

What is a Mentor?

Mentoring involves life-to-life exchanges that help others discover and pursue their passions and sort out their priorities. - David Stoddard

Ask any successful leader and he or she will tell you: a young person starting out in a career, for example, will benefit greatly from a mentor—an older, experienced person who knows the ropes and will teach a protégé how things are done.

Here's a pop quiz question:

A mentor is . . .

- a) A model
- b) An encourager
- c) An impartor of knowledge
- d) All of the above

The answer is "d." A mentor may wear many different hats but the one thing that all mentors share is the ability to listen and encourage. A mentor is "a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction," according to the Uncommon Individual Foundation, an organization devoted to mentoring research and training. It reports that mentoring is one of the most powerful tools we have for influencing human behavior.

The term *mentor* arises from an unlikely source. It first appeared in Homer's classic, *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus asked a wise man named Mentor to care for his son, Telemachus, while Odysseus was off fighting in the Trojan War. Mentor taught the boy "not only in book learning but also in the wiles of the world." The fabled Mentor must have done his job well, because Telemachus grew up to be an enterprising lad who gallantly helped his father recover his kingdom.

But mentoring is more than the stuff of legends. A real, life mentor, one who serves as a model and provides individualized help and encouragement, can be invaluable to a receptive mentoree. Among the most important roles mentors play include:

- giving timely information to mentorees
- modeling aspects of what they wish to impart
- challenging and motivating mentorees to move to higher levels · directing mentorees to helpful resources when needed (sometimes painfully so)
- encouraging goodness and inspiring greatness
- lessening mentorees' anxiety by normalizing experiences
- helping mentorees set goals
- keeping mentorees accountable to their goals
- providing a periodic review and evaluation of mentorees' performance

A word of caution is in order: Mentors can do all of the aforementioned things and still be ineffective. Two dynamics are vital to the success of any mentoring relationship. Without them, all the modeling, challenging, encouraging, goal-setting, and accountability will fall flat.

The two critical dynamics are (1) **attraction**, and (2) **responsiveness**.

Attraction is the starting point in every effective mentoring relationship. The mentor and the mentoree must be drawn to each other to some degree. If either side is not genuinely interested in the other, true mentoring will never take place. Along with this attractiveness, the mentoree must be willing and ready to learn from the mentor. Without a responsive attitude and a receptive spirit on the part of the mentoree, little genuine mentoring can occur.

What is a Marriage Mentor?

Through our Center for Relationship Development we have helped coordinate thousands of marriage mentoring relationships over the years and we know firsthand how beneficial this relationship can be. We've heard countless stories. We've followed hundreds of these relationships. And we've come to a conclusion: there is no single way to be a marriage mentor; every mentoring relationship takes on its own personality. Yet the variance in these relationships still operates within certain parameters and that's what allows us to define our terms.

So here goes. We define a marriage mentor as ***a relatively happy, more experienced couple purposefully investing in another couple to effectively navigate a journey that they have already taken.***

It is a broad definition because, as we just mentioned, there is no one right way to mentor. Each mentoring relationship takes on its own style. The amount of time couples spend together and the content they discuss is personalized to that relationship. A marriage mentoring relationship can be short term or long term. It can be consistent and predictable or spontaneous and sporadic.

While every marriage mentoring relationship has its own style that unfolds as the relationship develops, some potential confusion can be spared if the mentors and mentorees discuss their initial expectations of the relationship. This discussion, of course, necessitates the mentoring couple to be somewhat clear on their own "style" before meeting with the mentorees. For example, you may want to discuss whether you see yourselves more as models or as coaches or as teachers or as guides, and so on.

For now, here is a representative list of what a marriage mentor couple does. A marriage mentor couple:

- willingly shares what they know (in a noncompetitive way)
- represents skill, knowledge, virtue, and accomplishment because
- they have gone before the couple they are mentoring
- takes a personal and heartfelt interest in the other couple's development and well-being
- offers support, challenge, patience, and enthusiasm while guiding other couples to new levels of competence
- points the way and represents tangible evidence of what another couple can become
- exposes the recipients of their mentoring to new ideas, perspectives, and standards
- has more expertise in terms of knowledge yet views themselves as equal to those they mentor

The point is that each marriage mentor couple needs to consider what it is that they want to bring to the mentoring relationship. This means considering your two personalities and traits. Importantly, it also means being clear about what your role as a mentor couple does *not* include.

What a Mentor is Not

"What I need is someone to talk to who has walked down the path I'm just beginning," said Lisa, four months into her new marriage. "Whenever I go to my mom or dad with a situation, they end up parenting me or teaching me something I don't really need to learn."

Lisa, like most newlyweds we have met, needs a mentor. Mom and Dad certainly serve a helpful function in the life of a new bride or groom, but they cannot usually offer the distance and objectivity that a mentor gives. For this reason, it is important to realize exactly what a mentor is not.

The following is a list of mistaken mentoring roles we have witnessed, offered as a guide to keeping you from making the same mistakes. A mentor is not:

- a mother or father. Your job is not to parent the couple you are mentoring.
- automatically a pal or a buddy. Your job is not necessarily to be friends for the purpose of socializing.
- "on call" for every little crisis. Your time is limited to discussion about major situations, not minor ones.
- necessarily committed long-term. The mentoring relationship may have a prescribed timeline or it may follow a natural cycle of its own.
- a professor. Your job is not to instruct in the traditional sense; you'll typically not need to prepare for your meetings or do any research. Your life experience is your teaching tool.
- a know-it-all. We'll have more to say about this later, but let's make it clear right now: your job is not to have all the answers.

Instead, a marriage mentor is *a relatively happy, more experienced couple purposefully investing in another couple to effectively navigate a journey that they have already taken.*

Marriage Mentoring Mission

The passengers on the bus don't go to the Greyhound depot, walk up to the ticket window, and ask, "Which bus has the friendliest driver?" Instead, they ask for the bus that will get them to the desired destination. Before they buy a ticket and get on board, they want to know the direction the bus is going.

- Rich Doeblen

The Christian church has been built through a sense of mission. The Apostle Paul's mission was to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. John's mission was to teach the love of Christ. And when you consider Jesus' disciples you can clearly see they had a sense of mission. His first twelve followers were called to be fishers of people. When his seventy volunteers spread out across Galilee, their mission was to proclaim the kingdom of God. When Jesus prepared to leave his followers on the Mount of Olives, he gave them the Great Commission (Mark 16:15).

The first generation of Christians knew what their mission was. They were to go into all their world, preaching and teaching the gospel, baptizing believers, and gathering them into a church. This mission was translated into operational terms they could follow. Anywhere a Christian family moved, they started a meeting of believers in their own home. And for three hundred years, the "house church" was the only kind of church the Christian movement knew.

We believe strongly that the first priority for marriage mentors should be a well defined mission. This mission needs to be clearly stated, enthusiastically accepted, and internally believed. To be effective, every couple who volunteers to mentor another couple needs a strong sense of mission.

So what is that mission and purpose? We've talked to enough marriage mentoring churches to know that many have their own way of articulating this. But a vast majority of local marriage mentoring ministries have yet to define it.

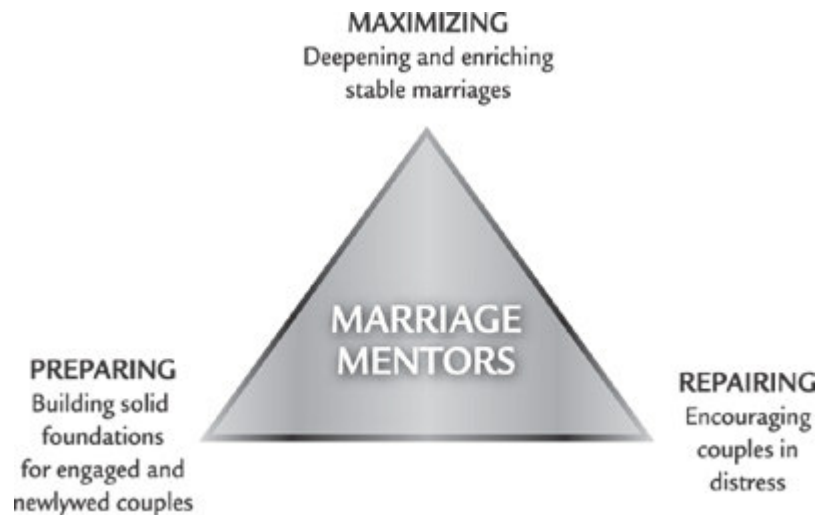
As with any mission, the place to begin is with a simple sentence stem: "The purpose of marriage mentoring is..." Once you can complete this sentence clearly and with enthusiasm, you have locked onto your mission. To help you do just that, allow us to give you a starting place. After reviewing many local marriage mentoring ministries and talking with volunteers and pastors, we believe the following sentence captures the spirit and belief of what most are trying to accomplish.

The purpose of marriage mentoring is to lovingly invest in the preparation, maximization, and restoration of lifelong marriages by walking alongside couples who are less experienced than their mentors.

Of course, you may find this purpose statement to be right in your sweet spot. Maybe it exactly captures what you are about. But feel free to edit it. Adapt it. Make it your own. The point is that for you as a couple to be great in your role as marriage mentors, you have to have a deep sense of your mission.

Marriage Mentoring Triad

So you know what marriage mentoring is; and you like the idea. But how do you line up mentor couples with couples in need? This is where the Marriage Mentoring Triad can help. [Click on the graphic below to download a PDF image.](#)

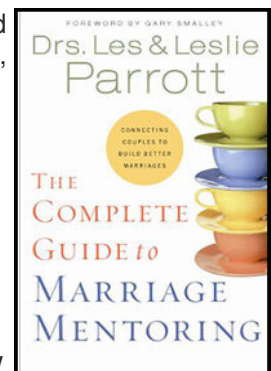


The Triad is depicted as a triangle with three major emphases. Most people can quickly and intuitively grasp the areas where mentors can be useful. We summarize each of these here, but flesh them out in much more detail in [The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring](#).

PREPARING: Mentoring Engaged and Newlywed Couples

So often we think of a marriage ceremony as the culmination of a courtship process. But in reality, it is only a beginning. It marks the start of lifelong love, offering newlyweds the opportunity cultivate positive habits right from the start that will pay off for them down through the decades.

The engagement period and newlywed months for a couple offer an especially important opportunity for marriage mentors. More than any other time in their married life, this window of opportunity can be the point at which they develop healthy habits that last a lifetime.



To equip mentor couples for helping engaged and newly married couples, we created a resource entitled [Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts](#). This resource is the culmination of nearly two decades of studying everything we can to help such couples get off on the right foot.

MAXIMIZING: Mentoring Couples from Good to Great

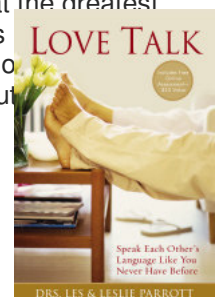
Sometimes the most neglected couples are the ones who are “doing just fine.” These are the couples who aren’t coping with a crisis. Their children are not acting out any more than is usual.

They aren’t struggling financially. From every indication they are committed to each other and in love. They are good citizens and church attendees. As we said, they are doing just fine. So what’s the issue?

To be frank, these couples may be missing out on something great.

Our friend and colleague Dr. Doug McKinley, a Christian psychologist in Chicago, often says that the greatest enemy to a great marriage is a good marriage. And he’s exactly right. That’s why so few couples marriage aspire to something better. They look around at other couples and realize they aren’t do *least we don’t have their problems*, they think to themselves. *We’re doing okay*. And they are. But for the state they are in, and by default, they’ve become complacent.

It doesn’t have to be this way. A good couple can make the leap to greatness – especially when marriage mentors are involved.

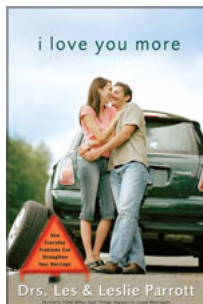


Since poor communication and time management consistently rank among the greatest barriers to a great marriage, we created two resources that can be used to mentor couples from good to great: [Love Talk](#) and [Your Time-Starved Marriage](#).

REPAIRING: Mentoring Couples in Distress

Every congregation has them: couples who are battling addiction, infidelity, infertility, loss, or some other serious difficulty. Often, these are couples on the edge of despair, looking into the abyss. They probably didn't see their crisis coming and, besides, no amount of planning could have prevented the jolt that has struck them. They may have had little or no control over its occurrence – but they can control their response to it. With hope and encouragement, with the model of a mentor couple who has gone through it before them, they can walk away from the abyss. Mentoring couples can literally turn couples in crisis around and become instrumental in saving their marriage.

We need to be clear. In nearly all cases, the marriage mentors who are coming alongside specific couples in crisis should have experienced this crisis before them. In other words, the best mentors for a couple struggling with loss are another couple who has successfully battled loss. Of course, the loss does not have to be exactly the same, but to gain respect and engender hope in the mentorees, they have to see that you know what they are going through.



We've created another resource to help in this area: [I Love You More](#). It is designed to show couples how minor and major problems can actually increase a couple's love for one another. Understood properly, problems can become the tipping point for a deeper love between a husband and a wife.

The Boomerang Effect

Effective mentor couples eventually recognize how much they receive from the couples they mentor. The wisdom of your mentorees, perhaps so different from your own, will complement and clarify your own understanding of marriage.

You will also be refreshed by this relationship. Mentoring will rejuvenate your marriage with the energy of youth. Almost by osmosis, the excitement of a blooming, or recovering, marriage in the couple you care about will begin to rub off on you.

And perhaps the most common aspect of the boomerang effect is satisfaction. As mentors, you will enjoy the satisfaction of work well done. When a married couple successfully works on any project together – whether wallpapering a room, raking autumn leaves, or planting a garden – a sense of satisfaction results. And how much more so when the project has lasting value!

Here are a few of the many, many responses we've received from mentor couples about their experiences:

Mentoring another couple causes us to talk about our own marriage more than we ever have before. We are enjoying some of the best conversations we've ever had because of it.

Anthony and Rebecca, married 41 years

We've been mentoring couples on the brink of divorce and since we've been there ourselves, we have a good idea of what they are experiencing. This experience renews our own commitment and makes us count our blessings, never taking our personal progress for granted.

Brian and Dee, married 38 years

We also think of our mentoring session like a date night. Not that we aren't doing serious work, but we typically feel like the batteries in our own marriage were recharged as a result of our mentoring.

Jerry and Taylor, married 22 years

The boomerang effect of marriage mentoring is significant. When you do good for another couple you're almost sure to receive more good in return!