

# SMART *Love*

How Improving Your  
***EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE***  
Will Transform Your  
***MARRIAGE***

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1995, Daniel Goleman published his book titled *Emotional Intelligence*, in which he defined five skills that represented the concept of emotional intelligence, or what we refer to as EQ: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) motivation, (4) empathy, and (5) social skills. Although he included romantic relationships and family relationships in his book, his ideas quickly captured the business world.

Over the years since, researchers have found that EQ was the single most important quality that defines someone as a truly effective leader. It is more important than cognitive intelligence, leadership skills, or even experience. They found that 90 percent of high performers in business understood and practiced EQ. The link between emotional intelligence and what a person earns is so direct that with every point increase on a person's EQ score, their annual salary increased by \$1,300.

Eventually the five skills of EQ were reduced to four. The skills are now called competencies, and they are (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, and

(4) relationship management. They form the foundation of what we call SMART Love as we relate the principles primarily to marriage. There is no connection between IQ and EQ. A person may have an IQ of 140 but be totally ineffective when it comes to EQ because they have never developed the necessary skills to navigate the world of emotions.

As of this writing, over half a million people have been tested for EQ, and researchers have found that only 36 percent of the people tested were able to identify their emotions as they happened,<sup>1</sup> which is the foundational skill of both EQ and SMART Love. Without the skills of SMART Love, a person not only will be less effective in business but will have a hard time effectively relating to the primary people in their personal life.

The more we have studied EQ and how powerful it is in the business world, the more we see the connection it has to all of our relationships. It affects our parenting, our friendships, and especially our marriages. It gives us insight into how important understanding emotion is and how learning to manage our emotions can make every relationship stronger. That's why we call it SMART Love.

Note: When we use "I" in the book, it refers to Dave, as he is the one in clinical practice.



## What Is SMART Love?

In successful, satisfying marriages, couples have learned how to be comfortable together in the land of emotions. They have learned to do the “not easy” part of what Aristotle once described: “Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not easy.”<sup>1</sup> Couples who have learned how to navigate the complex world of emotions experience what we call *SMART Love*.

SMART Love is based on the principles of emotional intelligence (EQ), which have been developed primarily within the business world. Emotions and how we manage them play an important role in the business world, but the skills of emotional intelligence are even more important in our personal relationships, in our family, and especially in our marriage. The difference between a so-so marriage and a great marriage

comes down to how “SMART” we are about love. It’s not just about how many workshops we’ve attended as a couple. It’s not about how many marital counseling sessions we’ve experienced together. It’s not about what conflict resolution skills we’ve been taught, or even based on how much we know about how relationships work in general. And it’s not based on our ability to carry on a conversation together, although that may be part of it. It’s about knowing how to develop, express, and experience the skills of SMART Love.

*SMART* is an acronym for the five competencies of SMART Love. You can experience SMART Love when the following are present in your life:

**S**elf-awareness of your emotions.

**M**anaging your emotions.

**A**ccountability to yourself, your spouse, and others.

**R**eading the other person’s emotions.

**T**ogether in the land of emotions.

The problems encountered in our learning how to love SMART are not limited to one gender, even though it might seem so. It’s true that men are often like strangers in the land of emotions, many of them not even able to come up with the words to describe their emotions. While women aren’t afraid to talk about emotions, they do this primarily with their female friends. When it comes to talking about their emotions with their husbands, they may also be at a loss for how to do it successfully.

As humans, we are emotional beings. We are all created in the image of God, and that includes being emotional. After all, the God of the Bible is an emotional God. In 1 John 4,

John tells us that the very essence of God is love. To truly know him is to experience his love. In fact, not only is God the personification of love, but “love comes from God” (v. 7). The Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, also describes God as feeling anger. He is angry about sin, and he was angry at his people, Israel, who were so rejecting of his love and so sinful. To solve the sin problem, and because he is righteous and loves us so much, he sent his Son to die in our place to bear the punishment for our sins.

God also experiences sadness. In Hosea, God says, “Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? . . . My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows” (Hos. 11:8). That’s an emotional passage!

God feels joy as well. We are told there is great joy in heaven when a sinner repents (see Luke 15:7). Since we are emotional creatures created in God’s image, it’s important to better understand the emotions we all experience so we can become comfortable in the land of emotions.

Of course, not all emotions are positive. For example, we’ve all been there, at least to some degree, when what starts out as an innocent conversation suddenly hits a trigger point, and before either of us knows what’s happening, we’re in the middle of a highly emotional argument. Passion suddenly overwhelms all sense of reason. Quickly, one or both of us gets out of control, saying things we’re going to regret later when we calm down. Sometimes the arguments can become so emotional that neither one of us can even remember what started it. One—or more likely both—of us has just had our reasoning hijacked by our emotions.

As we teach couples about SMART Love, they find it is a fresh vantage point from which they can view their own and

their spouse's emotional reactions. They each can learn how to be intentionally SMART about their emotions.

## **Fear and Anger**

As a counselor, I hear stories over and over that are similar to the experience of Pat and Don. As they sat in my office, they told me about what they called their out-of-control arguments. As we started the first session, it quickly became obvious what they were talking about. They had plenty of emotions in their marriage, but they hadn't yet learned how to manage them. Even though they were both able to express their emotions, they were strangers in the world of SMART Love. Here's what happened in their first session.

When I asked what brought them to counseling, they looked at each other for a moment and then Pat jumped in. She said she was wrapping her mother's birthday gift and had hoped to have it done before Don came home. She knew the sight of the gift would kick off a violent argument, but she had gotten busy doing some other things, and then it was too late. Don walked into the kitchen just as she was finishing wrapping.

She said he demanded to know what she was working on as he asked, "What's that you're wrapping?"

Don started to jump in to defend himself, but I motioned for him to wait. I reassured him he would get his turn.

Pat continued. "I told him it was just something for my mom's birthday. He pretended to be interested, asking sarcastically what I got her. He will deny the sarcasm, but we've been down this road about my mother so many times I don't remember how I responded—I probably wasn't nice. I think

I said something like, ‘What difference does it make to you?’ He pressed, so I finally said it was my mom’s sixty-fifth birthday and I got her a gold bracelet. I knew the minute I said ‘gold’ I should have kept my mouth shut. He yelled at me something like, ‘Gold? Like 14k? How much did you spend this time?’”

Pat said she didn’t remember what happened after that. Don just exploded, and she exploded back. She added, “I know I said things I’m sorry for now, especially because the children heard some of the hurtful things we both said. We’ve got to break the cycle—I can’t stand living like this!”

I then turned to Don and asked, “How do you see what happened?”

He was quiet for a while, and then he quickly ramped up as he started to describe what he thought was the real problem. “It’s her mother—that’s the issue for me.” He went on to describe what he saw as unfairness in how Pat favored her mother and bought her all kinds of things. He said she didn’t need a birthday as an excuse to surprise her mother with some gift. She talked with her mother every day, and he was convinced she didn’t really like *his* mother.

They had been married for nineteen years, but the mother-in-law issue was still alive and well. Pat jumped in and added that his mother still treated him like a boy, not a man. And Don just as quickly threw back at her that at least his mother respected him, which was more than Pat did.

“How do the arguments end?” I asked.

Pat answered, “I typically storm out of the room and we don’t talk for days.”

“This time, when we started talking again, we both realized we needed some help to break the cycle,” Don added.

Pat and Don were involved in two battles. The obvious problem in their argument was the issue of the perceived unfairness about the amount of money Pat spent on the two mothers. But the real problem was what was going on in the two different parts of their brains. You could say that God designed our brains to have an emotional center and a rational center. For both Pat and Don, their emotions were engaged in battle with their reason, and the emotional brain seemed to win most often. Couples experiencing that internal battle between their two brains, like Don and Pat were, find that the emotional brain usually wins the battle. The rational brain is ignored by their emotional brain.

It seems so natural, the dominance of our emotions. And it *is* natural. Whenever we see or hear something, it enters our brain and goes immediately to our limbic system, which is the emotional center of our brain. A key part of our limbic system—the amygdala—sounds the alarm that some new information is coming in and goes on alert to identify any potential danger. The amygdala’s primary orientation is fear, and that’s for a reason—to protect us from anything that threatens us. Don felt threatened. And his fear said to him, “Oh no, this spending is out of control again! We can’t allow that to happen!”

Pat’s emotional system was also on the lookout and was already prepared for the worst. Her emotional brain bypassed her rational brain as well, and when the conversation exploded, she was just as out of control as Don. For both Don and Pat, the information was never sent to the rational control center of the brain. The emotional part of the brain wouldn’t forward the message. It had blocked out the reasoning part. Maybe later, when things calmed down, their brains would

deal with the situation rationally, but by then it would be too late—the hurt and damage were already done.

Sometimes the lack of SMART Love results in not being able to enjoy something someone else is enjoying. Angie’s mom and dad are like that. They are the opposite of Don and Pat. They never argue. If you were to watch them interact, you might wonder if they experienced any emotions at all.

Angie is in the tenth grade and is typically a B student. But as she started her classes in the fall, she determined to do better. She decided she wanted to get into a good college after high school and realized how important her grades would be in determining what college she would attend. So she worked hard on her homework and asked for extra help in a couple of classes, and at the end of the first semester her final grades were four A’s and two B’s. She was ecstatic—she radiated great joy at her success, and she couldn’t wait to show her grades to her parents. But when she did, all they said in response was, “That’s nice.” And with that, her dad picked up the newspaper to continue his reading, and her mom turned back to the TV program she had been watching.

Angie was crushed by her parents’ lack of response, but as she thought about it, she wasn’t surprised. Neither of her parents ever showed any emotion. If it weren’t for Angie and her siblings, their house would be an emotional wasteland. She lived with two parents who were terrified to enter the land of emotions, even when it came to their daughter, who desperately needed to be affirmed.

To say that Angie’s parents expressed no emotion is probably not accurate, for they were dominated by one of the negative emotions—fear. Something had to have happened as they were growing up that made the experience of any

emotion scary and a thing to be avoided. They experienced an overwhelming amount of fear, even as they related to their children.

Sometimes only one person in the marital relationship seems to show any emotions. Kimberly told me that she was the one in her marriage who was the hothead. Every time there was a potential argument, she was the one who would lose control emotionally. Jerry might lose his temper and explode back at Kimberly as she railed at him, but only on rare occasions and when she didn't let up with the accusations. More often he was the one who might say, "I don't know," if he said anything. Or he would stare at the wall or turn the TV on and begin flipping the channels. Sometimes he would simply get up and leave the room as Kimberly raged at him. Occasionally he would try to defuse the situation by saying something like "uh-huh" as an attempt to calm Kimberly by agreeing with her. But anything he did was motivated by his attempt to avoid the situation and to keep himself from feeling any emotion on his part. He was in the freeze mode of fear.

What brought them to counseling was what Jerry did during their last argument. Not only did he walk out of the room, but he left the house and was gone for several hours. Basically, from all outward appearances, emotion lived only on one side of their marriage—Kimberly's.

Jerry's side of the marriage was like an emotional desert. He thought he had long ago locked his emotions into a safe place, somewhere he couldn't get hurt again. He had learned how to stay away from his emotions, and he wished Kimberly would do the same. He didn't realize he was trapped by the emotion of fear. And what seemed to make no sense to him

was that the less emotion he invested in the marriage, the more emotional Kimberly became. He didn't realize that for her, their marriage felt so empty that she wondered just who Jerry was—she felt like she hardly knew him.

Every time Kimberly lost her temper, she would later ruminate for hours, berating herself, trying to understand what had set her off. She promised herself that she would stay in control of her emotions in the future. But even when she was determined not to blow up, she would lose her temper and explode at Jerry. It seemed every time that happened, she would say things she later regretted. And recently, she blew up at Jerry and said some really ugly things about him that hurt him deeply. It was the first time in a long time that Kimberly saw an emotional response from him. Jerry used that episode to blame her for all their problems.

In each of these examples, the individuals say that they truly love each other. But for love to grow, the skill of traveling in the land of the negative emotions must be acquired. Only then does love have meaning. The good news is, any one of these couples can learn the skills of SMART Love. And so can you.

### **How It All Goes Wrong**

None of these couples married with any thought that they might have trouble in their relationship when it came to their emotions. In fact, early in the relationship, they were each able to make the other person feel important enough that there was a peaceful calm to the relationship. They could talk together without either one losing control of their emotions. In addition, Pat and Kimberly had felt connected to their

husbands. They seldom felt the need to hide something from them or criticize them in the hope that things would get better. They both felt they were truly being helpful in the suggestions they frequently handed out to their husbands. Things were good back then. Neither Don nor Jerry realized that they were missing out on life because they were controlled by their fear. To them, that was just the way they were, and what they'd grown up with as they observed their parents. The same goes for Angie's seemingly emotionless parents.

Early in a couple's relationship, especially before the wedding and soon after, a man takes the time to calm his future wife and is basically able to soothe any anxiety she is experiencing. He easily engages her in conversation, and he truly believes and communicates to her that she is important to him. He knows how to express that to her. But as the marriage moves forward in time, he may gradually become more and more distracted by work and the success he begins to feel on the job. Or he may get caught up in the success or failure of his favorite sports team, or in the distraction of his hobby—be it hunting, fishing, golf, or something else. He once looked at his home as a place where he could relax, but her “helpful criticisms” make it less and less relaxing to be there. He begins to feel that no matter how much effort he makes in the marriage, it will never be enough.

For the woman, those early days of the relationship are great because her future husband makes her feel she is connected to him, and he talks with her at length. Her basic understanding of what she wants in a spouse is to be with someone with whom she can interact. Interacting makes her feel connected to him. Little does she know that her need for him to talk would feel like pressure to him, and it would

begin to trigger his sense of shame at his failure to be what she wants him to be. Her “helpful criticisms” only add to his shame of being a failure. Neither of them realizes that a man’s core fear is becoming a failure, and his natural response is to protect himself by closing down. As he withdraws, she begins to feel more and more disconnected from him, and that just feeds into her core fear, which is to be shut off from her husband—to be disconnected.

Even though a wife may have a network of female friends with whom she can talk, it just isn’t the same. She wants him to talk to her and wants him to actively listen when she talks to him. She wants to feel a connection with him, and she feels talking is the path to that connection. But now the only time they talk is when he is angry or when she is fed up.

Add to all of this the differences in how a man and a woman view emotions. It all starts on the playground. What do most little boys love to do? Be active! Whatever game they play, they will ignore their emotions and enjoy playing. Most little girls don’t need to be so active, so they enjoy sitting on the sidelines “relating.” They talk about what they are feeling. That’s why they have slumber parties—so they can relate to each other. Not one of our sons asked to have a slumber party, nor do I remember them ever being invited to one.

So when a couple gets married, the wife may know how to talk about feelings and emotions, and the husband may know how to be active in sports or work hard at his job. He needs to slowly ease his way into any area of emotions. But because she is more familiar with the world of emotions, she gets anxious with his discomfort, and her frustration leads her to what is called a “harsh start-up” of a conversation, as opposed to a “soft start-up.” In a harsh start-up, the wife

jumps into the issue at full speed emotionally. In addition, she knows the language of the emotions, whereas for the man, the language of emotions is often like learning a second language—he doesn't know the vocabulary.

That's why Don eventually shuts Pat out and leaves her alone with her hurt and anger. Jerry ends up doing the same thing—he just does it from the beginning of the would-be conversation. And Angie's parents have no clue as to how their lack of skill to navigate the land of emotions hurts Angie and isolates them from one another. For a positive end result to these situations, each person has to learn how to recognize and manage their emotions. Learning how to navigate their world of emotions by developing the skills of SMART Love will transform their relationships.

### **It's How We Are Wired**

What Don and Pat didn't know was that their problem is universal and is based on how our brains work. They didn't know that whenever we see or hear something, that information, as we said earlier, is sent directly to the emotional part of our brain. The emotional brain is designed to protect us from any threat, even when the threat we perceive is coming from our spouse. It's our warning system that prepares our body to fight, take flight, or freeze. In other words, we are wired to experience anger and fear.

Pat was already on guard with Don, and just his walking into the room set off within her a warning signal to get ready for trouble. She would have fled the room if that had been possible, but instead she froze in place and prepared for the fight. Don came into the room, his emotional brain

sensed the tension, and he quickly geared up for a fight. He had trained his emotional brain to be extra sensitive to any perceived threat.

Kimberly and Jerry had a different routine. Kimberly's brain operates much like Don's in that she is always on the lookout for potential problems, and her preferred response is to fight. Jerry's warning system is overly sensitized in the other direction. It's almost as if he had shut down his emotional brain and depended solely on his rational brain. Every perception of a potential threat triggers in him the response to take flight, and he usually does that by withdrawing into himself.

Both of Angie's parents had learned at an early age to be afraid of their emotional brains. To them, feeling anything only led to hurt and disappointment. While they enjoyed the emotions they felt during their dating and engagement, it didn't take them long to revert to their old pattern of perceiving everything they experienced through the rational part of their brains. There is no war going on in their brains—the emotional brain had conceded and surrendered to fear! There was no out-of-control expression of emotions, only the controlling power of their fear.

Pat, Don, and Kimberly each experienced an emotional hijacking in that the information they perceived was never processed and passed on to the rational part of the brain. That's why after most couples have a fight, they later feel it was irrational. And it was! "We argued about *that*?" they say to themselves, and maybe they even say it to their spouse. Or they ask themselves, "Why are we so fearful when it comes to interacting?" Then they end up berating themselves for either freezing or losing control and determine to stay calm

and get involved in a healthy conversation the next time. But left to human nature, the next time will be much like the first.

### **What about Shame and Sadness?**

We've looked at how anger and fear are wired into our brains, but let's look at the two basic emotions that we have to learn: shame and sadness. These also affect our relationships. There are two kinds of shame—rightful shame, which is a form of genuine guilt, and toxic shame, which leads to consistent feelings of false guilt. Rightful shame is what we feel when we've done something wrong or embarrassing. Toxic shame is shame unrelated to any current behaviors or misdeeds. Many of us struggle with feelings of toxic shame but don't understand why we feel it. Its roots go back to early experiences that we barely remember. There is nothing in the present that gives a rational basis for our feeling toxic shame. In spite of that, we interact with others out of a position of one-down, and we feel like we are the bad person in the interaction. We may have no awareness that the shame we struggle with is toxic. As a result, it colors our experiences, leading us to a fearful posture in relationship to others. We say things and do things that reflect that emotion, but we can't put a label on any of our current behaviors as being the cause of our feeling toxic shame.

Sadness is an important part of the grieving process, just as anger is a protest against loss. But sadness can also be a learned emotional stance when it is experienced as a persistent state. Over time, it shows itself as a general melancholy or a somber mood that persists. Or it can be diagnosed as a state of dysthymia, which is a persistent mild form of

depression. Sadness can also be an ongoing condition of pessimism. People who experience sadness as their basic emotion probably grew up in a very negative, “glass is always empty, or at best only half full” experience in their family.

When our perceptions stay in the emotional brain and don’t get sent to the rational brain for evaluation, it is usually because we’re holding on to our experience of one or more of the negative emotions. So our experience of anger, fear, sadness, and/or shame doesn’t get processed. These negative emotions disrupt our marriage relationship and undo any hard work we have invested in building a strong marriage. And it happens so quickly that it surprises us. We need more than a vow to ourselves that “we’ll never do that again.” We have to learn now to stop and recognize this as a vicious cycle. Once we allow our negative emotions to rule, it becomes easier to fall into the same old pattern again and again. That’s why we need to learn how our emotions work the way they do—we have to become emotionally intelligent in order to experience SMART Love!