

## DO MARRIAGE INTENSIVES HELP TO HEAL ABUSIVE MARRIAGES?

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 269 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have back one of my favorite guests, Gretchen Baskerville. She's the author of *The Life-Saving Divorce*. It is a book I recommend all the time. It's an incredible Christian resource for women who are in abusive marriages and/or have experienced infidelity or neglect and are wondering if they can get a life-saving divorce from a biblical perspective. Gretchen is an experienced advocate and researcher, and she brings all of that insight and wisdom into her book, her website, [lifesavingdivorce.com](http://lifesavingdivorce.com), her YouTube channel, which is amazing, and her Facebook group.

She has been on the Flying Free Podcast five times in the past, and I just want to highlight those episodes in case you listen to this one and you think, "I'd like to listen to other ones by Gretchen." And by the way, you can find these episodes by, you can either go to the Flying Free Podcast on your favorite podcast listening app, or if you go to [flyingfreenow.com/](http://flyingfreenow.com/) and then the number of the episode, you can go directly to it.

So Episode 33, "Practical Tips For Single Women After Divorce," Episode 35, "Shamebusting Your Divorce," Episode 56, "Questions Christians Have About Rebuilding Life After Divorce," Episode 63, "Can a Christian Get a Divorce?" and Episode 200, she came on with myself and some other advocates, and it was my 200th episode celebration. We talked about the state of the Christian survivor and advocate community. And so welcome back to the Flying Free Podcast, Gretchen.

GRETCHEN: I am so thrilled to be here, Natalie. It's just so much fun to talk with you and with your audience. And I just want to say a big thank you to you because you were one of the people who got me started, who helped me learn tips and tricks on how to blog, how to do YouTube videos, how to do Zoom calls. So I am really thankful to you.

NATALIE: Wow. Well, I don't even remember that, but I am so glad that you have launched your ministry because it is so needed and it dovetails so well with the women that I'm working with are at, and if they do decide that they want to get a divorce, you have so many great resources to help them feel really good about that decision and feel good before God with that decision.

GRETCHEN: To know the biblical side of it and how we've been sort of gaslighted by well-meaning Christian leaders in many cases to believe that God hates divorce in every case. And yet we are told in the Bible to run from abusers, not even to associate with

them, not even to eat with them. We also have missed the fact that the Bible commands divorce in three different passages. I was a Bible major at Wheaton College — I didn't know that. And so there's a lot of biblical background that people really need to know that they haven't learned in church.

NATALIE: Yes, yes. Okay, at the end of this episode, we will go into more of where people can find you on your platforms too so they can learn more about your book and other things. You've got some great teachings on YouTube now. I feel like your YouTube channel is just full of amazing videos and stuff.

Today's topic, though, is about marriage intensives. And Gretchen and I are in a Facebook chat group together with some other advocates, and Gretchen was telling us about how she did this big huge survey, and I actually shared it with everyone on my mailing list. She wanted to find out how effective marriage intensives are in helping women who are in problematic marriages. And what she discovered was very eye-opening. And I think the reason you wanted to do it is because you were reading claims that a lot of these marriage intensives were putting out there, you know, "If you come and spend \$10,000 doing this work with us, you will have this amazing marriage afterward."

So at first Gretchen and I were going to have this Q&A kind of conversation, but Gretchen said she's got twelve highlights that she came up with after she put together all the results of her survey. And I'm just going to let her roll with that. So Gretchen, take it away.

GRETCHEN: All right, super. Well, by the way, my survey was also of men. So it was a co-ed survey. It wasn't limited to women.

NATALIE: Oh, I did not know that. Good to know.

GRETCHEN: And I didn't have a lot of men, but I did have some because men need life-saving divorces too at times. So a lot of people are wondering if the marketing claims of these big, multi-day, overnight, marriage intensives, marriage retreats, generally marriage enrichment programs, are actually true. Will they really do a miracle? Will they really increase your connection? Will they really keep you from divorcing?

And a lot of people wonder, can they turn a troubled marriage into a safe and loving and kind one? Will they really change your spouse's heart? Will your spouse — in the case of your audience, I'll say the husband — will your husband come home with a renewed commitment to your marriage that lasts more than a couple of weeks or

maybe months?

The other thing is, people are wondering, will that leader get through to my mean, controlling, or unfaithful husband so that he will repent, feel genuine remorse, and stop hurting you? Or perhaps their goal is to find a marriage intensive where the leaders will listen to your story, truly see your pain, understand the tension and the turmoil you've been through that your spouse has inflicted on you.

A lot of people are wondering, will they confirm that I have truly experienced abuse? Because as your book says, is it abuse or is it just a normal up and down of marriage? Will they confirm that I've experienced abuse, that though I'm not perfect, I am not the abuser, and will they support a divorce if that's what it takes to be safe? So those are kind of the big questions in the minds of your audience and mine.

Or maybe you're a family member or a pastor, and you wonder if it's worth the money to help send a couple to a marriage intensive. Will they really come back refreshed and renewed? Or would it be better to maybe send them individually to their own therapist and see if they could work on their own issues?

So I'm going to tell you twelve highlights of what I learned from this survey on multi-day, in-person marriage intensives. But first, a little background. So I launched this survey in December 2023. It was an anonymous survey of people's memories and experiences of attending overnight, multi-day, in-person marriage intensives or marriage retreats. And it turned out that the vast majority were Christian ones. The survey was only open for fourteen days. And to be honest with you, I only expected 50 responses, but wow — I got 330 responses before I shut off... Imagine what would have happened if I had kept it open for more than fourteen days.

Those respondents indicated that they had attended at least one marriage intensive, and I had no idea, but they mentioned more than sixty different marriage intensives or marriage enrichment programs, the vast majority of which were Christian. Now, why are so many of them Christian? Why aren't there more secular intensives? Well, there are a few, but wow — people who follow me, people who follow you, they primarily went to Christian ones.

NATALIE: I think it's because in Christian circles we have an agenda to make sure that we keep the marriage together. Whereas I think more secular people probably go to individual counseling and get help with making a decision about whether maybe this relationship is just not viable and we need to end it. It's more acceptable to get a divorce and just be done with it. But in Christian circles that's not even an option, so we

have to have these safety nets. A marriage intensive, I feel like that it's a safety net. "Well, if you're that bad, let's throw them into the safety net and that will be the miracle cure-all."

GRETCHEN: Right. And I was asking people, was this a miracle cure-all? So I asked thirty questions, eleven of which were open-ended rather than multiple choice, because I really wanted to understand people. I wanted to see them. I wanted to feel the turmoil they'd been through or the happiness of coming out on the other side with a fixed marriage. I wanted people to be able to give me positive, negative, and neutral answers. I even wanted them to just fill in their own answer in case some of the multiple choices didn't come anywhere close to what they really felt.

So my survey goal was to find out what they remembered from these intensives, to find out what they expected and what they experienced, what they found to be helpful and what they found unhelpful. And then finally, I wanted to know what their marital status is today. Someday, by the way, I'd like to have a professional demographer do a much larger survey with a representative sampling of all attendees, but for now, mine gives some hints that the marketing claims of these intensives are likely exaggerated, and maybe exaggerated wildly.

So I did expect to hear both good and bad stories from participants. The invitation to take the survey was offered to two types of online, Christian Facebook groups of nearly equal number of followers. So I had some groups for people in troubled Christian marriages who were headed for or already separated or divorced, and if I combine all those groups, that was about 96,000 followers. And then I also had the survey offered in groups for general Christian marriage advice. Those huge groups equaled about 110,000 followers, so I kind of expected some very good stories and some very bad stories. So I'm going to share with you the results and give you the twelve biggest surprises or the biggest highlights in the survey responses. I'm going to do a backward countdown. So here we go. Are you ready?

NATALIE: Yes.

GRETCHEN: Okay. So surprise number twelve in my countdown is that people really do go to multi-day marriage intensives for vastly different reasons. Obviously, a lot of people are going because they are facing serious marriage-endangering behavior or attitudes in their marriage, and they want to get that fixed. But a handful were people who were just starting their marriage and they wanted advice. They were newlyweds. A few, maybe under a half dozen, just wanted to leave the kids at home and have a vacation.

Some of them, but many of them, were facing serious problems. Many of them were being abused or betrayed or treated meanly or with absolute indifference by their spouses, and they were hoping their spouse would experience conviction of sin, a change of heart, and a renewed commitment to marriage. Those were the things they talked about over and over.

Some people wanted to convince their unfaithful spouse that divorce would destroy them and their children. So they wanted to appeal to that unfaithful spouse and say, "You're hurting the kids by divorcing and by cheating." Others were the opposite. I was told that oftentimes their spouse, the abuser or cheater or addict, wanted to block them from leaving and to keep them under their thumb by convincing them to stay in this miserable situation by telling them that divorce would destroy them and would universally destroy the children, which is not actually true. And I've got thirty years worth of research, stuff dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, that says when the marriage is highly toxic, that divorce is absolutely better for the kids than abuse, than staying in that situation.

Many people wanted confirmation. They really hoped this marriage intensive would give them confirmation that the abuse and betrayal that they were experiencing was serious and destructive. And I'll be honest with you, only 6 in 100, so a total of 21 people, said that that's what they got out of the marriage intensive. A small handful went there asking for an expert assessment. They wanted a third-party assessment from licensed therapists and they wanted clarity that they had tried everything they could and had given it their all and had tried hard enough and now could freely walk away from a destructive marriage with a clear conscience. And a few wanted assurance that God would not hate them if divorce was the only option that would keep them and the kids safe. So lots of different motivations.

So let's jump into whether those wants and those desires and those hopes and expectations really came true. Well, surprise: Number eleven is that 7 in 10 people indicated that they are now separated or divorced. And probably another 1 in 10 indicated that they planned to separate or divorce. I mean, that was shocking to me. Of the 330 respondents, nearly half of the respondents are already divorced, so about 5 in 10 respondents. And another 2 in 10 respondents said they're now separated. So again, the vast majority. 7 in 10 participants in the survey said they're now currently separated or divorced.

So despite the marketing hype that 75% or 80% or 94% or 97% of attendees are still married or have greatly improved marriages... And these are numbers cited by intensives such as Weekend to Remember or Hope Restored or Retrouvaille, what

people call Retroveil, or the now defunct Love and Respect marriage intensives. I just have so much skepticism about these figures.

Now, I don't have ironclad evidence that they're wrong, and I don't have ironclad evidence of what their real numbers are, because to do that, it would take someone who would need to survey a representative sample of everyone who had ever attended, and that's well over 200,000 couples. I didn't do that.

NATALIE: Can I interject something here too? I don't know if their statistics are ironclad. We don't know that because when my ex-husband and I finished our intensive, one week after our intensive, we were sent a survey. And yes, we were still on a high. I was the one out of my own money who had paid for it, so I was invested financially in making sure that this thing worked. I was still on hopium, hoping that it would work.

And so I'm the one who completed the survey — my husband didn't. And of course, I wrote a glowing review and said everything was going great and that this was the answer to our problems. If I would have only waited two more weeks or if they would have sent out the survey a year later when we were separated, it would have been a completely different story. So I think it's okay to be skeptical unless they're providing their research...

GRETCHEN: Their data, yeah. They've never shown us their surveys.

NATALIE: Exactly, exactly. So if they're just going by a survey they send out a week later and then I'm sure that 97% of them probably did say, "Yeah, things are going great," seven days later.

GRETCHEN: It's very interesting because I think you hit the nail on the head when you're on that high, that mountain high, that emotional high. A lot of people said they felt hopeful, but even that number is going to be surprising to you. I got enough feedback that I suspect there are very serious problems with their surveys.

And by the way, I did contact every single one of the top five marriage intensives except for Love and Respect. Their marriage intensive they gave up on. They stopped doing it about 2015, at least the overnight, multi-day one where you actually came in person. So I've contacted them all to ask for their real data, their real surveys, what proof they've got, and I've never had any of them get back to me and say, "Here's the proof." Hope Restored said, "Nah, we're not going to give you any information." A couple have given me information, but the information they gave me made it clear that they didn't do good surveys.

So I really don't buy into the idea that these marriage intensives surveyed everyone who had ever attended. Some of them even admit that they haven't. Some attendees have told me they didn't get a follow-up survey or that the survey they received had only multiple-choice answers that didn't include a negative response that fit their situation. The most common reason for divorce in America is infidelity. It didn't even have a negative response that would cover that.

So some people told me that they were surveyed only on the last day of the intensive while they were still on this mountain high, the summer camp high, and they felt pressured to feel happy and hopeful. Or these marriage intensives reported marital status only at the two-year point. And you and I know that if it's a contested divorce, it often takes more than two years, first of all, due to the long waiting period in many states. My divorce took four years to finalize. So to take a litmus test at two years whether a couple is still legally married, and if you're not going to ask is it good, bad, or neutral, if you're not even going to do that, I just have a lot of doubts about their survey results.

NATALIE: We weren't divorced until four and a half years after we had gone to the intensive.

GRETCHEN: Okay. So you're another case in point. Thank you.

NATALIE: Because it takes a long time, especially when you're still hoping and still trying to do all the things to make it work, it takes a long time to even decide that you want to finally get a divorce. And if you're a Christian, that decision has to go along with am I ready not just to get a divorce, but am I ready to be excommunicated? Am I ready for my family of origin to reject me? Am I ready to lose all my Christian friends? And a lot of us, it's like, I don't know if I'm ready for that. I might need a few years to think about that.

GRETCHEN: Do I have an education so I can make a living for myself?

NATALIE: Exactly. Exactly.

GRETCHEN: So to your point, that's nothing. So a huge number of people in my survey went to a marriage intensives years ago. I think the furthest back was something like thirty years ago. And so they've had plenty of time to finalize divorces or separations or whatever.

So let me give you surprise number ten. And this shocked even me because I was

expecting more happy people, married and happy people. Only 24 of the 330 respondents indicated that they're married and happy today. And only 4 of those said that the marriage intensive was life-changing for them. The rest pointed to other factors such as individual therapy years later, other factors. So you just go, "Uh, you've got to be kidding me." And this is another reason why I think a bigger survey needs to be done with more representative sampling. I really think there's got to be more than 24 out of 330. That's only 8%. That's only 8 out of 100.

NATALIE: Do you remember, of those 24, were there — and maybe you'll get to this in one of your other headlights — but the reason that they went to the intensive, was it more just for connection and because it would be a fun vacation or whatever, or were any of those 24 because their marriage was really on the rocks and there might have been abuse or infidelity going on? Because that would be interesting, too, to know, if they really didn't have any problems and they loved the marriage intensive, that would be different from having major, major problems, going to a marriage intensive, and everything gets miraculously fixed.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, that's a good question. I will tell you that they weren't just all happily married when they walked in the door of their marriage intensive. I would say most of them were in trouble. And so they are married and happy today. Only four said it was because of the marriage intensive. The rest said it was either individual therapy, or in some cases they needed to work on their own trauma and their spouse needed to work on his drug or alcohol addictions, and that eventually happened. Some people just found that it was their own view of biblical teachings that needed to change. They said, "We were in a church where we were forced to view marriage as a hierarchy where the husband made all the decisions. And when we finally, over the next few years, rejected that, our marriage became much happier."

NATALIE: It's amazing how partnership can change everything, right? Just the concept of partnership.

GRETCHEN: It really can. There was one other that really surprised me, and they said, "We do believe completely that the man is the head of the house and he has the right to make all the decisions, but I found a book that was really hard on men that was written by a proponent of this viewpoint who basically said, 'Men, if your wife isn't happy, it's all your fault.'" And she said, "That worked for her for our marriage." It was just kind of humorous.

NATALIE: I think I know which book you're talking about, because did you mention that book in our little chat?



GRETCHEN: Yeah, I did.

NATALIE: Because my ex read that book too. He was given that book when we were getting help from our church. It did not work for him. Just saying. But I'm glad it worked for that other guy.

GRETCHEN: If your abusive husband is vulnerable to reading that kind of material... But I think for the most part, abusers feel that they're absolutely right to abuse, that there's nothing wrong with them, and that what they're doing is the correct thing to do. And so they're not really open to being confronted, I think, even by a book like that.

So I said only 24 of the 330 respondents said they were married and happy today. And you would think that if both people put in time and effort to attend one of these marriage intensives, often taking vacation time from work, maybe even taking unpaid time off of work, hiring a babysitter or a pet sitter, that they would both be committed to improving the marriage. But there were a shocking number of stories of spouses who either did not participate, sometimes they didn't even show up for sessions, they refused to do the homework, they sat there in stone silence, or they were actively abusing during and right after the marriage intensive, like on the drive home or even in the room at night.

One person said like, "I was horrified. I felt like I was run over by a truck. My heart was completely pulverized." Another said, "I was terrified for my life and the lives of my daughters. I felt unseen and confused." Another said, "I felt horrible. They failed to call him out on his sin, and they blamed me for continuing to give my heart to a man who had vowed to love, honor, and forsake all others, who should have been safe and honorable. He was neither." And another said, "Horrible. I spent the whole weekend in tears." I got a lot more than this. These are just the ones I want to throw in for now.

If you're ready, let's move on to surprise number nine. Half of the respondents indicated that they attended a marriage intensive that used manipulation. Half of the respondents did not mention any manipulation tactics or complain about manipulation. So I'm not going to say that all marriage intensives are manipulative, but about half the respondents indicated that they felt manipulated. So we're basing this on their memory and their historical viewpoint.

So for those who felt manipulated, they used words such as, "It felt fake, manipulative, coercive, brainwashing, dangerous, covering up the truth, and insincere." So let me give you some stories, some quick examples of stories and manipulation that were brought up in this survey.

So suggesting that participants tell the group, "My spouse is not my enemy," and even hold up a sign that says, "My husband is not my enemy," when the husband really was the enemy, he had a history of, and was even currently unfaithful, violent, mean, addicted to drugs or alcohol. And it was like they were in a ship and the wife was rowing towards shore and the husband was drilling a hole in the bottom of the ship. This led these women, or at least the person who participated in my survey, to embarrassment and to regret that they had been coerced to falsely represent their marriage as better than it actually was.

Second example, a manipulative suggestion that a good Christian would expect a miracle and that not to expect a miracle reflected badly on your spiritual and emotional maturity. And yet these people felt they had to fake it. So they were pretending all along.

NATALIE: This is abusive. They're literally using abuse tactics in their marriage intensives to re-abuse women, or men as the case may be.

GRETCHEN: Now, the third example is to promote a vow renewal ceremony in front of the whole group with eyes on you if you don't participate. The vow renewal was accompanied by a certificate that some abusive spouses used later against the invested spouse. Example four is a session full of leaders' testimonies. This suggested that all abusers would change if you just did the right things and prayed hard enough. Number five, teaching women in a separate session, just for women, that being more available and enthusiastic about sex would absolutely fix their marriage. And we know that's pure baloney.

Number six, telling people that divorce would destroy their children when thirty years of family research — and people can look on my website — shows that abuse is worse for children than divorce. And then seven, telling them that God would be displeased if they divorce, when in reality the Bible condones divorce in several cases and even commands it in three separate passages that no one ever discusses.

So these are just some examples of the manipulation that went on in half of these. And not all marriage intensives use all seven of these types of manipulations. Some only use one or two. So I don't want to suggest that they're all using all of these tactics.

NATALIE: Did any names come up more often than others when it comes to these kind of...

GRETCHEN: Oh, yeah.

NATALIE: Are you going to get to that or no?

GRETCHEN: Yeah. As long as you're asking me, Weekend to Remember is just absolutely horrific in the area just based on the number of people who told me about Weekend to Remember and these vow renewal ceremonies and these "My husband is not my enemy" signs that they had to hold up. Just this whole being taught to be more available and enthusiastic — Love and Respect that is now a defunct program and they no longer have an overnight, multi-day, in-person program — but they were big, obviously, on being enthusiastic and available about sex.

A lot of these groups will tell you that divorce will destroy your children, that God hates divorce in every single case. "Even if Jesus did allow for divorce for infidelity, we know the heart of God, that God really does think you're a horrible person if you divorce."

So I would say by far and away the worst ones are — according to my survey, according to what people told me — Weekend to Remember, the now defunct Love and Respect, Retrouvaille, or what people call Retroveil, which is a Catholic... Boy, they were really hard on telling people that this divorce would destroy their kids and that God would be horribly displeased. Those were the worst ones in terms of manipulation. I'm basing this on what people remember. And I haven't looked at their actual curriculum. I haven't been to all of these marriage intensives myself. I didn't record them. So I'm going by what they remember, and that's what they remember.

NATALIE: Right. Well, this is what it is, and people can take this information and do with it what they want. But I'll tell you this, if I was thinking about going to a marriage intensive and I was thinking about going to Weekend to Remember, this would be good to know. This would be information that I would want to know before I clunked down a bunch of money to do that. I'd want to know what I was in for.

GRETCHEN: Yeah. This thing, they are going to pull out all the stops. They are pretty horrible. So Weekend to Remember, Love and Respect was particularly bad, and Retrouvaille, the Catholic one, was actually the worst, actually. Now, I didn't have a huge number of participants, so take that with a grain of salt, but it is one of the top five marriage intensives that was listed by people. And we don't talk about it much in evangelical circles, but it is open to Christians of all stripes. That was one that came up a lot.

Okay, surprise number eight: Of the people who said they felt hopeful on the last day of the event, 7 in 10 are now divorced or separated according to their report to me. And what's more shocking is that only 45 in 100 said they left the marriage intensive that

day feeling hopeful. So where the heck do these marriage intensives come up with their ridiculous or gigantic... Saying, 97% or 94% — or even today on the Hope Restored website, right on their homepage, they say “99% would recommend this.” And you just go, “I don’t think so.”

NATALIE: That is blatant marketing manipulation tactics. They're lying to people on the front of their website.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, I'm not willing to call them liars, but I am absolutely going to tell you I'm a skeptic.

NATALIE: I am.

GRETCHEN: Okay, you say they're liars, go for it.

NATALIE: I'll go on record and say they're freaking lying.

GRETCHEN: In fact, maybe it's not a bad idea to call them liars, and then if they sue us for defamation, there's something in the legal process called “discovery,” and they're going to have to show that we're lying. They're going to have to show all their data, all their survey methods, how they did it. And I don't think they will ever sue us for defamation because they can't afford...

NATALIE: They don't have the evidence to back up their claim.

GRETCHEN: I really agree with you. That's my guess. It's my opinion that they do not have the evidence to back up their claims in a scientifically verifiable way. And that's that.

Now, let me give you another follow-up. So I just said that only 45 in 100 said that they left the marriage intensive that day feeling hopeful. 47 in 100 indicated that they felt the same or worse on the last day of the event. And a handful, about 6 in 100, assessed the situation and said they got clarity, and they decided during that marriage intensive that their marriage was unsalvageable. The marriage intensive revealed during the sharing time, their spouse, their husband, revealed serious betrayal or either infidelity or addiction or whatever, and they realized that pursuing this marriage was futile. And 9 in 10 of those indicated that they were now divorced. So that was really interesting. About 2 in 100 either left it blank or had answers that were difficult for me to categorize.

When you go to an event like this, you want to walk out feeling better about your marriage and feeling hopeful. But my survey indicates that fewer than half do. So why do so many marriage intensives claim that attendees leave with this renewed hope and feeling better and therefore they've succeeded? I don't understand that. Are they actively lying about their survey results? Are they using very slanted survey questions? Is it possible that attendees are so humiliated that they're deliberately withholding their real viewpoint on the last day of the intensive? Who knows? But more people felt either the same or worse than hopeful, according to this survey.

And as I said before, my survey isn't definitive evidence and a larger survey does need to be done of a more representative sample, but I feel totally safe in saying these marriage enrichment events do not match their marketing hype.

So I know that people would like me to say which of these in-person multi-day marriage enrichment programs work the best for fixing troubled marriages, and the truth is, I don't think any of them really do. I think there are some that are better at giving an honest assessment of your marriage, but an emergency room to fix your troubled marriage? Mmm, I don't think so.

NATALIE: There's not a quick fix to a troubled marriage anyway. I mean, I bought into it. I did. So I get that thinking. But looking back, a marriage of many years that is that problematic, and then you think that just a three-day or a five-day intensive is going to fix that? People with issues need ongoing therapy. You need to dig in. It's going to get really messy for a long time if you want to make something work that's gone that far downhill.

And so to me, it just seems so disingenuous to say, "Yes, this is going to..." And also you'd think that the people running these places would be licensed counselors or therapists or would have some kind of education to understand the interpersonal human dynamics and that they would know that... I can't think of any therapist that I know personally who would say, "You know what, if you spend a couple of days with me, I'll fix you."

GRETCHEN: Yeah, it's totally unrealistic. And I don't want to laugh at people who go to these clinging to hope.

NATALIE: No, oh, no.

GRETCHEN: Another good reason, a completely sensible reason to go is that let's say that you live in an area where there are very limited mental health resources. You don't

have a Christian licensed therapist near you who knows anything about anything. And two of these top five are run by licensed therapists. They still don't do any better from what I can tell in my survey, but if you want to go because you don't have anybody to go to, that's a totally legit reason for going to one of these marriage intensives.

And like I already mentioned, a handful of them did want a little time away with their sweetie to get reconnected, so I don't want to dismiss those either. Maybe if that's all you want. But the manipulative messages are still so poisonous. I'm not even sure I would send people like that to a Weekend to Remember because if they go home and repeat those poisonous messages to people in abusive marriages, they've just become part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Okay, surprise number seven: If your spouse is not respectful when you share about your innermost needs, fears, or insecurities at the marriage intensive, there is not much hope for your marriage. In fact, I would say there's no more than 2% hope for your marriage. 2 in 3 survey participants said that the marriage intensive they attended encouraged them to tell their spouse their innermost needs, fears, and insecurities. And the vast majority of them, 9 in 10, reported that their spouse was not respectful or only respectful for a short time about these disclosures, and almost all of them are either divorced, separated, or in unhappy marriages today.

To me, this is the number one red flag. Let's say that after this whole video we're shooting a person gets coerced by their pastor or their family member to go to a marriage intensive to give it one last try, okay? Make sure you don't go to one, the two and three, that encourage you to share with your abusive spouse your needs, fears, and insecurities because they absolutely will use them against you.

NATALIE: Yes, yes. You are making yourself vulnerable. It's like going up to a wolf or a lion and lifting up your neck and saying, "Here. Here's my jugular vein — go for it."

GRETCHEN: Yeah, "Here's where I'm most vulnerable. Will you please respect me and care about me?" And this is why couples counseling is considered unethical by professional counselors because this is exactly what happens. Couples counseling is so dangerous because some well-meaning, helper-type person becomes a counselor, and they think, "If I could just get these two people in the room and the person who's so hurt could just share how much they're being hurt, surely the other spouse, the husband, is going to honor that and feel compassion for them and empathy for them and stop doing it," and that's not what happens.

NATALIE: It's so naïve.

GRETCHEN: In reality, it's a total setup for being hurt and injured even more. So let's put an end to these dangerous counselors who do this. It is unethical according to the Gottman Institute, and they say that it's even likely illegal. And yet, this is happening every day in many of these marriage intensives.

NATALIE: Yeah, such a good point. These are getting better and better. I can see why you layered them up.

GRETCHEN: Yeah. Surprise number six: Even though people mention in my survey results that the training and basic communication and problem-solving skills would be really helpful for anyone... Because I did ask what they liked, and I gave them open answers. They could answer anything they wanted to. They could say, "I really loved that we were in a beautiful mountainous area." But a lot of people did say that they like training in basic communication and problem-solving skills and that they would be helpful for anyone, yet nearly 9 in 10 indicated that they would not likely recommend their marriage intensive to others.

This is why I'm so skeptical when Hope Restored and other programs claim that 99% would recommend their program to others. I just don't see how that can be true because even those who identified themselves as married and happy, only 4 in 10 of them said they would recommend a marriage intensive to others. That means 6 in 10 married and happy people did not. They would not recommend that marriage intensive to others. So what the heck is going on? Maybe they ask this question just as people are running out the door of the marriage intensive — the last day.

But boy — people now who are looking back months and years later, they changed their minds. They decided that these techniques could only help so much. They might be able to help the wording that was used when they had conflict, but they didn't change the character of a selfish or controlling or cold-hearted spouse. Learning better ways of saying things doesn't change a mean person.

NATALIE: Okay, so you've got this good thing that you're teaching, and it sounds like the people who took the survey, they were noticing these good things that they were learning, but just because it's a good thing doesn't mean that you can apply that across the board to everything and it's going to fix everything.

I watch Grey's Anatomy. So I know that in the medical world there are certain techniques that you use on certain conditions that you wouldn't just apply and use that technique on every condition. So it's a good thing — it's wonderful, it's marvelous — but if you've got this other condition over here, then you need to apply a different

technique to cure or to help that other condition.

So I think it's important for us who have hope that we can maybe get some help for our marriage condition to understand that yes, you might learn some good things. That doesn't mean that they're going to help what's ailing your particular marriage. And so I think these marriage intensives are just mismanaging their triage process.

GRETCHEN: Yeah. Let's be honest: You and I know that there are immature people out there who can't argue safely, they're not safe to argue with, they aren't reasonable, they're not rational, they're really immature, they're childish. Sorry for using these kinds of words, but we know that people do need to learn good communication skills. We know that people need to learn good problem-solving skills and conflict-resolution skills. But the point is that just merely learning these techniques, it doesn't change the character or personality of someone who's just going to use these techniques to abuse you further. So that's the problem.

Okay, surprise number five. This is wild and we never talk about it. Money matters, okay? Couples who paid for their own marriage intensive... And I ask people, "Did you pay for it 100% or did you win it in a raffle or did your church send you or did family? How much did your intensive cost and did you pay for the whole thing or did someone else help you?"

It turns out that couples who paid for their own marriage intensive were more likely to be divorced or separated. In other words, one or both of them was willing to sacrifice good money — some of these intensives are between \$3,000 and \$12,000 — and when it didn't help, when they had invested that much money of their own money, they were far more likely to walk away.

NATALIE: Very interesting.

GRETCHEN: Here's another really interesting fact. You would think that the more you paid, the better the counseling would be and the more likely they would succeed. Au contraire. People who attended the most expensive marriage intensives — these are the ones between \$3,000 and I think the highest one that was reported to me was \$12,000 — they also reported that 8 in 10 of them were now divorced or separated. That's higher than the rest of the group. The group as a whole was 7 in 10. These guys, the ones who paid for the top-notch, deluxe, luxury marriage intensive, 8 in 10 of them are now divorced or separated. So it appears that people divorce more often if they go to the expensive marriage intensives than people who attend the less expensive ones.



How do we interpret this? Again, I'm going to say for the third time that we absolutely need a bigger study done. But for right now, my hypothesis is that wealthier, high-income couples who can afford to pay several months' worth of rent or mortgage for a high-end marriage intensive can also afford to divorce and do divorce. They're just not willing to put up with a really low-quality marriage. And they're going to do so because they can. And they're going to divorce at a higher rate than others when that marriage intensive doesn't prove to fix them.

Okay, surprise number four: Marriage intensives attract all kinds of people. And I think I already mentioned that several of the people who answered my survey, they went, "This is a newly marrieds program." That surprised me. So surprise number three, many survey participants said that the topic of abuse was never mentioned or described, and some said they were not allowed to bring up abuse or any other marriage-destroying behavior such as infidelity or addictions or attitudes that had been perpetrated in the marriage. They had to almost pretend as if none of it had ever happened. And to me, this is really dangerous because it sends the message that the abuse, injuries, and terror don't really exist.

NATALIE: Yeah. That's a total denial of reality.

GRETCHEN: Exactly. And I had so many people say, "I felt unseen, unheard, and completely alone."

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, how traumatic. Wow.

GRETCHEN: Utterly traumatizing. And on top of it, because all this had been made to disappear, now you add to that some kind of coerced vow renewal ceremony that several marriage intensives do, and it becomes a trap for the abused spouse. The abused or betrayed spouse wants to step out to show their faith in God and renew their vows in hopes that this program will launch a happier future, but it doesn't occur to them that their spouse hasn't changed, and this ceremony was done under duress and with the expectation that the other spouse would invest equally in the health of the marriage. But we all know that the abuser, betrayer, or addict, or anyone who has a pattern of this kind of behavior, they don't. They don't step up and carry their end of the emotional bargain. It is completely a one-sided deal.

And here's the worst part: The marriage intensive makes the abuse victim feel guilty that if they were to escape this marriage and find relief from the destruction by seeking a life-saving divorce, they now accuse themselves of not taking this new vow before God and everyone else, this great cloud of witnesses, seriously. So now this deceptive

and manipulative vow renewal ceremony persuades their conscience to believe that they are the liars and they are the vow breakers who are 100% guilty if they divorce. And this is one reason that so many people look back to Weekend to Remember and say that it made them feel worse about their marriage.

Now, here's my last two. Surprise number two: If your spouse fakes it at the intensive and acts respectful for a while either at the intensive or during the follow-up period where they do kind of follow up with you and then goes back to their normal attitudes and behaviors within a short time, my survey showed there is zero hope for your marriage. In my survey, not one of these people who said this, not one of the people who said there was a short-term improvement, reported being married and happy later.

NATALIE: Wow. That's the category I would have fallen into. Mine faked it and then faked it for a few weeks afterward, and then we were divorced four years later.

GRETCHEN: Yep. And you know what? To be honest with you, we could have predicted it. If they faked it for a while, virtually all of those people were separated, and divorced today. If they showed respect, you were twenty times more likely to be married today, but it still isn't more than half of them. Just the fact that you had to go to a marriage intensive implies that there are probably some pretty serious things going on in that marriage.

So surprise number one, and we already talked about this a little bit: Some people who are happy and married today said that the marriage intensive was a failure but that individual counseling did work sometimes many, many years later. And I've already mentioned that they dealt with their childhood trauma or their spouse dealt with their own addictions in separate counseling. And we've already mentioned that sometimes the marriage got better when they stopped believing that marriage was a hierarchy and decided that it was an equal partnership.

So basically my survey found that Weekend to Remember from Family Life is, according to my survey, the most manipulative of the intensives out there. And man, I would just avoid that one with a 10-foot pole. For example, if you look at their website today, I double-checked it yesterday, and they have this weird claim that grammatically doesn't make sense. It just says, "96% said it greatly improved their relationship." Well, where's the subject of this sentence? Let's diagram this sentence. Why are they being so vague? Why don't they say, "96% of all attendees"? Well, maybe because it's not true. Maybe it's 96% of attendees who said they loved the program. We just don't know.

Another really bizarre claim on their website yesterday was that, "Marriage improvement was reported on average 4 to 6 on a 10-point improvement scale." Well, that's pretty much a mind game. I mean, that's really strange. I mean, an average, by definition, is a single number. So what are they trying to do? Is the truth of it that the average is the marriage improvement was only a 4 on a 10-point scale? That means it wasn't very much or not very long. I don't know. It's just weird stats. They're like cheater stats.

NATALIE: Well, it's almost like a marketing firm put it together and threw out, "Tell me what you think about this," to the people there that were trying to put together their homepage. "Yeah, well, we think it's, you know..." And so the marketing firm threw that on there. I'm not saying that's what happened, but that's what it feels like.

GRETCHEN: No, no, no. A lot of these are death by marketing firms. And I have to tell you something absolutely hysterical. Weekend to Remember makes this big deal about how they have 100% money-back guarantee, but if you dig down into the FAQs, the frequently asked questions, it's only for seven days after the event.

NATALIE: Of course. While you're still trying to process what you just went through.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, exactly. My takeaway is if you want to go to one of these, do it. I mean, I was really surprised at the various attitudes people had. But just be aware that it may not give you what you want. Now, if you want to say that you've tried everything... And a lot of people do for their own conscience. They want to say, "I don't want to walk out of my marriage until I have tried a marriage intensive," or they're fed up and they have had more abuse and betrayal than they can stand, but they don't think their church will stand behind them and support them. Or maybe their own parents or their in-laws won't stand behind them or support them unless they go through one of these marriage intensives. So I get why people would want to go even after they've watched this video.

But just be aware. There's not going to be any miracles here, and I do think that the marketing departments of these organizations, many of them are completely unethical. It's actually against the ethics code of the American Association of Christian Counselors to claim that you can do miracles at your marriage intensive. And yet, that's what Focus on the Family's president, Jim Daly, says about their Hope Restored marriage intensive over and over on his broadcasts, on the website, on his own personal blog. The irresponsibility and the lack of ethics to make those kinds of statements, and also the manipulation using fear, guilt, and obligation, is completely unethical according to the American Association of Christian Counselors Code of Ethics. So a lot of these marriage

intensives are really skating on thin ice.

NATALIE: It's almost a wonder how they can get away with all of that without being called to accountability.

GRETCHEN: Well, I think people haven't sued them. I think it would take a class-action lawsuit. People like me can't do it because I haven't attended these, so it can't be an advocate. It has to be someone who basically was injured financially and maybe even exposed to more danger who would have to do that. Now, I'm not an attorney. I can't say to a group of people, "Hey, this'll really work." You'd have to find an attorney who was an expert in class action lawsuits against providers who claim to be licensed, because you can only do this against people who have licenses, right? So this is outside of my area of expertise.

But to be honest with you, I'm really hoping that someday someone does. Because a lot of these people, they have to maintain the same code of ethics that doctors do. And it's pretty evident to me, in my opinion, that they don't, that they're really pushing the envelope here. They're skating on thin ice. So anyway, that is what I found in my survey. And you are the first person to hear about my findings.

NATALIE: I am grateful that you did that survey in the first place and also that you so thoroughly articulated in twelve amazing points all of your findings because I think it's going to help people when they're considering making their own decision about whether or not they want to do a marriage intensive. Your choice is your choice, but we always want to be able to make informed choices. We want to know, "Okay, I know what I'm getting myself into. I can be prepared intellectually about what is going to possibly happen at this thing."

And then I was one of those people who went into a marriage intensive as a last-ditch effort and wanting to make sure that all of my boxes were checked off. And to me, it was worth the money to do that. And also it was a good experience for me just to see. It just helped because our programming is so strong, and my programming really needed to be dismantled step by step by step. And the marriage intensive played a big role in dismantling that programming, ironically enough. It was trying to keep the scaffolding in place, but it actually helped me to get rid of all of that, which then, of course, made the way for me to go, "Okay, we need to be separated and then eventually divorced."

GRETCHEN: Well, it's good to hear your story because that's important for people to hear, that we're not saying don't ever go to one of these. You may need to go to one for

your own peace of mind to say you tried everything or to convince someone else you have. But in the end, they don't meet their claims.

NATALIE: Yeah, they're not the miracle cure that you're hoping for.

GRETCHEN: 7 in 10 of the people who took my survey — and I'll admit it's not a representative sample — 7 in 10 are separated or divorced today. And that's just shocking. That tells me something isn't right in their claims. I'm not going to say what the numbers are, but I certainly want to poke them and show some skepticism here because I don't see how they could possibly be right.

NATALIE: Yeah. And that is the main point of this particular episode is that what they're claiming will happen if you go is not what actually happens. It really just boils down to that. And so take that for whatever it's worth and use that in your own decision making — just like you mentioned at the beginning — not just if it's you going to a marriage intensive, but if you're recommending that another couple go or if you're trying to help someone or advise someone.

GRETCHEN: Absolutely. And for people who want to know more about marriage intensives, in particular Hope Restored, I have a blog post and a video on YouTube about are the miracle claims offered about Hope Restored scientifically validated? And so as I mentioned, I've got a blog post on it and a YouTube video on it.

NATALIE: And we'll put the direct links to those in the show notes so people can directly link to those. And then also we'll make sure that we put direct links to Gretchen's website, YouTube channel, to her book, *The Life-Saving Divorce*, and free Facebook group too. She has a free Facebook group with, how many people are in there right now? I feel like it's pretty big.

GRETCHEN: We're over 5,900. We're thriving. Co-ed.

NATALIE: Just make sure you know if you're a woman that it is co-ed.

GRETCHEN: If you're triggered by having men talk about having a narcissistic wife, don't come.

NATALIE: It's true though that they do. Because I know people like that.

GRETCHEN: Oh yeah. There are so many books written about narcissistic mothers. Yes, they were married to somebody.

NATALIE: Exactly. Well, thank you so much, Gretchen, for being on the podcast again. We'll talk soon.