

Is My Marriage Abusive? Here's How to Know

God designed marriage to be a transformative, healing, growth-producing, fulfilling relationship full of intimacy and love. In our sinful, messed-up world, that doesn't always happen. Some would say marriages fulfilling God's design this way are a true exception. But how bad is bad enough? Your marriage may be troubled, but when is it abuse?

More marriages end because of neglect than trauma. Your spouse making you unhappy or not meeting your needs does not equal abuse. Yet the reality remains that some marriages do involve serious and damaging abuse even among Christians. What then?

The troubled spouses I talk with tend to fall into two categories. There are those who are unhappily married and are consciously or unconsciously maximizing their spouse's bad behavior, almost hoping it qualifies as abuse so they can feel less guilty about leaving. If you're in a marriage like this, you have certainly suffered wounds from your spouse, and your misery is real.

Another category are those spouses, usually wives, who are struggling in a destructive marriage that is truly abusive. They feel powerless to leave because of physical threats, extreme psychological control and/or toxic religious pronouncements around submission. "God hates divorce" has been forged into a chain and used as a weapon of control and destruction.

As Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* begins, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Your marriage is unique, and only you and God know the realities you are living with. But these ideas can help you understand whether or not your own marriage is abusive. Looking at the

truth may be difficult, but it can also be liberating.

Here are some things to consider in asking, when is it abuse?

What Abuse is *Not*:

Every marriage struggles. You are a sinner married to a sinner, and that will always cause pain. Marriage is not about happiness; it's about learning to love well. So it's as important to discuss what abuse is not as well as what it is.

Here are some painful realities of marriage that are *not* abuse:

- **Not getting needs met.** There has been no marriage on earth where any spouse got every need met. God never intended marriage to meet all your needs. No human being can withstand that level of pressure or expectation. Learn to appreciate what needs your spouse does fulfill, and find healthy ways to seek fulfillment of other needs—from other healthy people, and most of all from God Himself.
- **Absence of intimacy.** While intimacy is a primary element of a healthy marriage, its lack does not equal abuse. Withholding sex, inability to engage in sex, lack of interest in sex—while pursuing intimacy with your husband or wife is always important, its lack does not on its own equal the end of marriage. If intimacy is a challenge, there are ways to improve that factor in your relationship.
- **Failure to communicate.** Healthy communication is necessary for a healthy relationship. Not talking, living in one's own world, not sharing or responding as you wish or need—those situations may be painful but do not in themselves equal abuse. Communication is a skill that can be learned, even when your spouse does not communicate well.
- **Unmet expectations.** Expectations around finances,

children, intimacy, health, household responsibilities, jobs/careers and so much more are almost certain to be dashed in marriage. Differing and unmet expectations are part of every marriage, and working to find creative ways to deal with them is possible and healthy. Unmet expectations do not equal abuse.

- **Fights and conflict.** Here we get right to the edge. Disagreements are normal. Conflict *will* happen. Couples who learn to handle conflict well may continue to differ, but intimacy can actually increase. It's not the conflict that makes a marriage abusive; it's often how that conflict is handled.

Your marriage, happy or unhappy, will likely have to address these elements. Addressing communication, intimacy and conflict, for example, are things every couple can get better at.

So what, then, does make a marriage abusive?

What Abuse Is:

While every marriage causes wounds that need healing, not every marriage is destructive. Here are three elements I believe are necessary for a troubled marriage to "qualify" as abusive.

1. **Desire to cause harm.** For example, forgetting to inform your spouse about a financial error is very different from scheming to control your spouse through withholding or hiding money. Mental illness or substance abuse do not explain away this idea of choosing to harm. The point is, it's not accidental. When the intent is to harm you, it may well be abusive.
2. **Actually causing harm.** How one does that is somewhat immaterial. This almost always involves a significant element of attempted control, manipulation or domination. Your spouse may do this through physical

injury, emotional trauma, using sex as a weapon, even spiritual punishment or any number of ways. These are not minor “scratches;” they constitute deep and ongoing destruction to your body, mind and spirit.

- 3. Refusal to change behavior.** Anger issues, sexual dysfunction, ongoing criticism—God can and does heal and restore marriages affected by these and other problems, but only when He is given that chance. When a spouse refuses to seek healing, help, transformation and more, God will not force them. And you can’t either.

When these elements are consistently or regularly in play, it’s abuse.

What to Do Next

If your marriage is abusive, get some help right away. There are times God releases someone from a marriage; if you are being abused, this may be one of those times. Don’t go through this alone.

If your marriage is unhappy but not abusive, get to work. You cannot change your spouse, but you can change you. You can learn healthier ways of communicating, pursue intimacy, invite God’s intervention in your relationship and work on learning to love well.

If you’re not sure whether your marriage is abusive, seek input. Only God and you truly know what’s going on; seek His perspective on your situation. Write to me about it. Seek input from a mature godly friend or counselor.

My prayer for you is that you see your marriage as God sees it—honestly and with compassion. And regardless of what the details are, may you know His guidance, peace, hope and presence.

Your turn: Are you looking at your marriage with honesty? How do you believe God sees your marriage? How does that help you

in knowing the next step to take? Leave a comment below. {eo}

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