

PLAY, DATE, SLOW DOWN

Chapters 3 & 4 • Based on *The First Few Years of Marriage* by Jim Burns and Doug Fields

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ARC OF THIS SESSION

From a **marriage running on a breathless, joyless pace** → to a **marriage that protects play, presence, and pace**

Anchor Scriptures

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Proverbs 17:22 (NIV)

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4 (NIV)

"Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'"

Mark 6:31 (NIV)

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed for couples walking through the First Few Years of Marriage book and video series together. Each session includes Scripture for reflection, real-life stories that illustrate the principles, questions for couples discussion, and personal reflection for journaling. Work through it at your own pace. There are no wrong answers here — only honest ones.

For best results: Read Chapters 3 and 4 of the book, then watch Session 3 together. Open your Bibles. Then work through this guide at your own pace, saving the discussion questions for conversation with your spouse. Close with the prayer together.

Introduction

In Session 2 you learned to recognize the drift. Session 3 hands you three of the most practical course corrections in the whole book: play, dating, and slowing down. They sound almost too simple — until you realize how easily a busy marriage abandons all three.

Jim and Doug are blunt about it: laughter is medicine, a weekly date is worth one percent of your week, and busyness is not a fact of life but a choice of the heart. The enemies of a joyful marriage are rarely dramatic. They're the breathless pace, the screens between you, the slow slide from being "romantic partners" to being "roommates" who give each other time scraps. This session is about reclaiming the fun — and protecting the time and presence that fun requires.

Before you dive in, take a moment to settle in. Invite God into this time. Start with one honest sentence to each other about where your marriage is today.

To begin:

- When did the two of you laugh hardest together recently? If you can't remember, what does that tell you?

Scripture Foundation

Before we talk about what to do, we start with what is true. These three passages anchor everything in Session 3. Read each one slowly — out loud and together if you can.

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."
Proverbs 17:22 (NIV)

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4 (NIV)

"Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'"
Mark 6:31 (NIV)

Reflect

- Which of these three verses speaks most directly to where your marriage is today? Why that one?
- Proverbs 17:22 calls a cheerful heart "good medicine." Where does your marriage most need that medicine right now — and what has been crowding it out?

Play, Date, Slow Down

Jim and Doug name two great enemies of marital joy: the loss of fun and the breathless pace of busyness. Their prescription is refreshingly concrete. Play — because laughter is medicine and connection leads to communication, not the other way around. Date — because one percent of your week (one hour and forty minutes) protects the relationship from drift. Slow down — because busyness is a heart issue, and presence requires saying no to the noisy intruders. The two stories below are about couples who reclaimed all three

A STORY TO REFLECT ON

The Tuesday Reservation

Scripture: Proverbs 17:22

Three years in, Priya and Sam Okafor had become, in Priya's words, "a very efficient committee." Every conversation was an agenda item. The water heater. The credit card. Whose turn it was to call the landlord. They were good at it. They were also, somewhere along the way, not laughing anymore.

It hit Priya at a wedding. Watching another couple goof off on the dance floor, she leaned over to Sam and said, "We used to be like that." Sam didn't argue. He just said, quietly, "Yeah. When did we get so serious?" Neither of them had an answer. They hadn't decided to stop having fun. The fun had just gotten crowded out by everything that felt more urgent.

So they made a rule that felt almost silly. Tuesday nights. One hour and forty minutes — they'd done the math, it was exactly one percent of their week. A standing reservation with each other. And one ironclad condition: no logistics. No bills, no schedules, no problems to solve. If it belonged on the committee agenda, it was banned from Tuesday.

The first Tuesday was awkward. Stripped of their to-do list, they realized they'd half-forgotten how to just... be together. But by the third Tuesday they were laughing at a terrible magician at a restaurant bar. By the second month, Sam noticed something strange: the hard committee conversations had gotten easier too. Turned out that when they were connected, the logistics didn't feel like landmines anymore.

They had it backwards the whole time. They'd been trying to talk their way back to connection. What they actually needed was to play their way back — and let the connection do the talking.

BIG IDEA

Connection doesn't come from words — words come from connection. Fun isn't the reward you earn after the serious work. It's the medicine that makes the serious work survivable.

Reflect on the Story

- Priya and Sam had become “a very efficient committee.” Where has your marriage become more about managing logistics than enjoying each other?
- Their rule banned logistics from date night. Why is it so hard to protect time that isn't “productive”? What would your version of a no-logistics Tuesday look like?
- They discovered that connection made the hard conversations easier — not the other way around. Where have you been trying to talk your way back to connection when you actually need to play your way back?

A STORY TO REFLECT ON

Knee to Knee

Scripture: Mark 6:31

Daniel and Bree were busy people who loved each other and almost never saw each other — not really. They'd be on the same couch, knees touching, each lit by the blue glow of a separate phone. They called it “spending the evening together.” Dinner came with a side of email. The last thing they each saw at night was a screen. The first thing in the morning, too.

The wake-up call was small. Bree was mid-sentence — telling Daniel something that had hurt her that day — when she watched his eyes flick down to his phone, then back up. “Sorry,” he said, “what were you saying?” But she didn't want to say it again. The moment was gone. And it wasn't the phone, exactly. It was what the phone said: this is more important than you.

They read about a couple in their study guide, Fadi and Kim, who protected two small windows a day — coffee in the morning, something warm in the evening — phones away, kids told not to interrupt. Beverage bookends. Daniel and Bree tried it, plus one more rule borrowed from the book: a basket by the front door. Media jail. Phones checked in at dinner, sprung after the kitchen was clean.

The first few nights felt itchy, like quitting something. But by the end of the second week, they were talking again — real talking, the kind that wanders and lingers and goes somewhere. One night Bree realized they'd been sitting at the table for forty minutes after dinner, just talking, both phones in the basket across the room. Knee to knee. And, for the first time in a long time, eye to eye.

BIG IDEA

Even Jesus pulled away from the noise to protect what mattered. You are not too busy — you are too available to the wrong things. Presence is a choice you make by saying no to the noisy intruders.

Reflect on the Story

- “Knee to knee but not eye to eye.” When was the last time a screen interrupted a real moment between you? What did it communicate, even if you didn’t mean it to?
- Daniel and Bree protected two small windows a day — beverage bookends. What two windows could you protect? When would they be?
- Jesus pulled away from the noise to rest. What would it look like for the two of you to “come away to a quiet place” — even for fifteen uninterrupted minutes a day?

Couples Discussion Questions

These questions are designed for couples to honestly discuss. Take your time. Listen more than you speak. Be sensitive and compassionate to what your spouse is feeling.

1. Jim and Doug say connection leads to communication, not the reverse — fun builds the bond that makes honest words possible. Does that match your experience? When has play opened a door that talking couldn’t?
2. The 1% Rule asks for one hour and forty minutes a week — one date. What’s the real excuse that’s been getting in your way: “too busy,” “no money,” or “no babysitter”? What’s the honest response to it?
3. Jim and Doug warn against the child-centric marriage — where the kids’ needs always outrank the marriage and “later” never comes. If you have kids (or plan to), where is the line between loving them well and quietly demoting your marriage?
4. Busyness is described as a heart issue, not a time issue — often a hidden drive for affirmation or people-pleasing. Which of the warning lights ring true for you: constant clutter, addiction to speed, relationship fatigue, superficial relationships, or spiritual emptiness?
5. The “no muscle” is the ability to say no to good things to protect the best thing. What’s one “yes” in your life right now that’s really stealing time from your marriage? Could you do a “responsibility surgery” and cut it?
6. At the end of life, the authors say, your most valuable possession will be your museum of memories. What’s one memory you want to build together this year that you’re not currently on track to build?

Personal Reflection

Set aside fifteen quiet minutes this week. Find a pen and a place where you won’t be interrupted. Sit with these questions and write whatever comes — unfiltered, unpolished.

- Finish this sentence: “The last time I really laughed with my spouse was...”
- Finish this sentence: “The ‘yes’ that is stealing the most time from my marriage is...”
- Where is technology a “noisy intruder” in your marriage? What is one boundary (media jail, no phones after 8, no phones in the bedroom) you’d be willing to try?
- What is one small course correction — doable this week — to add play, protect a date, or slow your pace?

A Prayer

God, You made us to laugh, to rest, and to delight in each other — and somewhere in the busyness we forgot. Forgive us for giving each other time scraps. Forgive us for the screens between us and the breathless pace we keep choosing. Teach us to play again. Help us guard a slower rhythm, to protect the small windows where we actually see each other. Make ours a cheerful heart that heals, and give us the courage to say no to good things so we can say yes to the best thing — each other. We trust You with our marriage. Amen.