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## Is Divorce the Right Choice for You?

**It may seem like your marital relationship is on the rocks right now. But are you sure divorce is the only option -- or even the best one?**

By Jeffrey Cottrill

Divorce is a painful, difficult experience that often has shattering effects on people's emotions, finances, and familial relationships. Yet the rate of divorce in North America has been alarmingly high for the last few decades, and it shows no signs of slowing down. Of course, some marriages are destined to end due to chronic abuse, addiction, fundamentally incompatible goals or morals, or major changes in one or both spouses' lives or personalities. But is this true for every marriage that ends in divorce?

If you're considering divorce, remember that this decision will deeply change the lives of your spouse, your children, your parents, and maybe extended family and friends as well as your own. Divorce is not something to be decided hastily. It's a choice to end the most important relationship in your life -- a relationship that, once upon a time, may have been wonderful. You may feel sure there's no bringing back the marital satisfaction you once enjoyed (or expected). But is divorce going to solve your current problems -- or just create more?

Remember that even great marriages require work. All romantic relationships are, to some degree, an exercise in compromise: there's always some level of adjustment toward each other's conflicting tastes, schedules, moods, quirks, and expectations, because there's no such thing as a couple whose personalities are completely in sync with each other. But when this work pays off, a healthy marriage can be a source of incredible happiness, comfort, and security. Should you throw away such a potentially good thing? Ask yourself if it's worth making the effort to see if your marriage can be saved before you file for divorce.

### Why do good marriages break down?

In a DivorceMagazine.com poll, 29% of respondents said that infidelity had caused their divorce; 22% blamed the marital split on communication problems; 15% said that the problem was basic incompatibility; and 14% cited emotional or physical abuse. Other reasons included drug addiction, financial woes, and one spouse being a workaholic.

"A variety of factors can lead to breakdowns," says John Gray, Ph.D., the author of the famous *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* books. "External pressures such as job loss, health problems, family issues, and internal problems such as infidelity and changing values can contribute." Sometimes, certain behaviors or changes (such as repeated infidelity or abuse) directly lead to irreparable marital breakdown; other times, however, they're temporary problems that you can work through.

"Sometimes, couples simply grow apart, in different directions, and they're not conscious of it," says Otto Collins, a relationship coach in Chillicothe, OH and co-author (with his wife, Susie) of *Should You Stay or Should You Go?* "Everyone grows all the time, in different ways. You and your partner can become different people, but there's a problem if you're not aware of where each other is." It's only natural that individual personalities evolve and mature during the course of each person's life, and successful long-term relationships should be able to adapt to such changes.

This separate evolution can cause couples to put other priorities in their lives ahead of their marriages. For example, this happens when one or both spouses get deeply involved in their careers, with their children's lives, or with separate social crowds and interests. It's not that they intended to neglect the marital relationship in the first place; maybe they just started to take it for granted. "They put the relationship on the back burner," says Susie Collins. "People quit talking about what's important to them and lose track of who they really are. Then they wake up and ask, 'Who am I married to?'"

Another frequent problem is the unrealistic expectations that many of us bring to love and marriage. "All marriages, even good ones, go through developmental stages," says Michele Weiner-Davis, MSW, who runs Divorce Busting, a therapeutic center in Illinois that focuses on saving marriages. "When their marriages hit the terrible twos and the teenage years, people begin to think they've made a mistake or married the wrong person." Much of it also stems from the faulty examples we grew up with, she adds. "Most of our parents weren't great role models, so we enter marriage with no effective notions of how to make it work."

We all carry our own idealistic pictures of a perfect relationship with us -- notions that can be sorely tested by reality. When you fall in love with the right person, it's natural to anticipate never-ending joy. And perhaps there will be a lot of fun, excitement, and intimacy in your married life. But love means more than this. It also means accepting both the best and worst in your spouse. It means supporting and encouraging each other through the bad times as well as the good. Far from the traditional fairy-tale notion of "happily ever after," successful marriages involve working through and surviving problems, setbacks, and conflicts to become stronger.

"Marriages never exist in a static state," says Dr. Gray. "In a real sense, they have a life of their own. I like to say that marriages move through seasons: warm and loving and exciting in summer, and sometimes distant and strained in winter. Every loving relationship has its own winters. The issue is not whether these challenges will come, but how a couple will address them when they arise."

"Couples need a roadmap of what goes on in a normal marriage," explains Diane Sollee, the founder and director of Smartmarriages.com. "They're always comparing themselves to 'how happy I should be.' But it has nothing to do with whether you find Mr. or Ms. Right. It has little to do with 'compatibility', because even incompatible couples have made it. The courtship process is about looking for compatibility, but after you're married, things change and you'll find lots of incompatibilities between you. Whether you understand that this is normal will predict how well you do."

Lori H. Gordon, Ph.D., founder of the PAIRS relationship-skills programs, suggests that our notions of what constitutes a successful marriage have changed in the last several decades. "In the past, you had a good marriage if your husband brought home the paychecks and didn't hit or abuse you. But that's no longer the standard," she says. "Today, men and women look for love, pleasure, and intimacy and have a desire for connection and bonding. If they can't find and nurture that bond, it leads them to decide they might as well leave the marriage."

So there are many possible reasons, internal and external, why your marriage may seem to have lost its spark -- but most of them don't necessarily mean that the relationship is over.

### **Can You Rescue Your Relationship?**

Whether or not you've been able to put your finger on what the problem is, you need to decide if it's worth investing your time and energy (and your spouse's) to save the marriage. How do you know?

According to Otto Collins, one factor is your willingness to work it out. "Ask yourself: 'Do I want the marriage to be saved?'" he advises. "Some people aren't committed to creating the relationships they want. But if they want to, they can." And Susie Collins adds that both spouses should be willing to work at it. "It takes both people saying, 'Yes, I'm committed,'" she says. "If one person isn't in there, the process might drag on for years."

Weiner-Davis strongly believes that most marriages are worth saving and their problems are solvable. "To me, healthy and happy marriages are essentially no different from most couples that are divorcing," she says. "Hopelessness is the cancer in marriage. People convince themselves that their problems are too huge to surmount and so they have to divorce. When couples think that change is impossible, that's when they throw in the towel. So my work as a marital therapist has focused on injecting a healthy dose of optimism and hope into couples."

If the marriage is salvageable, both of you must be willing to do things differently -- as opposed to carrying on the same mistakes that have kept the marriage in stagnation or trouble. "It depends on your openness to learning and change, and on your willingness to talk about what's causing your unhappiness," says Dr. Gordon. "Attitude is very important. If you both say, 'It's over' -- if you're that closed toward trying to change things, I wouldn't give your marriage much hope for survival. But I've seen huge transformations come about when one person is open to change."

According to Dr. Gray, it's a matter of distinguishing between whether your conflict is temporary or symptomatic of permanent distance between you. "Disagreements -- even those that are bitter -- and falling out of love are two different things," he points out. "Just as people grow close, they can grow apart. This process is distinct from two people going through a difficult period in their relationship. For the committed couple that is going through difficult times, there is a willingness on the part of one, and eventually both, to seek common ground. For those marriages where one or both has fallen out of love, the only thought is to head for the exit and not to search for points of reconciliation."

Sollie suggests that, as with married life, the public today needs to be better educated about the realities of life after divorce. "We've failed to give people an accurate picture," she says, referring to some mental-health professionals who recommend divorce too quickly. "Almost everybody who gets divorced expects to remarry somebody better or move on to a different life." Yet the rate of divorce for remarriages is considerably higher than that for first marriages, she says. "And there's no such thing as a permanent divorce when you have children, because you still have to deal with the other parent. Often, there's a great motivation to stay married when you know the reality."

It's even possible that you may come to realize that the problem is not that the marriage isn't working, but that it's merely in a slump. Like everything else in life -- friendships, careers, etc. -- marriages also go through periods of "downtime," or, as Dr. Gray puts it, they return to the "winter" stage. Sometimes marriage slumps are seriously exacerbated because of neglect on the part of both spouses; often, though, it's just part of a natural cycle in which the relationship becomes a lower priority in the spouses' lives. If you have some patience and are prepared to put some work into your relationship, things might pick up again.

### Trying to Save Your Marriage

Happy marriages don't emerge from a vacuum. They're products of communication, teamwork, compromise, and adjustment to constantly changing circumstances. You and your spouse may be able to save your relationship on your own simply by employing these values. However, if the problem seems too big to solve by yourselves, you might want to get some outside help.

"A new movement that has been taking the U.S. by storm is marriage education," says Weiner-Davis. "It's strange that a marriage license is the only license you can get without required education. Couples have rocky times because they're lacking in relationship skills that have to be taught and learned. The more tools you have in your toolbox, the more likely you are to save your marriage." Marriage counseling or classes may point you toward alternatives you haven't considered -- or show you precisely in what areas you've been struggling.

"Being a counselor, it probably sounds like I'm simply endorsing my own profession," says Dr. Gray, "but going together to a marriage counselor can be the best investment of your time and money. Why? Because there are times when you have both become locked into your own positions, and a third party who favors neither spouse can be essential in allowing you to find common ground and rebuild a relationship that, for whatever reason, has been damaged. The average couple will spend more on any vacation than they would ever spend on two or three months of working with a therapist. Help getting past those issues that divide you can bring more relief to your marriage than any week in Hawaii."

Dr. Gordon suggests taking a course or workshop in relationships, such as a local PAIRS class. "We were not born knowing how to sustain a long relationship," she explains. "As we need lessons for driving a car, we need the same for marriage or parenthood." She points out four distinct stages in the experience of learning how to maintain healthy relationships: "We start out 'unconsciously incompetent.' It's not true

that we're born to live happily ever after: we need education and training to sustain a loving marriage. The second stage is "conscious incompetence," in which you know how much you need to learn. The third stage is "conscious competence," and the fourth is "unconscious competence" -- when you're unconsciously doing the right thing to keep the marriage going."

There are also things you and your spouse can attempt on your own. Read a book about communicating with and understanding your mate, or maybe one about rekindling passion. Try spending more time together (away from the distraction of the kids, if at all possible), doing something you both enjoy -- from ballroom dancing to bowling to hang-gliding to horseback riding. Regular participation in a fun and/or exciting activity could remind you of why you got married in the first place, and it will give you something to talk about aside from the bills and who is taking the kids to soccer practice. Perhaps all you need is to spice up the romance again, to recapture the excitement of the early part of your relationship. A vacation together, or a little sexual experimentation with the help of a book or video designed for couples, might fit the bill here.

On the other hand, if the problems stem from the fact that you've already been spending too much time together and stifling each other, maybe you need a bit of temporary time apart. Even in the best relationships, individuals need their own space to some degree.

The Collins' suggest concentrating on the positive aspects of the relationship. "People tend to focus more on what's wrong with the relationship than on what's right," says Otto Collins. "We encourage people to appreciate each other. Think, "This person is special to me. How can I acknowledge this?" You can express little kindness, for example: those things can make a huge difference." Another way is to turn your conflict into diplomacy, he continues. "One of the best things you can do is what we call "making your steps clear': let the other person know where you are in the relationship. Create agreements for how the relationship is going to be."

Susie Collins adds that "such agreements can include, "I'll help more around the home," or "I agree to spend more time with you," or having weekly dates. Talk about it. Agree to do something once every week that you haven't done in a long time. Things like that can keep a relationship juicy and flowing. Find ways to be on the same page on how you'd like the relationship to be. You should make the relationship a priority from the beginning and keep the spark alive. Give the relationship the importance you want it to have."

"Communication is another huge issue," says Otto Collins. "It's important to be authentic, real, and honest. We all change, and you need the courage to share what's really in your heart and soul and to see how your partner responds." Ironically, he points out, "when people do break up, it's then that they're willing to share thought and feelings they've held within them for years. If you're committed to saving the marriage, share things now with the intention to create." Authentic communication is not the same as dumping, venting, or blaming.

According to Sollee, one of the most important skills you should have in relationships is the ability to manage conflict. "In the marriages that make it, the spouses understand that disagreements are normal," she says. "They know it's normal to have to work around differences and manage them." Keeping a marriage going doesn't mean you'll never have disagreements or conflicts: it depends on how you handle them. You and your spouse can work out your problems in a rational way, or you can choose to ignore the problem and continue to drive each other crazy. "Some people think that if it's true love, they'll agree on everything. For them, it's not going to work."

Just as important as working out conflicts is the willingness to forgive each other for past wrongs and let them go. Contrary to what many people think, it is possible to get past betrayals, infidelity, boredom, and other disappointments -- as long as they're not repeated over and over. And of course, you must forgive your spouse's annoying habits and quirks, or any characteristics he or she can't help, to have any hope of staying content in the marriage.

## **Happily Ever After?**

Many people think that when you're in a bad marriage, the only way to find happiness again is to get divorced. However, a study released from the University of Chicago found that, on average, unhappily married adults who get divorced are no happier five years later. In addition, about two-thirds of the observed unhappy marriages that stayed together actually turned around and became happy in the same time span. While divorce is necessary and unavoidable in some situations, it shouldn't be looked upon as a quick fix for all of your marital problems -- largely because the marriage itself may not be the problem. Instead, try fixing things within the marriage first before you make that final decision.

"Don't throw in the towel until you can accept that what you'll get is single life or remarriage, which can both be hard," says Sollee. Making a new start on your own is extremely difficult, so why not attempt a new start with your spouse first?

## Making Marriage Work

### Positive signs

You might be able to save your marriage if:

- at least one of you is willing to seek help in some way: marriage counseling, relationship workshops, books on how to re-ignite passion
- you both recognize that disagreements are a normal part of any marriage
- you're open to learning how to communicate openly and honestly -- without accusing or blaming each other, or "hitting below the belt"
- you're willing to accept responsibility and apologize for the damage you've done to your spouse and to your marriage
- you're willing and able to devote time and effort to improving your relationship
- you both believe the marriage is worth trying to save.

### Negative signs

Divorce might be the best choice for you if:

- there's a pattern of abuse, drug addiction, or repeated infidelity
- neither of you is willing to change or adapt to present circumstances
- neither of you is able to forgive past wrongs or make amends
- you're committed to seeing yourself as 100% innocent and your spouse as 100% guilty regarding the problems in your relationship
- one of you has declared a new sexual orientation
- you believe the marriage isn't worth trying to save.

## Where to Get Help

If your marriage is having problems and you're interested in keeping it alive, here are just a few of the many resources available to you:

- The PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) program conducts courses and workshops across the U.S. and Canada that teach the skills necessary to sustain good relationships. Visit their website at [www.pairs.com](http://www.pairs.com).
- Divorce Busting offers telephone consultations by self-described "marriage die-hards" who give you tools necessary to renew your bond with your spouse. Call (800) 664-2435 or visit [www.DivorceBusting.com](http://www.DivorceBusting.com).
- SmartMarriages.com is full of useful essays and studies on what makes marriages work.
- Susie and Otto Collins offer numerous articles and a free weekly newsletter featuring practical tips on improving relationships at [www.collinspartners.com](http://www.collinspartners.com).
- Imago Relationships International trains counselors in Imago therapy, which provides tools for transforming relationships. You can find an Imago therapist near you at [www.ImagoTherapy.com](http://www.ImagoTherapy.com).
- Retrouvaille is an international program for couples in troubled marriages, separated individuals, and those who want their previous marriage to work again. Visit [www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.org) or call (800) 470-2230 (in the U.S.) for more information.