

5 THINGS **EVERY HAPPILY MARRIED COUPLE** DOES EVERY DAY

An easy-to-follow guide to the five essential stops to make on your daily marital commute



HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION:

No matter how healthy and happy you believe your marriage to be, how would you answer this question: **You have the opportunity to make your marriage significantly and substantially happier, but you have one day and one day only to act.**

What things would you do?

MARRIAGE IS A **JOURNEY.**

Your marriage is *in motion*. It's on the go. Each day, your marriage is headed somewhere. Forward or backward. Growing healthier and happier or growing less healthy and less happy. Standing still isn't really an option. Luckily, researchers have found the five things happily married couples do to get where they want to be.

SEATBELTS, EVERYONE

There are no shortcuts in your marriage travels. It takes time to establish these daily habits. We're never truly arriving, just continually improving and strengthening our marriages. Happiness isn't a magical destination or even a car upgrade. Happiness is a big-time life upgrade. But the trip takes time, and maintaining your car takes commitment. *No asking, "Are we there yet?"*

You've got five essential habits or "stops" to make on your daily marital commute. During each of them, you'll look down the road and see:



CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

These are typical relationship obstacles couples run into.



THE SCENIC ROUTE

These are practical things you can do to bypass the delays.

OK, LET'S GET THIS MARRIAGE ON THE ROAD...



1ST STOP:

COMMUNICATE EVERY DAY

FUN FACT: Did you know research indicates that *fewer* signs on hazardous roads actually cause drivers to drive *more safely*? Even signs like "Sharp Curve Ahead." That's because fewer signs force drivers to "read" the "feel" of the road and pay better attention to driving conditions.

Signs are important. But to stay on the road in your marriage, you need to learn how to read your spouse and pay attention to them. Communication is everything. This daily habit is the first for a reason. It's on all the lists. Communication is the key fob that unlocks all the doors and turns on the ignition. Communication is how you and your spouse get the "feel" of each other and stay on the road.

Your first daily stop on your commute is about a **certain kind of communication**. It's the kind that draws you and your spouse closer together, deepens your connection, and strengthens your relationship. Sure, "Did you pay the cable bill?" is a standard everyday type of communication in marriage. But what about:

- Learning to speak to your spouse so they can hear your heart.
- Learning to listen to your spouse so they feel heard.
- Embracing difficult conversations with humility and mutual respect.
- Navigating conflict in a constructive, not destructive, way.
- Having times when you check in with each other to stay connected.
- Enjoying plain ol' chit-chat like old friends.

Hopefully, in your marriage, you both can *safely and openly express your opinions, needs, concerns, feelings, and hopes*. In practice, this can be tricky and takes some work. **Don't settle for surface communication with your spouse.** Your destination is transparency, vulnerability, and effective communication with the person you share the rest of your life with. All that takes time, practice, and trust. *No distracted driving. Signal your turns. Don't be a backseat driver.*

CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

Let's get real. Communication has the potential to skid sideways quickly and easily. Just think of a simple text message that auto-correct *auto-complicated*. Then there's the confusing "Make a left here?" and you get greeted with an ambiguous, "Right."

How does communication go so wrong so quickly?



SOMETIMES WE ARE TOO
BLUNT OR SARCASTIC



SOMETIMES WE SEND
MIXED MESSAGES



SOMETIMES, OUR
COMMUNICATION ONLY
MAKES SENSE TO US BECAUSE
OF OUR BACKGROUND



SOMETIMES,
WHAT'S FUNNY TO US
UPSETS OR HURTS
OUR SPOUSES

SOMETIMES WE
DON'T HAVE OUR
THOUGHTS TOGETHER
OR SPEAK THEM
CLEARLY



SOMETIMES WE TRY TO COMMUNICATE, AND
IT SIMPLY **ISN'T THE RIGHT TIME OR PLACE**

Communication is a simple complicated process. You both have different communication needs and styles. It's normal if they're totally different. **Take your time and don't give up!**

THE SCENIC ROUTE



- ➔ Try to connect each day with a focused, undistracted conversation.
- ➔ Take advantage of "moments." Car rides. Housework. Walking together.
- ➔ Schedule a weekly check-in. *"What happened this week we should talk about?"*
- ➔ Asking questions = avoiding miscommunication.
- ➔ Some "Conversation Starters" are listed on the resource page at the end to help you move beyond clichéd convos.

BOTTOM LINE

Know and understand your and your spouse's communication patterns. **Talk about how you talk.**



2ND STOP:

***SPEND SOME TIME APART* EVERY DAY**

FUN FACT: According to the National Sleep Foundation, about half of U.S. adult drivers admit to consistently getting behind the wheel *while feeling drowsy*. About 20% admit to falling asleep behind the wheel at some point in the past year. More than 40% admitted this has happened at least once since they became drivers.

Pulling up to your second daily habit. You got married to spend time with your spouse. Noted. But happily married couples report that having a little "alone time" every day actually enhances the time they spend together. **Spouses that do the following things experience less marital satisfaction and poorer marital outcomes. (They're less happy.) They...**

- Expect or demand to spend every moment with their spouse.
- Exhibit possessiveness and controlling behaviors.
- Feel threatened or insecure if they aren't with their spouse.
- Lack supportive social networks. (Healthy friendships.)

HEALTHY, THRIVING MARRIAGES REQUIRE HEALTHY, THRIVING INDIVIDUALS

You and your spouse need some productive alone time every day. Suppose you and your spouse are both seriously taking care of yourselves and enriching your minds, hearts, and bodies. Then, when you're together, you both will bring all that "good stuff" into each other's lives and into your relationship. A little bit every day. Happy individuals, happy couple.

Taking care of yourself is one of the most loving things you can do for your spouse. Know when to pull into that rest area. You're not a good driver when you're burned out. Or a good spouse.



CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

Busyness. We play multiple roles and juggle a ton of responsibilities each day. It's hard to get quality time with your spouse, let alone yourself. If something is going to get sacrificed to busyness, it's probably gonna be you.

YOU'VE GOT 24 HOURS IN
EACH DAY. KNOW YOUR
PRIORITIES AND BE
INTENTIONAL ABOUT
SCHEDULING YOUR TIME
ACCORDINGLY.



Learn to say "no" to opportunities and options when you need to. If your day always involves trying to speed through heavy traffic to make up time, it's time to make adjustments. Establish habits and routines that remove words like "hectic," "crazy," and "chaotic" from your day. Sometimes chaos just happens, but you don't have to pave the way for it by not planning. (This is all to create room for some daily alone time and some daily together time.)

THE SCENIC ROUTE



- ➔ **Early bird? Set your alarm for 15 minutes earlier than usual.** (Journal, stretch, go for a walk, sit with a cup of coffee. Anything that recharges and refreshes you and gets you to pause before rushing into your day.)
- ➔ **Night owl? Go to bed 15 minutes later than usual.** (The same, but maybe replace the walk and coffee. Do something that brings calm and closure to your day.)
- ➔ **Maybe you're the type who can carve out time at lunch, when kids are napping, or after work. Do it.** You deserve 15-20 minutes minimum of taking care of yourself. (So does your spouse.)

BOTTOM LINE

Your marriage is at its best
when you're both at your best.





3RD STOP:

ENJOY EACH OTHER'S DIFFERENCES EVERY DAY

FUN FACT: Differences in driving surfaces save lives. Roads are often designed to change from asphalt to cobblestone to indicate areas with pedestrians. Studies have shown that differences in road surfaces are more effective than signs to signal drivers to slow down.

Here's your third daily stop or habit. Happily married couples enjoy each other's differences every day. They accept their spouse for who they are without trying to change them. Of course, you want to share the same fundamental core values and be in agreement about the "non-negotiables" of your marriage. Beyond that, bring on the differences! **Your marriage is stronger because of your differences in:**



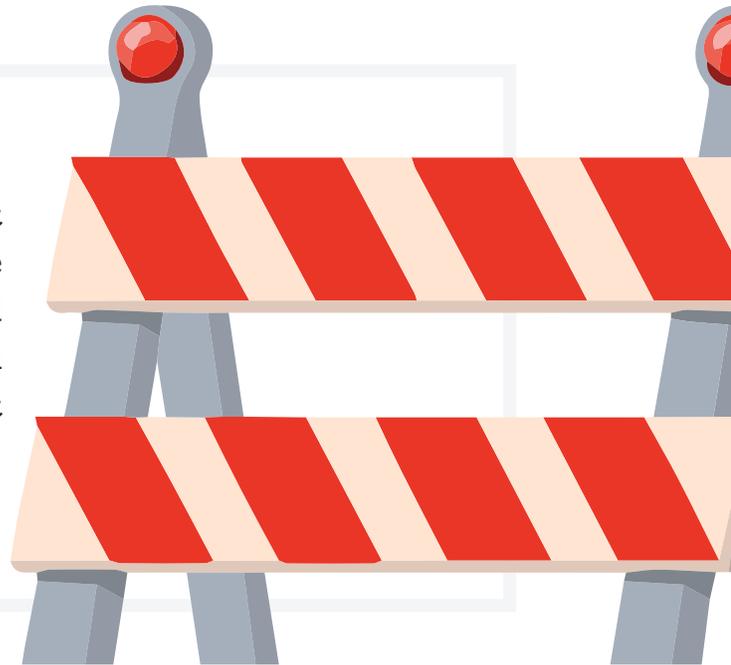
CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

Differences usually cause us to make a judgment. Someone is right, and someone is wrong. Guess who is usually automatically "right" when you encounter a difference with your spouse? Yup. It's you. So, what's that make your spouse? Wrong. This can be the on-ramp to competition, criticism, conflict, or coexisting.

MARRIAGE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS.

Just like your destination isn't always on the right, marriage isn't about always being right. Let go of little things being "right" or "wrong" and just let them be. Differences can be delightful. **Differences keep the trip interesting.** They can make up for your blind-spots as you're motoring along. There's no I in "Team," but there are two in "Driving."

Just to be clear, we aren't talking about helping your spouse toward a goal they've shared with you. If your spouse has invited you to encourage them or provide them with some accountability, that's a different difference situation.



Rosie Eberle, 80 and happily married for 56 years, made one of those comments only old people get away with. She said that when it comes to trying to change your spouse, "It's just plain stupid." Can't argue with 56 years of marriage.

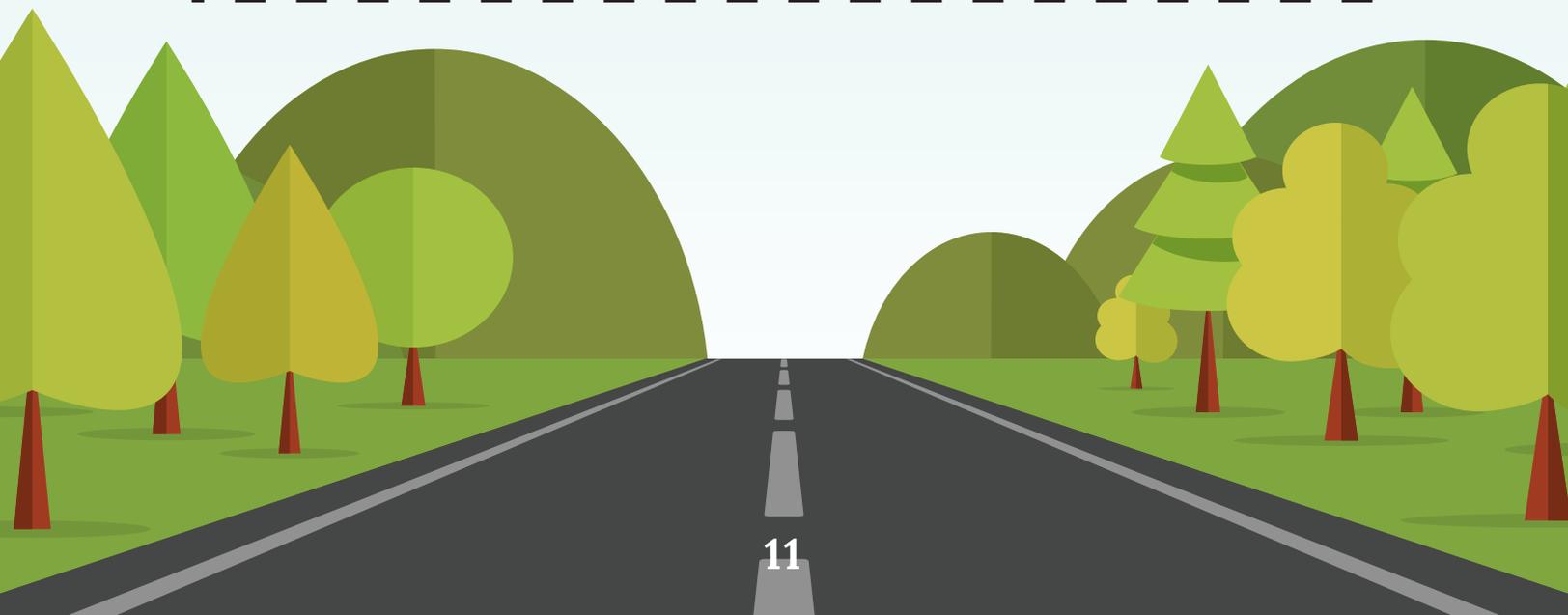
THE SCENIC ROUTE



- ➔ **Have at least one thing in common you enjoy doing together, and be sure to do it!**
- ➔ **When you encounter a difference, do things like compliment your spouse, express gratitude, and remind them you love them.**
- ➔ **Don't confuse unity with uniformity in your marriage.**
- ➔ **Learn how to agree to disagree and to not sweat the small stuff.**
- ➔ **Watch out for rumble strips.** They're a signal you're getting irritated or frustrated. Stay focused on the road and your marriage. (Should we call them "grumble strips?")
- ➔ **Play to your strengths.** Beware of stereotypes. Hopefully, you make financial decisions together, but let the spouse who is more organized keep track of the budget. Vacuum cleaners don't have a Gender setting. They're either on or off. In many situations, you need to switch out drivers. It's a healthy part of getting there together.

BOTTOM LINE

Every day, seek to understand the differences better, learn from them, lean on them, and love them. You'll be happy that you did.





4TH STOP:

EXPRESS AFFECTION, GRATITUDE, AND THANKFULNESS EVERY DAY

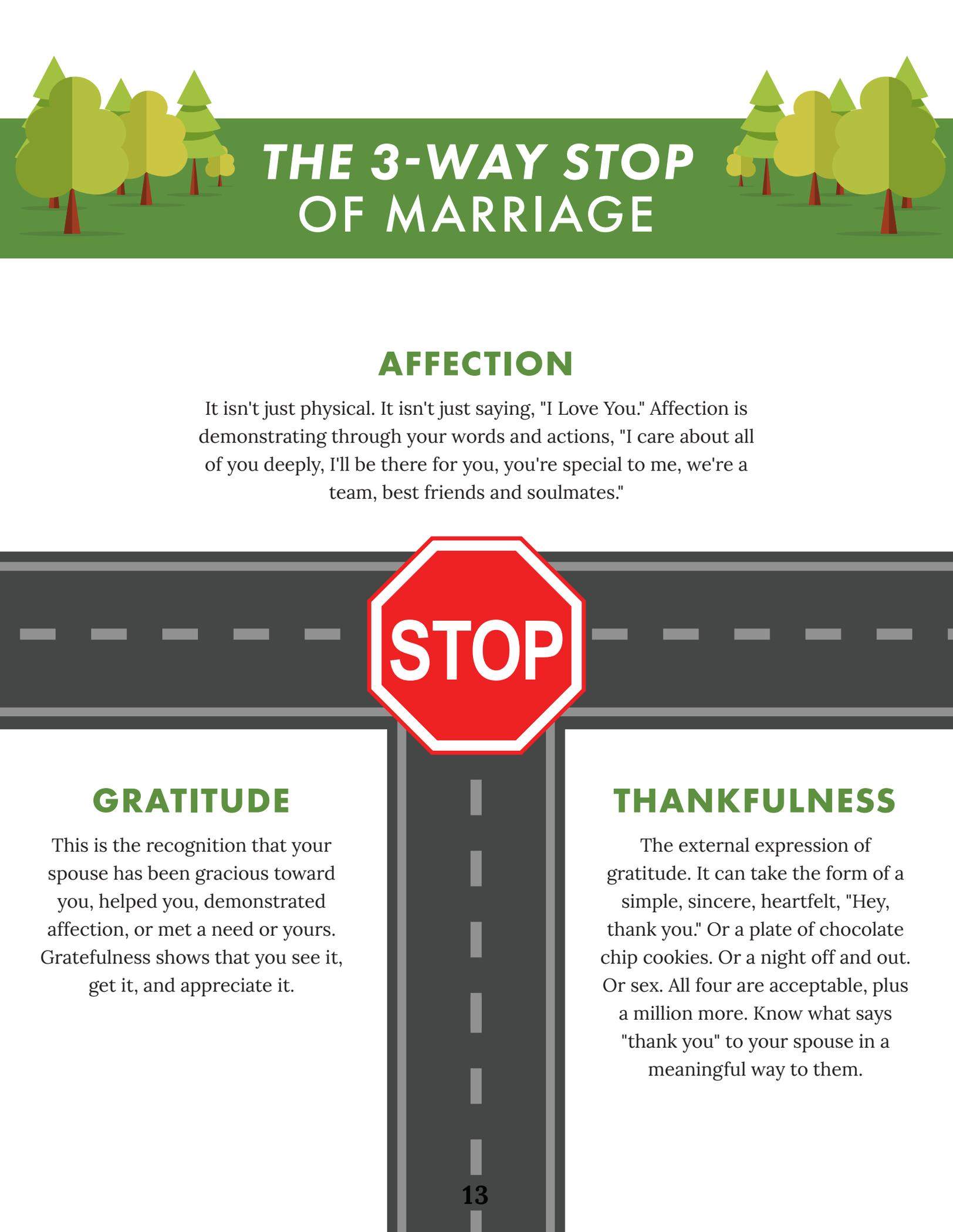
FUN FACT: Here are the official rules for navigating an "all-way stop," more commonly known as a four-way stop. (All vehicles are always required to stop and also to yield to pedestrians.)

- A. The vehicle that arrives at the stop first has the right of way. Vehicles then proceed from the right of the car that came first.
- B. If two vehicles arrive simultaneously, the car to the right has the right of way. (There are some nuances for other situations, but these seem to be the ones drivers struggle with the most.)

Four-way stops are a constant source of frustration. Often, for all four drivers. Everyone just seems to do their own thing all willy-nilly. Emotions can run high. Horns are honked, hands make gestures, and accidents can happen. Usually, it's simple ignorance, or even worse, willful bad manners and selfishness.

There is a reason affection, gratitude, and thankfulness find their way onto every list of what happily married couples do every day. They create positive emotions and swerve around negative ones. **To not demonstrate these to your spouse is simple ignorance, or even worse, willful bad manners and selfishness.** (The highway patrol around here doesn't want to hear excuses for bad driving.)

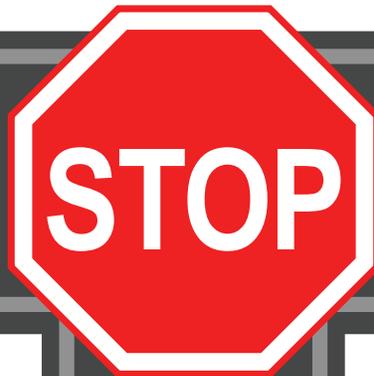
Don't take your spouse for granted. You may have logged thousands of miles on the road together-- these three things are still crucial. **Affection, gratitude, and thankfulness keep traffic moving smoothly in your marriage and prevent frustration and accidents.** Think of these three as an intersection with a three-way stop.

The page features a green header with stylized trees. Below it is a road with a central stop sign. The road is depicted with grey dashed lines on a dark grey background. The stop sign is red with a white border and the word 'STOP' in white capital letters. The text 'THE 3-WAY STOP OF MARRIAGE' is written in white on the green header. The word 'AFFECTION' is in green on the white background above the road. The words 'GRATITUDE' and 'THANKFULNESS' are in green on the white background on either side of the road. The number '13' is at the bottom center.

THE 3-WAY STOP OF MARRIAGE

AFFECTION

It isn't just physical. It isn't just saying, "I Love You." Affection is demonstrating through your words and actions, "I care about all of you deeply, I'll be there for you, you're special to me, we're a team, best friends and soulmates."



GRATITUDE

This is the recognition that your spouse has been gracious toward you, helped you, demonstrated affection, or met a need or yours. Gratefulness shows that you see it, get it, and appreciate it.

THANKFULNESS

The external expression of gratitude. It can take the form of a simple, sincere, heartfelt, "Hey, thank you." Or a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Or a night off and out. Or sex. All four are acceptable, plus a million more. Know what says "thank you" to your spouse in a meaningful way to them.

CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

Sometimes withholding affection from your spouse can be used as a form of manipulation or even punishment. Maybe you feel like you don't get enough affection, and this is how you retaliate. Talk to your spouse sincerely; don't take affection away spitefully. This is a car crash waiting to happen. Many marriages end up in a ditch because of bitterness, resentment, and contempt. Your affection will naturally hit the off-ramp toward someone else. **Scary.**

GRATITUDE PUTS YOU IN A POSTURE WHERE YOU ASSUME AND BELIEVE THE BEST ABOUT YOUR SPOUSE.

Often, we think the worst, project attitudes, and imagine bad intentions. **Research shows that your perception of your spouse is one of the most significant determining factors of your total marital satisfaction.**

If you perceive your spouse as an adversary or competitor, you won't find much happiness in your marriage. If you look for the positive qualities in your spouse and why you should be grateful for them, you'll find what you're looking for, and your marriage will flourish. **Being thankful will flow out of your gratitude organically.**



BONUS

YOU'LL SPEND LESS TIME ANALYZING AND ARGUING ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP AND MORE TIME ENJOYING IT.

THE SCENIC ROUTE



- ➔ **Affection = acts of thoughtfulness.** Anything that communicates, "I'm thinking of you."
- ➔ **Keep a gratitude journal.** Start your day focusing on 5 reasons you're grateful for your spouse. Every. Day.
- ➔ **Pick your perspective wisely.** (We're all imperfect spouses. You'll find in your spouse whatever you're focusing on-- positive or negative.)
- ➔ **Find a way each day to say "thank you" without using the words "thank you."**

BOTTOM LINE

Make the adjustments to your marriage's heat and air-conditioning. Keep it cozy.





5TH STOP:

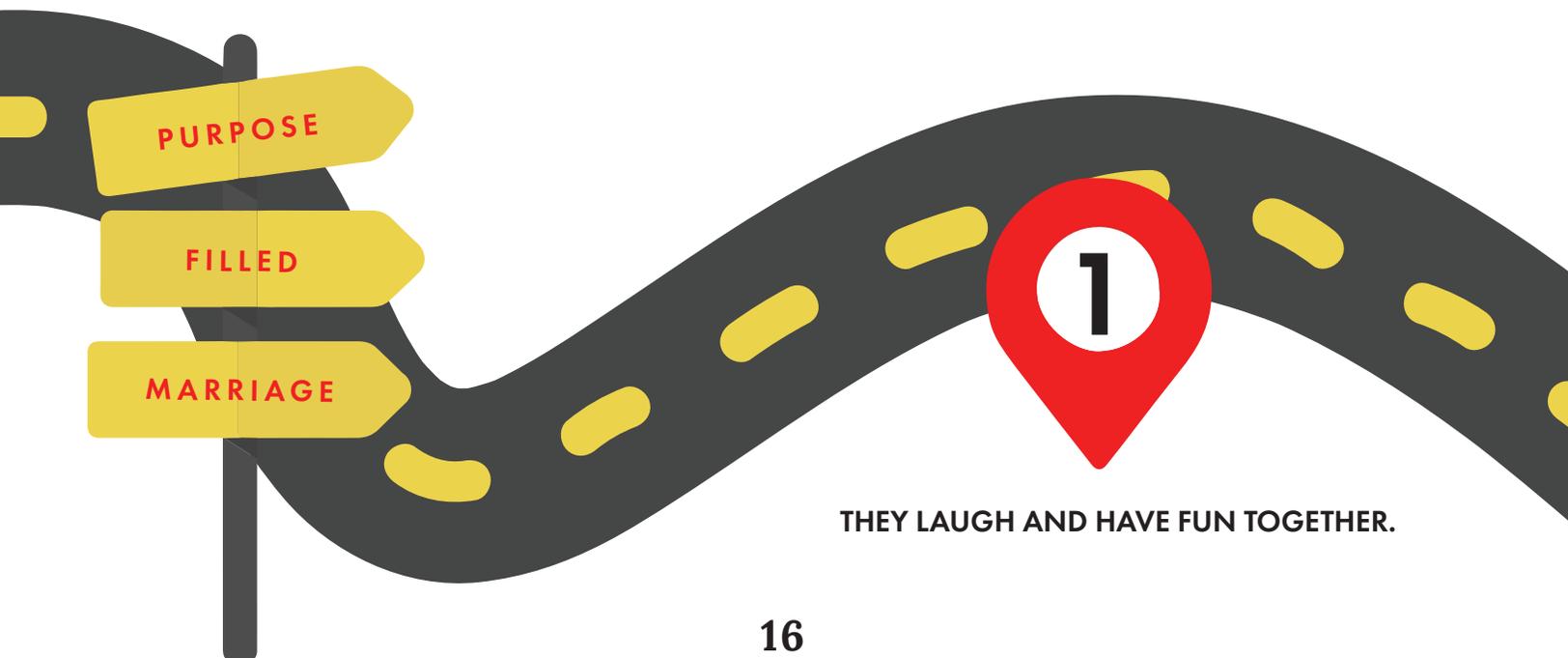
DO THE LITTLE THINGS EVERY DAY

FUN FACT: Traffic is one of the ultimate expressions of human purpose. Think about it. Everyone in their car on the road has a purpose in mind. Work. Shopping. Venti Latte. Whatever. We only climb into our cars on purpose, with a purpose.

Marriage is no different. When you climb out of bed in the morning, what's the purpose of your marriage? What's your goal as a spouse today? **Healthy marriages don't just happen. They only happen on purpose.** To do the little things that strengthen your marriage and “trick it out” with happiness, you need to be focused, intentional, and goal-oriented.

On a road trip, the little things are everything. Cupholders. Charging ports. Snacks. Leg-room. A comfy steering wheel cover. Without them, a long road trip can quickly turn into road rage.

Purposeful marriages, or marriages full of purpose, require spouses to do the little things daily. What little things?





2

THEY TOUCH EACH OTHER - HUGS, KISSES, CUDDLES, FOOT MASSAGES, SHOULDER SQUEEZES, AND ADDITIONAL NON-SEXUAL TOUCH. (NOTHING WRONG WITH SEXUAL TOUCH. BUT YOU'D BETTER BE DOING THE LITTLE THINGS IN YOUR MARRIAGE AND EXPECTING NOTHING IN RETURN. IF NOT, IT'S MANIPULATION).

3

THEY HAVE LEAVING AND RETURNING "RITUALS."

4

THEY DO THINGS TO HELP EACH OTHER BE THEIR BEST SELVES.

CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

We have this cognitive bias that success comes from getting the "big things" in life right. There are few actual big things. There are tons and tons of little things. Objects in mirror are closer than they appear. **The little things are the big things.** Couples don't grow apart. Nope. If it's real growth, it brings you together. Couples definitely do drift apart. Often, because they stop doing the little things.



DON'T STOP GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SPOUSE. STAY CURIOUS ABOUT THEM. BE OBSERVANT. ASK QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE THEM. THE "LITTLE THINGS" YOUR SPOUSE NEEDS TODAY MIGHT BE DIFFERENT THAN WHAT THEY NEEDED A YEAR AGO. OR FIVE.

We often do "little things" for our spouse that are meaningful to us. They might not carry the same meaningfulness to your spouse. This is like adjusting the car seat and the mirrors so they're the most comfortable for you - when your spouse is going to use the car. Find out what is meaningful to them.

THE SCENIC ROUTE



➔ **Ask your spouse questions like:**

- What makes you feel loved and appreciated the most?
- What challenges are you up against? How can I help?
- What little thing could I do that would make the most significant difference to you?

➔ **There is absolutely nothing wrong with making yourself a list or setting reminders on your phone.** Sometimes we need a little help doing the little things. Eventually, they'll become habits.

➔ **Make it a goal to do one little thing for your spouse each day.**

BOTTOM LINE

You won't believe the mileage
you'll get out of the little things.





ARRIVED:

YOUR DAY ENDS HERE

It would be completely understandable if all of this marital traveling felt a little overwhelming. There have been five daily stops for the day-to-day life of your marriage. Don't try to do them all at once.

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR YOUR COMMUTE:

- ➔ Talk through these daily habits with your spouse.
- ➔ Remember, every marriage is unique. Approach these habits in a way that works best for you and your spouse.
- ➔ Are there a couple of habits you can both agree you can already visit by heart, no directions needed? Awesome! Maybe try the "scenic routes" to keep things fresh.
- ➔ Is there one daily habit you both agree to be your first stop? Buckle up and go for it!
- ➔ Maybe you each pick a habit that resonates with you individually. You agree to work on different parts of your relationship together. Share your goals. Support and encourage each other along the way.

You both want to be happy and happily married. Here are the five things happily married couples do every day. Secret. Is. Out. Put more joy in the journey. Some days you'll be stuck in traffic, and some days you'll be zipping along the express lane. Just make sure you both are leaving a reasonable amount of time for the trip. Don't be disappointed if it's taking you longer than you thought it would. You're riding together.

REMEMBER: ENJOY EACH OTHER AS YOU ENJOY THE JOURNEY EACH DAY.

YOUR WEDDING DAY WAS
NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT
DAY IN YOUR MARRIAGE.

TODAY IS.



RESOURCES

1

COMMUNICATE

- 5 Days To Better Communication In Your Marriage
- How To Communicate Better With Your Spouse
- 200 Conversation Starters For Couples
- 3 Great Dates To Enhance Communication In Your Marriage
- 4 Things Every Couple Should Know About Communication In Marriage
- Why Do Couples Stop Talking?

2

SPEND TIME APART

- 5 Signs You Need Some Alone Time
- Why Spending Time Alone Is Good For Your Marriage
- 10 Ways To Create Comfort In Your Life
- How Couples Can Help Each Other De-Stress And Improve Their Relationship

3

RESPECT EACH OTHER'S DIFFERENCES

- We're Total Opposites! Can Our Relationship Work?
- What To Do When You And Your Spouse Are Really Opposites
- Help! My Spouse And I Have Nothing In Common
- Why It's Important To Care About Your Spouse's Interests
- How to Stay Motivated During Marriage Challenges

4

EXPRESS AFFECTION, GRATITUDE, AND THANKFULNESS

- How Practicing Gratitude Can Strengthen Relationships
- 30 Days Of Gratitude And Love
- 7 Ways To Show Your Spouse You're Thankful For Them
- What is "Romance" in Marriage?
- Discover Deeper Intimacy In Your Marriage

5

DO THE LITTLE THINGS

- 6 Exercises To Strengthen Emotional Intimacy In Your Marriage
- 8 Ways To Care For Your Spouse's Mental Health
- The 3 Most Important Things You Should Do for Your Spouse
- 3 Easy Ways To Make Your Marriage More Fun
- The Difference Between Sacrifice And Compromise In A Relationship



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RELATIONSHIP RESOURCES?**

FIRSTTHINGS.ORG

