



DON'T BE A
Cold-Gravy Spouse

My relationship with my wife had gone cold. But together we renewed our marriage.

By Mark Clayton

“I still love you, but I am not in love with you anymore,” my wife told me.

As a professional marriage counselor, I knew this was serious. When I hear a client say this to a spouse, it usually means, “I want a divorce.”

We were driving home from the Las Vegas Nevada Temple. Ironically, we had just witnessed a young couple get sealed for eternity. I had asked my wife to drive so I could work on the Gospel Doctrine lesson I would teach the next day. My wife was willing to drive, but after nearly two hours of silence while I worked, she wasn't feeling very close to me.

That had recently been our pattern. I hadn't been a very good husband lately because I was so caught up in doing “more important” things. Once she made her announcement, however, I finally understood what was truly important and what was not.

A Marriage Gone Stale

President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) once said, “Many couples permit their marriages to become stale and their love to grow cold like old bread or worn-out jokes or cold gravy.”¹

Simply put, I had become a “cold gravy” husband. Fortunately, my wife was not telling me she wanted a divorce. She was telling me she wanted a good husband.

I asked her what I could do to be better. She gave me a list that included things like cleaning out the storage shed, being more aware of finances, and knowing the details of our kids' schedules. Sadly, none of it was new to me.

I knew I had to reevaluate my priorities to put my marriage at the top. I started working on the list right away. I cleaned the shed, began regular budget meetings with my wife, and put my kids' schedules into my cell phone calendar. My wife also worked harder to feel in love with me again. We increased the consistency of date nights and of prayers as a couple and spent more quality time together. Ultimately, we were able to renew our marriage.

In contrast to our story, I often see unhappy endings when marriages grow stale. I saw it many times as a bishop. Some couples just aren't willing to put in the work required to renew their marriage. And there are those who might ask, “Is that so wrong? Can't we go on living the gospel and being a good person and let our marriages be what they are?”

The family proclamation states, “Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other. . . . [They] will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.”²

That is a sobering perspective. Our marriages are important to God, and we are expected to do everything we can to keep them alive and strong.

That being said, we cannot have complete control over a relationship that involves someone else's agency. In cases of abuse, leaving a marriage may be the only option. I have the utmost empathy for people in these heart-wrenching situations. We can find peace in the promise that “faithful members whose

circumstances do not allow them to receive the blessings of eternal marriage and parenthood in this life will receive all promised blessings in the eternities.”³

Beautiful, Sweet, and Growing

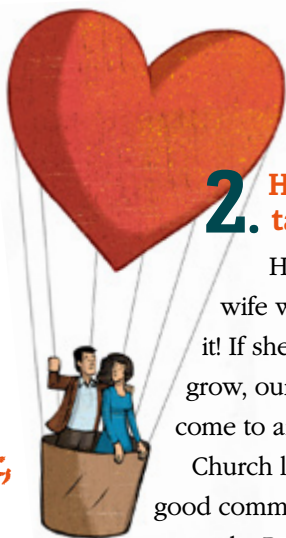
President Kimball had this counsel for cold-gravy spouses: “These people will do well to reevaluate, to renew their courting, to express their affection, to acknowledge kindnesses, and to increase their consideration so their marriage again can become beautiful, sweet, and growing.”⁴

So how can we do this? Here are some suggestions based on my experiences as a husband, marriage counselor, and bishop.

1. Admit your marriage could use some work.

While serving as a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, Elder Joe J. Christensen said, “Any intelligent couple will have differences of opinion. Our challenge is to be sure that we know how to resolve them.”⁵

Everyone has marriage and family problems. We risk becoming cold-gravy spouses if we do not admit our marriages could always use some work.



2. Have heart-to-heart talks about problems.

How lucky I am that my wife was willing to talk about it! If she had let her hard feelings grow, our marriage might have come to an unhappy ending.

Church leaders often emphasize good communication in marriage. For example, President Russell M. Nelson said: “Communicate well with your spouse. . . . Couples need private time to observe, to talk, and really listen to each other.”⁶ In *Gospel Topics* we read, “Couples can strengthen their marriage as they take time to talk together and to listen to one another, to be thoughtful and respectful, and to express tender feelings and affection often.”⁷

Tender implies discussing matters at the level of our feelings—having heart-to-heart talks. Contention or arguing is of the devil (see 3 Nephi 11:29; Doctrine and Covenants 10:63).

It is an attempt to prove yourself right and your partner wrong. On the other hand, conflict resolution is of God, and it requires humility and vulnerability.

3. Channel your anger away from your spouse by taking a time-out.

Time-outs are necessary to keep hard feelings from building up. Elder Christensen taught: “When differences do arise, . . . there are instances when it is best to take a time-out. Biting your tongue and counting to ten or even a hundred is important. And occasionally, even letting the sun go down on your wrath can help bring you back to the problem in the morning more rested, calm, and with a better chance for resolution.”⁸

4. Validate your spouse's feelings so your spouse knows that you are really listening and that you really care.



One Latter-day Saint marriage and family counselor said:

“Almost every relationship will thrive if there is a healthy dose of validation.

“Validation begins with paying attention to what your spouse is saying. . . . By verbally acknowledging your spouse’s emotions, fears, thoughts, or concerns, you are communicating validation and conveying appreciation, love, and respect.”⁹

My wife had been asking me to clean out the shed for a while because she was worried about mice and spiders. To me, mice and spiders belong outside, and since the shed is outside, I wasn’t worried about it. But after our talk, I realized that I had not validated her feelings or taken her emotional concern to heart. I promptly cleaned out the shed to show my wife that what is important to her is important to me.

In my counseling practice, I have boiled down communication skills to what I see as the three crucial skills described above: heart-to-heart talks, time-outs, and validation (recognizing, of course, that other professional counselors may emphasize communication skills differently). While I teach only three basic skills, I find it takes most of our therapy time to help couples apply them (no, it is not as easy as it seems). Once couples are able to apply these three key skills, they usually feel much better in their marriages.



The Music of Marriage

To improve our marriages, we each need to tune in to the emotional reality beneath the behavioral surface.

Elder Wilford W. Andersen of the Seventy described a similar idea when he counseled us to strive to hear the music of the gospel instead of just dancing the steps. “We learn the dance steps with our minds, but we hear the music with our hearts,” he explained. “The dance steps of the gospel are the things we do; the music of the gospel is the joyful spiritual feeling that comes from the Holy Ghost. It brings a change of heart and is the source of all righteous desires. The dance steps require discipline, but the joy of the dance will be experienced only when we come to hear the music.”¹⁰

Can we hear the music in our marriages, or are we trying to dance without a tune? Feeling the music requires soft hearts. Have our feelings become hardened and distant, or are our hearts soft? Do we feel and express love for our spouses? Do they feel and express love for us?

If we cannot hear the music now, we can work with our spouses until we can. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “No matter how flat your relationship may be at the present, if you keep adding pebbles of kindness, compassion, listening, sacrifice, understanding, and selflessness, eventually a mighty pyramid will begin to grow.”¹¹

I was lucky that my wife had a forgiving heart and was willing to work with me. We were able to renew the music in our marriage. But we still need regular tunings!

My personal and professional experience is that when couples work hard together in humility, their marriages become stronger and happier than ever before—no matter how cold the gravy was. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, “Marriage and Divorce” (Brigham Young University devotional, Sept. 7, 1976), 6, speeches.byu.edu.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 1.3.3.
4. Spencer W. Kimball, “Marriage and Divorce,” 6.
5. Joe J. Christensen, “Marriage and the Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 65.
6. Russell M. Nelson, “Nurturing Marriage,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 37.
7. “Marriage,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org; see also *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (2004), 100.
8. Joe J. Christensen, “Marriage and the Great Plan of Happiness,” 65.
9. Mark Ogletree, “Speak, Listen, and Love,” *Ensign*, Feb. 2014, 15, 16.
10. Wilford W. Andersen, “The Music of the Gospel,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 54.
11. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “In Praise of Those Who Save,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 78.