



Minding Your Marriage

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

My marriage is in trouble. My husband and I act like roommates. We have little in common beyond our children. We are exhausted and spend our weekends running errands. One of our neighbors is getting divorced, and we are getting nervous. Can you offer any advice?



Illustration by Jana Christy

Dear Parent:

Your dilemma is a common one with nearly one in two marriages ending in divorce. Our culture appears to undermine our expectations about marriage with unrealistic “happily ever after” notions of love.

Divorce is often emotionally and economically devastating. Divorce can also result in greater hostility and complexity with regards to family

dynamics and raising children. Most ironic is how the healing and growth in a marital relationship come out of our differences and our conflict. Unfortunately, too many couples avoid the work and go into denial, blinding themselves to the roadblocks up ahead.

We all manage to “walk down the aisle” because we are “in love” and at a stage of life when our need for security is great. Naturally, the

first stage of marriage is often easy and blissful. We feel as if we are “as one” with our spouse. We believe our partner thinks and feels as we do. We overlook or minimize the differences as we bond and build a foundation of trust and hope.

The latter stage of marriage is a greater challenge. Along the way, we can create a lot of distractions to help us avoid the work of minding our marriage, including sleep

deprivation, a job and caring for our children.

Yet just as the flames of early love begin to die out, we literally trip over each other’s “baggage” and begin to wake up to our differences. We begin to recognize that our spouses are definitely from another planet. As we passively float into separate and distant worlds, we fail to maintain physical intimacy, as well as emotional connection, and this can

lead to resentment and/or extramarital relationships.

In committed, healthy relationships, two people have a mutual desire to remain close. Such motivation can lead to a deeper and more meaningful love, but there is nothing passive about it. The work involves daily awareness, along with a kind of "stretching" yourself to see and recognize your partner for who he is.

need to be seen and accepted for who we are.

Positive marriages are also about shared joy and bonding. It is impossible to play and be spontaneous if you do not feel safe and secure with your partner. Creating trust and safety is paramount to pleasure and intimacy.

If you recognize a need to rekindle and recommit, start speaking

Make every effort to understand and accept your differences, rather than making an effort to fight or "win" some kind of power struggle. The goal is shared understanding and a "give and take" that is born out of mutual acceptance.

The work involves a wish to give and to love, for the sake of giving. The work involves a wish to be curious about who this alien is, as opposed to being angry about what he is not.

Lastly, and frightening to many couples, the work involves knowing what "pushes your buttons," so you can communicate effectively about old hurts and underlying needs. This sounds like such a burden. Yet, most of us walk around with unmet needs and old wounds, regardless of how well we tuck them away.

Marriage is challenging and requires two intentional partners who cultivate safety and friendship above all else. We must be mindful of our vulnerability and recognize that needs for affection and affirmation can look baffling, if not bizarre. Most of our defensive behavior, whether we attack or retreat, is about our

up about it and be patient. Take your time, as long as you both agree that neither partner is fleeing and there is something better to be had. Just feeding any relationship with some extra attention and care offers hope for renewal and comfort.

Make every effort to understand and accept your differences, rather than making an effort to fight or "win" some kind of power struggle. The goal is shared understanding and a "give and take" that is born out of mutual acceptance. This shift in thinking is courageous and remarkable for the positive outcome you will find.

Here are a few suggestions for couples who are in a committed, positive relationship and want to enhance it. For couples who have drifted to the point of hostility,

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resentment or acting out of unmet needs, please seek professional help and expect to work for a year or two, plus a lifetime thereafter.

- Agree to a commitment to rebuild and revive your marriage.
- Do not expect all your needs to be met by your partner.
- Generate a list of simple caring behaviors each of you desires and exchange the lists. Make an effort to do one or more caring behaviors daily.
- Show or express appreciation or offer a compliment daily.
- Downsize your life in any manner possible to make time for each other.
- Drop all the errands and be discriminating about your priorities. Make time with your spouse a top priority.
- Take time out on a Saturday or Sunday, just let go, relax together

There is not one kind of marriage or a “right” marriage. There is simply *your* marriage and what you choose to make of it.

– even with your children present. Just make the energy connected and calm.

- Communicate frequently, using e-mail, voice mail or old-fashioned handwritten notes.
- Be kind and gentle. Focus on what you appreciate.
- Meet once a week to discuss business and once a week for a “play date.”
- Be a good listener, and wait for your partner to respond. Keep asking questions, rather than talking.
- Greet your partner with a smile.
- Give each other a break and

play tag team with the children so you each have time to refuel.

- If you have significant frustrations and disappointments, make it a priority to consult a professional so you can communicate effectively and set mutual goals.
 - Be patient with each other and recognize that you are each in need of some comfort and care.
- There is not one kind of marriage or a “right” marriage. There is simply *your* marriage and what you choose to make of it. Envision a bubble around you that no one can take

away. You have a sacred relationship together, independent of your relationship with your children and independent of your role as parenting partners.

Find your common ground. The more effort you put into your relationship, the greater the reward. And remember, the growth is within the conflict. As you engage in examining your differences, try to remain patient, curious and kind. Your goal is to learn about each other. Show curiosity and stretch yourself to see and recognize your partner’s needs. In this manner, you are minding your marriage, for keeps.

Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her “Parenting With Confidence” Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at Congregation Beth El. For more information, visit her website www.kayabrams.com.

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