

# RESILIENCY

Married for eternity





# Tolerating Discomfort

The first aspect of marital resilience is the ability to tolerate discomfort. This happens a lot in married life – discomfort that is. Whether its just the hard work of caring for each other when over-loaded, **lack of sleep** in managing young (or older) children or being exposed to the annoying behaviours of our spouse, discomfort is part of every intimate relationship, including marriage.

We once had a conversation with a priest friend in his seventies who had just had a transfer from a parish. He was telling us how irritating he had found the parish secretary. He readily admitted that she was competent and nice enough, but that something about her just grated.

“I know it’s me”, he said. “but I’m just too old and I don’t have the energy to sort it out in therapy”.

Good on him for owning the issue (even if he chose not to confront it). We’ve both been in situations like this many times over our life. Even as children, there were other kids, we just didn’t like. Despite parents and teachers cajoling us to play together, it was always an unnatural friendship.

***Too often, when we interact with people we dislike, we blame them for it. We excuse ourselves and make their flaws or personality the culprit for our discomfort.***

One of the things that attracted us to our spouse and led us to fall in love was the fact that we felt so compatible and attuned to each other. We never dreamed that a few years into marriage our spouse would occasionally transform like the Incredible Hulk into the most annoying person in our life!

Yet, every one of the irksome habits and hurtful exchanges between us is an invitation: an invitation to grow in fortitude and forbearance. Just as we coach our kids to stick it out when they want to quit music lessons or give up on one of their subjects, we need to remind ourselves that how we react to these incidents are both character defining and opportunities for self-growth.

When our spouse is annoying, rather than hitting back, shutting down, leaving the room (or abandoning the marriage), **choose to stay present**. Even when it’s emotionally uncomfortable because we think our **spouse is being a jerk**, stay present.

Obviously, we’re not talking about abusive situations where staying present can be interpreted as permission to abuse. We’re talking about the vast majority of normal marriages, where the annoyance is part of ordinary interactions.

It’s this kind of staying power that builds personal forbearance and relational resilience. Having a foundation in Christ is important here: it helps us to stay grounded in our value and worth, which gives us confidence in resisting the temptation to quit.

So, learn how to **tolerate discomfort** and face into the issue. Like our priest friend, if we are honest and reflective, we often discover its more about us than it is about them.



# Rebound Capacity

An important aspect of resilience is our ability to rebound from setbacks. If we let a **setback overwhelm us** or look for an easy exit to the challenges in our life, we will likely do the same when we have challenges in our marriage.

I (Francine) remember a conversation with a mother at our son's school. Our son had just been placed into the second-grade cricket team and was deeply disappointed to have missed the firsts.

**Uncomfortable with his emotional distress**, I tried to console him by suggesting that the coach would probably be better in the seconds. This mother jumped in with confident advice to our son: "Don't give up, train hard, do your best and fight your way to the top".

*She was right. In trying to protect our son from disappointment (something that is impossible to do anyway), I was discouraging him from trying hard. Although well-intentioned, I was in fact disempowering him by teaching him to turn away from disappointment and challenge rather than embrace it.*

There will be many times in a couple's marriage when we hurt each other, sometimes very deeply. At challenging times like this, our **willingness to forgive** the other for their faults will determine whether our marriage thrives or deteriorates.

We also need to learn how to forgive ourselves for our own weaknesses – something few of us do well at but which is incredibly important. A failure to reconcile with our own limitations and sinfulness leads us either into self-condemnation and depression, or into anger and entitlement as we project our guilt onto others – usually our spouse.

Our rebound capacity depends on **optimism and hope**. It relies on a firmly established 'growth mentality' that sees setbacks as opportunities to improve and grow stronger.

One of the simplest ways we can build our rebound capacity is to maintain a bank of positive, **loving memories of our relationship**. Far from simple nostalgia, the practice of active memory building and memory recalling is a powerful strategy for nurturing personal optimism because it puts us in touch with our relationship at its best and strongest.

When our relationship is weak and fragile, that's exactly when we need to be reminded of the resilient strength that is presently dormant or hidden from our awareness.



# Boundaries and Checkpoints

A third and vital aspect for a resilient marriage is the building and maintaining of **boundaries and checkpoints**. We need to be clear with each other about what is acceptable in our relationship and what is not.

We remember reading in the press about a media interview with the wife of a prominent American politician. The politician was a committed Christian and devoted to his wife. He protected his marriage by having very specific boundaries. These included never consuming alcohol at social events unless his wife was present and never having after hour meetings alone with a female colleague.

Boundaries can be implicit or explicit. We all have implicit boundaries – expectations or rules that have never been explicitly voiced but which we assume the other knows and respects. These might relate to our recreational time, how much we spend on personal items, fidelity or decisions about work.

For example, we might assume that our spouse would consult us before accepting a work opportunity that had a significant impact on the family, but our spouse may assume that any pay rise would be welcomed and not in need of discussion.

Likewise, for checkpoints. For example, we might assume that our discretionary spending is ok up to a certain amount, but our spouse might have a very different amount in mind, especially if he or she earns more than we do.

***For boundaries to be effective in supporting our marital resilience, we need them to be specific and explicit.***

Having a conversation about our commitment to fidelity needs to specify what boundaries we want established for when we're apart.

Similarly, for our expectations for our career and lifestyle; when we leave our implicit expectations unexpressed, there's too much room for misunderstanding.



# Resiliency

## THE MARRIAGE BOX MYTH

Most people get married believing a myth.

They believe that marriage is a beautiful box full of things they have longed for... companionship, intimacy, friendship, etc.

The truth is that marriage at the start is an empty box.

You must put something in before you can take anything out.

There is no love in marriage.

Love is in people. And people put love in marriage.

There is no romance in marriage. You have to infuse it into your marriage.

A couple must learn the art and form the habit of giving, loving, serving, praising, of keeping the box full.

If you take out more than you put in, the box will be empty.

*(Written by Dr J Allan Peterson)*





**What are you doing to continue to grow your love relationship with each other?**

“Marriage truly is like an empty box. Many people get married for all the wrong reasons and have an abundant of expectations when they get married. I was one of them. I thought marriage was going to be filled with all sorts of companionship, sex, love, romance, intimacy, prayer, Bible studies, understanding, deep friendship and love. Boy, was I wrong! I found out that marriage truly is empty unless you are infusing into it daily.”



# Priority

- What pulls you away or toward the priority of your marriage, your spouse?
- A Friend's Story
- "That woman is my wife. Nothing will come between me and her ever – and that includes you. You will never speak to my wife again like you did this afternoon. And if you do, you will leave our home."



# Seizing the Growth Moments

Resilience is the result of overcoming difficulties, recovering from failures and facing into challenges.

*We don't start out in life with resilience, we develop it. Like a house that is built brick-by-brick, resilience is the product of learning how to successfully navigate the daily challenges of life; learning where I need to grow and where we need to grow.*

The more we grasp these **'growth moments'**, as inconvenient as they may be at the time, the more capacity our marriage has to both grow in intimacy and withstand the unwanted, yet inevitable, 'shocks' that are a part of life.