

Who is Responsible for Fixing the Marriage?



"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."

Peter Drucker

It's April and spring is here! The roses are blooming, the birds are out chirping and showing off their colors to attract a mate, and even the mallards have decided to take a dip in my pool. In many cultures, spring is a symbol of renewal, rebirth, and a season of hope! Yes, love is in the air and couples are seen walking arm in arm, talking about romance — and even marriage. But do they talk about it *enough*?

Marriage is probably the most important contract of our lives, yet partners enter into it, often casually, without any communication about such important things as: who controls the money, child rearing, who does what household tasks, intimacy, and when something goes wrong with the marriage, who is supposed to *fix* it?

Not being clear about what marriage means is one reason that over 40% of the more than two million annual marriages* in the U.S. end up failing. This subjects the children of these marriages to heartbreak, to growing up without a sound belief system, and to missing out on healthy role models that know how to deal with conflict. When the partners avoid the responsibility of figuring out what went wrong, they are often doomed to repeat their relationship patterns in their next marriages. The divorce rate for second and third marriages is also high. In fact, splitting up has become so common that when we hear about a *long-term relationship*, we often wonder, "What's the secret?" What makes love last? What turns the blue skies of love and romance into a stormy sea?

Moving the Goal Post

One huge issue is that when it comes to defining marriage, the goal post keeps moving. Once, it was easier to define marriage and its main purpose — love, family, and *the protection of women, children, property, power, and name*. Today, early assumptions about the meaning and purpose of matrimony have been turned upside down. Couples now freely create their own private definitions of marriage (if they marry at all!), draw up their own rules, and even plan their own marriage ceremonies. A generation ago who would have imagined how many couples would come to say, "Why bother to get married at all. What's the point?"

Contemporary marriages may take on varying forms: sometimes democracies, sometimes autocracies, and sometimes simply top dog/underdog combat zones where one partner's "need to win" subjects the other to the role of a perpetual loser. This dynamic of polarized extremes builds anger, resentment and emotional withdrawal instead of emotional intimacy. We need to learn how to break free of these polarized positions; otherwise things fall apart. Where's the reciprocity?

A case in point is the marriage of Beth and Jim. Beth was initially attracted to Jim because of what she viewed as his "quiet strength," but over time that strength began to look more like a

wall that he built-up to keep her away. He needed distance; she wanted closeness. When she tried to reach the "marshmallow part" of her husband, tried to soften his heart and get him to open up and share with her, he backed off even more, reinforcing his defensive wall, refusing to let her in. From Jim's point of view, Beth was being "emotionally intrusive" and "too needy" and he didn't respect it. It created a power struggle in their marriage. When she kept drilling away, trying to change him, trying to connect with him, and *still* she got nothing back, she filed for divorce. This forced Jim into doing an about-face. He began to take the idea of better communication in their relationship seriously, and as his walls began to come tumbling down, their marriage evolved into the emotional intimacy that both really longed for down deep. Sadly, many such relationships *do* end in divorce without the assistance of a licensed therapist to help them through it.

Another issue that can break the couple's bond is how they handle finances. A close look at this area may be instrumental in determining what kind of love, freedom and trust they share. When the foundation of a relationship is built on one partner's need for power, the other often feels powerless; as if they have no "weight" in the marriage. Unmet needs for autonomy, control, and approval, often using money or sex, can turn love and marriage into a battleground of dominance and submission. What may have started out as a perfect match turns into one of emotional slavery. In the heat of passion, each blames the other for what goes wrong. Neither has learned some simple tools for communicating their feelings and needs.



Sometimes we can all use a little support!

When unmet needs and *immature* warrior energy rule the roost, it results in resentment and dependency, and leaves little room for loving. Everyone loses something: self-esteem, intimacy, security, autonomy, and independence. That's when somebody in the relationship starts asking: "Why did I ever get married? What went wrong? Where did the love go? "What did I do wrong?" And then, "What are *you* going to do to fix it?"

"*When are you going to fix it?*" is a blame-game that puts the partner on the defensive. Lots of people don't like hearing this, but each partner is 100% responsible for putting effort into the care and repair of the relationship. "Know thyself" means to know your own feelings and needs, learn skills to communicate them, and take action to get them met — compassionately. The signs of new possibilities begin to spring up everywhere when you define or redefine what marriage means for you. Decide if your relationship fits the bill. Can these skills be *learned*? "YES!" It takes courage try to pick up the pieces, confront our differences, and use relationship challenges as an opportunity for rebirth and renewal. This journey takes us to a new place that enriches rather than depletes us.

An ideal example of this occurred at our March 8, "**Men Only Workshop.**" The room was filled with the *mature* warrior energy of men who put any personal fears of intimacy aside and continued their hero's journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Yes, men want to learn tools and gain valuable insights for healthier relationships. It's not just a woman's job to fix things. Relationships evolve when based on love and respect, not on "I win-you lose" notions. Whenever problems occur in the areas of communication, closeness, transference, and attachment, instead of running, blaming or splitting, they work it through, often with professional support.

It takes courage to look within rather than to your partner, to address the evolving needs within the relationship. Crisis can be a gift, an opportunity to grow, to learn to communicate, to "know thyself," and to take action to get everyone's needs met. The result is a win-win: **1+1=3**. That is a basis for maintaining a healthy relationship!

* Statistics from CDC's *National Survey of Family Growth*, 2014.