

7 Steps to Dealing With Big Marriage Problems

You could handle the little things, or so you tell yourself. You could pick up his dirty clothes now and then, or overlook the times she forgot to tell you about a purchase she'd made. But this time it's really big. Your spouse has messed up badly. It's all you can think about, and you're not sure you can live with the consequences.

We're talking about such big marriage problems that your relationship is truly threatened. Little ongoing frustrations may eat away at you, but those are for another time. This is about the big stuff.

- You find pornography on your spouse's computer.
- You discover your spouse has been abusing drugs or alcohol—again.
- Your spouse has lied to you about something big—a huge financial mistake, telling you they were one place when they were somewhere else.
- A fight with your spouse becomes physical and you felt truly afraid.
- You find evidence your spouse is having an affair.

Your mind is swirling. How could they do this to you? Shouldn't you have seen the red flags earlier? Aren't you supposed to forgive people, even your spouse, when they mess up? How could you ever do that? Hurt, confusion, anger, fear, despair, guilt, shame—it's overwhelming.

One article such as this can't tell you everything you need to know about dealing with such big marriage problems. But I can give you a framework for the questions to ask and the ways to think about what to do next. You can use these steps to get clarity about your marriage situation and about the actions you may need to take.

If Your Spouse Has Messed Up Badly:

1. What's really going on here? No sugar-coating the truth; it's time to face reality. Your emotions may make this challenging, but you will usually regret decisions you make out of fear or anger or guilt. Put your feelings on hold for a moment, and look at the situation with as much honesty as you can. If you struggle with this, find a counselor, pastor or godly Christian friend to help you see reality.

Here are some questions that may help you evaluate the truth. Is your spouse a good person who did a bad thing, or is this a "bad person" who may have done some (confusing) good things on occasion? What kind of impact is this likely to have on your life, your children, your relationship, your finances? Are there external reasons your spouse behaved this way? (Not to excuse, but to understand—such things as physical or mental illness, extreme pressure, honest lack of knowledge, etc.) Is your spouse sorry for getting caught or honestly sorry for the serious pain they caused you and/or others? How interested is your spouse in doing the hard work that would be required to regain trust or change their character if that is needed?

2. Safety first. Addiction, abuse, infidelity or sexually acting out may put you and/or your children in real danger. Look at this possibility honestly. Do you need to take action in order to protect yourself or your children while you work through the other issues involved? Taking necessary action to prevent harm is appropriate if the danger is real. This decision is a separate one from whether or not to continue the relationship, to forgive or to trust again. Be safe!

3. Own your feelings, but don't follow them. Stuffing your feelings will only damage your own body, soul and spirit, and it won't help you deal with the problem wisely. Conversely, acting out or making decisions based on your emotions will also be counterproductive. You must own your feelings as your own—anger, fear, guilt, confusion, hurt or whatever they may

be. Look at them, feel them, embrace them, write them down or express them in some safe way.

And then let them be. Emotions are to be felt and owned, but they are a very fickle and unreliable basis on which to make decisions. Wait until you have put the emotions aside before making the long-term and important decisions that any marriage problem is likely to require.

4. Forgiveness is for you, not your spouse. Holding on to bitterness and refusing to forgive hurts you—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Choosing to forgive is a process, and it's not easy. But you also must realize that forgiveness does not necessarily mean the relationship is restored. Forgiving your spouse means you let go of your right to seek revenge, to pay them back for the harm they have caused. It means you choose to give God the right to deal with your spouse as He sees fit.

Your spouse may or may not ask for your forgiveness. You can offer forgiveness as a gift whether or not they ask for it, want it or accept it, and whether or not they change.

5. Trust is earned. While forgiveness is a gift you must choose to give, trust is earned. If your spouse has demonstrated a serious character defect that is likely to cause ongoing harm to you or others, it's important to do what's necessary to remain safe. If your spouse promises to do things differently in the future, it's OK to withhold trust until they demonstrate that they are truly making a change. Ongoing outside accountability and help may be important in this process. Placing conditions on extending trust again is sometimes necessary—and a good thing.

If your spouse is doing the hard work necessary to regain your trust, you will want to pray for God to guide you in how much and when to open your heart again.

6. Are you still dancing? Your spouse is always responsible

for his/her behavior. Always. But so are you. It's rare indeed for a serious marriage problem to come up without both parties having some measure of blame. Take an honest look at your own character and behavior. Have you been enabling? Nagging? Cold? Needy? Neglectful? Blind to issues? Critical?

Your own behavior does not excuse your spouse in any way! But the only way you will have a better life in the future—with or without your spouse—is to look in the mirror, accept God's opinion of you, and allow Him to do in your own character what He needs to do.

7. Healing is always possible. You can find healing regardless of what your spouse does or doesn't do. It will take work! But I can assure you that doing the work of healing is always worth it.

God can restore any human being and any marriage where He is allowed to work. That means He can restore your marriage! Whether or not that happens is only partially up to you. Your spouse's choices will also determine the outcome. If your spouse is willing for God to do His necessary work in them (as you are for Him to work in you), your marriage can become even stronger.

I don't know what the outcome of your big marriage problem will be. That's up to you and God—and your spouse.

Along the way, these steps can help you find the clarity you need to see the truth and cooperate with God in the work He wants to do for you—and your marriage.

Question: Has your spouse really messed up big? Which of these steps do you most need to take right now? *{eo}*

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