

240 Marital Conversations

* This resource is an excerpt from section three of the "[Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Communication](#)" seminar.

What is the least obvious and most important part of a fish tank? The water. Water is essential for the life of the fish and plants. Water upholds and sways the decorations. Water is what reflects the light in "aquatic" ways and captures our attention. Yet no one ever looks at a fish tank and says, "Wow! You've got great water." If the tank is algae-ridden, then people may say, "Yuck! You need to clean your water."

Water in a fish tank shares a roll similar to day-to-day communication in a marriage. It is essential for the vitality of the marriage, surrounds all the special and significant moments, and it captures all the "relational" qualities of a marriage that we were made to enjoy. But day-to-day is too often ignored or neglected unless it reaches a point that it is noticeably unhealthy.

In this chapter we will talk about two aspects of cultivating healthy day-to-day communication: (1) cleaning the tank – removing the contaminants of good communication, and (2) filling the tank – providing a lifetime-supply-answer to the question, "So what are we supposed to talk about?"

Cleaning the Tank

Good day-to-day marital communication requires maintenance. It is not something you can leave on autopilot and expect to have frequent, quality interactions that cover the breadth of life issues that face a marriage. That would be the equivalent of a teacher putting no effort into planning a class and expecting to cover all the necessary areas of curriculum well.

"You need to be committed to talk, talk, and talk... Sinners living in silence do not produce unity, understanding and love (p. 161). You must listen, listen, and listen... Listening is not about being passive. Listening is an active commitment (p. 162)." Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

The majority of what we'll look at in the "Cleaning the Tank" section is merely preventing the responsibilities of life that are shared in marriage from stifling the friendship that sparked the marriage. It is learning to maintain the elements of friendship while "doing life together."

"If it is the joy of each other to make the other happy, a hundred problems will be solved before they happen (p. 134)." John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Equilibrium Agent

Often communication books will provide a ratio of how many positive comments are needed to cancel out a negative one. If we actually try to keep up with the math, it tends to become laborious, disingenuous, or legalistic. But if we see the picture behind the numbers it can provide the benefit without the bondage.

Communication has a "tipping point" at which it begins to become toxic (deteriorating health rather than contributing to health). There are many difficult and negative things that couples will have to discuss. Avoiding budget cuts, child discipline, or life disappointments is not "being positive," it is living in denial. The solution to maintaining marital equilibrium is not eliminating all unpleasant conversations. It must be accomplished by engaging in enough satisfying, enjoyable, meaningful conversations that the home remains a life-giving environment.

"A wife, if she is very generous, may allow that her husband lives up to perhaps eighty percent of her expectations. There is always the other twenty percent that she would like to change, and she may chip away at it for the whole of their married life without reducing it by very much. She may, on the other hand, simply decide to enjoy the eighty percent, and both of them will be happy (p. 97)." Elisabeth Elliot in *Love Has a Price Tag*

Self-Examination: In what ways are you prone to negatively skew the equilibrium of your marriage: pessimism, critical comments, being purely functional, discontentment, failing to encourage, impatience, unrealistic expectations, etc...?

Read I Thessalonians 5:1-11. Notice what Paul's concluding application was to the coming "Day of the Lord." It was to encourage one another (v. 11). These people were facing uncertainty (v. 1-2), social challenges (v. 3-5), and having to work diligently both physically and spiritually (v. 6-10). In the midst of this environment, Paul reinforced the importance of using their words to build each other up. Not only this, Paul put his counsel into practice by highlighting this was something they were already doing (v. 11). So do not hesitate to be repetitive in your encouragement or enjoyable conversations.

Removing Barriers

We communicate (both listening and speaking) through the filter of our fears and pride. Both our insecurities and our boasts influence what we hear and what we say. Removing these barriers does not mean eliminating fear and pride from our life. That won't happen. It does require being humbly self-aware and open about these areas of your life.

Self-Examination: Which of these barriers of pride or insecurity are you prone to filter communication through?

I have to be strong.	I don't want to disturb the peace.	What I think/feel is not important.
I don't want to sound stupid.	I don't want them to worry about me.	I can handle this on my own.
My approach to this is better.	Other: _____	

These barriers become the reasons we don't talk, talk in code, don't say what we mean, or are wrongly offended by what others say. Trust is letting the barrier of pride or insecurity be known, preferably before, the content of our thoughts. Once we do this, the differences between a husband and wife (which are often attributed to gender, personality, or home of origin) begin to make sense and generate unity instead of division.

Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10. Notice that it is the weakness of Christ's humanity that allows Him to be such a great Savior. We can trust Christ because He knows us and has made Himself known to us. It is only the gospel that gives us the courage and freedom to acknowledge the barriers of pride and insecurity. Disclosing these barriers requires the belief that there is sufficient grace to cover/change them. Instinctively we know that apart from Christ this grace does not exist, so we hide like humanity has done since the inception of sin (Gen. 3:8). When we stop hiding our weaknesses we begin trusting our spouse on the basis of a mutual trust for what the gospel means for our marriage.

"You simply cannot have a relationship with someone whom you do not trust. Such a marriage is a cycle of doubt, accusation, conflict, recrimination, hurt, disappointment, and withdrawal. I've listened to people who have so little trust between them that they literally debate everything the other says... Here's what you need to understand: the building of trust between you begins vertically before it ever begins horizontally (p. 154)." Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

Filling the Tank

When you finish reading this section you should *never* again be able to say, "What is there for us to talk about?" That has actually been a primary objective of the entire *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage* seminar series – to fill your marriage with excellent conversations (embedded throughout every seminar) and dates (Appendix A in every seminar) that draw you closer to Christ and each other.

In this section, we list 270 conversation topics in ten categories. The goal is to provide a variety in the type of conversation, multiple topics within each type, and an understanding of how each type of conversation contributes to the quality and closeness of your marriage. As you read, don't become overwhelmed. We'll discuss how to assimilate "all there is to talk about" within your marriage at the end of this section. That will involve a tissue box, but not for the reason you think.

Daily Review Topics

In marriage it is important to know what is going on in the life of your spouse; not as a parent, spectator, or news reporter, but as a prayer partner, encourager, friend, and lover. Showing interest in the incremental changes of your spouse's life is a way to show your love. Otherwise trivial things are significant because they are happening in the life of someone important to you. This perpetual honor-of-interest is a great way to affirm your spouse and counter the drift-of-indifference that erodes many marriages.

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- What was the highlight of your day?
- What was the lowlight of your day?
- What made you smile today?
- I Corinthians 13 – I saw a great example of love today when...
- I was encouraged today when...
- What simple pleasure did you enjoy today?
- We never got to finish talking about...
- I don't say thank you enough for...
- I thought of you when...
- What do you need help with today?
- What was the most random thing about your day?
- How can I pray for you today?
- How can I make your day better, easier, or more complete?
- What has been on your mind most today?
- What did you think about the news today?

Reflective Topics

There is a level of intimacy that comes from considering challenging, personal questions together. One measure of closeness is the kinds of questions you're willing to engage with another person. Your spouse should be the person with whom you have the most and best of these conversations. This is one of the key ways to make sure that nobody else becomes more of an "insider" in your life than your spouse. Conversations like these are how you get to the point that the person who knows you best loves you most and is your most faithful companion in life's journey.

- What are the biggest challenges you anticipate facing this week, month, or year?
- What are some of the blessings in our life that we often overlook?
- 10 years from now I believe [blank] will prove to be the most significant thing we did during this season of life.
- What is on the short list of things you "need" in order to be content?
- What difficult season of our marriage or personal life can we now give thanks to God for?
- How is where we live now (time and place) different from where you grew up?
- Fruit of the Spirit: Where or how do you think *self-control* does or could bless our marriage most?
- How have you noticed your priorities change over the last year or since we've been married?
- I miss it when we used to...
- Philippians 4:8 – It is a joy to think about the aspects of your character that are *pure and lovely* [describe].
- It meant a lot to me when you said [blank].
- The advice I would give a young couple based on our first year of marriage would be...
- My favorite part of our courtship was...
- Here are ways I have seen God grow you and shape your character in the last 5 years...
- My favorite memory from our first year of marriage was when...
- I have noticed my motivation to [blank] increase/decrease lately.
- What is your favorite memory with your grandparents?
- What are the most important yet subtle ways we can protect our marriage and family?
- The freedom that I most enjoy or appreciate is...
- What is your favorite childhood picture / memory?
- The thing that has surprised me most about you since we've been married is...
- What is your favorite holiday memory?
- How is life different from what you thought it would be at this age?
- How have we changed (personality and values) since we got married?
- What is your favorite memory from our honeymoon?
- What is the biggest surprise we have experienced this year?
- What are the top three highlights from our marriage this year?
- What is the most meaningful conversation you remember us having this month?

Romantic Topics

Married couples should flirt and have intimate conversations. You stoke the fire of your interest about anything (i.e., job, hobby, faith, politics, etc...) by talking about it with those who share your passion. Why would we not do the same for our marriage with our spouse? Often when we talk about other interests we are not learning new information; we are merely rehearsing what we enjoy again (often in the same words we've used many times). Why would we be hesitant to do this with our marriages? Too often we only rehearse our disappointments with one another. Use these questions to spark many, many conversations where you rehearse the delights of our marriage with your spouse.

- What is your favorite memory from our courtship, first year of marriage, or this past year?
- When have been the moments that our love for each other has grown the most (dating, engaged, married)?
- Fruit of the Spirit: I see *goodness* in you most clearly when...
- My favorite date we've been on so far is...
- I have great confidence in your...
- I love watching your joy when you/we...
- I Corinthians 13 – Your *kindness* blesses me when...
- A date that would be fun to me is...
- Thank you for...
- I hope our kids get your... (an indirect way to complement qualities you appreciate about your spouse)
- Philippians 4:8 – What are the things that are *excellent* and *worthy of praise* in our life and marriage now?
- I think your most attractive outfit is...
- It makes me smile when you...
- For our next anniversary I would like to...
- I noticed you sacrifice [blank] for our marriage/family and it meant a lot to me.
- Three things I love about you more now than when we got married are...
- My favorite way you say "I love you" is...
- You look most attractive to me after...
- The most meaningful gift you have ever given me was...
- I have really seen you grow in [blank] area of your life.
- What I like most about your sense of humor is...
- You make it easy to trust and love you by...
- The little things that you do which mean a lot to me are...
- The best compliment/surprise you ever gave me was...
- On our next three day weekend we should...
- You show me honor when you...
- How could I make a "regular day" most special for you?
- I was challenged by your sense of hope and perseverance when...
- You bless me by [list] and my life is better because of you.
- What form of mild affection (i.e., holding hands, cuddling, etc...) do you enjoy the most?
- How can I make the time we spend together more special for you?
- What is your favorite picture of us together?
- I miss you most when...
- I feel closest to you when...
- I am most proud of you for...
- What compliment can I give you that would be most meaningful to you in this season of life?

Planning Topics

Thinking about and preparing for a shared future is a way that we demonstrate commitment to and enthusiasm about our marriage. Too often the word "planning" is heard with a sterile, business meeting connotation. Think about how someone plans for a vacation, business venture, retirement, or having children. That planning is not laborious or tedious. While there are details involved in each, the overarching tone is excitement for what is ahead. When you contextualize marital planning conversations as the pursuit of God's blessing, the conversations below should take on a similar feel.

- What are your plans, hopes, or dream for the next month / year?
- I see your diligence in [blank] and it encourages me to think about our future together.
- This summer I would like to...

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- I think we need to focus on [blank] in the character of our kids for the next period of time.
- If we are going to make our marriage the priority it should be then we need to...
- For our next family picture...
- Before we retire I want to...
- The next project I'd like to engage with our house is...
- A good idea for our marital or family devotions would be...
- What should our next significant purchase be?
- What should our next family outing be?
- By the end of this year I want to...
- We need to [blank] with our finances.
- We need to [blank] with our time.
- What is most important for you to avoid burnout or discouragement in this season of life?
- What is the next marker in the life of our marriage / family and what do we need to do to prepare for it?
- What ambitions or life goals do you have and how can I support you in those?
- Where would you like to visit and what would you want to do there?
- What would be the marks of a "good life" as we grow old together?
- How and where would you like me to be more, less, or differently involved in decision making?
- What is a goal you have for this week and how can I help you accomplish it?
- What would make a great day trip for the two of us?

Evaluative Topics

Enhancing something is a form of love. Men who love their cars are constantly tinkering with them. Women who love their homes are perpetually updating the decorations. The fact that they find something to improve is not an indication that they are dissatisfied with their car or home; actually it reveals the opposite – they delight in them. Similarly, if we love our spouse and marriage, we will engage in conversations about how to best steward this God's blessing.

- What are the skills that you most need to learn, refine, or implement at home?
- I've really seen you grow in [blank] ways recently.
- Fruit of the Spirit: Where do you see that I need to become more *faithful* or *reliable*?
- I want to manage [blank] better than I have recently.
- I Corinthians 13 – I need help thinking about how to handle [blank] situation without being *rude*.
- I Corinthians 13 – I want to protect our marriage by...
- What do you think we should put more time into and what would we take that time from?
- What has become more important to you than it used to be in the last year?
- I need to relax about [blank] because I can tell it's becoming too important to me.
- Philippians 4:8 – How have we begun to focus on the things that are dishonorable more than *honorable*?
- Philippians 4:8 – How have we begun to focus on the things that are unjust more than *just*?
- I need to work on how I communicate when...
- I need to be a better listener when...
- I would like for us to be more unified on...
- I should use more words when...
- I should use fewer words when...
- The area of my life that I need to take better care of is...
- I give up too quickly or press too hard on...
- I believe you show excellent wisdom and discernment in/with...
- My character goal for next month is...
- You make me feel safe because I don't have to worry about...
- Does our budget represent our family mission and values?
- I see Christ most in you when...
- I want to do a better job of expressing [blank] emotion.
- I feel most/least known by you in [blank] areas of my life.
- When I put myself in your place...
- How well do we handle disappointment (individually and as a couple)?
- How well do we handle our weaknesses (individually and as a couple)?
- Do we spend too much or too little time and money on entertainment?
- How has being married made facing life's challenges different?

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- What could I do that would have the greatest positive impact on your sense of confidence and security?
- What one thing could I do each day that would be a blessing to you?
- What is the hardest change in our lives at this time for you to accept?

Confessional Topics

Confession of sin, weakness, and shortcomings is a significant way that we display how much we value our spouse and marriage. When we confess, we show that we value our spouse and marriage more than our pride. When faced with a choice of whether to protect/defend ourselves or honor the marriage, confession proves we choose the latter. The gospel reminds us that every marriage is comprised of two sinners in need of grace. Confession is how we display that we believe this reality and enact its implications.

- What are the greatest character challenges you are facing at home?
- Fruit of the Spirit: I need to grow in *patience* with...
- Fruit of the Spirit: I need to grow in *gentleness* with...
- I have been slow to repent for...
- I Corinthians 13 – I have grown prone to *envy* [blank] recently.
- I Corinthians 13 – I have been prone to *irritability* about [blank] recently.
- I over use the excuse that...
- I tend to be sarcastic, harsh, or silent about/when...
- It is hardest for me to maintain hope in the area of...
- I need to show more honor to you and our marriage by...
- I tend to be too controlling with/about...
- My emotions are too tied to...
- I have been grumbling too much about...
- I can tell I am becoming more selfish or self-centered in/with...
- I need to forgive...
- My sense of humor tends to degrade [blank] and I need to show them more honor.
- I should have taken more responsibility for...
- I am too concerned with [name's / group's] opinion of me.

General Interest Topics

What do you enjoy simply because your spouse enjoys it? What do you know a good deal about merely because it is important to your spouse? The longer we are married the longer and deeper these lists should become. A couple doesn't have to enjoy the same things in order to enjoy one another – this is one of the most destructive myths that discouraged couples begin to believe. When we are selfless enough to show interest in the things that intrigue each other, our marriages will always be rich and our conversations full.

- Recently I have begun to enjoy [blank] more.
- I Corinthians 13 – What do you enjoy that I can learn about so I don't always *insist on having my way*?
- I would like to learn more about or how to...
- What do you find most rejuvenating and what about it gives you energy?
- I want us to make more time to...
- I want to understand more about why you enjoy...
- Tell me more about what you have been doing or plan to do with your hobby.
- I've noticed myself getting more competitive about...
- My favorite thing to do outdoors is...
- My favorite thing to do indoors is...
- Politically, I am most interested in...
- How are things going with your [goal/dream/project]?
- I realize now why [blank] is so important to you more than I did when we were first married.
- You enjoy [blank] and we should do it more.
- What would you like to do or get for your next birthday?
- I want to help you more with...
- What meal have we not had in a while that you would enjoy?

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- What things do you enjoy more now than you did 5 years ago?
- How can I show more interest in the things you enjoy?
- What talent or interest do you want to develop?
- If you could pick one new thing for me to do with you what would it be?
- What is it about your interests that are most refueling?
- What is your favorite thing to do in the Spring, Summer, Fall, or Winter?
- What is your favorite thing to do that is free?
- What are the little things that make for a great weekend?

Spiritual Growth Topics

A Gospel-Centered Marriage has one ultimate purpose: Christ-likeness. Both husband and wife are striving to be more like Christ in order to (a) find personal satisfaction, (b) bless one another, and (c) reach the world. If that is the shared mission of husband and wife, then there is plenty to talk about. If both husband and wife are willingly pursuing Christ and realize that we are changed by grace, then these are safe conversations. If these conversations become strained, then you need to ask yourself (a) am I valuing something other than Christ, (b) are we trying to become more like Christ through external pressures rather than grace, or (c) has life become more about me than reaching the world?

- What you have you been learning in your personal Bible study recently?
- How has God challenged or encouraged you in the sermons recently?
- What things are you praying about that I can also pray for?
- Fruit of the Spirit: My sense of peace is most closely tied to...
- Where have you seen God at work in your life this week?
- I believe my spiritual gifts and experience could best serve...
- I Corinthians 13 – I believe God is calling me to be less *arrogant* about...
- What do you appreciate most about our church?
- I have seen you make great progress in your ability to forgive...
- Philippians 4:8 – The *truth* that I most often forget or neglect is...
- What do you appreciate most about the leaders of our church?
- What do you appreciate most about our small group?
- I believe God is calling me to sacrifice [blank] in order to [blank].
- When I am afraid I...
- How can we improve the quality of discipleship that is occurring in our family?
- I think we should be praying more for/about...
- If I thought about God and the gospel more I would...
- The “if only” I have learned to live without and still trust God is...
- What do you appreciate most about the worship at our church?
- I have seen you grow in your willingness and ability to serve our family by...
- What do you appreciate most about the servant leaders at our church?
- I have noticed God’s mercy in...
- I feel most close to God and am aware of His presence when...
- What do you appreciate most about the preaching at our church?
- I want to focus more on [blank] in my personal Bible study and devotion time.
- Beatitudes: Which of the qualities in Matthew 5:3-12 do you believe you are currently growing in?
- What is the biggest personal, family, or church blessing we should give thanks to God for?
- Who are we (personally and as a couple) making intentional efforts to share Christ with?
- What worship song or hymn best tells your life story?

Social Topics

We were created to live in community. Our spouse should be our best friend, but not our only friend. We should have friends who are mentoring us, friends we are mentoring, friends we just “do life with,” and friends we are seeking to win for Christ. There are sides of your spouse’s character that you will only get to see and enjoy when he/she interacts with people who are different from you. One of the primary ways that a husband and wife encourage each other to live in healthy Christian community is to talk about the kinds of questions listed below.

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- Who are the five most important people in your life right now?
- How can I be praying for your friends?
- How can I be praying for your Christian influence at work?
- Fruit of the Spirit: Who is the *kindest* person you know and how do they demonstrate kindness?
- I would like to see us get more involved with...
- I am grateful for our friends [name] because of how they enrich our lives.
- Philippians 4:8 – What are some of the most *admirable* qualities that we see in each other’s friends?
- Who is an older couple we need to have over for dinner and learn from their marriage?
- Who is a younger couple we need to spend time with and pour into their marriage?
- I should seek the advice/guidance of [name] about [blank].
- How can I help or encourage you to get more quality time with your friends?
- What old friend (couple or individual) do we need to reconnect with?
- Who is the first person you turn to for advice on an important question?

Popcorn Topics

Random conversations can be a fun, light-hearted way to enjoy your spouse. Doubtless many rabbits will be chased in the conversations listed above, but below are some questions just meant to generate fun conversation. As with all the other categories, be creative and add to the list. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive (or exhausting), but merely to get you thinking about the possibilities.

- What nickname has no one called you in a long time?
- What is your idea of a dream vacation?
- If we were to move to another country where would you want to move?
- What habit of mine used to be annoying but now you find endearing?
- What decoration within our home is most meaningful to you?
- What is the most/least helpful piece of advice you’ve ever received?
- If you could ask God any question you wanted, what would you ask?
- My idea of a good Monday, Friday, weekend, etc is...
- What is something I still don’t know about you?
- If you were President and First Lady, how would the media “spin” your marriage?
- What event in your life would have won a prize on “America’s Funniest Home Videos”?
- What stereotypes do you not fit?
- What do you remember about our first date?
- How would our marriage be different if we switched personalities?
- What do you still not understand about your spouse?
- If every marriage were like your marriage how different would the world be?
- If you and your spouse had known each other in Middle School what would you have thought of each other?
- What do you think will be the “stand out quality” that your kids use to describe you to your grandchildren?
- What person in the Bible or history do you most identify with and why?

The question now shifts from, “What is there to talk about?” to “How are we going to have all of these conversations?” That is a powerful shift in mindset. But it is essential that you don’t get overwhelmed into passivity. A chapter like this can have the effect of a strong rain – there is so much information no action soaks in. Here are three suggestions help you assimilate these conversation possibilities.

First, rank your areas of strength and weakness. It is less overwhelming when you realize that you are already having or are comfortable having many of these conversations. You can intentionally put effort toward those areas of conversation that are most difficult or least natural. This intentional effort would probably entail carrying a list of the questions in your area of discomfort so that you can give them more forethought before discussing them with your spouse.

Daily Review

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Reflective

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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Romantic

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Planning

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Evaluative

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Confessional

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

General Interest

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Spiritual

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Social

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Popcorn

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Wife's Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Second, you can set this list at your dinner table and rotate picking a subject from one area per night when you have dinner at home. If you have children and this would be difficult, you can put the list in the area of your home where you settle after putting the children to bed and engage a question before you begin any entertainment activities. Regardless of when and where, the main idea is to place the questions in an area where you are regularly with your spouse so that you remember to initiate conversations.

Third, you can put your favorite conversations from this list (along with your preferred additions) on slips of paper into an empty tissue box and have a raffle whenever there is a free moment for conversation. This brings a playful element to these conversations which is important (we continue to do things that are fun). In this version you can also add slips of paper with compliments and words of encouragement to one another to be drawn out and echoed during these conversation times.

