

Becoming Better Together Book Review

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Sue Johnson, clinical psychologist, couples therapist, and author of *Hold Me Tight* says that “being the ‘best you can be’ is really only possible when you are deeply connected to another. Splendid isolation is for planets, not people” (Johnson, 2020). This is why marriage can be such a beautiful and powerful thing in our life if done well. It can also be difficult, painful, and even lonely if not consistently worked on. Relationships and marriage are something that almost all of us participate in, because God made us relational beings, but not all of us were taught how to do relationships well. We learn many things in school as a child but healthy relationships, which could possibly be one of the most beneficial subjects for us to learn, is not typically taught. That is why couples and marriage counselors along with books on marriage can be so beneficial.

In this paper we will discuss the book *Becoming Better Together*. This book is a Christian marriage counseling book written by Christian couples counselor, Dr. John Van Epp along with the assistance of his Daughter, Dr. Morgan Cutlip. In the book Epp and Cutlip utilizes what they call the “RAM Plan” to help couples grow together. R.A.M. stands for Relationship Attachment Model and is made up of 5 components: “Know, Trust, Rely, Commit, and Touch” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 29).

Epp and Cutlip emphasize throughout the book the work that goes into keeping a relationship strong. They state that relationships are “constantly fluctuating and needing adjustments to stay strong; they need to be intentionally managed and directed; and unless they are directed and adjusted, they do not self-correct any deficiencies or problems.” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, P. 9). They give us a guide on how and what adjustments need to be made through the RAM Plan. It gives places to check-in on our marriage and where to make up those deficiencies that they mention.

They go into depth of each part of the RAM Plan and how to catch up on these parts with what they call “huddles”. They explain the *huddles* as “reviewing your relationship to identify what was lacking in order to balance your imbalances” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 38). They start these explanations with what it means to *Know* your spouse. They describe knowing as “the ways you share your thoughts, dreams, feelings, and experiences from day-to-day so you can truthfully say *my partner knows me better than anyone else*” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 30). They say that you can do this in your huddle by catching up “with what has happened since your last huddle” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 41).

In the next part of the RAM model that they go into is to *Trust* your partner. Trust is commonly considered one of the most important parts of a relationship but as they say “Most of you will immediately think that trust only refers to keeping your vows and staying faithful.” Which of course is important but it’s more than that, “Trust expects your spouse to be there for you. To step up when needed, and to do what they said they were going to do.” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 31). Focusing on this within the huddle might look like reviewing “the ways that your spouse has blessed you... and if there were any misunderstandings, conflicts, or breaches of trust, then give and receive your apologies” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 41). This shows us that trust in relationships is much more than just knowing that your spouse won’t cheat on you. Trust means knowing that your spouse will be there for you when you need them, it means that you can trust their word, and that if they fail you on that, then you can trust that they will care enough for you to apologize.

Epp and Cutlip then discuss the ability to *rely* on your spouse. They state that “Rely refers to the ways that you depend on each other to meet each other’s needs and wants” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 32). This could easily be confused with trust but they explain the difference

between the two as “Trust is more about what you think of your spouse whereas reliance is more about what you do for your spouse” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 32). This idea is in line with Ephesians 5:21 where it states “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” and goes on to say that wives should submit to their husbands as the Church does to Christ and husbands should love their wives as they love themselves (*Niv bible* 2007). Epp and Cutlip share that the way to work on relying on each other in your weekly huddle is by making plans for the future to look forward to doing with each other and follow through with those plans before the next huddle.

Next Epp and Cutlip discuss what it means to *commit* to your spouse. They share that commitment goes beyond the vows you say on your wedding day and says that it has “three dimensions: promise, priority and presence.” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022 p. 32). Not only are you committing to stay with that person for the rest of your life but you’re also committing to make them a priority and to be present in your relationship. In the weekly huddle Epp and Cutlip say that you can show commitment to your spouse by “finding ways you can support each other in your upcoming responsibilities and activities.” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 42)

Finally, Epp and Cutlip discuss *Touch* within your relationship. It seems pretty obvious that you should show physical affection to your partner but it often seems that as relationships go on, this is forgotten. The importance of physical intimacy is even scientific. As Epp and Cutlip explain to us that “the chemicals produced in your brain during sexual arousal are known for their bonding effects” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 34). They also state that this portion of your relationship is “impacted by the other four dynamic bonds of your relationship.” And this can be worked on just by talking about it, “What you appreciate, and what you would like to do” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 42). The physical portion can sometimes be uncomfortable for people to

discuss or think that their partner should just know what they want, but Epp and Cutlip show that this, like everything else, can be worked on in the huddles.

Throughout the rest of the book Epp and Cutlip go in depth about each of these five relationship dynamics. They even offer exercises, scripts, and worksheets to grow in each of these areas with your spouse. In conclusion of the book, they state that the goal of the book is for you to “feel empowered to actively run your marriage relationship, and that the RAM has provided you with a job description of what it means to keep your relationship growing, balanced, and fulfilling” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 191). Overall it seems that this book gives couples a way to actively work on their marriage rather than just trying to be better and hope for the best.

In our textbook *Foundations of Couples, Marriage, and Family Counseling* by David Capuzzi and Mark D. Stauffer, they discuss many modalities and techniques that we could use for families and couples. There are a few that specifically correlate with Epp and Cutlip’s techniques. Three of those that seemed to coincide with their technique the most were; *Experiential Family Therapy, Strategic Family Therapy, and Cognitive Behavioral Theories.*

Capuzzi and Stauffer tell us that Walter Kempler, the creator of *Experiential Family Therapy*, “believed that an effective family approach should incorporate effective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions into a holistic approach promoting optimal family functioning.” They also tell us that “Experiential therapy was grounded in creating moments in sessions with families to help families increase awareness about their thoughts and feelings, take responsibility, obtain a sense of autonomy, and maintain authenticity to bring about change.” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p 132). This therapy technique sounds very similar to Epp and Cutlip’s “huddles” which we discussed earlier. Capuzzi and Stauffer also state that the goal of this therapeutic

technique is “to actively engage each family member in the counseling process so they can experience one another, increase awareness of themselves and the family dynamics, become more united, and practice communication”(Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021). Both Epp and Kempler’s techniques seem to focus on communication to increase bonding and awareness.

The next technique to compare to Epp and Cutlip’s technique is *Strategic Family Therapy*. According to Capuzzi and Stauffer, “Instead of explaining why people behave the way they do, the creators of strategic family therapy began to inform people how they could behave differently” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 191). This is similar to Epp and Cutlip in that they also do not focus much on why your partner might be behaving in a certain way, but rather a model to discuss those behaviors. Though similar in idea, the two models are very different in action. Where Epp and Cutlip simply give us a model for behaving differently, strategic family therapy gives several different interventions to use. Such as “restraining,” “prescribing the symptom,” and “amplifying the problem” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 198). We will not go into the details of these techniques but understand that they are much more complex than Epp and Cutlip’s RAM model.

Finally we will compare *Cognitive Behavioral Techniques* to Epp and Cutlip’s book. In Capuzzi and Stauffer’s text they state that “all cognitive behavioral approaches share an emphasis on research and clearly outlined goals, ongoing assessments, and treatment interventions” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 209). They also say that “behavioral couples therapists gradually replaced token economies with written contracts and good faith contracts for behavioral exchanges and added communication and problem solving skills training” (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 211). Though Epp and Cutlip never mention contracts or specifically written assessments. They do talk a lot about discussing goals and problem solving by communication

through his “huddles”. As they explain “your huddles are the regular time you set to review your relationship, looking at what you are doing well, and what you need to either increase or add to your relationship” (Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 167).

Overall *Becoming Better Together* has good information, utilizes great biblical references, and gives a very helpful outline for couples relationships. The only criticism that could be found is that the book is somewhat repetitive, going over the model multiple times and probably could have been summarized more briefly. The final paragraph of the book seems to summarize all of it, “So, keep your huddles. Set your goals. Make it happen. And know that as you put out this small amount of effort, you will gain a lifetime of happiness together”(Epp & Cutlip, 2022, p. 192). This gives couples a great amount of motivation and hope of a happy relationship.

References

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