

nected. However, don't force it. If one of you needs to stop or rest, please honor that request. Play stays fun when we are tender toward weaknesses and we respect limitations. It is important to learn how to let the other person know when you are getting overwhelmed by something and need to pause or stop. Some couples have code words, like "avocado" (I made that one up). But the point is to have signals that keep interactions safe and enjoyable by letting the other person know when you need a break.

Earlier in the book we mentioned the hormone **oxytocin**. Let's take a closer look at this important chemical. Oxytocin is sometimes called "the bonding hormone." When it is present, it *personalizes joy* by telling our brain that *our spouse* is the source of the good stuff. It is like glue that helps us stay attached. Oxytocin makes us feel generous, trusting, and connected with the one we love. This love hormone increases with skin-to-skin contact, so you will notice each exercise includes a variety of ways to physically connect. The exercises may look modest—even rigid—at first glance, but watch the sparks fly when you intentionally interact with the one you love!

How well the exercises go for you comes down to one main factor: the status of your brain's relational circuits.<sup>2</sup> If your relational brain is awake and alert, you will be able to start some joy. If your relational brain is asleep, the exercises will feel tedious and tiresome. For this reason, each exercise includes steps to activate your rela-

tional brain so you get the most out of each interaction. Pausing to feel thankful will warm up your relational brain, so anytime you feel disconnected during an exercise, this step will reboot your relational circuits for maximum joy. And, while the exercises are designed for you to practice in a sequential order, you and your beloved can practice exercises as often as you like and in the order that works best for you. Go, strap on your seat belt and enjoy the ride!

### Practice eye smiles 15 MIN

1. Looking at your spouse is one of the best ways for your brain to build joy while voice tone is a close second. This means seeing your spouse and hearing your spouse's voice can be invigorating—as long as joy is the emotion you are amplifying! The muscles around the eyes are where spontaneous joy shows up, not the mouth. **Eye smiles** are what happen when we are glad to be together and our eyes "light up" seeing the one we love.

Eye smiles engage the brain's joy center and nonverbal communication happens at a rapid rate, so you want to 1) start out feeling relational when you begin this exercise, and 2) look away for rest at the right times when you feel like you are no longer growing joy. Don't force it! This

interaction is meant to be an interactive joy and rest sequence, not a stare-down contest. As soon as you feel the joy is no longer growing by looking at your spouse, it is time to look away for a few seconds and disengage to rest. Rest is a normal response, so be sure to rest as needed. Return to the eye smiles as soon as you feel ready and it looks like your partner is ready.

Joy can bring up a variety of reactions, so don't be surprised if different emotions come up while you practice, from tears to laughter. If this exercise is uncomfortable for you, you may want to experiment with playing music in the background as you practice this skill. Try both high-energy and low-energy music to see what you prefer.

**NOTE:** Try this exercise several times in different ways and see which methods connect with you the best—a little practice goes a long way!

2. While cuddling, reminisce about one of your favorite memories with your spouse. ⌚ 5 MIN
3. Next, play some music you both enjoy, then sit across from each other knee to knee while you hold hands. Without using words, look into each other's eyes with a warm smile (connect), then look away (rest) and take a breather whenever you need one. The goal here is to connect, then rest again and again for two minutes. ⌚ 2 MIN

4. When finished, hold hands or cuddle while you discuss how this exercise felt for you. What did you notice? ⌚ 5 MIN
5. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 5 MIN

#### **Date Night** ⌚ 15 MIN

1. Plan a special date night doing something fun you both enjoy. As part of your evening, be sure to include the following exercise:  
Reminisce some of the highlights from your wedding day and honeymoon. What do you remember about your special day that made you smile? Try to come up with as many fun moments as you can remember. ⌚ 7 MIN

**NOTE:** *If for some reason your wedding day does not invoke fun feelings, then think about a vacation together or another memory that is meaningful for both of you.*

2. At the end of your time, hold hands or cuddle, then share what was fun about this special outing. Highlight three things you enjoy about your partner's heart and character. ⌚ 5 MIN  
Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 3 MIN

**Get Relational** ⌚ 15 MIN

1. While holding hands or cuddling, spend several minutes telling each other the qualities you enjoy about your partner. Be sure to look into your lover's eyes and try to include moments you observed these qualities in action. ⌚ 5 MIN

*EXAMPLE: I really like how generous and thoughtful you are. Just today you surprised me with my favorite bag of coffee beans that you know I love!*

2. Notice how you feel when giving and receiving appreciation. Talk about what you notice as you practiced the previous step. ⌚ 3 MIN

3. Take some time kissing like you did when you were first married. ⌚ 2 MIN

*HINT: You may want to brush your teeth first if you had onions or garlic for lunch.*

4. Close with several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 5 MIN

**Just between Us** ⌚ 15 MIN

1. You will want some privacy for this exercise. (You can wear your birthday suit if you like.) While lying in bed holding each other, start by sharing some highlights from your day. ⌚ 3 MIN
- NOTE: Avoid talking about anything upsetting.*

2. Spend some time caressing each other while you share stories about your favorite intimate moments together. Include specifics about what made these times meaningful for you. ⌚ 3 MIN
3. Next, take some time to cuddle and quiet without caressing while you both place a hand on your partner's chest to feel his or her heartbeat. ⌚ 3 MIN
4. Now, continue the caressing for another several minutes followed by cuddling while you take turns listening to each other's heartbeat. ⌚ 3 MIN  
Then enjoy some relational sexual intimacy that brings you both smiles and satisfaction. (Take as much time as you need for this step!)
5. Have some time to rest, then close by expressing appreciation to your spouse about what you enjoy about his/her heart, mind, and body. ⌚ 3 MIN

a diet plan for your marriage. Only, instead of shrinking your waistline, you are shrinking your joy gap. Whenever you feel like you need a refresher, you can get out the book and go through the plan again.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

No marriage is perfect, but if you build enough joy in your relationship, you will recover from conflict more quickly, feel greater security in your relationship, and find yourself looking forward to time together more often.

One of the most powerful things you can do in this life is have a great marriage. Think about it. Marriage is a punchline for comedians. People have learned to expect that marriage is a trial to endure. But imagine the impact on our society if joy became the common experience of married couples everywhere! We would see less anger, less anxiety, and better relationships. Our world could use a joy revolution, don't you think? It starts one marriage at a time.

We hope this book has helped you shrink the joy gap in your marriage and helped you set sail on a new adventure of building a joy-filled marriage. Just a reminder: There is more fun to be had! The appendices contain more exercises that you can use to continue building joy in your marriage.

#### APPENDIX 1

## More “Play Together” Exercises

### Expressing Your Joy 15 MIN

The brain processes nonverbal cues faster than words. This is why, “It’s not *what* you said, it’s *how* you said it!” carries so much weight in conversation. As I say in my book *Transforming Fellowship*,

Eye contact, facial expressions, voice tone (prosody), posture, gestures, timing and intensity all contribute to the interactive dance we know as communication. . . . Our body is the canvas to express our thoughts, feelings, desires, fears and our most prized memories. . . . When working together, our brain and body tell a story that shows up on our face and in our voice!

For this exercise, you first engage the nonverbal brain in order to activate joy in your relationship.

1. While cuddling or holding hands, individually think about the first time you met your spouse. What was happening? What were you thinking and feeling? ⌚ 2 MIN
2. Now, take turns nonverbally “telling” the story about the time you first met your spouse. Using your face, body, motions, and gestures, convey what was happening in the story including what you were thinking and feeling. Be creative and have fun. ⌚ 4 MIN
3. When you finish your nonverbal story, tell the story again using words while you demonstrate it. ⌚ 6 MIN
4. Once you both finish telling your stories, spend some time cuddling or holding hands, then discuss what you enjoyed about this exercise. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 3 MIN

### Get More Relational ⌚ 15 MIN

1. Take turns massaging each other. You can start with your partner’s neck, shoulders, arms, hands, back, etc. While you massage your partner, emphasize the qualities you enjoy about your partner so he or she can hear. ⌚ 10 MIN

*HINT: You may want to set a timer so each person receives the same amount of time.*

2. Share how this exercise felt for you. ⌚ 2 MIN
3. Practice several minutes of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 5 MIN

### Interactive Adventure ⌚ 15 MIN

For this exercise, you and your spouse need to do something fun that engages your body and your relational brain.

1. Try an activity that is both fun and interactive, such as flying a kite, throwing a Frisbee, playing ping-pong or hacky-sack, painting or drawing, giving piggyback rides, riding bicycles, walking a trail, or playing miniature golf or charades. ⌚ 12 MIN

*NOTE: The goal here is to have fun and smile, not win.*

2. At the end of the activity, spend some time cuddling or holding hands and discuss what you enjoyed about this interaction. ⌚ 5 MIN