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Marriage foundation is built on strengths

Like many couples, you and your potential spouse may be faced with one or two rough spots in a good relationship. If unresolved, even a minor area of conflict can damage your marriage. If a satisfying solution is found, you will have strengthened your relationship and added to its positive foundation.

That's what the marriage enrichment movement is all about — de-emphasizing weaknesses and building on strengths.

Since the first marriage encounter weekend retreat in the '60s, thousands of couples have benefited from marriage enrichment. They attend discussion groups or weekend retreats led by trained couples, clergy, teachers, counselors or psychologists. In groups such as Marriage Encounters, PREPARE/ENRICH, the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment and Training in Marriage Enrichment, couples learn that they can enhance their relationships.

YOU CAN START enrichment at any point, even before the wedding. And it's never too late — you can enrich your relationship at any time from one to 50 years into your marriage. All you need is a commitment of time and effort and the willingness to change.

For Ann and Tom Williams, the eight years of their marriage had been mostly happy ones — except when Tom's parents were in town. Those weeks were full of tension as they tried to explain to Tom's parents why they didn't move back to Tom's hometown, why they hadn't fixed the garage roof and, it seemed, the "why" of anything they did. Ann and Tom were happy with each other and liked the choices they had made, but they needed a way to communicate this to Tom's parents — before their parent-in-law problem threatened all they had built.

Ann and Tom sought the advice of psychologists Don Dinkmeyer and Jon Carlson, authors of "Training in Marriage Enrichment," published by American Guidance Service. Ann and Tom weren't looking for therapy — their marriage was basically healthy and they accepted

themselves and each other. They just wanted to learn to solve this problem together. So the Williams joined three other couples for weekly training sessions and soon learned how to cope with Tom's family, using a more relaxed and united approach.

Whether you're working on your own or in a group, there are several basics to enriching your marriage. One is learning to take responsibility for your own actions and feelings. It's not your partner who's driving you into a rage when the living room is a mess — you're allowing your feelings to overwhelm you. Changing reactive behavior is the first step toward resolving any problem.

ANOTHER BASIC: You need to communicate honestly and openly about your feelings. Without the skills to do this, no marriage can successfully negotiate the pitfalls and choices today's lifestyles bring.

Remember, even little changes affect the whole marriage. Be sure to be patient with yourself and your partner. All change takes time.

To help you get started, here are some practical marriage-enriching tips from authors Dinkmeyer and Carlson:

- Be as polite to your partner as you are to a stranger.
- Encourage each other often.
- Avoid placing blame.
- Set limits on the time you'll use to discuss problems.
- Spend regular time together having fun.
- Have realistic expectations.

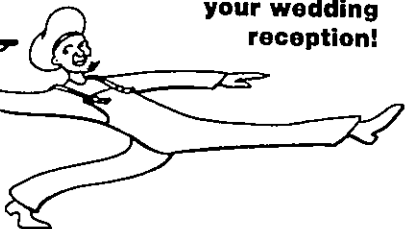
Each day you have numerous opportunities to nurture your relationship. Leave a love note on the pillow, buy flowers, give a reassuring hug. Couples in truly successful marriages work at their relationships daily.

If you're interested in learning more about marriage enrichment, check with your local church, temple or community center or contact the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment in Winston-Salem, N.C., at 919-724-1526 or American Guidance Service in Circle Pines, Minn., at 800-328-2560.

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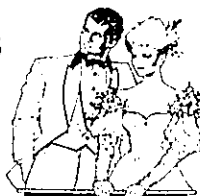
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