

7 Steps to Save a Distressed Marriage

Most people treat their pets better than their spouse. It's true.

The person we once adored quickly becomes the enemy once we tie the knot. So how do we beat the "50 percent of Christian marriages end in divorce" odds?

What if I told you the greatest joy you could experience takes place at home—with your spouse?

Before you disagree, hear me out. I'm not a counselor. I'm a survivor of a bad marriage that was heading toward divorce. It took battles with cancer, debt and other distractions before our hearts changed.

Let me explain.

Once married, I clung to my husband for emotional comfort, advice and help around the apartment. I wanted him with me all the time.

But he soon started choosing his buddies over me.

Resentment over his outings with friends led to my withholding of affection. I began eye-rolling when listening to him voice his dreams about a new job venture he was considering—again. And I often dropped reminders of what he could not spend, since I lorded over the budget. No wonder he found opportunities to entertain himself away from home.

Eighteen years and four children later, the man I mocked has become my best friend again.

So, what changed?

Here are seven steps that saved our marriage:

1. Prayer

You can't change your spouse no matter how loud you nag, so take your complaints to God. He won't change your spouse overnight, but He will put people and resources in your path to draw you closer together when you seek Him. He promises that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16).

Not only should you pray *for* him, but you should also pray *with* him. According to a 1993 Gallup poll, married couples who prayed together daily had a divorce rate of 1 percent. Prayer works. Make it a priority.

2. Stop Stealing From Your Spouse

Are you distracted by an office flirtation, an Internet site or an edgy novel? When we aren't happy at home, we seek comfort elsewhere. That innocent encounter at work or the gym or coffee shop seems innocuous, but time focused on others is time stolen from our spouse. Mr. or Mrs. Wonderful from our diversions will never be the answer to our longing for love.

Life is filled with temptations. Set boundaries. To circumvent that overly friendly office buddy, have an escape tactic ready. No closed doors, personal phone calls or lunches out without a third party present. Cheating, emotionally or physically, can't happen if there's not an opportunity.

Along the same lines, avoid late-night Internet usage. Better yet, install an Internet filter. This sounds legalistic, but isn't your marriage worth it?

3. Make Time for Intimacy

Every marriage needs physical closeness. God created this pleasurable act for us to enjoy, and since the best way to keep your marriage in check (other than spending time with God

together) is intimacy, we need to practice this exercise frequently.

Ladies, if you want a happy spouse, put the kids to bed early twice a week and make time for him. Most men desire sex. If we educate ourselves, intimacy can be one of the most fulfilling marriage-building acts. Not to mention if he's getting fed at home, Suzie Tight Skirt's appeal diminishes. Test this theory and see if your spouse does not respond differently to you.

In the same hand, women seek attention from those who value them and listen to what they have to say. Mr. Office Boy starts looking mighty handsome if her husband isn't treating her with kindness at home. Sex and communication go hand and hand. For women, according to marriage specialist Mark Gungor, "Real intimacy begins above the waist. Listen to her; talk to her. ... Men need to understand that for romance to work in the bedroom, there has to be romance outside of the bedroom."

4. Take a Financial Class

Take Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace course or Crown's MoneyLife Finance Study. We had no idea how to handle our checkbook or credit cards or student loans. Many senseless arguments would have been avoided if we were on the same page. Let them get mad at Dave. Take the course and implement these sage practices.

Debt-free living is glorious. You can't argue about money if you're not worried about the bills.

5. Seek Wise Counsel

Plug into a marriage Bible study. Third-party opinions help us take our emotions out of the equation. We all need accountability. We're going to mess up.

Coming together weekly with other Christian couples helped us realize we were not the only relationship with quirky

disagreements. Feeling normal was helpful. So did implementing the advice we received. Each week we worked through an area of our marriage. We started to communicate about sticky subjects and found a common ground. That's where the healing begins.

6. Kill the Contempt

Well-known relationship psychologist Dr. John Gottman studied behavioral patterns in couples and found four common characteristics that increased the likelihood for divorce. These included "criticism of partners' personality, contempt (from a position of superiority), defensiveness, and stonewalling, or emotional withdrawal from interaction." His studies confirmed that "stable couples handle conflicts in gentle, positive ways, and are supportive of each other."

Dr. Gottman equates contempt with pouring sulphuric acid on love: "Not only does it destroy love, but it also destroys the immune system of the person who receives this contempt."

What nonverbal and verbal signals are you sending when you disagree? Can changing our responses really make a difference? The experts seem to think so.

7. Follow the Biblical Mandate for Marriage

Love and respect are biblical mandates (Eph. 5:33). According to marriage expert Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, "Love best motivates a woman, and respect most powerfully motivates a man."

Most men desire admiration and thrive when they are valued. Women, on the other hand, gravitate toward romance novels, chick flicks and weddings. Why? Women love the idea of love—warm fuzzies, first-time tingles, but mostly the security they feel when someone chooses them above any other. *Pick me. Want me. Cherish me.*

There's nothing wrong with this. It's a beautiful design by the Father. God told men to love their wives like Christ loves

the church. Why would He have to tell us this? He knew once the guy got the girl that his focus would shift to conquer work, hobbies, sports or other distractions. There's nothing wrong with hobbies or goals. Just be certain your priorities are straight. An unloved wife builds resentment for her husband.

Likewise, something happens when women value their husband's words. He stands a little taller, he cherishes his wife, and he desires to spend time with her.

Dr. Gottman also discovered that the most important sign of an unwavering marriage was how a couple resolved an argument. He found that lack of respect for your partner pushed them further away. Interestingly, these precepts correlate biblically. Treat each other the way you want to be treated (Matt. 7:12). Honor one another (Rom. 12:10). We have the ultimate template for happiness right in front of us.

Read your Bible, follow God's mandates, and watch your relationship strengthen.

If you are intentional about putting your spouse first, the rest will fall into place. But the choice is up to you. You're a team. Act like a team. Come out swinging to make it, with callused knees and an understanding heart and lots of fun behind closed doors.

Let's skew the 50 percent statistic, and blame our better-than-engagement love on prayer, sex, love and respect.

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