
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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Should I Stay or Should I Leave?

Referrals to mental health professionals often come from family law attorneys who have identified ambivalence in potential clients during initial consultations about the efficacy of divorcing their mate. Much to their credit, these attorneys often recognize the clients' 'fence sitting' and suggest counseling as a first step to evaluate whether to pursue a divorce or remain in the marriage and work to repair the relationship. It then becomes their job to explore what has gone wrong in the relationship. The process of evaluating the viability of the marriage sometimes is undertaken on an individual basis, such as through individual counseling, but more frequently is done in co-joint therapy with both partners present.

There are many areas of conflict that lead partners to question the health and future of their marriage. Some common areas of conflict are communication (respecting, valuing, and listening to the other), value systems (usually stemming from family of origin differences) and children (when children become the central focus of the couples' lives, they may drift away from each other.)

And so, with no bias as to the outcome of the therapy, the clinician starts what might be marriage counseling or possibly divorce counseling. Hopefully, each partner will be able to look at themselves and take responsibility for their own part of the dysfunction that has brought them to treatment. If partners decide that the marriage is not viable and divorce is the outcome, each one will hopefully be able to learn enough to avoid the same pitfalls as they go forward.

In the best of marriages, both parties can be petty and petulant with each other. Needs go unmet, dreams go unfulfilled and sometimes it is lonely. Arguments about the correct way to load the dishwasher, choices for children's activities, where to go on holidays with family, and what movie to see are a

normal part of the reality of a long-term relationship. While partners may have strong feelings about issues such as these, there are other important factors that go into evaluating the future of a marriage. There are several questions that need to be explored through the therapeutic process. For example, can partners accept each other's "unique traits" and idiosyncrasies, both the assets and liabilities, which are present in all of us? Can they learn new ways of coping with the inevitable irritations common in all relationships instead of exiting the relationship? Can a more nourishing connection evolve? Can both partners be able to see beyond the discomfort to the true core of the relationship? The opportunity for individual and partnership transformation can be a gift if selected. Despite the ongoing issues facing each couple day to day, it is possible that, with a degree of acceptance, their relationship can grow and last for a lifetime. Counseling is intended to help answer these questions.

There was a recent article in the New York Times, titled [Knowing Marital Bliss When You Get To It](#). Its author, Sally Freedman, discussed some of the difficulties and realities of long term relationships. The last sentence of this delightful piece seemed to sum up the essence of a healthy, successful relationship- that is, many fantasies and expectations of partnership and many individuals' needs may not be fulfilled but in the end each partner should feel that "we are each other's homeland".

Suggested readings:

Bill O'Hanlon & Pat Hudson, [Love Is A Verb](#)
John Welwood, [Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships: Healing the Wound of the Heart](#)

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