

Married and Lonely?

Combating the threat of isolation in your marriage relationship

by Dennis and Barbara Rainey

If there's one thing worse than a miserable, lonely single person, it's a miserable, lonely married person. The irony is that no husband or wife marries with the intention of being isolated from a mate. Most people believe that marriage is the cure for loneliness, but I want to warn you: You began battling the dreaded foe of isolation as soon as you drove off on your honeymoon. Isolation has reached epidemic proportions in the most intimate of human relationships. In addition to more than a million legal divorces each year¹, isolation saps the strength from millions of marriages that still appear intact.

A psychology professor writing in Psychology Today observed:

I know of no more potent killer than isolation ... no more destructive influence on physical and mental health than the isolation of you from me and us from them. Isolation has been shown to be the central agent in the development of depression, paranoia, schizophrenia, rape, suicide, and mass murder ... The devil's strategy for our times is to trivialize human existence and to isolate us from one another while creating the delusion that the reasons are time pressures, work demands, or economic anxieties."²

I believe that isolation is Satan's chief strategy for destroying marriage. Barbara and I feel its dividing tug in our relationship when we have disagreements and misunderstandings. Our busyness repeatedly invites its presence into our marriage.

Like a terminal virus, isolation invades your marriage silently, slowly, and painlessly at first. By the time you become aware of its insidious effects, it can be too late. Your marriage can be disabled by boredom and apathy, and even die from emotional malnutrition and neglect.

What Is isolation?

The dictionary will tell you that isolation is "the condition of being alone separated, solitary, set apart," but I like what our daughter Ashley said once when she slipped into my study to ask me what I was writing about.

"Isolation," I explained. "Do you know what that means?"

"Oh," our ten-year-old replied, "that's when somebody excludes you."

Ashley's answer is a profound observation on human relationships. When isolation infects a marriage, a husband and a wife exclude each other. When you're excluded, you have a feeling of distance, a lack of closeness, and little real intimacy. You can share a bed, eat at the same dinner table, watch the same TV, share the same checking account, and parent the same children—and still be alone. You may have sex, but you don't have love. You may talk, but you don't communicate. You live together, but you don't share life.

Because of the alarming number of couples in good marriages who are unaware of this problem, I must state forcefully a sobering truth: Every marriage will naturally move toward a state of isolation. Unless you lovingly, energetically nurture and maintain intimacy in your marriage, you will drift apart from your mate.

The soul was not created to live solo. We yearn for intimacy, and marriage is where we hope we'll find it. The tragedy is that few couples achieve it.

Telltale signs of isolation

Barbara and I have seen this death of hope occur in the marriage of some friends. In many ways their story is typical of many others.

This couple enjoyed dating and were married in their early twenties. After a brief honeymoon, they packed up their belongings and moved to a new city. On the two-day drive to their new home, they began to notice their differences. She felt alone and apprehensive about their new life together; he felt puzzled that their conversation had dried up so quickly. Isolation had already begun.

She took a demanding job, and he was promoted in his. Busyness and fatigue set in as they moved into the stream of everyday life. Instead of having companionship, they felt alone. She felt undiscovered, unknown. He felt uncared for.

Initially, the birth of their first child seemed to bring them back together. Later, when she returned to her job, she adjusted her hours to maximize her time with the baby. Life became focused on the child. Their marriage wore down under the draining influence of isolation.

She would bring up a problem. He would quickly deny it or say, "When this phase in our lives passes, things will get better."

Because their frequent spats became increasingly painful, each retreated and learned to feel safe that way. Both realized that life was smoother when they wore their masks, and they played the marriage game as if there wasn't anything wrong.

Although they seldom missed church, and no one who knew them would have guessed it, isolation had firmly entrenched itself in their marriage. Had this couple not attended a FamilyLife Weekend to Remember® conference, their marriage might have continued its spiral farther into isolation and, ultimately, divorce. But at the conference they recognized they had a problem. They realized they needed to take steps toward oneness as a couple by biblically resolving conflict, listening to each other, and making God the Builder of their home.

As it happened with this young couple, isolation starts when husband and wife slowly drift apart in ways they may not recognize at first. *Signs include the following:*

- Feeling that your spouse isn't hearing you and doesn't understand.
- Having attitudes of, "Who cares?" "Why try?" "Tomorrow we'll talk about it—let's just get some sleep."
- Feeling unable to please or meet the expectations of your spouse.
- Sensing that he's detached from you.
- Feeling that she's going her own way.
- Refusing to cope with reality: "That's your problem, not mine."
- Feeling that keeping the peace by avoiding the conflict is better than experiencing the pain of dealing with reality.

Couples will present a happy facade, keeping house and playing at marriage while real needs go unmet. While unmet needs indicate isolation's presence in a marriage, the irony is that slipping into a state of isolation seems to offer protection and self-preservation. Silence feels like a security blanket but is perilously deceptive.

Many marriages continue for years in a state of armed truce. Competition replaces cooperation, and ugly reality dashes the dreams of hope as conflict unravels the fabric of love and concern. Broken hearts stain pillows with bitter tears.

The choice is yours

Every day, each partner makes choices that result in oneness or in isolation. May I recommend three important choices you need to make?

Choice #1: Resolve to pursue oneness with each other, and repent of any isolation that already exists in your marriage. Remember, you don't have to be married a long time to be isolated.

Choice #2: Resolve never to go to bed angry with each other. Find a way to resolve your differences and move toward oneness. Realize that often it's easier to hold a grudge than to forgive. Resentment and oneness cannot coexist.

Choice #3: Resolve to take time to share intimately with each other. Allow your spouse into your life. Ask questions of your spouse, and listen patiently. Learn the art of healthy, transparent communication.

What if you're already in deep trouble? Swallow your pride. Get help. Call a mentoring couple, your pastor, or a counselor. Don't allow isolation to take up residence in your home by ignoring it.

Make the right choices, and you'll know love, warmth, acceptance, and the freedom of true intimacy and genuine oneness as husband and wife. Make the wrong choices, and you'll know the quiet desperation of living together but never really touching each other deeply.

We were not meant to be alone in the most intimate human relationship God created. Choose today to move toward warmth in each other and away from the chill of isolation.

Footnotes: 1. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 119th Edition, 114. 2. Philip Zimbardo, Psychology Today, August 1980, 71-76.

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