

WHEN MARRIAGE IS HARD

From Conflict to Connection
A guidebook from one who has been there.



JULIE BENDER
SMART LIVING IN SMALL BITES

To read more, the entire book is available on Amazon.

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This book is written by the author to share her life experience with the sole purpose of providing insight, encouragement, and hope. The information provided in this book is for informational purposes only and is not intended to substitute professional counseling or treatment.

Use this QR code for extras, including a free printable companion journal, the CFOR tool, the Needs Assessment, and other resources on marriage, and more.



Acknowledgments

To Donny, you truly are the love of my life. I'm so grateful I get to spend my days learning to love you better. Thank you for all the ways you love, serve, and lead me and our children. May God continue to get glory from our story. In all ways, always.

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Dear Reader

This book is almost 20 years in the making. At the young age of 22, I sought out a relatable marriage resource and couldn't find what I needed. So, now, I'm penning my own. Why? Because I know what it's like to wonder if your marriage is "normal," if you're normal, or... if maybe you just aren't quite cut out for wife-ing—at least, not to the degree of perfection you feel pressured to achieve.

This book is for the wife who loves her husband but struggles to like him sometimes. Who wants her marriage to thrive but finds her life is not as dreamy as her beloved Hallmark movies (or reality TV shows) claim it could—or should—be. For the wifey who knows there could be more for her marriage but is at a loss for practical ways to get there while also managing the rest of her life. I'm that wife, and I'm still figuring it out. But, I've learned some real steps to take and pitfalls to avoid, and I want you to start with the right steps and skip the bad ones so you can enjoy your man (and marriage) more—now.

So, "Hey girl, hey!" Let's get into it, for real.

Julie



“And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”

—Philippians 4:8

My Story

I feel a need to tell you right away that I've been married twice. I was only 21 years old when I married my college sweetheart, and after 11.5 years, I became a widow unexpectedly. Then, I married the love of my life (whom I met on Match.com) when I was a single mom in my mid-30s.

The marriage advice I am offering, the problems I've faced, and the steps I suggest you take have been tested and tried with these two men, and I've seen them work (for the most part) with both. I am not sharing this so that you will simply take my word for it. Instead, I want you to understand that I've been married to two very different men, in two very different seasons of life, and those realities have taught me some foundational truths about marriage that I go back to over and over again while trying to invest in my marriage today.

To start, let's talk about that 21-year-old girl at the first altar.

Before we go there, I should tell you that my childhood was hard. You see, my mom was a teenager when I was born, and she wasn't able to raise me or my sisters. My dad was not in the picture either, actually, because he was in jail. I grew up in my great-grandmother's home, and it was very turbulent. I often told myself, "It could be worse, at least you're not on the streets or surrounded by drugs." I share this because, with time and healing, I've come to understand just how much my

background impacted my decisions—including my choice to clearly ignore some serious red flags.

I was in college when I met Paul, my first husband. I was new to embracing my faith in every area of my life—beyond just going to church on Sunday. Paul pursued me pretty obviously, and even though I had “sworn off dating” for a time (because, as I was growing in my relationship with God, I realized how much my difficult childhood had messed with my ability to judge good character in guys), I said yes to *one date*. That way, I could let him down easy and explain my need for the dating hiatus.

All it took was a little attention from a guy for me to change my no-dating rule. Plus, Paul was a Christian, came from a home with still-married parents, and seemed like an all-around “good guy.” I figured that since I wasn’t incredibly attracted to him, our relationship would be safe and could actually help me grow. And it did, for a while. Soon, we were exclusive. I think I even dropped the “L word” first. Looking back, I see that I was simply trying to progress in the relationship; I wasn’t in love, but I was pretty certain he was.

Our dating was kind of like that. We moved forward although I felt an inner sense that it wasn’t right. I thought, “But he is a good guy, and we could have a healthy relationship.” Having the right intentions is what matters, right?

I don’t think I had any idea just how traumatized I was by my childhood. I didn’t recognize the abandonment issues, my fear of not

being loved and wanted, and constantly feeling like I was too much and not enough all at the same time. I didn't see how much I craved a man's attention because I never had a father in my life. I just knew I wanted to be married. I didn't realize I was settling because I desired any level of security. This was the scenario that led me to accept a proposal from Paul, knowing in my gut that our relationship had become truly unhealthy and codependent. (Do I even need to tell you that I didn't know that term?)

"Getting married will solve our problems," I thought. His anxiety would lessen when we could spend more time together. His workaholicism (apparent even at 21) would settle down once we shared some expenses by living together. We would be married and having sex, so we'd have less shame over creeping close to the line that Christian purity culture taught us to avoid like the plague. I could help him with it all. And, I wouldn't have to worry about where to live because he could afford to buy us a condo. I was about to graduate college and leave my roommates, what else could I do?

So, with legitimate fear in my stomach (beyond wedding day jitters), I vowed to follow Paul as the leader of our home, to be his helpmate, and to love him in sickness and in health until death do us part. I had been taking care of myself my entire life. Now, I had someone who vowed to take care of me. And, I hoped it would all be fine because we both claimed to want a God-centered marriage.

But it wasn't fine. A few days later, I was crying on our honeymoon because Paul was anxious about being away from work and wanted to leave Jamaica early. He sent me to the front desk to find out if or

we could get a partial refund if we left right then, and if so, how much. They said we had prepaid at booking, and whether we stayed or left, we'd pay the full amount—no refund. With that, he said we could stay, but there was true annoyance and zero joy in his tone. I knew right then we were in trouble. But he didn't seem all that fazed. It just... was what it was.

That's what it was like being married to Paul.

He focused on work. He truly believed his role as a husband was that of a provider and that he was accomplishing it. But he was not able to provide for me emotionally. Nor could he really provide for me spiritually, because he thought I expected too much.

I know that, in some ways, I did. I expected marriage to fix our problems, but marriage doesn't work that way. Two people must be in it, working on it, seeing and working on the weaknesses while developing the strengths. Weathering the trials together, growing in and through what life throws at you, because you're a team.

After one year of marriage, I was in the Christian living section of the bookstore looking for advice. I wanted more. I knew what the Bible taught about marriage, but I needed advice for when it didn't seem to be going that way. At times, Paul agreed that our marriage could be better, but he was way too overwhelmed with his anxiety and work to have the headspace to invest in it.

So, I figured I could do it. I found the book, *The Power of a Praying Wife*, and just knew it would fix him (us, whatever... same thing, right?).

The rest of the author's story has been intentionally removed. To read more, the entire book is available on Amazon.



“I don't know exactly what the future holds, but I'm stepping forward with grit, anchored in grace.”

—Julie Bender

Your Story

Now, it's time to write Your Story.

No two stories are the same. Even if we've faced similar challenges, we have nuances and circumstances unique to us. As you begin to take steps to strengthen your marriage, I want you to go back and think about your journey to date.

Tell your story here, even if you're the only one who ever reads it. There's purpose and healing in reflection like this.

Blank lined paper for writing.



*“On the day I called, You answered me;
and You made me bold and confident
with [renewed] strength in my life.”*

—Psalm 138:3 AMP

Problems to Face

Marriage is a beautiful gift from a loving God. But let's be honest, it can be hard, too. When we say "I do," we have dreams and hopes of how it will be. Often, those hopes and dreams morph into expectations. And expectations can be like slow cracks spreading through your house, threatening the foundation of your marriage. As you live day to day as a wife, months stacking into years, you will undoubtedly encounter problems. I know I did, and I still do. In this section, I address some of the common struggles I think many marriages face.

First, I want you to be encouraged by acknowledging the fact that every marriage experiences problems. There is no perfect marriage, because there are no perfect people. When two sinners do life together, they are going to experience conflict due to each person's own selfishness, pride, and mishandling of emotions. And then, life will throw challenges at you that you can't avoid (and some you could have).

When we learn to accept and embrace the fact that marriage is going to challenge us, we can begin to face our problems with a better attitude and outcome.

Let's look at five common issues many marriages face.

Comparison

When D and I were dating, we used to go out all the time. Even after we tied the knot, we spent more time together than we do now. I loved how we prioritized it. Fast forward two years, and we have added a lot of responsibilities to our plate. So, date night happens maybe every 6-8 weeks.

I also see others around me who seem to date their spouse weekly. Many are taking couples' trips annually. But in my house, we are in a season where that's just not possible. Whether I'm looking at other couples around us or even back to "better times" within my own marriage, it's easy to fall into the comparison trap and feel discouraged.

You've heard it said, "Comparison is the thief of joy," and I can see how it has the potential to kill many marriages. The grass often looks greener in your neighbor's yard.

Other husbands seem better, and you see them everywhere—in your social media feed, on TV, standing at your pulpit, living down the street. You notice the husbands who are better at making money, co-parenting, communication, or even having fun. And suddenly, you're disappointed. I find myself comparing my husband of today to who he was as my boyfriend in our first months of dating. And he falls short.

Have you ever compared your husband or marriage to your past relationships or other people? If yes, what was the outcome of your comparison?

The rest of the problems faced and the steps taken have been intentionally removed. To read more, the entire book is available on Amazon.

IS YOUR MARRIAGE NOT WHAT YOU HOPED IT WOULD BE?

Maybe it feels too hard to handle on your own. Do you wish you could talk to someone who understands—someone who's made it through, could walk with you, and lead you toward hope?

In this book, you will find that woman.

- *Read her story—a story like yours.*
- *Discover the problems she faced and the steps she took.*
- *Find courage through her confidence and hope.*
- *Pen your own story and struggles on the pages provided.*
- *Take comfort in realizing you don't have to walk alone.*

When you said your vows on your wedding day, you probably pictured a blissful life with your husband. But now, that image seems worlds away as you battle frequent arguments and disagreements with the man you pledged to walk beside for a lifetime—through the good times and the bad.

In *When Marriage Is Hard*, author Julie Bender walks you through her difficult first marriage, offering an honest picture of common marital challenges and the beauty in committing to finding resolutions in her current marriage. You may be dealing with conflict, communication issues, or other problems that tempt you to walk away from your spouse. This book will help you embrace the power of growth as you trace your own marriage story alongside Julie's and identify the challenges you need to address. You'll uncover the steps needed to face these trials head-on to repair your relationship and rebuild a healthy, resilient marriage for a lifetime.



Another guidebook in the Smart Living in Small Bites Series.

