

⁵ Restoring and Strengthening a Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Guide

Josh and Kristy's Journey: Josh and Kristy are devoted Christians in Bendigo, Australia, raising two little ones (Sylvie, 3, and Elias, 1). They deeply love each other and share strong faith and community values. Yet, they feel stuck in painful cycles – unequal power dynamics, “trauma-bond” highs and lows, hot-and-cold emotions, and communication that often leads to hurt. Josh’s ADHD, complex PTSD, and **anxious-preoccupied** attachment cause him to crave reassurance and fear rejection, while Kristy’s **fearful-avoidant** tendencies and postpartum struggles lead her to alternate between closeness and withdrawal. Both are exhausted young parents who genuinely want to **heal, grow**, and ensure a healthy, loving home for their children.

This guide will walk through evidence-based strategies – integrating **Family Systems Therapy (FST)** principles, **attachment theory**, **trauma-informed care**, and a **Christian worldview** – to help Josh and Kristy rebuild a thriving marriage. You’ll find practical tools, scripts, exercises, and resources tailored to a time-poor couple juggling parenting and healing. The goal is to restore **mutual respect**, eliminate any **coercive control**, improve self- and co-regulation, enrich communication, deepen intimacy, grow spiritually together, and break negative cycles so they aren’t passed to the kids. Let’s dive in.

Understanding the Cycle: Attachment, Trauma, and Power Imbalances

Before focusing on solutions, it’s critical to understand the dynamics at play in Josh and Kristy’s marriage. They are caught in what therapists call an **anxious-avoidant cycle** – a push-pull pattern where one partner pursues closeness and the other withdraws. Josh’s anxious-preoccupied attachment means he **seeks constant reassurance and closeness**, fearing abandonment at the smallest sign of distance. Kristy’s fearful-avoidant style means she **craves love but also fears it** – when things get too intimate or tense, she instinctively pulls back or tries to control the situation to feel safe. This creates a painful dance: the more Josh chases (“Do you still love me? Please don’t pull away”), the more Kristy feels smothered and guarded, so she withdraws or becomes critical – which in turn spikes Josh’s fear of rejection. Round and round it goes.

The common pursue-withdraw cycle can leave both partners feeling hurt and misunderstood. In an anxious-avoidant dynamic, one partner’s attempts to seek closeness can trigger the other’s need for space, creating a frustrating loop of pursuit and withdrawal.

Trauma Triggers: Both partners also carry **trauma wounds** that amplify this cycle. Josh’s complex PTSD and **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)** (common in ADHD) mean he may perceive even minor slights as deeply painful rejections. A distracted tone or a request for space can trigger emotional flashbacks of not feeling “good enough,” leading Josh to panic, lash out in anger, or collapse into despair. Kristy has her own trauma history (perhaps past abuse or inconsistent caregiving) feeding her fearful attachment. She expects betrayal

before it happens, so she may preemptively act in controlling or defensive ways to avoid being hurt. For example, she might tightly orchestrate routines, finances, or social plans so nothing unpredictable (and thus scary) occurs. This **power imbalance** (one partner dominating decisions or monitoring the other) is often rooted in fear, but it can cross into **coercive control** if unchecked. *Coercive control* is a pattern of dominating a partner's life via tactics like micromanaging, constant criticism, isolation from supports, or threats. Both recognize this is unhealthy and are committed to eliminating any such behaviors, replacing them with mutual respect and trust.

The “Trauma Bond” Rollercoaster: Over time, Josh and Kristy’s relationship may have developed a **trauma-bond cycle** – periods of intense conflict or emotional distance followed by passionate makeups and pledges to change. These highs and lows create a kind of addictive emotional rollercoaster. It’s important to realize that the intensity can be misinterpreted as “proof” of love or fate, when in fact *unresolved trauma is playing out* in the relationship. Their deepest insecurities are activating each other. Josh’s fear of abandonment and Kristy’s fear of betrayal **trigger each other perfectly**, fueling fights that feel catastrophic (followed by relief when things are okay again). Recognizing this pattern is a first step to breaking it. As one therapist explains, “*each partner’s insecure attachment style activates the other’s deepest insecurities and unmet needs*,” leading to dramatic ups and downs. The good news is that with the right approach, **this cycle can be broken** and replaced with a stable, secure bond.

Postpartum Stress and Depression: Adding to the complexity, Kristy is in the postpartum period (her youngest is just over 1). The first year after a baby is notoriously hard on couples – **studies show a majority of couples experience a drop in relationship satisfaction after a baby**. Sleep deprivation, hormonal swings, and the stress of caring for young children can make anyone irritable and emotionally raw. Kristy’s reported “postpartum rage” episodes (intense outbursts over small things followed by guilt) and sadness or numbness suggest she may be suffering from **postnatal depression and/or anxiety**, which affects about 1 in 5–7 new moms. This is not a character flaw – it’s a treatable medical condition. Her mood swings and feeling of being overwhelmed are exacerbated by exhaustion and possibly **postpartum hormonal changes**. Josh, too, is affected by new-dad stress and may feel a bit sidelined or unsure how to help, especially if Kristy has been “gatekeeping” (insisting only she can do things for the baby). Recognizing the postpartum phase as a *temporary but challenging season* is important. Many couples find that with support, they can navigate it and even strengthen their bond – especially by maintaining open communication, sharing parenting duties, and extending extra grace to each other. (*More on parenting and postpartum coping later.*)

Key Point: Josh and Kristy are **not** doomed or “crazy” – they are a normal couple facing a perfect storm of challenges (trauma histories, opposite attachment needs, mental health conditions, and life stress). Their patterns make sense given what they’ve been through, and **patterns can be changed**. Next, we’ll explore how Family Systems Therapy and related approaches can map out a path to healing these painful dynamics.

Family Systems Therapy: Healing the Family as a Whole

Family Systems Therapy (FST) offers a powerful lens to understand and transform Josh and Kristy's relationship. The core idea is that a family (or couple) is an **interconnected system** – what affects one person *affects everyone*. Instead of viewing Josh's and Kristy's issues in isolation, FST looks at the **circular interaction patterns** between them, and how those patterns might have roots in each partner's family of origin. This approach can help break generational cycles and create healthier dynamics for their own children.

Viewing the Marriage as a System

In a family-systems view, Josh and Kristy's marriage is the **nuclear family system**. Their individual behaviors aren't happening in a vacuum – they respond to each other in a loop. For example, Josh's defensiveness under criticism and Kristy's controlling tendencies form a self-reinforcing loop: the more he withdraws or acts out when he feels criticized, the more she feels she must take charge; the more she micromanages or criticizes, the more he feels inadequate and reacts. FST helps make these loops **visible** so the couple can change them together. One of Bowen's foundational principles is that "*what happens to one member of a family happens to everyone in the family*" – so Josh and Kristy must work as a **team** to shift the whole system toward health.

Differentiation of Self: FST also emphasizes **differentiation**, which means each partner learning to maintain their own sense of self and emotional stability **without** being swept up in the other's emotions. In a highly fused system, one person's anxiety or mood immediately infects the other. For instance, if Kristy is in a low mood, Josh becomes anxious that he *caused* it and rushes to fix it; or if Josh is upset, Kristy immediately takes it personally or feels she must "solve" him. Building differentiation means each can **soothe their own anxieties** better, and relate without always absorbing or projecting feelings. We'll build this skill through self-regulation practices and boundaries.

Family of Origin Patterns: Often, the way a couple interacts is influenced by patterns from their families of origin (the families they grew up in). FST would have Josh and Kristy reflect on their upbringing: Did Josh witness or experience abandonment, which now makes him hypervigilant to any sign of disconnect? Did Kristy grow up with chaos or betrayal that taught her to tightly control her environment? These past influences (called the **multigenerational transmission process**) can unwittingly shape current behavior. The good news is that becoming aware of these influences allows one to consciously choose a different path rather than replay old scripts. A therapist might even help them diagram a **genogram** (a kind of family tree mapping relationships and patterns) to spot generational trauma, abuse, or attachment styles that could be "echoing" in their marriage. For example, if Josh's parents had an anxious-avoidant marriage, he might be reenacting what he learned about how husbands and wives relate. By identifying that, he and Kristy can say "We're going to do this differently for our kids."

The Family Projection Process: FST warns that parents can **project their emotional issues onto children** if not careful. Josh and Kristy are determined to prevent that. For instance, an anxiously attached parent might *cling* to a child or worry excessively about the child's normal independence, or a fearful-avoidant parent might become emotionally distant or overly strict when triggered. Part of healing their marriage is ensuring they don't pass on

their insecurities. We'll discuss specific parenting approaches in a later section to keep the family system healthy and break the cycle of dysfunction.

Triangles: Another useful FST concept is **triangulation**, where a third person (often a child) gets drawn into the couple's tension. If Josh and Kristy are not in sync, one might subconsciously ally with a child or a friend to cope (for example, venting to a friend about the spouse instead of addressing it directly, or in unhealthy cases, confiding in a child about adult issues). Triangles can stabilize tension temporarily but ultimately **undermine** the marriage and put unfair stress on others. Josh and Kristy should strive to solve issues **together**, not via third parties. This might mean agreeing not to put Sylvie in the middle ("Go ask Mommy if she's mad at me" – no) or not bad-mouthing each other to friends/family. Instead, use **healthy outlets**: joint counseling, or individual mentors/therapists who support the marriage rather than take sides.

Rebalancing Power: Family systems work also involves examining the **structure and power balance** in the couple. A healthy system has **clear, flexible boundaries** and **shared leadership** between spouses. If one partner has been dominating (even unintentionally) – for instance, Kristy making all decisions about parenting because of anxiety, or Josh controlling the social calendar due to his needs – it's time to **re-evaluate roles**. The goal is to move toward an **egalitarian partnership**, reflecting the Christian ideal of mutual submission ("Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ", Ephesians 5:21) and **servant-leadership** from both sides. We'll later outline how to explicitly rebuild mutual respect, but from a systems view this might involve **structural adjustments**: e.g., scheduling decision-making meetings so each voice is heard, dividing responsibilities more evenly, and agreeing on family rules together instead of one-sided "rules."

Whole-Family Healing: Finally, FST encourages seeing therapy or growth not as "fixing one person" but as improving the **interaction patterns**. Josh isn't the "problem" and Kristy isn't the "problem" – the *cycle between them* is the problem. Adopting this mindset ("We're on the same side, tackling the cycle together") reduces blame and shame. It's "us against the problem" rather than against each other. This outlook is empowering and very much aligned with their faith – just as the body of Christ works together, the family system heals together. Changes in even one part of the system (say, Josh learning to pause instead of yelling, or Kristy allowing Josh more parenting involvement) will ripple out and improve the whole family climate.

Action Steps – Family Systems Perspective: *To apply FST ideas, here are some things Josh and Kristy can do:*

- **Identify Patterns:** Together, name the common loops ("When I get anxious and text you repeatedly, you shut down – then I panic more. Let's call this our Pursue/Withdraw cycle."). Externalize it as *the enemy*, not each other.
- **Genogram Exercise:** Sketch out family patterns (communication, conflict, roles) from each of your childhoods. Discuss how you might be replaying some of those and what you want to do differently for your kids.

- **Prevent Triangles:** Commit to resolving issues between you. If one of you starts to drag a third party in (venting to a friend too much, seeking emotional comfort from the kids), gently refocus back to the marital team.
- **Rebalance Decisions:** Create a list of major decision areas (finances, parenting approaches, social activities, church involvement, etc.). Rate how shared vs. one-sided each has been. For any imbalances, discuss how to make it more mutual (e.g. alternate who takes the lead, or make joint decisions).
- **State Family Values:** As a couple, write down 4–5 core values for your family (e.g. “We treat each other with kindness,” “We listen and respect even when upset,” “Faith and family come first”). Post this as a “North Star” for your household. It reminds you that *the marriage is the foundation* of the family system – nurturing it is the best thing you can do for your children.

Rebuilding a Secure Attachment: From “Demon Dialogues” to Deeper Connection

Josh and Kristy’s end goal is to feel **emotionally safe, loved, and connected** with each other – to replace that anxious-avoidant dance with a secure bond. **Attachment theory** tells us that adult partners, like infants and caregivers, need a reliable emotional bond to thrive. When that bond feels threatened (one partner seems distant, or conflict erupts), it triggers primal fear. A leading couples therapy approach that directly addresses this is **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)**, created by Dr. Sue Johnson. EFT is evidence-based and rooted in attachment theory – it guides couples to identify their negative cycle (“demon dialogues”), communicate their underlying emotions and needs, and respond to each other in ways that build trust. Josh and Kristy might consider EFT with a therapist, but they can also start applying its principles on their own.

Identify Your Demon Dialogues: In *Created for Connection* (Johnson’s Christian adaptation of EFT), the first step is recognizing the negative communication patterns that keep a couple stuck. Common “demon dialogues” are pursue-withdraw (which they definitely have), or criticize-defend, or protest-police. Josh and Kristy can actually **give a name** to their pattern – e.g., “The Chase and Hide Game” – to externalize it. Next time they catch it happening, one of them can say, “Looks like we’re doing the Chase-and-Hide dance again.” This signals that *the pattern* is the mutual enemy, not either person. It brings some objectivity and even a bit of teamwork into a heated moment.

Find the Raw Spots: Often what triggers a blow-up is a “**raw spot**” – a deeply sensitive emotional wound from the past. For Josh, a raw spot might be *feeling ignored or dismissed* (which hits at his fear of abandonment and RSD). For Kristy, a raw spot might be *feeling controlled or accused* (which hits her fear of betrayal or inadequacy). They should gently identify each other’s raw spots and treat them with care. For instance, if Kristy needs a few hours to herself, she can reassure Josh “I love you, I just need alone time – this isn’t me leaving you.” If Josh needs to discuss something without voices raised (due to past trauma), Kristy can remember to soften her tone even when upset. Understanding each other’s tender

points turns anger into empathy. It helps answer “*What’s really hurting me when we fight?*” so they can address the hurt rather than just the surface argument.

Example Dialogue – Naming a Raw Spot:

Josh (calmly): “When you walked away while I was talking, it hit a raw nerve for me. I felt invisible – like I did as a kid when my opinions didn’t matter.”

Kristy (softening): “I’m sorry. I truly just needed a breather, but I see how that felt like rejection. I value what you say. I’m not abandoning you – I’ll come back, I promise.”

(They hug or hold hands for a moment to reassure connection.)

Kristy: “One of my raw spots is feeling cornered. When voices get loud, I panic. I need to take a pause then.”

Josh: “Thanks for telling me. Next time, I’ll remember you’re not shutting me out forever – you just need safety. We’ll take 20 minutes, then try again.”

In this kind of conversation, both partners practice **vulnerability** – sharing the hurt *underneath* the anger, and reassuring the other of their intentions. This is hard to do in the heat of the moment, so EFT suggests **revisiting rocky moments later, when you’re calm**. You might even sit together and replay a recent argument like watching game tape: “When you said ___, I felt ___. Then I reacted by ____.” Each takes turns describing their inner experience during the fight, *without* blame. The goal is to understand how the “dance” went wrong and to take mutual responsibility for it. Over time, this builds trust that you can get through conflicts together.

Hold Me Tight Conversations: Once Josh and Kristy get better at stepping out of the cycle and talking about feelings, they can attempt what EFT calls the **Hold Me Tight conversation**. This is where they openly share their deepest **fears and needs** with each other – effectively saying *“Here’s what I’m most afraid of, and here’s what I need from you to feel secure.”* For example, Josh might say, “I’m most afraid that I’m not good enough for you and one day you’ll leave me. I need to know you want me and you’ll stick with me even when I mess up.” Kristy might say, “I’m most afraid of being hurt or controlled. I need to know you will respect my boundaries and love me even when I’m struggling.” These admissions are hard – they require dropping defenses (or as one counselor put it, *“dropping your sword”* in conflict). But when each partner dares to be vulnerable, it invites the other to respond with reassurance rather than defensiveness. As Sue Johnson notes, a successful Hold Me Tight conversation ends with both partners feeling heard, accepted, and emotionally **held** by the other.

Christian integration: One beautiful insight from *Created for Connection* is that Christian couples might find this vulnerability familiar – it’s akin to **prayer**. In prayer, we come to God with our fears and needs openly. Josh and Kristy can pray together after such conversations, offering those fears to God and asking for help to love each other as He loves them. Knowing that *“perfect love drives out fear”* (1 John 4:18) can encourage them to keep reaching for each other even when scared.

Forgiveness and Past Injuries: Attachment-focused healing also means addressing past wounds in the relationship that haven’t fully healed. Perhaps there were harsh words, broken trust, or periods of emotional distance that left scars. It’s critical to engage in **Conversation**

5: Forgiving Injuries (in EFT's model). This doesn't mean ignoring or excusing wrongs; it means *finally hearing each other's pain and sincerely apologizing*, so those events stop haunting the present. If Josh, say, lied about a purchase or lost his temper in a frightening way, he needs to acknowledge the hurt it caused Kristy and show he understands why it was so damaging. Kristy similarly might need to apologize for times she stonewalled Josh or said hurtful things when dysregulated. Genuine forgiveness in a Christian sense involves confession, repentance (actively changing behavior), and grace. It can be very freeing – a chance to wipe the slate clean and start fresh, with lessons learned. (Serious betrayal or abuse might require guidance of a therapist or pastor to work through; minor resentments can be handled with a heartfelt talk and prayer together.)

Rekindling Affection and Intimacy: As emotional safety grows, physical and sexual intimacy can also improve. Right now, intimacy may have suffered – postpartum issues, stress, and unresolved conflict all dampen desire. It's common for **communication, affection, and sex to nosedive in the baby/toddler years**. To gently rebuild, Josh and Kristy should focus first on **non-sexual affection and emotional closeness**. Small daily gestures – a hug, holding hands during a movie, a back rub with no strings attached, a text saying "I appreciate you" – go a long way to assure each other "*we're in this together*". They can also schedule **date time** (even an hour at home after kids sleep, just for "us," no chores talk). When it comes to sex, proceed with patience and openness. Given Kristy's recent childbirth and possible body image or hormonal issues, it's vital that Josh is patient and understanding – intimacy is a two-way street of comfort and pleasure, not pressure. They can redefine intimacy broadly: "**sex doesn't have to mean intercourse**" at this stage. Cuddling, making out, massage, or simply lying together sharing feelings can be very bonding. As trust and desire return, they can slowly resume fuller sexual relations. The key is **no pressure, no guilt** – just love and playfulness at their own pace. (If challenges persist, a counselor or even a medical checkup for hormonal issues could help. But many couples find that as emotional closeness increases, physical intimacy naturally follows.)

Rebuilding a secure attachment involves being present, listening, and responding to each other's emotional needs. Over time, small moments of connection – a gentle touch, focused conversation, shared prayer – rebuild trust and affection.

Action Steps – Building Secure Attachment:

- **Name the Cycle:** Pick a nickname for your negative pattern (e.g. "The Storm"). When arguments start, either partner can say "I think the Storm is brewing – let's not go there." This breaks the spell and reminds you it's *the cycle vs. us*.
- **Use "I Feel" Language:** Practice expressing feelings instead of blame. For example, "When X happens, I feel Y, and I need Z". ("When you check your phone at dinner, I feel unimportant; I need some quality time with you.") This reduces defensiveness and focuses on emotions.
- **Regular Check-Ins:** Set aside 5–10 minutes each day as an emotional check-in. Ask each other, "How are you *really* doing today? Is there anything you need to share or anything I can do to support you?" These small check-ins maintain connection and

prevent issues from festering.

- **Reassurance Rituals:** Given Josh's abandonment fears and Kristy's trust issues, build little rituals of reassurance. This could be a specific phrase ("I'm not going anywhere, just need a timeout – promise") or a physical gesture (a squeeze of the hand, a 6-second hug) when one of you is anxious. Brainstorm what helps each of you feel secure.
- **Pray and/or Journal Together:** Once a week, consider a couple's devotional or joint prayer time focusing on your marriage. Thank God for progress, and pray for each other's needs (e.g., "Lord, help me be patient when Josh feels insecure; heal his wounds"). Spiritual intimacy like this can deepen your emotional bond.
- **Celebrate Wins:** When you successfully navigate a conflict without the usual blow-up, **acknowledge it!** Perhaps debrief: "Hey, we didn't spiral this time. You took a break and came back – thank you. I listened better. We're improving!" Thank each other for efforts. Building a secure connection is a journey, so celebrate each step.

Trauma-Informed Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation

Because both Josh and Kristy have trauma-related emotional volatility, a **trauma-informed** approach is essential. This means recognizing that when one of them is **triggered**, their brain is going into survival mode (fight-flight-freeze) and they lose some capacity for rational talk until they calm down. Here we'll cover strategies for **self-regulation** (each person managing their own emotional state) and **co-regulation** (helping calm each other), so that conflicts don't spin out of control and both partners feel emotionally safe.

Expanding the “Window of Tolerance”

We all have a **Window of Tolerance** – a zone where we can handle emotions without getting overwhelmed. Trauma can narrow that window, meaning Josh or Kristy can more quickly go into panic, rage, or shutdown over minor stress. The goal is to gradually **widen their window** through mindfulness, grounding, and somatic (body-based) techniques. This will help them stay present with each other even when upset, rather than flipping into fight or flight.

Recognize the Early Signs: Both should learn the *physical cues* that they are escalating. For example, Josh might notice his heart pounding, face flushing, or thoughts racing (signs he's entering "fight/flight" mode). Kristy might notice her chest tightening, hands shaking, or an urge to run or throw something. These are signals: **time to pause**. In fact, one clever tip is using a pulse oximeter or smart watch heart-rate monitor during tough talks – if pulse goes over ~100 BPM, it's a sign your body is entering fight/flight. At that point, *stop the discussion*. Tell your partner you need a break to calm down (make sure to agree on a time to resume, so it's a *break* not abandonment).

Grounding and Self-Soothing Tools: Here are some quick **grounding techniques** to deactivate intense emotion (Josh and Kristy can each make a list of what works for them):

- **Deep Breathing:** Slow, diaphragmatic breathing can signal your nervous system to relax. Try “4-7-8” breathing (inhale for 4 counts, hold 7, exhale 8) or simple belly breathing for a few minutes. Even 10 deep breaths can help.
- **5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Grounding:** Name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel (touch), 3 things you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. This brings focus out of your racing mind into the present moment.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Briefly tense and then release muscle groups from toes to head. This can discharge tension.
- **Breath Prayers/Meditation:** Combine spiritual practice with calming. For example, inhale thinking “Be still,” exhale “and know that I am God” (from Psalm 46:10), or another short scripture. This centers the mind on God’s peace.
- **Safe Place Visualization:** Each can have a mental “safe place” (perhaps imagining sitting with Jesus by a calm lake, or a happy family memory). When triggered, close your eyes and spend a minute in that scene to regain composure.
- **Cold Water or Grounding Object:** Splash cold water on your face or hold a cold object – it can physiologically reset panic. Or hold a comforting object (a cross necklace, a stress ball) to ground yourself.
- **Movement:** If adrenaline is high, doing some push-ups, shaking your arms, or taking a brisk walk around the yard can burn off the fight/flight energy.

The idea is for each person to take responsibility for their own calming. This prevents fights from escalating to destructive territory (yelling, insults, door-slammimg) because you *catch it early*. It's absolutely okay – even healthy – to **pause an argument** by saying, “I’m getting overwhelmed; I need 10 minutes to cool down” (or longer if needed, just not indefinitely). Research shows that a **20-minute break** is often effective to let heart rates come down and thinking brain come back online.

Co-Regulation: Calming Each Other: While self-regulation is the first step, one gift of marriage is that spouses can help soothe each other – this is co-regulation. However, it must be done carefully, since in trigger moments the other person might *be* the source of stress. A few co-regulation strategies:

- **Offer Empathy First:** If you see your spouse getting agitated, *acknowledge their emotion*. E.g., “I know this is really intense – I’m sorry we’re both upset. I understand you’re hurt.” Validating that the feeling is heard can in itself bring some calm.
- **Physical Comfort (if welcomed):** Sometimes a gentle touch can soothe – like placing a hand on their back, or saying “Can I give you a hug?” If either of you is in a

very defensive state, ask permission (“Would you like me to hold you or do you prefer space?”). Josh, being anxious, might often welcome a hug when he’s spiraling – it reassures him Kristy isn’t abandoning him. Kristy, being fearful, might sometimes welcome a soothing touch, but other times she might feel too flooded and need physical space. Respect each other’s cues.

- **Use a Calm Voice:** How you speak can either amplify or defuse panic. When one is triggered, the other should try to speak softly, slowly, and kindly. Phrases that help: “I’m here with you.” – “We’ll work this out, I’m not leaving.” – “Take your time, it’s okay, you’re safe.” These kinds of words counter the fear narrative in their heads.
- **Tag-Team Parenting:** If a blow-up is brewing and the kids are present, co-regulation might mean one partner swiftly engaging the kids elsewhere to shield them and give the other space. For example, if Kristy is about to lose it from toddler chaos, Josh can step in: “Hey kids, let’s go play outside for a bit and give Mum a break.” Removing external stressors is a big part of co-regulating in a busy household.
- **Aftercare:** Once a conflict has de-escalated and you’ve cooled off, do something comforting together. This might be as simple as sitting on the couch silently holding hands, or brewing a cup of tea for your spouse as a peace offering, or praying together. This “reconnection ritual” helps signal that you’re okay again and still a team.

Therapy for Trauma: Because Josh has complex PTSD and Kristy has unresolved trauma plus possibly postpartum depression, **professional therapy** for each individually is strongly recommended (alongside couples therapy). Trauma-focused therapies can greatly improve their ability to self-regulate. For instance: **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)** can help Josh process painful memories that fuel his extreme reactions. **Somatic Experiencing or Sensorimotor Therapy** could teach both of them how to release trauma stored in the body and regain calm. **Internal Family Systems (IFS)** is another excellent modality where they learn to interact with their “parts” (like angry part, fearful child part, etc.) in a healing way. An IFS-informed therapist might help Josh nurture his wounded inner child that fears abandonment, and help Kristy soothe the part of her that trusts no one. As they heal individually, their capacity to connect as a couple will grow.

Postpartum Recovery: For Kristy, being trauma-informed also means taking her postpartum mental health seriously. She should **consult a GP** about her symptoms – treatment for postnatal depression might involve counseling, support groups, and possibly medication for a time. In Australia, organizations like **PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia)** offer free hotlines and resources. Recovery might also mean practical adjustments: ensuring she gets some stretches of sleep (maybe Josh can take over a night feeding on weekends with a bottle, or family can babysit occasionally), light exercise and sunshine for mood, and continuing to monitor her hormones/thyroid if needed. Josh can support her by actively encouraging her self-care and **not taking her mood swings personally** – understanding it’s a medical issue, not a lack of love. Likewise, Josh may explore treatment for adult ADHD (if he hasn’t already) – medication or ADHD coaching can improve focus and emotional regulation, which reduces stress on the marriage.

Boundaries for Safety: Trauma-informed care also requires setting **firm boundaries against abuse**. If either partner ever feels in **physical danger** or if conflicts ever verge into physical aggression, immediate steps must be taken (separation, involving a counselor or even police if needed). From what is described, it sounds more like emotional volatility than deliberate abuse, but given the mention of coercive control, it's worth stating clearly: *violence or ongoing intimidation have no place in a healthy marriage*. As Christians, honoring the image of God in your spouse means refusing to harm or control them. So, part of their plan should include: "No matter how upset, we do not hit, shove, or threaten. We do not call each other demeaning names. If that line is crossed, we will urgently seek help." Having a written commitment or discussing this boundary in calm times is important. It appears they are both on board with stopping any form of coercion or toxic behavior.

Action Steps – Trauma-Informed Practices:

- **Personal Calming Plan:** Each spouse creates a quick list of their top 3 go-to self-calming strategies (breathing, prayer, walk, etc.). Post it on the fridge or a note in your phone. When overwhelmed, *use the list*.
- **Code Word:** Agree on a “pause” word or signal (e.g., saying “Time-out” or a hand signal) that either can use when they feel triggered. The rule is that both must respect it immediately – stop talking and give space. Resume the discussion only when the person who called time-out feels ready (within a day at most).
- **Daily Regulation Habits:** Preventative self-care goes a long way. Aim for basics: adequate sleep (take turns sleeping in on weekends if possible), exercise (even a short walk or home workout), and maybe short individual prayer/meditation times. These keep the nervous system more balanced overall. You might do a short breathing exercise together each night as a wind-down routine.
- **Trauma Education:** Consider reading a book or two on trauma together, such as *“The Body Keeps the Score”* by Bessel van der Kolk or a faith-oriented one like *“Try Softer”* by Aundi Kolber. Understanding the science of trauma responses can help you both not take each other’s reactions too personally. You realize *“This is my wife’s trauma speaking, not her heart”* and vice versa.
- **Normalize Therapy:** There’s no shame in getting help. If you haven’t already, line up individual counselors. You might find trauma-informed Christian counselors through **Australian Christian Counsellors Association** or ask your church for referrals. Remember the wise advice: *“Professional help isn’t a bad thing”* – it helps couples learn, grow, and change. Therapy can be a short-term investment for long-term peace.

Healthy Communication and Conflict Resolution Techniques

Improving how Josh and Kristy **communicate** – especially during disagreements – is crucial. Poor communication habits (yelling, blaming, interrupting, silent treatment) can turn minor issues into major conflicts. Fortunately, decades of research (notably by Dr. John Gottman) have identified key communication skills that happy couples use. We'll blend those with biblical principles (like being “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry” – James 1:19) to create a toolbox for Josh and Kristy.

The “Four Horsemen” to Avoid

Gottman describes four toxic communication behaviors – nicknamed the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* – that predict divorce if not changed: **Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling**. Let's see how they might manifest here and healthier replacements:

- **Criticism** (attacking your partner's character or behavior broadly): Kristy might say, “You never help with the kids, you're so selfish!” or Josh might say, “You always nag; you're impossible to please.” This generalizing and accusatory tone puts the other on defense. **Antidote:** Use *gentle start-ups*. Complain about the issue, not the person. Use “I” statements and specific examples. E.g., “I felt stressed handling both kids last night. I really need us to share the bedtime routine – could you help with Eli tonight?” This is respectful and specific, not an attack on character.
- **Defensiveness** (making excuses, counter-blaming when confronted): When one brings up an issue, the other says “Yeah, well *you* do X” or “It's not my fault because...” For example, Josh: “I only shut down because you were being mean. Why should I apologize?” **Antidote:** *Take responsibility* for even a piece of the issue. E.g., “You're right, I did raise my voice. I'm sorry for that. Let's find a better way.” Owning up to your part diffuses tension and invites cooperation.
- **Contempt** (sarcasm, eye-rolling, name-calling – communicating disgust or disrespect): This is very damaging. Comments like “You're pathetic” or “Maybe if you had a brain, you'd understand” are emotional abuse. It's good that Josh and Kristy's values are against such contempt; they must keep it out. **Antidote:** *Build a culture of appreciation*. Regularly thank and praise each other for good things (“Thanks for cooking dinner, it was great” or “I appreciate how hard you work”). It's harder to be contemptuous if 90% of your interactions are positive. Also, if you *feel* contemptuous in a moment, bite your tongue and revisit the conversation when calmer – it's usually unprocessed resentment speaking, which you need to discuss respectfully later.
- **Stonewalling** (shutting down, giving silent treatment, or emotionally withdrawing to avoid conflict): Kristy might do this when overwhelmed – just go silent or leave. Josh might do a version by disengaging or going numb. **Antidote:** *Self-soothe and re-engage*. It's okay to take a break (as discussed in regulation), but stonewalling is when someone refuses to ever address the issue. Agree that whoever withdraws will circle back after a break. And the other should not chase or nag during the pause. When you resume, start with something reassuring (“I want to resolve this – I care about you. I needed a breather, but I'm here now.”).

By avoiding these four horsemen and using their antidotes, Josh and Kristy will already be miles ahead in communication.

Practical Communication Tools

1. Speaker-Listener Technique: This structured approach can be a game-changer for high-conflict couples. Here's how it works: only one person speaks at a time (holding a physical object like a "talking stick" can be a fun way to designate the speaker). The speaker makes a brief point using "I" statements, and the listener's job is to *reflect back* what they heard, **without rebuttal**, to confirm understanding. Then they switch. For example:

- **Kristy (speaker):** "I feel anxious when I think the house is chaotic. When you leave toys everywhere, I start feeling out of control. I need order to feel calm."
- **Josh (listener):** "What I hear you saying is that mess really stresses you out and it makes you feel unsafe. You need me to help keep things tidier, did I get that right?"
- **Kristy:** "Yes, exactly." (*Feeling heard, her tone softens.*)
- **Josh (now speaker):** "Okay. I want to help. I also feel overwhelmed because I have trouble keeping track of chores due to my ADHD. I'm not trying to ignore the mess; I literally don't notice it sometimes. I need gentle reminders without feeling attacked."
- **Kristy (listener):** "So you're saying you do care, but you miss things because of ADHD, and if I remind you calmly instead of criticizing, it would help? Is that right?"
- **Josh:** "Yes. Then I won't get defensive, and I can actually respond better."

This technique forces both to slow down and actually *hear* each other. It can feel awkward at first, but it reduces miscommunication (so many fights are because Partner A said X, but Partner B *heard* Y). When using this method, **keep statements short**, and focus on emotions and needs, not blame. It's okay to take turns a few times until each feels understood. If things get heated, take a break and come back.

2. "When X, I feel Y, I need Z" Framework: Mentioned earlier, this simple formula keeps conversations non-attacking. It forces you to identify the specific behavior bothering you (X), your emotional response (Y), and a concrete positive request (Z). For instance: "When you scroll on your phone during our conversation, I feel hurt and unimportant. I need us to have undistracted time to talk in the evenings." This is clear and direct, and much more effective than a vague or accusatory "You never listen to me!" Kristy and Josh can practice writing out a few of these statements for recurring issues.

3. Weekly Couple Meetings: As time-poor parents, intentional time to communicate is often missing. They could establish a short **weekly meeting** (perhaps Sunday nights) to touch base on logistics (schedule, finances, to-dos) *and* feelings (how are we doing, any grievances to clear?). Start with something positive – each share a "win" or something you appreciated that week ("You took the kids so I could nap – thank you!"). Then discuss any

issues calmly. This prevents small problems from piling up. End the meeting with prayer or an enjoyable ritual (dessert together, etc.) so it's bonding, not just business.

4. Use Soft Start-ups: How a discussion **begins** often predicts how it ends. If one barges in angry – “Why didn’t you take the trash out?!” – the other will likely react defensively or with anger. Instead, start soft: address your partner by name, maybe a gentle touch on the arm, and lead with a positive or at least neutral tone. Example: “Hey Josh, can we talk about something? I know you’ve been busy, but I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed managing the chores. Could we figure out a better plan together?” This invites cooperation. Soft start-ups are especially important for wives addressing husbands – research shows husbands are more likely to get defensive if they *perceive* criticism. And for a sensitive husband like Josh, a gentle approach will make him much more able to listen (reducing his RSD trigger).

5. Repair Attempts: In the middle of a conflict, if one of you realizes it’s going off the rails, **reach out with a repair**. A repair attempt can be a phrase like “I’m sorry, that came out wrong,” or “I don’t want to fight, let’s slow down,” or even some humor to lighten the mood (“Okay, that escalated quickly – can we rewind 5 minutes?” said with a small smile). The Gottman Institute notes that the success of repair attempts is a big factor in whether couples stay happy. Josh and Kristy should be attentive to each other’s repair bids and *accept them*. If Josh says mid-argument, “I’m feeling attacked, can we rephrase this?” – that’s a repair attempt. Kristy can respond, “Alright, let me try again, I’m not trying to attack you.” Or if Kristy says, “This is getting too heated, I need a break,” Josh can nod and give that break. These little peace offerings prevent damage.

6. End on “Same Team”: After working through a conflict, it helps to reaffirm you’re on the same side. A quick hug, an “I love you,” or “We solved that, good job us,” can close the loop. Even if you didn’t fully agree, you can agree that your relationship matters more than the issue. Sometimes agreeing to disagree on minor things is fine. The main message is, “**I choose you, we’re okay.**”

Example Script – Soft Startup vs. Harsh Startup:

- **Harsh: Kristy (hands on hips, sighing):** “You’re late again picking up Sylvie. Unbelievable – you can’t do anything right, can you?”
- **Defensive reply: Josh (loud):** “Oh give me a break! I got caught in traffic. Maybe if you got off my back –” (*escalation ensues*).
- **Soft: Kristy (calm voice):** “Hey Josh, I was a bit worried when you and Sylvie got home later than I expected. Can you tell me what happened?”
- **Josh (relaxed):** “I’m sorry – I lost track of time at the store. I should have messaged you. Traffic was bad too.”
- **Kristy:** “Okay. I’m not angry; I just need a quick text next time so I know you’re safe. It’s stressful when the schedule shifts and I don’t know why.”

- **Josh:** “Got it. I’ll do that. And thanks for letting me know how you feel without yelling.” (*They smile and move on.*)

In the second scenario, Kristy gave Josh the benefit of the doubt and a chance to explain. Josh responded owning his mistake and apologizing. This kind of gracious communication aligns with “bearing with one another and forgiving one another if any has a grievance” (Col 3:13). It de-escalates problems rather than inflaming them.

Action Steps – Communication Skills:

- **Practice Active Listening:** This week, set aside 15 minutes where one talks and the other only listens and paraphrases. Then switch. It could be about a low-stakes topic to start (e.g., how your day went) just to build the habit of listening fully *before* responding.
- **Ban Absolute Language:** Agree to avoid words like “always” and “never” which are exaggerations and provoke defensiveness. Instead of “You never help,” say “This week I noticed I did all the laundry. I’d like us to share that.”
- **Create an “Issue List”:** Sometimes things come up when you don’t have time or emotional capacity to discuss right then (e.g., in the middle of kid chaos). Keep a small notebook or note on your phone where you jot down issues to address later. In your weekly meeting or a calm moment, bring out the list. This prevents the “we need to talk NOW” blow-ups; issues can wait for the right time.
- **Use Tech Wisely:** If face-to-face discussions get too charged, consider writing letters or texts to each other for tough topics. Writing can help organize thoughts and reduce interrupting. Some couples have a shared journal where they write back-and-forth on issues. Just be sure to also schedule an in-person follow-up, so tone isn’t misread.
- **Educate Yourselves:** Consider reading *“The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”* by John Gottman – it’s a practical book with exercises for communication and conflict resolution from the guru of marital research. Another accessible read is *“Crucial Conversations”* (Patterson et al.) to navigate high-stakes discussions. Apply what you learn gradually – even one new skill can improve your dynamic.

Parenting as a Team with Trauma-Awareness

Being **time-poor, exhausted parents** is a reality for Josh and Kristy. The good news is, strengthening their marriage will directly benefit their kids’ wellbeing. Conversely, improving their teamwork in parenting will reduce marital stress. Here, we integrate **family systems and trauma-informed parenting** strategies so that Sylvie and Elias grow up in a secure, nurturing environment – and so parenting becomes a source of joy and unity rather than conflict.

Presenting a United Front

One critical concept from family systems and **structural family therapy** is that the parental subsystem should be a **united leadership team**. That means major family decisions (discipline approaches, routines, values) are decided by **both parents together**, and the children see their parents as a cohesive unit. Josh and Kristy should avoid undermining each other in front of the kids. Even at ages 1 and 3, children are very perceptive. If Sylvie senses that asking Mommy versus Daddy yields different answers or that her parents disagree, it can breed insecurity or behavior issues.

Practical steps: Have private discussions (maybe during those weekly couple meetings) about parenting philosophies. Agree on some basics: e.g., “How will we handle tantrums? How do we feel about screen time? Bedtime routines? What are our non-negotiable values (kindness, respect, etc.) for the kids?” You won’t anticipate everything, but having a game plan prevents on-the-spot conflicts. If one parent is about to intervene with a child and the other disagrees, use a subtle signal or short phrase like “Pause – let’s talk” (out of earshot of the kids). Then hash it out calmly and return with a consensus. Never say “Well, I think it’s fine but your father doesn’t” to the child – that splits the team. If you mess up and contradict each other, debrief later and present a corrected, unified message to the child: “Mommy and Daddy discussed it, and we’ve decided *together* that...” This shows kids that their parents are in harmony.

Consistent Routines: Kids, especially toddlers, thrive on consistency. Having agreed-upon routines (meal times, nap/bed times, etc.) reduces chaos and gives both parents structure. It can help Kristy’s anxiety, too, if she knows there’s a set plan – but crucially, *make the plan together* so Josh’s input is valued. Write down the daily schedule and each parent’s typical duties. This also ensures Josh has clear opportunities to be involved (e.g., Daddy does bath time while Mommy cleans up dinner, etc.). Consistency doesn’t mean rigid – be flexible as needed – but a predictable flow to the day helps everyone.

Sharing the Load and Gatekeeping

Exhaustion is a huge enemy of a peaceful marriage. With two young kids, chores and childcare can feel endless. To avoid resentment, **divide responsibilities fairly**. It might not always be 50/50 at every moment (e.g., if one is having a rough mental health day, the other might carry more), but over time it should balance out and feel equitable. List out all the tasks (cooking, cleaning, shopping, feeding kids, night wake-ups, etc.) and negotiate who does what or how to alternate. Perhaps Josh handles breakfasts and daycare drop-offs while Kristy does dinners; or each of you takes one “morning to sleep in” on weekends while the other takes both kids. Even small breaks for each parent can prevent burnout.

For Kristy, it’s important to **overcome any “gatekeeping” tendency**, where she might feel the need to redo what Josh does or hover because she’s anxious it’s not done “right”. Unless something truly unsafe is happening, let Dad have his own relationship with the kids and his own way of parenting. If Josh puts the diaper on backwards or dresses them in mismatched clothes – who cares, the baby is loved and cared for. Micromanaging his parenting will discourage him from helping and make Kristy more exhausted. Instead, encourage and empower Josh’s involvement: “Thank you for giving Elias his bottle – I love seeing you two

together.” The more he feels competent and appreciated, the more he will do. This also gives Kristy breathing room to recover from PPD and stress.

Conversely, Josh should **step up proactively** where he can. Don’t always wait to be asked – look around and anticipate needs. If the baby is crying and Kristy’s busy, go for it. If you notice laundry piling up, start it. This kind of initiative shows partnership. However, also communicate so efforts align: e.g., ask Kristy to show you her system for packing the diaper bag, or how to soothe the baby if one method works best – learn from her expertise without feeling criticized. You can even make some tasks fun “Dad traditions” (maybe Josh does a special silly bedtime song that’s his trademark). The goal is both parents feel confident and trusted in caring for the kids.

Attachment-Focused Parenting

Having learned about their own attachment styles, Josh and Kristy can apply those insights to **create secure attachments for their children**. Secure attachment for a child comes from caregivers being *consistently responsive, warm, and reliable*. That doesn’t mean perfect – just “good enough” attunement. Some tips aligned with **Circle of Security** parenting principles:

- **Respond to Emotional Needs:** When the kids cry or have big feelings, strive to respond with empathy and comfort. E.g., if Sylvie throws a tantrum, instead of reacting with harshness (which can happen if a parent is triggered), try to stay calm and say “I see you’re very upset. I’m here.” Once she calms, gently teach words for feelings or correct behavior if needed. Avoiding shaming language (like “Stop being a baby” or “Boys don’t cry” for Elias as he grows) is important. Given Josh’s rejection sensitivity, he can be very attuned to not wanting his kids to feel rejected. And Kristy can channel her protective instincts positively by comforting, rather than controlling, when kids are distressed.
- **Beware of Projection:** FST warned about the projection process. Be mindful not to put your feelings onto the child. For example, if Josh feels Kristy was cold to him one day, he shouldn’t cling to Sylvie for comfort in a way that burdens Sylvie. Or if Kristy feels Josh isn’t listening to her, she shouldn’t, say, over-discipline Sylvie for “not listening.” These things can happen subconsciously. The remedy is self-awareness: pause and ask, “Am I upset at my partner or the situation, and taking it out on the child?” If so, step away, let the calmer parent handle the moment.
- **No Triangulating Kids:** Even in frustration, never recruit a child to “take sides” or deliver messages between parents. Don’t vent about your spouse to a child. If one of you has a conflict, don’t give the child extra sweets or permissiveness to win favor – maintain consistent parenting regardless of marital ups and downs.
- **Repair in Front of Kids:** It’s actually okay if kids see *minor* conflict (disagreeing, etc.), as long as they also see **healthy resolution**. If Sylvie saw Mom and Dad sniping at each other at lunch, make sure she later sees affection or hears, “We’re sorry we argued earlier, but we made up – Mommy and Daddy are okay.” This teaches her conflict can be resolved and doesn’t mean the end of love. For bigger

fights, try not to do it in front of them at all (go to another room). If they did witness something scary (like a yelling episode), you both should calmly reassure them after: “We’re sorry you heard Mommy and Daddy yelling. We were upset, but we’ve worked it out. We love each other and we love you. Sometimes adults get loud, but it’s not your fault and we are okay.”

- **Quality Time as a Family:** Build positive experiences as a family unit, which strengthens the overall system. Maybe a weekly outing (even a simple walk in the park or Saturday pancake breakfast). Also, each parent should get *one-on-one* time with each child regularly – this fosters secure attachment and also reduces any feelings of competition or exclusion. For instance, Josh can have a “daddy-daughter” date with Sylvie to the playground while Kristy cuddles the baby, then switch another time.
- **Discipline Gently:** Trauma-informed parenting suggests avoiding overly harsh discipline, which can be triggering to both kids and parents. Use techniques like redirection, natural consequences, and time-ins (sitting with the child to calm down) rather than shaming or spanking. Of course, set boundaries – kids need to know some behavior is unacceptable – but do so firmly and kindly. If either parent finds themselves reacting in anger (yelling or a impulse to smack), that’s a sign *they* need a break to regulate. Tag the other parent in if possible. It’s okay to say, “I’m too angry right now, I need to step away for a minute” instead of lashing out. This models self-control.

Supporting Each Other in Parenting

When one parent is dealing with a challenging kid moment, the other can practice “**empathic support**” rather than criticism. E.g., if Josh is struggling to soothe a screaming toddler, Kristy should resist “You’re doing it wrong” comments. Instead, either let him handle it (if safe) or kindly offer, “Need a hand?” Conversely, if Kristy is at her wit’s end with baby not sleeping, Josh can step in: “Go take a shower, I’ll rock him for a bit.” Proactively relieving each other is a huge gift. It prevents resentment (“I do everything!”) and builds gratitude and teamwork.

Also, **praise each other as parents**. It’s validating to hear your spouse say, “You’re such a loving father” or “I love how you care for our kids.” Especially with Kristy’s self-doubt in PPD and Josh’s self-esteem issues, affirming their parenting strengths is powerful. It also reinforces that you notice each other’s contributions.

If disagreements about parenting continue to cause conflict, consider taking a **parenting course together**. Programs like *Circle of Security*, *Tuning In To Kids* (an Aussie program on emotion coaching), or church-based parenting classes can provide common ground and techniques. You might find local workshops through the council or a family center. Even reading the same parenting book and discussing it (e.g., *“Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child”* by Gottman, or *“Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles”* by Paul Tripp for a Christian angle) can get you on the same page.

Action Steps – Parenting Unity:

- **Weekly Parent Sync:** Use part of your weekly meeting to specifically talk about the kids – any changes in routine needed? Any concerns about their behavior or health? Align strategies (“When Sylvie refuses dinner, let’s do X consistently”). This prevents spur-of-moment fights about handling something.
- **Divide & Conquer:** Each parent picks some kid-related tasks they *enjoy* or prefer. For example, one might love doing bedtime stories, the other likes cooking for the kids. Claiming “ownership” in a positive way can give each a sense of competence and relief the other.
- **Hire Help if Possible:** If budget allows, an occasional babysitter or mother’s helper (even a teen from church for a couple hours) can give you both a break – perhaps to have that couple time or just to nap. It’s an investment in your sanity. If no family nearby, consider swapping babysitting with a trusted friend (they watch yours one afternoon, you watch theirs another).
- **Family Fun Rituals:** Create a simple family ritual that brings joy amidst chaos. Maybe a dance party in the living room every Friday evening, or Sunday afternoon walks. Laughter and play together will reduce overall stress and create positive bonding, which indirectly helps the marriage too.
- **Parental Self-Care:** Remember that taking care of *yourselves* is part of taking care of your kids. A burnt-out parent has less patience. So, ensure each of you gets some downtime each week. It might require planning (e.g. one watches the kids while the other goes to a Bible study or to the gym, then swap another night). Don’t feel guilt – you’re recharging so you can be the loving, present parents you want to be.

Growing Spiritually Together

Josh and Kristy’s shared faith is one of their greatest assets. It provides a common foundation of values (love, forgiveness, service, faithfulness) and a source of strength beyond themselves (their relationship with God and the support of a faith community). However, spiritual connection in marriage doesn’t always happen automatically – it takes intentional effort, especially when the relationship is strained. Here are ways to **anchor their healing in their Christian worldview** and grow spiritually **as a couple**:

Praying Together: There is something profoundly bonding about praying with and for your spouse. It’s an intimate act of inviting God into your marriage. Even if it feels awkward at first (especially if conflict has been present), start small. Perhaps each night before sleep, hold hands and each say one sentence of prayer. For example, “Lord, thank you for my wife and kids. Please help us tomorrow and give us rest.” / “Lord, give us patience and help us love each other as You love us.” It can be very brief. The key is consistency – making prayer a habit signals that *God is the third partner* in this marriage, and you acknowledge needing His help. Over time, you might extend the prayers or be more specific about struggles (“God, we

had a hard time communicating today. Please soften our hearts and guide our words.”). *Where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there among them* (Matt 18:20). This practice not only invites divine help, but also increases empathy – it’s hard to stay angry at someone while praying with them.

Studying the Word Together: Consider doing a couples devotional or Bible study together. There are many **Christian marriage devotionals** (like “*The Love Dare Day by Day*,” or “*Night Light*” by the Dobsons, etc.) that have a short reading and scripture each day. Alternatively, pick a Bible passage each week that speaks to marriage or any virtue you’re trying to grow in (patience, gentleness, etc.) and discuss it. For instance, read 1 Corinthians 13 and talk about which aspect of love is hardest for each of you and why. Or read Ephesians 5:21-33 and discuss what mutual submission and sacrificial love look like in practical terms in your home (emphasizing “*submit to one another*” and husbands loving like Christ – which is a call to servant-leadership, not tyranny). Studying scripture shifts the focus from “my way vs your way” to *God’s way* for both of you, aligning you on the same team under Christ.

Worship and Community: Make church a priority, even when it’s tempting to skip due to tiredness. Being in worship together, hearing sermons, and engaging in church life provides spiritual nourishment and positive community around you. It sounds like you both value community highly. Lean into that: join (or start) a **couples’ small group** or a “*life group*” at church that focuses on marriage or young families. Sharing with other couples in a faith setting can normalize your struggles and give mutual encouragement. Perhaps host a casual fellowship at your home (once you’re comfortable) with other Christian parents – this builds a supportive village, which is vital in a regional area where resources might be fewer. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us not to forsake meeting together – community can hold you accountable and uplift you.

Aligning Values and Vision: Revisit those **vision and values** documents you each wrote (it’s wonderful you have those!). Notice how both of you deeply value following Jesus, loving others, and supporting each other. Use that as a compass when making decisions. For example, if a conflict arises about money, recall “we both value generosity and stewardship – how can we use money in line with God’s calling?” If a power struggle arises, remember “we both vowed to love and respect each other; in God’s eyes we’re equals (Gal 3:28) and called to serve, not dominate.” Perhaps even craft a *joint* mission statement for your marriage/family. It could be a simple statement like: “**Our family’s mission is to know God more, love each other deeply, raise our children in faith, and be a blessing to those around us.**” Frame it or put it on the fridge. This keeps you focused on the big picture during petty squabbles.

Spiritual Friendship: Cultivate the idea that you are not just spouses and co-parents, but also **brother and sister in Christ, and friends** on a spiritual journey. That perspective can increase grace for each other. If Josh sees Kristy not only as “my wife who’s frustrating me right now” but also as “God’s daughter, my sister in the Lord who is hurting,” he may find extra compassion. Likewise for Kristy. Encourage each other in personal spiritual growth: if Kristy wants to attend a women’s retreat or Bible study, Josh can support by handling the kids that day (and vice versa with men’s events for Josh). Sometimes growing individually in

faith (getting refreshed by God's Word or godly mentors) spills over positively into the marriage.

Serving Together: Doing ministry or service projects as a couple can unite you in purpose. Perhaps volunteer together at a church event, or help another family in need. Even hosting a small group or doing an Alpha course in your home counts. Working side by side for God's kingdom often rekindles affection and teamwork. It reminds you that your marriage has a mission – it's not just about you two, but how you can together shine light for others. That mindset can reduce self-centered conflicts.

Leaning on Grace: A Christian worldview emphasizes forgiveness and grace, which are the oil in the gears of marriage. You will mess up; your spouse will mess up. But God's grace is sufficient. Make it a habit to extend forgiveness quickly, as Colossians 3:13 encourages. This doesn't mean ignoring problems – it means once addressed, truly let them go and don't keep a record of wrongs (1 Cor 13:5). It also means forgiving yourself. Both of you carry some shame (Josh about his outbursts, Kristy about her moods). Remember Romans 8:1 – there is no condemnation for those in Christ. God's mercies are new every morning; you can start each day anew.

One caution: sometimes Christian couples misinterpret scriptures in ways that enable unhealthy dynamics (for instance, a wife enduring mistreatment thinking she must "submit no matter what," or a husband thinking he must have all authority). It's important to **interpret Scripture in context and with love**. Mutual love and respect are paramount. Any teaching that undermines one spouse's dignity or the call to love as *Christ loves* should be examined critically. Christ used his authority to *serve* and *uplift* others, not to control them. So any habits of control in the marriage are out of line with Christ and should be shed in favor of servant-hearted love.

Action Steps – Spiritual Growth:

- **Devotional Challenge:** Choose a 30-day couples devotional (many free plans are on the Bible App too). Commit to doing it each day, even if it's just 10 minutes. If you miss a day, no guilt – just pick back up. At the end, discuss what impacted you most.
- **Prayer Board:** Have a small board or journal where you list prayer requests for your marriage and family. For example: "Healing from past hurts, patience with the kids, closer intimacy, guidance for job decisions," etc. Pray over them weekly. Update it when prayers are answered or needs change. This makes you a prayer *team*, storming heaven together.
- **Date in God's Presence:** Occasionally, make one of your date nights a creative spiritual activity. Go for a picnic and take turns sharing your favorite Psalm or worship song and why. Or attend a worship night or marriage seminar at church as a "date." It's a way to feed your souls and relationship at once.
- **Mentor Couple:** Seek out a slightly older Christian couple you both respect (maybe from church) and ask if they'd be willing to mentor or meet with you occasionally. Sometimes having a "spiritual big brother and sister" to talk to, pray with, and get

perspective from is invaluable. They've likely been through similar young-child challenges and can reassure you that with God's help, you'll make it.

- **Remember Grace at Mealtime:** Perhaps incorporate a short family devotional or sharing at dinner a couple times a week. Even with little kids, you can start habits like saying one thing you thank God for today. Hearing each other express gratitude and struggles in a spiritual context keeps hearts soft.

Shared Vision, Decision-Making, and Rebuilding Equality

A healthy marriage is a **partnership of equals**. Given the earlier imbalance and control issues, Josh and Kristy need to consciously **rebuild equality and mutual respect** in their relationship. This involves decision-making processes, division of power, and ensuring both feel heard and valued. It also involves looking to the future together – crafting a shared vision so they move forward in unity instead of at cross purposes.

Mutual Respect and Co-Leadership

In practical terms, how do you eliminate “coercive control” and establish **mutual respect**? It starts with attitude and flows into actions:

- **Consent and Agreement:** Make it a norm that significant decisions are made *jointly*. If one of you unilaterally makes a big choice (e.g., spending a large sum, committing the family to an event, changing a parenting rule), the other has every right to say, “We need to discuss this together first.” It might help to set a rule: *No unilateral decisions on [list of topics]*: money beyond \$X, discipline measures, work changes, etc. This forces consultation and prevents one from feeling overrun.
- **Equal Voice in Conversations:** Pay attention to how you converse day-to-day. Does one person interrupt or talk over the other consistently? Work on taking turns speaking and really considering your spouse’s ideas and opinions. If you find yourself dismissing or belittling their perspective, pause and correct that behavior. Each should feel safe to express thoughts without eye-rolls or immediate “No, that’s wrong.” If an idea is disagreeable, respond respectfully (“I see your point. I have a different view, can I share it?”).
- **Fair Division of Labor:** We touched on household tasks under parenting, but it’s worth reiterating as an equality issue too. Emotional labor (keeping track of appointments, planning social activities, etc.) often falls more on one partner – try to share that load so one isn’t the default “manager” of the household. Perhaps use a shared calendar app or a chores chart so both have visibility and accountability. Equality means both adults are capable and responsible for making the home run – just possibly specializing in different areas.

- **Personal Boundaries:** Respecting each other's boundaries is part of respect. If Josh says, "Please don't look through my phone without asking, it makes me feel untrusted," then Kristy should honor that (unless there's a prior serious breach of trust that they're working through; even then, they'd establish mutually agreed transparency rather than one secretly snooping). If Kristy says, "I need 30 minutes alone after work to decompress," Josh should respect that time and not insist she engage immediately. Boundaries actually foster closeness because each person feels safe and respected as an individual.
- **No Controlling Behaviors:** They must actively root out any remaining controlling habits. For Kristy, that could mean no longer *dictating* how things must be done, but rather making requests and negotiating. For Josh, if he has any controlling behaviors (perhaps emotional coercion like persistent guilt-tripping to get reassurance), he should also stop and use honest communication of needs instead. They might even list out behaviors that each finds controlling or disrespectful when done to them. Swap lists and agree to work on eliminating those. Examples: "raising your voice and looming over me feels intimidating – can you instead tell me you're upset without getting so close?" or "when you threaten to leave the house during a fight, it feels like manipulation – can we agree not to make threats of separation in anger?"
- **Humility and Service:** Adopting a mindset of *mutual submission* (Eph 5:21) means sometimes yielding to each other out of love. It's like taking turns putting the other first. If an issue matters more to one than the other, consider lovingly giving way. E.g., if Kristy strongly wants to attend a specific church and Josh is neutral, he might say "Sure, let's go where you feel fed." If Josh really wants to pursue a career change and Kristy is on the fence, she might support him taking a reasonable risk. The idea is not one always sacrificing – but a **balance** of sacrifice based on love. Keep an eye out: if one person is *always* giving in, that's not balance either.
- **Re-establish Trust:** Equality also grows when trust is rebuilt. This involves consistency in keeping your word, and transparency where needed. If coercive control stemmed partly from mistrust (e.g., checking phones or controlling movements), building trust can reduce the urge to control. For instance, share schedules and information openly ("I'll be home by 6 and if I'm late I'll call"). If both are open books voluntarily, there's less temptation for one to snoop or accuse. With Josh's RSD, trust-building also means Kristy choosing not to use sensitive information as ammo. And for Kristy, it means Josh being dependable in what he says he'll do, so she can relax control.

Shared Vision and Future Planning

During times of conflict, couples often get stuck in the **immediate issues** and lose sight of their long-term vision. Josh and Kristy actually did a great exercise in the past defining individual visions and values. Now is the time to converge those into a **shared vision for their marriage and family**. This can be an inspiring and bonding activity.

Dream Together: Set aside an evening (maybe when kids are asleep, make a cup of tea or dessert) and ask each other big-picture questions: *Where would we love to see our family in 5 years, 10 years? What do we want our kids to remember about our home atmosphere? What do we want our marriage to feel like? What is God calling our family to contribute to our community or church?* Let it be a fun brainstorming where no idea is too silly or too grand initially. Maybe you dream of doing a family mission trip, or having a home where neighborhood kids always feel welcome, or being that old couple still holding hands in church. Find the common themes in your dreams.

Set Shared Goals: Based on that discussion, identify 2-3 concrete goals or projects you can work toward **together**. For example: if spiritual growth is a shared vision, a goal could be “*Within 6 months, establish a weekly Bible study night at home.*” If community impact is a vision, a goal might be “*Host a neighborhood BBQ or a church small group this year.*” If a strong family bond is the vision, a goal could be “*Plan a family camping trip next summer for quality time.*” Also consider couple-focused goals like “*Attend a marriage retreat by next year*” or “*Read two marriage books together.*” Working on these goals gives you something positive to collaborate on, which counters the tendency to only collaborate on problems.

Vision Board or Statement: If you’re visual, make a collage or board with images and words representing your desired family life. Include your core values (faith, love, adventure, etc.), maybe a family Bible verse, photos that inspire you (like a happy family doing an activity). Alternatively, write a **Family Mission Statement** as mentioned. Keep it visible. It might read like: “We, the Parris family, strive to love God and each other wholeheartedly. Our home will be a place of safety, joy, learning, and grace. We commit to communicate kindly, support one another’s dreams, and face challenges as a team. In all we do, we will seek to serve Christ and our community.” This is just an example – craft your own so it feels authentic. Such a statement is something you can return to whenever you’re lost in the weeds of daily stress, to remind yourselves “*Why are we doing this? What’s our purpose?*”

Financial and Life Planning Together: Often power imbalances show up in how finances or life decisions are handled. Make sure you are **jointly managing finances** – both should know the budget basics, accounts, and have input on spending priorities. If one partner was handling all money, schedule monthly finance dates to review together. For life plans – discuss career moves, housing, schooling for kids, etc., well in advance so both perspectives are considered. If one of you has been more passive in decision-making (perhaps Josh avoided it to keep peace, or Kristy took over by default), intentionally equalize that: “Let’s get your thoughts on this – they matter.”

Celebrate Team Successes: When you achieve a milestone or even just have a good month of cooperation, celebrate! Maybe treat yourselves to a special date or buy a small item for the home you both want. Positive reinforcement isn’t just for kids – it works for couples too. It builds a sense of “we did this together!”

External Support for Equality: Sometimes, ingrained patterns of imbalance benefit from counseling or workshops. They might consider a program like **The Gottman Institute’s “Art & Science of Love”** workshop or a local marriage enrichment seminar, which often cover conflict and shared decision-making skills. In Australia, **Relationships Australia** or **Marriage Encounter** weekends can be resources. Also, if the power imbalance was

significant or tied to abuse, working with a therapist who understands **domestic conflict** can ensure that the less empowered partner finds their voice safely. However, since here both want to change it, they are already on the right path.

Action Steps – Shared Vision & Equality:

- **Update Your Life Plans:** Remember those personal visions you wrote? Share them again, update each other on what still resonates and what's changed. Find at least one new goal from each person's list that you can support each other in (e.g., Josh's goal to finish his degree, Kristy's goal to return to a hobby or part-time work after kids). Make it a family goal, not just individual.
- **Monthly “State of the Union”:** Borrowing a Gottman idea – once a month, have a bigger conversation about how the marriage is doing. Are there any lingering hurts to address? What is each of you grateful for in the other this month? What needs adjustment? Then discuss upcoming plans/decisions. This keeps the partnership intentional.
- **Equality Check:** Every so often, do a quick check: “Do you feel like we’re equals in this marriage this week? Is there any area you feel unheard or disrespected?” Listen to each other. If, say, Kristy says, “I felt you dismissed my opinion about the daycare choice,” then Josh can apologize and course-correct. Or Josh might say, “I feel like I have to ask permission to go out with a friend, and that feels unequal – can we talk about that?” Then find a compromise that respects freedom and partnership.
- **Use Tools for Decisions:** If you struggle to come to agreement on something, try using a decision-making tool like writing pros/cons, or even **taking turns** for low-stakes choices (e.g., each of you gets to pick the weekend family activity on alternating weeks, so it’s fair). For high-stakes, consider seeking wise counsel (pastor, mentor, or therapist) who can provide an objective view that you both trust.
- **Affirm Equality Verbally:** Sometimes, explicitly telling each other “Your opinion matters to me” or “I trust your judgment” can rebuild confidence. Kristy might need to hear that Josh *wants* her partnership not submission; Josh might need to hear that Kristy *respects* him and isn’t trying to mother or control him. Speak these sentiments often to rewrite the narrative between you.

Professional Support and Resources

Healing and growing in all the ways described is a big undertaking – but Josh and Kristy are not alone. There are many **resources (affordable and accessible in Australia)** and evidence-based therapy modalities that can support their journey. Here’s a curated list:

Couples Therapy Modalities to Consider

- **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT):** As discussed, EFT is highly effective for couples struggling with attachment insecurity and conflict. It has about a 70-75% success rate in clinical research in moving couples from distress to recovery. A Christian-compatible version is “*Created for Connection*”. Seeking an EFT-trained couples therapist in Victoria (some offer sliding scale fees) could be extremely beneficial. They will guide Josh and Kristy through those conversations and help them experience new emotional bonding.
- **Gottman Method Couples Therapy:** The Gottman approach is very practical and research-grounded. Therapists trained in this method might have them do an online **Gottman Relationship Checkup** assessment to pinpoint areas to work on. Sessions would teach them communication exercises, how to build fondness, and manage conflict (including eliminating the Four Horsemen). This could complement EFT or be another option.
- **Internal Family Systems (IFS) Therapy:** IFS can be done individually or in couples. An IFS therapist would help each partner recognize their “parts” that flare up (like Angry Protector part in Josh or Critical Controller part in Kristy) and heal the wounded parts driving them. Some couples sessions involve speaking from these parts in a safe way. Since they both have trauma, IFS could be a gentle way to understand each other’s inner worlds.
- **Somatic Therapies / EMDR:** These are primarily individual therapies. EMDR, as mentioned, could reduce the intensity of Josh’s PTSD triggers or Kristy’s traumatic memories. Somatic Experiencing could help discharge their fight/flight energy that causes explosive reactions. A healthier individual makes for a healthier couple. If cost is an issue, even a short course (say 6-10 sessions) focused on coping skills can yield tools they bring back into the marriage.
- **Attachment-Based Christian Counseling:** There are Christian counselors (some listed on sites like *Christian Counsellors Network*) who specialize in attachment and trauma from a biblical perspective. They may incorporate prayer, scripture, and psychological techniques. This could resonate well with Josh and Kristy’s desire for spiritual alignment.
- **Group Programs:** Sometimes attending a marriage workshop or group can be cheaper and less intimidating than private therapy. Look for things like **Alpha Marriage Course**, **The Marriage Course** (Nicky and Sila Lee – often run in churches), or community center offerings. **Focus on the Family Australia** and **Relationships Australia** occasionally have marriage enrichment seminars or retreats. There’s also **FamilyLife Australia** which has events. A group setting also reminds them they’re not alone in these struggles.

Australia-Specific Resources:

- **Relationships Australia – Victoria:** Offers counseling on a sliding fee scale. They have offices in most regions and also phone/online sessions. They’re experienced in

family and couple issues and are accessible.

- **Better Place Australia (formerly LifeWorks):** A not-for-profit providing affordable counseling services including for couples. Some branches in Victoria.
- **Local Counselors in Bendigo:** From the search we saw, there are private counselors like Karen Patton (PACFA registered) who specialize in trauma and relationships. Also **Bendigo Community Health Services** provides general counseling but not couples counseling, so for couples they might refer out. There's a listing for **Joni Bennett** couples therapy in Bendigo. It could be worth calling a few to ask about trauma-informed, faith-friendly approaches and fees (some might use mental health care plan rebates for individual sessions).
- **Christian Counselling Services:** If they prefer explicitly Christian counseling, they can search the **Christian Counsellors Association of Australia (CCAA)** directory for someone in regional VIC or willing to do Zoom. Some pastors are also trained in counseling, but given the complexity of trauma, a professional counselor or psychologist might be wiser.
- **PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia):** 24/7 hotline and resources for Kristy's postpartum depression. They can provide support and referrals for counseling specifically for PPD.
- **ADHD Support:** ADHD Australia and local support groups might have resources for couples where one has ADHD. The website **ADDitude** has many free articles and forums (though US-based, content is relevant globally) on ADHD & marriage (e.g. communication tips).
- **Complex PTSD Resources:** Look into **Blue Knot Foundation** (an Australian org for complex trauma) – they have helplines and could recommend therapists or support groups.

Books and Podcasts:

- “*Created for Connection*” by Sue Johnson & Kenneth Sanderfer: A highly recommended book for them to read together. It weaves biblical faith with attachment science and has exercises for couples. Could be like doing a self-guided marriage course at home.
- “*How We Love*” by Milan & Kay Yerkovich: A Christian book specifically about how different attachment styles in marriage interact. They give practical steps to move toward secure attachment. Josh and Kristy might see themselves in the “Pleaser” (anxious) and “Vacillator” or “Controller” (fearful-avoidant) patterns described.
- “*Keep Your Love On*” by Danny Silk: A faith-based book that focuses on communication, boundaries, and connection, written in an accessible style.

- “*The Body Keeps the Score*” (Bessel van der Kolk): For understanding trauma in depth. Might be heavy, but skimming relevant chapters can validate what Josh experiences (flashbacks, etc.) and emphasize the need for body-mind approaches.
- “*Boundaries in Marriage*” by Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend: Provides a Christian perspective on setting healthy boundaries with a spouse – which could help ensure respect and prevent control. It teaches how to say no lovingly and yes freely.
- “*Emotionally Healthy Relationships*” Workbook by Pete and Geri Scazzero: This is often done in church groups, but the book itself has practical skills (like “incarnational listening,” “climbing the ladder of integrity”) from a Christian lens that might help emotional maturity in the marriage.
- “*And Baby Makes Three*” by John & Julie Gottman: Addresses preserving couple intimacy and friendship after children arrive. They share tips to avoid common traps postpartum (ties in with what research we cited).
- *Podcasts:*
 - **Focus on the Family’s marriage podcasts** – often have 30-minute episodes on topics like healing childhood wounds in marriage, balancing parenting and marriage, etc. Russ Taff’s story mentioned might be inspiring as it deals with childhood trauma affecting marriage and finding redemption.
 - **Stronger Marriage Connection (USU Extension)** – not explicitly Christian but often has episodes on attachment and trauma in marriage.
 - **Where’s The Joy in That?** (by the Fierce Marriage folks) or **Fierce Marriage Podcast** – a Christian couple discussing real marriage issues, including emotional connection and faith.
 - **The Place We Find Ourselves** by Adam Young – more about personal trauma healing from a Christian therapist, could help each understand how their pasts affect them.
 - **Anatomy of Us** – a podcast by a Christian couple who went through a major marriage crisis (with trauma and dysfunction) and candidly talk about tools that helped them rebuild.
- *Online Courses/Workshops:*
 - **Created for Connection Online** offers a self-paced program for Christian couples (it’s a paid course but less than therapy).
 - **Gottman’s “Making Relationships Work”** or **“Roadmap for the Romantic”** (some are on YouTube or Gottman’s site) – not faith-based, but very insightful lectures.

- **XO Marriage** (marriagetoday.com) – Christian marriage videos, though some content may lean more religious advice than therapeutic.
- *Assessments:*

- **Prepare/Enrich:** a facilitated questionnaire used often in churches and counseling which gives a detailed report on a couple's strengths and growth areas. You typically need a certified facilitator (could be a pastor or counselor) to administer and debrief it. It might be worthwhile to do, as it covers communication, conflict, finances, parenting, etc., and can help pinpoint where to focus.
- **Attachment Style Quiz:** Many free ones online (even the Hart Centre site had one). Could be interesting for them to take and discuss their results, spurring conversation about how to become more secure.
- **Love Languages Quiz:** Gary Chapman's 5 Love Languages is popular and quick. If they haven't done it, discovering each other's primary love language (Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, etc.) can guide daily efforts to make each other feel loved in the way that resonates.

Finally, given their community values, they might organize a **marriage support network** – e.g., get a few like-minded couples to commit to hanging out and encouraging each other, maybe reading a marriage book together. In a regional area, creating your own supportive community can be golden.

Budget considerations: Many resources above are low-cost (books from a library, podcasts free). For counseling, check if either has **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** benefits through work, which sometimes cover a few sessions. Also, some Medicare Better Access plans can include “couple therapy” if framed as treating one person’s mental health (e.g., Kristy’s PPD or Josh’s anxiety) with spouse involvement. It requires a supportive GP/psychologist willing to use the spouse in sessions – worth asking. Church benevolence funds sometimes help subsidize counseling for members in need, so don’t hesitate to inquire discreetly if finances are tight. The investment in your marriage’s restoration is invaluable compared to the cost of ongoing distress or separation.

Conclusion

Josh and Kristy, you are embarking on a challenging but profoundly rewarding journey – one of healing past wounds, learning new ways to love, and rebuilding your marriage on a firm foundation of **equality, respect, and faith**. Remember that **growth is a process**. There will be ups and downs. Some weeks you might slip into old habits; other weeks you’ll see beautiful breakthroughs – a calm discussion that once would have been a blow-up, or a moment of deep connection and understanding. **Celebrate progress, however small**. As you practice the tools in this guide – from identifying your negative cycle and using calming

techniques, to praying together and seeking support – you are rewiring the “default settings” of your relationship.

Keep in mind the **hope** you have: Scripture promises that “*God makes all things new*” (Rev 21:5) and “*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion*” (Phil 1:6). Your marriage can be renewed and even strengthened beyond what it was. The fact that both of you are committed to growth and share a deep faith means you have a strong common ground to build on. Lean on that in hard times – **you’re on the same side** and God is on your side too.

Be patient with each other. Healing from trauma and changing attachment patterns isn’t linear. If one of you falters (say, Josh has an outburst or Kristy shuts down one day), rather than despairing, use it as a learning opportunity: debrief, forgive, and plan for how to handle it next time. Over months and years, these incidents will likely diminish in intensity and frequency. Think of it like recovery from an injury – with consistent rehab exercises (communication skills, etc.), the relationship muscles grow stronger.

Also, **guard your marriage**. Life with young kids is hectic – but don’t put your marriage on the back burner. It’s the core of the family. Continue to prioritize date nights, check-ins, and personal connection even when busy. Protect your marriage from external stress as much as possible – whether that’s turning down some commitments to have more family time, or kindly setting boundaries with relatives if they interfere.

Involve your **faith community** appropriately in your journey. Not in a gossip way, but perhaps select one or two confidants to pray for you regularly. Maybe your pastor or a prayer group can cover your marriage in prayer. Sometimes churches have programs or can help match you with a mentor couple (as suggested). The body of Christ is there to uphold you – you don’t have to pretend everything is perfect; it’s okay to say, “We’re working through some stuff, we’d appreciate prayer and support.”

Lastly, think of the **legacy** you are creating. By doing this hard work now, you are not only saving your marriage, you are giving Sylvie and Elias a gift beyond price: a loving, stable home and a model of how to handle struggles in a healthy way. You are effectively breaking chains of dysfunction so that your children will not have to carry them on. They’ll grow up seeing parents who apologized when they were wrong, who fought for each other instead of against each other, who centered their lives on faith, love, and community. That example will shape their own futures and even generations to come.

On days when the effort feels too much, remember **your “why”** – those precious kids, your vows before God, and the love that brought you together in the first place. And remember, **God’s grace** is sufficient. When you fall short, His power can shine through your weakness. As you extend grace to one another, you mirror God’s love and open the door for His healing presence.

You have what it takes to transform this marriage – not by your own strength alone, but with each other and God’s help. Take it one day, one step at a time. Cling to hope. Your desire for growth and the steps you are taking are already the first major victories. In time, you will look back and be amazed at how far you’ve come.

“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Keep that threefold cord – you, your spouse, and the Lord – at the center, and your marriage will stand strong.

May God bless your journey as you restore and strengthen your marriage and family. With faith, professional guidance, and persistent love, a beautiful new chapter is ahead. You've got this!

Sources:

- Johnson, Dr. Sue, *Created for Connection: The “Hold Me Tight” Guide for Christian Couples* – Attachment, EFT and Christian integration
- Psychology Today, *Family Systems Therapy* – FST principles (Bowen's concepts of family as an emotional unit, projection, etc.)
- Madison Square Therapy Blog – *Anxious-Avoidant Relationship Guide* – describes the pursue-withdraw cycle and its intensity due to trauma
- Wildflower Center – *Postpartum Relationship* – research on decline in marital satisfaction postpartum and importance of teamwork
- JustMind.org – *Communication in ADHD Relationships* – tips like focusing on feelings, practicing redo's, knowing when to pause for high heart rate
- The Hart Centre – *Coercive Control* – definition as pattern of dominating via micromanagement, criticism, etc., which this couple is working to eliminate
- Tapestry Counseling – *Review of Created for Connection* – outlines conversations (demon dialogues, raw spots, Hold Me Tight, forgiving injuries, bonding through sex, keeping love alive)
- Wildflower Center – *Postpartum Intimacy* – note that intimacy often declines postpartum and suggesting non-intercourse affection to maintain connection
- JustMind.org – emphasis that professional help (counseling) can help couples learn, grow, and change (encouraging use of therapy when needed).
- **(Additional general concepts drawn from attachment theory by Bowlby, Emotionally Healthy Marriage resources, and scripture have been integrated contextually.)**