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the Re- marriage manual

How to Make
Everything
Work Better the
Second Time Around

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Author's Note

my interest in studying remarriage and stepfamily life began with my own experience, because I was raised in a blended family consisting of three older sisters and a younger stepbrother. My passion for this topic grew after my own divorce in 1995, and my remarriage two years later. After watching my father and stepmother navigate the challenges of a second marriage successfully for over three decades, I assumed that I was well prepared. But after going through a tough period in my own remarriage, it became obvious to me that experience isn't always the best predictor of success in marriage. As a result, I began paying more attention to the issues that the remarried couples in my practice face and looked for books and resources to support them, so they could establish healthy, happy, and long-lasting relationships. Unfortunately, the books I found were either outdated or focused on issues with stepchildren rather than giving remarried couples practical tools to help them thrive.

When I decided to write this book, I supplemented my clinical and personal experience by interviewing dozens of remarried couples who I approached through my practice, website, and referrals from colleagues. Over a period of three years, I interviewed a hundred couples who had been divorced at least once, and at least one partner had been

married at least twice. The average age of participants was 43. These interviews formed the basis for *The Remarriage Manual: How to Make Everything Work Better the Second Time Around*.

The couples quoted in the following pages were participants in that study, and the stories told here are profiles and composites based on real people. However, names and details have been changed to protect their privacy. Details about the locations of the interviews were altered in some cases as well, for the participants' protection.

Please note that this book is not meant to replace professional individual or couples therapy. Rather, it is intended to offer an in-depth chronicle of the joys and struggles of remarriage and stepfamily life and to provide concrete ways to improve and strengthen family relationships. For simplicity, the word *stepfamily* is often used in the book to denote both stepfamilies and blended families. In the end, it is my hope that couples reading this book will learn how to be present for each other, so they can heal from past relationships and create a truly loving and intimate bond that will endure the test of time.

Terry Gaspard, MSW, LICSW

Introduction

An Opportunity to Start Fresh

When couples begin a remarriage, the most frequent mistake they make is expecting that everything will fall into place and run on automatic. Love may be sweeter the second or third time around, but once the bliss of a newfound relationship wears off, the reality of joining two distinct worlds sets in. Different routines and parenting styles; financial issues; legal matters; relationships with ex-spouses, children, and stepchildren—all of this can chisel away at the closeness of the remarried couple. If you haven't established a strong connection and are unprepared to deal effectively with conflict and lack the tools to repair daily breakdowns in communication, you may end up pointing fingers at each other rather than being supportive.

For instance, Conner, 49, and Tara, 48, remarried for six years, take seats on opposite ends of the couch during their first counseling session with me. When I ask them about some of the challenges they've faced in their second marriage, Conner clarifies why he feels frustrated with Tara. He also explains that he still loves Tara very much and hopes that our meetings will shed some light on how to get back to feeling good about their marriage.

Conner speaks directly to Tara and puts it like this: "You seem to forget that I have to work long hours to keep us afloat. Since Michael

was born three years ago, our budget is really tight. Of course I love all of the kids, but they're expensive. And I wish you'd stop comparing me to your ex. I know he betrayed you financially, but it doesn't seem like you're ever going to get over it."

Tara responds, "That's the problem. Our relationship always comes last. You don't think we have a problem even though I keep telling you how lonely I am. We haven't spent time together in over a month. It seems like you're always working, just like Gary did, and never have time for me and our family."

What is at the heart of this couple's disagreement? Like most remarried couples, they aren't really arguing about how often they have candlelit dinners. They're feeling emotionally disconnected and that has created conflict. Similarly, most of the couples I interviewed for this book were looking to restore intimacy in their relationship but didn't know where to begin. They were longing to rekindle the passion and emotional connection of their early days together, before the stressors of remarried life set in. One thing is certain: you can't return to the glory days. But you can most definitely learn to cherish each other again. This starts with intentionally choosing each other *daily* (more on this as we continue) and letting go of the expectation of a perfect partner who will meet all your needs!

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

At the age of 42, I endured a high-conflict divorce and two years later married the love of my life. I was hopeful and optimistic about marrying Craig, confident we were more emotionally and sexually compatible than I had been with my ex and better aligned in our values and aspirations. Life had certainly thrown me some curveballs before I met my second husband, but I still believed in marriage. He swept me right off my feet and proposed four months after we started dating. It would be a second marriage for both of us. He had been married and divorced ten years earlier and had no children. I had two children, ages 9 and 11, from my previous marriage. It may sound surprising, but Craig wanted to be a stepparent, and right away we also discussed having a child together. Having a new baby and starting a stepfamily made the first several years of our marriage busy and exciting.

Eight years in, our marriage was on shaky ground. We were dealing with myriad issues common to remarriage, including co-parenting with a former spouse, unresolved emotional baggage from our first marriages, financial stress, and different parenting styles. We were also dealing with jealousy, anger, and resentment around the competing needs of children and stepchildren and the expectations of in-laws. I assumed we would be one big happy family, but Craig still often felt like an “outsider” with my two biological children, and we hadn’t truly learned how to nurture our intimate relationship.

We argued frequently, and for many years we were unable to understand the complex dynamics unfolding before us and support each other as loving, devoted partners. We drifted so far apart that we discussed separating. Thankfully we found an excellent marriage counselor and began healing. It took time, but we fell back in love and have learned to accept each other’s differences, work through conflict, and repair our relationship after a dispute. We’ve been remarried twenty-two years and couldn’t be happier.

Sadly, we’re the exception.

According to experts, even though the majority of divorced people will eventually remarry, most of these marriages will fail due to the difficulties that remarried couples face building a relationship while adjusting to, and combining, existing families and complex relationship histories. Few couples understand at the outset how complicated and demanding remarriage is.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND HERE

If you’ve been looking for resources on remarriage, you’ve undoubtedly noticed that conventional books about marriage simply don’t address the unique situations remarried couples face, and the current books available on remarriage tend to focus more on stepfamilies than on the remarriage itself. Many also take a religious view.

I wrote this book to fill a major gap in the literature. I can help set you up for a successful remarriage and/or bring back the joy if your remarriage has started to falter. The statistics work against you, but I am here to tell you that with intention and effort, you can make your

remarriage work. It will take energy and determination, and I'll be here to support you.

In *The Remarriage Manual*, you'll find all kinds of stories about the problems remarried couples encounter, as well as solutions that work. I feature thirty-one couples who, like Tara and Conner, experience different degrees of emotional disconnection and trust issues. Reading about their struggles and triumphs, you'll be able to examine your own relationship and learn how emotional and sexual intimacy in your marriage is the absolute key to success. It is a means of expressing the profound love you feel for your spouse. When I use the word *intimacy*, I'm talking about a powerful expression of love infused with emotion (caring, empathy, excitement, pleasure), which allows partners to experience a deep sense of connection. This kind of bond cannot be taken for granted, and it doesn't just happen. It takes daily tending, and occasionally it takes some work.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Remarriage Manual looks at the ten challenges I see most often among remarried couples. Along with poignant real-life stories, I offer exercises with clear action steps specifically designed to be put to use immediately. Ideally this book should be read with your partner. However, you can benefit from reading it alone if you implement strategies and have your partner's support. Throughout the pages of this book, I use the word *remarried* to mean couples who were married to other people and are now married to each other. Sometimes reading the chapters and doing exercises will feel enjoyable and other times it will feel like pulling teeth.

The first chapter in our remarriage journey is about building a culture of respect, appreciation, and tolerance in your family through loving words and actions. The diagnostic tool in this chapter can help you assess your own and your spouse's strengths and weaknesses and points you to other chapters that address your areas of need. In chapter 2, you'll learn the action steps needed to make your remarriage a top priority, so you can beat the odds of divorce. Chapter 3 will offer tools, powerful real-life stories, and proven strategies to

help you heal from emotional baggage and begin to love your partner in the here and now.

In chapter 4, we'll focus on the importance of being transparent and not keeping secrets about money, so you can have honesty, integrity, and financial security. Chapter 5 will help you overcome the trust issues that may be stopping you from being vulnerable and intimate with your partner. In chapter 6, you'll learn how to put your inhibitions aside and uncover the pleasures of a dynamic sex life by fostering emotional and sexual intimacy. You'll discover some of the common reasons why couples stop enjoying passionate sex such as the pursuer-distancer dynamic.

Chapters 7 and 8 will illustrate the dos and don'ts you'll need to communicate more effectively, curb defensiveness, and manage and recover from conflict through potent action steps. In chapter 9, you'll learn what you need to do to support each other in your newly created family. You read that right! You can adopt strategies that embody the mind-set of "we're in this together," so your children cannot divide and conquer. Embracing the role of a stepparent is one of the major challenges of remarried couples. The good news is that you can actually begin to create positive family memories and develop a stepfamily legacy right away with some wise planning of enjoyable activities and quality time together.

Finally, chapter 10 will show you the importance of apologizing and granting each other forgiveness so you don't harbor resentments that can pull you apart. Learning the best ways to offer your partner a sincere apology and ways to avoid ruining an apology will help you rid yourself of the toxic hurt feelings that hold you and your partner back from being vulnerable, connected, and emotionally and sexually intimate.

Whether you're thinking of remarrying and concerned about going the distance or you're already remarried and struggling, this book will provide the expert advice, practical tools, hope, and inspiration you need to build—or repair—a strong relationship foundation, avoid the most common mistakes remarried couples make, and prevent challenges from becoming deal breakers. It will show you why it's so important to focus on cherishing and accepting each other rather than

trying to change each other. The steps described in each chapter will help you and your partner create a shared vision for your remarriage, foster emotional closeness, and know how to recover quickly from hurt and miscommunication.

If you show up and do the work, you'll create a deeply trusting, loving, and sustainable relationship.