

INDICATIONS YOUR MARRIAGE NEEDS HELP

From your children's behavior to physical abuse, several indicators can help you determine if your marriage needs help.

by Mitch Temple

Input From Family and Friends

If your family or friends recognize that you have a problem that needs addressing, pay attention. People outside your marriage can often spot a serious problem before you can. Family members and friends often have intuitive hunches or become concerned about your relationship based on behaviors or attitudes you may manifest. Listen carefully if someone says, "You guys need marriage counseling."

Children's Behavior

Another indicator involves your children. Their behavior can often provide a barometer of what is occurring inside a home. You and your spouse may believe that the current level of interaction and health in your marriage is okay and just the way it will be, but your children may sense that something is wrong and needs to change.

Young children often react to marriage problems through abnormal behavior. They begin to act out at school, around friends or even at home. The same is true of teens, who will often react to trouble at home by becoming involved in activities or with people that are out of character. Teens typically attempt to deal with the stress of an unhealthy marriage in unhealthy ways. Teen behavior and attitudes often provide a means of medicating their pain.

The Present Compared to the Past

A very practical, commonsense indicator that you need counseling comes from comparing the way your marriage used to be, to the way it is currently. In the beginning of marriage, most couples spend a great deal of time together, serve one another, compromise on differences, communicate and solve basic problems. Yet time, conflict and the stresses of life have a way of squeezing out healthy habits. A marriage cannot survive without a regular dose of basic nurturing.

If these practices were once commonplace and are now extremely rare or nonexistent, your marriage is likely struggling. All relationships become sick or eventually die without these basic ingredients being added to everyday interactions.

Physical Abuse

If physical abuse is taking place in your marriage, the first concern is safety. If you are being physically abused or threatened, get to a safe place. Don't remain in a situation where you are likely to be hurt again. Contact your local abuse hotline or the police. Though you may think what is occurring is justified, and you don't have any options, don't believe it. Physical abuse is never justified or normal. There are always options and people who can help you.

Substance Abuse

Most addiction problems in marriage – such as drugs, alcohol, gambling and pornography – cannot be solved by the addict or the spouse alone. Treatment for the specific addiction is a complex and long-term process. Most people cannot just stop an addictive behavior. It will not just go away. It requires professional help and ongoing accountability. Ongoing counseling and inpatient treatment is often required to effectively deal with an addiction. It can quickly destroy a marriage, so don't try to deal with it on your own.

Sexual Problems

Because sexual dynamics in marriage are so personal and so much a part of biblical oneness, this area of your

marriage should be nurtured and protected. If sexual problems are persistent in your marriage, avoiding or ignoring them will not make them go away. Sexual problems can lead to more severe problems, such as a spouse seeking alternatives for having physical or emotional needs met. The Internet, pornography Web sites and online chat rooms are all breeding grounds for more problems.

As eating properly is essential to good physical health, healthy sex is vital to good marital health. Don't ignore sexual problems in your marriage.

Emotional Problems

If you or your spouse begin to experience problems such as ongoing anger, depression, anxiety, abnormal stress, guilt or biochemical problems (i.e., bipolar symptoms, schizophrenia, paranoia or other psychosis), help is needed. Emotional problems are often reactions and responses to something being out of balance with your spouse or in the relationship. Until the core problem(s) is properly addressed, the presenting problem(s) and emotional disturbances will keep reoccurring. One emotional problem left untreated can lead to more serious problems. For example, unhealthy anger can lead to severe depression. Until the anger issue is addressed, the depression will likely continue.

Extramarital Affairs

The discovery of an affair is one of the darkest and most painful moments in marriage. The emotional damage and accompanying symptoms that take place after an affair are monumental. There is no hurt or pain like the pain felt by a betrayed spouse. The emotional pain and intensity reflect the experience of an extremely traumatic event. Shock, denial, anger, depression and other emotions are normal. When this level of hurt occurs, you need to get professional help. After an affair, most people can't go through the healing process successfully without outside intervention. You experience thoughts, feelings and spiritual challenges never felt before.

Being objective and trying to manage the roller coaster of emotions alone should not be attempted without professional Christian counseling. Weekend marriage intensives are also available: They are specifically designed to help turn around marriages which have experienced crises such as affairs. Ongoing counseling and support are always necessary even after a couple attends an intensive or crisis seminar.

Realize that an extramarital affair doesn't necessarily mean your marriage is over. In fact, as painful and difficult as it can be, an affair has proven to be the turning point in many marriages to help them move beyond dysfunction and pain to health and success.

Withdrawal

Prolonged withdrawal is always a dangerous sign. Withdrawal in a marriage indicates that one or both of you have reached a point of such intense pain that you can't function inside the relationship any longer, so you withdraw physically or emotionally. The natural result of withdrawal is a downward spiral into an apathetic state where you simply don't care any more. Communication, sex, affection and other normal relational necessities become nonexistent.

Ongoing withdrawal is one of the most difficult states a married couple can be in or get out of. As long as there is some type of interaction, including healthy arguments, there is still some level of concern or care in the marriage. But when one or both withdraws, it's a sign they have given up.

Counseling is typically needed to redirect the couple to the basics and start over to rebuild the trust, concern and emotion vital to the growth and functioning of a healthy marriage. Remember that just because you have tried counseling before, there is no reason not to try a different type of program or counseling in the future.

Destructive Patterns

Do you find you continue to follow the same destructive pattern? If you continue to experience a problem, and the same reactions surface repeatedly, it's likely you need outside help. Doing the same thing will only net you the same result. It is extremely easy for a couple to get into a perpetual rut. The only way to get out of a deeply rutted pattern is to change course and responses. Calling an experienced Christian therapist could be the first step to pull

you out of the rut.

Some patterns can be altered without outside intervention. For example, a wife may consistently complain and nag as soon as her husband walks in the door from work. If she is made aware of this unconscious habit, she could easily become motivated to break it. Simply learning to give her husband a few minutes to unwind after arriving home may also precipitate a willingness on his part to respond to his wife's requests more promptly.

Negative Spiritual Relationship

The Bible teaches us that a marriage is systemically connected to a couple's relationship with God. If your marriage is unhealthy, it will eventually affect your spiritual life. The apostle Peter writes:

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives . . . Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:1-2,7, NIV).

Marriage problems can obstruct healthy access to God and the spiritual blessings that flow from it. If your marriage is in a tremendous amount of pain, chances are you will not focus on your relationship with God. You may even start acting like someone who is not a child of God. You will tend to say and do things that are out of character and dishonoring to God. Pain has a way of overriding our values, instincts and even our beliefs.

For example, no matter how well trained and mildly tempered a dog may be, if you stand on his paw long enough and with enough intensity, he may bite you. The same is true with pain: If you stay in it long enough, your thoughts, beliefs and behavior can be negatively (and dramatically) affected.

If your marriage is unhealthy, your walk with God may be as well. It is difficult to have one right and the other wrong. God purposely connected our spiritual relationships with our heavenly relationship. The way we perceive and treat each other definitely affects how we perceive and respond to our heavenly father.

God commands us to treat each other with love and respect: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband" (Ephesians 5:33). God also views your marriage as a lifelong commitment to your spouse and to Him.

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