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## CHAPTER 1

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# Shrink Your Joy Gap

**THE STORY OF HOW** my wife, Brenda, and I fell in love is not one of love at first sight. We knew each other for two years before we went on our first date. During that time, we didn't really think of each other in romantic terms. For starters, Brenda was in a serious relationship with someone else for most of that time. In addition, I was her professor, so Brenda was kind of off-limits. I started teaching college at the age of 25 and promised myself I would not date any of the students. The idea of a serious relationship with Brenda snuck up on me unexpectedly. It started when I launched a young adult group at my local church. Brenda was the spiritual life director for the students on campus and the leader of the chapel band, so I invited her to join our team. It wasn't long before I realized how much I looked forward to those planning meetings! That's when it hit me: "I think I'm starting to fall for this girl!" During

those dating years, I remember how much joy I felt. We were falling in love, and it was a lot of fun.

### THE JOY GAP

You may have heard that love is a choice. Strictly speaking, this is not true. Love is attachment. It is a bond you share through good times and bad. You can choose to do loving things. You can choose to do kind things. You cannot choose to feel love. However, the more joy you build into your marriage, the more that feeling of being “in love” will stay strong and grow.

*Falling “out of love” is all about the absence of joy.*

Falling in love is all about joy. When you fall in love with someone, you experience a “joy explosion” in your brain that floods your body with hormones (like dopamine and oxytocin)<sup>1</sup> that make it hard not to smile. Couples who stay in love throughout their married lives are couples who excel at the art of keeping their joy levels high. The opposite is also true. Low joy couples are in trouble. Falling “out of love” is all about the absence of joy.



A **joy gap** is the length of time between moments of shared joy. But when too much time passes between mo-

ments of shared joy, a joy gap is created that makes you feel distant and alone in your marriage. The wider the joy gap becomes, the more likely it is for your problems (and everyone has them) to overwhelm you. Couples who let the joy gap get *too* wide struggle tremendously and start to feel hopeless about their marriage. Not only does the gap rob you of intimacy, but the gap begins filling with resentment, and bad habits can begin to form that keep you apart instead of bringing you together. You start to feel like you are “falling out of love.” People rarely just wake up one morning to the thought, “I’m not in love anymore.” It happens gradually as the gap between moments of shared joy grows wider and wider with too much pain, too much resentment, and too many bad habits in between.

Eleven years into our marriage, Brenda and I started to struggle. She felt like she was living on emotional scraps and getting my relational leftovers. It seemed like work never stopped, and when it did, I shut down and gave myself to entertainment. For the most part, I was either working, spending time with the kids, or watching TV. She was around but rarely the focus of my attention. Our joy gap was definitely growing.

I didn’t notice how big the joy gap in our marriage was getting until Brenda and I went on a date that went terribly wrong. We were finishing our meal, and I was feeling rather proud of myself for taking a few hours to

invest in the marriage, when Brenda dropped a relational bomb on me. She told me she was starting to feel desperate about the distance in our marriage. To help me get the point, she painted a word picture for me. She said she felt like she lived in a cave with prison bars across the front. Meanwhile I was standing in front of the cave facing away from her and focused on everyone else.

That picture should have made me feel compassion, but it didn't. Instead, I got mad. I felt wrongly accused! How could she think such a thing about me? Instead of showing compassion, I justified myself and defended my behavior. The night didn't end well. It was clear something was broken in our marriage, and I had no idea what it was. At that point, I had never heard of a joy gap.

Just when we needed it most, I became friends with Jim Wilder and discovered his profound teaching on brain science and joy. Brenda will tell you it was the best thing that ever happened to our marriage. Learning the brain science helped us understand why we reacted to each other in certain ways. Grasping the importance of joy and learning some tools for building it into our marriage gave us new tracks to run on. Brenda and I have been married for over 28 years. We are both in our fifties, and our kids are adults in their own right. It has been quite a ride, and we have learned how important it is to make joy a priority in our marriage. It isn't that we don't have problems, but we have learned how to recover and

keep our relationship bigger than our problems.

One couple who came to Chris for help typifies the process. They were successful, busy, and burned out. In Chris's terms, the husband was particularly "crispy." In spite of their success in the workplace and the outward signs of living "the good life," their marriage was on the rocks. Chris listened to their story then got them started on a routine of joy exercises (many of which are in this book), and the results were phenomenal. The earthquake that was shaking their marriage and threatening to destroy it quieted significantly. Within a few weeks, they began to feel much more stable as a couple. Not only did their marriage improve, but the anxiety level of their children subsided noticeably as the entire family benefited from the difference. A little joy went a long way. The husband later told Chris that doing these exercises was, without a doubt, the turning point in his marriage.

These daily exercises have helped this couple form some new habits that have all but eliminated the joy gap in their marriage. With these new tools, they have built a lifestyle that helps them experience joy together every day. Joy has become the new normal in their marriage.

Most marriages could use more joy. Honestly, if you don't learn how to shrink the joy gap in your marriage, things could get ugly. The goal of this book is to introduce you to four habits that shrink the joy gap and make joy your default setting. To help you get there, we rec-

commend reading the chapters (on your own or together) and then blocking out fifteen minutes every day to do the exercise for that day. Your marriage is *worth* fifteen minutes a day. It's time to dive in and start making joy the new normal.

### MAKING A PLAN

My dad is a World War II veteran. He likes to tell me the story of a friend from college who proposed to his fiancée in a unique fashion. It was the 1940s, the war had just ended, and my dad returned home from serving in Patton's Third Army to get his degree at a small college in the farm country of Indiana. His buddy was an electronics whiz and used his skills to put together a very special plan for proposing to his girlfriend. One night after dinner, he took her for a walk across campus. He casually suggested they stop by the science lab because he had been working on a project he wanted her to see.

When they arrived at the lab, the young romantic flipped a switch on a control panel, and through the magic of electricity, a heart of red lights sprang to life on the wall at the end of the room. He then flipped another switch and a white arrow began to gleam brightly as if shot through the heart. Finally, he flipped another switch and electric lights spelled out the words, "Will you marry me?" Who could resist a proposal like that? She said yes.

What impressed me about this story was the prepa-

ration involved. The extra work my dad's friend did took a memorable event and made it unforgettable. He went the extra mile to make the experience special. All the planning and preparation demonstrated that he had been thinking about her and loved her enough to spend hours making that night something they could relive for years to come.

To a large extent, this is what romance is all about. It is taking the time to prepare to be together. Preparation means you have been thinking about the other person. Your heart and your mind have been dwelling on how to make your special person happy, how to bring him or her joy.

To help you make a plan for building more joy into your marriage, Chris and I have identified four habits of joy-filled marriages. To help you remember them, we arranged them into an acrostic that spells PLAN.

**Play together**

**Listen for emotion**

**Appreciate daily**

**Nurture rhythm**

We will spend the rest of the book explaining these habits and giving you exercises to help build them. For now, let me give you a quick introduction.



### Habit 1: Play Together

I have some good friends who have been married for nearly fifty years. When I told them I was writing a book on the four habits of joy-filled marriages, the man leaned forward in his chair and said, “What’s your first habit?” I could tell by the look in his eyes he knew what he wanted to hear. I said, “Our first habit is playing together.” The man nearly jumped out of his chair. “Exactly!” He was beaming. “You have to play together and keep having fun. We have made that one of the top priorities in our marriage.” It seems to have worked. They have raised twelve kids of their own and served as surrogate parents to dozens of other young people through the years.

I have known this couple for two decades, and they have one of the most joy-filled marriages I have seen and have raised some of the most joyful children I know. One of their secrets was their commitment to having fun together. They built their calendar around family trips. They constantly invited people to their home. We often weren’t the only guests at the table when we visited them. It was clear from being around them that they worked hard and played hard and made relational joy a top priority for their family.

I also couldn’t help but notice that this man was rubbing his wife’s feet as we talked. Next to their faith in God, they both agreed that playing together was the key to being in love after a lifetime together.

## Habit 2: Listen for Emotion

Left-brain people tend to listen for problems. Right-brain people listen for emotions. In a classic (fictitious) left-brain conversation, Anne tells her husband Tom about something important while he reads the newspaper, keeps tabs on the TV in the background, and eats his breakfast. At some point, Anne explodes, “Are you even listening to me? I feel like I’m talking to the wall!” At this, Tom calmly lowers his paper and, with a feeling of triumph, repeats back to her every word she just said. Anne is mystified but not really comforted. The reason Tom can do this is because he is listening to his wife with the problem-solving, left side of his brain. What he is *not* doing is tuning in to her by looking his wife in the eyes and listening for the emotions being expressed.

I have found that one of the most helpful pieces of advice for left-brain dominant people is to learn how to listen for emotions and not just problems. This helps keep your relational engine engaged. A woman approached me at a recent conference and asked, “What are emotions? How can I listen for emotions if I don’t know what they are or how to identify them?” She went on to explain that she had spent her whole life managing relationships, doing damage control, and avoiding most emotions. If you can relate to this, then be sure to read chapter 5 on listening for emotion. We will explain six foundational emotions to listen for as you learn to build this skill.

### Habit 3: Appreciate Daily

Not long after learning about the power of joy, a couple asked to meet with me about some issues in their marriage. I decided to try an experiment. After listening to their story and validating the emotions I was hearing, I asked them to take a moment and think about what they appreciated most about the other person. Specifically, I asked, “When you were first attracted to this person, what did you most admire or respect about them?” I then had them pivot toward each other, hold hands, make eye contact, and share their feelings of appreciation. There was just one rule when sharing appreciation: they couldn’t use the word “but.” They couldn’t say, “I really admire the way you love our kids, but I wish you wouldn’t . . .” Adding a “but” to the expression of appreciation pulls the rug out from under it.

With this ground rule in place, they did the exercise, and the results were shocking. They went from barely looking at each other, sitting on opposite sides of the room, to snuggling so close I had to tell them not to start kissing. Shared joy can be a powerful thing, and appreciation is one of the most powerful habits you can form for building joy.

### Habit 4: Nurture Rhythm

Life can be hectic. It is easy for your marriage to turn into a business partnership. Sometimes we spend all our time cleaning, working, organizing, parenting, and

crashing. We don't have a rhythm to life that creates margin. Instead, we have a rhythm that creates distance in our marriage and burn-out in many areas of our lives. Couples who share joy on a daily basis generally have healthy marriages. It is essentially impossible to have sustained joy in your marriage without a rhythm that includes rest.

Couples who nurture rhythm by incorporating times of resting together, as well as playing together, create a foundation for joy that is sustainable for years to come. One couple I know always sits on the back deck together for half an hour or more in the evening and watches the sun set. Another couple plays cards every evening before bed. Habits we develop that allow us to rest together create security in our relationship and promote the kind of rhythm that helps us keep our love fresh.

### SHRINKING THE GAP

As part of helping you shrink the joy gap in your marriage, we want to introduce you to some of the brain science behind joy. Brain science may sound technical and a bit boring to some (or perhaps exciting to others), but we will do our best to keep things simple and practical. We want you to understand enough about how the brain operates to give you a picture of why joy is so important and how it grows.