

Around We Go - Marital Cycles

The marriage relationship provides both the opportunity to serve like Christ and also react out of our humanness. One moment we feel grounded, connected, enjoying fellowship and the next day something happens and we experience intense negative emotions, frustration, and disconnection. These can be painful moments, but they are also moments to grow in understanding of both our self and our spouse.

Cycles

God's creation is filled with cycles or patterns. We see this in creation – *“And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.”*(Genesis 2:2). God was “working” or in creation mode for six days and on the seventh he rested. Likewise, life is filled with seasons. Consider *Ecclesiastes 3* – *“To every thing there is a season.”*Cycles and seasons have a few things in common - they are predictable, circular, and cycles need to be understood in context. Predictable means there is an expected pattern – day follows night. Circular implies the impact does not solely flow just from one direction. And finally, cycles are best understood within the context of the bigger picture.

Cycles in Marriage

What do cycles have to do with marriage? Often couples get caught in negative and predictable cycles which can drive disconnection rather than connection. Consider this example: Sunday mornings can be difficult for Bob and Mary. Mary would like help with the kids and cleaning up before leaving for church. Mary really appreciates Bob's help as Sunday mornings are stressful. Bob really wants to please Mary but feels like he never cleans up to meet Mary's expectations. So, Bob gets frustrated and heads out to the garage for some quiet moments before church – just to clear his mind. Mary gets hurt and irritated to find out that Bob is in the garage...when she needs help. Thus, Mary finds herself pursuing Bob to the garage and is critical of Bob. Mary is afraid they will be late for church and really needs Bob's help.

Thus begins an illustration of a marital cycle. In this relationship Bob withdraws when there is tension in the relationship. Bob makes this move to “protect” the interactions from getting too heated and moves away from a place where he “feels” like he fails or experiences negative emotions. Mary, on the other hand, tends to pursue in the relationship and experiences pain when she feels disconnection and does not feel seen or heard by Bob. Mary seeks to soothe this pain by pursuing Bob to get on the same page, get understanding, and to be seen. In this manner, the couple takes familiar stances in their relationship and engages in a predictable cycle – Bob withdraws and Mary pursues.

Next, there is a circular pattern to their interaction – Mary is pursuing in response to Bob's withdrawing or pulling away. Bob on the other hand is withdrawing in response to Mary's pursuit. Their own behavior is influenced by their spouse's behavior. The more Mary pursues, the more Bob withdraws – and around and around they go. Unfortunately, when this negative cycle plays out, both feel even more frustrated and disconnected because their own move unintentionally leads to reducing emotional safety in the relationship. Finally, the last point of a cycle is that it makes sense in context. Other couples/individuals may respond or react differently, however, this is how Bob and Mary interact and respond in their relationship. And rather than comparing their interactions with other couples, it is most helpful for them to consider and accept the reality of their interactions in their life.

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Working through Cycles

Now that cycles are identified, how do couples counteract these destructive patterns? The first step is to identify the emotions and responses which each person is feeling. When a negative cycle takes over, Bob feels like he can never please Mary and internalizes being a failure. Bob copes with the distressing emotions from such experiences by withdrawing – to “clear his mind” and perhaps to prevent escalation. Mary, on the other hand, feels like she can never depend on Bob. Mary is left coping on her own with the feelings of loneliness and perhaps the thought she is not wanted. This is extremely painful and isolating. At times Mary becomes reactive and critical in hopes of getting connection.

What are Bob and Mary then to do? First, they need to begin to recognize when this cycle plays out in their relationship, in this case often on Sunday mornings. Secondly, it will be helpful for one of them to label it when it happens – “We’re caught in our cycle” – doing so in a non-blaming way. Next, it will be vital to understand their behaviors (withdraw/pursue) in context of the relationship and the feelings and thoughts they have that lead to such behaviors. Finally, they should move toward acknowledging and validating each other’s experiences. For Mary, this may mean – “It makes sense you would pull away when you feel like you never get it right.” For Bob, this may mean – “It makes sense you get critical and react out of the pain of not being seen or wanted by me.” In this manner, their marriage begins to communicate understanding and shared acceptance of the bigger story. This leads to a great example of increasing safety, vulnerability and deepening connection – and is a great step in portraying a Gospel marriage.