

So, let's begin to look at some practical ideas that anyone can use to help themselves become a "Get Away Couple."

First of all, let's consider the question: "Why get away?" We often see couples in our office, couples who were once very much in love, telling us that they never did go away on a trip alone together. There are many reasons to get away. We get away to re-focus ourselves on what is important, what really matters to us. Getting away together can also help you to reconnect with each other when busyness robs you of emotional closeness. When the pace of life drains your strength and causes confusion about yourselves and your marriage, getting away can re-energize your partnership and helps you to clarify your vision as a couple.

Another benefit of getting away is that it allows you time to examine the health of your marriage, and to correct aspects of the relationship that may be headed off course. When you take some time to evaluate where your marriage is headed, you will reap a huge return on the small investment that you have spent in terms of time and money in getting away. The idea of getting away to refocus your perspective is not a new idea. Many teachers, religious leaders, and other writers set examples for us about the benefits of withdrawing from everyday life for a period of time to set our priorities in order.

Certainly, getting away can be a time of examining our priorities, and aligning them with our personal and spiritual values. One of the first things that should be on your list of things to do while away, is to arrange for some time to be alone with your thoughts and do something that is meaningful to you that will help you to reflect about the course of your life. Journaling, prayer, inspirational readings, are all ways that you can do this.

Another issue that can be handled during a time away is discussing and making major decisions. This is a perfect time to create an uninterrupted setting for working through a major decision as a couple. You are free from the stress of work, children, and the normal routines of everyday life, and being away can help you to look at the decision in a new light, and also to feel that you have time to really discuss the decision in depth.

Another topic that can be discussed or worked on during a time away is meditating about ways that you can impact the lives of those that you love. For example, you and your spouse may talk about each of your children, and how you can direct their lives in a certain direction over the next several months. Or perhaps another relative has a need that you can help fulfill. Talk about ways that you and your spouse, (as well as your family) can reach out to those you love. Reaching out to others can add a refreshing and new aspect to your couple and family life.

Getting away together can also be a time to plan a strategy for facing an unwanted or difficult situation in your life. We knew of a couple that got away to deal with the recent diagnosis of the wife's breast cancer. It gave the couple a chance to be alone together, without the pressure of having to face family, doctors, and friends, and to think about how they were going to deal with this difficult diagnosis. They came

back more unified than ever, and ready to face the crisis with an attitude of faith and grace.

And, we are happy to report, the wife is now free of cancer!!

So, getting away together can provide you with an opportunity to have some personal time for reflection, time to deal with making a major decision, time for considering ways to impact the lives of loved ones and friends, and time to deal with unwanted or difficult situations. Taking time to deal with these topics in a thoughtful and stress free environment can often make a very positive difference in your lives.

Well, if you are considering a get away, here are some thoughts about planning your get away. First of all, consider where you might go. If you are outdoor enthusiasts, you might want to go camping, or look into renting a cabin. Other options are taking advantage of off season rates at a resort—for example last year we went to a ski resort in early September—this was after the summer crowds, and before ski season. We stayed in a beautiful mountain resort for a week for only \$150. There are bargains to be found, you just need to look for them! On other occasions, you might have a friend or relative who may have a lakeside cabin or a condo that they will let you stay at for a few days. While the location isn't terribly important, getting out of town is critical!!! One note of importance: CHECK OUT the weather forecast before you go!! Make sure that you are prepared for any unexpected changes in the weather.

Well, once you get the location figured out, we recommend that you plan at least two nights away. One-night retreats are ok, but a two-night retreat will give you the time you need to unwind, have meaningful conversations, and to avoid the rush to get back home. Once you have decided on the dates, we most often focus on the budget, schedule, and travel plans. HOWEVER, there are some other needs that must be considered. First among these would be making sure that your children are well taken care of. Imagine how distracted one, or both of you will be if you aren't certain that your children's well being is taken care of. While you're away, provide the best solution possible. This may involve finding a sitter or family member that you and your children are comfortable with, or perhaps swapping weekends with another set of parents—your kids spend the weekend at their house, and in exchange you keep their children for a weekend later on.

Another aspect of planning is to discuss each other's expectations for the get away, and to adjust your own! Someone once said "All conflict is the result of differing assumptions or expectations." With that in mind, do all you can to reduce the chances for conflict over schedules by discussing your expectations in advance. How does each of you envision spending your time away? Reading a good book? Resting? Taking walks alone or together? A fun activity? Is there a pressing issue that needs your focused attention? Consider doing this exercise a few days before you leave:

1. Separately write out your expectations for your get away.
2. Think about some issues that your marriage is currently facing that are most important to you. Prioritize them in order from most to least important.

3. Get together with your spouse and share your expectations and explain to each other why you think your top issues need to be discussed during your time away, as well as your other expectations.
4. Decide on your mutual expectations, and the top two topics for discussion, and write them on a separate piece of paper. Once you have done this, realize that it is just a plan, and sometimes we need to be flexible with our plans. Leave some room for spontaneity and fun.

Once you have made arrangements for lodging, travel, childcare, and discussed your expectations, you might want to consider the following as a suggested schedule. We are assuming that you are leaving around mid-day on the first day, and returning home around mid-afternoon on the third day. On the first day, you travel to your get away location, get settled, and spend a quiet dinner alone. For discussion at dinner, we suggest some “re-connecting” questions that will help you get your conversation going. Asking each other questions like: What is a character trait that you would like to improve upon in yourself? Or tell your spouse one aspect of her/his personality that you appreciate and describe the impact of that trait in your life and the lives of others. (You can get many of these types of questions from a game called “The Un-game.”) The whole point of the evening is connecting—the more conversation the better. So relax and enjoy being together.

During the second day, set your own schedule for meals, relaxation, romance and fun. We suggest that you plan a time for discussion in the morning, and another time in the afternoon. One of these times should be to handle one of the pressing issues that you agreed upon before your getaway. But be sure to plan time for fun, activities, and personal relaxation as well.

Day 3 should be similar to day 2, in that you are flexible and set your own pace. The goal isn't to complete everything on your list for discussion, but to enjoy the process of meaningful and uninterrupted communication. HOWEVER, before you leave for home, we highly recommend that you get out your calendars or planners, and make sure that you have coordinated your schedules over the next several months. While doing this, set the date for your next get away---ideally in six more months.

So, that is a brief outline of planning your get away. Next we want to give you some ideas for activities that you can do while away that will help you to refocus and reconnect with your spouse.

**WHY Questions:** There are a number of sources for finding questions like this. Games, books on “icebreakers”, search the Internet, and even entire books full of questions are available. Questions such as: Other than your spouse, name a person who made a significant contribution to your life. Tell how this person influenced you. OR Share with your spouse the things that energize you at work, at home, or in your personal hobbies.

Next is an activity called: “My Single Change”. In this activity you list the following areas of life: physical, spiritual, relationship with friends, work, marital, financial, and familial, (or children and family.) Then, next to each area of life, write down ONE WORD that describes your feeling about that area of your life. Then, share the

lists with your spouse. Talk about each area, and why you wrote what you did. Decide on one area to improve on in the next 6 months, and write out some steps for achieving your goal.

The next activity is called: Testimonials. Think back over the last 6 to 12 months. In this activity, you make a list of completed projects, critical decisions, lessons learned, a unique experience, goals achieved, and personal habits either overcome or in the case of good ones, cultivated over the past 6 to 12 months. These may relate to your work, marriage, family or friendships, or your personal life. Share this list with your spouse, and then tell which two are the most meaningful to you, and how each made you feel, and why.

Another activity is to take time to write a love letter to each other. Taking time for this after we have been married for a number of years can really help us to refocus our love for one another. Many times, couples haven't written love letters to each other since they dated. Take time to describe your love, and how much you love your partner. You'll be surprised at the results!!

Taking time for personal reflection is also important while you are away. Spending some time alone, engaged in an activity that will help you focus on the values that are important to you will help you to examine whether or not you are living your life according to those values. This can be a great time for "course correction!!!" Discuss what direction you see your lives going, and if you need to make some changes, and what those changes might be. As someone once said, "if you are aiming at nothing, you are sure to hit it!!" Make sure your life reflects what you want it to reflect!!!

Another activity, if you have children, is called: Child Talk. You and your spouse are to do this separately. In this activity, take a sheet of paper, one for each child, and divide the page into two columns. Title one column "Strengths, and the other "Growth Areas". List out the strengths and growth areas for each child. Also, write out a few general comments you have about each child. When you are finished, get together with your spouse, and share your lists. Finally, based on the "growth areas" agree on one area to focus on for the training and encouragement of each child. Talk about creative ways to build your child up in this area of need. Commit to focus on this point for six months, and then re-evaluate at your next get away.

A final activity that we want to mention is Calendar Coordination. The biggest benefit to Calendar Coordination is that it will help you to determine a manageable pace for your marriage and family and will allow you to make the most of your available time. This will allow you to reserve time for marriage and family relationships, as well as help you to avoid forgetting important dates, and helps you to anticipate how you can support one another during especially busy or demanding times. Make sure you pack your personal planners or calendars, school calendars, sports team calendars, and church, civic or community calendars. On your trip, spread the calendars out, and discuss activities that need to be coordinated, fun activities, social obligations, and don't be afraid to dream about future trips. Once you have done that, put the "non-negotiables" on the calendar: birthdays, holidays, weddings, church, school, and civic events. Be sure to block off time for family and date nights. Then add in dates for inviting friends for dinner, weekend plans, and

future vacations. Finally, schedule your next “Couple Get Away” about 6 months in the future.