



Close to Home Study Guide

Dealing with Marital Discord

1. Opening (3 minute)*

During this session, be especially sensitive to the fact that some in the group may not be married. Also, some may have experienced a painful divorce, or may be experiencing abuse or violence from their partner. It will be important to clearly distinguish between “normal” discord and an abusive relationship.

Acknowledge that there is great beauty and joy in love, but also tremendous pain when this is absent or no longer present. Read Psalm 88:1-5 as a way to describe some of the despair and misery which people experience during times of conflict or discord.

2. Story-telling (7 minutes)

Summarize the story about Christy and Jack. What was their “fight” about? What had happened to them and their marriage?

Alternatively, invite each person to think about a significant disagreement they’ve had with a spouse or close friend. What led to the disagreement and how did they work through it? What are two important lessons they’ve learned about dealing with conflict?

3. Review of pamphlet (15 minutes)

- Ask the group to list qualities needed for a good marriage. Compare your list with the research given in the middle box on page 7 and the brown box on page 8. What is similar or different?
- What are some reasons for marital discord, or what factors place stress on a marriage? Look at the list on page 4 and note how your list is similar or different.
- Discuss the paragraph about submission at the bottom of page 7. How do you understand the primary message of Ephesians 5:21-31? Be sure to note the strong emphasis on love, as well as the words about being subject to one another.
- Emphasize the caution in the red box at the bottom of page 8, and discuss how abuse is different from discord and disagreement. Review the signs of a healthy relationship and the signs of an abusive relationship given in the brochure, *Home Shouldn't be a Place that Hurts*.
- Point out that abuse can be present even when there is no physical violence. The primary characteristic of abuse is a pattern of control, which may include emotional, physical, sexual and/or spiritual intimidation or violence. Stress that couples counseling is not appropriate in these situations because the person being abused may be in serious danger if they disclose what is happening to them.

4. Reading of Scripture text (7 minutes)

Review the material on pages 6-7 about the agape love which God showed to us in Jesus. Point out that we receive this love as a gift but also learn to love. Spend some time discussing these two dynamics. How do we receive love as a gift? How do we practice and grow in love? Note that

*The suggested time frames are for a 45-minute session. With more discussion and storytelling, you will need to adjust upward, and possibly extend to a second session.

love is not primarily a feeling or emotion, but a way of living and relating to one another.

Jesus demonstrated this love in many ways. In John 14-15, he called his disciples *friends* and asked them to love one another as he had loved them. He answered their questions and gave them an example of how to serve one another with care and humility.

His friendship with Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:1-44) also displayed great care and warmth. Each person was free to ask questions, express disappointment, and show emotion and concern. Love doesn't always mean harmony or complete agreement, but deep respect, honesty and empathy.

What other examples of love from the Bible have been helpful to the group?

5. Steps toward healing (12 minutes)

- Review the *Steps toward a wholesome relationship* on pages 8-9. Why is it important to reach out to others? What is “normal” stress and when is it necessary to ask for help? How did Christy know it was time to reach out?
- Think about how the congregation provides education and encouragement to married partners. Brainstorm additional ideas, such as providing pre-marital counseling, mentors for young couples, Sunday School classes, pastoral check-ins, baby-sitting so couples can take time for a “date,” sermons, parenting classes, etc.
- If there is time, invite one or two couples who've been married more than 30 years to share with the group. What has been most helpful to them? Most challenging? How have they worked through difficult times?
- Also think about how the congregation provides resources and training for dealing with conflict in constructive ways. What additional steps could be taken?
- Provide information on local resources such as marriage counselors, pre-marital and marriage enrichment seminars, and workshops on conflict transformation.
- Encourage your church library to purchase the books listed on page 10, as well as resources on conflict transformation. If possible, bring titles to your session.
- Pray together for all those dealing with a difficult marriage or other close relationship, that all involved would find healing and wholeness.

6. Closing (1 minute)

Loving God, we acknowledge that there are difficult relationships among us. Heal us we pray and heal our relationships. Help us to love and encourage one another and not tear each other down. Keep us accountable. Give us wisdom, discernment, patience and strength. Hold us with your love and lead us toward wholeness. Amen.



This study guide is written by Linda Gehman Peachey, Director for Women's Advocacy in the Peace and Justice Ministries section of Mennonite Central Committee US. It is one of a series of free downloadable study guides for the Close to Home pamphlets, which can be ordered from the Mennonite Publishing Network of the Mennonite Church (see www.mpn.net/closetohome) or the Mennonite Brethren Kindred Productions (www.kindredproductions.com/closetohome).