year was 1940. The French army had just collapsed under Hitler's onslaught. The Dutch had folded, overwhelmed by the Nazi regime. The Belgians had surrendered. And the British army was trapped on the coast of France in the channel port of Dunkirk.

Two hundred twenty thousand of Britain's finest young men seemed doomed to die, turning the English Channel red with their blood. The Fuehrer's troops, only miles away in the hills of France, didn't realize how close to victory they actually were.

Any attempt at rescue seemed futile in the time remaining. A thin British navy—the professionals—told King George VI that they could save 17,000 troops at best. The House of Commons was warned to prepare for “hard and heavy tidings.”

Politicians were paralyzed. The king was powerless. And the Allies could only watch as spectators from a distance. Then as the doom of the British army seemed imminent, a strange fleet appeared on the horizon of the English Channel—the wildest assortment of boats perhaps ever assembled in history. Trawlers, tugs, scows, fishing sloops, lifeboats, pleasure craft, smacks and coasters, sailboats, even the London fire-brigade flotilla. Ships manned by civilian volunteers—English fathers joining in the rescue of Britain's exhausted, bleeding sons.

William Manchester writes in his epic novel *The Last Lion* that what happened in 1940 at Dunkirk seems like a miracle. Not only were most of the British soldiers rescued but 118,000 other Allied troops as well.

Today the Christian home is much like those troops at Dunkirk—pressured, trapped, demoralized, and in need of help. The Christian community may be much like England—waiting for professionals to step in and save the family. But the problem is much too large for them to solve alone.

We need an all-out effort by men and women “sailing” to rescue the exhausted and wounded families. We need an outreach effort by common couples with faith in an uncommon God. For too long, married couples within the church have abdicated to those in full-time vocational ministry the privilege and responsibility of influencing others.

We challenge you to invest your lives in others, to join in the rescue. You and other couples around the world can team together to build thousands of marriages and families and, in doing so, continue to strengthen your own.

Be a HomeBuilder

Here are some practical ways you can make a difference in families today:

- Gather a group of four to seven couples and lead them through this HomeBuilders study. Consider challenging others in your church or community to form additional HomeBuilders groups.
- Commit to continue building families and marriages by doing another small-group study in the HomeBuilders Parenting Series or the HomeBuilders Couples Series.
- Consider using the *JESUS* film as an outreach. For more information contact FamilyLife at the number or website below.
- Host a dinner party. Invite families from your neighborhood to your home, and as a couple share your faith in Christ.
- If you have attended FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember getaway, consider offering to assist your pastor in counseling engaged couples, using the material you received.

For more information about these ministry opportunities, contact your local church or

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our problems, God's answers

Every couple has to deal with problems in marriage—communication problems, money problems, difficulties with sexual intimacy, and more. Learning how to handle these issues is important to cultivating a strong and loving relationship.

The Big Problem

One basic problem is at the heart of every other problem in marriage, and it's too big for any person to deal with on his or her own. The problem is separation from God. If you want to experience life and marriage the way they were designed to be, you need a vital relationship with the God who created you.

But sin separates us from God. Some try to deal with sin by working hard to become better people. They may read books on how to control anger, or they may resolve to stop cheating on their taxes, but in their hearts they know—we all know—that the sin problem runs much deeper than bad habits and will take more than our best behavior to overcome it. In reality, we have rebelled against God. We have ignored him and have decided to run our lives in a way that makes sense to us, thinking that our ideas and plans are better than his.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

What does it mean to “fall short of the glory of God”? It means that none of us has trusted and treasured God the way we should. We have sought to satisfy ourselves with other things and have treated them as more valuable than God. We have gone our own way. According to the Bible, we have to pay a penalty for our sin. We cannot simply do things the way we choose and hope it will be okay with God. Following our own plans leads to our destruction.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12)

For the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

The penalty for sin is that we are separated from God's love. God is holy, and we are sinful. No matter how hard we try, we cannot come up with some plan, like living a good life or even trying to do what the Bible says, and hope that we can avoid the penalty.

God's Solution to Sin

Thankfully, God has a way to solve our dilemma. He became a man through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a holy life in perfect obedience to God's plan. He also willingly died on a cross to pay our penalty for sin. Then He proved that He is more powerful than sin or death by rising from the dead. He alone has the power to overrule the penalty for our sin.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:8)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 6:23)

The death and resurrection of Jesus have fixed our sin problem. He has bridged the gap between God and us. He is calling us to come to Him and to give up our flawed plans for running our lives. He wants us to trust God and His plan.

Accepting God's Solution

If you recognize that you are separated from God, He is calling you to confess your sins. All of us have made messes of our lives because we have stubbornly preferred our ideas and plans to His. As a result, we deserve to be cut off from God's love and His care for us. But God has promised that if we will acknowledge that we have rebelled against His plan, He will forgive us and will fix our sin problem.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

When the Bible talks about receiving Christ, it means we acknowledge that we are sinners and that we can't fix the problem ourselves. It means we turn away from our sin. And it means we trust Christ to forgive our sins and to make us the kind of people He wants us to be. It's not enough to intellectually believe that Christ is the Son of God. We must trust in Him and His plan for our lives by faith, as an act of the will.

Are things right between you and God, with Him and His plan at the center of your life? Or is life spinning out of control as you seek to make your own way?

If you have been trying to make your own way, you can decide today to change. You can turn to Christ and allow Him to transform your life. All you need to do is talk to Him and tell Him what is stirring in your mind and in your heart. If you've never done this, consider taking the steps listed here:

- Do you agree that you need God? Tell God.
- Have you made a mess of your life by following your own plan? Tell God.
- Do you want God to forgive you? Tell God.
- Do you believe that Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead gave Him the power to fix your sin problem and to grant you the free gift of eternal life? Tell God.
- Are you ready to acknowledge that God's plan for your life is better than any plan you could come up with? Tell God.
- Do you agree that God has the right to be the Lord and Master of your life? Tell God.

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. (Isaiah 55:6)

Here is a suggested prayer:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.

The Christian Life

For the person who is a follower of Christ—a Christian—the penalty for sin is paid in full. But the effect of sin continues throughout our lives.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

(Romans 7:19)

The effects of sin carry over into our marriages as well. Even Christians struggle to maintain solid, God-honoring marriages. Most couples eventually realize they can't do it on their own. But with God's help, they can succeed. To learn more, read the extended version of this article at FamilyLife.com/Resources.

leader's notes

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about leading a homebuilders group

What is the leader's job?

Your role is more of a facilitator than a teacher. A teacher usually does most of the talking and instructing whereas a facilitator encourages people to think and to discover what Scripture says. You should help group members feel comfortable and keep things moving forward.

Is there a structure to the sessions?

Yes, each session is composed of the following categories:

Warm-Up (5–10 minutes): The purpose of Warm-Up is to help people unwind from a busy day and get to know one another better. Typically the Warm-Up starts with an exercise that is fun but also introduces the topic of the session.

Blueprints (45–50 minutes): This is the heart of the study when people answer questions related to the topic of study and look to God's Word for understanding. Some of the questions are to be discussed between spouses and others with the whole group.

HomeBuilders Project (60 minutes): This project is the unique application that couples will work on between the group meetings. Each HomeBuilders project contains two sections: (1) On your own—questions for husbands and wives to answer individually and (2) With your spouse—an opportunity for couples to share their answers with each other and to make application in their lives.

What is the best setting and time schedule for this study?

This study is designed as a small-group, home Bible study. However, it can be adapted for more structured settings like a Sunday school class. Here are some suggestions for using this study in various settings:

In a small group

To create a friendly and comfortable atmosphere, we recommend you do this study in a home setting. In many cases the couple that leads the study also serves as host, but sometimes involving another couple as host is a good idea. Choose the option you believe will work best for your group, taking into account factors such as the number of couples participating and the location.

Each session is designed as a sixty-minute study, but we recommend a ninety-minute block of time to allow for more relaxed conversation and refreshments. Be sure to keep in mind one of the cardinal rules of a small group: good groups start *and* end on time. People's time is valuable, and your group will appreciate your respecting this.

In a Sunday school class

If you want to use the study in a class setting, you need to adapt it in two important ways: (1) You should focus on the content of the Blueprints section of each session. That is the heart of the session. (2) Many Sunday school classes use a teacher format instead of a small-group format. If this study is used in a class setting, the class should adapt to a small-group dynamic. This will involve an interactive, discussion-based format and may also require a class to break into multiple smaller groups.

What is the best size group?

We recommend from four to seven couples (including you and your spouse). If more people are interested than you can accommodate, consider asking someone to lead a second group. If you have a large group, you may find it beneficial to break into smaller subgroups on occasion. This helps you cover the material in a timely fashion and allows for optimum interaction and participation within the group.

What about refreshments?

Many groups choose to serve refreshments, which helps create an environment of fellowship. If you plan to include refreshments, here are a couple of suggestions: (1) For the first session (or two) you should provide the refreshments. Then involve the group by having people sign up to bring them on later dates. (2) Consider starting your group with a short time of informal fellowship and refreshments (15–20 minutes). Then move into the study. If couples are late, they miss only the

food and don't disrupt the study. You may also want to have refreshments available again at the end of your meeting to encourage fellowship. But remember to respect the group members' time by ending the session on schedule and allowing anyone who needs to leave to do so gracefully.

What about child care?

Groups handle this differently, depending on their needs. Here are a couple of options you may want to consider:

- Have people be responsible for making their own arrangements.
- As a group, hire someone to provide child care, and have all the children watched in one location.

What about prayer?

An important part of a small group is prayer. However, as the leader, you need to be sensitive to people's comfort level with praying in front of others. Never call on people to pray aloud unless you know they are comfortable doing this. You can take creative approaches, such as modeling prayer, calling for volunteers, and letting people state their prayers in the form of finishing a sentence. A helpful tool in a group is a prayer list. You should lead the prayer time, but allow another couple to create, update, and distribute prayer lists as their ministry to the group.

Find additional help and suggestions for leading your HomeBuilders group at FamilyLife.com/Resources.

about the leader's notes

The sessions in this study can be easily led without a lot of preparation time. However, accompanying Leader's Notes have been provided to assist you when needed. The categories within the Leader's Notes are as follows:

Objectives

The Objectives focus on the issues that will be presented in each session.

Notes and Tips

This section provides general ideas, helps, and suggestions about the session. You may want to create a checklist of things to include in each session.

Blueprints Commentary

This section contains notes that relate to the Blueprints questions. Not all Blueprints questions will have accompanying commentary notes. The number of the commentary note corresponds to the number of the question it relates to. (For example, the Leader's Notes, session 1, number 5 in the Blueprints Commentary section relates back to session 1, Blueprints, question 5.)

session one

your marriage *is* different

Objectives

Recognizing what unique details make a first-responder marriage different from other marriages is the key to choosing oneness over isolation in these areas.

In this session couples will

- Share individual challenges they're facing
- Evaluate their marriage expectations
- Identify times when they can choose unity over seclusion

Notes and Tips

1. If you have not already done so, you will want to read the information “About Leading a HomeBuilders Group” and “About the Leader’s Notes,” on pages 41–44.
2. As part of the first session, you may want to review with the group some ground rules (see Welcome to HomeBuilders, page 5).
3. At this first meeting collect names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of the group members. You may want to make a list that you can copy and distribute to the entire group.
4. Because this is the first session, make a special point to tell the group about the importance of the HomeBuilders project. Encourage each couple to “make a date” for a time before the next meeting to complete the project. Mention that you will ask about this during Warm-Up at the next session.
5. You may want to offer the closing prayer instead of asking others to pray aloud. Many people are uncomfortable praying in front of others, and unless you already know your group well, it may be wise to venture slowly into various methods of prayer. Regardless of how you decide to close, you should serve as a model.
6. If there is room for more, you may want to remind that group that because this study is just underway, they can still invite another couple to join the group.

Blueprints Commentary

Here is some additional information about various Blueprints questions. (Note: The numbers correspond to the Blueprints questions they relate to.) If you share any of these points, be sure to do so in a manner that does not stifle discussion by making yourself the authority with the real answers. Begin your comments by saying things like, “One thing I notice in this passage is . . .” or “I think another reason for this is . . .”

7. Some additional ways the job demands of a first responder puts pressure on a marriage include the following:
 - After working for prolonged periods in a state of heightened awareness and energy, it’s often difficult for first responders to “come down” when they are at home. Sometimes it takes a day or two.
 - Constant handling of violent, abusive, or intoxicated people can cause first responders to become desensitized to normal, everyday problems at home. An injury to a child, for example, might seem minor to the first responder, and his response may not be appropriate.
 - First responders often assume a position of stern, absolute authority when dealing with the public. It’s not easy to soften their relational style when they return home.
 - Over time, first responders can allow their frustrations and anger to build up inside, causing depressions, fits of rage, isolation, etc.
 - First responders may develop close friendships on the job, but may not feel the same bond with their spouses.
 - It is not uncommon to find high rates of infidelity among first responders because of what they are exposed to at work, the ease of finding other partners, and the close bonds they may form with coworkers of the opposite sex.

session two

making your marriage a priority

Objective

Apart from each spouse's relationship with Him, God intended for the marriage relationship to take precedence over all other relationships.

In this session couples will

- Identify what relational aspects draw people together
- Study God's design for marriage priority
- Evaluate their relationship in light of God's marriage priority standards

Notes and Tips

1. You may wish to have extra study guides and Bibles available for those who come to the session without them or for any new group members.
2. If someone joins the group for the first time in this session, give a brief summary of the main points of session 1. Also be sure to introduce people who do not know each other. You may want to have each new couple answer the Warm-Up question from session 1.
3. If refreshments are planned for this session, make sure arrangements for them have been made.
4. If your group has decided to use a prayer list, make sure this is covered.
5. You may want to ask for a volunteer or two to close the session in prayer. Check ahead of time with a couple of people you think might be comfortable praying aloud.

Blueprints Commentary

4. Friendships will enrich your life and your marriage. Friends can provide companionship, counsel, and perspective in different ways than a spouse. It's also important for a couple to be part of a community of people who help each other in times of need.
5. First responders are routinely exposed to a side of life that the general public views far less frequently. A natural camaraderie forms between first responders as they share these

experiences. In many cases, they save each other's lives. It is natural for them to discuss these experiences and feelings with a partner or coworker, creating a bond of friendship that is often stronger than those in other professions.

6. The first thing to note in Genesis 2:18–25 is the importance God places on marriage. He was intimately involved in creating a man and a woman suited for each other. This is the first human institution He sets up, and He does it immediately after the Creation. The phrase, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” speaks of the need for a husband and wife to make their relationship a higher priority than other relationships and of the special bond they can enjoy. Marriage marks the formation of a new family.
7. Each individual needs to be willing to give up a good amount of independence in order to give the marriage the time and emotional energy it requires. (For some, this will be a bigger struggle than for others.) You need to fight against your own natural selfishness, which constantly urges you to meet your own needs first; instead you need to focus on meeting your spouse's needs. These principles will be lived out in many practical ways—from how you spend your free time to how you divide household chores. It will mean saying no to some things so that you can say yes to your spouse.

session three

improving communication

Objectives

Clear communication isn't just important on the job of a first responder; clear, intentional communication is also a must in any successful marriage relationship.

In this session couples will

- Discuss what components make up effective communication
- Commit to not withhold even positive information from one another
- Commit to work together to resolve barriers to communication

Notes and Tips

1. By the third session your group members should know one another well enough to feel relaxed and comfortable in talking—at least about the external aspects of marriages. This session probes some sensitive areas, exploring ways many spouses are hurting right now. Some people may have difficulty expressing these hurts to their spouses or the group, and some people may have difficulty hearing these hurts expressed by their spouses. **Your role here—providing acceptance and support without pressuring anyone or taking sides—is crucial.**
2. Remember the importance of starting and ending on time.
3. You may want to take some notes right after the meeting to help evaluate how things went. Ask yourself questions such as, Did everyone participate? Is there anyone I should make a special effort to follow up with before the next session?
4. Make sure that you and your spouse are completing the HomeBuilders project weekly as models to the group.

Blueprints Commentary

1. First responders need to communicate quickly, directly, forcefully, and authoritatively. They need to know when to speak and when to listen. They need to hear and understand each other clearly and immediately. They need to use words, phrases, and commands that everyone involved understands.

5. The opposite of James 1:19b is how we most often respond (slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry). In a marriage, however, both spouses need to be committed to create an atmosphere at home where each has the chance to be heard and understood. Unresolved conflict leads to greater and greater isolation in a relationship. The husband and wife become fearful, angry, and bitter.

session four

shifting from “society guardian” to family member

Objectives

First responders need to be sensitive to how the needs of their family are very different from the needs of the community that they protect on the job every day.

In this session couples will

- Define their roles within the family setting
- Discuss how important each role is to the family
- Share tips on how to change relational styles from job to home

Notes and Tips

1. Congratulations! With the completion of this session, you will have led your group through an entire HomeBuilders study!
2. It is crucial that you approach this final session as an opportunity to encourage couples to take specific steps beyond this series to keep their marriages growing. While this HomeBuilders Couples study has great value itself, gradually people will likely return to their previous plans of living unless they commit to a plan for carrying on the progress made. Continuing effort is required for people to initiate and maintain new directions in their marriage. As one option this group might be interested in doing another study from this series.
3. As couples discuss the topic of a first responder’s relational style, be careful to not allow the conversation to turn into a blame game. Involve both spouses in discussing how fulfilling their individual role is vital to building a strong family.
4. You and your spouse may want to write notes of thanks and encouragement to the couples in your group this week for completing the study. Let them know you’ll continue praying for them.
5. As part of this session, you may want to devote some time to planning one more meeting—a party to celebrate the completion of this study!

Blueprints Commentary

4. To fulfill their responsibilities effectively, first responders often need to assume a position of stern authority. They expect the public to obey their words instantly (this is especially true with police officers).
5. They may expect their family members to obey them instantly, without discussion, and may appear to be harsh and uncaring.

more tools for leaders

Looking for more ways to help people build their marriages and families?

Thank you for your efforts to help people develop their marriages and families using biblical principles. We recognize the influence that one person—or couple—can have on another, and we'd like to help you multiply your ministry.

FamilyLife is pleased to offer a wide range of resources in various formats. Visit us online at FamilyLife.com, where you will find information about

- getaways and events, featuring Weekend to Remember, offered in cities throughout the United States;
- multimedia resources for small groups, churches, and community networking;
- interactive products for parents, couples, small-group leaders, and one-to-one mentors; and
- an assortment of blogs, forums, and other online connections.

who is familylife?

FamilyLife is a nonprofit, Christian organization focused on the mission of helping every home become a godly home. Believing that family is the foundation of society, FamilyLife works in more than a hundred countries around the world to build healthier marriages and families through marriage getaways and events, small-group curriculum, *FamilyLife Today* radio broadcasts, Hope for Orphans® orphan care ministry, the Internet, and a wide range of marriage and family resources.



Dennis and Barbara Rainey are cofounders of FamilyLife. Authors of over twenty-five books and hundreds of articles, they are also popular conference speakers and radio hosts. With six grown children and eighteen grandchildren, the Rainey's love to encourage couples in building godly marriages and families.