

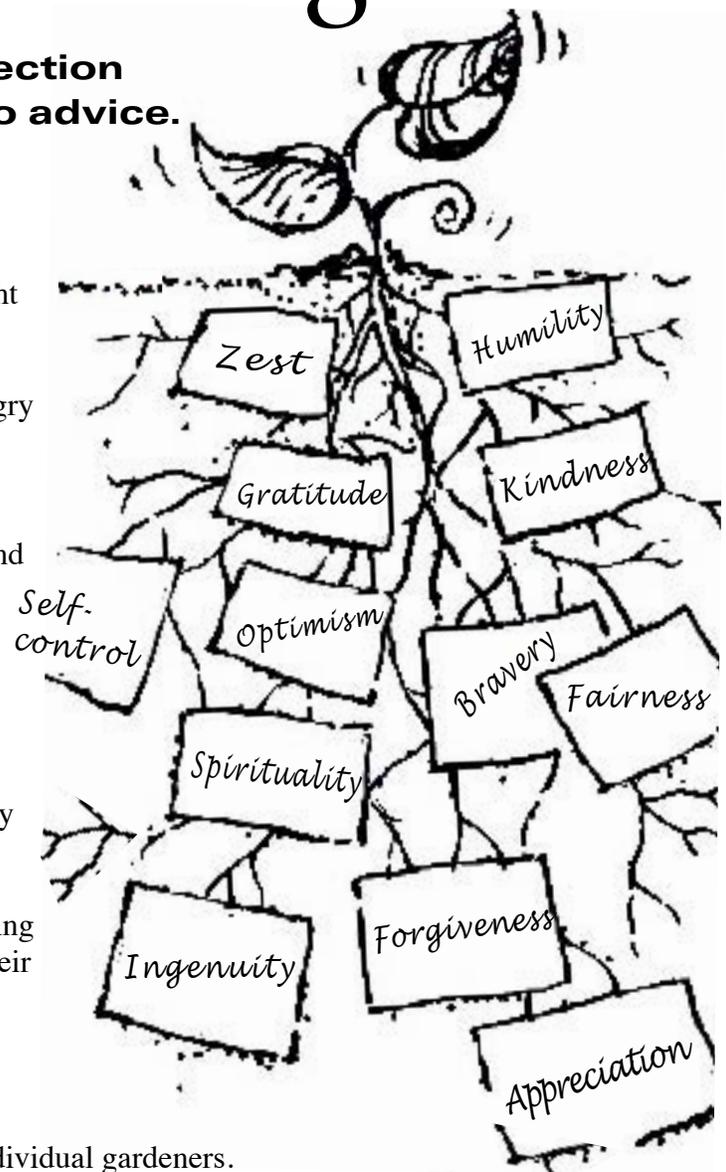


Grow: Cultivate Your Strengths

Get ready to garden with this collection of tips, plans, and practical how-to advice.

Review — Guiding Principles for Marriage

- **Seek the light:** More truth will be found in the light than the darkness.
- **Notice your feelings:** If we dwell on tense and angry feelings, those feelings will grow.
- **Speak from peace:** Thinking peaceful thoughts prepares us to share ourselves in a helpful way and move our relationships forward.
- **Weed your own garden:** We are responsible for changing ourselves rather than our partners.
- **Manage expectations:** Roses come with thorns. Rather than waste time resenting the thorns, enjoy the rose.
- **When your soul speaks, take great notes:** Focusing on good feelings and experiences can increase their power in our lives.



Cultivating your strengths

The health of the garden is rooted in the health of the individual gardeners. If we do not nurture our personal strengths and abilities—or if we fail to manage our personal weaknesses—we will not be well prepared to take on our gardening tasks. The most successful gardeners know that they must invest time in reflection, learning and improvement. They then have more strengths to bring to the garden and to their gardening partnerships.

1. Gardeners need to recognize and cultivate their strengths

Gardening is a demanding activity. Since every garden provides new challenges, a good gardener must be willing to be active and alert. Gardeners must be responsive to changing conditions; they must invest energy and commitment. A good gardener must ensure that he or she is physically, mentally, and emotionally well prepared to take on the work of gardening.

There are things we can all do to increase our well-being. Most of us are familiar with good habits of eating and exercise. But the keys to good mental and emotional health may not be so well known. This lesson guide will emphasize three things we can all do to be growing and vibrant:

- Cultivating appreciation of our past, present, and future
- Recognizing and developing our talents
- Using our strengths and talents to serve

These behaviors will help us to take the best care that we can of ourselves, so that we will be able to offer more to our partners and our marriage gardens.

2. Appreciation is the foundation of happiness

The first key to well-being is appreciation. While most of us are programmed to want something more than we have, happiness is more likely when we enjoy what we already have.

It is easy to see this truth in gardening. While one person might step into his garden and see only imperfections—weeds and wilt—a more appreciative gardener might step into the same garden and see lush growth and blooms. The choice to see the good in all areas of our lives helps us live better.

Psychologist Martin Seligman has studied how humans can be healthy and continue growing. He talks about three different kinds of appreciation. He urges us to savor and enjoy the past, the present, and the future.

Appreciating our past

Seligman says that when we fail to be mindful of the good things in our past, we undermine contentment and well-being. In contrast, when we choose to remember and cherish good events from the past, we open the gate to peace and serenity. In those cases where we have been hurt or disappointed, we can repair our history by applying compassion and understanding to those who hurt us.

Reflection:

- Think of one person who has made an important and positive difference in your life. Reflect on the blessing of having that person as a part of your life story.

Maybe you would like to write a one-page summary of how your life is better because of that person. You may choose to share your summary with the person. Or you may choose to save it as a page in your own life story.

Appreciating our present

Some people have a knack for savoring every moment and blessing of life. I remember a man who told me one Sunday morning how grateful he was for the ability to see, running water in his kitchen, food in the pantry, and sweet companionship. My reaction was immediate. I wondered how long it had been since I was consciously grateful for any of those great blessings.

Do we enjoy the sun on our faces, the wonderful variety of foods available to us, a roof overhead, and people to love? Research shows that, if we are not going hungry, more money will not make us significantly happier. The key to happiness is appreciating the blessings we already have.

Reflection:

- Close your eyes right now and think of the blessings you have enjoyed just today. Savor them. Be grateful.

Appreciating our future

As human beings, it is easy for us to become defensive, anticipating future dangers. Centuries ago, for example, it made sense to worry about lions, bears, and snakes. Being alert to danger might make the difference between a productive life and becoming a predator's lunch.

But times have changed. Most of us do not face serious threats from wild animals. Unfortunately we still have the same tendency to react very strongly to perceived threats. When a spouse says something unkind or when someone cuts us off in traffic, we may almost go crazy with rage.

Today more people are killed by rage than by wild animals. Living in fear damages our hearts and may cause us to overreact to small surprises. It is better for our well-being that we stay mindful of good things in our past and present while looking forward to more good things in our future.

Many of us can allow our gentle, tender, positive emotions to be swamped by the brutal self-preservation instincts. If we want to thrive in marriage, we need to learn to listen more to our gentle emotions and less to our savage self-protection emotions. Rather than see our spouses as threatening lions, bears, or snakes determined to kill us, we can see them as good people who are trying to raise a healthy garden with us.

Rather than live in fear and dread, imagining every kind of unhappiness and misery, we can be optimistic. We can look forward to new learning to accompany new challenges. We can turn stumbling blocks into a garden path.

One of Seligman's discoveries is that those people who tend to think most about the good things in their lives are the happiest. They may not be very objective. In fact they may exaggerate and embellish the good. And that is good for human growth! When we have a choice between seeing the wilted flowers or the new growth in our lives, why not look for the new growth?

Reflection:

- Think of a time when you have chosen to see the good in your past, present, or future. How did it feel? What helped get you there?

Key Point: Appreciating our past, present, and future helps us to grow in happiness.

3. Our lives are best when we use our talents often

We have considered three kinds of appreciation—the first key to well-being. The second key to well-being is to design our lives so that we often use our talents.

It makes sense that life is best when we get to use our talents regularly. But many of us still obsess about our weaknesses. We worry about them. We plan self-improvement projects that often flop. We become discouraged because of our failings.

The best new wisdom suggests a different strategy. Rather than trying to overcome our weaknesses, we can design our lives to use our strengths regularly. We will still have weaknesses—and we make reasonable efforts to manage them.

Recognizing your talents

There is another trick in using our strengths. Many of us aren't sure what our talents are. We may wonder if we really have any. Fortunately, Mother Nature gives us important clues about our strengths: they are revealed as we notice what we love to do.

Reflection:

- Think of times when you have gotten so absorbed in a challenging task that you lost track of time. It could be any number of things: singing, learning, jogging, offering compassion, cooking, sewing, woodworking, etc. What were you doing? What do you think might be your talent?

There are many different ways of thinking about talents. Some think in terms of traditional talents like music and dance. There are also personal or personality talents. Some people have taken personality tests like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Such tests (available through counselors as well as online) can help us know our personal strengths.

Seligman has developed a different way of assessing talents: character strengths. By taking the VIA Signature Strengths Survey, you can find out what strengths you have—such as creativity, loyalty, humility, fairness, and kindness. He has identified 24 such qualities of character. Each person's top five strengths Seligman calls signature strengths.

Reflection:

Take a minute to respond to these questions:

- What do you already know about your talents?
- Are there some tests you are interested in taking to learn more about your talents? (For more information about these tests, see the resource list at the end of this lesson.)

Psychologists describe a state they call flow, which is when we take on a challenging task that allows us to use our talents, and we become so absorbed that we lose track of time. This is important for human flourishing.

Maybe Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner, was describing flow when he said "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." Liddell is describing that sense of everything-is-right that accompanies using our talents. Pay attention to the times when you experience this feeling.

Sometimes we design our lives to have prestige or money. But we may trade off a lot of life satisfaction when we let money design our path in life. Talents are a much better basis for designing our lives. Many of the people who have made the biggest contributions to their fields—from Thomas Edison to Bill Gates—are people who have dedicated their lives to the work they love.



Reflection:

Take a minute to respond to these questions:

- Think of people you know who thrive because their lives are full of opportunities to use their talents. What can you learn from them?
- What jobs--paid or unpaid--have you most enjoyed doing? How can you adjust your life to do more of what you love to do?

Maintaining and balancing a variety of interests

To paraphrase a familiar saying, growth is the surest sign of life. Picture a gardener who never learns anything new and invests very little energy in taking care of him or herself. It is easy to imagine how that person's garden will look! Now picture a gardener who loves life and is regularly growing and learning. Imagine what his or her garden will look like!

A great gardener does not have to limit his or her interests to gardening. She may also love music. He may enjoy woodworking. Any good interest that energizes the gardener is likely to make for a better gardener.

You can easily see the application to marriage. A partner who is bored and stale is not as likely to have a great marriage as the partner who continues to grow, learn, and become a better, happier human.

When two people are vibrant and growing, they have more to bring to their marriage. Of course, if either partner gets so wrapped up in personal development that he or she makes no investment in their partnership, the relationship is damaged.

Growing requires balance. Both partners work to be vibrant, happy people. Yet they also make sure that their personal development does not get in the way of their partnership.

Reflection:

- What are some hobbies, interests that help you stay vibrant? What are some of the hobbies and interests that help your spouse stay vibrant? How can you support each other in your individual growth and well-being?

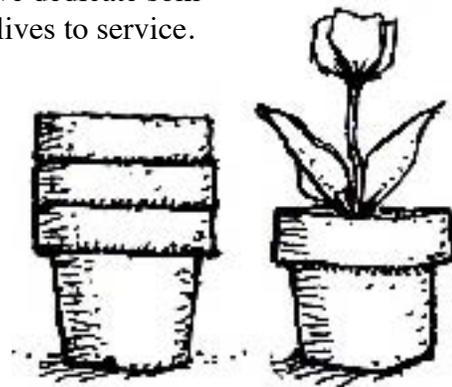
Key Point: Choosing to grow will help us be better marriage gardeners. When we design our lives to use our talents, our lives are likely to be more productive and satisfying.

4. Using our talents to serve is an important way to build our well-being

Based on his discoveries about well-being, Seligman recommends three things all people should do. We have already discussed two of them—being appreciative and designing our lives to use our talents.

The third key to well-being is serving. Each of us can dedicate some part of our lives to making our world a better place. This is so important that an entire unit is dedicated to discussing service.

In this unit we will simply say that there are many ways to serve! Whether we are good at offering a listening ear, teaching, caring for the environment, organizing--whatever it is--our lives are better when we dedicate some part of our lives to service.

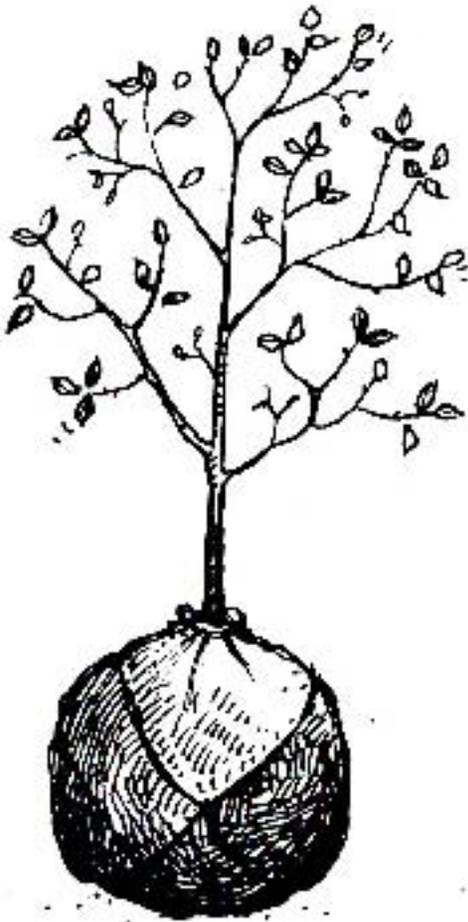


Reflection:

Take a minute to respond to the following questions:

- What are some ways you have enjoyed serving in the past? Do you currently have projects that allow you to give back? What adjustments would you like to make to give service a prominent place in your life? Are there ways that you and your partner like to serve together?
- How would you like to design your life differently in order to be more appreciative, use your talents, and serve?

Key Point: Service enriches our lives—
and our world.

**Teaching Resources:****Teaching tips and teaching outline**

Select the major points you want to emphasize. Build a session using the stories, exercises, and group discussion that your time allows.

Resources you might use:

Learn about well-being:

Read Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* (2002, Free Press).

Learn about flow:

Read Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi's *Finding Flow* (1997, Basic Books).

Discover personality strengths:

Take the Myers-Briggs test from a counselor

Or take the Keirsey Temperament Sorter at:
http://www.advisorteam.com/temperament_sorter/register.asp?partid=1

Identify signature strengths:

Take the VIA Signature Strengths Survey free at:
www.authentic happiness.org

Learn about gifts, how to discover them,
and how to use them:

Read Martha Beck's *Finding Your Own North Star* (2002, Three Rivers).

Read Goddard and Morgan's *The Great Self Mystery* (\$1 each from Alabama Cooperative Extension; E-mail publications@aces.edu or call 334-844-1592).

The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability, marital or veteran status, or any other legally protected status, and is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer.

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