

IMPROVING YOUR MARRIAGE CAN IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

Mark Beard, LPC, NCC

Although the majority of married couples report they are happy or moderately happy with their marriage relationship, there remain a certain percentage of couples that report they are unhappy. Many among that number of unhappy couples either feel there is nothing that can be done to help and consequently only have two choices—divorce or be miserable. However, there is a third option. That alternative is to seek qualified help in working on improving the marriage relationship. Furthermore, believe it or not, working to improve one's marriage could do more than preserve the relationship; it could also increase happiness, life satisfaction, one's self-esteem, and even improve one's health.

Drawing on, "Longitudinal data from a national sample of married individuals and a multi-dimensional scale of marital happiness," researchers Daniel Hawkins and Alan Booth found that, "Compared to otherwise continuously married people, the unhappily married group suffers from lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction and self-esteem as well as more symptoms of psychological distress and poorer health."

IT'S WORTH A TRY

In spite of this, the first response of an unhappy couple *should not* necessarily be to simply give up and divorce. First, honoring the commitment to the marriage, if possible, is important. Secondly, when couples divorce before attempting to address relationship issues, as well as personal issues causing problems, they are likely to see those same problems arise in their next relationship. Thirdly, many marriages could be saved and the individuals can find greater happiness and better satisfaction with life and the relationship. Additionally, they can even see their psychological outlook and overall health improve.

When we look at the potential benefits of preserving a marriage and the corresponding benefits to the family, one's finances, and everyone's emotional and physical well-being, it is easy to make the case for trying to improve the relationship.

DON'T GIVE UP BEFORE STARTING

I can already hear the objections of some, "But we have already tried!" or "I don't know where to start." Consider trying again by taking the following steps.

- Seek out a qualified licensed professional trained to help couples with their relationships.
- Make a mutual commitment to work on the marriage. Each person must take ownership of improving him/herself. Effective marriage counseling is *not where you "fix" your partner* or have them "fixed." It is a time for mutual growth.
- Next, engage in the process *without* a predetermined timetable. Building a happy marriage is not an event it is a process.
- Finally, remember, your marriage is a living relationship, not a project, and relationships need to be cultivated with love, fun, patience, flexibility, a respect for personal boundaries, and more.

HAVE A GOAL IN MIND

Maybe you have been in an unhappy relationship so long you do not even know what a happy relationship would look like. Psychologist John Gottman uses his research with couples to paint us a picture. According to Gottman, *the following components are important to successful long-term relationships for couples.*

1. They are gentle with each other.
2. They spend time in and enjoy conversation with each other.
3. They allow for influence by their partner.
4. They do keep score by remembering the good things their partner does for them.
5. Each partner knows themselves reasonably well.
6. Each partner honors the others dreams.
7. There is a positive sense of humor in the relationship.
8. There are shared goals and a sense of teamwork in the relationship.
9. There are good conflict resolution skills in the relationship.(sometimes this means doing something, and sometimes it means lettings things take care of themselves.)
10. There is a sense of continued romance in the relationship.
11. Contempt, for the partner, in all its forms, will, more than anything else, bring the relationship down. It needs to be avoided or worked through.

BEGIN YOUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

Perhaps I have convinced you that working on your marriage and reaping the benefits is worthwhile, but you are still afraid you cannot find the way to your destination. Rest assured, a qualified helping professional will know how to lead you along the path that will take you to your destination. For now, your biggest decision may be whether to begin the journey. Can I guarantee you will make it? Too much is beyond my control to guarantee another person's success. However, you will never know if you do not try. On the other hand, if you do nothing, I think we both know you will likely remain unhappy.

References

- Hawkins, D. N., & Booth, A. (2005). *Unhappily Ever After: Effects of Long-Term, Low-Quality Marriages on Well-Being*. Social Forces (University Of North Carolina Press), 84(1), 445-465.
- Gottman, John., Silver, Nan (1999). *Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*. Crown Publishers.