

4 Signs That Your Marriage is in Trouble

A man walked into a Burger King in Ypsilanti, Mich., at 7:50 a.m., flashed a gun and demanded cash. The clerk said he couldn't open the cash register without a food order. When the wannabe robber ordered onion rings, the clerk said they weren't available for breakfast. The frustrated man stormed out of the restaurant.

In Tennessee, a burglar realized he'd left his Nikes at the home he'd just robbed. So he returned and asked the lady of the house if she'd seen his shoes. She called the cops, and the guy was arrested.

The mistakes criminals make could fill a book. In fact, they have. Leland Gregory's *The Stupid Crook Book* reveals dozens of real-life stories about captured criminals who are so dumb you almost feel sorry for them.

But we want to show you how to catch the most common time bandits of your day. Beware. These crooks are far smarter than the inept criminals you just read about. You may not even be aware of how much time they are stealing from your marriage.

Of course, there are literally dozens of time bandits walking off with time you could have spent on each other, but the following four are the most common and the sneakiest.

Unfinished Business

One of the greatest time bandits prowling around your relationship is the past. When you are weighed down by regret, pain or guilt over things that happened two decades ago or two hours ago, you will no longer be able to live fully in the present.

Unfinished business consumes your time like few competitors.

Why? Because the brain remembers incomplete tasks or failure longer than any success or completed activity.

Once a project is complete, the brain no longer gives it priority or active working status. But regrets have no closure. The brain continues trying to come up with ways to fix the mess and move it to inactive status. But it can't—not until you work to close it.

If you need to gain closure on anything from your past, the first place to begin is where it hurts. Healing your hurts is essential to feeding your time-starved marriage, not to mention your own emotional health. Why? Because healing the pain from your past protects you from repeating the pain in your present marriage.

This may sound strange, but if we never come to terms with our past pain, we use our marriage as a means to make it right. The trouble is, marriage was never designed to do that. You'll just continue to repeat relationship problems and replay your pain again and again.

Once you identify the loose ends of pain from your past, you'll need to work on resolving them. You may need to apologize to someone you've hurt or forgive someone who's hurt you.

You may need to return something that's not yours or regain something that rightfully belongs to you.

The goal is to deal with the unfinished business from your past. You'll be amazed by how much time you'll reclaim for your marriage by doing so.

Technology

Some guys are car freaks. Some are sports nuts. Me? I'm a gadget guy. I love the latest and greatest technology.

When I first heard of something called Wi-Fi, I was giddy. A

wireless network in my own home! Now Leslie and I could work, pay bills or check our e-mail from any corner of the house: the kitchen, living room and patio, even the bedroom.

The wireless network was just what I needed to carve out more quality time for Leslie and me and our family. Or so I thought.

On the first day of my new wireless life, I checked the headlines of a half-dozen newspapers while sitting at the breakfast table. I scanned the television listings for my evening's viewing. And I checked the course enrollments for my upcoming college class; I was hooked.

That night, after tucking our boys in, we were in bed—just me, Leslie and my Sony laptop. I needed one more look at my e-mail. Leslie, on the other hand, needed to talk.

"When you're done with that, I want to tell you about my day tomorrow," she said.

"OK, go ahead," I said as I clicked away on my keyboard.

"Can we talk without that thing in our bed?" she said, pointing at my computer.

Uh-oh. This isn't good, I thought. Thankfully, I screened out my first impulsive response: Why don't you instant message me?

"Of course," I said out loud as I quickly powered down.

It soon became painfully obvious: The wireless network that was making it so much easier for me to be online was also making it harder for me to pay attention to Leslie.

Who'd have thought that with all the technology designed to give us more time, we'd be cramming all those extra moments we'd saved with even more time-consuming technological wizardry? With all the gadgets, we feel more harried than ever

before.

We still have Wi-Fi, but I now control it more than it controls me—and it never enters the bedroom. If we aren't careful, technology can delude us into thinking we're saving time for our marriages when just the opposite is happening.

Impatience

Most of us want what we want now. We can't wait. So we overextend our budgets, our credit and our calendars.

This same impatience infects our relationships, especially our marriages. We expect our spouses to do what we want when we want.

We grow weary of waiting, even for a moment, if he or she is a bit late. Impatience steals intimacy from our relationship by infusing it with intolerance, irritation and annoyance.

"Serenity now!" If you were a fan of the 1990s television phenomenon called Seinfeld, you immediately recognize that phrase.

The episode featured a subplot about Frank, the father of main character George. Whenever Frank feels tense, he is to lower his blood pressure by calmly saying, "Serenity now." Frank, unfortunately, doesn't get the idea that this phrase is to be said slowly with a deep breath for a soothing effect.

Instead, whenever he is frustrated, he shouts out the phrase in anger. Like a lot of us, he's demanding to have "serenity now!" No time to cultivate it. No time to wait.

Don't allow yourself to get caught in the same trap. Impatience corrodes your time like few other poisons, eating away at what could otherwise be a pleasant moment.

It's tempting to justify impatience by telling ourselves: "This is just how I act when I'm in a hurry. The real me, though, is more loving, and my spouse knows that." Are you

sure?

Take a good look at this “temporary” trait and be sure it isn’t becoming a permanent resident. Giving impatience the boot may be one of the most important things you can do to reclaim the time you’ve been missing from your marriage.

The Clock

We have nothing against clocks. In fact, we have a huge clock in our home that nearly every guest comments on.

We’re not fanatical here. We only want to tell you a story. It’s an old tale of a village that bought a fancy clock tower. Sometime after it was installed, a visitor to the town discovered that all the people were sleeping during the day and working at night.

When he questioned them about this, they answered: “We have the most unique town in America. After we got our new clock, we began to notice that the sun kept rising earlier and earlier every morning. Finally the daytime hours were dark and the night hours were light. We are petitioning the president for special recognition as the only town in America with such a situation.”

As it turned out, the new clock had been running slower and slower because sparrows were roosting inside it. The point? The people of the village were so enamored by their clock that they allowed it to control them instead of the other way around.

And that’s the potential problem with clocks. If we aren’t careful, they can make us their slaves. We can’t extinguish our reliance on timepieces. We’d have chaos. But if we surrender completely to the clock, it spins our relationships out of control as well.

Don’t always give in to the tyranny of the clock. Linger over a latte together every once in a while. If you have a deadline

to meet, don't be irresponsible, but don't be a time tyrant either. It's a fine line to walk. It requires balance—something those driven solely by the clock seldom have.

Overactivity

OK, we said there were four sneaking time bandits we wanted to highlight. But we want to squeeze one more onto the list here to illustrate a point. Pushing one more thing onto the agenda is exactly what this brazen time bandit requires.

Overactivity, the close cousin of overcommitment, is the most obvious time bandit around. "We've just got to make this work," we say as we hurriedly make new arrangements and move things around in our date book, as if it were an unexpected guest looking for a place to sleep.

Allow us to make a fundamental point that may be just what you need to hear to keep this one from robbing you blind. If your family car has become a taxicab for running kids to church activities, school events and children's sporting events, realize that you don't have to do it all. Nowhere is it written that to be a good parent you have to sign your children up for everything and spend all your free time shuttling them around and attending each and every event.

Examine what you might drop from your list. Hold a family meeting to talk about what regaining this time would mean to all of 't feel guilty about trimming the activity list using your own good judgment.

Steal Your Time Back

- None of these will steal your time unless you decide to do nothing about them. What choices can you make to steal back your time? The following questions can help you get started:
- Has technology deluded you into thinking you're saving time for your marriage when just the opposite is happening? If so, how?

- When are you most likely to become impatient and why? Can you think of a time when your impatience actually ended up costing you more time than you thought it might save you? What can you learn from that incident?
- What have you done to bring closure to unfinished business in your own life? You can no longer wonder how you got so busy. Own up to the choices you've made, or the time bandits will keep ripping you off. Don't let them. Regain the moments together you've been missing.

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