



Crazy
Little Thing
Called
Marriage

Downloadable
Date Nights to
Strengthen Your
Marriage

FCCUS®FAMILY™ | FOCUS ON MARRIAGE™

Date Night Secret #1

One secret to maintaining romance in your marriage is to make a commitment to having one date a week. That's just you, your spouse, and an idea for fun. Erin and I usually also make time to share a meal. Preferably, you and your spouse should get away from the house and any distractions. But if an hour alone at home after the kids are asleep is all you've got, then make it work.

A date night should also include a *short* list of topics for discussion—and we don't mean household business like who's going to take little Morton to the dentist or whether you should put eggshells in the compost heap. We mean relationship topics that are presented in the form of questions like these: What attributes do you appreciate most about me? What dreams do you have for the next decade?

Commitment Date Night

Here are some suggestions for a date night designed to increase the commitment level of your marriage.

In honor of Chinese general Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, cook a Chinese meal together, or buy Chinese food at a sit-down restaurant, take-out chain, or at the grocery store.

Each spouse is to ask the following questions to the other spouse:

What was the most important part of our wedding vows?

What do you love about your marriage? List your favorite aspects of your marriage relationship.

What things do you see that demonstrate you have “burned the boats” and are committed to you?

What was most difficult about “burning the boats” for you?

Got More Time?

Watch one of these movies or select one of your own that reflects a theme in this chapter. If you're unsure if these selections are right for you, check out the movie reviews at Focus on the Family's Plugged In website (www.pluggedin.com).

The Song—lifelong commitment

Les Miserables—sacrificial love

The Spy Next Door—marriage is worth fighting for, even if you're a spy

Plan for Romance

Bring home a souvenir from your date night as a memento. It could be the take-out menu, chopsticks, or a fortune from inside an almond cookie. While you drive home, brainstorm a dream vacation or a special date. Later, budget to set aside some cash—ten dollars a week or more—so you can go somewhere or do something special for your next wedding anniversary. Keep the cash or a slip of paper with a running total written on it in a jar. Glue the memento to the jar so you have a visual reminder of your plans. Spending money on your marriage shows that you honor it.

Date Night Secret #2

In honor of the first nuclear chain reaction, which took place at Stagg Field, University of Chicago, dine on the best Chicago-style pizza you can bake or buy. During the date, discuss the ways you like to best relate to God. The goal is to understand how each of you uniquely connects spiritually with the Creator.

To help you out, we've listed nine spiritual love languages that are outlined in the book *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas. See which of these match your style.

The Naturalist who is most inspired to love God out-of-doors by being in a natural setting.

The Sensate who loves God with the senses—through awareness of taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound.

The Traditionalist who loves God through ritual and symbol.

The Ascetic who prefers to love God in solitude and simplicity.

The Activist who loves God through contributing toward justice and the enhancement of life in the world.

The Caregiver who loves God by loving others.

The Enthusiast who loves God with mystery and celebration.

The Contemplative who loves God through contemplation.

The Intellectual who loves God with the mind.

Got More Time?

At home, list the “spiritual giants” in your life. Those wonderful folks can be obscure people only you know, a relative, or a friend. But each of you must also list at least one contemporary Christian leader who has influenced you. Find a YouTube clip of that person and watch it together.

Plan for Romance

Pick a special spiritual event to attend—a church service out of your city, a couples retreat, a Christian concert, an apologetics seminar, a prayer hike—and plan to stay overnight in romantic accommodations, even if it's your bedroom that has been spruced up and the kids are taken care of somewhere else. Keep track of your spiritual insights and discuss them together the next morning.



Date Night Secret #3

We suspect that when you first started dating you talked till the wee hours of the morning. You couldn't wait to share the news of the day with your future spouse. But as the years ticked away, you decided the menu had changed. You could wait hours, days, or weeks to talk. Well, snap out of that mindset! This is the season to talk and share and delight in each other as never before.

Communication Date Night

Here are some suggestions for a date night designed to increase the communication level in your marriage.

Make "Talk-Os" or go out to a Mexican restaurant and order some tacos you normally wouldn't. With each ingredient, pick the first letter and say something you know about your spouse that begins with that letter sound. If you order or make fish tacos, for example, the ingredients would likely include fish, batter, cabbage, mayonnaise, pepper, and corn. You'd tell your spouse something like this: "F stands for your favorite pair of shoes, which are the Clark's tennis shoes. B is for your brother, who makes you worry. You wish he wouldn't drink so often."

Cue up the YouTube clip, "It's Not about the Nail," watch it together, and share if you've been in either spot. Talk about "what the nail might be" in your marriage. This is the link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4EDhdAHRog.



Date Night Secret #4

A date night should be fun for both spouses. Make sure you've crossed off enough to-dos on the chore list so you can relax. If that means waiting to go out for dessert on a Saturday night, then so be it. It's important to have your hearts and minds clear to focus on each other.

Fighting for Peace Date Night

Here are some suggestions for a date night designed to improve your ability to keep open hearts.

Go to a place that serves "comfort" foods such as meatloaf and mashed potatoes or chicken and dumpings . . . or whatever emotionally satisfying pile of carbohydrates fits the bill.

Each spouse is to ask the following questions to the other spouse:

Was your mom a Fighter or a Flighter? What about your dad?

Who is someone you know who handles conflict in a healthy way?

What do you identify as our first fight, and how could we have handled it differently?

Got More Time?

Watch a classic romance movie set during wartime in which the couple argues a lot. Ask each other what the main characters' hot buttons or pop-ups are. Some good choices include *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, or *The Patriot*. (Remember to check Focus on the Family's Plugged In website (www.pluggedin.com) for movie reviews of newer releases to make sure they are appropriate for you and your spouse.)

Plan for Romance

Decide to revisit and talk through one of your more manageable fights. Work on the conflict resolution skills taught in this chapter . . . then kiss and make up.

Date Night Secret #5

No one wants to be on a date with someone who talks negatively about other people. Learn to honor all in your speech, not merely your spouse. When you date your spouse, don't complain about your boss, coworkers, basketball buddies, best friends, mothers, or your kids' teachers. Don't talk about them, and if possible, don't even think about them. Honor your spouse by providing him or her with your undivided attention and a positive attitude.

Honoring Date Night

Here are some suggestions for a date night designed to help you see the value of your marriage partner.

To tip your hat to Starbucks and having a "special something" relationship, plan ahead to make a hot drink part of your meal together.

Ask each other the following questions:

What was the first thing you respected or admired about me?

What is one thing I've done for you that has made you "warm up" to me?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did your parents honor each other? How did their attitudes affect your view of marriage?

Got More Time?

Gather some nice paper and markers or colored pencils. Begin to list the positive traits of each other. Your goal should be at least one trait or memory for each year you've been married. Newlyweds should strive for at least five.

Plan for Romance

Hebrews 3:14 speaks to the honor of marriage and the importance of the "marriage bed." While you're on your date, plan something that will put that "something special" into your sex life or the atmosphere of your bedroom.

Date Night Secret #6

Sometimes your spouse needs to know a date is all about him or her. Be sure that you don't aim for win-win dates every week, compromising so that each of you is half-pleased with the choice. Every once in a while, you should sacrifice a night and do what your spouse wants to do, even if it's not your favorite. (Scratch that; do it even if you'd rather contract a tapeworm!) Make him or her feel pandered to, catered to, as if his or her wants are the most important thing in the world to you.

Nourishing Date Night

Plan ahead on how to work some nourishing Superfoods into a meal either at home, health-food store salad bar, or at a restaurant. Choose from wild-caught salmon, grass-fed beef, avocados, sweet potatoes, kale, blueberries, broccoli, mushrooms, almonds—go organic if you can.

While you're dining, discuss the top three "nourishing" actions your spouse already provides for you. Affirm him or her in those areas.

Got More Time?

Sometime in the next week, create a list of ways you'd like to be nourished, and ask your spouse to do the same. Have your spouse answer the statement: "I feel loved when you—." You answer the statement as well. Set aside an extra thirty minutes in the morning to discuss the lists together. Pick one or two things from the list you can do this week to nourish your spouse.

Plan for Romance

Nourishing your spouse includes caring for his or her physical well-being as well as emotional and spiritual needs. Set aside resources to learn how to give an energizing foot and calf massage. Choose a night and treat each other to a massage. You don't have to stop at the legs!

Date Night Secret #7

Spending time together as a family can also bond couples, so this date night idea is for those of you who can't find babysitters or can't afford one. You'll grow closer as a couple when you see each other being good parents, because those moments build respect.

So while family dates aren't great on a weekly basis, every once in a while they're beneficial. Your kids will also get to see what it's like for a man to treat his wife with respect, and vice versa. And, while we don't recommend you make out, showing affection to your spouse will be a good thing for your kids to witness.

Time Date Night

Learn the art of pre-ordering a meal at a fast-food restaurant like Chipotle or a sit-down casual diner like Red Robin. Save the phone numbers in your cell phone for the next time you're in a rush. (This doesn't work as well at nice, elegant establishments where ambiance and top-notch service are part of the experience.) You'll discover that you can save twenty to thirty minutes, which can be the difference between having enough time or not.

While you're dining, discuss your next adventures together as a family or couple to connect. Here's the Smalley go-to list: local hiking, miniature golfing, shopping, going to the discount movie theater or renting a video, bowling, or buying a day pass to the YMCA or other recreation center.

Got More Time?

Plan a year's worth of family together time. Instead of buying gifts for birthdays or holidays, consider setting aside the money for a trip or other adventure to commemorate the days. This will teach your children how to plan ahead, the joy of anticipation, and the value of family community.

Plan for Romance

Take the next step for the anniversary trip you began saving and planning for in the Commitment Date Night. Book the hotel or the plane flight today. Don't wait till "one day." That day is today!



Date Night Secret #8

Embracing Date Night

Try something new and exciting, an activity you'll both enjoy. Whatever your choice, make sure to listen to your spouse and empathize with him or her while you are having fun together. You might want to consider a quieter activity, without a lot of distractions and stimulation, a time that affords you the opportunity to zero in and focus on one another. Convey tenderness toward your mate throughout the evening.

Got More Time?

Talk through some questions in a quiet and romantic spot. Focus on the topic of tenderness.

Ask things like:

What things do I do that communicate tenderness toward you?

Are there other ways I can communicate tenderness on a regular basis?

Were your parents tender toward each other? How?

Especially after long, tough days, how can we make a real effort to reconnect and show tenderness and empathy?

Plan for Romance

Dim the lights. Light a scented candle or two. Whisper “sweet nothings” in your spouse’s ear. That’s an old-fashioned phrase, but it’s still romantic today. What words of praise and love will mean the most to your loved one? Get up close and personal and whisper in each other’s ears.



Date Night Secret #9

Keep in mind that the two of you are much more than a couple. You are a team! You are working toward the same goals, using your strengths and skills to complement each other. Your teamwork reflects this truth from 1 Corinthians 12:12: “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.” And so it is with your marriage. Be ready to spend some time together enjoying the way you work together as a couple and the unique contributions each of you makes to your team.

Service Date Night

Here are some suggestions for a date night designed to help you appreciate the service aspect of your marriage.

Think up some exciting, team-based activities to do together. Maybe go bowling with another couple and form teams as couples. Or go to a karaoke club and sing a duet together. If you want to stay in, host a game night with other married couples. Rather than using the old “guys play the girls” approach, stick together as married couples and work as a team. Serve your spouse by putting him or her in the spotlight, supporting the strengths of your teammate. Be a cheerleader as well as a team member. Win or lose, have fun playing together.

Got More Time?

Choose an activity you enjoy doing together, from going out for a meal to taking a long walk in a special place. During your time together, each should make an effort to show extra thoughtfulness and care to the other. Focus on being supportive and appreciative of each other, demonstrating gratitude for your spouse. Think of a special gesture of love and appreciation you can offer to provide in the week ahead.

Plan for Romance

Make a thank-you card for your spouse; it can be very simple, but it ought to be handmade. Write a note that affirms your spouse and thanks him or her for some act of service regularly performed around the house. Recognize the sacrifice of time your spouse makes for you in caring for your home. Each of you can leave your card on top of the other’s pillow, so you can read them together before going to bed.

If you can’t think of anything to write, find an inspirational teamwork quote like this one on Pinterest: “A snowflake is one of God’s most fragile creations, but look what they can do when they stick together.”



Date Night Secret #10

This chapter talks about the real battle in marriage: keeping your heart open and guarding against apathy and hardness. Special time spent together will help you stay connected throughout the challenges of life.

Enduring Date Night

Pick out a new recipe, one you've never made before. (If you are stuck, go online to find recipe ideas. And if you lack confidence in your cooking skills, you can find step-by-step cooking videos on YouTube.) Buy the ingredients together beforehand and make that part of the fun. Find the freshest ingredients you can. Cook your recipe at home and enjoy it together!

Got More Time?

While enjoying your meal together, discuss the following questions:

Do you like this recipe?

Are there some other recipes we could try together?

How well did we perform as a team on this project?

Were we both open to doing something new?

Did you learn anything about me during this process of making a meal together?

Plan for Romance

Make or buy a delicious dessert, something sticky and gooey. Change into comfortable clothes... easily washable! Wash your hands, then feed dessert to each other without using spoons or forks. If you didn't get a chance to feed each other wedding cake on your wedding day (or even if you did), now's your opportunity to feed your spouse. Feel free to laugh, and to be messy!



*Date Night
Secret #11*

Time together can smooth off the rough edges of your relationship, especially during times of stress.

Pearls Date Night

For this date night, honor the shelled animals that create pearls. Visit an oyster bar or enjoy clam chowder at a seafood restaurant or at home.

While you're dining, talk about the following questions:

What makes you feel safe in our relationship?

What was something difficult that led to something good in our married life?

Name one area where you feel you are teachable. What's one where you need to grow and learn?

Got More Time?

Visit a department store with a jewelry department. Evaluate the difference between the plastic pearl necklaces or earrings and the merchandise in the glass cases. Note the sheen, color, size, and price.

While you're out, tell your spouse the reasons he or she is a treasure to you.

Plan for Romance

Start saving for a piece of jewelry or other jeweled ornament (for example, cuff links, pin, belt buckle, or money clip). It doesn't have to be expensive. Present it to your spouse on his or her next birthday, your anniversary, or at a "just because" celebration.

Date Night Secret #12

Consider going on double dates with other couples at least three times a year. Don't feel as if you need to become best friends with them, because sometimes fellowship depth isn't there—but look forward to it if you do connect. Here're two ideas to get the night moving: Ask the husband and wife their individual stories about their childhoods. Let them choose the restaurant, but add this condition—they have to share their “love story” over dinner (how they met, fell in love, the proposal, the wedding, and the honeymoon).

Fellowship Date Night

Choose which kind of couple fellowship you and your spouse would like to cultivate: mentor, peer, or mentee. Start calling at least a week in advance and ask a couple that matches your criteria to a double date.

While you're dining, ask the following questions of the other couple:

Who was in your wedding party? Are you still close to those individuals?

Who or what has influenced your marriage the most?

What's one piece of marriage advice you can give to us? Or, What's been the toughest time in your marriage that you feel comfortable talking about?

Got More Time?

Plan a short hike or trip to a museum with the couple. Go somewhere you can talk—avoid movies or plays unless you have time to chat for an hour afterward.

Plan for Romance

Take that overnight you've been planning. Bring your wedding video or photo album so that you can watch or read it together. Reminisce about the memorable things that have happened over the course of your marriage (your first date, when you fell in love, your wedding, your honeymoon, your first apartment or house together). You have an amazing love story. One of the best things you can do for your marriage is to reminisce about your life together. Remembering the good times you've had in your marriage can help strengthen the bond between you and your spouse and draws you closer together. Recalling memorable events also provides hope through the anticipation of similar enjoyable times in the future, helps you remember happier times, and helps you keep a positive attitude about your marriage: “Although we've gone through some hard times, we've made it through . . . we're pretty good together.”