

Surviving Mid-Wife Crisis

Before you judge your wife for letting herself go, take a good look at the man in your mirror.

Sometimes it's physical—wrinkles and sagging body parts. Other times a raging boredom sets in. Sometimes it's a career that goes awry. Sometimes it's just a simple unhappiness with the way your life is turning out. A man looks at his wife one morning and thinks, Maybe I should trade in my 40 for two 20s.

Forty percent of first marriages eventually end in divorce. Will yours? Many of these dissolutions take place during midlife.

Practically speaking, divorce is never over, and most divorced people wish they had worked harder to make their marriages work.

I've been married to Patsy for 32 years. Patsy saved my life. Long story, but basically my dad got spiritually burned out. As a result, my family left the church and Christianity when Dad was 40 and I was in the 10th grade.

By my senior year, I had wandered far enough astray that I quit high school. For the next six years I was a golf ball lost in the woods. Then I met Patsy. God brought the gospel back into my family line through her family line.

Despite all that I owe Patsy, our 26th year was the hardest for me (and, as a result, the hardest for Patsy too). One day, I looked at Patsy and realized she had become middle-aged. I wanted her to turn back the clock. After a year of pestering her, I finally noticed that I had changed too. Finally, it dawned on me, This is not about her; it's about me. By God's

grace, I woke up and started giving her the honor she deserves.

Far and away, the biggest issue we see at Man in the Mirror is that men's marriages are not working the way God intends.

Brett thought Jennifer's quirks were cute when they were dating, but by the age of 30 her lip smacking and messy housekeeping were driving him crazy. His job often demanded 55-hour weeks, and Jennifer tired of him constantly forgetting to let her know he would be home late for dinner. Every time she asked for him to call her out of respect, he heard "nagging."

At the office Brett worked around many professional women. Some looked really good. Some smelled really good. None complained about him working too much. In fact, Brenda apparently appreciated the sacrifices Brett was willing to make for the company.

Brett found himself fantasizing that Brenda could give him the doting attention he thought he was not getting from Jennifer. In truth, Brett was putting a load on his wife that wasn't fair, but he couldn't see that.

Perceptions aside, by the age of 40 Brett found he was turned off by the wife of his youth. He had long since stopped making many "deposits" into her emotional bank account, and that had only made Jennifer more vocal about her unmet needs. The more she talked, the further away he moved emotionally.

Brett was very close to chucking the whole thing. Brett's parents divorced when he was 13. He had read somewhere that children of divorced parents are 38 percent more likely to divorce themselves. He vowed that would never happen to him.

The only thing keeping him in his marriage was his Christian commitment to not repeat the sins of his parents. Still, he thought, there just doesn't seem to be a way out of this.

Maybe you can relate to Brett's story. Or, maybe you're thinking, I'm not in any kind of crisis now, but how can I avoid one? Either way, here are three ideas to strengthen your marriage today and defend it down the road against potential dead ends.

First, answer the question, 'What's normal?'

Recently I cleaned out my wallet. Several pictures of a younger Patsy had to exit to make way for new pictures. As I stuck those pictures on my mirror, a thought struck me. Patsy was more beautiful at every age than I gave her credit for at the time. This has made me appreciate her so much more today.

Physical beauty is great while it lasts. However, for 99 percent of us at midlife, the purpose of our clothing purchases shifts from emphasis to concealment. We experience a relocation of body parts due to a long association with gravity. Give your wife some slack.

Second, answer the question, 'What should I expect from my mate?'

As I said in my book *Second Half for the Man in the Mirror*: "To successfully negotiate this passage we must be patient. We must let changing physical realities season our expectations. When your body or mind or the body or mind of your mate starts to lose its supple 'youth,' give yourself at least a couple of years to adjust your expectations."

In writing about what makes a successful marriage in *Generation to Generation*, Edwin H. Friedman said, "In reality, no human marriage gets a rating of more than 70 percent." In other words, even the most successful marriage will only work right about 70 percent of the time.

All disappointment is the result of unmet expectations. If you will lower your expectations of your mate, you will both be better off.

Third, practice the principle of the 'emotional bank account.'

This is easily, the most powerful marriage concept I've run across. Here's how it works:

Every wife has an "emotional bank account" into which we make deposits and from which we make withdrawals. Basically, every time we interact with our wives, whether verbal or nonverbal, we make a deposit or a withdrawal.

For example, you've had a rough day. You come home, slam the door, expel loud grunts simulating a large zoo animal, plop down on a chair, turn on the television and bury your nose in the paper. Is this a deposit or a withdrawal from your wife's emotional bank account? OK, you get the picture.

Now, let's say the following morning you feel terrible for being such a bum the night before, so you take your wife coffee in bed. That would be a deposit, right?

Here's the big idea: After a few years, a lot of wives end up empty. Their emotional bank accounts have been depleted. Why? Too many withdrawals, not enough deposits.

This is not merely a "cute idea," but is the Continental Divide between those marriages that make it and those that don't. Wives and husbands alike can be controlling, neglectful, strong-willed, pouters, unexpressive or unappreciative.

Withdrawals like that, without a plan to make offsetting deposits, will eventually destroy a marriage.

Survival Strategies

What if you are already in the middle of a marriage crisis? Take these three steps.

Give it two years. Whatever your marriage problems, however you feel, patiently entrust those feelings to God in faith, and two years from now you will feel a lot differently. I promise.

Remain committed to the institution of marriage. It's actually more important to be committed to the institution of marriage than it is to your wife. Notice I didn't say it isn't important to be committed to your wife—that's crucial. But it's even more important to be committed to the institution of marriage. Why? If your commitment is to a person rather than the institution of marriage, what is the moral glue that keeps you in place during those inevitable times when you just don't like each other very much?

Begin making deposits into her 'emotional bank account.' Expect nothing in return. Remember, she may feel like you put her into bankruptcy. Send her flowers. Write her notes. Take her out to dinner. Pick up her favorite magazine. Offer to stop for groceries on the way home. Find out her love language (how she wants to be loved), and love her that way. Don't expect her to trust your motives right away. But be consistent, and do so daily.

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