

What to Do When Marriages Go Wrong

Do you know that the United States of America reached the distinction of having the highest divorce rate of any country in the world - - in 1889? And, we have held first place for over 100 consecutive years. According to author Stephanie Coontz, “We have a culture that has a problem sustaining long-term commitments.”

No one wants a marriage to fail. Every marriage begins with high hopes of success and happiness. However, there sometimes comes a turning point when a marriage starts to go wrong. Knowing when that is and knowing what to do about it can make all of the difference between success and failure in a marriage.

There are some simple principles that are worth considering. The first is to act sooner rather than later. Sooner begins before the marriage. The obvious advice is to marry the right person, although that may not be the best advice.

Consider two couples. Couple number one each marries the “right” person but goes about marriage in the wrong way. Couple number two each marries the “wrong” person but they go about marriage in the right way. Now which couple do you think has the greater predictability of success and happiness in their marriage? It is probably couple number two every time. Of course, the best of all worlds is to marry the right person and to do marriage in the right way, but it is the way that we go about marriage that is most important of all.

There is a growing movement in the United States to help prepare couples for successful marriages. The movement has been tested in places like Modesto, California, where the divorce rate has dropped by a third in the last decade or so. It begins with those who can legally perform wedding ceremonies. This varies from state to state, but most weddings are conducted by ordained or licensed clergy, judges, magistrates or mayors. The goal is to get every legal officiant in a community to

sign an agreement on pre-marital preparation. This usually includes a waiting period of at least four months and some significant pre-marital education. The whole idea is to help couples know how to “do” marriage. Just as preparation is required to drive a car, preparation helps make a marriage succeed.

Sooner is better than later when helping couples that are already married. Every marriage counselor can tell you stories about couples that could have had wonderful marriages if they had gotten help sooner. The difficulty is often not the problems they faced but the failure to catch them early.

This is not to say that every couple should be on a daily hunt for problems, but we should all be looking for ways to make relationships good. If something concerns you, do something about it now rather than after it has escalated and become a far more complex problem.

There’s something very important to note in all of this. Rarely do any two people in any relationship see it in exactly the same way. This is true of brothers and sisters, parents and children, employers and employees, and even next door neighbors. We all have different expectations from the relationships that we have.

We must be careful not to assume that others think as we think or feel as we feel. Nor can we assume that we know what someone else thinks or feels unless we ask. Each of us has a responsibility to go to the other person and make our feelings known. Don’t expect the other person to guess!

Unfortunately, sometimes we assume the other person feels and thinks the same way we do and then we may let the relationship deteriorate without talking about it. If there is something that needs to be said or done, say it and do it sooner rather than later.

A second principle is to work on marriage to-

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gether. Think of your marriage as a project like building a house or planning a vacation or developing investments. Read books, subscribe to marriage magazines, go to marriage growth seminars. Set up goals to build your relationship.

When there is a conflict or a need, talk about it and tackle it like any other project. Pray about it together. Do research. Talk about your approach. Instead of letting the issues divide you, let the problems unite you. Think of marriage in terms of skills. Focus on education more than on therapy to solve the problem.

Let me give you an example. Joe and Mary have been married for seven years. Both admit that their marriage needs some help. They love each other and want their marriage to succeed. So she suggests that they go to a marriage counselor together to get to the root of the problem. He says he doesn't want to go to a stranger and talk about their problems, so she suggests going to a counselor they both know. He says he doesn't want to go to someone he knows and talk about their problems!

Mary does a little research and concludes that most men are like Joe. They're reluctant to see doctors, reluctant to ask for directions, reluctant to visit counselors or talk about problems. However, she finds that men are very open to learning skills. Education, yes; therapy, no.

They talk about this together and strike a deal. They will learn skills of conflict management, financial planning and how to argue. They'll do this together for six months and if it doesn't work then they will try the counselor. They agree to get their education by reading the Bible, asking God for help, buying and studying a few marriage books and taking a pair of seminars on marriage and on money. What they have done is work on their marriage together. It becomes a joint project and that is very good.

But what if the person to whom you are married is unwilling to work with you on the marriage? Then you do it yourself. Instead of blaming or shirking responsibility, take responsibility. Pray. Read the Bible. Study marriage books. Go to seminars. Get counseling. Figure out what skills you need to help your marriage by yourself.

Now, obviously, this is not the preferred ap-

proach. It's plan B rather than plan A. But it can still be an extremely helpful approach. You will build skills that will be beneficial to your spouse even if he or she is reluctant to cooperate.

A third principle is to pick your counselors carefully. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." The Bible repeatedly encourages and demonstrates the value of advice and counsel from others - - - as long as you pick your counselors carefully. But the Bible contains multiple stories of people who took bad advice and, as a result, ruined their lives as well as the lives of others.

Picking counselors doesn't primarily refer to professional marriage counselors. It can be anyone who gives advice and influences your marriage. The people who surround us and talk with us powerfully influence us. If your co-workers think that divorce is the solution to every marital conflict, they will influence you toward divorce. If you are surrounded by immature and troubled marriages, this may hurt your marriage. If you choose a counselor who thinks divorce is the absolute last resort, you may try every other alternative first.

Who are the best counselors for a marriage that is going wrong? Often the very best influence comes from other couples who have experienced similar problems and have gotten through them successfully. You can't say to that couple, "It will never work out", because they worked it out. They truly understand. They can be sympathetic, confrontational and helpful all at the same time.

When picking a professional counselor, ask if this person gives wise and good advice. Is this someone who shares your Christian values and biblical perspective? Is it someone with whom you will feel comfortable and whom you trust? Call and talk to the recommended counselor in advance. Have a trial session and pay for it. If this isn't the best counselor for you, move on to someone else.

Be careful that you are not just looking for someone to take your side and tell you what you want to hear. Pick friends, advisors and counselors who have your marriage's best interests at heart.

Right now, ask yourself a question: *Who are the people who most influence my marriage? Are these people who influence my marriage for God and for good?* Pick your counselors carefully!

A fourth principle to adopt a “do my best with no regrets” approach. This will serve you well no matter what happens. It is a commitment to do everything possible in the relationship to make the marriage survive and thrive. Determine to please God and do what is right regardless of what your spouse does.

This can be very difficult. We are all tempted to be controlled by the behavior and attitudes of other people. When they fail to meet our expectations or hurt us we want to retaliate. We become defensive and try to protect ourselves. When they seem to deliberately do wrong, we may be tempted to escalate the tension and make things worse. We are repeatedly faced with harsh and hard choices.

However, returning good for evil is a basic Christian strategy for life and relationships. Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That is specifically applied to marriages in 1 Peter 3:1. There it says that a Christian wife may actually win her husband to Christ by her behavior. This is an extremely powerful tool for transformation when a person behaves Christianly in the face of less than Christian behavior from a spouse. In other words, do your very best to help your marriage and do what is right even if the other person does what is wrong.

Will it work? Often it will work, but sometimes it does not work. If it doesn’t work, you will be able to look back and say before God, “I can honestly say I did the best I could. I did what was right. I did everything that I possibly could to make this marriage succeed. I did what was right and my partner did what was wrong and ended the marriage.”

A fifth and final principle is to make divorce the last resort. Research indicates that couples

who do not consider divorce to be an option have a much higher probability of staying together than couples who always think that there’s a way out.

Suppose you go to a physician because you have a sore arm. If the doctor’s first course of treatment is amputation, you probably want to try a different doctor. Amputation may become necessary eventually, but you want it to be the absolute last resort. Try everything else first. If nothing else works, then maybe amputation should come up for discussion.

The Bible lists two reasons for divorce. The first reason is in Matthew 19:9 and is a direct quote from Jesus Christ. He said, “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The Greek word translated “marital unfaithfulness” is *porneia* from which we get our

English word pornography. Most often it refers to heterosexual adultery, although it could refer to homosexual activity as well. Jesus was saying was that adultery is a legitimate, but not a necessary, grounds for divorce and for remarriage.

The second reason is found in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Here it talks about the marriage of a Christian

whose spouse abandons the marriage and says that Christian is then free to divorce and remarry. It says, “. . . if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” The obvious intent of the Bible is that divorce is to be rare and only under very limited circumstances.

1 Corinthians 7:10-12 has a lot of other advice about marriages going wrong and what to do. St. Paul writes:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband

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must not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord):
If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

That seems pretty clear to me. If you are married, even if there is difficulty in the marriage, plan to stay married. As a Christian, don't ever be the person who breaks up any marriage. If circumstances are such that a couple has to separate, do so, but don't remarry. Keep working on reconciliation. If the other person commits adultery, abandons you because you are a Christian or goes and marries somebody else, you are free to divorce and remarry. But, it's the last resort, the amputation that was dreaded but happened anyway.

Some people will say, "This is an absolutely wonderful standard for Christian marriage!" Others will say that this is an absolutely impossible standard for marriage. That takes me back to a line in the Christmas story. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was going to have a baby, even though she was a virgin, and that her relative, Elizabeth, was going to have a baby even though she was infertile. The expression on Mary's face must have been one of doubt or even skepticism. So the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary's response was tender and terrific. She didn't ask how God would do the seeming impossible. She simply said, "I am the Lord's servant!" In other words, Mary said she would do whatever God wanted her to do.

If your marriage goes wrong, act sooner rather than later. Work on your marriage together. If your spouse won't, then work on your marriage alone. Pick your counselors carefully. Adopt a "do my best, no regrets" approach. And make divorce the last resort. But most of all, remember that "nothing is impossible with God", and tell him, "I am your servant and I will do whatever you want me to do."

Lord God of marriages, come powerfully into our marriages. Show us your love. Bring us your power. Where the marriage is good, make that marriage even better. Where the marriage is going wrong, intervene and make it right. If need be, Lord God of marriages, do the impossible in the lives of us your servants. May you have great glory and may you take great delight in all of our relationships together. We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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