



## going from good to great

How 30 minutes a week can re-energize your marriage

**Y**our marriage doesn't have to be in trouble to benefit from an objective, encouraging third party—a life coach. “If couples are able to address an issue, goal, desire, or vision proactively, they can head off any number of potential crises,” asserts Christopher McCluskey, a master certified Christian coach who works with couples around the world, objectively encouraging and helping them see paths to growth and success.

McCluskey, whose background is in psychotherapy, worked primarily in marriage and family therapy for 12 years prior to becoming a coach. In 1998, he founded Coaching for Christian Living ([www.christian-living.com](http://www.christian-living.com)). He is also the director of the Christian track at the Institute for Life Coach Training, an accredited school with the only distinctly Christian life coach training program in the world.

In the last several years life coaching has become more prominent among couples. Here's what McCluskey had to say about the rewards a couple can attain through life coaching.

### Why would a couple seek a life coach?

Because they want to grow their marriage or they want to pursue a stronger or clearer vision for their family.

One of the most frequent reasons is to enhance their level of intimacy. They have a good marriage but are plateauing. They may feel their lives are scattered and out of control. And they want help getting back on track, help clarifying and living out God's unique calling on their lives.

They may need help working through obstacles to get a spouse home from the work force or a job change, or they're preparing for empty nesting or graduate school.

Another reason is blended families. A primary conflict in a blended family is children. So rather than just hold your breath and hope for the best or wait for the inevitable conflict, many blended families will work with a coach to help them proactively develop a better vision for how to blend their family and to head off the problems before they take root.



I also work with couples as they move their families into the pre-teen and teen years. A lot of parents stumble through those years never nailing down a clear vision, and they wind up having the default vision of our Western culture: simply “surviving.”

They wander through those years thinking, *Where do the kids need to be now? What new activities are they involved in? How am I going to deal with this new mouthiness? What am I going to do about this new group of friends they're hanging with?*

They're constantly reacting to every new “crisis.” And so couples become like a steel ball in a pinball machine, bouncing off whatever's screaming for their attention. That's not an effective way to do family or marriage. They need to identify what they're going to say “yes” to in their family and what they're going to say “no” to.

That's where coaching can help. A couples coach can help them catch a fresh vision and then use that vision to make it their reality.

### What's the difference between life coaching and therapy?

Therapy is based on a “reactive” mode—in other words, responding to whatever is wrong, fixing the problem or crisis. It's about digging into the past and present to get a couple to stable, healthy functioning.

Life coaching, on the other hand, is entirely proactive. It begins with the present, but is focused on the future. If counseling is about healing and issues of brokenness, coaching is about growth and issues of vision. Coaching takes a stable, healthy functioning couple to a vibrant, dynamic, intimate level—from “acceptable” to “exceptional.”

### What exactly does a coach do?

A coach is an *objective* party who will help you hear yourself and God better. A coach has no agenda, no personal investment in your taking one path versus another. Instead, he or she will focus on “the gap”—that distance between what the couple is seeing right now and where they would really like to be or where they sense God would have them to be. What's God's vision for your parenting or for your marriage?

A coach will challenge the couple to think about things they may never have thought of before, or only thought of in passing. A lot of times we ask ourselves the right questions but we don't really probe for an answer.





### What do you mean?

Let's say a spouse wants to change jobs or a couple wants to know how to handle their child's toddler years. The couple may ask, "What are we going to do about that?" But they don't really mean, "Hey, what *are* we going to do about that?"

In Scripture, Jesus tells us to "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

So coaching helps couples begin asking the questions that they may have previously thrown to the wind. What are we going to do so we can live on one income to allow my spouse to start his own business? Or to stay at home? How do we discover and discern who God created us to be? How do we develop a plan to fulfill our desire to have family vacations? What is a godly vision of what we believe God would have us to do in shaping our children?

### It sounds as if the coach draws on what's inside a couple's heart rather than offering "outside" solutions.

Exactly right. He or she is simply helping the couple to catch and clarify *their own vision*, or to discern *God's vision*. It's all about questioning, probing, digging, prodding, clarifying, challenging.

You don't worry so much about the whys, the dynamics and inter-workings, or about your experience growing up. You focus instead on the vision of what you want. What is it that



you believe God's called you to? What's it going to take to get there? What needs to change? What do you need to learn? What books do you need to read? What resources do you need to access? What rules may need to change?

Everything is about what, not why. As a couple begins to take action, the insight often follows.

The coach is looking inside the person and saying, "Let's listen for, scripturally speaking, the desires of your heart. Let's listen for your natural strength, your God-given passions. Let's listen for the indications of calling upon your life." The point is to look inside the couple and collect all the different disjointed pieces of self, and say, "Wow, look at the bigger picture of what these could be in the way you live your life and do marriage and family."

### Can this be a challenge when dealing with a couple's personality differences?

Definitely. Coaching is highly individualized, helping the couple hear themselves and each other, and to hear God more clearly; so that they all get on the same page.

It helps them recognize where they're different, and oftentimes where they're more similar than they realize.

## A TYPICAL COACHING SESSION

**HOW OFTEN:** A couple will usually contract with a coach on a monthly basis rather than session to session. The sessions average three times a month, for between a half hour to an hour.

**PRE-SESSION PREP:** The day before each session, the couple will e-mail to their coach a prep form. This form lets the coach know what the couple has done since the last session, what they're struggling with, and what they need/want to focus on in the next call. "This brings everybody up to speed" says McCluskey, "so they know before the session begins what they're going to be concentrating on."

**MODE OF COMMUNICATION:** Most coaching is done over the phone, which makes it more convenient. Couples don't have to arrange babysitting, take time off work, drive across town, sit in a lobby.

"I'm working with a couple in another state," says McCluskey. "The husband is at the office and the wife is at home. They e-mail the prep form the day before. We all meet for a half hour over a conference call, hang up the phone, and everybody goes right back to what they were doing. It's really convenient."—GK

Together they try to catch a clearer vision for what *they* want *their* marriage and family to be.

### Are couples impacted spiritually through coaching?

Usually as we coach around issues, we unmask areas where there's tremendous opportunity for spiritual growth. So the couple is growing in terms of their practical physical vision, and simultaneously God is stretching them, and they're growing deeper intimacy with each other and with God.

Any time you see growth in one area, it often impacts growth in other areas. Couples don't usually come to me saying, "We'd like you to coach us around spiritual growth." Instead, through the natural turn of coaching, they begin to recognize that they're growing spiritually more than they have in years. They're talking more openly. They're journaling. They're praying more frequently.

### So it's important to find a Christian life or couples coach.

Extremely. From a Christian perspective, we speak of discovering or discerning a vision for your life because God says, "I know the plans I have for you" or "I knew you before I knit you together in your mother's womb" or "The gifts and the call of the Lord are irrevocable." All of these Scriptures say there are treasures placed directly inside each one of us, and the Christian coach can help you discern what those are. It's looking to get clearer on what God called you to, how God gifted you, what God's vision is. It's really exciting to walk with a couple who have a solid foundation and watch them move more fully into the joy, peace, contentment, and fulfillment of God's design for their marriage and family. **mp**

### Want more information?

Check out these websites:

- Coaching for Christian Living [christian-living.com](http://christian-living.com)
- Christian Coaches Network (CCN) [christiancoaches.com](http://christiancoaches.com)
- International Coach Federation (ICF) [coachfederation.org](http://coachfederation.org)