

Divorce Versus the Unhappy Marriage

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Categories: Considering Divorce, Divorce and Annulment If you're thinking about getting a divorce, here are the signs to look out for before making that decision.

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To assess whether you should end your marriage, you must compare living in a divorced family with its realistic alternative: living in a family that is chronically unhappy, that is in open conflict, or that is hopelessly stalemated and alienated.

An unhappy, intact marriage often follows a win/lose model in which the feeling of “us” has broken down. Each of you wants to gain the upper hand to finally, once and for all, prove the other wrong. It’s more like a war than a marriage. Let’s take two examples – one of life in a happy marriage and the other of life in an unhappy marriage.

The Win/Win Model

When Alex and Leslie moved into their new house, they were full of enthusiasm. It was late spring, the house was freshly painted, and the furniture, carpets and drapes had all been cleaned. It was an exciting new start in a new community. They had a small garden, and the two decided to go to a local nursery and shop for some flowering plants. Alex, who likes to cook, had put a corned beef in a pot with water. He put the pot on a low flame, and left it to simmer on the stove. After planning the garden at the nursery and buying the plants, the two thought of several other stops they needed to make before getting back home. When they pulled up to the house hours later, after a lovely day of shopping, the entire house was filled with a greasy, gray smoke that the corned beef had turned into.

How did each of them act? Well, of course, they were both upset, but more importantly, Alex didn’t defend and Leslie didn’t attack. Alex accepted responsibility for his huge mistake and profusely apologized to Leslie for creating this mess. She insisted that it was just as much her responsibility as his; she also could have remembered that the pot was on the stove. The issue that consumed both of them was what they needed to do together to repair the damage. They got to work and after many weeks of considerable effort and expense, they restored the house. The story became a humorous, although rueful, family legend.

Some years later, Leslie, who was under a lot of stress at work at the time, absentmindedly left a pot of eggs boiling on the stove and went to work. Fortunately, Alex happened to come home for lunch that day. Yes, once again, the house was filled with smoke. He remembered the compassion Leslie had shown for him years before with the corned beef incident. Without calling her, he got to work to rectify as much of the damage as he could. He knew how upset she would be with herself, and wanted to minimize the additional stress of this accident rather than pile more stress on to his already

overextended wife while she was at work. Compare this win/win model of communication with the win/lose model so common among unhappily married couples.

The Win/Lose Model

Gio took his nine-year-old daughter over to his brother's house one Saturday afternoon so she could play with her cousin of the same age. The two kids were playing on a backyard swing as the brothers drank coffee on the patio nearby. Gio's daughter fell off the swing and broke her arm. They immediately took her to the hospital to have it set. Gio's wife, Anna, had been out running errands. When she got to the hospital a couple of hours later, their daughter's arm was already in a cast. The little girl was pale and a bit shaken, but otherwise fine. Gio's wife was understandably upset about the accident, but she directed all her anger at Gio, whom she blamed for not supervising their daughter properly.

For months, long after the arm was healed, Anna repeatedly used the incident to bolster her arguments in other disagreements that she and Gio were having in their unhappy marriage. Whenever she had the chance, she "threw in his face" that he was a poor father, irresponsible, self-involved, and careless.

In the win/win model, a couple see themselves as on the same side, so when adverse events occur, they are happening to "us." The fact that an action of your mate's precipitates the adverse event doesn't make him the "bad guy." In fact, it may make him worthy of your compassion because you know he feels bad about it. In the win/lose model of communication, any adverse event is fresh evidence of your mate's inadequacies and your disappointment in him.

So how do you know if it's time to go? Which model of communication does your marriage operate with most of the time? If it's the win/lose, we would say you are probably living in an unhappy marriage. You have to make serious efforts to correct this problem. How does anyone in your family benefit if you and your spouse continue to operate as adversaries? If you have already made those efforts, to no avail, it may be time to go. What kind of outside help have you sought? How vigorously have you tried to tell your mate that the model of communication the two of you are engaged in together doesn't work for most things, but most assuredly doesn't work for a marriage?

Questions to Think About

1. Do my spouse and I communicate using the win/lose model? Yes___ No___

2. Is one or both of us frequently trying to demonstrate the other's shortcomings, mistakes, and inadequacies? Yes___ No___

3. Does one or both of us usually try to gain the upper hand to prove the other wrong in a crisis, rather than see the crisis as happening to "us"? Yes___ No___

This article was excerpted with permission from the book *How to Know If It's Time to Go* (Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.) by Dr. Lawrence Birnbach and Dr. Beverly Hyman. Dr. Birnbach is a psychoanalyst who specializes in working with people in troubled relationships. He practices in New York. Dr. Hyman is a business and organizational consultant specializing in conflict management and negotiation. The authors were both divorced before they were married to each other in 1997. www.sterlingpublishing.c

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