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Key Points About Love & Marriage¹

(1. Based on the work of Susan Johnson, author of “Hold Me Tight” and founder of Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples. Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples is the fastest growing evidenced-based approach to treating relational distress in couples in the world. Developed by Dr. Sue Johnson, EFT provides a well researched road map for helping couples grow closer and resolve relational problems. The model is based on the science of emotions, attachment theory, humanistic psychology and family systems theory. EFT helps couples move from distress in their relationship to a safer, more fulfilling relationship.)

1. Secure, loving connection is important throughout our lives

- These bonds are often referred to as “attachment relationships.”
- Emotional connection—a felt sense of closeness—is coded as a safety cue in our brains.
- Loving connection is the most powerful survival tool given to us by God.

2. Secure attachment and autonomy are complementary—*not* contradictory.

3. Secure loving bonds are built upon principles of:

- **Accessibility:** Can others reach us when they are in need?
- **Responsiveness:** Can we be depended on? Do we lovingly respond to our loved one’s call?
- **Engagement:** Are we really “there” -- emotionally present with others?
- The key question in our love relationships is, “Are you there for me?” (This translates into, “Do I matter to you?”, “Can I reach you?”, “Are you accessible/emotionally available to me?”, “Can I rely on you to respond when I need you?”, “Will you engage with me and give me your attention?”) This is the A.R.E. question (Accessible, Responsive, Engaged). This key question is buried just under the surface in most of our recurring arguments about issues such as chores, personality differences, sex, kids, and money. If partners feel safe and loved, they can deal with differences and problems together. If not, then relationship issues and fears get channeled into endless disagreements around pragmatics.

4. We thrive within secure bonds of love — and perish without them.

5. The quality of our emotional relationships is key to how we develop as human beings.

6. Without secure bonds of love, we often fall into negative, self-reinforcing patterns in our relationships.

7. Relationships can Heal

Three Stages:

Safety → Healing → Growth

The “ABCs” of Truly Loving Relationships

- **Acceptance**
- **Belonging**
- **Comfort**
- **Safety** (emotional & physical)
- These are often the underlying healthy needs underneath the unhealthy interactions between couples.



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Advice for Meeting With Couples

Preparation:

- Do all you can to remain worthy of the trust they place in you (See D&C 121:41-45)
- They will always need a Bishop, regardless of what happens. They need to feel your sincere love and to know that your “faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death.”
- Involve both parties: plan to take from 50-90 minutes at the beginning, and invite them to prayerfully prepare for the meeting.
- Be firmly committed to maintaining the couple’s confidentiality — few things destroy trust more quickly than not keeping confidences.
- Honor them for their courage in sharing these vulnerable challenges with you.
- Try to be aware of how your own humanity can create “blind spots” — these can sometimes come from your own exhaustion or “compassion fatigue”, the desire to avoid addressing difficult issues, or personal discomfort with topics others are struggling with.

General Principles/Suggestions:

1. Listen first

- The goal is to help each party feel deeply heard and understood.
- Don’t take sides (even if there is someone who has clearly done hurtful/wrong things).
- Don’t assume you “know” them fully; people can hide all sorts of behaviors.
- Ask questions in the spirit of love — “interrogation” rarely has positive effects.
- Listen for the meaning they attach to their experiences.
- Resist the impulse to: jump too quickly to conclusions, suggest solutions, rush the forgiveness process, or give cliches or “canned answers”

2. Help the couple slow things down

- Look for the healthy needs (ABCs of love) underneath their reactivity (fight/flight).
- Help each individual identify both levels:
 - 1. Their reactive/self-protective behaviors
 - 2. The healthy needs and primary vulnerable emotions underneath the reactivity.
- Unless safety is an issue, encourage them not to make reactive decisions (e.g., about divorce)
- Assess for motivation

3. Empower them: Help them use their own “Liahona”

- Our responsibility as leaders/helpers is on how we respond in love — not whether we solve the problem for them.
- If you receive inspiration, run it by them as to how it might apply for them (encouraging them to take an active role).
- In a loving and supportive way, help them to identify their own:
 - Impressions
 - Desires
 - Abilities



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- Options/Choices
- Resources
- You have an opportunity not only to help them find solutions to specific problems, but also to help them grow in how they seek and receive their own inspiration.

4. Expressing Hope (without minimizing their struggles)

5. If they are not progressing...

- Explore with them what is getting in the way, e.g.:
 - Hopelessness
 - Lack of desire, ability, or effort
 - Trauma
 - Lack of safety
 - Unaddressed mental health issues or addictions

6. Give Resources

- This is most helpful if **both** members are willing to look at the resources.
- Refer them to helpful conference talks, scriptures, etc.; but **also** to other quality resources
 - e.g.: books, articles, workshops, etc.
- See my resource list or website for some ideas.

7. Assess for these danger signs -- The Three 'A's:

1. **Abuse:** Ask about abuse, physical, verbal, mental, and sexual. Do not take abuse lightly. Consult with the church helpline in **all** cases of abuse [800-453-38602 ext.1911](tel:800-453-38602)
2. **Addictions**
3. **Affairs** (or other traumatic betrayals, such as compulsive sexual behaviors)

6. Accountability and Follow-Up

- Make a plan for following up — don't just wait until you or they remember.
- This is especially important for spouses of those who struggle with pornography; they need you to reach out to them and remember them (Moroni 6).

Discerning When to Refer Couples to Additional Help

Research has identified that distressed married couples, on average, waited 6 years before seeking counseling. Don't "wait for the house to burn down" — err on the side of referring, but remain connected to the couple in your spiritual role.

Things to Consider:

- The Three "A"s: Abuse, Addictions, Affairs/Betrayals
- If they desire counseling, support them in that desire (this relates to helping them use their own discernment and inspiration).
- If you recognize that you are "in over your head" — there is no shame in this; we're all stronger together.
- The combined and sustained efforts (of both the couple and your own) aren't making a difference; patterns, pain, and entrenched feelings.



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- Sexual issues
- Mental illness
- Trauma

Identifying Good Professional Help for Couples

- Ask other leaders in your area if they have had good experiences referring to someone.
- Search for a counselor with specific training in Emotionally Focused Therapy (the most empirically validated approach to marriage counseling) www.iceeft.com (Or call me for referrals)
- Search for a counselor who is “marriage friendly”
- Search for a counselor who is interested in “working himself/herself out of a job” (desires to empower the couple to help themselves) — but who isn’t afraid to spend the time and do the deep work necessary to address the couple’s issues.
- Search for a counselor who is willing to work closely with you (provided the couple gives consent). Your roles can be mutually supportive and helpful.