



5050 Kingsway Suite 206  
Burnaby, B.C. V5H 4H2  
Tel (604) 639-3236  
Fax (604) 638-3101  
cfsg@telus.net  
www3.telus.net/cfsg

## Making Marriage Last: A Guide to Preventing Divorce

© 1997-2000 American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML)

**Here's Some Good News:** If you're courageous enough to pick up this booklet, you've taken the first step toward making your marriage work. That you are willing to learn what is needed to make a successful marriage means that you believe in marriage as a lifelong commitment.

It may strike you as odd that a group of people who make a living off of failed marriages would write a booklet about divorce avoidance. After all, if every couple stayed together until death did they part, none of us would have jobs. Unfortunately, we all know that not every marriage makes it through thick and thin and that we, as matrimonial lawyers, will always have work.

We will continue to see thousands of men and women walk through our doors wanting out of a marriage. We'll still hear every sad story. We'll still see couples who split up because times are bad and divorce seems like the next step.

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, a non-profit association of attorneys who are experts in family law, was established in 1962. During the last few decades, our 1,500 members have learned a lot about marriage and the pitfalls of divorce.

The information provided in this booklet evolved from a comprehensive survey of our members on what they see as the most common factors leading to divorce.

Our members know that divorce isn't always the answer. Though some marriages should be abandoned – for reasons such as physical or sexual abuse or other intolerable situations – many “unsalvageable” unions can be saved. If you are willing to devote some time and energy to identifying and correcting the problems in your marriage, chances are, you can avoid the financially and emotionally draining process of divorce.

Please treat this booklet as merely an introduction to the process of working on your marriage. In addition to the tips and information contained here, your library or local bookstore contains a wealth of information, as does the Internet. We have included a sampling of books on marriage, as well as a list of support groups and organizations aimed at helping marriages. Couples should also not be afraid to seek professional help from a trained marriage and family therapist. Churches and synagogues are also good resources for family support.

It takes time and energy to strengthen a weakened marriage. But it can be done. And we hope this booklet helps. In fact, we hope we never see you again!

## Why Marriages Fail

Not all marriages fail for the same reason. Nor is there usually one reason for the breakdown of a particular marriage. Nevertheless, we hear some reasons more often than others.

**They are:**

**Poor communication;  
Financial problems;  
A lack of commitment to the marriage;  
A dramatic change in priorities; and  
Infidelity**

There are other causes we see a lot, but not quite as often as those listed above

**They Are:**

**Failed expectations or unmet needs;  
Addictions and substance abuse;  
Physical, sexual or emotional abuse; and  
Lack of conflict resolution skills**

## Communication

Poor communication is often the catalyst for all other marital problems.

Unfortunately, the simple act of saying "I do" doesn't turn a spouse into a mind reader. So couples must share their thoughts and feelings or they risk losing touch with what is important in their marriage.

Direct communication is always best. As the old saying goes: Mean what you say, say what you mean. If you want or need something, tell your spouse. If your spouse is doing something that bothers you, tell him or her why it bothers you and what you would like your spouse to do about it. As with all communication, however, the secret is in the delivery. Never be accusatory or disrespectful.

If your spouse reacts badly to something you've said, it's possible that he or she did not understand what you meant. Before you overreact, take time to find out what your spouse thinks you meant, and, if necessary, explain what it is you were trying to say.

Arguments are a legitimate way to communicate, but the arguments must be based on a person's actions or words, not what one side imagines is motivating the other side. Arguments are also okay when they are fair, honest disputes about family policy or priorities.

Personal attacks against your spouse are disrespectful and they get in the way of real discussion about important matters.

Some communication problems may be the result of the different ways men and women tend to communicate. Each sex often expects a particular response when they say something, and some are surprised or offended when they get something else. Women often want their feelings acknowledged, while men want to fix things, to solve problems.

For example, a wife who complains about her terrible day at work probably wants empathy, not a discussion about what she should have done to avoid it. Alternatively, a husband who asks his wife where she wants to go for dinner probably wants an answer, not a vague response that "anything is fine."

It is dangerous to react to your spouse with anger. Anger impairs judgment and impedes communication. When people get angry, they may be speechless, or they may cry, yell, stomp out of the room, run away, or throw things. Some may even beat their spouse or children. None of this conduct helps a marriage thrive. It does not resolve disputes; it simply intimidates the other person.

## **Communication Do's and Don'ts**

Focus on solving the problem instead of winning the argument; Listen with an open mind to make sure you understand what your spouse means instead of launching into an unnecessary argument;

Explain yourself if you feel you have been misunderstood;

Respect each other's opinion, even if you can't find an immediate solution to the problem;

Spend time discussing problems and issues you each think are important;

Be quick to forgive, quick to forget;

Be sincere. Your words may say one thing, but your body language may convey something completely different;

Don't talk in code. Say what you mean, and say it respectfully;

Don't go to sleep before resolving a conflict;

Don't talk to your spouse in a rude, disparaging way;

Don't criticize your spouse in front of others;

Don't let anger cloud your judgment about the proper way to speak to and treat your spouse;

Don't start arguments based on things that happened long ago;

Don't assume that your spouse is personally attacking you just because he or she disagrees with you.

## **Financial Problems**

No matter how rich or how poor a couple is, one of the constant subjects of marital disagreement is money. Whether it's over how money is earned, spent or saved, money fights are common because money is a part of daily life, from paying the electric bill to saving for retirement.

Attitudes toward money are learned in childhood. When spouses are raised with widely differing attitudes toward money, conflict is inevitable. The key is for couples to discuss their views on money and to decide among themselves how they will make decisions about how the family money will be controlled.

It is probably not a good idea to have one spouse in complete control of all family assets. That's not to say that a spouse with a particular skill in managing money should not use that skill, but that spouse should always discuss with the other spouse what he or she is doing.

There are several ways you may decide to divvy up the responsibility. Some couples keep their earnings separate but agree in advance who will pay what bills. Some couples put every penny of their financial lives into a joint account. Financial togetherness can be as intense or as separate as the parties wish. As long as the goals and attitudes toward money are shared, the mechanics of fiscal management are less important.

## Managing The Marital Money

Here are some ways to prevent money-management disputes from destroying a marriage:

- 1 Regardless of who earns how much, make a fair division of responsibility for both routine family financial decisions (such as utilities or groceries) and the major ones (such as a house or a car).
- 2 Set short-and long-term goals together, and stick to them unless you both agree to change them.
- 3 Be sure each partner has some money they can spend however they like. The amount, of course, depends on your financial circumstances. Neither spouse should ever have to beg for money.
- 4 If you spend more than you earn, work out a budget together and follow it for at least year. Don't deviate from the budget unless you both agree. If you can't work out your own budget, see a financial planner.

## Lack of Commitment

Marriage is supposed to be a lifetime commitment, a pledge to do whatever is necessary to keep the relationship together. If couples look at matrimony as a job they can quit or an apartment they can break the lease on, their marriage is headed for trouble. Spouses have to agree that keeping the marriage healthy is their top priority. To do that, they have to commit time and energy to it. Both spouses should be as concerned with the welfare of each other as they are with themselves.

Devoting time to one's marriage can require some tough decisions, such as turning down challenging work assignments that would take away from "couple time," spending less time with friends, leaving the office even when duty calls, etc. But it can also be as simple as having a weekly "date night."

Though unexpected events, such as death of a family member or loss of a job, happen to everyone, these events should not be used as an excuse to ignore one's commitment to their marriage. Committed couples who deal with unexpected problems together actually strengthen their marital bonds.

## **Do you lack commitment to your marriage?**

Are you a "workaholic"? Do you spend so much time at work (or at your volunteer job) that you miss important family functions? Do you rationalize the excessive time you spend at work by saying it's "for the family"?

Have you physically or emotionally abused your spouse? Are you so hung up on having control over everything that you lash out to keep your spouse in line? Do you spend hours and hours meeting strangers on the Internet?

Do you complain about your spouse in anonymous chat rooms?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may lack the necessary commitment to keep your marriage afloat. These aren't the only situations, but they are ones we see a lot. Workaholics use work as an excuse to avoid conversation and intimacy with their spouse. Abusers use threats and violence to make sure they always get what they want. Internet junkies shut their spouses out by talking to strangers about marital problems.

If you notice yourself in these scenarios, it's time to recommit yourself to your marriage.

## **Changes in Priorities**

The most common change in priorities comes during a "mid-life crisis." Fearing the transition into older age or more responsibility (such as having children), many people push aside all that they have valued in exchange for something new, exciting or completely opposite.

But there are other reasons for changed priorities: children going to college, which can often prompt stay-at-home moms to re-evaluate their lives in their children's absence; a deteriorating sex life; major health problem; the completion of a longtime goal; or death of a parent or child. Any of these things can make a person feel the need to break away from their "routine" as a way to get back what they feel they have lost.

Once again, the key is communication. Couples need to discuss their priorities and their expectations, and what they hope to achieve in the future. And they should do this not just on their honeymoon, but throughout their marriage. Even if they don't always agree on the specifics of the new priorities, an open line of communication will facilitate a resolution as well as prevent unpleasant surprises.

## **Infidelity**

The sad fact is that that some people will risk their entire marriage for the sake of an extramarital affair. But infidelity is rarely the only reason a couple breaks up. Usually, a couple has a host of other problems and infidelity is simply "the last straw."

The expectations and priorities of a spouse who commits the adultery may have shifted, as discussed above. A cheating spouse may find comfort in the arms of someone else when the other spouse has stopped communicating. Neither scenario is an excuse, but spouses who have extramarital affairs pick an inappropriate way to fulfill a need that's not being met at home.

The spouse who is betrayed may feel humiliated. Children sense these feelings and may worry that

the unfaithful parent will someday betray or abandon them in the same way.

In addition to the emotional toll on the family, extramarital affairs also present health risks, such as AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases that can cause infertility or death to an unsuspecting spouse.

Not all couples split up after infidelity. Some may be able, after a great deal of time and effort, to repair the broken bonds. If staying together is an option, a marriage counselor will be of enormous help in making the transition.

## **The Journey to Happiness**

It has been said that most of life's happiness, and most of its misery, emanate from one's marriage.

Spouses in a happy marriage are more productive on the job, are physically healthier and experience less emotional stress than their unhappily married counterparts. They also raise happier, healthier, more confident children who themselves go on to have happy marriages.

With so much riding on it, it makes sense for couples to make their marriage their number one priority. We hope that the information provided here helps couples begin the journey to their own happiness.

## **Improving Your Marriage**

Treat your spouse like your best friend or most important colleague.

Don't expect to get more from your spouse than you give of yourself.

Don't lose your sense of humor; have fun with your spouse.

Don't demean your spouse in public or in private.

Learn to listen, learn to hear.

Learn to argue respectfully.

Look for resolution rather than victory.

Assess your own mistakes and acknowledge them.

When you apologize, mean it, and sound like it. Be short on blame and long on forgiveness.

Be willing to change your opinions and attitudes.

Look at changes in your life as an opportunity to grow.

Don't try to change your spouse; accept your spouse "as is."

For more information about **Making Relationships Last**

Please go online [www3.telus.net/cfsg](http://www3.telus.net/cfsg)