

A Difficult Marriage

Finding Hope and Help

Even the best couples can struggle to protect their marriage vows. But what happens when marriage troubles become unbearable? Is there a point at which couples should end a bad marriage? Or is there hope for something better? Walk through the following steps as you prayerfully evaluate your situation.

STEP ONE: Discern Minor from Major Trouble

Unfortunately, many marriages end today over troubles that could have been overcome. University of Texas researcher Norval Glenn has found that divorces today are often blamed on problems such as “lack of commitment,” “too much conflict and arguing,” “unrealistic expectations” and “lack of preparation.” These are problems that couples can and should work to overcome. Despite what friends, family or popular culture might say, these issues are no reason to end a marriage—especially in light of the serious long-term impact of divorce on your children.

In their book, *The Case for Marriage*, Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite explain that couples who think their only options are to either divorce or be miserable often find things getting better if they’ll just stick it out. In fact, almost eighty percent of husbands and wives who were very unhappy in their marriage yet stayed together described themselves as very happy just five years later! Are the problems you are facing minor or major?

STEP TWO: Anticipate the Hope after the Trouble

Major trouble occurs when someone either abuses or abandons their role in a marriage—when they break faith with their spouse and violate their vows. While God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), He permits it for marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:1-8). However, God is in the business of helping couples redeem what many would see as a hopeless situation. Grace and forgiveness are hallmarks of the Christian faith.

“Even marriages that have faced one or more of the big ‘A’s—abuse, affairs or addictions—can be saved,” says Mitch Temple, a licensed counselor who directs Focus on the Family’s marriage ministry. Temple has led numerous intensive counseling sessions with couples that faced these major challenges and even though they had Biblical grounds for divorce they found a way to save their marriages. When God is involved, your marriage can be a testimony to the world that He has the power to heal even the most damaged of relationships (Philippians 4:6-7).

STEP THREE: If Needed, Protect Yourself and Children

If your relationship is marked by physical abuse, you may find yourself confused, frightened and unsure about what to do. The most important thing you can do right now is take steps to protect yourself and your children from harm.

Even if you want to save your marriage, you should not risk the safety of your children or yourself. A period of structured and therapeutic separation may be needed and can make it possible for you to get the help your marriage needs while making your family less vulnerable.

Sometimes the boundaries imposed by a separation will cause the abuser to seek help in making necessary changes to their behavior. It also gives the spouse being abused a chance to heal and grow emotionally stronger and less codependent.

Because of the emotional dysfunction that thrives in an abusive marriage, seek support and accountability during the separation process. Stay connected to a safe group of friends and family who know the situation and have your family’s best interest at heart.

STEP FOUR: Seek Guidance—Don't Go It Alone

Whatever situation you're in, resist temptation to struggle through a difficult marriage alone. You need the church body like never before—for perspective and advice, counseling and encouragement, and hope for God's redemption. Chances are someone has already been through your current situation and made it through to a better marriage, so seek out help.

A difficult marriage can strain every aspect of your life, including your relationship with God. People who are going through the private and agonizing challenges of a rough marriage often feel isolated and alone.

Depending on the circumstances, you may feel angry, betrayed and/or ashamed. You may have a deep sadness, leading you to withdraw from social situations when you actually need those connections more than ever. Seek out safe people of the same gender who will honor your confidences, care for your heart, and life you up to God in prayer.

GOING FURTHER – Resources

Recommended Books:

Some books are available for checkout at the Faith@Home Center or for purchase online.

Boundaries in Marriage (by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend) shows couples how to apply the 10 laws of boundaries that can make a real difference in relationships by learning when to say yes and when to say no.

Love Must be Tough (by Dr. James Dobson) offers hope for marriages in crisis—including those who have an unfaithful spouse.

Love and Respect (by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs) discusses a powerful biblical model for each spouse understanding and meeting the other's most deeply felt need.

Breaking the Cycle of Divorce (by Dr. John Trent) helps those who had no model of marriage stability break the cycle by creating a successful relationship.

Recommended Website:

TroubledWith.com Look for the various topics under "Relationships" that address dealing with a troubled marriage.

GOING FURTHER – Church Support

Periodically we offer a dynamic marriage class. If this is something you are in need of please let us know.