

When a Marriage Grows Cold

My book, *Divorce Proofing Your Marriage*, deals with 10 lies that lead to divorce and 10 truths that help prevent it. Judging by the numerous radio call-ins, emails and letters I've received with the question, "What do you do when a spouse tells you he no longer feels love for you," Lie No. 5—"I've lost that loving feeling, and it's gone, gone, gone"—has apparently hit a national nerve.

To hear those words from someone who was once crazy about you, couldn't live without you and publicly committed his or her future to you is devastating. It's normal to wonder: What happened?

The process is not a mystery. Love gets "lost" through our actions and attitudes.

Relationship deterioration is progressive. It begins with minor discontent, a little criticism here and there. Then criticism becomes more frequent.

Confrontation moves from challenging behaviors to character assassination. You search for negative attributes and expect to find them.

After months of criticism, you begin to feel contempt for your partner. You progress from disapproval and unhappiness to an all-out feeling of disgust toward him or her.

Eventually, contempt kills love. Regularly you entertain thoughts of: "I don't love this person anymore. I don't deserve this. I'm unhappy. I want out."

The Pharisees are biblical examples of men who allowed criticism to turn to contempt. They were continually angry at and critical of Jesus. How dare He heal on the Sabbath, talk to women and touch dead people! Criticism eventually gave way to feelings of contempt—contempt so deep they plotted to kill

Him.

Are you like the Pharisees? Do you constantly find fault with your spouse? Has faultfinding moved from criticism to feelings of contempt? Perhaps you are thinking: I can't stand the person I married. I want a divorce.

Contempt has no place in the heart of a Christian. Jesus commanded us to love one another. If you feel contempt, repent. Whatever led you down the contempt path must be handled swiftly, in love, with forgiveness, release of judgment and grace. This is God's way.

Maybe you don't feel contempt for your partner but are defensive because you've been criticized. When attacked, you put up a wall. If you stay defensive, your relationship will suffer.

Defensiveness creates a block to intimacy. Eventually you will grow apart emotionally from your spouse. And emotional distance is a significant predictor of divorce.

Finally, a spouse can respond to criticism by stonewalling (shutting down emotionally and refusing to respond). Usually stonewalling comes after criticism and defensiveness have been present a while.

Stonewalling is a defense shield that protects from emotional distress. However, it too leads to emotional distance.

People don't just "fall out of love" with one another. Instead, they allow negativity and unresolved relationship issues to build until they feel out of love.

Don't go by your feelings. Lost love can be restored. Here are ways to begin:

- Remember your history. You were once friends and attracted to each other. Start treating your spouse like your best friend again.
- Focus on the good. Identify, think about and speak of

the good qualities your spouse has.

- Build up a caring relationship. If you want to feel loved, love first—and let your actions show it by doing caring things to make your spouse feel special.
- Love, love, love. Love your spouse as yourself. It's biblical!
- Sow good seed. You reap what you sow. This is a scriptural law that applies to relationships as well as to other aspects of your life. If you sow the fruit of the Spirit, you'll reap love.
- Control your tongue. There is incredible power in what we say (see James 3).

You won't feel like doing these things, so don't wait until you do. Instead, choose to restore lost love by acting and thinking in a loving manner. Criticism will stop, and defensiveness will go. Lost love will be rekindled.

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