

5 Life-Changing Steps to Take if You've Messed Up in Your Marriage

Marriage is the union of two sinners. You can be sure your spouse will mess up; that's what sinners do. And the same goes for you. Whether you knew better or not, you will fail your husband or wife in some way, perhaps in many ways. So what do you do if you messed up in your marriage?

Perhaps you've failed to give your spouse the respect, attention or benefit of the doubt they needed. Perhaps you paid more attention to your own needs and desires than unselfishly being the person God needed you to be to your spouse. Perhaps you failed to understand or allowed unhealthy baggage from your past to intrude on your relationship.

And there are the bigger mess-ups. Perhaps you crushed your spouse's spirit with truly destructive words. Perhaps you've indulged in pornography or emotional infidelity. Perhaps you've made disastrous financial decisions that have created lasting harm for your family or have been acting co-dependently.

Or there's the really big mess-up. Perhaps you've crossed the "flesh" line and ended up committing adultery in a physical affair, betraying whatever trust your spouse still had in you.

These mess-ups are not all the same. Some actions cause more damage than others.

But the principles of what to do next are similar. For small mess-ups, these steps may take minutes or hours. For really big mess-ups, these steps may take months, or longer. And you may need help along the way.

But regardless of how you've messed up, here are the steps to take.

1. Own Your Own Stuff

No excuses, no blaming, no weaseling out of this. You did this. While there may be many circumstances that impacted what you did, you said that, responded that way, did that. You let your spouse down. Whether you intended to or not, you caused pain.

Some people never take this first step. Some people remain in denial, blaming their spouse or some other circumstances for their mess-up. But no healing or growth is possible if you don't own your own stuff.

And then some people park here. Don't do that! This is a critical step, and sometimes it takes time to get out of your denial and own your stuff. But once you do that, move to the next step right away.

2. Be Real with God

He knows anyway. And He still loves you. There's absolutely nothing that can keep Him from loving you—not even this.

If you've truly owned your own stuff, it's likely you will struggle with some degree of shame. Remember that shame comes from the enemy, not from God. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1a). If you are feeling condemnation, run back to Jesus.

Jesus loves you right now, before you change. Yes, He calls you to change, but He loves you even before you get to that step. It's important to move forward from a place of knowing God sees you and truly loves you anyway.

3. Examine the Root

While there are no excuses for harming your spouse, there are

reasons that led you to act the way you did. The only thing that will prevent you from harming your spouse in similar ways in the future is if you examine the pathways that led to your harmful behavior.

Did you learn these ways of behaving from your family of origin? Have you failed to adequately take responsibility for caring for your own heart? Have you isolated yourself from other growing believers who can support you? Do you not fully understand what God has to say about the situation—money, sex, marriage and so on?

This step can feel like the surgeon opening up your belly to find the problem. Yes, it hurts. Do it anyway.

But don't do this alone. It's important to do this with Jesus and with others. A fellow follower of Jesus, or a professional if needed, can help you examine the root clearly and receive God's grace in the process.

4. Confess the Harm

God is the one who forgives sins. If you haven't already, make sure you have confessed to Him. He *will* forgive!

But it's in being open in relationship to your spouse that healing comes.

If the mess-up was small, this may simply be saying something such as, "Honey, I'm sorry I didn't listen when you wanted to talk. How did that feel? Can I listen now?"

If the mess-up was big, this process will take much longer. Confessing means you are willing to hear from your spouse the kind of pain they experienced and may still be experiencing. While you may now feel unburdened, your spouse may need significant time to process their own heart. Don't demand your spouse "forgive." The process takes as long as it takes.

5. Change!

In other words, don't do it again!

Once trust is broken, it will take time to demonstrate that you are becoming a different person, and that your spouse can now risk trusting that you will not cause them further harm in the same way.

Unless you have gone through the previous steps, you *will* do it again. This does not mean you can ever expect to be perfect, but it does mean your spouse will need to see you doing the work if they are ever to trust again.

You can only do this with the Holy Spirit doing His work in you.

And next week, we'll talk more specifically about the process of change in regard to the mess-ups in your marriage.

Your Turn: *How long has it been since you messed up in your marriage? Which of these steps has been hardest for you to embrace? Leave a comment below.* {eo}

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