

# How To Save Your Marriage

A few things to consider  
before filing for divorce



**This feels like the end ...** or at least it could be. Your relationship is falling apart before your eyes, and you just don't know how to save your marriage. You're feeling alone and helpless, asking yourself, "How did we even get here?" At this point, leaving may even seem like the easier, the better option.

## **But wait...**

There's still hope for your marriage. Sure, it will take work. A lot of work. But if you're reading this, that's a big sign you aren't ready to walk away. You've got just a little mustard-seed faith that your marriage could still work out. And a little faith can go a long way to saving your marriage.

"Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17:20

So keep reading. And know we're praying for you and fighting for your marriage, too.


What you'll find inside:

- [5 Reasons Your Marriage Isn't as Bad as It Seems Right Now.](#)
- [4 Reasons You Might Be Drifting Apart and Ways To Paddle Back Together.](#)
- [Think Your Marriage Is Dying? 7 Signs To Consider.](#)
- [What Marriage Counseling Is ... And Isn't.](#)
- [Saving a Marriage Through Separation.](#)
- [Reunited: Rebuilding a Marriage After Separation.](#)
- [Should I Get a Divorce? Questions To Consider.](#)

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**Before you dive in:** If there is any form of abuse in your marriage, separation is a necessary first step to protect the life of the abused and get the abuser the help he or she needs. But announcing a desire to separate without first having a plan in place can be dangerous. If you are in an abusive situation, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline for help making a plan. Call 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) or visit <https://www.thehotline.org/>.





# 5 Reasons Your *Marriage* Isn't as Bad as It Seems Right Now

By Tracy Lane

“But I really did hate him the other night!” a friend admitted. “I wasn’t thinking it to be mean. Or even saying it out loud to hurt him. I really, truly felt like I actually hated him!”

We both laughed because we’ve both been there. It’s obviously a serious admission; nothing to joke about. But it’s one of those things that when you hear someone else say it, you breathe a sigh of relief knowing you’re not alone.

I would say my friend and her husband have a strong marriage. They’ve been together for two decades, have four happy children, and work in ministry. She’d say my husband and I have a strong marriage. We’ve been together for a decade, have two happy children, and work in ministry.

Still, we both confessed that sometimes our thoughts about our marriages can be cavernous. And at times in both of our marriages, those cavernous thoughts of

despair have been pretty accurate of the state of our relationships too.

So how do we know if it’s time to lean into the disgust and throw the house key in his face (for at least one night!)? Or if we need to check our emotions, apply a lens of reason, and reevaluate?

When is marriage as bad as it seems? Consider your marriage still worth the while if:

## **1** You wish it was better.

Things are hard right now. You’re in a really tough season. Maybe a set of tough years! But you haven’t given up hoping for and wanting things to get better.

You’ve heard the quote: nothing changes if nothing changes. So turn that wishful thinking into action. Schedule an appointment with a counselor. Take a marriage class at your local church. Let your sister keep your kids and go to a weekend marriage intensive.





**Or maybe it is:** It does take two to tango. If you're the only one still fighting for your marriage, seek some serious outside support. The one-sided burden of a two-person marriage is too heavy to carry on your own.

## 2 You talk things out.

Maybe louder than you used to. Maybe less often than you used to. But you still see the value in bringing your concerns to each other.

You're at least mentioning how she hurt you and broke trust by spending a late night out with co-workers. You're at least asking him to see your point of view, so you can both understand each other better the next time he forgets to tell you he'll be late for dinner or goes camping with the guys for another weekend.

**Or maybe it is:** Fighting all the time is exhausting. If it really has become a daily practice in your home, it's time to get to the bottom of it. Especially if you find yourself avoiding conversation altogether because the threat of conflict is so high. Talk to a counselor who can help you open up communication again in your home.



## 3 You make time for each other.

Admittedly, it's not enough. And often, you really don't want to be together. You'd rather mindlessly scroll your Instagram feed than face how stuck you are.

After 52 days in the hospital with a 2-year-old while our newborn daughter endured two open heart surgeries, our life felt wrecked. We were totally done as spouses, as parents, as people. Honestly, tending to our marriage felt like another burden to carry, and we really weren't interested in that.

One Tuesday night, a friend showed up at our front step to take over dinner, baths, bottles, and bedtimes. And she sent us out with each other. We didn't want to go. We had nothing to say to each other.

A lot of times we fought. At best, we stared silently in opposite directions, sipping our coffees. But we went the next time our friend showed up. And the next. The choice to go was a commitment to ourselves and to each other.

**Or maybe it is:** One or both of you is unwilling to fit each other in. Work schedules are busy. Parenting demands are high. All true. Except those are easy excuses we tell ourselves to keep avoiding our spouse. If one or both of you isn't up for finding some time to still invest in your marriage, seek outside help. Talk to your pastor. Get some accountability from a trusted mentor.



#### 4 You still have sex.

Sure it might not be as hot as the honeymoon, but that was 15 years ago in an exotic location with no distractions. Lately, you've been up with the baby all night, helping your parents move, and watching your sister's kids so she and her husband can get a weekend away.

Engaging in somewhat regular sexual intimacy keeps you physically and emotionally bonded. Why not up the quota with an agreed upon monthly schedule for connection?

**Or maybe it is:** God intended sexual fulfillment of every kind to be strictly reserved to the willing marriage bed. If one of you is seeking sexual gratification outside of your relationship, it's a serious detriment to your marriage. Or if one of you is regularly unwilling to engage in sexual intimacy, it's time to uncover why. Admit it to a friend. Then seek professional help.

#### 5 You show up together.

Okay, it's not romantic. His arm isn't wrapped around you. The most recent hand you held through the church parking lot was your 3-year-old's. All six kids might sit between you in your Sunday morning seats. But you're there as a family.

Those Friday night bleachers might find you talking mostly with the other players' parents. Still, you're both chomping concession stand snacks for a shared dinner.

Even if it's mostly for show, being out in the world together really does say to your kids, to yourself, to each other that you're still doing this marriage.

**Or maybe it is:** You can't even fake it anymore. You and your spouse live totally separate lives. There's no semblance of together anymore, except for sharing a last name. But it doesn't have to be the end. Some serious attention to your marriage and hard work at home through prayer and counseling can get you back on track.

Marriage isn't really a "fake it until you make it" kind of gig. Marriage is intense, sacrificial, sanctifying, God-honoring stuff. You'll likely need outside support in various seasons to be sure you and your spouse make good on your vows.

Admit where you are. Confess the momentary (or prolonged) hatred to a friend. Then move forward in your fight for your marriage.







## 4 Reasons You Might Be Drifting Apart and Ways To Paddle Back Together

By Janel Breitenstein

When I was in elementary school, I realized what all children must at a certain age: Breakfast cereal in general has a disgusting after-taste.

Of all the times I coned my mom into thinking I brushed my teeth before school, I was a willing convert to dental hygiene on cereal days. How could something that tasted so good suddenly leave my mouth in such vast disappointment?

Surely, there's a metaphor for marriage here. Ever found your once sweet, nourishing relationship to leave a bad taste in your mouth?

One Italian study found that the brain chemistry of the first flush of passion lasts, at most, two years. Inevitably, the heart-pounding, nerve-quickenning twitterpation of first love dissolves into little more than an aftertaste.

Hmm. Those two years seem to be about three percent of the time we actually need marriage to last.

So yes, you could blame the drift in marriage on hormones. But what else might be causing you to drift? And—barring a scientific breakthrough of intravenous aphrodisiac therapy—what could you do to stop it?

### 1 The significant other.

I'm not talking about another woman or man, necessarily—although that may indeed be what draws one of you away. But what if I told you the “affair” could be with work? Your kids? Money? Busyness?

Allow me to ask in a different way. When asked about its greatest competitor, someone from Netflix answered, “Sleep.”

As humans, we get it. Money, the ambition of schedules, our own selfishness—they're subtle, engaging lovers. And then there's the problem of real people. Emotional affairs, in particular, can flourish because there's not a clear line between appropriate ... and not. We drift into them.



Some of our greatest competitors aren't what we think they might be. Get jealous. What's the main competitor and life-sucker for your marriage?



### Fight the Drift:

Be honest. What perpetually stands in the way of you and the closeness you crave? And what's one definitive, ruthless thing you could do about it?

## 2 Untended wounds.

Few of us stand starry-eyed at the altar and think we're doing this for worse, for poorer, and in sickness. "I can't wait to love you when we're struggling with infertility, or your mom dies, or my business is forced to file bankruptcy!"



### Fight the Drift:

Take the time you need to personally and privately sort through your emotion toward your spouse.

How would your marriage change if you dealt with your resentment, disappointment, sadness, or fear? What would happen if you agreed to the counseling you've been wondering about? What if you forgave your spouse? What if it was the two of you against the problem... rather than against each other?

## 3 Missing what marriage is about.

From our breakfast-cereal years on up, we marinate in Disney-esque tales where relational success is defined by happiness. There within fiction, our defenses are down. We forget that love triumphs not in getting what we want, but in laying down our lives for another.



Our culture often translates love as getting to do what you want and be happy with the person for whom you have affection. (Ask the spouse of the person who had the affair, or the child whose parents divorced, if he or she felt "loved.")

The Bible defines love this way: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16).

What if we gauged genuine love not by our level of personal pleasure, but by enduring, selfless commitment—and the choice to love?



### Fight the Drift:

For the next two weeks, ask God to give you unconditional love like His for your spouse. Actively "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5)—including all those thoughts convincing you the grass is greener elsewhere.



Maintain a no-secrets policy between you and your spouse. And share your device and social media passwords.

#### 4 What's robbing you?

There's a story about a jewel thief who succeeded, not by robbing jewels outright, but by switching the price tags. Sometimes, our marriage is conned out of its value when its "price tag" is exchanged for what's culturally shiny—or simply more urgent. What's of the highest value and craftsmanship is pilfered from beneath our noses.

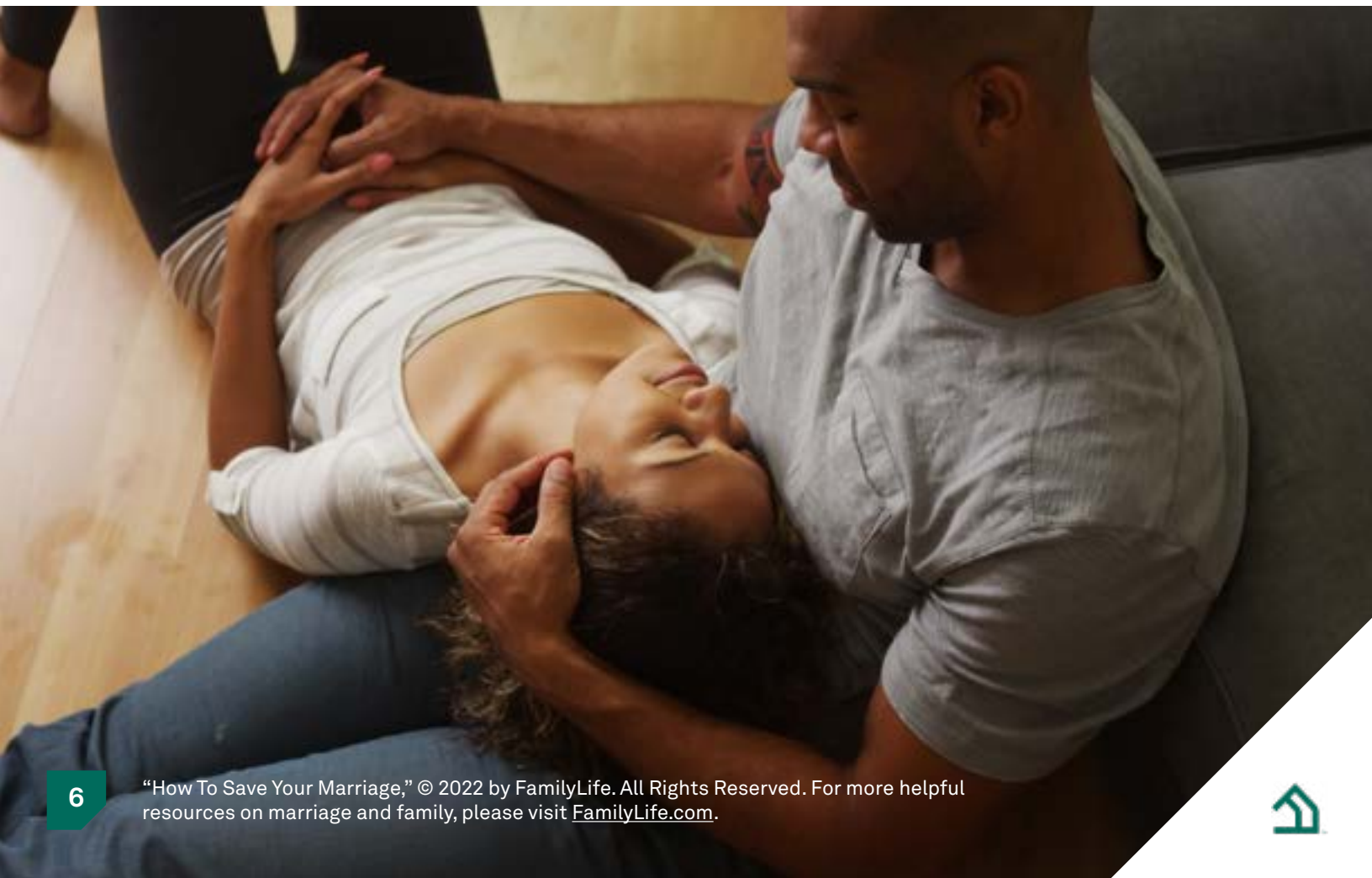
The young husband of the ancient Song of Solomon has a similar plea: He longs to drive the foxes from his vineyard (2:15). It's a metaphor for what was robbing his relationship. You might not imagine foxes could steal

much from a vineyard. But one bunch at a time, profit and enjoyment and investment is gradually ripped from the vineyard of your marriage.

What "small" robberies are eating at your marriage? Could it be the busy schedule, the late nights at work, the bigger paycheck, the late nights on the internet, the unresolved conflicts, the growing irritation?

#### Fight the Drift:

Gently come to your spouse with concerns about the "thieves" in your marriage—and genuinely accept responsibility for your contributions. Together, pray about a plan that makes a priority of your marriage, rather than your relationship getting the leftovers.







# Think Your Marriage Is Dying?

## 7 Signs To Consider

By Janel Breitenstein

It's your billionth fight about the same thing. And you've noticed your go-to script involves throwing out the d-word (divorce) like a threat.

Back when the temperature in your marriage was pretty hot, you never imagined things could get so cool. Even cold.

But how do you know things have gone from bad to worse? What should you do if you think your marriage is dying?

Here are seven signs your marriage is in trouble and suggested steps toward bringing it back to life.



### You don't mutually respect each other.

Ask yourself: Do I still respect who my spouse is?

Sometimes, the size of a person's weakness and failure swell beyond our ability to see what's valuable about them. Or simply see their humanity.

**Steps toward a solution:** Forgiveness, as impossible as it may seem, begins to expel the poison of disdain, which kills from the inside.

Even without the other party's apology, we carry the power to choose not to dwell on weakness. It's often a choice we must make over and over again: To forgive—choosing to move toward this person, despite their flaws—and choose to do good to them even when they don't deserve it.

It takes time to reroute your brain, reminding yourself your spouse is more than the sum of their weaknesses. When you're tempted to marinate in your spouse's prolific shortcomings, think of three ways you're thankful for them.





## You don't respond to each other.

You may not be listening well. Or you may not feel received when you're divulging a part of yourself. Even in the small things, you may be tempted to respond with a mental *Whatever*.

There's a self-protective, spreading callous we often feel when protecting ourselves even in the small interactions, ceasing to let ourselves be moved, pulled, pushed, or affected by one another.

**Steps toward a solution:** Evaluate why you're self-protectively (or otherwise) unyielding. What are you trying to preserve or communicate?

Is it your independence or sense of self? Your revenge to your spouse for feeling like your marriage is dying? Your sense of safety or superiority?

If you sense this protectiveness in your spouse, what can you do to understand what lies beneath?



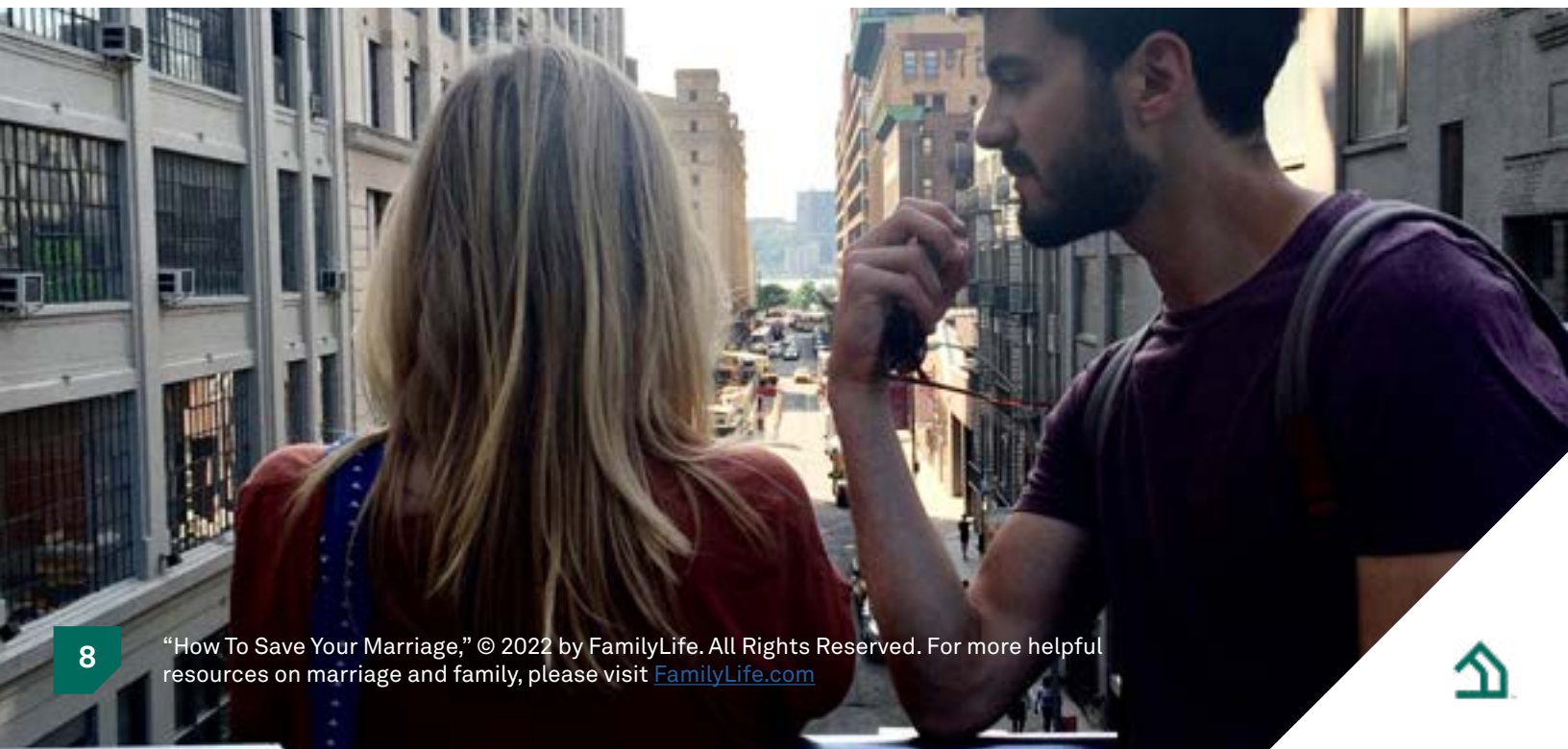
## Another relationship consistently takes priority.

It could be the kids. Your mom. A friend. Or you've found yourself confiding in someone of the opposite sex; it feels so good to have someone ask what you feel or think.

**Steps toward a solution:** When your marriage isn't a priority, everything else topples amidst the imbalance.

Maybe it's your kids. Of course you love them, and of course parenthood's demanding. Yet kids weren't made to run the show. (Neither were mothers-in-law. Or your boss, no matter how many figures in your paycheck.)

What relationships do you need to establish boundaries around so your marriage stays primary?





## You frequently indulge certain types of negativity.

Marriage researcher John Gottman, in *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, partly predicts divorce by the successive appearance of what he calls “The Four Horsemen.”

- **Criticism:** different from complaint in that it negatively addresses character and personality rather than an isolated event.
- **Contempt:** superiority over your partner.
- **Defensiveness:** Unfortunately, Gottman points out, this rarely results in the other person backing down or apologizing.
- **Stonewalling:** One partner tunes out impassively, looking away or down without a sound.

**Steps toward a solution:** Often, a lack of graciousness indicates darker issues swimming beneath the surface. A much greater failure of a spouse might sap all extra wiggle room for kindness and resilience.

Researcher Shaunti Feldhahn suggests the following for fractured marriages stuck on negativity.

- 1] Don't say anything negative to or about your spouse, even to a friend.
- 2] Find one thing positive and praiseworthy. Tell your spouse and one other person.
- 3] Perform a small act of kindness or generosity for your mate, even when you don't feel like it.



## You've stopped having sex—especially fulfilling sex.

No, sex is not the be-all, end-all. For seasons (when raising young children, late pregnancy, hormonal or fitness issues, radical prostate surgery), it may wane. But sex is a microcosm of your relationship. It naturally occurs when you're connecting in other ways.

Some refer to sex as a thermometer, but not a thermostat. It's taking the temp of your relationship, but it lacks the “oomph” to actually affect a great deal of change when you've got other issues.

**Steps toward a solution:** Think deeper. What's beneath your lack of desire?

Treat a lack of enjoyable sex as a symptom, and seek to understand the disease. As with any conflict, first seek to acknowledge 100% of what you're contributing, even if you think it's only 1% of the problem.



## One of you struggles with addiction.

Addiction is tough to wrap your head around because, as addict Stephen King writes, “[Addicts] build defenses like the Dutch build dikes.”

Whether it's alcohol, shopping, gambling, work, eating (or not eating), lying, porn, opiates—addiction is like having another person in the relationship. Because addictions are progressive, shrouded in denial and chaos, and





often flirt with codependency, marriage with addiction can feel like quicksand.

**Steps toward a solution:** Honesty is a must (the first step of any 12-step program: admit you have a problem). But too often, we assume divorce is the only option when it feels like the marriage is dying.

What if it isn't? In her book, *Contemplating Divorce*, licensed counselor Susan Pease Gadoua reminds spouses, "The threat of divorce is not usually enough to get an addict in the throes of their addiction to stop. It's almost never a function of their love for their mate, rather it is an indication of the level of progression in their addictive illness."

So professional help is a must, despite the stigma. You need someone (or a group) specializing in addiction and recovery. And remember that there will need to be a plan for the entire family, including yourself, because treating the addict alone will not heal the dysfunctional system perpetuating the addiction.



## You're isolated.

We're talking daydreaming about someone else or even entertaining notions of divorce. Or you might be holding back your emotions, or simply withholding yourself, so you're no longer truly present. Or perhaps one of you has simply stopped caring or investing.

You haven't slept in the same bed for three years. You live in the same house, but the silence feels smothering. You're more like roommates, coexisting because it's just easier.



**Steps toward a solution:** Your marriage isn't an island. And you don't have to go it alone.

Let a friend in on what's going on—one who will encourage you to stay married. And the earlier you and your spouse find counseling the more effective it's likely to be. And the more likely you are to find the marriage fulfillment you dreamed about when you held hands years ago and made promises you intended to keep for life.

Don't give up. No matter how much you feel like your marriage is dying—or even already dead. It doesn't have to be over.





# What Marriage Counseling Is ... And Isn't

By Garrick Conner

Speaking as a longtime licensed marriage and family therapist ... It's important to iterate that there is no such thing as a perfect marriage. Because there are no perfect people. Even on our best days, we each have our struggles.

Every one of us misreads signals. We fail to verbalize our thoughts and feelings accurately. We misjudge our partner's capacity to have an honest conversation. These things are normal in all human relationships.

But when those things become more and more common, the stress on the marriage relationship becomes increasingly difficult to manage. That's when a lot of couples consider seeking help. Except they're usually afraid of some common misconceptions.

So let's set those straight.

## **Marriage counseling isn't a waste of time**

Most people spend more time and money maintaining their vehicles than their

marriages. How many marriages could benefit from a regular checkup?

Many couples wait until their relationship has gone completely off the rails to even begin seeking help. It's the equivalent of continuing to drive your car until the four flat tires are rolling on the rims. But even in the most difficult situations, I look for opportunities to inject hope while being realistic about the challenges ahead.

## **Marriage counseling isn't just an opportunity to create a paper trail for divorce proceedings**

I know very few counselors who get excited about testifying in divorce court. We are trained to help individuals and couples work through issues, not navigate legal minefields. As a result, most of us make pretty lousy witnesses.

## **Marriage counseling isn't just a bunch of psychobabble for couples**

Media reinforces this cynical viewpoint time

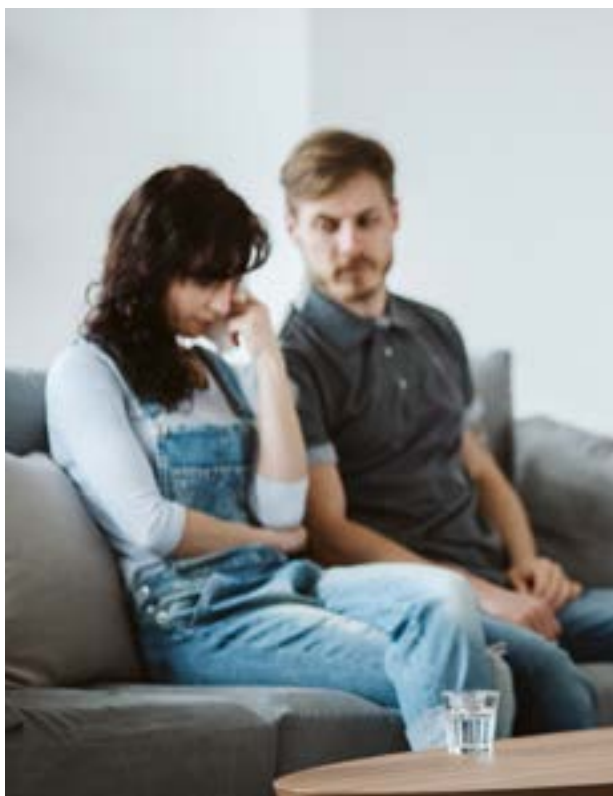


and time again. I cringe at the way TV shows portray therapists—all in an effort to get a good laugh from the viewing audience.

Counselors go to school for years and practice under a high level of supervision before they can be licensed by the state counseling boards. Sure, we tend to focus on emotions more than other professions, but that's the nature of the work at hand.

### **Marriage counseling isn't just one spouse's attempt to control the other.**

It's true that one spouse is almost always more invested in counseling than the other. Sometimes one spouse gives the other an ultimatum: agree to counseling or the relationship is over. Most often the need to control is more general ... simply a symptom of the emotional distress.



## **So what is marriage counseling all about?**

No two situations are exactly alike, but here are four general tasks all counselors engage to some extent.

### **1. It's about assessing the damage.**

An early goal of marriage counseling is to help the couple assess their strengths and growth areas. Help evaluate trouble spots. Then we work through issues in a way that is healthy, respectful, and productive.

Whether the couple decides to push through the pain and fight for the relationship or go their separate ways is up to them to decide. Competent counselors and therapists guide each spouse to express his or her own feelings in the emotionally safe confines of the counseling office.

### **2. It is triage and crisis management.**

Rarely is one person sufficient to manage a major crisis, whether a physical storm or an emotional one. Depending on the nature of the issues and their impact on each partner, referrals to a psychiatrist or other medical doctor may be warranted.

For example, it's almost impossible for an individual to think clearly and communicate effectively while experiencing extreme anxiety or depression. Sometimes the "marriage work" has to take a back seat to allow primary concerns to be appropriately addressed.

### **3. It's a place for rebuilding trust.**

Trust is the foundation of all personal relationships. That's even more true for intimate relationships like marriage.





Rebuilding trust is one of the most difficult and time-consuming processes a couple can experience. That's because consistency across time and situations establishes trust. There are no shortcuts.

#### 4. Counseling is a means to chart a way forward.

Good therapists help couples see all the possibilities. Then the couple can make decisions that are consistent with their values, beliefs, commitment level, and mental, emotional, and spiritual resources.

I always remind my clients that marriage is a journey, not a destination. My wife and I have weathered our fair share of storms over 20+ years together. It hasn't always been sunshine and rainbows. But it has always been worth it.

From my own vantage point, marriage counseling is not about restoring the relationship. After all, what the couple had wasn't really working all that well in most cases. Rather, marriage counseling is about rebuilding and creating something new, even better than what they had before.

#### When it's time to seek help ...

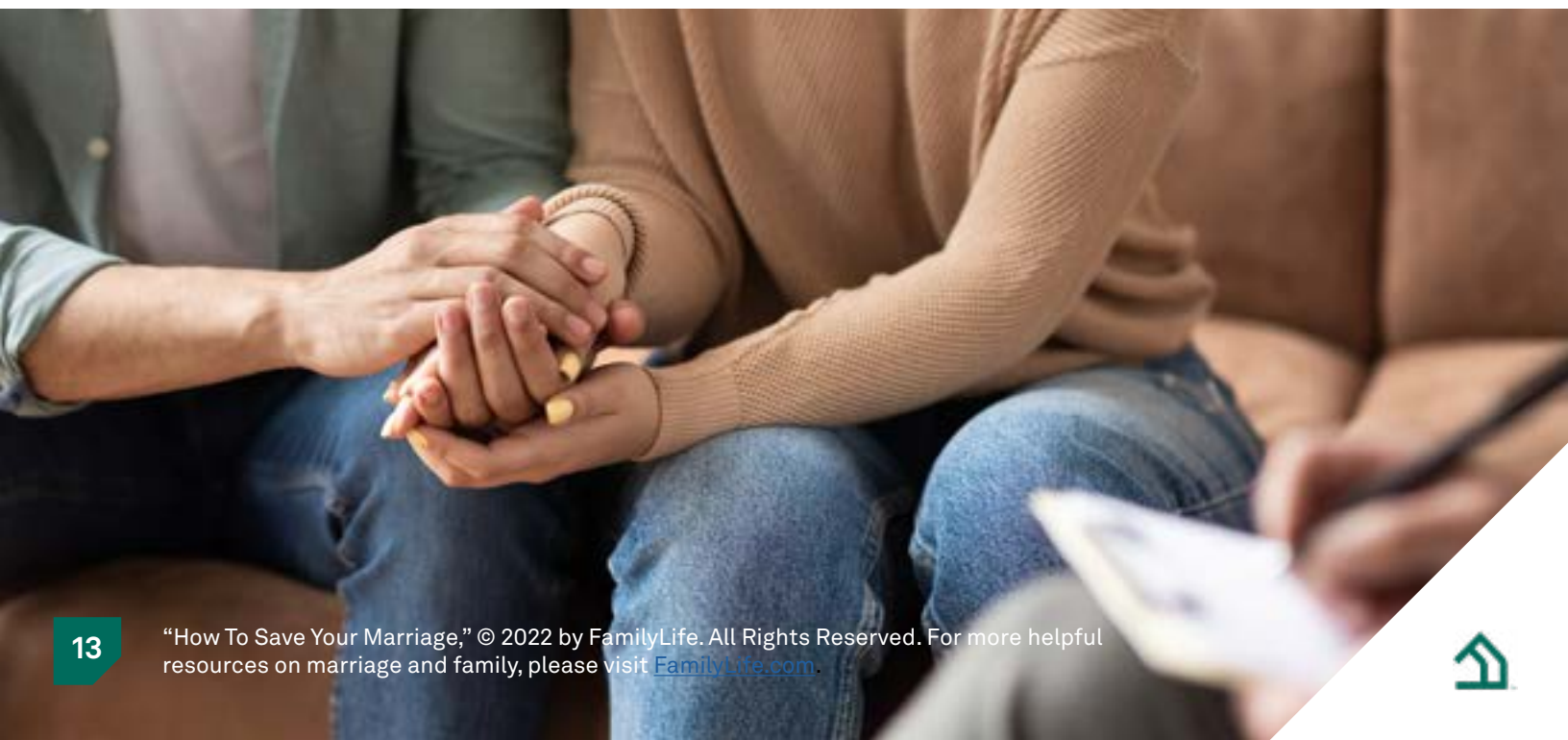
If you are struggling in your own marriage relationship, it might be time to seek help. I'd urge you to begin intentionally investing in your relationship.

Sure, do date nights together. But more than that, take advantage of marriage enrichment classes, seminars, books, and getaways. FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember® is an experience thousands of couples—including my wife and me—have found extremely rewarding.

If it's time for marital counseling, I encourage you to research multiple options for counseling before settling on one. One of the most significant indicators of potential progress is the relationship between the couple and their therapist. It's important the couple sees that person not just as someone who is trained and educated, but also as someone who truly cares about them and their family.

I'm in this with you. Your marriage is worth fighting for.

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# Saving a Marriage Through Separation

By Carlos Santiago

Thirty minutes into our counseling session, Jeff dropped the bomb. “On my last business trip, I met someone.”

His wife barely reacted as he told his tale of infidelity. There were no tears, no screams—just the expressionless stare of a woman too numb to react.

When he finished talking, she calmly declared, “I’m leaving,” and walked out.

You never know what to expect in the counseling room, but I certainly didn’t think I would lose the couple on our first day. They had been married for 15 years, had two kids, and were both leaders in their church. They even participated in a marriage small group the previous year.

How could it come to this?

## Biblical separation

Jesus very plainly said, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6). This was such a

straightforward statement that many had trouble accepting it. Even His own disciples replied, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (verse 10).

Their reaction makes sense. Especially given that Jesus had just finished explaining how we should forgive those who wrong us “seventy-seven times” (read [Matthew 18:21-19:12](#) for full context).

But in the face of our marital pain, Jesus’ words can feel heartless and out of touch.

Our minds immediately look for wiggle room. “But what if my spouse does \_\_\_?” How are Christians to reconcile God’s desire for unity and forgiveness with the realities of living with a spouse who blatantly violates God’s law?

When the apostle Paul discovered a man in unrepentant sin within the church, he was faced with a similar dilemma. He responded, “deliver this man to Satan for the Destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5).



Paul used separation to protect the church. But his goal wasn't to "get rid of the bum" and move on. His ultimate desire was that "his spirit may be saved."

Temporary separation protected the church, caused the offender to recognize the seriousness of his offense, brought the offender to repentance ([2 Corinthians 2:6-11](#)), and created a pathway to ultimate reconciliation. This should be the goal of any separation.

## Saving a marriage through separation

For other marriages in which sin is causing staying together to become more damaging than being apart, a temporary separation might be in order—but proceed with caution. Roughly 80% of couples who separate eventually divorce.

If you or someone you know is contemplating a temporary separation, the following points can help improve the chances of a successful reconciliation down the road.

### 1. Before deciding anything, talk to your pastor.

Before anyone moves out, talk to your pastor and agree to a counseling plan. It's okay if you meet separately for a time, but it's critical you both commit to regular counseling. Even if you think you've done nothing wrong.

### 2. During the separation, don't hide from the church.

Marital problems are intimate. Our natural instinct is to keep quiet. But if we keep our problems a secret, we interfere with God's primary method of offering aid—the body of Christ.

Jeff and his wife continued to meet with me separately after our initial encounter, but I wasn't the only one supporting them. Jeff's men's group helped him break off the relationship with his mistress and recommit himself to God. His wife's friends helped her heal and forgive. Mentors and youth group leaders walked alongside the children, helped them cope, and gave them much needed stability in a time of chaos.

### 3. Remember the goal of separation.

The goal of separation is reconciliation, not to go back to the way it was. The "way it was" contributed to where you are now. Use your separation as an opportunity to practice new ways of relating to each other and handling conflict.

God can heal your marriage, even if it takes longer than you'd like.

### 4. Watch out for entanglements.

Separation necessitates finding new housing, transportation, and childcare arrangements. If you're not careful, these new entanglements can pull you further apart.

Stay away from signing a long-term lease, taking an out-of-state job, starting a business, or going on a date with someone new. If you hold onto your "new life" loosely, it will be easier to come back together in the future.

### 5. See the separation as a time of rest.

After a difficult season of marriage, the relative peacefulness of living alone can feel wonderful. But rather than see the peace as God's confirmation you should divorce, see it for what it is—a time of Sabbath rest.





Use the tranquility to hear from God and begin the healing process. Take time to pray for your marriage and develop a habit of Bible reading. Not to manipulate God into answering your prayers, but so He can reveal areas of your life you need to surrender to Him.

God has not forgotten you. He wants to help your marriage, but He also wants to work in your life to conform you into the image of His Son.

### 6. Don't worry too much about your rights.

In the early months of Jeff's separation, he felt he was being taken advantage of. Paying for a separate apartment and utilities added stress to his already strained relationship. Expenses he gladly paid for while living at home, began to feel extravagant.

Each week brought another fight about money. He asked if he should get a lawyer to protect his rights.

"That depends," I said. "Is she your wife ... or ex-wife?"

When Jeff viewed his separation as permanent and his marriage as temporary, his financial problems were amplified. But when he viewed his marriage as permanent and the separation as temporary, the money problems felt less significant.

### 7. Take it slow.

Financial pressures, parenting pressures, social pressures, loneliness, and shame can all work to make you want to "get back to normal" as fast as possible. But don't rush it. Healing takes time.

The average length of separation for those who ultimately reunite with their spouse is two years. It can be hard to work on something for so long without seeing immediate progress. It takes diligence and commitment to stay engaged that long.

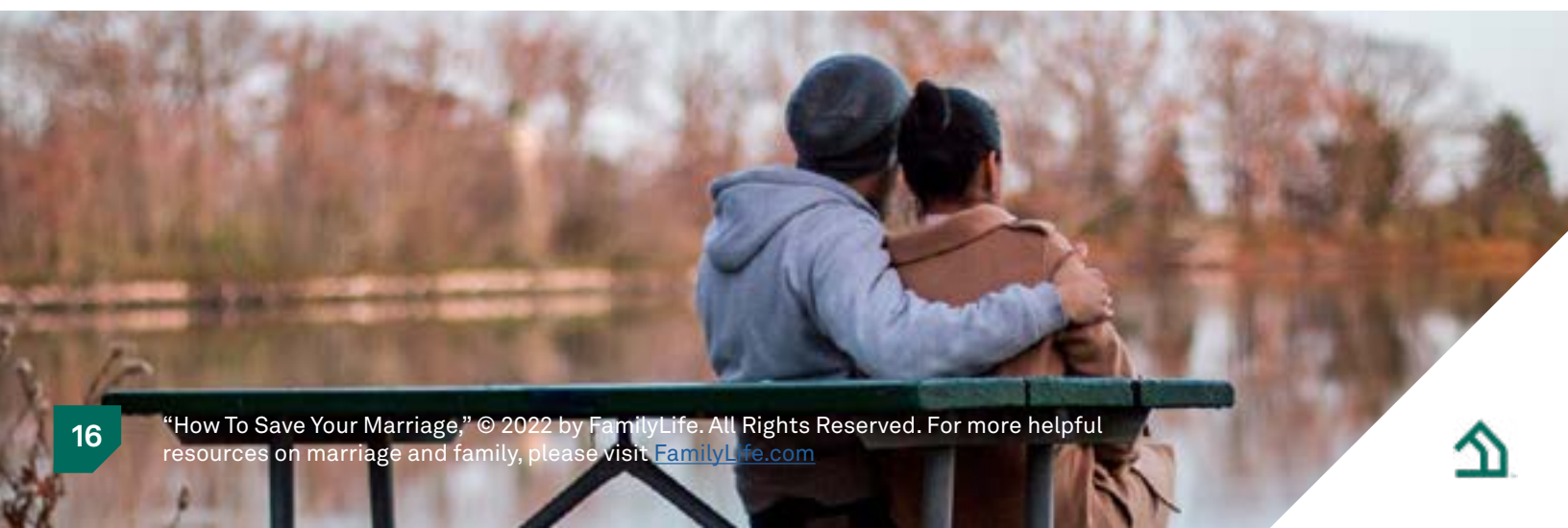
### Better than before

It took a year and a half of hard work, but Jeff and his wife were eventually able to recover from his affair.

While neither one of them would have chosen the path they took, their marriage is stronger now because of it. They learned how to talk openly about struggles and temptations and have a deep support system of friends who have walked with them during the most difficult time of their lives.

God not only restored their marriage, He made it better than it ever was before.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).





# Reunited: Rebuilding a Marriage After Separation

By Carlos Santiago

“Dad’s home!” my brother exclaimed.

For a moment, everything felt normal. There was no fighting. No talk of divorce. No discussions about custody. Just Dad coming home.

My brother was too young to realize how close our family came to permanently falling apart, but I knew. As our dad laid his bags in the corner, I looked over at my mother and saw a strange mixture of hope and doubt. Her smile said she was happy, but her eyes cried out, *Will we make it?* I shared her fears.

The years that followed our family’s reunion were rocky, and there were moments where we almost didn’t make it. But more than 35 years later, my parents are not only still together, they’re happy.

## Rebuilding a marriage

If you’re considering reuniting with your spouse or you’ve recently moved back in after

a separation, here are some things to keep in mind on your road to restoration.

## “Forgive and forget” won’t be easy

Separations are traumatic. They undermine the foundations of trust and commitment necessary for a marriage to succeed. While every situation is different, one thing is the same: Reconciliation will not be possible without forgiveness.

But forgiveness does not mean we forget the offense. On the contrary, true forgiveness is only possible when, with the full depth of the offense before us, we choose to release the other person from restitution. It’s when we say, “What you did hurt me deeply. I have every right to make you pay, but because God has forgiven me, I choose to forgive you. No payment (or punishment) is necessary.”

But don’t be surprised if you find yourself having to forgive again and again as secondary layers of pain come to the surface.



For example, you may have forgiven the affair but find yourself in tears one day over the realization of a lie used to cover it up. This is normal. Traumatic events can rarely be processed as a whole. You may feel pressure to “move on” and “let it go,” but don’t rush it. Issues not resolved now will only grow into fights later. Take the time you need to fully deal with the pain.

### Trust has to be rebuilt

Trust is expensive, paid for with thousands of proven moments. Just because you forgive someone doesn’t mean you immediately trust them again. After a separation, trust will take time to rebuild. If there was betrayal, infidelity, or any form of abusive behavior taking place, it will be even more difficult.

But no matter how deep the cracks are in your foundation, they can be repaired with a track record of honesty. If you say you’re going to be someplace at a certain time, be

there at that time. If you promise to pick up milk on the way home from work, do it. Every promise kept, no matter how small, builds upon itself. Over time, trust will return.

### Don’t make the same mistakes

After reconciliation, there is intense pressure for things to go back to normal, but do you want to have a *normal* marriage or a *great* one? To have a great marriage, you’ll need to do things that aren’t normal.

Openly talk about your expectations, discuss your fears, and negotiate responsibilities. Join a marriage group at church, commit to an annual weekend getaway, and continue to meet with your counselor even after the fighting stops.

Put safeguards in place to protect your marriage from anything that could cause you to drift back toward isolation. Share phone passwords, locations, merge your bank accounts, deactivate social media accounts, or change your social circles.







## Prayer is vital

It has often been said, “a couple that prays together, stays together.” And it makes sense. It’s difficult for problems to escalate when couples are in the habit of humbling themselves before the foot of the cross and asking for forgiveness.

According to a study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, “the frequency with which couples engage in regular in-home worship activities (e.g., prayer, scriptural study) was also positively linked with relationship quality.”

Make time to regularly thank God for what He has done in your life and marriage. Ask Him to help you protect it and use your story for His glory.

## Other couples need to hear your story

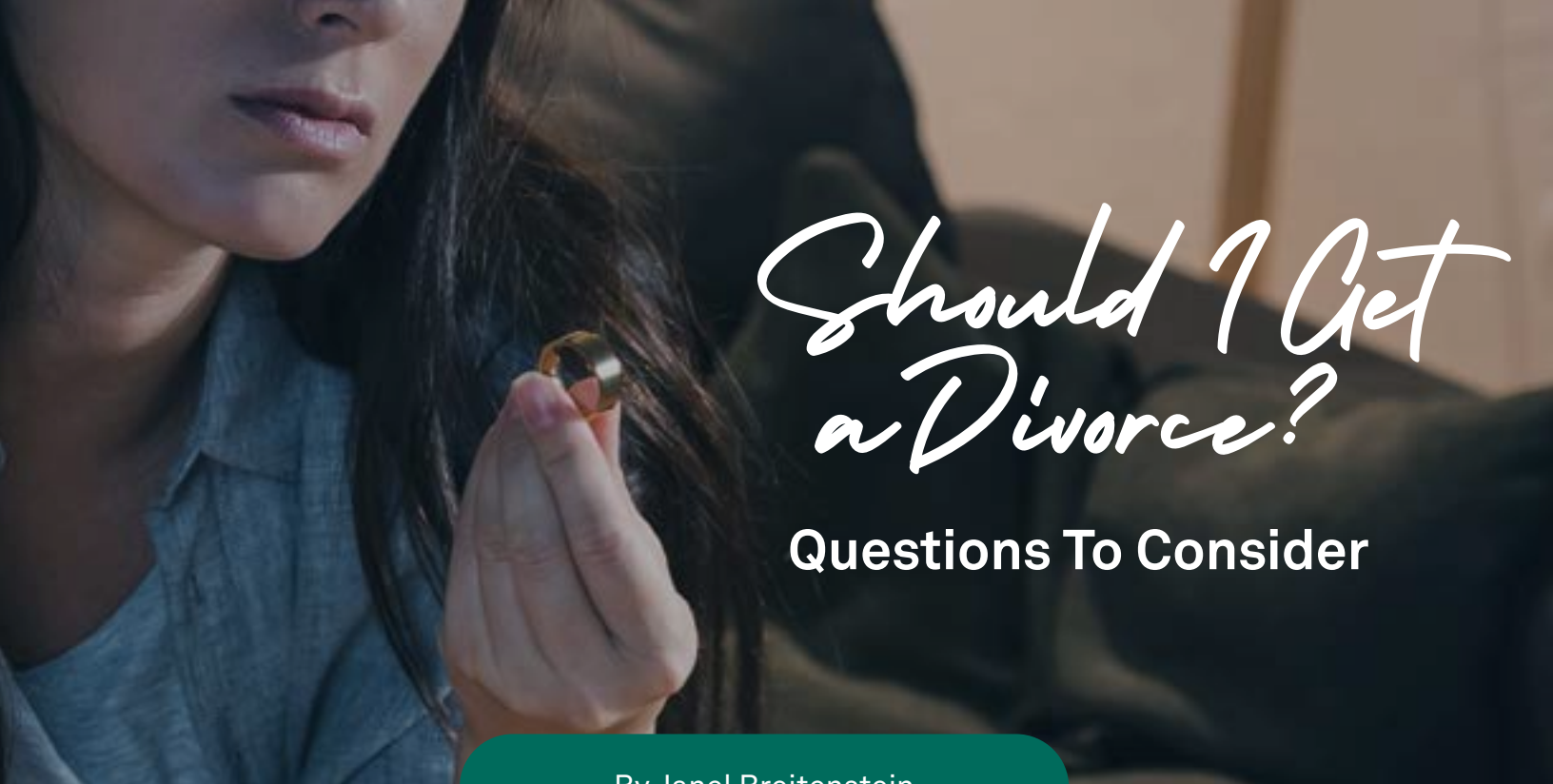
Often in the midst of our pain, we wonder, *Why God? Why are you allowing me to suffer?*

The pain that brought your marriage to the edge of divorce is probably something you would like to forget as quickly as possible. Your story’s filled with the worst, most embarrassing moments of your life – things you wish you’d never said and done.

God doesn’t waste our pain, but we do when we’re too scared to share it.

Satan likes to make us believe our situation is unique and no one will be able to relate, but that is simply not true. If God is rebuilding your marriage, don’t be afraid to let others know. The deeper the pain, the greater the potential impact we can have.



A close-up photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. She is holding a gold ring in her right hand, looking down at it with a thoughtful expression. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be another person's shoulder and arm.

# Should I Get a Divorce?

## Questions To Consider

By Janel Breitenstein

Sitting up one night in the third trimester of her pregnancy, Mia woke her husband from sleep to ask if he was having an affair.

“Yes,” he answered, then rolled back over to fall asleep.

Raised in a trusting, God-fearing environment, Mia didn’t see divorce as a plausible option. “I kept thinking he would wake up and want to come back to me. I could fix this. A strong family where I raised my boys was my dream. It was everything I wanted. I’d happily be drug through the mud to keep it from being broken.”

Maybe, like Mia, you’re wondering, *What does God think about all this? Does He see me? Is He even here in this mess? Does He want me in a bad marriage?*

### Should I get a divorce?

Whether your situation resembles Mia’s, or

simply feels hopeless or loveless—it’s a dire, terrifying place to be.

Both staying and leaving can both require more courage and resources than you feel like you possess. But remaining in an unhappy marriage restates God’s faithful love to the world even when His people are not. It’s how Jesus loved us. And God considers married couples bound by not just state law, but His (Romans 7:2). Marriage is His creation (Genesis 2:18, 24).

If your marriage is in despair, think about the following:

- We all tend to underestimate the consequences of our own contributions. What’s the full extent of mine? Have I sought forgiveness?
- Could my thoughts and emotions be labeled as an emotional affair? (This is an emotional connection surpassing



marriage as the primary source of emotional support and trust.)

- Are there behaviors I refuse to forgive? ([See Matthew 18:21-35.](#))

*Note: Forgiveness is not excusing behavior, or foregoing consequences or accountability. Forgiveness is a choice to choose good toward the person rather than harm or revenge, and not to dwell on the incident. It may or may not include reconciliation.*

As you evaluate the priority of your happiness in a lonely marriage, consider the rich biblical story of Hosea, who was told by God to marry an unrepentant prostitute ([see Hosea 1](#)). Throughout the Bible, people like Abigail, Esther, and Sarah trust God completely as their omnipotent co-signer in marriage, a safety net even in unspeakably painful places to flawed spouses.

## What reasons for divorce does the Bible give?

Like the rest of us, divorce is never God's best-case scenario (see Matthew 19:8).

**Renowned biblical scholar Wayne Grudem concludes the Bible allows more than two causes for divorce:** sexual immorality (Matthew 19:9) and an unbeliever leaving (1 Corinthians 7:15).

But, Grudem asserts, "restoration of the marriage, if possible, must remain the first goal ... So long as it is consistent with the necessary protection for an abused spouse." This is consistent with Jesus' words: "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6).



Grudem acknowledges biblical reasons *could* include:

- Abuse.
- Extreme, prolonged verbal and relational cruelty destroying mental and emotional stability.
- Credible threats of serious physical harm or murder.
- Incurable drug, gambling, pornography, or alcohol addiction, accompanied by regular lies, deceptions, thefts, overwhelming indebtedness, and/or violence.

Dr. Rubel Shelly, author of *Divorce and Remarriage: A Redemptive Theology*, seems to agree with Grudem:

...[D]ivorce may be necessary in order to protect yourselves ... You are not being unfaithful to your vows or abandoning your husband; you are trying to live with a modicum of God's peace in your life under extraordinary conditions ... Get out of there before you get killed, have to see your children get caught up in his addictive behaviors, or become party to denying them the gospel.





In truth, far more Bible verses declare God's hatred of violence than the verse occasionally translated as him hating divorce (Malachi 2:16, NASB).

## How do you know if you should stay or leave? More questions to consider

Any relationship on the rocks requires wisdom. In the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, evaluate more questions like these to make sure that decisions are life-altering in just the right way.

- Is there a way to save my marriage? What is it? What holistic costs must I consider and intentionally choose?
- What clouds my judgment?
- Have I sought substantial help? Have I invited any professionals (counselors, psychologists, legal counsel, etc.) to weigh in on reality and options?
- What would I estimate is the future, even generational impact of staying? Of going?
- How receptive am I to truth spoken about our marriage?

- What advice would I give an adult child or close friend in my situation?
- What am I hoping my spouse will do to save this marriage? What if they don't choose to make any changes?
- Have I been completely honest with my spouse about my concerns with our relationship—and reasons I'm tempted to leave?

## Where do I go from here?

God's presence is a place you can set aside shame and fear hovering around questions like, "Should I get a divorce?" Ask for His intricate wisdom and deep courage for what to do next ([see James 1:5](#)). He is "a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe" (Proverbs 18:10).

## Consider these next steps.

### 1. Assemble a care team you trust.

These are people who love God and His Word, love you, and have a reputation of wise, compassionate decision-making. Keep the circle small, but consistently tell them the complete truth. Request



their regular prayer for you, your family, your marriage, and your spouse.

Consider, too, resources like the [Center for Relational Care](#), providing counseling and marriage intensives. Or [find a counseling referral to a counselor in your area](#).

[You can find tips for finding a counselor here](#).

## 2. Spend extended time praying for your marriage—and God’s wisdom for it.

Get on your knees about your marriage; consider fasting on a regular basis. Ask God for enduring love, wisdom, and the grace to love your mate beyond what they deserve. Or when it’s necessary to draw a healthy boundary of safety and separate in hopes of reconciliation.

## 3. Remember: Your ability to save your marriage does not earn your acceptance before God.

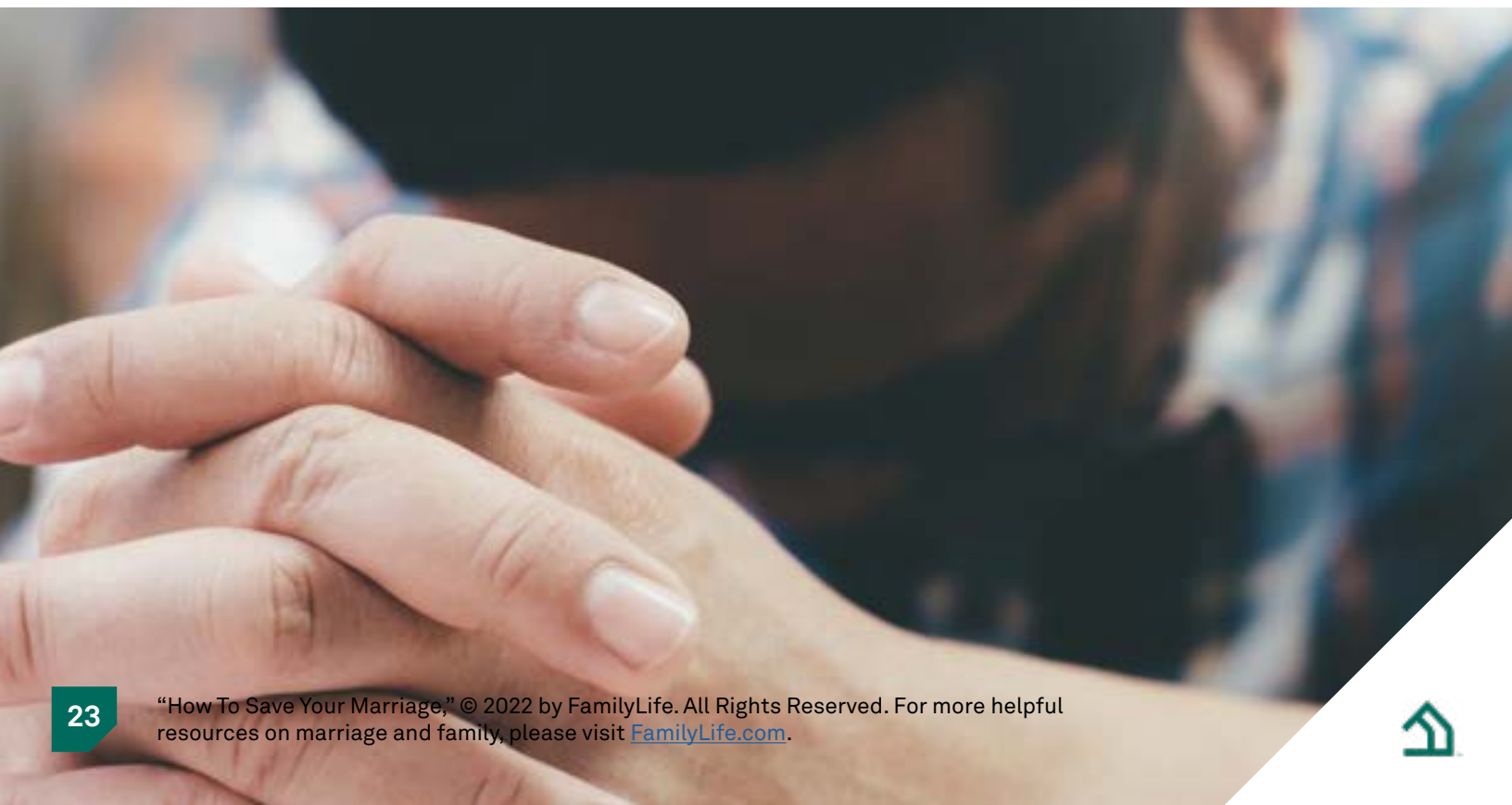
Your ability to perform (including saving your marriage) has *never* been what makes you worthy before God.

He accepts us for one reason: our trust in Jesus’ sacrificial death on our behalf. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

No “failure” is bigger than God’s ability to create beauty and purpose, including when you’re the victim of someone else’s sin: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

So keep asking God about the next holy, loving, courageous step for your marriage. Rather than waiting to punish you, He stands ready as your safest refuge.

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Weekend to  
Remember.  
by FamilyLife.

“ Our marriage is not “fixed,”  
but I do have hope, where  
I had none a few days ago. ”

- 7 YEARS MARRIED.