

CHAPTER SEVEN

Deciding Whether or Not to Divorce

THE LEAD FEATURE in each issue of *Ladies Home Journal* is a column entitled “Can This Marriage Be Saved?”, which the *Journal* bills as “The most popular, enduring women’s magazine feature in the world”

The feature has three sections. The first section is “The Wife’s Turn” in which the wife recounts the frustrations of her marriage and why she is considering leaving it. Second, the husband takes his turn and talks about his unhappiness. (The husband usually comes across as being more at fault than the wife.) Third, the counselor takes a turn and analyzes how the couple reached an impasse and what can be done to save the marriage. In *Ladies Home Journal*, the marriage always is saved.

In real life, marriage counselors, of course, do not save all marriages, but they can help save some marriages, and they also can help wives and husbands with individual growth regardless of whether they decide to divorce.

The decision to divorce usually is not an easy one. It is common to go through periods of ambivalence when deciding whether or not to stay with a marriage. The ultimate decision may be based on a combination of logic, intuition, and gut feeling.

Placing structure on the decision-making process can be helpful. If you are considering divorce, you might benefit from making a series of lists. The first two lists could be reasons to stay married and reasons to divorce. The

reasons would include what you like and don't like about your spouse as well as other factors, such as impact on your children, impact on your relationships with extended family and friends, financial security, and day-to-day needs and services provided by your spouse,

You'll note that not all items on the list are of equal weight. You might try a quantitative approach--assigning a number value to each item on the lists ("five" for high importance; "three" for middle importance; and "one" for low importance). Add the columns. See how the numbers compare. Put the list away for a while, and then look at it again to see if there are other factors or changes in the importance of items on the list.

Another list (somewhat related to the first two) is a set of goals for your life. Try to list all the important goals--perhaps a warm, sharing relationship with a mate; happy, productive children; time with friends; a satisfying job; travel; recreational activities; spiritual growth. Then go through the list again and try to figure out how staying with your mate will advance or interfere with the goals, and, conversely, how a divorce will advance or interfere with those goals.

When a marriage is in a rocky period, it is common after yet another fight or another humiliation to think, "I can't take this any more! I've got to get out of this relationship!" The time may come when that is true, but the negative times also may be part of a cycle that needs to be placed in perspective.

One way of gaining that perspective is to keep a log or make marks on a calendar regarding how you feel--about your spouse, your marriage, yourself, or

life in general. Make brief notations (perhaps in code if you are worried about discovery) about how you feel each day. Keep the log for a month or two and then look at the overall picture. Do the bad days really outnumber the good? Is there a pattern to the good days or bad? Do the same issues arise?

One cautionary note about keeping logs or diaries: in some states these might be subject to **discovery** in court litigation--meaning that your spouse and your spouse's attorney may be able to order you to produce the logs and diaries for their inspection because the documents might be relevant to some issue in the case. In other states, logs and diaries could be protected under a right of privacy or under rules that keep confidential documents that you prepare to help your attorney with the case.

The decision of whether or not to divorce boils down to the question: "Am I better off with my spouse or without my spouse?" The answer lies not only in how you feel about your spouse and how your spouse feels about you, but also in an assessment of how your total life will be different after a divorce. There may be prospects for a better romantic relationship after a divorce, but other things will be different too. Will that total cluster of differences be a net improvement or a net deficit?

On the subject of hope for a better relationship in the future, take inventory of the reasons for the breakdown of the current relationship and try to assess if you truly have the perspectives and skills for a better relationship next time around.

A deep perspective on what went wrong is hard to achieve. It takes some genuine soul-searching with careful attention to patterns that developed in relationships with parents early in life. Many therapists have noted that people seem to have an unconscious radar that draws them to mates who have significant characteristics in common with their parents--particularly the negative characteristics.

Husbands and wives who had conflictual relationships with parents may have vowed not to marry someone with a particular problem. The husband and wife may (or may not) have avoided that problem, but often they zeroed in on a mate who duplicates some other problems from which they came. There is comfort--perhaps unconscious comfort--in things that are familiar, even if the result is conflict.

Before heading out on a new path in the quest to feel whole, it is best to be sure the path will be a better one.

There is not a precise, automatic formula for deciding whether or not to divorce. Many counselors, however, agree that there are certain circumstances in which divorce is often the best solution. A divorce may be the best solution if you are married to a person who is abusive; addicted to alcohol, drugs, or gambling; or severely mentally ill. Even in these circumstances, there is the added question: "Is your spouse genuinely willing to seek professional help?" If so, there may be a relationship worth saving. The spouse, however, must actually seek help and stick with it. A mere promise to change followed by a few days of improved conduct is not enough.

Describing more subjective factors in the decision to divorce, psychiatrist, Dr. Peter Martin has written in *The Ann Landers Encyclopedia A to Z*, “In my experience there are only a few factors that would make a marriage impossible to save. One is the absence in both mates of the ability to feel sympathy for the other. This is usually accompanied by a deep unchanging hatred.”

Monitoring your own well being is another indicator of the need for divorce or making other changes. If you chronically feel sad or if you have low energy, trouble sleeping, and a difficult time focusing on day-to-day tasks, that probably is depression. Similarly, if you are developing anxieties or phobias about things that did not bother you before, or if you are physically ill more frequently than before, these too are signs of trouble. Professional help from a physician or therapist can help, along with an evaluation of how much of the problem is related to the marriage.

For many people contemplating divorce, there is not a single, dramatic circumstance that leads to consideration of divorce. For them, the problems do not include abuse, addiction, or mental illness. Instead, there is a growing malaise (coupled with anger)--a growing sense that the marriage is not working and that the relationship is draining more energy than it is giving back.

For many couples, the primary problem is communication. This book is not a detailed “How-To” manual on healing an injured marriage. There are dozens of books on the shelves on that subject. But it is worth recapping some of the main themes of marriage counselors on how to improve a

marriage. Unless the need to get out of the marriage is urgent, these steps can be useful:

- Try talking again with your spouse about your feelings. Focus on your feelings and on your partner's feelings. Talk about what makes you happy or sad--what you each need. Start with subjects that are relatively non-controversial and work up to more sensitive topics.
- Recognize that if you or your spouse came from a family where feelings were suppressed or punished, it is hard to talk freely about how one feels. But also recognize that neither one of you are mind readers. If you want your spouse to understand how you feel and what you'd like, you have to communicate.
- Talk in a way that is non-accusatory. Name calling and listing the other's faults just adds to the anger and usually misses the heart of the issues. Humiliating or demeaning each other is not going to solve the problem.
- If anger erupts, take "time out". . . leave the room for a while; take a deep breath; count to ten; hold off discussion of the issue until the next day. Don't respond in anger. But do tell your partner what makes you feel angry or empty.
- In addition to avoiding verbal anger, watch body language too. A sneer or rolling of eyes can have the same counter-productive effect as a verbal assault.
- To help make sure you each understand what the other is saying, structure the conversations so that you each listen carefully. Allow each of you to

Speak uninterrupted for a few minutes. After one of you has spoken, have the other repeat the essence of what was said--without commenting on what was said. The goal at this point is to insure that you each understand what the other has said and felt--not to reach agreement on a particular issue.

- Talk about why you feel a certain way. Recall your relationships with parents, siblings, or former spouses. Think about why you may have an emotional allergy to certain things your spouse has done or said. Your “allergic” reaction may be more severe than “normal,” but nonetheless quite understandable when you (and your spouse) see where the reaction is coming from.
- If you have fallen into the habit of not spending private time together and really talking, schedule some time. Take a walk; go on a weekend vacation; schedule a series of half-hours in the evening (but not so late in the evening that you are too tired). If you have children, hire a sitter and go out by yourselves. If you can’t afford a sitter, perhaps a friend or family member can watch the children for a while.
- Find out what little things would make the other happy. Do them (and try to come up with a few things of your own initiative). Work up to bigger things.

Marriage counseling can be useful. Counselors can be found through a variety of sources, including: family physicians, hospital referral services, crisis intervention programs, other community service programs, friends, and Yellow Pages (usually under "Marriage Counselors").

Marriage counseling is not guarantee of saving a marriage. In order for a marriage to work well, it takes commitment by both partners as well as a reasonably good match of partners in the first place.

Even if marriage counseling does not save the marriage, a good counselor can facilitate communication and clarify issues. If the marriage is going to end, marriage counseling can be converted into “divorce counseling”-- helping the parties to get out of the marriage while minimizing harm to themselves and their children.

Impact of Divorce on Spouses

Divorce, of course, is a stressful time in a person’s life. Emotional reactions include depression, anger, jealousy, humiliation, disorientation and sense of loss.

The sense of loss arises not only from loss of positive aspects of a marriage, but also from loss of negative aspects of a marriage. Divorce researchers Andre Derdeyn and Elizabeth Scott have written: “The sense of loss can be just as great if the relationship had long since been almost exclusively negative and conflictual. . . . [T]he intensity of grief is related to the intensity of involvement rather than of love.” For many spouses, the marriage--whether dominantly positive or negative--was an integral part of their emotional being and the loss of the marriage can be very disruptive.”

Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly, who research the effect of divorce on parents and children, found that the average time after a divorce for women to

reestablish “inner equilibrium,” “external stability” and “a sense of continuity in their lives” was three to three and a half years. For men, the average time to reestablish continuity was two to two and a half years. Men had a shorter recovery time than women because men, as a group, had more external supports, including greater financial security and job satisfaction to help the transition process.

Although most spouses recover from divorce with the passage of time, some do not. For those who do not recover, the decline in adult functioning becomes chronic. Spouses who are not able to regain equilibrium often had their primary identity wrapped up in the marriage and have few inner or external resources on which to fall back.

Parents who divorce often find that their parenting skills drop during the period of divorce. In the time surrounding a divorce, it is common for parents to become more self-centered and less available to the child as parents cope with their own wounds. In most (but not all) cases, parenting skills return to normal after a few years.

Reaction of Children to Divorce

One of a child’s first reactions to divorce is fear of abandonment. The child reasons if one parent can leave, then the other parent might leave too. The child needs steady reassurance that the child will not be abandoned. Hopefully, the reassurance can come from both parents, including through substantial contact with both parents.

Young children also are concerned that the parent who is moving out will not be taken care of or will not have a place to stay. Some of those concerns can be alleviated by promptly showing the child where the departing dad or mom will live.

Other common reactions of children to divorce include: sleep disturbances, fears of impending disaster, suspiciousness, under-achievement in school, poor peer relationships, emotional constriction, anger, and regression in behavior (such as bed-wetting).

Many children feel powerless and vulnerable in the period during and following a divorce. Assuming the child liked both parents, the child wants to stop the divorce, but cannot. Children often blame themselves for the divorce and think if they had done something different that their parents would not be divorcing.

Children need to be told--often many times--that the divorce is not their fault . . . that dad and mom are not living together because dad and mom could not get along, not because the child did something wrong.

Although nothing takes all the pain out of divorce for a child, Dr. Wallerstein notes that the manner in which children are told about a divorce will have a lasting effect on them. Certain ways of telling a child will maximize suffering, such as telling the child, "He left *us!*" or "She does not love *us!*"

Telling the child that the divorce will not make a difference also is unwise. Obviously, the divorce will make a difference. The child should be given a simple, honest explanation of the divorce, without giving lurid details

designed to alienate the child from the other parent. The parents should explain what will be different and what will not be different--including talking about where the child will live, where the child will go to school, and when the child will be with each parent.

The child should be given an opportunity to express feelings and to ask questions. The child also might be told that things will be difficult for a while, but they will improve with the passage of time.

Studies have shown that one of the most important ingredients for a child's recovery is a close, ongoing relationship with both parents.

Deciding to Proceed with a Divorce

As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, the process of deciding whether to divorce can be filled with ambivalence and anxiety. When the decision to divorce is reached, however, it also can be a time of relief.

Barry Lubetkin and Elena Oumano wrote a book on the psychological aspects of divorce called *Bailing Out* (Fireside Books 1993). Early in the book they comment, “ ‘[B]ailing out’ when you know your relationship is no longer viable can be one of the most affirmative, liberating acts of one’s life. Bailing out can be a wonderful growth experience *if* you use this period of your life as a time to explore, discover, and evaluate beliefs that have determined your behavior. . . .The irrefutable fact is that staying with someone in a miserable or indifferent relationship, whether in a marriage or a live-in situation, erodes your self esteem.”

Ann Landers echoed part of that view in *The Ann Landers Encyclopedia A to Z*: “Life is too precious to waste years in a joyless marriage--or, worse yet, in a miserable one.”

When you have decided to divorce (or have a strong inclination to divorce), a question of timing may remain: When do you announce the decision or take additional steps such as separating or filing a legal action? The answer lies in balancing the stresses of maintaining the *status quo* versus the benefits of waiting.

Sometimes it is best to wait. If you are feeling emotionally spent and do not have plans on how to proceed, it may be useful to pause while building emotional energy and planning the next phase of your life. Steps to take include: (1) deciding where you want to live; (2) figuring out options on custody if you have children; (3) determining if changes related to employment are likely to be necessary (4) planning a budget (or range of budgets, depending on how the divorce proceeds); (5) lining up a lawyer if one is necessary; and (6) cementing ties with friends, family, and other support networks during your time of transition.

The list of issues on which to work may seem daunting, but when they are taken one step at a time, the issues are manageable.

Talking with friends who have gone through a divorce can be helpful. In addition to providing emotional support, friends also can offer perspectives on how to cope with the changes.

Advance planning has psychological advantages. A study of a group of women found that the length of time between the decision to divorce and marital separation was positively associated with the ability to adjust to divorce. In other words, the longer the period between the decision to divorce and separation, the better the adjustment (although it is possible to have a good adjustment in a short period of time too).

Embarking on a new path is a time for renewal. Most people in an unhappy marriage at some point stopped being involved in certain activities that once brought them pleasure, or they did not pursue other activities that they always wanted to do. Now is the chance to pursue those activities.

The new outlets may be a recreational activity, a college course, theater, more time with friends, or just quiet evenings at home by yourself.

Divorce is a beginning as well as an end.

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