



OVERCOMING MARITAL STRESS AND CHALLENGES

FIELD GUIDE

BY JAMIE ATEN, PH.D. & KENT ANNAN, M.DIV.



SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™

Spiritual First Aid
Wheaton, Illinois
© 2026 by Jamie Aten and Kent Annan

This resource may be shared or quoted with proper attribution to *Spiritual First Aid* and its authors. It is not for resale.

“Spiritual First Aid” is a trademark in the United States of Jamie Aten and Kent Annan. All rights reserved.

This field guide is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment.

Printed in the United States of America.

Scriptures are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage requires both grace and resilience.

Marriage holds both deep joy and deep vulnerability. It is a place where love and trust grow, but also where pressure, disappointment, and stress can accumulate. Even the strongest relationships face seasons of strain brought on by financial challenges, parenting, illness, or emotional distance. When tension remains unresolved, trust begins to erode, and partners can start to feel like adversaries instead of allies.

Research in marriage and family psychology shows that ongoing conflict is strongly linked to anxiety, depression, and physical health problems. Chronic relational stress disrupts sleep and undermines immunity. Yet, when couples learn to communicate openly and protect safety, these moments of tension can become opportunities for understanding rather than injury.

This guide will help you understand marital stress and its impact, outlining evidence-based and biblically informed coping practices and care strategies.





DEFINITION

Marital stress is the emotional, cognitive, and relational strain that arises when unmet expectations, miscommunication, or chronic external pressures disrupt the connection between partners. Stress may stem from internal dynamics like: personality differences, trauma histories, or attachment wounds, or from external forces such as financial hardship, health crises, or caregiving responsibilities.

Occasional disagreement is normal and even healthy. However, persistent tension can lead to destructive interaction patterns. The Gottman Institute identifies four predictors of relational breakdown: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, known as the “Four Horsemen” of marital distress.

It is vital to differentiate between stress that can be resolved through communication and situations that endanger physical or emotional safety.

When conflict involves coercion, control, or violence, it is no longer “marital stress,” it is abuse. In such situations, the focus of care should shift to safety immediately (see page 10 for more on responding to safety issues).





OVERVIEW

Conflict is inevitable in marriage; harm is not. Research finds that conflict management, not the absence of disagreement, is associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Stress intensifies when partners have different coping styles. One may seek closeness while the other withdraws, creating cycles of pursuit and retreat. Over time, frustration replaces curiosity, and partners interpret actions through disappointment rather than empathy. External stressors such as financial strain, infertility, illness, caregiving, and job loss can compound these cycles, making ordinary disagreements feel unmanageable.

The Bible acknowledges relational conflict but frames love as a choice rooted in humility, self-control, and grace (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Healthy relationships are grounded in these qualities. Churches can play a powerful role when they emphasize mutual dignity and accountability rather than endurance of harm.

Support should never pressure individuals to remain in unsafe situations.





SIGNS OF MARITAL STRESS

Marital stress often presents in subtle and overt ways across emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. These patterns distinguish common relational strain from serious safety concerns.

EMOTIONAL SIGNS

Couples often feel resentful, disconnected, or numb. They may express sadness and insecurity where closeness once existed. Emotional withdrawal, such as avoiding vulnerability to prevent further hurt, is common and often mistaken for apathy.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

Frequent arguments, avoiding difficult topics, or using work and technology to escape tension are markers of strain. Partners may shift between confrontation and silence as criticism and defensiveness erode trust.

COGNITIVE SIGNS

Assuming negative motives or believing change is impossible fuels hopelessness. Partners may replay grievances or mentally disengage, concluding that intimacy is no longer worth the effort.





COPING PRACTICES

Coping with marital stress requires intentional efforts to strengthen communication, restore trust, and support well-being. These evidence-informed, biblically grounded strategies help couples navigate conflict and reconnect. These approaches promote healthier patterns and reinforce mutual care.

PRACTICE SELF-AWARENESS BEFORE ENGAGING IN CONFLICT

Emotional flooding is when the body's surge of stress hormones impairs listening and empathy. Couples should learn to pause before responding when anger or anxiety rises. Taking a brief walk, practicing slow breathing, or agreeing to revisit the issue later allows reasoning to return. James 1:19 encourages restraint: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Self-awareness prevents escalation.

USE STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Evidence based "I-statements" reduce blame, while active listening fosters validation. Helpers can coach couples to stay on one topic and recognize triggers. Structure prevents small conflicts from spiraling into contempt.



FOCUS ON SMALL ACTS OF REPAIR

Repair attempts, apologies, humor, gentle touches, or affirmations signal goodwill even during conflict.

Gottman's research shows these small moments carry far more weight than grand gestures. Couples who regularly "turn toward" each other during tension create a climate of safety that buffers future stress. Proverbs 15:1 mirrors this: "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

BALANCE INDEPENDENCE AND TOGETHERNESS

Healthy marriages honor both shared connection and personal autonomy. Maintaining individual friendships, interests, and faith practices prevents overdependence and burnout. When each partner nurtures personal growth, they bring renewed energy to the relationship. This balance echoes Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, where partnership is portrayed as mutual support, not control.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL AND PASTORAL SUPPORT EARLY

When communication breaks down or resentment deepens, outside help can interrupt destructive cycles. Approaches such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) or the Gottman Method help couples identify and repair attachment injuries. Pastoral counseling can complement therapy by addressing spiritual aspects of forgiveness and trust. Seeking help is a proactive act of care, not a sign of weakness.



ADDRESS UNDERLYING TRAUMA OR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Unresolved trauma or addiction often surfaces as conflict. Integrated treatment or recovery programs can stabilize these factors. Helpers should view distress as a potential symptom of broader suffering requiring coordinated care.

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY AND PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Relationship stress worsens when couples are isolated or overwhelmed by logistics. Faith communities can reduce pressure by providing meals, childcare, or financial guidance. Supportive mentors and small groups offer perspective and accountability.

— “

“Carry each other’s burdens,” applies not only to individuals but to marriages under strain.

—Galatians 6:2,

” —





CARE STRATEGIES

Supporting couples in times of marital stress involves equipping them with tools for emotional regulation, healthy communication, and shared purpose. The strategies below draw from research-based practices and biblical principles to guide helpers in offering compassionate, constructive care. These approaches are designed to strengthen relationships, ensure safety, and foster long-term resilience within marriage.

PROMOTE EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND DE-ESCALATION

Teaching couples to calm physiological stress, through grounding, slow breathing, or brief timeouts, helps prevent impulsive reactions. Regulation enables empathy to surface even in disagreement. Research shows that couples who manage arousal communicate more constructively and recover faster from arguments.

ENCOURAGE EMPATHY AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

Asking partners to articulate each other's viewpoint softens defensiveness. Questions like "What were you hoping I would understand?" replace accusations with curiosity. Philippians 2:3-4 calls believers to value others, fostering empathy.

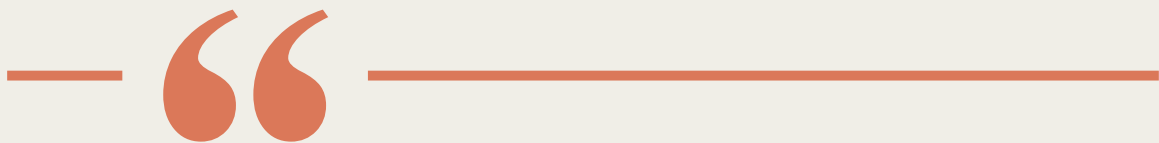


FACILITATE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT FRAMEWORKS

Guided conversation models, such as the Gottman “State of the Union” meeting and EFT’s attachment dialogue, enable couples to express their needs without blame. Helpers can coach partners to schedule regular check-ins, address one issue at a time, and acknowledge progress. Consistency rebuilds safety after prolonged tension.

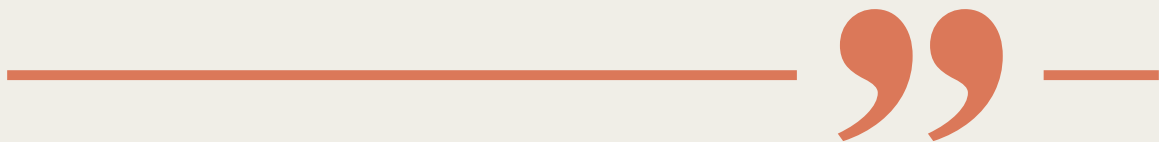
SUPPORT BIBLICAL REFLECTION ON SHARED PURPOSE

When couples explore what the Bible teaches about love, forgiveness, and partnership, they reconnect to a larger vision of marriage as mutual service rather than self-interest. Practices such as joint prayer, gratitude journaling, or reading passages like Colossians 3:12-14 can nurture humility and grace when used voluntarily and safely. Helpers should never use Scripture to assign blame or demand endurance of harm.



And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

—Colossians 3:14





SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

If one partner feels threatened, trapped, or controlled, immediate protection takes precedence over reconciliation. Helpers must be clear that love never excuses harm.

SAFETY RED FLAGS

Coercion, intimidation, or physical harm indicate abuse, not typical stress. **Do not recommend joint counseling if safety is a concern.** Priority must shift to safety planning and professional intervention.

RESPONDING TO SAFETY ISSUES

In situations where safety is a concern you should refer to trauma-informed professionals or domestic violence advocates. **Involve the proper authorities and call 911 right away in case of a immediate threat or danger to another.**



Resources such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE / 7233) provide confidential safety planning.



CONCLUSION

Marital stress is a common part of shared life, but it does not have to define or derail a relationship. When stress is recognized early and addressed with care, couples can move from patterns of tension toward greater understanding and connection. Healthy communication, emotional regulation, and small acts of repair can protect trust and reduce the long-term impact of conflict.

While many challenges can be worked through with support, situations involving control, fear, or harm require immediate protection and professional help. **Love never requires enduring abuse, and seeking help is a wise and compassionate step.**

With the right tools, supportive communities, and, when needed, professional guidance, couples can navigate stress in ways that strengthen resilience rather than deepen division. Marriage grows not through the absence of difficulty, but through intentional care, humility, and shared commitment during difficult seasons.



SPIRITUAL FIRST AID

CO-FOUNDERS



Jamie Aten, Ph.D., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Blanchard Chair of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership, and Co-Coordinator of the Trauma Certificate Program at Wheaton College. He is both a Hurricane Katrina and a late-stage early-onset cancer survivor. As a trauma psychologist, Jamie has responded to and researched disasters and mass traumas around the globe. He has published nine authored and edited books and over 150 scholarly publications, including some of the the top peer-reviewed journals in psychology. His research has been supported by over \$12 million in awarded grants. He is frequently cited, interviewed, and published in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC News*, *Psychology Today*, *Religion News Service*, *Moody Radio*, and *Christianity Today*. In 2016, Jamie was awarded the FEMA Community Preparedness Champion Award at the White House. He also received the Early Career Award and Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He is co-host of *The Better Samaritan* podcast at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Jamie on LinkedIn.



Kent Annan, M.Div., Kent Annan, M.Div., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and Director of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College. His humanitarian work has included living in England, France, Albania, Kosovo, and Haiti. Kent is a senior consultant for Development Associates International, which trains Christian leaders around the world. In addition, he co-founded the nonprofit Haiti Partners. He previously served on the board of directors of Equitas Group, which focused on child trafficking issues in Haiti and Southeast Asia. Kent writes for publications such as *The Washington Post* and *Christianity Today*. He is the author of four books, including *Slow Kingdom Coming: Practices for Doing Justice, Loving Mercy, and Walking Humbly in the World*. He is co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* podcast at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Kent on LinkedIn.





Mental health is complex. Helping doesn't have to be.

BIBLICALLY-INFORMED

EVIDENCE-INFORMED

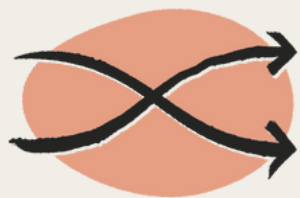
TRAUMA-INFORMED

Spiritual First Aid is a frontline peer-to-peer spiritual and emotional care intervention structured around our proven BLESS CPR framework.

When a friend approaches you with a crisis, do you experience...

- Uncertainty in what to say
- Missing signs of emotional struggles
- Personal burnout
- Hesitation in crucial moments
- Misinterpreting situations as trauma
- Compassion fatigue

In a world where mental health complexities can be overwhelming, Spiritual First Aid takes the guesswork out of spiritual and emotional care.



FLEXIBLE FORMATS

Complete the certificate course on-demand at your own pace or as part of a facilitator-led group.



ALL-INCLUSIVE

Receive 9 videos and a downloadable field guide, workbook, and 20+ tools.



HANDS-ON

Gain practical helping skills through activities and role-play simulations.