

Refresh. Renew. Revive. Repeat.



Your Marriage Retreat

**7 Date Nights to
a Thriving Marriage**

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MASTER OF FAMILY THERAPY



YOUR MARRIAGE RETREAT

7 Date Nights to a Thriving Marriage



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my husband, parents, and kids, who have stood by me through every crazy idea I ever had. You are my strength and my backbone. You have given me the courage to pursue my God-given passions in life and for that I am FOREVER grateful. I love you all dearly.

To my kids, especially, as you grow and mature, may you always have the resources at your hands and use them to never let fear stop you from pursuing and living your God-given dreams.

I pray blessings over you in all that you put your hands to now and in your future.

You are my heartbeat.

And I pray blessings upon every married couple that face your struggles head. Know this, by placing the reigns of your marriage in God's Hands, as you reach for the tools to help you thrive, you will win at this. For the enemy seeks to destroy you at every turn, but

IF GOD IS FOR YOU WHO CAN BE AGAINST YOU?

Thank you for choosing to invest your hard-earned money in me.

A BIG THANK YOU

To God above all else for all of the blessings he bestows on us daily.

To my sweet sister and brother-in-love, Shea & Marc Jackson, for allowing me to use of their beautiful wedding photograph, taken by Teresa Congiolo of Dayton, Tennessee, on the cover of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Special Instructions

How do you do this marriage retreat on your own? I have created for you, 7 Date Nights that you can do on your own.

This retreat is very flexible. You will see in the outline that the retreat is divided up into 7 different topical dates.

1. Creating Brilliant Habits in the Name of Love (Love Languages and Healthy Habits)
2. Let's Talk About It (Communication and Conflict Resolution)
3. Getting to the Other Side of Forgiveness (Forgiveness and Moving On)
4. Building Trust (Trust and Boundaries)
5. Exploring Intimacy (Nurturing Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical Intimacy)
6. It's All About the Fun (Fun and Games)
7. Creating a Marriage Mission

The last chapter in the book is a bonus chapter that I have included. It's a lot of resources I have personally used in my own marriage, in my therapy business with other couples. It's full of tools I've found helpful along the way. Enjoy!

You should be able to complete each session in 2 to 3 hours. I would encourage you to clear at least 3 hours per date to allow plenty of time to do everything.

You can do each date night once a week, once a month, or even set aside a whole weekend and do an intensive! I got a plan for that too!

You can do it at home, or you can make it a real retreat away from family, business, pets, and expectations by booking a night or two away at a hotel! With the exception of a few dates, it can all be done in your home.

I've included suggested itineraries to give you some ideas. Follow them, tweak them, or make your schedule on your own. It's completely up to you!

Throughout this retreat, I'm going to give you some good skill-building concepts and tools to use in your relationship. I'm going to help you potentially change some expectations about how you see your husband or wife and what you value most in your relationship. It's important to come to terms with the concept that if you want this fantastic marriage, you are going to have to work for it. Sometimes the work is a lot of fun and other times, well... not so much. There will be lots of opportunities on your marriage journey to invest in each other. Take advantage of those times, and most importantly, create fun for each other.

Each date/session includes at least 1 to 2 teaching sections, a couple's activity to complete, another teaching session and then there is a homework challenge that you should complete between each date night.

I know there is a lot of information in here, but all the pieces fit together to reinforce what you are learning. Just remember the more intentional you are in practicing, the less weird something feels and the more likely it will become natural at some point.

Now here are a few rules I'm going to encourage you to follow. Yes, I know what you are thinking...Rules. Awesome. But they are necessary. 😊

1. No Interruptions.

That means, no interruptions. I get if you have kids and there's an emergency, but we all know those are rare. Don't do business during this time. Don't text friends and family during this time. Don't be looking at social media. Take advantage of this time and go all in.

2. Be engaged in this process and in between sessions.

I hope you pick a time to do the sessions when you are not exhausted. That will be counterproductive if you are too tired to stay awake. You paid me your hard-earned money because you want a more enriched marriage. I know there's value in it for you to get everything that you paid for. Trust me in this. The information, exercises, and resources are only a piece of the equation. You got to follow through and do the work.

3. Be intentional.

Life will pass you by if you are not intentional about things. The things that you are going to learn across these next 5 sessions will be very valuable to you if you practice and put them into place in your lives. Your hard work pays off when you stay committed to each other and this process.

4. One final rule to recognize that you are both invested in your marriage retreat experience.

Now, I get it...investment may look different for both of you. I'm going to generalize here for a minute and I realize that generalizations are not always 100% accurate, so bear with me for a second and just chunk it to the side if this doesn't fit your situation...

I realize that there may be couples where one person may feel like he or she is more invested in the marriage than the other partner. I'm going to challenge you to recognize and acknowledge that you both showed up to do these lessons. You both committed this time. Let's look at each other with the acknowledgement that you both want a more enriched marriage. You value it. You set it aside, and you're here. That's investment.

That's it. Those are the 4 basic rules. They will stand throughout every date night.

And finally, take the time now to decide on your format and put the times in your calendar as sacred time. Make sure to get the kids squared away with a sitter, or at a friend's house, so that there will be no interruptions or distractions.

I want you to take some time and look over the possible itineraries and then decide how and when you will complete the date night sessions.

I want you to just go all in. You've invested the money. You're investing the time. So now I want you to invest your efforts and energy.

So look at each other and say, "Let's do it!!"

Awesome! Now, get started!

Potential Weekend Retreat Intensive Schedule

Day 1 (Evening)

3:00-4:00 - **Check-in** to your hotel or create your “hotel” atmosphere at home

4:00-6:00 - **Date Night #1 Creating Brilliant Habits in the Name of Love**

(instead of dinner do a snack or dessert)

6:00-9:00 - **Date Night #2 Communications and Conflict Resolution** (Dinner)

Day 2

9:00-12:00 - **Date #3 Getting to the Other Side of Forgiveness** (Breakfast)

12:00-1:00 - BREAK

1:00-4:00 – **Date #4 Do What You Say You Will Do** (Lunch)

4:00-5:00-BREAK

5:00-8:00- **Date #5 All About the Intimacy** (Dinner)

8:00-11:00-ENJOY YOUR NIGHT

Day 3

8:00-11:00 – **Date #6 Fun and Games** (Breakfast)

11:00-12:00- BREAK

12:00-2:00 – **Date #7 Your Marriage Mission and Bonus Activity: Now on to Forever** (Lunch)

CHAPTER 2

Date #1: Creating Brilliant Habits in the Name of Love

Suggested Schedule:

Dinner Conversation & Eating: Up to 1 hour

The Thing About Love Languages: 20 minutes

Couple's Activity: up to 30 minutes

Daily Attempts for Connection: 15 minutes

Homework: All week long!

Prep: Get all dressed up for each other and grab your conversation starters. You will also need access to the internet for the Couple's Activity.

Dinner Plans: Either go out for dinner or set the stage for a fancy romantic dinner at home by cooking together or picking up take-out. Tonight is all about love.

Conversation Starters

1. Describe what love is to you.
2. When you were growing up, how did you see love expressed in your home?
3. Was affection openly expressed in your home? How did that shape your views on affection in your marriage relationship?
4. When you were growing up, how were birthdays and holidays celebrated?
5. How was family time managed in your home growing up? What kinds of things did you do? Was family time done consistently and frequently, or randomly?
6. As you were growing up, what kinds of verbal encouragement did you hear? Who did it come from most often?
7. What has been the best gift you have ever given your spouse?
8. What are one or two things you have done to make your spouse feel loved?
9. What is one action that your spouse has done in the past that has made you feel most loved?
10. What can your spouse genuinely say to you that would make your heart flutter?
11. What is one gift that your spouse can give to you that would make you feel their love?
12. What is your favorite form of non-sexual physical touch?
13. What does quality time with your spouse mean to you? What do you do during this time?
14. What is one way that your spouse serves you?
15. What is one way that you have served your spouse?

The Deal About Love Languages

I can't think of a better place to start than with talking about love. I hope that as you went through the conversation starters that you learned something new about each other. If you did, make sure to keep a note about it.

I would encourage you to study your spouse and keep notes about their likes and dislikes, especially when they change over time. Remember when you first met, and you began chatting and asking each other questions to learn about each other? You want to continue to that process. So, keep notes when you stumble upon something, especially if you didn't expect it to be true.

When we think about love, the first thing that usually pops into most brains are those fluttery feelings we feel in new relationships. The starry-eyed looks, the day-dreaming episodes when I just can't wait to see my person again, the excitement when I lay my eyes on them, and all of those ooey-goey emotions. Most would refer to this as puppy-love or infatuation, but not real love.

Emotions typically fade over time. Really. They do. I'm not trying to burst the love bubble or be unromantic but go with me for a minute to look at Andrew.

Andrew wakes up in a fantastic mood. He's getting ready to go to a very important meeting that could potentially be career-changing and boost him to the next level. He leaves early and feeling confident, turns up the music as he drives down the road jamming to his favorite song. But then something happens as he's driving down the interstate. Smoke starts pouring out of from under his hood and he sees the temperature gauge inching its way to hot. Thankfully, avoiding all the traffic, he was able to safely pull over to the emergency lane.

To his frustration, his radiator hose has blown. It's an hour before the tow truck can get to him to pick his car up, and he's still 45 minutes away from the office and only an hour and a half before this oh-so-important-career-changing meeting. He frantically tries to brainstorm his options to get him to the meeting on time but comes up empty-handed. He reluctantly calls his boss, who is also pretty frustrated at this point, and he is told that he should either be at the meeting or he doesn't have a job any longer. If you were in his shoes, how would you feel as the time ticks by, knowing you just lost your job, your car has broken down, and there is nothing more you can do about it?

If you are Andrew, where are your emotions now? Okay so your emotions went from an excited high to a devastated sadness in the course of a few hours.

So, what makes us think that the emotions we feel in the “honeymoon” stage should last a lifetime with all of ups and downs that are normal in marriage? That expectation doesn’t make sense at all but there are so many couples who think something is wrong in their marriage because they don’t have butterflies when they think of or see their spouse.

Let’s go back to the emotional scenario I just gave you. What do you do now? Do you give up and stop trying since you lost your job? Maybe for a bit, but at some point, you figure out you have to keep going. You start by fixing up your resume, exploring your options, looking for openings, and dealing with everything you have to deal with to find a new career.

This is representative of the same thing you do in marriage when things don’t turn out the way you think it should. You keep trying. You do everything you know to do. Emotions are fleeting.

To figure out what love is, we are going to consult the Bible and go with that definition. Let us look at what love says to do.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. ... ~1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)

But what if you try all of these things and your spouse doesn’t reciprocate? Let’s see what the Bible says to do then.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ~Matthew 5:44-47 (NIV)

Okay. Ouch. That was pretty harsh. I know. I’m very sorry. I really am. Don’t get me wrong, if you are in an abusive relationship, your safety is most important. I’m talking about non-abusive marriages here.

Our relationships are cyclical. When we are consistent in doing what we know to do, the hope is that our spouse will reciprocate, but of course, you can’t manipulate or force your spouse into doing what you want them to do. Love isn’t controlling your spouse. On the contrary, love grants freedom!

Dr. Gary Chapman has an amazing book collection on the topic of love languages. You should really read some of them for a more in-depth overview but I'm going to give you the simplistic version according to Christi. 😊

Essentially, what he discovered is that there are 5 emotional love languages

1. Quality Time
2. Acts of Service
3. Physical Touch
4. Words of Affirmation
5. Gifts

Dr. Chapman says that when our love tank is full, we feel loved and valued in our relationship. We are going to talk more about this concept on Date #6, but for now just know that the love tank is the measure of how we feel loved.

I have a story to tell you.

Over the years of my marriage, my husband has given me some fantastic gifts. Not necessarily expensive, but so incredibly thoughtful. He has always put so much into his gift-giving, not just in the gift itself, but even into the presentation. I have always loved his gifts. I really have! Another thing about my husband is that he steps up and takes over when I'm down for the count. During 3 of my pregnancies, I was placed on total bedrest by the 4th month. He had to take over completely. I have had back issues that put me out for days or even weeks! He took over without a second thought. He has always been one to help me with household chores. We usually tackle most all of our responsibilities as a team. I truly appreciate all that he has done for me over the last 26 years.

But there was one time that I can recall that really spoke volumes to me. About 9 years ago, I had a car accident and had broken my right wrist, which of course is my dominant hand. Talk about a frustrating experience! Anyway, I am horrible about taking pain medication because I don't like the way it makes me feel. He was insistent that I took it every 4 to 6 hours the day after my accident so the pain medication could stay in front of the pain.

His plan was to watch *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy with the kids that day to keep everybody occupied and let me rest. They LOVED this trilogy. It's one of his all-time favorites, and he has roped the kids into his movie love. That afternoon, I began waking up from being knocked out

for a few hours, and I heard him say to the kids, “Hold on. We have to stop this while I get Mom her lunch and next dose of meds.”

I kind of dozed back off, and a few minutes later, he was bringing me soup, a drink, and meds. He sat down on the bed and talked to me while I ate, and when I was done eating, he took my dishes and tucked me back in to bed. I was knocked back out in no time.

Weeks later, as I was driving to my office, I was thinking about love languages. I know, it might just be a marriage therapist thing I was doing. Whatever. Anyway, I was thinking about it in the context of my own marriage. And that moment when he stopped his most favorite movie to serve me soup and take care of me was absolutely a definitive example of meeting my love language.

I had an epiphany in that moment and realized that my top two love languages were quality time and acts of service. So, I began thinking through what his might be and came to the conclusion that his are physical touch and of course, gifts. Bingo! Gifts were just never my thing. I appreciated them, and I absolutely love to give them but over the years if money was tight, it was easy for me to say, “Let’s just not do gifts this year” or “Can we just do a \$15 limit this time?” It was easy for me because it’s only about the thoughtfulness behind the gift. For my husband it was the thoughtfulness, the gift itself, the presentation, and EVERYTHING about the gift giving process to communicate to me his love. See the difference? He was showing me love in the way he thought I would receive it.

He didn’t understand that HE was my gift. His time chatting with me was my gift. His love was being communicated to me over the years through his help, service, and time! What was I doing to communicate to him my love though?

Yeah... that was a heart-wrenching moment for me.

How do you get your tank filled up? I wish I could tell you but I can’t. I’m fixing to give you some tools in a Couple’s Activity so you can discover the answers for yourselves.

Use my example and remember that what makes one spouse feel love is not ALWAYS the same as what may make the other feel loved. Of course, you may be one of the fortunate ones who speak the same language. I hope you are!!

If your top love languages are different from your spouses, that is okay. It just means you have to be intentional in showing love in the language that your spouse will understand best. You never know what you will unlock when you start doing new things.

Couple's Activity

Go online to <http://www.5lovelanguages.com/profile/> and each of you take the love language test.

Afterwards, share your results with each other and make a note somewhere you can refer to from time to time.

Read through the descriptions of all of the love languages it gives you but pay special attention to yours and your spouse's top two. Don't discount the rest though.

Were there any surprises?

How are you the same?

How are you different?

How can you be intentional in showing love to your spouse from this day moving forward?

My Love Languages

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My Spouse's Love Languages

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Move on to Creating Brilliant Habits.

Creating Brilliant Habits

I know what you might be thinking, creating brilliant habits doesn't sound quite so exciting. You might be right, but it's an important part of your marriage relationship.

We tend to develop patterns of relations in our marriage. Some are good and some are... not so good. Wouldn't you rather create intentional good habits rather than allow bad relationship habits to creep in and take over?

Absolutely! I'm going to help you with this by giving you some guidance in creating not just good habits, but brilliant habits.

We create habits or routines all the time in our morning and evening rituals, spiritual life, food, careers, and even with our kids. So why in the world wouldn't we create good habits in our marriage?

You accomplish this by planning the habits and following through.

Here are Six areas to begin incorporating good habits in your routine.

Establish a Routine of Communication.

1. It's important that you talk daily. Give yourselves at least 15 to 20 minutes a day of sharing about the good and bad of your day. Do it whenever it's convenient for you. For example, this is a great dinnertime conversation because your kids can include thoughts about their own days.
2. It's important to also schedule a more serious meeting every few weeks for discussing the important issues that arise during the week that need to be dealt with, such as financial planning and schedules.
3. Sending short texts throughout the day is also a great way to connect and share with your spouse that you are thinking about them.
4. Sharing about a scripture that has been on your heart that day is also a great way to open a spiritual dialogue, but to also express vulnerability, and therefore bring connection to you both.

Establish a Spiritual Routine.

You have to find what works for you and your schedule. Don't try to make a square peg fit into a round hole. It will just get you frustrated and bring up feelings of guilt.

1. Take a few minutes and pray together, at the start of the day if you can. There have been times in our marriage, due to work schedules that this was not possible. We were simply people passing in the night. One of the things that we have done from time to time is to text a prayer over each other. This was really meaningful for us because, at a time that we struggled to connect, I could read over his words and feel his presence even when he couldn't be there.
2. If you can't fit a daily couple's devotional time into your routine, try a weekly couple's devotional time. The point is to share common ground and work on applying the things you learn from scripture to your lives.
3. Serve together in the community, with your church, or be active in a small group of like-minded adults. This accomplishes a few things. It gives you a common ground to work on together and it helps you by being around other couples too.

Establish a Financial Routine.

I know. I know. Who really wants to do this? BUT, finances are one of the biggest topics in couple's therapy and divorce court. Let that sink in for a minute. It is so incredibly important that you find agreement and work together on such a hot topic.

1. Schedule the dreaded financial meeting. Share your concerns. Brainstorm your options. Each of you give a little where you can. Work together. You are a team.
2. Be accountable for your budget and spending. I have found a wealth of resources on Pinterest with free printables to help us stay accountable for everything from daily spending to what bills have gotten paid so far this month. There are easy strategies that you can put in place to help you here. I have placed some helpful apps and websites in the Resource List at the end of this book. Check them out.
3. Agree to get out of debt. This is a big one for a lot of people. Everyone has a difference of opinion about what is acceptable debt and what is not. Debt creates problems for couples, especially when it's out of balance. If you carry a lot of debt, it may be because you are living above your means and need to have a moment of clarity about what your goals are before going forward.

It says in **Proverbs 22:7 (NIV)**, ***"The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender."***

There is so much truth in that verse. Dave Ramsey has some great resources on this topic. We learned so much by going through Financial Peace University.

Establish a Physical Routine.

1. Be intentional about non-sexual touch every single day. A nice long hug, a kiss every time you greet each other, a backrub or a foot rub, holding hands, sitting close while watching television are all great examples of non-sexual touch. Of course, non-sexual touch can (and sometimes does) lead to sexual touch, but it doesn't have to. Often times one partner will actually shy away from non-sexual touch because there is an unspoken expectation that it will lead to sex. Let it go. I want you to focus on non-sexual touch.
2. Be intentional in having sex. Yes, I said it. You have to decide what kind of frequency is acceptable between the two of you and make the adjustments. The Bible is pretty clear on this one too. I'm not going to pull out the scripture because I'm going to guess you already are aware of it. The scripture says that our bodies are not our own but belongs to our spouse.

If you are too tired at the end of the day, then plan it for when you aren't too tired. If you don't ever have time, then make time. If you don't feel "into it" then change those thought patterns and get yourself "into it" for your spouse. It's an opportunity for sacrificial love, at its best! If you don't want to have all the "planned" sex, then don't. Have some spontaneous and some planned. You get to do that. You are married. ☺

Establish a Self-Care Routine.

This one gets so overlooked. How can you consistently give to others when you are depleted?

1. Take care of your health. Get enough sleep. Eat food that is good for you. Drink a lot of water. Get exercise in your life in some way.
2. Relax. Take 15 minutes for yourself at some point in your day so that you can just sit and breathe. Do something you enjoy, soak in some sunshine outside, or take a power nap. It's up to you.
3. Have a hobby that you can participate in and do on a monthly basis. It gives you something to look forward to during the month and gives you a break from life. This is a great outlet to do with other friends. For example: Go play golf, go to a painting class, or a cake decorating class, or join a Bible study group with people at church.

Establish a Dating Routine.

1. Go on consistently planned date nights. Ideally every week, but at a minimum, every month. I have heard so many couples say, “We can’t do that because we don’t have the money.” Do free things. A picnic in your living room, backyard, or at the park are all free.
2. Get creative. “We don’t have a babysitter. I don’t trust anyone to keep Junior.” I empathize with you. I really, really do. But, if you have a church home that you love, you could probably find someone to trust Junior with who will love him for just a couple of hours. OR... have your date night at home after Junior goes to bed. I know, it’s not getting all fancied up and spending the night painting the town red, so to speak, but it accomplishes one of the reasons for date night, which is to connect with just the two of you for several hours of alone time.
3. Vary the date plans. Plan a few special ones every now and then. Have fun dates. Have romantic dates. Do something interactive. Stay home and have a board game marathon!

Date nights don’t have to cost a fortune, and they don’t have to be elaborate, but they should be consistent. You might have to be creative sometimes, but you can still make them happen. Later in the book, I will focus more attention on this topic. Well, every single chapter is a date!

Oh, and one final thought on creating brilliant habits, put your spouse first in everything. Always take a moment to consider them and their love language while creating intentional habits to pour into your relationship.

Homework time! Yay!

Homework Challenge

Remember that making demands suffocates love while true love gives freedom. Your homework this week is to consider how you might begin incorporating some of the suggestions above into your daily routine. Use this page to come up with your own ideas how you might go about adding brilliant habits to enrich your marriage.

Keep your spouse's love languages at the forefront of your mind this week as you plot and plan to be intentional in your marriage. Try one or two of the ways listed below or come up with your own.

1. Keep a written record of the words of affirmation you say to your spouse.
2. Set a goal to give your spouse a compliment. Record them so you don't duplicate. If you don't have a clue what to say, be observant of your spouse and as you watch tv or movies, make a mental note of the ones that make sense for your spouse.
3. Write a love letter to your spouse over the next few weeks.
4. Build up your spouse to your friends, parents, or kids.
5. Make a plan for your next date night.
6. Put down any distractions and devote time to listening to your spouse this week.

Complete this sentence for your spouse.

I feel most loved when you _____.

After a few weeks, ask for feedback. Accept the response and reassure that you will keep trying.

Together, discuss and list 1 habit (from each area) you can incorporate this month into your routine.

Communication _____

Physical _____

Financial _____

Spiritual _____

Self-Care _____

Dating _____

That's it for your preview! I hope you enjoyed Date Night #1!

If you are interested in purchasing the rest of the book, you can find it at SincerelyChristi.com/Your-Marriage-Retreat for a very reasonable price.

Don't hesitate to email me with any questions at Christi@SincerelyChristi.com and you can also find me on Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram too!

Facebook.com/SincerelyChristi

Pinterest.com/SincerelyChrsti

Instagram.com/SincerelyChristi