

The ScreamFree Marriage, by Hal Runkel, LMFT a book review by Stephanie Delmore, MA, LPC

I was wandering through the “New Books” section of my local library recently, and was intrigued by the title of a book I saw on the shelf, “ScreamFree Marriage”. Being a professional counselor, and intrigued with all books related to relationships, I decided to check it out and give it a try. From the first chapter, I knew immediately that this book would be an excellent resource for a couple that I was currently working with in couples counseling. The author is as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who has worked with hundreds of couples and pulls experience from both his professional and personal life to create a model for how to succeed in marriage. His thesis is this: “Calm down, grow up, get closer”. Sounds simple in model, but I can tell you from the years of couples I have worked with, this is much easier said than done. The author goes on to explain that “Screaming” in marriage is anxious reactivity. It can be in aggressive forms such as yelling, raging, and hitting or in passive-aggressive forms such as shutting down and withdrawing.

“Calm down” relates to the ability to manage our own feelings and mood. Runkel states that “If you’re not under control, you cannot be in connection. Your greatest barrier is your own reactivity”. The process is about learning to manage all those difficult emotions such as, anger hurt, frustration, etc. It’s about learning to really understand and recognize not only what you are feeling, but being able to tolerate being in that feeling, while still remaining calm and engaged with your partner and at the same time articulating your feelings in a way your partner can understand. See how complicated it gets?! Runkel challenges readers to work on these skills on an individual level. One strategy he employs is a technique he calls “going to the balcony”. This technique is about visualizing yourself in up in a balcony, looking down on the conflict you and your spouse are engaged in and looking at your own behavior. It’s about taking responsibility for what you can control in the situation.

“Grow Up” is about taking responsibility for your own behavior. It’s about realizing that we all bring our own “stuff” to marriage but at some point we need to make a decision that if any of that is holding us back to being in the marriage we want to be in, we need to take ownership for learning new ways of relating. Runkel pushes readers to think about true intimacy beginning with “I”. It’s about knowing who you are and having the courage to authentically represent yourself to your partner. This can be scary and create feelings of vulnerability but it is the way to true emotional intimacy. “The only communication skill you need to learn is Authentic Self Representation” according to Runkel. Throughout the book is also a theme of a healthy marriage being the coming together of two separate, healthy individuals. The author writes that “it’s not what you have in common; it’s what you have inside”. It’s a cultural myth that happy couples spend all of their time together and are emotionally needy with each other. The opposite is really true: a successful marriage is made of two healthy, separate people who are choosing to come together.

“Get Closer” is about creating emotional intimacy in marriage. Runkel challenges reader to think about intimacy beginning with “I”. It’s about taking the risk of boldly pursuing your partner with your true self. It’s about creating trust and safety in the relationship so that both people can authentically know how they feel, what they need, what they can do to create change, and what they need from their partner. In summation, Runkel states that “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem”.

Throughout the book, Runkel uses humor to illustrate his theory. He pulls from case examples from his clinical work, and also very humorous, self-deprecating stories from his own marriage. The book is a very light, easy read and I expect that most readers will find Runkel's approach very easy to understand. What I found refreshing about Runkel theories is that this is not about another marriage therapist telling you to understand your partner more or learn a new communication skill. It's really about taking responsibility for, and having the courage to understand and communicate what you need in your marriage. "If you want a warm marriage, you have to walk through fire", according to Runkel.