

A LETTER TO YOU IF YOUR MARRIAGE IS IN DIFFICULTY

Dear troubled,

If you've come to this page because your marriage is in difficulties I am writing this for you. Maybe you don't know what to do. Maybe you want some ideas to restore some of that freshness and joy that you once had and dream of again. Maybe you're about to get divorced. Maybe your spouse is having an affair. Maybe you're having an affair. Maybe your spouse won't listen. Maybe your spouse won't talk. Maybe you've grown apart and don't feel the love you once did.

Whatever the reason I want to offer you a message of hope. If that sounds patronising or empty, please bear with me and read a little further. It might help you to know that my wife Kate and I have been through dire straits ourselves.

Back in 1994, we looked like a terrific couple to the outside world. We were young and healthy. We'd been married eight years and had two beautiful young girls. We lived in Asia where I had built a successful business career. We had a thriving social life with lots of friends. But on the inside, we were a mess. We were living more as flatmates than as intimate friends and lovers. We had grown apart and this brought us to the very brink of divorce. We had so little time for each other that it was hard to sit down and discuss anything on our own for even five minutes in a day.

Yet today we are more happily married than ever before. We still have ups and downs, though. Actually we can be pretty volatile together. Our ups are very up and our downs are very down. But our marriage is secure because we've learnt that ups and downs are normal. We've learnt how to talk and listen to each other. We've learnt how to live with our differences. We've learnt how to let each other be different and not let it ruin our marriage.

May I reassure you that we are very far from perfect. In our arguments we often forget everything we've ever learnt. In the heat of the moment, we blow it like many people do. Sometimes these arguments can simmer on for a few days. But we have also learnt how to recover from these times. One of us will always break the ice by saying sorry and forgiving. Often this ends with laughter as we realise we've been behaving like two sulking children. We decide to let issues go because no single issue is ever worth busting our marriage apart.

From near divorce, we've learnt that it is really possible to rebuild something new and stronger than we ever had before.

- We value our marriage as worth keeping for life and we work at it.
- We've learnt the practical skills and attitudes involved in relating to one another and we keep working at them.
- We've needed supportive couples around us to keep us going.
- We've needed time to allow the old wounds to heal and time to trust that the good things are here to stay.

When things are bad, as perhaps they are for you right now, you probably can't see a way out. Our story is all very well for us. But how can we know your situation? I understand that. I tell our story in brief only to show that there are ways out. People have trodden the path you are treading.

Divorce is not a great answer to marriage difficulties. Unless pots and pans are being thrown, neither adults nor children end up better off after separation or divorce. Many do much worse in lots of ways. Sure, most of us cope and build new lives. But the fact that human beings are resilient doesn't mean we should take advantage by simply accepting divorce as OK. It's not. I know this too because I'm a child of divorce myself.

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As a child of divorce, I've been successful in different careers but I carry my wounds and scars on the inside. The only person to see the effect of those scars is Kate. It comes out in my most intimate relationship. That's the core reason why Kate and I nearly got divorced. The way I dealt with divorce as a child was by deciding 'it is better not to feel'. But not feeling means you can't relate to people. So I had few close friends in my childhood.

As an adult, my friends were not 'my' friends but 'our' friends. I didn't really have much of a clue how to relate. I didn't even know how to rate our marriage, good or bad, better or worse than average. I thought it might have been OK but I didn't really know. When Kate told me we were in trouble that was the first solid indication I had of where we really stood. I can remember it vividly now.

So I have some idea of what you might be going through. It's a very unsafe place. You become desperate to find any place that is safer. But that's not the way. Learning to make your own place safe is the better way.

Let's assume you might be prepared to try one more thing. What can I tell you that will give you your best chance of reconnecting with the person you presumably once loved? Please trust me for at least a little while and don't go to a lawyer or a counsellor. Both lawyers and counsellors tend to focus more on what's best for you as an individual and not what's best for your marriage.

As soon as you value the individual more than the relationship, you end up fighting each other instead of fighting for your marriage.

Paradoxically, our best interests are served by living in relationship rather than on our own. I am not knocking lawyers and counsellors as valued professionals. But the nature of their expertise on behalf of individuals is rarely appropriate for resolving relationship difficulties.

Couples with relationship difficulties need to do two things above all:

- (1) You need to learn how to communicate and handle conflict together
- (2) You need a friendly couple who will support you

Even if you can't get your spouse to learn, you can make a big difference on your own. If you don't believe that, think of it this way. You know exactly what words to say or what little flicks of behaviour will send your relationship into a downward spiral, don't you? Congratulations. You did that on your own. So surely it's possible to learn how to say things or behave differently so that the process spirals upwards? Of course it is.

How do you discuss your differences now? Does a dispute about some tiny issue suddenly turn into threats to leave? Do you put each other down instead of hearing each other out and dealing with the issue? Do you assume your spouse is out to get you (which is almost certainly not true)? Does one or both of you walk away when the going gets tough?

Persistent avoidance of problems is the single biggest predictor of divorce. If you never argue, you probably never talk. You start living separate lives because you're no longer connecting with each other. What kind of a relationship is that? If you can see yourself in any of these situations, then learning some simple skills will definitely help you a great deal. What I'm telling you is that you can learn how to handle your inevitable differences far better than you are doing now.

Now I have four highly practical steps you can take. I'm going to assume for now that it's just you who wants to save the marriage. That's OK. Steps 1 and 2 will hopefully lead you to a place where you can both decide to take Steps 3 and 4.

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Practical step 1: Choose to value your marriage

Choosing to value your marriage is all about commitment. Commitment means choosing to put your marriage first. Commitment means thinking about your marriage in terms of a long future together. People who commit do things differently, with more passion and more intent. They are far more likely to succeed.

However hard it seems, you need to start by committing to your marriage. Right now your marriage is going wrong. Most couples who end up divorcing do so because they have 'grown apart'. That is a pretty pathetic excuse. Whatever happened to 'in sickness and in health, for better or worse, for richer for poorer?' What kind of commitment is that?

Love is a decision, not a feeling. It's an action, something you choose to do. If you choose to see your spouse positively, you can bet your behaviour will be more positive. Your spouse will quite likely bask in the glow and your relationship will benefit. If you won't do that because you think your spouse will take advantage of your generosity, what kind of love is that? You two got together in the first place by valuing one another regardless of what each other did or said. I bet you behaved pretty well then and your feelings were terrific then. So do it again now. Be a team again.

Start by choosing to value your marriage. If you didn't already know this, you will soon find out that when you value something with your head, your behaviour and your feelings follow close behind. Love (the feeling) follows love (the decision). Sure, your spouse may well have behaved badly toward you. You hurt like mad. But when you choose to value your marriage, you'll discover you're more willing to forgive the pain of the past and look to a more hopeful future.

Practical step 2: Get properly informed

How come everything that goes wrong is always the other person's fault? Your marriage isn't working now. You think you've tried everything? You haven't. Consider the remote possibility that YOU could be doing something better. Start by reading a book that tells you why marriages go wrong and what people can do to make them go right. Then you'll at least have a better idea of what YOU can do to influence things more positively. I recommend you start with *The Divorce Remedy* by Michele Weiner-Davis. Buy the book, read it and try out what it says at home. It is a hopeful and practical book that will take you step by step through some simple things that have helped many other couples just like you. Anybody can do it.

Practical step 3: Get properly skilled

How much of your problem sounds like this?

- 'She doesn't understand'
- 'He just doesn't listen'
- 'She keeps getting at me'
- 'He never talks to me, I mean really talks to me'

We only argue because we are different. We're man and woman for starters. John Gray has made so much money out of his book series *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* precisely because of this simple observation. Some couples are more different and have to work harder to live with their differences. Other couples are more compatible. They may have similar family backgrounds, beliefs, values or personalities. But if only we knew how to talk and listen so that we felt understood, we could more easily learn to accept our differences, big or small.

Most couples split up because they have grown apart. It may be that you are not spending time together, being interested in one another, wearing each other's shoes. It may be that one of you doesn't listen and

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really hear what the other is saying. It may be that you're hurting each other when you have something important to talk about. It may be that you're failing to value one another in a way that will be received.

Modern marriage or relationship courses are fabulous and probably not at all what you might expect. I warmly encourage you to try one of these courses before you do anything else. It may be all you need to get back on track or hopefully onto something newer and better than you had ever imagined. There's no embarrassing group work or role play or counselling. Yuck! You don't have to talk to anyone else - only each other.

Much of what goes wrong in most relationships can be sorted out through better communication, better handling of differences and better attitude. Couples go on courses simply because they want to strengthen their relationship. It's a positive thing. Most don't have major problems but some will. No one has to know the real reason you're there.

Our *Listening, Laughing, Loving* one day course in Bristol takes couples through practical ways of doing all of these things better. If you're not in Bristol - and even if you are - you may prefer to try *The Marriage Course* which runs for six evenings. Whether you can both come along or not, get hold of one of the skills books *Fighting for Your Marriage* or *A Lasting Promise* and put what you learn into practice.

Practical step 4: Get properly supported

The best people to help marriages in trouble are ordinary couples who have experienced marriage trouble themselves and survived. There's a lot of evidence that this is a far more successful strategy for you than going to a counsellor. So, do you know a couple who have had marriage problems but seem to be doing OK now? I'd like to get that couple on our mentor training course as soon as possible so we can equip them to help you!

Don't be bamboozled by the idea that you need to see a professional. You most likely don't - unless you also have to deal with violence, addictive behaviour or other severe dysfunction. There are now published studies that confirm that trained ordinary couples are as good as or better than professionals at providing a relationship education programme. You need somebody who's been through trouble and come out the other side. They won't side with you or with your spouse. That's because they are on the side of your marriage. And that's what you really want.

I hope this letter gives you some encouragement, some hope and a way ahead. I know all too well from my own experience that it's a truly dreadful place to be when your marriage is falling apart. But I also know that you and your family will be ever grateful that you made the effort to learn how to do marriage really well. I would never have found this out unless we'd bothered to learn. I would never have kept going unless we'd had ordinary couples who kept supporting us and sharing their own stories.

If I hadn't tried to learn, I'd be divorced. I wouldn't have resolved the issues that split us apart. I'd have fallen into another relationship that I'd have had great hopes for but equally little clue about. And the chances are I'd have ended up divorced a second time as I never really got to grips with my own unresolved values, attitudes and behaviours. Most importantly, I'd never have found out so much about the wonderful wife to whom I am still married, I wouldn't have the glorious challenge of the six children we have now and I wouldn't be writing this to you.

Now you go to it. You have a spouse. You don't need another one. Don't throw your marriage away. Trust me when I say you really can fix it and make it better than ever. But you will need a new positive committed attitude, you will need to learn relationship skills that really work, you will need supportive friends who won't cave in at the first sign of your pain, and you will need time to work things out together.

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<http://www.bcft.co.uk/Advice.html>