

A Marriage Lesson: The Risk of 'Encouraging' Your Wife

Earlier this year a longtime friend of Man in the Mirror sent me this email:

Remember the time you shared about your wife—"she doesn't need to lose 20 pounds," or something like that? Would you please share that one again? I went looking for it a while ago but somehow it's not in my archives.

My wife is struggling with her weight and I don't think I am doing a good job encouraging her; because she knows me so well, I believe her when she says this. Being fit and trim has always been an important discipline of mine, and now that we are both 50, it seems to be more of an issue for us. Advice?

Thanks, Bryan (name disguised)

Here's what I wrote back:

Bryan,

Thanks for writing and the encouraging words.

So how can you encourage your wife in this struggle? You can't, you shouldn't, you won't, and if you keep trying you're putting your whole marriage at risk, even as far as divorce.

My point in the article was that I had to let the weight issue go altogether. The epiphany was when I realized if my wife lost 20 pounds it would not make me love her any more or make me any more happy.

Basically, God showed me that if I couldn't accept her "as-is," then I really had not addressed the core issues of trying to control her and making my love conditional by putting pressure on her to "stay young."

The bottom line is that I was more interested in preserving an image of us as a couple and her as a woman from younger days. There were so many strands of this selfishness—

I'm still not sure I fully understand. Very confusing.

But as the proverb says, no matter how far you have gone down a wrong road, the only solution is to turn back. So I started repenting daily of my sins against my wife, started praying The Marriage Prayer, and expected her to act like nothing had ever happened.

Guess what? It doesn't work like that. Because of the pressure I had put on her, her spirit had closed toward me in this area. It took about three years before one day she said, "I feel safe with you again."

I had worked hard to control her, and I had to work three times as hard and be very intentional to win her back. So as you can see, this is a much deeper issue than it might first appear.

So my concern for you is that you still want to "encourage" her to lose weight and live out your value of being fit and trim. I share your value. But let me be absolutely clear. Nothing you say about this will encourage her. Nothing. Quite the opposite. It will discourage her. And if you keep at it, worse.

So the question is, can you love and accept her as is? The way God does? Or does she have to lose 20 pounds? Will that make you love her more? Will that make you more happy?

And three years from now, when she finally feels safe again, remember that you were not trying to heal the relationship so you could take another run at her. Let it go.

I'll pray for you,

Pat

I didn't hear from Bryan for a long time, but recently he sent this:

Pat—you responded to my email six months ago, and I am just now saying thank you for your kind and firm counsel. Please forgive me for not telling you sooner how much I appreciate you taking the time to give such a candid and thoughtful response.

As you accurately described, “there are many strands of this selfishness—very confusing” You are so right and I have seen a side of myself I really don't like. The good news is that the Lord used your email, along with some other circumstances, to bring me to a beautiful and yet painful place of confession and brokenness—and this before my wife.

You're right too, that this is a much deeper issue than it might first appear—and thank you for your prayers as I win back my wife's trust. We were high school sweethearts and celebrate 29 years of marriage this March—and want our marriage to be vibrant and fresh.

It's probably important to note that this is from a guy who should know better—not a new believer, but a leader and bible teacher for almost 30 years. Ouch! Yuck. “Lord, may I never forget the sinfulness of my sin.” (I think that's what happened.)

Warm regards,

Bryan

This is one of those lessons that falls in the category, the most difficult lessons to learn are the ones we already know. Men, if you think you are “helping” your wife by trying to “fix” or “encourage” her, I can assure you tough times are ahead.

The solution? Call it by its real name, “control” or

“manipulate,” humble yourself, repent, and give it up.

For three decades, **Patrick Morley** has been regarded as one of America’s most respected authorities on the unique challenges and opportunities that men face. In 1989, he wrote *The Man in the Mirror*, a landmark book that poured from his own search for meaning, purpose, and a deeper relationship with God. With over 3,000,000 copies, this best-selling book has captured the imaginations men worldwide, and was selected as one of the 100 most influential Christian books of the twentieth century.