

The 4 Quadrants

Quick-Start Guide

Four skills that turn a marriage around

The same framework Mark Spurlock, LMFT, has used with couples for 28 years ,
boiled down to one guide you can start using tonight.

What's inside

- The 4 Quadrants explained in plain English
- A 2-minute Relationship Radar self-check
- The Cool-Down Agreement (the single most useful tool in this guide)
- A fill-in-the-blank Healthy Agreement template
- One communication rule that lowers the temperature of any fight

A word before you start

Most couples I meet don't have a love problem. They have a **skills** problem. Nobody taught them how to notice their own patterns, calm their own storm, keep their word to each other, or speak with respect when they're angry. Those are learnable. This guide is where you start.

It is written for people of faith, for husband and wife marriages.

— Mark Spurlock, LMFT

The 4 Quadrants

Think of a healthy marriage as standing on four legs. When one leg is weak, the whole thing wobbles. Here they are, in the order most couples need them.

1. Relationship Radar <i>Awareness: of yourself, your impact, and your patterns.</i> • Self-awareness: What am I feeling right now, and why? • Impact awareness: How does my tone and behavior land on my spouse? • Situational awareness: Have we had this exact fight before?	2. Emotional Mastery <i>Calming the inner storm before it becomes an outer one.</i> • Name the trigger before it names you. • Anger, fear, and resentment are signals, not commands. • You can't steer the marriage while you're flooded.
3. Healthy Agreements <i>Trust is rebuilt one kept promise at a time.</i> • Clear. Mutual. Written down. • Small agreements kept beat big promises broken. • Accountability is love with a spine.	4. Healthy Communication <i>Speak with love. Listen with respect. Even mid-conflict.</i> • Say what you need, not what they did wrong. • One person talks. One person listens. Then switch. • Rooted in Ephesians 5:33: love and respect.

Why this order matters

You can't communicate well while you're flooded with anger (Quadrant 2), and you can't calm down if you don't notice you're triggered (Quadrant 1). Agreements (Quadrant 3) only hold when both people can stay regulated long enough to keep them. So we start with Radar, and everything else builds from there.

Quadrant 1: The 2-Minute Radar Self-Check

Do this alone, honestly, before your next hard conversation. Check every box that's true today.

Self-Awareness

- I can name the emotion I'm feeling right now (not just "upset").
- I know what this feeling is really about, and it may not be my spouse.
- I've slept, eaten, and I'm not running on fumes.

Impact Awareness

- I know how my face and voice look to my spouse when I'm frustrated.
- I can guess what my spouse is feeling right now, and I'd bet I'm close.
- I'm aware of one thing I did this week that landed badly, even if I didn't mean it.

Situational Awareness

- We've had a version of this argument before.
- I can name the pattern: who starts it, who shuts down, how it usually ends.
- I can see what's different about this time, if anything.

How to read your score

7 to 9 boxes: your radar is on. Go ahead and talk. **4 to 6:** slow down, and consider a Cool-Down first (next page). **0 to 3:** do not have the conversation right now. Nothing good happens when the radar is off.

The pattern we keep repeating (in one sentence):

Quadrant 2: The Cool-Down Agreement

This is the tool I hand couples in the very first session. When a fight starts to escalate, either person can call a Cool-Down. No one is walking out. No one is winning. You're just pausing until both brains come back online.

Agree on this **before** you need it. Sit down together on a calm day and fill it in.

The signal	Either of us can call it with one agreed word or gesture. No explaining, no arguing about whether it's "really" needed.
The length	At least 20 minutes. 30 to 45 is better. The body needs that long for stress chemicals to clear. Under 20 and you'll go right back to where you were.
What we do during it	Separate rooms. No texting each other. No rehearsing the argument in your head. Walk, breathe, pray, wash dishes, anything that isn't the fight.
What we don't do	Slam doors. Leave the house without saying when you'll be back. Call a friend to build your case.
How we come back	The person who called it comes back and says, "I'm ready." We restart with one sentence each about what we <i>need</i> , not what the other person did.

Our Cool-Down Agreement

Our signal word or gesture:

Our minimum time (20 minutes or more):

Where each of us goes:

What I'll do to actually calm down (not just wait it out):

Signed: _____

Signed: _____

Quadrant 3: The Healthy Agreement Template

Broken trust is a marriage's silent killer, and it rarely breaks over one big thing. It breaks over a hundred small promises that quietly didn't happen. The fix is boring on purpose: make agreements small, specific, and written.

A good agreement passes three tests: **Clear** (a stranger could tell if it was kept), **Mutual** (both of you said yes without pressure), and **Reviewable** (there's a date to check in on it).

Fill one in together

The one thing we're agreeing on (be specific):

What it looks like when it's kept:

What we'll do if it slips (no punishment, just a plan):

When we'll check in on it (pick a date):

Quadrant 4: One Rule That Lowers the Temperature

You don't need a communication course to make tonight go better. You need one rule:

Say what you need. Don't say what they did.

"You never help around here" invites a defense. "I need help with the dishes tonight" invites a yes. Same problem, completely different conversation. It isn't about being soft. It's about being clear enough that your spouse can actually respond.

Try rewriting one complaint from this week:

What I've been saying:

What I actually need:

What to do next

If you've filled in even one page of this guide together, you've done more real work than most couples do in a year. Keep going.

This week

- Post your Cool-Down Agreement somewhere you'll both see it.
- Use the Radar self-check before one hard conversation.
- Keep one small agreement. Just one. Then notice what that does to the air in the house.

If you need more than a guide

Some things can't be fixed from a PDF. If you're dealing with betrayal, addiction, long-standing anger, or a spouse who has one foot out the door, that's the work I do every day, and it's work that responds to skilled help. You are not too far gone. I've watched couples come back from places they were sure were the end.

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Individual sessions are on Plus1 and couples sessions are on Rula.

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Coming soon

The 4 Quadrants of Saving Your Marriage: A Christian Guide takes everything in this quick-start and goes deep: scripture, clinical tools, and the stories behind each quadrant. [Join the waitlist](#) at MarriageAndFamily.com to get it first.

This guide is for education and self-reflection. It is not therapy and does not create a therapist-client relationship. If you are in danger, call 911 or the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.