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Restoring HOPE



An Integrative Approach
to Marital Therapy

Praise for *Restoring Hope*

When a marriage reaches the breaking point, it is critical for a couple to receive compassionate, skilled care from someone who can step in and steer the hurting husband and wife toward reconciliation and healing. *Restoring Hope* is poised to become an essential, comprehensive guide for professional therapists, lay counselors, and pastors who find themselves supporting and advising a couple facing a crisis in their marriage.

JIM DALY, President of Focus on the Family

The results of the Hope Restored programs speak for themselves. Thousands of couples who once believed they were destined for divorce now have new hope and a clear understanding of how they can cultivate a healthy, life-long marriage. *Restoring Hope* shows therapists, counselors, and pastors how to help struggling couples discover and utilize these life-changing tools.

DR. GARY CHAPMAN, author of *The Five Love Languages*

Christian marriages are struggling at unprecedented levels. Churches and therapists are inundated with requests for help yet often lack a theoretical and theological model to guide their efforts. In *Restoring Hope*, the authors integrate solid Biblical underpinnings, healthy psychological principles, and extensive research to provide a wonderful road map to utilizing Focus Marital Therapy. Focus on the Family has been at the forefront in the fight to defend and build strong Christian families, and this book carries that tradition forward.

MILAN AND KAY YERKOVICH, authors of the How We Love series and founders of the Relationship 180 counseling center

It's hard to argue with results. The Focus Marital Therapy approach is saving marriages and changing lives. This book presents the proven principles of FMT and invites you to join those who are saving marriages with this theologically informed and effective, systematic approach to marital therapy.

RON DEAL, LMFT and author of *The Smart Stepfamily* and coauthor of *Building Love Together in Blended Families*

Over more than two decades, I've had the privilege of working with Bob Paul, Bob Burbee, Christine Arnzen, and their excellent team as they've developed Focus Marital Therapy. In *Restoring Hope*, they give others access to the methods we use in Focus on the Family's highly successful Hope Restored marriage intensives. We've seen so many lives changed and marriages saved! I'm thrilled that these powerful techniques are now available to professionals everywhere.

DR. GREG SMALLEY, Vice President of Marriage at Focus on the Family and author of *Fight Your Way to a Better Marriage* and *Crazy Little Thing Called Marriage*

I've been familiar with Hope Restored since its inception, and I continue to be impressed with the staff's unwavering commitment to the meaningful integration of Scripture, ongoing research, and clinical relevance. As a clinical psychologist, marriage therapist, and seminary professor, I've read countless books on marital therapy, and *Restoring Hope* is one of the most unique, practical, and clinically relevant texts I have read. It is a valuable resource that marriage professionals will be recommending and referring to for years to come.

DR. GARY OLIVER, author of *Mad About Us: Moving from Anger to Intimacy with Your Spouse*

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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Introduction

IT IS NO SECRET that marriage has been undergoing significant societal changes for several decades. In many cases, the traditional marriage structure of one man and one woman, joined in a committed union meant to last, is seen as an outdated social institution. Today our culture is increasingly embracing a wide array of alternative marriage structures, and many who support a traditional marriage structure are harshly judged for not approving of alternative relationships. Additionally, some young people insist that there is a lack of credible examples of successful traditional marriages. Others even suggest rejecting traditional marriage as a necessary relationship structure altogether.

Despite these societal changes, people continue to formalize their relationship commitments in traditional marriage covenants every day. Many Christians, including those of us at Focus on the Family, consider the traditional marriage structure a God-ordained and foundational institution of a healthy society. Yet many couples struggle while trying to create and maintain intimate unions, even when operating within God's marital design. When these covenants are stretched, injured, and even betrayed, these marriages can become painful and disappointing, potentially leading to a couple's decision to divorce.

Strong marriages and families are the cornerstone of a vibrant and successful society, and widespread marital decay leads to a weakened society. That's true in every country and culture around the world. Recently, at a meeting of leaders from Focus on the Family's international offices, the challenges that marriages and families around the world face became crystal clear. Yet multiple Focus on the Family directors reported

remarkable government favor toward our mission of saving marriages and helping families thrive. Christianity is not the primary religion in most of these countries—in many, Christianity is not sanctioned or even tolerated. The reoccurring feedback from our international directors was that government leaders understood that, in order for their culture to be healthy and thriving, the marriages and families within it had to thrive. These officials all stated concern about the declining health and well-being of their country's families, and they frequently come to us hoping we might help the families within their countries function well.

Most mental health professionals recognize the foundational importance of healthy marriages and families. Interestingly, many counselors and therapists frequently report how much they dread the challenging work of couples therapy. For those of us at the Focus on the Family Marriage Institute (FMI), there is no work more central to our calling and professional expertise. We see working to help marriages and families thrive as the single greatest contribution we can make to help our nation thrive and advance the cause of Christ in this world.

As mental health professionals, the team at FMI has had a longstanding commitment to doing everything possible to integrate sound theology with the best techniques and principles we've found in our training in behavioral sciences. Our departmental vision statement is: *Pursuing excellence in the integration of Christian faith and professional discipline, FMI will find innovative and effective ways to influence our world toward God-inspired lives and marriages.*

We call our model and our approach to helping couples Focus Marital Therapy (FMT). Our goal is to make a significant positive impact in the lives of individuals, marriages, and families that will influence our culture and our world.

Perhaps you are a professional who loves counseling couples, or perhaps you are a layperson who recognizes the inescapable, foundational importance of marriage as the center of God's design for people, families, and culture. For either reader, the Focus on the Family Marriage Institute wants to support your work in strengthening and saving marriages.

Why We Wrote This Book

Over twenty years ago, a set of divinely orchestrated circumstances converged, and a new work began. At the time, none of the people involved could clearly see the scope of what they were creating, and they had no idea how far their work would go. Their goal was merely an attempt to create some training materials for an unaddressed ministry

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need. (More on the historical development of this model shortly.) The result was a program now called Hope Restored: A Marriage Intensive Experience. This therapeutic initiative to aid marriages in distress has had a remarkable track record of success, serving well over ten thousand couples from every state in the US and over thirty countries worldwide to date.

Originally, there was no fully developed therapeutic model employed at the Hope Restored centers. Like many therapists working elsewhere, this early group of professionals relied on their individual experience and training to provide the best possible service to hurting couples. Though there was no shared therapeutic model, the one common feature at the time was the need to use an intensive therapeutic structure—multiple hours per day over a few consecutive days—to address time and space limitations, since many of the clients were not local. Cotherapy, in which more than one therapist is present, was also employed as a preferred structure for treatment.

Due to the relatively higher upfront cost of this treatment modality, as well as the complexities of scheduling and traveling to a Hope Restored retreat center, many couples were reaching out as a last resort. Typically, the clients were people of the Christian faith whose marriage and family were on the verge of collapse. Nothing they had tried provided lasting help. The level of relational distress and personal pain resulted in a highly motivated clientele.

Unexpectedly, the combination of therapeutic teams working with couples in crisis in an intensive, time-limited structure created something of an unofficial marriage laboratory. The learning was multiplied through the process of sharing ideas, witnessing colleagues' methods of intervention, comparing notes, unexpected divine moments, trial and error, etc. Over time, Hope Restored therapists developed and refined a theoretical model and therapeutic approach to conducting effective couples therapy. Since more and more therapists were trained in this model, the overall outcomes have remained surprisingly consistent and unusually effective.

Couples were being dramatically helped through the work and often raved about how impactful and life-changing they found the model, tools, and therapeutic approach. Often in frustration, they asked, "Why have we never heard these ideas before?" As a result, this early group of professionals felt the need to do everything possible to get these concepts and relational principles and tools into the public forum. Resources were developed and published for the mass market. The first major publication was 2004's *The DNA of Relationships* by Gary Smalley, Greg Smalley, Michael Smalley, and Robert S. Paul. This was followed in 2006 with *The DNA of Relationships for Couples* by Greg Smalley and Robert S. Paul. Enrichment events

were also developed to share these ideas through conferences, retreats, and workshops. Over the years, Greg Smalley and Robert S. Paul have written other books and articles to further develop and deepen the presentation to couples at large. Their most recent book, *9 Lies That Will Destroy Your Marriage*, was published in 2020 and is an update of this model.

As ministry grew, two distinct issues started to demand attention. An unwavering faith commitment highlighted the need to establish a culture of integrity. Simultaneously, growth created concerns about maintaining high quality and consistency in our therapeutic practices.

Regarding integrity, FMI determined that for the work and ministry to effectively reveal insights into God's intended design for marriage, our team of professionals needed to "walk the talk." As an organization, we were unwilling to accept a "do as I say, not as I do" approach. We were not going to just teach something we claimed would work without demonstrating our own investment in these ideas. Thus, therapists at FMI all strive to personally employ the FMT model in their own lives and families. They are also encouraged to use their own personal stories of success and struggle in their work with clients. Since God is the true and ultimate healer, therapists posture themselves in sessions as experienced fellow journeyers, as opposed to distant experts.

Secondly, with multiple therapists on the FMI team, we needed to protect quality and consistency of client experience and, thus, therapeutic outcome. Since most therapists have specific training and unique experiences, this objective had its challenges. Over time, the FMI clinical leadership painstakingly worked to identify the essential practices of FMT. These elements are the ingredients that differentiate the FMT approach from other forms and models of marital therapy. Additionally, our incentive to clarify FMT essentials was to differentiate best practices from personal style and therapeutic preference. The FMI team is a multidisciplinary team of professionals with differing training, experience, personality, temperament, etc. Our ongoing desire has been to make sure there is always room for therapists to fully be themselves and exercise their God-given gifts within the parameters of the FMT approach.

As the FMT model has developed, it has been encouraging and validating that our organizational teammates—plus scores of couples attending enrichment events—use the model and principles successfully in their own marriages. This broad applicability has contributed to greater confidence in the power of what is being learned and the potential breadth of impact. The model, along with its principles and tools,

demonstrated equal effectiveness in healthy, thriving relationships and in marriages that struggle.

As news and publicity about the significant impact of the ministry's work with couples grew, a desire within the professional community surfaced to learn more about the methods and approach. Outside therapist requests for training were consistent and grew in frequency. Unfortunately, ministry resources were often scant in the early days, and the best we could offer were infrequent presentations at professional conferences and an occasional training event.

As a partial response to the professional community, the team published a seminal article in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* in 2011 to introduce the model, outlining theoretical foundations, therapeutic methods, and outcome research. At the time, the FMT model was referred to as Integrative Marital Intensive Therapy. Critical evaluation is in keeping with professional methods and ethics designed to protect client welfare, so by submitting the article, the team essentially invited their peers to scrutinize the model in light of professional standards.

Many of the therapists on the FMI team are contract therapists. In addition to their intensive work with FMI, they maintain their own regular office practices. The FMT model and intervention strategies have proven so successful in their work, these professionals report finding creative ways to employ the approach in their private offices. We continue to hear that with minor modifications, the FMT model and interventions have potential impact in multiple treatment modalities, not just in an intensive treatment structure.

A Brief History of FMT

Robert S. Paul (referred to throughout this book as Paul to distinguish from Robert Burbee, referenced as Burbee) grew up the son of secular marriage and family therapists. His parents, Jordan and Margaret Paul (stepmother from age five), were not only successful therapists but also creative, forward-thinking authors who developed theoretical concepts that had far reaching professional and cultural impact. One of their more influential books, *Do I Have to Give Up Me to Be Loved by You*, published in 1983, has sold well over one million copies and is still in print today.

Paul was profoundly impacted and influenced by his parents' ideas. He watched and learned as they entered a more public platform and experienced a degree of celebrity status. At the age of thirteen, he began his own study, in part out of genuine interest in counseling and in part out of normal adolescent frustration with his

biological mother. His father and stepmother were happy to provide books to read, such as *Parent Effectiveness Training* and others. Paul devoured these books and came back for more. Even though some of his motivation was less than pure—he was hoping to change his mother, or at least her parenting approach—his reading sparked in him an interest in the field of counseling, and Paul was learning to think and see the world through a psychological lens from an early age.

In 1980, Paul became a Christian. In 1988, eighteen years after beginning his informal study in the field of psychology, Paul followed a divine call to become a counseling professional. Around that time, Margaret Paul had begun developing a new form of treatment she called Inner Bonding. After graduating from Georgia State University and the Psychological Studies Institute in 1993, Paul entered private practice. He also became an adjunct professor at his undergraduate alma mater, Evangel University. During this time, his stepmother established a five-day therapy intensive utilizing Inner Bonding. Intrigued, Paul set out to observe and participate in these intensives.

Paul noted that the intensive modality worked incredibly well and was unusually effective and powerful. He saw enormous potential for this form of treatment with his own clientele and asked if his stepmother would consider coming to the Midwest to conduct an intensive so some of his clients could attend. She agreed, and time and place were arranged. Six of the twelve participants were Paul's clients, which meant he had direct knowledge of their backstory and therapeutic issues. Somewhat unexpectedly, he provided significant cotherapy assistance. A strong dynamic of working together was evident, and Margaret asked if he'd consider assisting her in intensives going forward. He agreed, and over the next five years—in addition to his private practice and teaching—he was able to regularly assist her in the development of the program while being trained in intensive therapy.

After transitioning out of working with Margaret, Paul connected with Greg (Smalley) and his wife, Erin, through Evangel University. Paul was a full-time professor and therapist at the university's counseling center. Erin was one of his graduate students. Smalley also taught some classes as an adjunct professor while finishing his postdoctoral internship at a local counseling agency. Smalley's intent after his internship was to open a counseling clinic adjacent to his father's (Gary Smalley) ministry a short distance away. Smalley's unique vision for this counseling center inspired a number of therapists, including Paul, to become involved.

As their professional relationship developed, Smalley learned more about Paul's unique background and training in intensive therapy. What he learned sparked a

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new idea, and he saw a possible opportunity to address an ongoing and unmet need and frustration within his father's ministry. Smalley approached Paul and told him that, for many years, people exposed to his father's teaching through books, video, and conferences had loved the teaching but struggled when they tried to implement it. They regularly would call from all over the world and ask to come and work with Gary or anyone there that could help.

Direct counseling had never been within the scope of Gary's training or calling, so he would generally decline, leaving the caller disappointed and unserved. Smalley saw intensive therapy as a possible solution and asked Paul if he might consider adapting the intensive model used with individuals to work with couples while weaving in some of Gary's teaching and principles. Paul immediately felt a divine nod and agreed. This was the summer of 1999, and Paul got to engage the remarkable team of therapists that God and Smalley had begun to assemble in order to design an intensive therapeutic option to aid couples calling in for help.

The initial therapeutic outcomes were strong, and the program began to grow as more therapists were trained. Along the way, Dr. Robert Burbee and Dr. Christine Arnzen (colleagues of Paul's at Evangel University and coauthors of this text) became involved in the work both as therapists and central contributors to the development of the model. In fact, both have served as clinical director of what today is FMI (Arnzen 2005–2012, Burbee 2015–2021).

In 2006, Smalley felt called to leave the ministry to pursue another ministry opportunity with a friend and colleague. He remained committed to the ministry he had founded, then called the National Institute of Marriage (NIM), and agreed to remain on as a board member. In 2011, Smalley was asked by Jim Daly (president of Focus on the Family) to bring direction and vision to Focus on the Family's marriage effort. Smalley accepted and currently serves as vice president of Marriage and Family Formation at Focus on the Family.

One of Smalley's first initiatives was to develop an overarching strategic plan for marriage at Focus on the Family. He came up with a three-part vision to help address all stages of marriages: *Prepare* to help couples just getting started, *Strengthen* for couples wanting enrichment, and *Save* for couples struggling. Focus's long and rich history in both the *Prepare* and *Strengthen* areas were unquestionable, and Smalley intended to bolster those efforts even further. However, he was keenly aware that Focus had had little direct work with couples in crisis. He began to look for new ways to grow Focus on the Family's *Save* efforts.

With no other intentions in mind, Paul approached Smalley in 2013 with an

idea about creating a digital version of the FMT model to assist with aftercare. He asked if Focus might be interested in working together on this project. Smalley was already completely committed to the FMT model and approach, so a digital product seemed a good fit to his overall Focus marriage strategy. Smalley and Paul created a proposal to present to Focus's upper management. During the presentation, the Focus executives were more fully informed about NIM's success in working with struggling marriages. A suggestion was posed: a partnership of some sort might help Focus minister more effectively to couples in crisis and simultaneously help NIM reach more people.

A ten-month dialogue ensued between the leadership teams and boards of both nonprofit ministries. After much discussion and prayer, all parties enthusiastically agreed to a merger. On May 12, 2014, NIM joined Focus on the Family to form the Focus on the Family Marriage Institute. Paul began as vice president of the newly formed institute, overseeing clinical services, FMT content development, and training. The intensive marital therapy programs were eventually branded Hope Restored: A Marriage Intensive Experience.

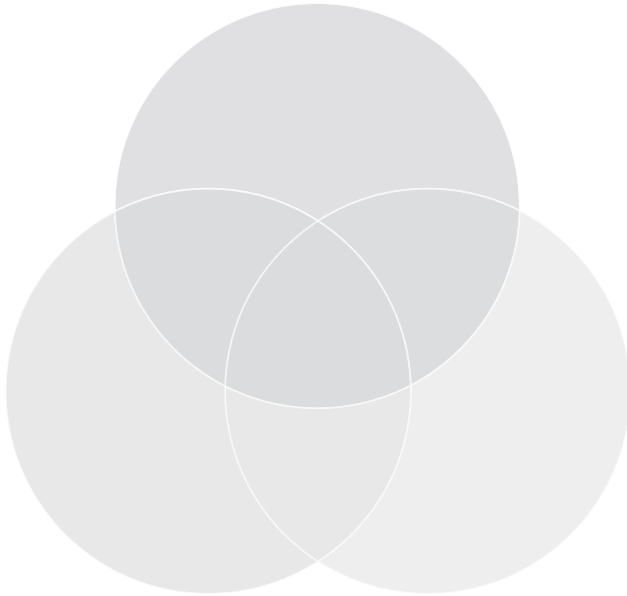
Over the next five years, the primary focus for FMI was to expand the Hope Restored program's depth and reach, but from the onset of the merger, Focus's leadership has been committed to finding meaningful ways to share the FMT model with individuals called to work with struggling couples. Our leadership was recently given the green light to make training of professionals, pastors, and lay counseling helpers a priority. The Focus on the Family marriage strategy has grown to add the initiative *Equip* (dedicated to providing training opportunities for those called to serve couples) to the other three—*Prepare*, *Strengthen*, and *Save*.

One major initiative in the *Equip* component is the creation of this text, which seeks to formally introduce the Focus Marital Therapy model and many of the corresponding intervention strategies and techniques.

Note: This text will not set out to teach the reader the ins and outs of conducting a therapy intensive, such as those utilized by Hope Restored. Rather, this book will outline the FMT model and therapeutic basics to enable its use in any treatment setting and modality that a professional chooses.

SECTION I

Key Concepts, Principles, and Skills

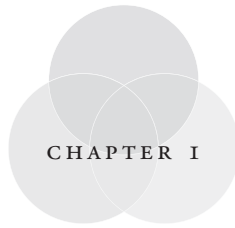


IN CHAPTER 1, we begin by presenting the key concepts, principles, and skills used in Focus Marital Therapy (FMT). Case examples in chapter 2 are to help the reader better understand the concepts presented and their potential application. These examples will be referenced throughout this text to illustrate how the principles, skills, and interventions might look in an actual FMT therapy session.

Chapters 3 through 8 will explore in more depth the concepts, principles, and skills that inform the intervention processes utilized by FMT therapists. During therapy, there may be moments in which these elements form the basis of a psychoeducational intervention. At other times, they are the context for therapeutic processing and experiential application by either an individual spouse or the couple together.

A firm grasp of the importance of these FMT basics and their application to life and relationship is essential for the successful utilization of FMT with clients. FMT therapists regularly use a whiteboard and/or large newsprint on an easel in the therapy room to help facilitate both the psychoeducational interventions and therapeutic processing. Therapists will draw diagrams and summarize insights on some type of display for client reaction and reference, and to assist with group process when applicable.

Section II: Process of Therapy will go in depth about FMT application and the FMT approach to addressing various therapeutic challenges. Section III: Foundations outlines how FMT evolved from various approaches to individual psychotherapy, group therapy, and family therapy. Chapters 14, 15, and 16 provide an in-depth discussion of the important theological and psychological assumptions supporting the model. Readers interested in the theoretical foundations of the model and marital therapy research context for FMT will want to digest chapters 17 and 18.



AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO MARITAL THERAPY

FOCUS MARITAL THERAPY (FMT) seeks a clear integration of sound theology with solid, research-based learning derived from the behavioral sciences. We will begin by providing the reader with a thirty-thousand-foot view of FMT while sharing the overarching treatment objectives and some of the integrative functions. Within that framework will be an articulation of how FMT, unlike some approaches to marital therapy, embraces both the individual spouse *and* the marital relationship as the concurrent focus for treatment. The remainder of the book will provide a deeper dive into details and specifics of FMT.

Foundation of Faith

First and foremost, FMT is a distinctly Christian approach to marital therapy. As stated in the Introduction, this model has evolved over more than twenty years with input from many professionals of diverse backgrounds, experiences, training, and influence. The one common factor is that all contributors are people of Christian faith. Within that foundation are a team represented by multiple denominational orientations and

faith backgrounds. Many on the team have significant theological training, and some have been active in vocational ministry roles. Others are private students of Scripture. Regardless of personal beliefs and training, the overall ministry orientation is based on a common belief and expectation in a real and present God. This orientation acknowledges and seeks the active ministry of the Holy Spirit at every moment of treatment.

Over the years, FMI team members have brought the best knowledge and skill gleaned from their years of both clinical and faith experience. A central underlying theological assumption has remained foundational. We hold to a basic belief that our Lord is creator and sustainer of the universe and not random in His involvement in this world. We have sought to identify and understand His intended design for us as people and for how relationships best function. This basic faith orientation also demands that we look to identify both the many ways humanity strays from God's design and the multitude of resulting negative consequences.

Since we believe God is not silent, we have sought to do our best as limited humans to hear from Him and be guided by Him. The Holy Scripture is our key, foundational source of divine guidance. As sensitive people of faith, we also exercise every other spiritual gift at our disposal. We trust that, as a community of believers, we can hold each other accountable to watch for unintended errors in belief and approach. A more thorough articulation of our theological assumptions, beliefs, and underpinnings will be addressed in detail in chapter 15: Theological Assumptions, though some will be touched on below.

Please recognize that we are not assuming our model currently possesses a perfect theology. Our understanding of God and His design is continually growing and (hopefully) maturing. What we present here is our current state of theological development. As a result of being in a continual state of maturation, we always encourage our clients—and obviously you, the reader—to engage in a thoughtful and discerning evaluation of all that is presented.

Organizationally, the commitment to be faith centered directs us to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in the development of our model. We are not willing to settle for creating a theory that simply relies on human wisdom and intelligence. Additionally, we are not interested in merely deriving principles and theories based upon our limited understanding and application of various scriptural passages. Our expectation is that divine, sometimes serendipitous revelations completely consistent with Scripture can stand up to the closest intellectual scrutiny while having significant practical application and usability. An idea or principle seemingly making sense, or seeming to be consistent with Scripture, is not enough for us to include it in the FMT model

and approach. The idea is subjected to a far more rigorous process of evaluation by our team of faith-based professionals before inclusion.

Professional Foundations

With a common faith as the backdrop, FMT has been developed with significant contributions from many gifted and experienced professionals. The FMI team consists of licensed psychologists, counselors, marriage and family therapists, and clinical social workers. Each professional on the team is expected to bring the best of their knowledge and experience to the workplace daily.

The clinical leadership at FMI has operated with an “iron sharpens iron” philosophy. A large portion of the therapy provided through the Hope Restored programs has always been conducted with cotherapy teams that are not static. Any qualified lead therapist is available to work with any other member of the team, and the cotherapy teams can vary for every session. Some have challenged this approach, suggesting that therapy teams ultimately would function more effectively and efficiently as consistent, practiced teams. While that may be true in some respects, a different value was deemed of greater importance for the overall strength and development of the broader team. It is assumed that therapists will best stretch and grow personally and professionally when able to learn to work together with a variety of skilled, like-minded professionals, significantly different from themselves in both training and experience. This collegial value and approach have meaningfully contributed to professionals feeling part of a larger FMI team and the overarching Focus on the Family marriage mission.

With that value in mind, FMI has successfully created and maintained a culture of professional growth and development. An intentional environment of collaboration has materially contributed to the evolution of the FMT model and approach. FMI therapists are encouraged to share the best of what they learn, respectfully work through differences of approach and orientation, and spur each other to investigate new potential therapeutic frontiers. Additionally, since there is almost infinite variety and creativity in the array of relational dysfunction our clients present, opportunities to therapeutically learn and grow seem endless.

Finally, as trained, conscientious professionals, we recognize that both our goal and our responsibility is to learn from and stand upon the learning of those that have come before us. We do not believe it is better to create a theory and approach to therapy from scratch or in a vacuum. Thus, we want to give credit to the theories

and techniques we have been influenced by, learned from, and borrowed from in the development of FMT. Chapter 17: Theoretical Foundations articulates the various theoretical influences as a foundation for this presentation of FMI's contribution to professional growth and dialogue. We trust that exploring our common heritage, while highlighting similarities and differences, will be helpful in both understanding and applying the FMT model to work with distressed couples.

Foundational Objectives of FMT

At the heart of FMT are a series of key philosophical, theological, and therapeutic objectives that have guided both the development and the application of this model. Also underlying FMT are several theological and psychological assumptions that have formed our therapeutic basics and treatment. The articulation of objectives and assumptions will help the reader gain a deeper appreciation of the *why* behind our approach and intervention strategies.

As a marriage therapy model, FMT developed a clear and simple definition of a great marriage: *A relationship both spouses feel great about—and both feel great about the direction the marriage is heading.* A marriage does not qualify as great when only one member is happy with it, even if that person is ecstatic. As simple as this basic definition is, it is astounding how rarely couples have established this criterion as their central operating objective.

Additionally, since Focus on the Family's faith position is generally well known, the primary clientele in the Hope Restored Marriage Intensive Programs are professing Christians. We hope and assume both spouses are believers and desire to have Christ at the center of their relationship. Obviously, this is not always the case, but it is the assumed starting place. Therapeutic adjustments are made as needed when working with individuals of little or no faith.

When working with Christians in marital distress, conjoint therapeutic goals can be established. One is to help them identify and work to overcome obstacles that keep them from having a marriage they *both* feel great about. The second is to help them explore God's intended design and align with it personally and relationally.

A Person-Centric Approach

One central characteristic of the FMT approach to marital treatment is that—while being committed to helping clients create and maintain a healthy and satisfying relationship—there is a simultaneous and unwavering “person-centric” approach.

We fundamentally believe that Jesus came and died for the salvation of people, not marriages. The people are eternal, but the marriage is not. *So while promoting attitudes and skills useful in building healthy marriages is essential, focusing on the well-being of the people must remain primary.* Since the marriage does not exist apart from the people in it, the marriage can never be healthier than the emotional, spiritual, and relational health of the individuals within it. Therefore, a tight focus on the health and well-being of the individual is maintained. It is probably worth noting that, contrary to what some might assume and expect, this person-centered approach to marital therapy has consistently yielded an extraordinary degree of success and effectiveness with couples in marital distress. This outcome research of FMT is reviewed in chapter 18: Relevant Research.

With the ultimate health and well-being of the individuals *and* the marriage in mind, the theological position on the necessary dependency on God must be mentioned here. A fundamental Christian belief is that life itself is fully dependent on God the creator and sustainer. All humanity experiences this aspect of common grace, regardless of any awareness or recognition of this fact. In addition, God is not random and is, in fact, completely intentional. Therefore, all life—including every individual—was created on purpose, with purpose, and God Himself remains actively involved. The resulting conclusion assumes a life and marriage well lived must include ultimately identifying one's true identity in Christ while striving to clarify and walk in line with one's corresponding divine purpose. Ultimately, that purpose will have something to do with contributing in some meaningful way to the larger unfolding of God's kingdom plan and purpose.

Throughout Scripture, God is confirmed to be a completely relational being, living in a perfect triune relationship comprising Father, Son, and Spirit. Relationships appear central to both who He is and how He accomplishes His purpose. Humans, made in His image, are also relational beings, and our relationships are a primary vehicle through which God accomplishes His purposes. There may be no relationship more powerfully positioned to contribute to furthering God's kingdom purposes than marriage. Marriage, by design, is intended to be the most intimate of all relationships a person can have.

Marriage Is Meant to Be More Than a Source of Fulfillment

Another underlying assumption is that, even though a marriage can be a tremendous source of fulfillment and satisfaction, marriage is ultimately meant for more than just that. The relationship itself can *also* make a meaningful contribution

to God's purposes and the unfolding of His kingdom plan. The FMT approach strives to help people see how their marriage is simultaneously designed to bless both married individuals and to bring a divinely inspired blessing to all who are touched by it.

With all the above in mind, FMT therapists see both the individuals and the marriage as simultaneous clients of therapy. Therapy/counseling using FMT must attempt to concurrently attend to the health and well-being of three entities: husband, wife, and relationship. Ideally, all three must be given attention and care. Hopefully, a therapist will not be placed in a position of having to choose any one over the others. However, if a choice is forced, the well-being of the eternal individuals will be given priority over the temporal relationship. The reader will find elements of this posture articulated and developed throughout this book.

An interesting note is warranted here. Some readers may have concerns that this approach either gives license to individuals looking for an excuse to exit their marriage or presents the wrong focus for marital therapy/counseling; neither are generally true. Clients rarely seek FMT as an easy justification for divorce, and no one seems to question the level of importance FMT therapists place on creating and maintaining a satisfying and God-honoring relationship.

Basic Role of Therapy and the Therapist

God designed humans to be relational beings, patterned after Him. This includes being fundamentally communal by nature. Beyond marriage, people are designed to exist and thrive in strong, supportive communities. The nuclear family is ideally at the center, but then add extended families, faith families, tribes, townships, etc., as the concentric community circles continue outward. In an ideal world, support, guidance, teaching, and every key item needed for people, marriages, and families to survive and thrive are available to all from within their respective healthy support structures.

Unfortunately, our increasingly mobile and hectic lifestyles have made relative isolation more common than communal support. Add to the equation the desperate state of a fallen world, often far from the heart of God, and the much-needed support is largely unavailable or of a poor and unwanted quality. Hence the rise and importance of the helping professions. When practicing well, a quality therapist/counselor can be worth their weight in gold. When the ongoing effort within the field of behavioral sciences to find effective and consistent treatment methods is in

the hands of a discerning, God-submitted professional, a therapist/counselor can become a meaningful member of a client/family support team.

Our focus at FMI, expressed in this book, is to assist all types of marriage helpers to become the most effective member of the client's support structure possible. Competent and ethical marriage helpers do not seek to create dependency in the couples they support. Helpers do potentially serve a valuable role, but realistically help is provided because of a breakdown in a person's intended support system. When professional service is at its best, everything possible is done to equip and empower clients to develop a life-giving relationship with God and build into their lives effective support systems. Ultimately, the best work of professional helpers renders future involvement largely unnecessary or, at least, merely optional.

Maintaining Perspective

The experience of training therapists has often revealed the obvious fact that most people entering the helping professions genuinely want to make a powerful difference in the lives of those they help. Christian professionals typically search early on to identify and connect with their divine purpose in life while hoping to ensure that their lives and efforts are significant. Genuine compassion for the hurting and broken people being served, combined with a passion to meaningfully help, can easily and unknowingly develop into a subtle form of a "messiah complex" lurking undetected inside. Clients who are desperate may pleadingly look to the professional as if they are drowning, hoping we can save them from their misery. As professionals grow in maturity, it becomes imperative that they identify this trap and address it as soon as possible. Professionals are wise to remember that, no matter how well trained, spiritually sensitive, and gifted they may be, humans don't save or heal anyone! The Savior and the Healer is the Lord Himself. The professional's job is to help people find their way to Him and help identify and remove any blockages to full and ongoing access. Then we step out of the way.

The above statement may seem remedial to some, and the intent here is not to offend or minimize the reader's awareness or spiritual maturity. Rather, it is intended to make clear a fundamental orientation as helping professionals and an overt stance assumed by all FMT therapists. This understanding materially influences how professionals posture while developing the therapeutic relationships with clients they are privileged to serve. This humility is essential to fully grasp and effectively utilize the various treatment strategies and techniques found within the FMT model and approach.

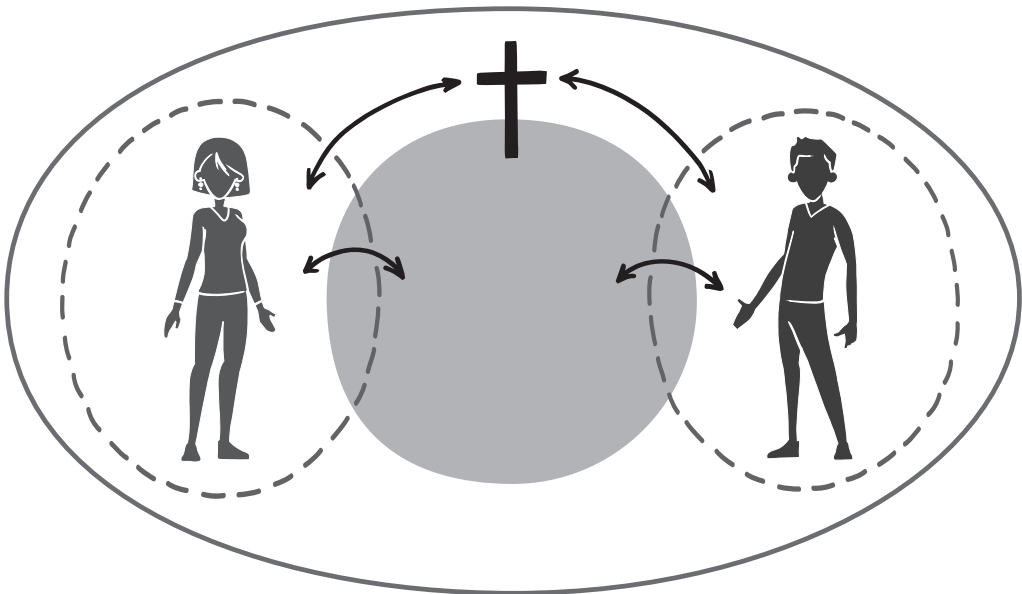
FMT Conceptual Framework

The FMT model consists of several key foundational conceptual components and several tools. A detailed presentation of each of the six elements will occur in chapters 3 through 8. What follows here will be a brief introduction to each.

Healthy Marriage Model

The basic FMT model of marital health and recovery can be best understood and visualized through a diagram known as the Healthy Marriage Model. Both the beauty and power of this depiction of marriage is its elegant simplicity consisting of a male and a female character and four circles:

Healthy Marriage Model

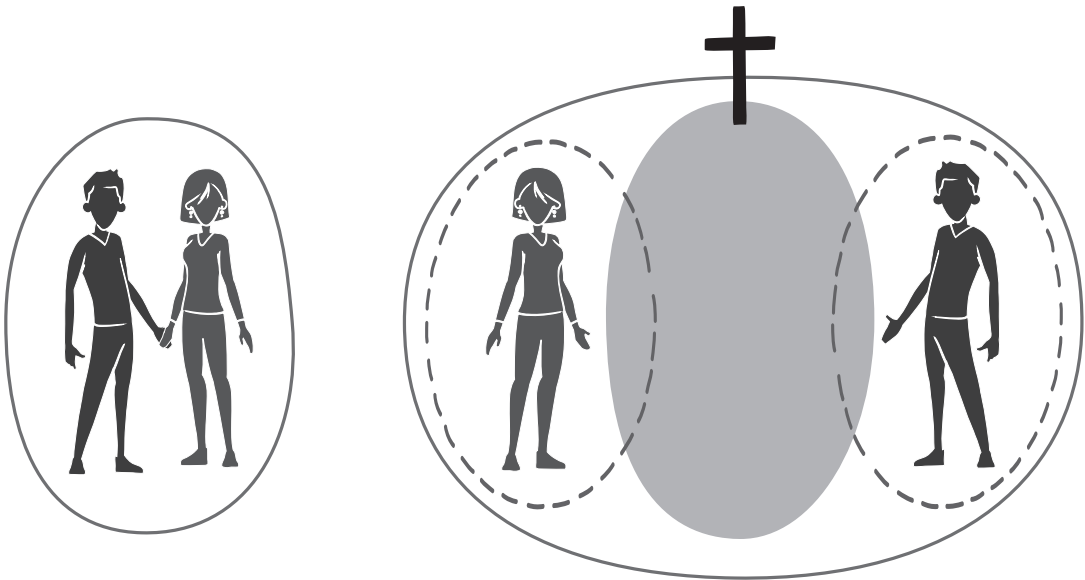


The circle around each person represents personal responsibility for overall health and well-being. The inner circle is the relational interactive space where human connection occurs. The outer circle reflects the marriage covenant boundary. All the FMT elements and activity can be represented within this picture.

The Healthy Marriage Model establishes the idea that a marriage is the union of two “becoming whole” individuals, each needing ongoing care and attention, who marry and create a third living entity—the relationship. For a Christian marriage to thrive, all three must be nurtured, attended to, and cared for.

A surprising therapeutic reality is the sheer number of clients who point to this diagram as the powerful game changer in their marital therapy/counseling experience. When seen in comparison to their normally unarticulated marital expectation, as illustrated below, it generates a startling new view of the ideal marriage structure and relational orientation going forward.

Compare



Clients commonly discover new insight and impact as they recognize each person as whole and independent within a marital covenant, with clearly visible boundaries, and areas of responsibility. This model provides therapists with a simple, easily created tool that establishes a clear visual foundation that can be returned to as often as is deemed therapeutically useful. Chapter 3 expounds a thorough explanation of the Healthy Marriage Model.

Safety and Security

The second primary conceptual component is the foundational principle of safety and security. Clients generally understand the importance of safety and security; however, when most are asked if their relationship is safe, they commonly limit their thoughts to physical safety. In FMT, safety and security go beyond the very important aspect of physical safety alone.

Physical Safety: freedom from fear of any form of physical disrespect or unwanted bodily interaction and touch.

Mental Safety: freedom to share thoughts and beliefs without fear of ridicule or judgment.

Spiritual Safety: freedom to share one's beliefs and spiritual journey and to co-experience God through worship and prayer without fear or regret.

Emotional Safety: freedom to share feelings without invalidation or judgment.

The underlying assumption is that humans were designed for deep, intimate connection with others and marriage ideally provides opportunity for one of the deepest forms of human bonding. But to approach intimate connection in the absence of genuine safety and security is an exercise in frustration and futility, a setup for disappointment and/or injury. Without a sense of safety and security in place, people may aim to artificially create an intimate connection—by trying to force themselves and their spouse to open their hearts. Intimacy ultimately is the result of having a connection of open heart to open heart. The FMT model encourages couples to see safety and security as “job number one.” When people feel supremely safe—physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally—they generally relax and open and connect with ease.

Creating a safe and secure environment is the necessary starting place to make significant improvement in relational dynamics. In fact, most FMT elements in some way work to enhance the overall experience of safety and security. The concept of safety and security will be further developed in chapter 4: Safety and Security.

Reactive Cycle

The third primary conceptual insight is the Reactive Cycle. Since a marriage is always the union of two people with God-created differences, entering from unique familial cultures, with gender, personality, and temperament differences added, conflict is inevitable. The Reactive Cycle is a simple way to help clients see that underneath relationship conflict is a predictable cycle that occurs when one spouse's fears—usually the result of old disappointments and emotional wounds—are triggered, prompting a knee-jerk reaction in an attempt to mitigate the discomfort and pain. That reaction will commonly trigger a fear in the other spouse, prompting a reaction, which commonly triggers another button in the first spouse. The result is an unpleasant spin of emotional trigger and reaction.

When not seen and understood, this normally unconscious knee-jerk reactive spin is a common source of disempowering, painful, and disappointing marital

distress. When clients become aware of what has been under the surface, the couple can develop strategies to break the destructive and unpleasant cycle. This insight helps explain to clients why conflict around most any topic feels eerily similar to all other conflicts within their relationship, regardless of the topic.

In FMT, couples are asked to take a simple Reactive Cycle spouse survey which aids couples in mapping their Reactive Cycle so they can visually see the dynamics at work in their relationship. (See Appendix: Identifying Your Reactive Cycle.) Couples typically have a powerful *aha!* moment when viewing a visualization of their Reactive Cycle. The insights can lead to instantaneous feelings of relief as they finally see how and why they get stuck in conflict. Therapeutic opportunities to eliminate a futile blame cycle and work with deeper emotional issues then become readily available. The Reactive Cycle will be further explored and developed in chapter 5: Reactive Cycle.

Care of Self

The final three core elements of the FMT model represent the three conceptual relationship-building principles of self-care, emotionally centered communication, and conflict management. Each includes a simple and usable corresponding tool.

FMT views each individual spouse, in addition to the relationship, as an important focus of therapy. The health and well-being of each individual connected to their divine purpose is of critical importance to an FMT therapist. Due to the eternal nature of each person, FMT therapists may emphasize, *“The ultimate well-being of the individual will always take precedence over the well-being of the marriage.”*

To many Christians, such messages sound radical at first, almost like anti-Christian, secular, humanistic statements. However, FMT therapists assert just as strongly, *“You were created by God on purpose, with purpose, and are on the planet to contribute to the unfolding of God’s ultimate plan and purpose. As an empty vessel, you are unavailable to God, yourself, your family, and the world. You can’t give what you don’t have.”*

Clients typically respond by becoming at least open enough to give the therapist time to develop the underlying rationale of the central importance of being a whole, healthy self as key to a life of God-honoring service. Care of self and the five-step Care Cycle tool will be developed further in chapter 6: Care of Self.

Emotionally Centered Communication

When couples are asked where they struggle and need help, the most commonly cited concern is communication challenges. FMT teaches two distinct communication

methods designed to drive at two different objectives and outcomes. The first utilizes a tool called Heart Talk, a speaker-listener technique developed primarily to fuel an emotional connection for the couple. With an underlying assumption that humans were created for close, intimate connection, Heart Talk is designed to maintain a profound emotionally intimate bond. The Heart Talk method of emotionally centered communication will be presented more thoroughly in chapter 7: Communication and Emotional Connection.

Conflict Management

The final concept in the FMT model revolves around communication that helps couples manage conflict and differences in ways that create and foster a deep feeling of unity with God and each other. This communication tool has come to be referred to as Work Talk. Under normal circumstances, human differences can be challenging. Conflict, power struggles, and disunity are practically unavoidable when attempting to manage those differences within the vulnerability and high stakes of an intimate marriage. Mark 3:25 states, “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” To counter those challenges, FMT seeks to help couples adopt and implement a “no losers” policy to assure they structure their relationship to remain in complete unity. Toward that end, we use a tool called the Steps to a Win-Win, which functions as a feedback loop to ensure the couple is always driving toward outcomes they both feel good about. This unity-building conflict-management method is presented more fully in chapter 8: Communication and Unity.

Section III provides further information about the foundations underlying the Focus Marital Therapy model and approach. Chapters 15 and 16 will present the theological assumptions and psychological assumptions that control and influence every application of this method of couples therapy. Chapter 17: Theoretical Foundations will highlight some of the many great thinkers and approaches to therapy within our profession that have influenced our thinking. Chapter 18 will then share our relevant research. Throughout this book, the reader is encouraged (whenever our discussion challenges their worldview or professional assumptions) to join us in the pursuit of theological and scientific integrity. This book is part of the larger conversation among our professional community on how to best serve the people who seek our consultation, assistance, and guidance. If these pages lead the reader to join the ongoing dialogue, then we are accomplishing our objective.