the bedroom. This wasn’t something that happened overnight, and even when we seemed to be handling the abstinence better, we would occasionally hit a rough patch.

If you want to learn to “tone down” your physical intimacy without shutting it off completely, know that it will likely take a while to re-educate your behavior patterns and not get “carried away.” Take it easy, and if it seems difficult at first, don’t give up. This is where the fruits of increased commitment and spiritual communication really shine through. If you pray together for a successful way of handling any problems you may have, you eventually will succeed.

If you were a couple who enjoyed a chaste courtship period, you really can re-learn the joys of spending time in one another’s arms without it leading too far. If you weren’t, you’ll probably really enjoy discovering how to be loving and intimate friends as well as lovers.

Emotional communication

When a marriage breaks down, emotional communication is usually where the couples are having trouble, yet this is the area that usually gets strengthened through the use of NFP. Why?

Think about the average couple using artificial contraceptives. Life being what it is, both people are busy, busy with work, children, and other interests. Bedtime is catch-up time, and when you’re not too tired, or you’ve been missing each other, etc., you likely have intercourse. Then, having physically communicated, you drop off to sleep. Too often, that becomes the total extent of their relationship. Meanwhile, life changes both spouses in different ways. Suddenly a crisis occurs, and they’ve changed so much and are so out of touch with each other that they feel lost, bewildered, and betrayed.

NFP couples are not immune from falling into these same patterns of behavior, but simply using NFP sheds light on it. If an NFP couple relies on physical intimacy as their primary means of deep communication, when the times of abstinence come around they find out that they don’t have much of a relationship during that time. Whoa!

Having been in this boat ourselves, we know it can be very traumatic. At times it seemed the relationship we had was being wrecked by NFP! But we both really believed that NFP was definitely what God wanted for our relationship, we knew it should help our relationship, not hurt it. Somehow, we had missed something important. Who would know better what to do than God? So we prayed about it.

Slowly we began to realize that our physical relationship was going to cycle on and off at times. God made the seasons of the year, the hours of the night and day. Cycles must be the norm. But we are more than just physical beings; we also have emotional and spiritual parts to our relationship. Didn’t it make sense for them to cycle on when the physical part cycled off? We gave it a try and changed our focus. It worked!

Instead of suffering in silence, or feeling misunderstood, unloved, and full of pity at how rotten things were, we started talking (what a revolutionary idea!) and getting to know each other better than ever. After a few months, we began to notice that the old thrill was back in our relationship. We began to fall in love again.

It was a journey that took some time, but when we renewed our mental commitment to marital chastity, learned to pray together and grew spiritually, practiced keeping things in check physically without being totally “hands off,” and renewed a sense of courtship and friendship within our marriage, our struggles with abstinence greatly decreased.

— Oscar and Susan Staudt were CCL volunteers for nearly 20 years.

Commitment

Commitment is key to successfully practicing periodic abstinence. It is like giving up smoking: until you’re really committed to doing it, you’re likely to have problems.

Having a committed attitude produces changes in behavior. Being really committed to periodic abstinence means that you don’t have that extra drink which might weaken your will so you “can’t help yourself.” Being really committed means that you don’t engage in greater physical intimacy than you can cope with without losing control. Being really committed means you don’t read stormy romances or provocative magazines or watch sexually suggestive television or movies.

The Scriptures tell us that God is ready and willing to help us in our difficulties: “You can trust God...
to not let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial He will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). But marital chastity has to be your will, too — and that means being really committed.

How committed are you to the belief that marital chastity is God’s will for your marriage? Are you convinced clear down to your toes that what you are doing is right, and that doing what is right is what you are going to do — no matter what?

In our case we found once we decided to look at our commitment to marital chastity in that way, we just didn’t think or do most of the things that had caused us trouble before. When we became of one mind that we were willing to endure the difficulties of periodic abstinence — no matter what — our times of abstinence began to change from days full of pain and sometimes guilt into days that were, well, almost joyful! These times became special because we were giving a very meaningful gift of self, one for the other. And we each treasured the other’s gift because we knew just how hard it was to give it.

Spiritual communication

Once we made the mental commitment to marital chastity, we were on the way. We observed and charted our fertility signs like we were taught, and then a period of sexual abstinence was upon us. All of a sudden things were not so easy any more! We figured the policy of no genital contact during the fertile time would not be a “piece of cake,” but we certainly didn’t think it would be this difficult.

It was helpful for us to acknowledge that certain outside factors contributed to our feelings of frustration. First of all, human nature seems to be such that we always tend to want what we cannot have. Second, and no small factor, was the seemingly constant bombardment by the media that the ultimate thing is sexual activity.

In spite of these influences, however, we learned how important it was for us to keep in mind that since we had committed to living God’s way and using NFP, He was going to help us with any difficulties we encountered. All we needed to do is ask.

We don’t want you to misunderstand what we are saying here — He did not take away all of the temptations and all of our moments of “pain and suffering,” but He gave us the strength and perseverance we needed to succeed. We began to live what we had always heard, that a true marriage is not just two people living together — it is husband, wife, and God. For us to succeed, we needed to develop a stronger spiritual relationship with one another and with God. We needed more of a relationship with God than just asking for help in our times of struggle, and this came through learning how to pray as a couple.

Although both of us were spending time individually in prayer, about the only time we prayed together was while we were in Church. Over time, we discovered that because we were not spending time in prayer as a couple, as man and wife, we were missing out on some great gifts from God!

The Genesis account of God creating Eve gave us insights into the spiritual connectedness of husband and wife. “God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves’” (Genesis 1:26). A little farther on in Genesis we are told: “God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, he took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh... The man exclaimed: ‘This at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh! This is to be called woman, for this was taken from man.’ This is why a man leaves his mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body” (Genesis 2:23-24).

In the fact that God took only a part of Adam’s physical body to create Eve, we see a sign that He also took only “part” of Adam’s spiritual being. Indeed, do we not experience that men and women are different in aspects other than just the physical? And just as their physical differences are complementary, might not the same be true of their spiritual differences?

Consider then Ephesians 5:28, when Paul tells us how Jesus loves the Church, and he directs that “In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself.” Then, after explaining that we feed and care for our own bodies just as Christ does for the Church, he quotes the book of Genesis: “For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body.”

When this passage stands alone in Genesis, it seems to imply more a physical joining into “one body.” However, in the context of Paul’s discussion, it seems to mean there is also a spiritual bonding and joining between husband and wife.

We already understood that God has given us the gift of procreation by joining our different, but complementary, physical bodies. It occurred to us that the spiritual joining of husband and wife — through praying together — could be just as creative in a spiritual way.

We began to naturally be more aware of the spiritual facet of our lives while practicing abstinence. We found that when we spent time in prayer together, morning and evening, our lives would go more smoothly. Conversely, when we neglected our spiritual time together, we would have more trouble coping with abstinence.

When we, as a married couple, spiritually joined together in prayer we found we could experience a spiritual wholeness that was just as satisfying in its own way as our physical joining. This is a gift, or grace, of marriage that brought us new, dynamic, and rewarding facets of our life together with each other and with God.

Physical communication

How did we approach our physical communication as we learned how to better handle times of abstinence?

A lot of couples think this will be easy — you simply don’t communicate physically during the fertile times. As a couple who tried to totally avoid one another during those times, we strongly recommend against it. We found, once again, that our struggles here came not from how God physically made us, but from the influences of society about expectations related to sexuality.

Society teaches this about physical communication: touching is sexy, and every touch must lead inevitably to intercourse, or at least orgasm. That view definitely conflicts with our use of NFP.

Physical contact is necessary for happiness and survival, and people need to have physical contact with other people they care about. But that physical contact doesn’t have to lead to sexual intercourse.

We decided to use the fertile periods to bring back some of the less intimate sharing of our dating days: good old-fashioned hand holding, back rubbing, and just platonic hugging. We learned once again that a hug or kiss can simply say, “I love you,” instead of, “I want to have sex with you.” We both discovered that it can be a relief to know that every touch doesn’t automatically mean a trip to