

A photograph of a man and a woman reaching across a set of train tracks. They are framed by ornate, gold-colored picture frames on the left and right sides. The background shows a green field under a blue sky with white clouds.

When Your Marriage Needs Help:
You Are Not Alone

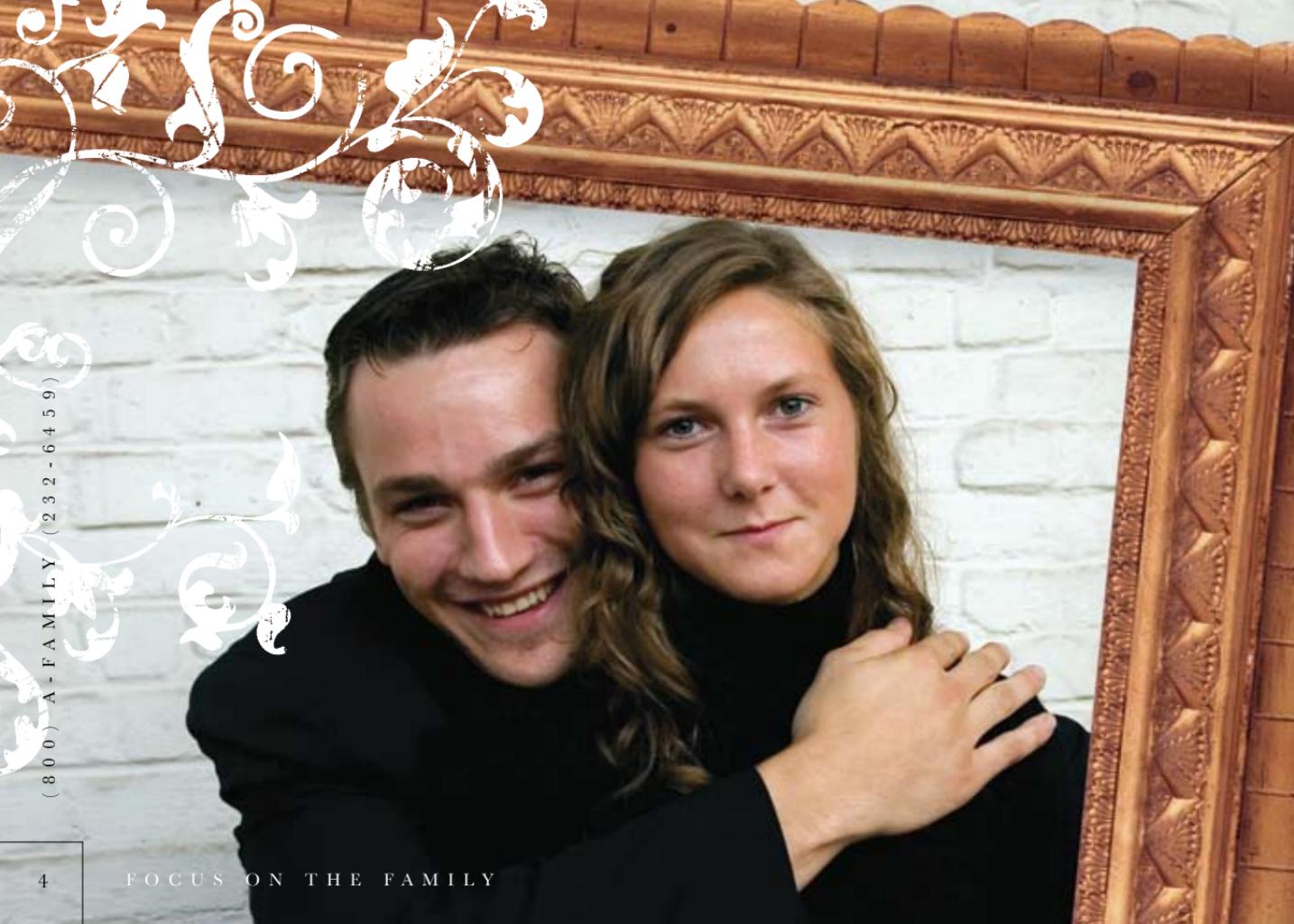
by Mitch Temple

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

When Your Marriage Needs Help: You Are Not Alone

by Mitch Temple
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

All Scripture quotations in this publication are from the HOLY BIBLE,
NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978,
1984 by International Bible Society. All rights reserved.



Every marriage experiences problems. No matter how long you have been married—whether one year or 40 years—you will have problems. Marital problems can be extremely intense and painful, and those hurts can cut deeply and last a very long time.

The pain caused by someone you care about as much as your spouse may be very difficult to deal with. Most of us have preconceived ideas about how our spouses should treat us. We expect mistreatment from other people, but not from our spouses. Just remember that as human beings,

we often think, feel and behave in ways that are hurtful, even toward those we love. Flawed people treat each other in flawed ways; so no matter how much we care, we'll sometimes hurt each other.

Your marriage isn't doomed because you hurt one another, have difficulty communicating or have disagreements over important issues. Couples have been experiencing and solving problems on their own—beginning with Adam and Eve, and continuing to this day. The more experience and maturity a couple develops in a marriage, the more success gained in managing and solving problems. God created us with the ability to successfully manage relationships in a healthy and productive way.

Ask other couples what it took to build a strong and successful marriage. Rest assured that their strong marriages did not develop overnight. They experienced some of the same problems you have. One reason their marriages are strong today is that they were committed to the idea that no matter what obstacles they faced, they would learn to manage their problems and overcome crisis on an ongoing basis.

As you read this booklet, please understand that the principles we're suggesting are not intended to deal with every problem that couples deal with in marriage. We especially don't want to imply that you should remain in a situation where your safety or the safety of your family is at risk. If you are in a relationship where your spouse displays any of the following signs, please seek help immediately:

- Physically abusive
- Displays symptoms of a significant mental illness
- Has a major chemical imbalance
- Threatens the safety of you or your children

These are not simplistic issues and cannot be dealt with by simply reading a book or talking to a friend. Seek professional help immediately. You can call your local mental health hotline or Focus on the Family (719-531-3400) for a referral to a Christian psychologist or psychiatrist in your specific area.

A Model Couple?

Chuck and Bettie seemed to be a model couple as they neared their 42nd wedding anniversary and volunteered to serve on a panel for a young couples' class at their church.

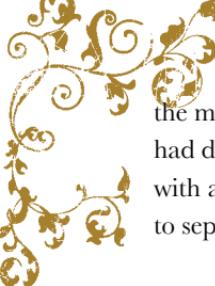
Rebecca, married only three years, asked the smiling pair, "Why are you still so happy together after 42 years, and how did you get so lucky? You seem like the most compatible couple in the world. Did you ever have any real difficult problems?"

The class laughed a little, and Chuck replied, "Yes." His eyes connected with Bettie's. Then he summarized each major stage of their lives, sharing some of the trials they had experienced. He wrote on the white board as he spoke:

In year one, Bettie had a miscarriage; in year three, she became pregnant unexpectedly and I lost my job. In year eight, our first child was diagnosed with autism; and in year 13, I took a job that kept me on the road three weeks out of



WHEN YOUR MARRIAGE NEEDS HELP



the month. In year 14, I admitted that I had developed an unhealthy friendship with a co-worker, which led Bettie and me to separate for six months.

As Chuck continued to list challenges and problems in their marriage, he also listed successes and victories—and described how they developed the skills to overcome their problems. He mentioned people and resources that contributed to their success.

Then Bettie concluded:

We were determined that no matter what happened in our marriage, we were going to rise above it. Having an unhealthy marriage or getting a divorce were not options, since we both came from homes where those things occurred. At each stress point in our marriage, we committed to solve the problem and allow it to be a learning experience, not an exercise in failure.

Like Chuck and Bettie, you can determine to solve, manage and overcome problems—even crisis—in your marriage. As Chuck and Bettie discovered, you'll find that marriage problems can actually become the mortar and glue for the overall strength and success of a relationship.

Problems and challenges can cause us to grow deep roots, like an oak tree, equipping us to endure devastating storms. Dealing with marriage issues can also clear the air, acting like a summer lightning storm, which first appears loud and destructive but can result in purer air and a fresh beginning.

Believe it or not, crises that are managed well can bring a couple closer together and move each partner forward to enjoy a healthier marriage than ever imagined.

Help for Different Types of Marriage Problems

Problems in marriages can range from minor to serious to crisis-level, with each demanding a

different kind of help. The following examples illustrate how wide-ranging marriage problems can be. It's important to realize that help is available at all levels and can turn even a hopeless-looking situation around in a radical way.

Minor Problems: Joe and Mary aren't communicating like they used to. They disagree often about how to discipline their kids, and they spend less time together. Finally, they recognize the need to refresh their marriage and attend a marriage seminar together at church. At home, they begin to find success implementing the tools they developed.

Serious Problems: George and Martha are either fighting or withdrawing, and George has threatened several times to leave. It becomes clear to both of them that their marriage will not survive without making it a priority to learn to relate in healthy ways. They seek out and find a Christian counselor; and after repeated visits, learn to break their destructive patterns.

Crisis: Scarlett is devastated to learn that Rhett has had an extramarital affair. At first, she is ready to

divorce him. She throws him out of the house. But in time, she realizes that she wants to fight for her marriage. He wants to rebuild their relationship, too. She insists on a separation until they can complete intensive marriage counseling. After six months, Rhett moves back in, and both commit to new patterns of behavior and continued counseling.

Though problems such as those described above are common in marriage, they can move from normal to abnormal in a short time period. If problems in your marriage have become unmanageable, unhealthy and destructive, or cause extreme emotional distress, you may need someone from outside your marriage to help provide objective help—someone who can address the root problem and not simply the *presenting issue*, that is, the apparent problem.

For example, you may feel your spouse no longer cares about you, but the core issue may be that you have said or done something that deeply hurt him or her. The presenting problem might be financial in nature, such as your spouse failing to



control his or her spending, or each of you failing to communicate about what is permitted or not permitted regarding spending limits. The core issue may be not communicating properly or setting appropriate boundaries.

Here's the bottom line: If a problem causes considerable distress and you do not seem to be making progress addressing it, approach the problem from a different angle. The best recommendation for ongoing, unmanageable problems would be to visit a licensed Christian marriage counselor. It's best to work with someone rooted in Christian values to complement your beliefs, someone professionally trained to work with relationship issues. Not every counselor is trained to deal with complicated relationship problems, nor does every counselor hold to basic Christian values.

Indications You Need Help for Your Marriage

Input From Family and Friends

If your family or friends recognize that you

have a problem that needs addressing, pay attention. People outside your marriage can often spot a serious problem before you can. Family members and friends often have intuitive hunches or become concerned about your relationship based on behaviors or attitudes you may manifest. Listen carefully if someone says, "You guys need marriage counseling."

Children's Behavior

Another indicator involves your children. Their behavior can often provide a barometer of what is occurring inside a home. You and your spouse may believe that the current level of interaction and health in your marriage is okay and just the way it will be, but your children may sense that something is wrong and needs to change.

Young children often react to marriage problems through abnormal behavior. They begin to act out at school, around friends or even at home. The same is true of teens, who will often react to trouble at home by becoming involved in activities or with people that are out of character.



(800) A-FAMILY (232-6459)

Teens typically attempt to deal with the stress of an unhealthy marriage in unhealthy ways. Teen behavior and attitudes often provide a means of medicating their pain.

The Present Compared to the Past

A very practical, commonsense indicator that you need counseling comes from comparing the way your marriage used to be, to the way it is currently. In the beginning of marriage, most couples spend a great deal of time together, serve one another, compromise on differences, communicate and solve basic problems. Yet time, conflict and the stresses of life have a way of squeezing out healthy habits. A marriage cannot survive without a regular dose of basic nurturing.

If these practices were once commonplace and are now extremely rare or nonexistent, your marriage is likely struggling. All relationships become sick or eventually die without these basic ingredients being added to everyday interactions.

Physical Abuse

If physical abuse is taking place in your marriage, the first concern is safety. If you are being physically abused or threatened, get to a safe place. Don't remain in a situation where you are likely to be hurt again. Contact your local abuse hotline or the police. Though you may think what is occurring is justified, and you don't have any options, don't believe it. Physical abuse is never justified or normal. There are always options and people who can help you.

Substance Abuse

Most addiction problems in marriage—such as drugs, alcohol, gambling and pornography—cannot be solved by the addict or the spouse alone. Treatment for the specific addiction is a complex and long-term process. Most people cannot just stop an addictive behavior. It will not just go away. It requires professional help and ongoing accountability. Ongoing counseling and inpatient treatment is often required to effectively deal with

an addiction. It can quickly destroy a marriage, so don't try to deal with it on your own.

Sexual Problems

Because sexual dynamics in marriage are so personal and so much a part of biblical oneness, this area of your marriage should be nurtured and protected. If sexual problems are persistent in your marriage, avoiding or ignoring them will not make them go away. Sexual problems can lead to more severe problems, such as a spouse seeking alternatives for having physical or emotional needs met. The Internet, pornography Web sites and online chat rooms are all breeding grounds for more problems.

As eating properly is essential to good physical health, healthy sex is vital to good marital health. Don't ignore sexual problems in your marriage.

Emotional Problems

If you or your spouse begin to experience problems such as ongoing anger, depression, anxiety,

abnormal stress, guilt or biochemical problems (i.e., bipolar symptoms, schizophrenia, paranoia or other psychosis), help is needed. Emotional problems are often reactions and responses to something being out of balance with your spouse or in the relationship. Until the core problem(s) is properly addressed, the presenting problem(s) and emotional disturbances will keep reoccurring. One emotional problem left untreated can lead to more serious problems. For example, unhealthy anger can lead to severe depression. Until the anger issue is addressed, the depression will likely continue.

Extramarital Affairs

The discovery of an affair is one of the darkest and most painful moments in marriage. The emotional damage and accompanying symptoms that take place after an affair are monumental. There is no hurt or pain like the pain felt by a betrayed spouse. The emotional pain and intensity reflect the experience of an extremely traumatic event. Shock, denial, anger, depression and other emotions are normal. When this level of hurt occurs, you need to



get professional help. After an affair, most people can't go through the healing process successfully without outside intervention. You experience thoughts, feelings and spiritual challenges never felt before.

Being objective and trying to manage the roller coaster of emotions alone should not be attempted without professional Christian counseling. Weekend marriage intensives are also available: They are specifically designed to help turn around marriages which have experienced crises such as affairs. Ongoing counseling and support are always necessary even after a couple attends an intensive or crisis seminar.

Realize that an extramarital affair doesn't necessarily mean your marriage is over. In fact, as painful and difficult as it can be, an affair has proven to be the turning point in many marriages to help them move beyond dysfunction and pain to health and success.

Withdrawal

Prolonged withdrawal is always a dangerous sign. Withdrawal in a marriage indicates that one

or both of you have reached a point of such intense pain that you can't function inside the relationship any longer, so you withdraw physically or emotionally. The natural result of withdrawal is a downward spiral into an apathetic state where you simply don't care any more. Communication, sex, affection and other normal relational necessities become nonexistent.

Ongoing withdrawal is one of the most difficult states a married couple can be in or get out of. As long as there is some type of interaction, including healthy arguments, there is still some level of concern or care in the marriage. But when one or both withdraws, it's a sign they have given up.

Counseling is typically needed to redirect the couple to the basics and start over to rebuild the trust, concern and emotion vital to the growth and functioning of a healthy marriage. Remember that just because you have tried counseling before, there is no reason not to try a different type of program or counseling in the future.

Destructive Patterns

Do you find you continue to follow the same destructive pattern? If you continue to experience a problem, and the same reactions surface repeatedly, it's likely you need outside help. Doing the same thing will only net you the same result. It is extremely easy for a couple to get into a perpetual rut. The only way to get out of a deeply rutted pattern is to change course and responses. Calling an experienced Christian therapist could be the first step to pull you out of the rut.

Some patterns can be altered without outside intervention. For example, a wife may consistently complain and nag as soon as her husband walks in the door from work. If she is made aware of this unconscious habit, she could easily become motivated to break it. Simply learning to give her husband a few minutes to unwind after arriving home may also precipitate a willingness on his part to respond to his wife's requests more promptly.

Negative Spiritual Relationship

The Bible teaches us that a marriage is systemically connected to a couple's relationship with God. If your marriage is unhealthy, it will eventually affect your spiritual life. The apostle Peter writes:

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives . . . Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:1-2,7, NIV).

Marriage problems can obstruct healthy access to God and the spiritual blessings that flow from it. If your marriage is in a tremendous amount of pain, chances are you will not focus on your

WHEN YOUR MARRIAGE NEEDS HELP

relationship with God. You may even start acting like someone who is not a child of God. You will tend to say and do things that are out of character and dishonoring to God. Pain has a way of overriding our values, instincts and even our beliefs.

For example, no matter how well trained and mildly tempered a dog may be, if you stand on his paw long enough and with enough intensity, he may bite you. The same is true with pain: If you stay in it long enough, your thoughts, beliefs and behavior can be negatively (and dramatically) affected.

If your marriage is unhealthy, your walk with God may be as well. It is difficult to have one right and the other wrong. God purposely connected our spiritual relationships with our heavenly relationship. The way we perceive and treat each other definitely affects how we perceive and respond to our heavenly father.

God commands us to treat each other with love and respect: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:33). God also

views your marriage as a lifelong commitment to your spouse and to Him.

Is Your Marriage in Crisis?

A marriage crisis typically occurs when an unusual amount of stress or unresolved conflict causes the level of anxiety to become too intense for the couple to manage. As a result, anger, resentment, dissatisfaction, frustration and hopelessness take control of the relationship. The couple typically continues the negative interactions—or disengages completely from one another, and the relationship shuts down. I call this the boiling point or marital meltdown in the marriage. It is usually at this place in the crisis process that a couple calls seeking help from a counselor, minister, friend or family member. Some counselors define a marriage crisis as a marriage where one or both partners desire to end the marriage.

Every day, you're faced with a broad variety of challenges and trials. Individuals and families are constantly exposed to news about natural and man-

made disasters such as domestic violence, terrorist attacks, abuse, rape, workplace accidents, crashes, military conflicts and weather-related disasters. According to statistics, there are approximately 36 million reported crimes and crime victims each year in America. The emotional, physical and spiritual responses that follow a crisis are often more than most people can manage alone.

People in crises such as these need others to help them—including counselors, pastors, police officers, social workers, Red Cross workers and others to intervene in their lives. The same applies to a marriage crisis. You must be open to others' help.

But what exactly is a crisis? How does crisis affect people? What are the short- and long-term effects?

Based on personal experience and knowledge, the definition of a crisis that I prefer is: "any situation or stimulus that causes high levels of emotional anguish or disparity in individuals, and which leaves them feeling helpless, out of balance and out of control."

Crises are capable of wounding us deeply, no matter what or who causes them. Some of the most destructive and devastating traumas are those caused or created by those we care about most: our family and friends. An example of this type of hurt could be a marriage where an affair has occurred. The emotional and social pressure on the wounded partner is far-reaching and undoubtedly long-term. There is nothing that causes more emotional pain in a marriage than to be betrayed by someone you love, depend on and trust.

I am convinced that the emotional scars and wounds that occur in families are some of the most unpleasant and damaging on the face of the earth. Crisis is difficult in and of itself, and even more so when it is caused by people whom we care for.

If a crisis has occurred or if problems have become unmanageable, you have a right to feel upside-down. Your entire life has changed in an instant. Your body, mind and emotions are thrown out of balance. You probably need outside intervention and help.

(8 0 0) A - F A M I L Y (2 3 2 - 6 4 5 9)

20

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY



On the positive side, a crisis can lead to a solution. It can become the bridge that moves you from pain to a new beginning.

Two symbols represent the concept of crisis in the Chinese language: danger and opportunity. In the ancient Greek language, the word crisis comes from two root words: decision and turning point. These symbols and words most accurately describe the underlying compositions of crisis: danger and opportunity, decision and turning point.

Is My Marriage Worth Saving? Why Even Try?

Without a doubt, your marriage is worth saving!

Though all marriages can't be saved, divorce does not typically solve personal or relational dysfunctions. For couples with children, it is important to understand that research validates the fact that most children do not want their parents to divorce, in spite of their parents' arguments and basic problems. In fact, one of the number one fears of children in the United States, ages 4 to 16,

is the fear that their parents will divorce.¹

Dr. Judith Wallerstein, a psychologist and one of the nation's premier divorce researchers, conducted a 25-year research study following 131 children of divorce. She states:

Twenty-five years after their parents' divorce, children remembered loneliness, fear and terror! Adults like to believe that children are aware of their parents' unhappiness, expect the divorce and are relieved when it happens. However, that is a myth; and what children actually conclude is if one parent can leave another, then they both could leave me. As a society we like to think that divorce is a transient grief, a minor upheaval in a child's life. This is also a myth; and as divorcing parents goes through transition, their children live in transition.²

Dr. John Gottman provides interesting research

findings that suggest why it is important to save your marriage. He states, "The chance of a first marriage ending in divorce over a 40-year period is 67 percent. Half of all divorces will occur in the first seven years. The divorce rate for second marriages is as much as 10 percent higher than for first-timers."

He goes on to explain:

Numerous research projects show that happily married couples have a far lower rate for physical problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, psychosis, addictions, etc. and live four years longer than people who end their marriages. The chance of getting divorced remains so high that it makes sense for all married couples to put extra effort into their marriages to keep them strong.³

According to a national study (the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey), more than three-fifths of divorced Americans say they wish

they or their spouses had worked harder to save their marriages (see fatherhood.org).

Findings from a study of unhappy marriages conducted by the Institute for American Values showed that there was no evidence that unhappily married adults who divorced were typically any happier than unhappily married people who stayed married. Even more dramatically, the researchers also found that two-thirds of unhappily married spouses who stayed together reported that their marriages were happy five years later.⁴

When people hear about these findings, their response typically is,

All that research is well and good; but I have tried everything I know to do, and my spouse simply will not agree to get help. I have cried, begged, threatened and pleaded, but nothing works. So what do I do? I can't do it on my own. There is nothing else I can do.

Maybe there is.



When a Spouse Won't Go for Help

Three of the most common reasons one spouse gives the other for not seeking help in the marriage follow:

- “We don’t have that kind of problem” or “Our problems are really not that bad.” That’s the denial response. The fact is, if your spouse requests counseling, your marriage is probably worse off than you think. Your spouse is apparently in enough pain to seek relief from it in some way. If your spouse is hurting to the point of taking this action, you need to join him or her in solving the problem. If your spouse has a problem, you have a problem.
- “We can’t afford it.” Most Americans can afford whatever they really want. If we can afford cell phones, hobbies, cable TV, eating out, health club memberships, daily visits to Starbucks and designer clothes, we can afford marriage counseling or an intensive designed

to save our marriage. A question to seriously consider is: “Can I/we afford not to go to counseling?” If you don’t go to counseling, what will be the outcome? Can you live for the rest of your married life with the outcome?

- Another common reason your spouse might reject counseling is that he or she simply is not hurting as much as you are. Your spouse is not where you are on the pain scale. The typical response shown by the motivated spouse is a sense of frustration or unhealthy responses such as nagging, pouting, arguing, accusing, angry outbursts or simply being bitter. But unhealthy responses like these only cause wounds to deepen and the other spouse to move further away from the relationship. You can’t “nag” your spouse into getting help.

On the spiritual side, a possible factor that could prevent you or your spouse from getting needed help is pride. Many marriages are failing and are eventually destroyed because one or both



partners are too prideful to admit that they have a problem and may be wrong. The same tenacity and stubbornness that often keeps a person in a marriage can lead to a level of pride that prevents that person from receiving the proper help when in trouble. If you think you are too proud to ask for help or feel too proud to face the embarrassment, you are too proud. Pride can stand in the way of progress like a sentry guarding a castle. Nothing can get past it or move beyond it.

One of the greatest things you can do for a troubled marriage is to be willing to say, "I'm wrong. I'm sorry and I realize this problem has a lot to do with me." This attitude is the opposite of a prideful attitude. It says, "I know I must be willing to change if I expect my spouse to change. I will do whatever it takes to save and change my marriage." This could mean committing time, money and energy to a counseling relationship that will hold you accountable for your growth and progress.

A heart dominated by pride says, "I would rather allow my marriage to die than admit I am

wrong." A heart driven by biblical love and commitment says,

I will do whatever it takes to salvage and rebuild my marriage. I will give up everything I own. I will change jobs. I will mortgage the house. I will do whatever it takes, because I know my marriage is that important to our children and our children's children.

Can You Do It Alone?

What if one spouse is willing to go to counseling and the other is not? Should the willing spouse go to counseling or seek help without the other? In most cases, the answer is definitely yes. Your marriage can be helped immensely if you initiate change.

When one spouse stops trying to change his or her partner and stops pointing fingers, making accusations, and withholding affection and attention, the energy often shifts to self-improvement. When you make positive changes, it allows positive changes to occur in your spouse.

The fact is, you cannot change your spouse, but you can change yourself. Often the most obvious point of movement in a conflicted marriage is self-movement. Changes you make to improve yourself and marriage can effectively produce healthy responses in the other spouse.

Sometimes the best way to change your spouse is to model positive change in your own life. You can encourage your spouse to communicate better by learning to communicate better yourself. You can coach your spouse to respect you by respecting him or her first. You can teach your spouse to stop complaining with a bitter spirit by breaking a pattern of complaining and developing a new spirit.

Your husband or wife may not be willing to read books, go to seminars or go to counseling at this stage; but if you take the first step, your changes may positively influence him or her.

For example, while Sharon was a Christian, her husband, Joseph, was Muslim. Their marriage was less than perfect, and Joseph had almost completely disengaged from their marriage. Sharon tried to

change Joseph repeatedly without success. As a last straw, Sharon went to her church for counseling. The Christian therapist directed Sharon to look at her own life and attitudes first, before trying to change Joseph. He reminded her of the biblical principle of making herself beautiful on the inside, instead of focusing on external beauty and alterations.

Sharon began to evaluate her attitude and relationship with Joseph. She realized that one weak area involved showing proper respect to her husband. She realized that she had a responsibility to respect him as the head of her home, even though he was a nonbeliever. She had made that commitment to him and to her God. She began to see that respecting someone doesn't necessarily mean complete acceptance or agreement.

Sharon began to reframe the way she saw her husband. As a result, her interactions with her husband changed significantly; and ultimately, these changes in Sharon totally transformed Joseph.

Sharon's radical changes affected Joseph relationally and spiritually. Not only did Joseph

reconnect with his wife, he began to question the principles of his beliefs. He saw something in Sharon's religious way of life that was missing in his own. In time, Joseph converted to Christianity. The old proverb stands firm: *Change produces change. Sameness produces sameness.*

Think of your decision in practical economic terms. Ask yourself: If I take no course of action or even pursue divorce, how economically advantageous will that be? The cost of divorce in the United States can average anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000. A majority of couples who divorce find themselves living on half of their pre-divorce income. After divorce, many single women are forced to live below the poverty line while attempting to raise their children.

Divorce is not the answer to most problems. Divorce is not the best solution to being unhappy or unfulfilled. It typically creates more problems than you can ever imagine and will have a long-term effect on your children, as well as generations to come. Therefore, the question is: "Can you

afford not to go to counseling?" From a practical standpoint, it may be like asking, "Should I have heart surgery if I know that I will die if I don't have it?" If your doctor says you will live in pain the rest of your life or that you will die, can you afford not to have the surgery?

Common Mistakes in Approaching Your Spouse

- *Showing disrespect.* As Sharon realized, you can't change a person by tearing him or her down. There's only one response for that kind of approach: negative. Think about it. How do you feel when others treat you disrespectfully? Does it make you want to do something for them? Does it make you want to show affection? No. Showing disrespect will only alienate your spouse to the idea of seeking help.
- *Losing control of your anger.* Anger is often a way of punishing your spouse when he or she does not give you what you want. It's



not only ineffective in producing a long-term change in how your spouse behaves, it also destroys any threads of love or feelings that may still be evident. Sure, if your spouse doesn't respond to your requests, the temptation exists to respond in anger; but if you don't get the response you want, getting angry and sparking a heated argument won't help.

- *Blaming your spouse.* Don't accuse or point fingers. Don't resort to exaggerated or over-generalized language such as: "You always act like this! You never do what I ask you to do. You just don't care anymore. It's always your fault. You always do this or always do that." That type of language isn't valuable in solving the problem. It only creates more issues to deal with and more wounds to heal in the future.

Approaching Your Spouse the Right Way

- Begin by approaching your spouse at the right time and in the right manner. Choose a time when he or she is not distracted or too stressed or tired.
- Approach your spouse in a non-confrontational manner. An angry tone of voice or condescending "parent to child" approach will only cause him or her to shut down.
- Make sure you bring up the topic in a non-threatening way. If your communication pattern has digressed to the point that when you bring up this topic, your spouse becomes defensive and "blows up," you may consider writing him or her a letter to be read when you are not present. This gives your spouse time to think about what was said and respond without all the emotions.
- Don't say, "You need counseling." Recognize

and admit that "we" have a problem, and it must be addressed as a team.

You may try statements like the following to encourage your mate to join you in getting help for your marriage:

"I'm concerned that if we allow this problem to continue, it will only get worse. I can't go on like we have been. I need the help more than anything. I know you are uncomfortable with this, but so am I. It's embarrassing and even frightening to me. I realize, however, that if we keep doing the same things in our marriage, we'll get the same results."

"We need outside intervention and direction. It's like being in a strange city and asking others for directions. Locals know the area. They know the correct path to take, and which roads are easy ones and which roads are dangerous and difficult. A trained Christian therapist knows the way around, has been trained and is capable of helping with issues and dangers that we can't deal with on our own."

"I know God wants us to do better in our marriage, and our children deserve a more stable home environment than this. It's obvious that if we don't get help, we are making the decision to continue in a painful marriage. I believe there is hope for us and it is possible to have a healthy marriage like we used to."

"I love you with all my heart, but I am tired and need your help and support on this. If you won't go for yourself, would you go with me? Let's talk about it after dinner tonight."

These nonthreatening approaches take some of the pressure and blame off the other partner. They typically open doors to the possibility of getting help instead of closing doors by using negative approaches.

What to Look for in a Christian Counselor

The key criteria for selecting a Christian counselor involve the counselor's credentials and faith.

Just because a person refers to himself as a

counselor does not necessarily mean he's properly trained. A counselor should be licensed by the state in which he practices. Also, if you are experiencing marriage problems, you may want to look for a Marriage and Family Therapist. MFTs have specific training in relationship dynamics. Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) have specific training in dealing with individual problems, but many also have experience and training in marital issues. You may also look for someone who has specific experience in working with couples in crisis.

You can ask questions that will help you decide if a particular therapist is a good fit for you:

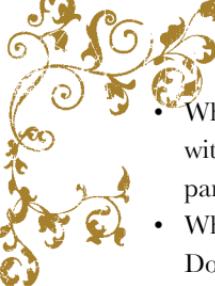
- What type of license do you have? The most common types of licensure include: Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), Psychologist, Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Psychiatrist (MD).
- Where is the license held? Which state? The license should be from a state licensing

board, not simply from a professional or national counseling association. The counselor's license should also be from the state where the therapist is currently working, not just from any state.

- Is your degree from an accredited university?
- What other credentials do you hold? Professional memberships?
- Do you have specific experience in working with couples in crisis? What type of problems have you worked with?
- Are you active in your faith?

Just because a person refers to herself as a Christian therapist does not necessarily mean she is Christian in beliefs and practices. Here are some questions to help determine a therapist's level of faith:

- Is she recognized and recommended by the local church community?
- Does she attend church regularly?



- What activities is the counselor involved with at church? Does she teach a class or participate in service activities?
- Who is the counselor's minister or pastor? Does the counselor feel uncomfortable with the prospect of you talking to her pastor?
- Does the counselor have a statement of faith? Do her beliefs conflict with yours?
- What does the counselor believe about marriage and divorce?
- Does she encourage reconciliation and offer therapeutic services to couples toward that end?
- Does the counselor use prayer and Scripture in her practice?

If a counselor seems reluctant or uncomfortable in answering these questions, feel free to seek other recommendations from trusted Christian advisors such as church leaders, staff, Sunday school teachers, denominational boards, etc.

Focus on the Family offers a free referral service to over 2,000 licensed therapists who are

screened and evaluated for their beliefs, expertise and ethical practices. To request a referral to a licensed Christian marriage counselor in your area, you can call 719-531-3400 and ask to speak to someone in our Counseling department.

In addition to traditional counseling, there are seminars, marriage workshops and retreats that offer education about specific issues like communication, finances, conflict and intimacy. There are also hundreds of specific books, DVDs and CDs that address a variety of marriage-related topics from a Christian perspective. You can go to Focus on the Family's Web site (family.org) or call 800-A-FAMILY (232-6459) to view a list of Christian resources. Focus on the Family's Counseling, Correspondence and Marriage departments maintain a current list of recommended resources.

There are a number of recommended Web sites that address marriage-related problems:

- Focus on the Family Marriage site (family.org/marriage)
- TroubledWith.com
- LoveandRespect.com
- FamilyDynamics.net
- FamilyLife.com

In addition to traditional counseling for couples in crisis, there are also specialized intensives that are designed to help you save your troubled marriage. Most intensives are three to four days long. Their purpose is to help couples in extreme distress break down barriers and turn their marriages around in a short period of time. Many of these approaches to marriage crisis are seeing great success. For more information on intensives, log on to **TroubledWith.com** or **FamilyDynamics.net**

Conclusion

You can fight for your marriage and get the help you need. You are not alone in the battle, and there are many people and resources available to help you. Most of all, God will stand by you as you act with integrity to preserve the relationship He joined together. Find help, and start today.

Endnotes

- ¹ From *When Your Child Is Afraid*, by Dr. Robert Schachter and Carole McCauley (Simon and Schuster, 1988).
- ² From *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce—The 25 Year Landmark Study*, by Judith Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee (Hyperion Publishers, 2000).
- ³ From *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Three Rivers Press, 1999).
- ⁴ “Does Divorce Make People Happy?” (Institute for American Values, 2002).



f a m i l y . o r g / m a r r i a g e

FOOTOOT