

5 Godly Things to Do About Your Spouse's Destructive Behavior

Your spouse's bad behavior can make your life seem as though it's falling apart. Your psyche is stretched to the limit, and you're not sure how much longer you can survive if things don't change. You could really use some concrete ways to move forward or at least a clear way to think about things.

I hear from spouses every day:

"My husband refuses to get help for his gambling and substance abuse. He won't even acknowledge he has a problem."

"My wife is only after me for my money and spends irresponsibly. She refuses to engage in intimacy or conversation."

"My husband has had a mistress for several years. He keeps promising to cut things off with her, but he's back with her again."

"I'm always walking on eggshells around my husband. I never know what will cause him to fly into a rage. I live in fear."

You've tried to change your spouse—unsuccessfully. You've threatened, cried, put up with, tried to let it go, ignored, waited and anything else you can think of. Perhaps you've tried to get professional help and read anything you can find on the subject. You've prayed and prayed, and things are still the same. Am I stuck with this miserable marriage forever? Is this bad enough for a divorce? Why doesn't God fix my marriage when I keep asking Him to?

If you want the same results, keep doing the same thing. If you don't, it's time for a change. Time for you to change.

Feeling emotional, powerless and desperate is understandable. But decisions made from that mindset almost never result in a good outcome.

No marriage is perfect. You and your spouse are both sinners. However, thoughtfully working through the following five areas will provide a framework for you to move forward.

1. Get Honest

Not emotional—honest. What is your spouse doing, really? How is it affecting you? How is it affecting others, such as any children involved? Have you been enabling your spouse's bad behavior in any way? Is your spouse basically a person of good will who is struggling with a specific problem, or do they have an evil heart? Is their heart open in any way, or is it completely hard and closed?

The state of your spouse's heart is often the most critical question of all and not always an easy one to discern. You may need to get some outside perspective from a trusted Christian friend or professional counselor. You may need to spend some time in prayer, seeking God's perspective on the situation.

2. Get Out of the Way

"Behaving badly" and "not meeting my needs" are two very different things. Marriage is not primarily about your happiness; it's about learning to love well. If you're emotional, frustrated or angry because your spouse isn't communicating well, keeps refusing sex or is not as spiritual as you would like, your relationship may need some serious work. But that is very different from them being destructive.

Put your own needs aside, and let your emotions cool down. Although your feelings are important, they will not form the basis for wise decisions. If he/she is engaging in addiction, abuse, pornography, infidelity or is otherwise clearly being destructive, your spouse's bad behavior is the issue, not your

unhappiness.

3. Care Enough to Confront

If your spouse is destroying themselves or the marriage, you are not loving them by ignoring the situation. Only your spouse and God working together can change their behavior, but that does not mean you are powerless. There are many ways to confront; you may need to use several.

If your spouse's heart seems open at all, begin with a conversation. Don't blame them; talk about the behavior, the problem. If you're enabling them in any way, stop! If you or others are in danger, you may need to remove yourself to a safe place before confronting. You can write your spouse a letter. You can take a trusted friend, pastor or counselor with you as you confront. Such interventions are well known as an option for substance abusers; the same principle applies for any bad behavior.

4. Set Healthy Boundaries

It's a mistake to believe there are no boundaries in a healthy marriage. If your spouse has an open heart, they may respond to healthy boundaries. Such boundaries could include such things as requiring marriage counseling, anger therapy, rehab for substance abuse, an accountability group or partner, software/TV/internet controls.

Setting healthy boundaries includes being prepared to follow through with action if your spouse does not do what is required. You have choices in what actions you take. Your position should be something like this: "For our relationship to continue you will need to do ... If you do not, then I will ..." Simple, clear, firm, unemotional. There's more on these ideas in *Boundaries in Marriage*.

5. Care for Your Own Heart

You get worn out physically, emotionally and spiritually when your spouse is behaving badly. You need to proactively get filled up again regularly. Take care of your body with healthy food, rest and exercise. You'll make better decisions when you do. Spend time with healthy godly friends who can speak positive things into your life. Read or listen to uplifting encouraging books, podcasts and other media.

And most of all keep seeking God's perspective on your own heart, your spouse's heart and your marriage. Don't stop praying. If your marriage fails anyway, you will most certainly need His grace to make it through. And if He calls you to stay, you will need His wisdom and courage to be the catalyst for Him to use in restoring your spouse and your marriage.

Your spouse's bad behavior should spur you to take action. My prayer is that your action will be the means God uses to bring a new level of healing and growth to both you and your spouse.

*Reprinted with permission from Dr. Carol's blog. **Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley** is an OB-GYN, minister, author and speaker.*