

Is Generational Dysfunction Sabotaging Your Marriage?

If you are having difficulty in your marriage relationship and desire change, an excellent place to start is with your family history. I know this sounds like something your medical doctor would ask, but it also applies to relationship styles and patterns.

When a couple comes to see me for marriage counseling, one of the first things I ask them to do is to complete a genogram. Similar to a family tree, the genogram looks back a few generations. The partners each fill in as much information as they can about their parents and grandparents.

In therapy, we are looking for patterns—divorce, anger issues, emotional reactivity, depression, anxiety or a history of abuse.

Light bulbs come on as couples look back at their family dynamics diagrammed on a genogram. They can see the generational patterns and identify the ones passed down to them—in other words, the ones their parents or grandparents did not resolve in their lifetimes. You see, that's how it works.

We pass the issues that we don't overcome in our lives down to our children. They can either make changes to resolve the familiar pattern, or they will continue to pass it down to *their* children. That is how generational dysfunction is perpetuated, often gaining momentum and strengthening as it goes from one generation to the next.

This dynamic can be a good thing when it involves positive traits, such as kindness or accepting personal responsibility for your feelings and actions, but it is quite the opposite in situations involving alcoholism or abuse.

Anger issues are a common reason couples seek marriage counseling. One spouse usually has an anger issue and the other partner portrays the complimentary pattern of being codependent and unassertive. It becomes one of the perfect storms in marital therapy.

Each partner brings his or her own generational issues and expectations to the marriage, with each person's role contributing to the couple's relational difficulties. Often, the person with the anger issue is singled out and identified as the patient, while the other partner takes the victim role.

The use of a genogram helps couples reframe the problem and see it as a relationship issue—one to which each person uniquely contributes. Only then will progress be made in healing the marriage, as each person takes responsibility for his or her own attitudes and behaviors and begins to work on changing self, rather than focusing on changing the other.

Your marriage relationship will become healthier and more fulfilling as you begin to recognize and change old patterns that may feel familiar to you. You will experience the freedom that comes from choosing your behaviors, rather than emotionally reacting to situations.

Ephesians 5:33 (KJV) gives us an example of what a healthy marriage looks like. "Nevertheless let everyone of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence *her* husband." Remind yourself often that you can choose the scriptural model of marriage even if you have not seen it modeled by previous generations in your family.

Some helpful questions to ask yourself upon completion of your genogram are:

1. What generational patterns did you discover as you completed your genogram?
2. What attitudes or expectations about marriage have been

passed down to you by your parents or grandparents?

3. Are any of those attitudes sabotaging your marriage? If so, what changes are you willing to make?
4. What healthy patterns are worth holding on to and passing down to your children? List those patterns.

May God bless you as you learn to rise above generational dysfunction and stop allowing unhealthy relational patterns to sabotage your marriage! {eoa}

Excerpts from Stephanie Murphy's recently published book, Rising Higher: Spirituality and Grace in the Healing of Generational Dysfunction have been used in this article by permission.

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