

## 15 SYMPTOMS OF AN UNHEALTHY MARRIAGE

by Steven H. Everts<sup>1</sup>

How important is it to strengthen our marriage relationships? There might be a tendency to think this question applies to others and not ourselves. But whether you are single, married for a short or long term, divorced one or more times, or widowed, this question has application to you. Almost everybody has a family member, close personal friend or acquaintance that is going through or has been through a divorce.

Here are 10 statistics about divorce and children in the United States that will make you think seriously about this question:<sup>2</sup>

- Over 50% of first marriages end in divorce;
- 67% of all recent marriages will end in divorce;
- Over 1,000,000 children are affected by divorce each year;
- Less than 25% of all homes are composed of the biological unit of mother, father, and their offspring;
- 80% of the time only one spouse wants the divorce;
- 66% of the time women file the divorce;
- 66% of children living with a stepparent live with a stepfather;
- 75% of children of divorce end up going through a divorce themselves;
- The Maricopa County divorce rate averaged around 74% between 1997 and 2008, but has dropped slightly since then; and
- 39% of Arizona children are born out of wedlock.

In 2009 there were 21,347 marriages and 14,088 divorces in Maricopa County. That is a 69.99 or 70% (rounded) divorce rate. In 2011, there were 19,336 divorce filings, up 2% from the prior year. There were 12,464 other pre-decree filings and 18,555 post-decree filings,

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<sup>2</sup> Statistical records of the Clerk's Office of the Maricopa County Superior Court in Arizona (1996, 2005 and 2008).

for a total of 50,355 family court filings in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, many of these cases involve families with children.

These statistics remind us of a statement made by one philosopher:

Marriage may be compared to a cage: the birds  
outside frantic to get in and those inside frantic  
to get out.<sup>4</sup>

So, in answer to the question posed above, there is a resounding, "Yes, there is an overwhelming need to strengthen our marriage relationships!"

The purpose of marriage is to achieve the greatest joy life has to offer. It should not be an endurance contest. Those couples not having this kind of joy are missing something. Effective marriages require more than random discussions or articles on the subject. Couples who achieve true happiness in marriage have learned to be vigilant in protecting it. This process frequently involves a knowledge and awareness of the symptoms of an unhealthy marriage relationship.

We are told to be one in marriage. Like all relationships, a marriage is a living thing, separate and distinct, to a certain extent, from the individual participants. It is like a business entity or corporation, made up of people, but retaining its character as a separate entity. One of the issues about which we have to be vigilant is watching for signs or symptoms of an unhealthy marriage, just like an illness to a person. These are the warning signs that tell us something is wrong and may be headed for trouble. Some marriages are healthy and strong. They exercise regularly and eat healthy foods. Some have minor or temporary ailments, like a cold or rash, that are simply annoying and keep them from being their best. Some have major debilitating diseases or long-term illnesses that keep

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<sup>3</sup> [www.superiorcourt.maricopa.gov/MediaRelationsDepartment/docs/annualrep/FY2011Annual Report](http://www.superiorcourt.maricopa.gov/MediaRelationsDepartment/docs/annualrep/FY2011AnnualReport); [www.azdhs.gov/plan/index](http://www.azdhs.gov/plan/index).

<sup>4</sup> Montaigne (1588), as quoted in *Compact Classics* (Vol. 1), p.3-C4 (1992).

them at a permanent disadvantage. And some, unfortunately, are on life support in the intensive care unit, just waiting for someone to pull the plug. None of these symptoms is incurable. They can all be treated. Those wise enough to recognize the signs and symptoms find a remedy that will help prevent the tragedy of misunderstanding and divorce. But, if they are not heeded, if they are allowed to go untreated and uncorrected, they can be lethal to a marriage.<sup>5</sup>

According to a survey of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers,<sup>6</sup> the nine most common reasons marriages fail are:

- Poor communication
- Financial problems
- A lack of commitment to the marriage
- A dramatic change in priorities
- Infidelity
- Failed expectations or unmet needs
- Addictions and substance abuse
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Lack of conflict resolution skills

These are the reasons that are recognized by me and my colleagues, the most highly experienced family law attorneys across the nation.

I have made several observations from my own practice. First, by the time spouses get to me, they have already been to the family, the counselors, and the church, none of them have worked, and they are ready to just get the paperwork done. Second, spouses process divorce issues at different paces. The separation occurs emotionally before it occurs physically. There are the leavor and the leavee, one emotionally way ahead and the other continually trying to figure out what happened and catch up. Third, even though we have to diagnose before we can prescribe, we are really here to talk about preventing the divorce from happening. We are trying to fix the cracks in the vase before it breaks. We

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<sup>5</sup> Curtis, Lindsay R., M.D., "Seven Danger Signals of a Sick Marriage," *Improvement Era*, August 1970, 10.

<sup>6</sup> AAML.org.

want to let the steam out of the teapot before it explodes all over the kitchen. These may be subtle issues that we sometimes hide or deny. At a minimum, we simply take them for granted and ignore them until it's too late. Then your spouse is sitting in my office paying a retainer.

In my 35 years of practice, I have worked with thousands of couples going through divorce. As a result, I have observed some common characteristics, the study of which might help spouses deal with the issues long before someone decides to file. Here are 15 of the more common symptoms of an unhealthy marriage I have observed.

1. Saying the Word "Divorce". Saying the word divorce is one of the hardest words to say for divorcing spouses. It's like an alcoholic in a 12-step process finally admitting their weakness. It's like crossing a line that can't be retracted. If you or your spouse ever use the word "divorce" during an argument, then one of you has already decided it is a viable option. Never use the term with your mate, even in jest. It has long-lasting effects. Marriage is sacred and we should never tamper with sacred things. Future trust, security, and loyalty are inevitably undermined. A similar problem occurs when spouses question if they made the right choice of a partner in the marriage. This causes an insidious crack in any marriage because the partners quit working on it.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is a fruitless and negative exercise where the only alternative is to worry and possibly leave the marriage. It is far better to be resourceful and spend one's energy "being the right one" and making it work.

2. Romance Wanes. One of the major needs of married partners, particularly women, is to receive affection. This is not to be confused with sex. If we do not say, "I love you," every day, or periodically go on dates, give flowers, cards, notes, or presents, our partner's needs are left lacking and often filled elsewhere. Almost anything can become trite and travel-worn, except for the phrase "I love you." All of us love to hear it over and

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<sup>7</sup> Wisner, Martha M., "The Call of the Mild," *Ensign*, April 1989, 18.

over again. For over 20 years, one of my law partners called his wife from work every day at lunch to tell her he loved her.

3. Lack of Physical Intimacy. Whether we like to admit it or not, one of the best barometers of the state of a marital relationship is the nature of the physical intimacy between the partners. Lovemaking is the personal witness of love and commitment between husband and wife.<sup>8</sup> There was an alarming statistic released recently about the high percentage of spouses that report difficulty in this area. Partners who separate themselves on couches, who simply have no desire, or who do their grocery list during lovemaking, would do well to heed this warning. Of course, we should never presume that force of any kind is acceptable. Moreover, no one has the right to tell a couple what or how much is appropriate. The important thing is that partners reach for mutuality in intimate affection together.<sup>9</sup>

4. Desiring to be Alone. It's 5:00 p.m. and quitting time for many people. But you don't feel like going home. Stress, tension or illness exist there, making life difficult or depressing.<sup>10</sup> Or, a spouse expresses a desire to go out with friends to a social event where singles or members of the opposite sex may be present. This desire is often justified as a means of fairness or equality for time the other spouse devotes to recreation, work, children, church, or something else. Whatever the cause of these problems, if this becomes a pattern for one spouse or the other, or a spouse prefers to be with others rather than their mate, the marriage is headed for trouble. People who decide to divorce eventually come to the conclusion that living alone, no matter how painful, is better than living with their spouse.

5. Using Hurtful Words. The old phrase, "Sticks and stones may break my

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<sup>8</sup> Skidmore, Rex A., *A Temple Marriage to Last Forever* (1991), 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Skidmore 17.

<sup>10</sup> Stoker, K., "Spiritual Rx Best for Marital Illness," *Deseret News* (Church News) 6/17/89, p. 10.

bones, but names will never hurt me," is false, particularly if such words are said by a spouse. A marital relationship lays open for both partners the tender faults and frailties of each. Hurtful words make wounds that rarely ever heal completely. Beware of bruising with words like name-calling, belittling, competing, blaming, and word beating.<sup>11</sup> "Never yell at your spouse unless the house is on fire," is sage counsel for any era. A subtler form of criticism is sarcasm, which is hidden anger and hostility disguised by humor. Gerry Spence, nationally-recognized trial attorney from Wyoming, teaches that if we trace anger to its source, we usually find hurt.<sup>12</sup> So, instead of reeling from anger, or giving an eye for an eye, sometimes we might consider embracing it and trying to help our partner relieve the pain. Avoid sniping, making derogatory remarks about your spouse in public, being pushy or comparing your spouse to others.<sup>13</sup> Even a disguised criticism like, "I love you for your potential," sends the message that your mate is never quite good enough.<sup>14</sup> Compliment your partner. Show appreciation. Talk positively about your spouse and marriage in public. Be kind, it is one of the most important qualities to foster. Give in sometimes. Don't let one position be the hill upon which you die. Seeing only a spouse's weaknesses and becoming critical of our partners is a sure way to disaster.

6. Physical Abuse. Have you ever noticed that children can hurt or hit each other and somehow still be friends? This rarely occurs between spouses or any other adults. It is almost impossible for a spouse to forget physical abuse. I've seen people that can remember the exact date, time, location and circumstances of spousal abuse even years after the event, when other memories at the same time have long since faded. And abuse is committed by both men and women. In 2010 there were 8,001 Orders of Protection

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<sup>11</sup> Skidmore 74.

<sup>12</sup> Spence, Gerry, *How to Argue and Win Every Time*, St. Martin's Griffin (1995).

<sup>13</sup> MacFarlane, Howard C., M.D., "How Can I Improve My Relationship With My Spouse?" *Ensign*, April 1989, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Wiser 17.

granted in Maricopa County. In 2011 there were 8,536, a 7% increase. If you have committed an act of physical abuse in your relationship, seek forgiveness immediately and never, never do it again. If you have been a victim of physical abuse, yes, you have to forgive. But nobody ever has to get back in the ring. Do not tolerate it or allow it to continue. Seek professional help where necessary.

7. Abandonment of Common Courtesies. Simple things, like opening a car door, helping a woman with her coat, allowing her to go first, saving her steps, allowing and helping her to be seated first, are all little things -- or are they? Do they speak louder than the words of love, consideration, and tenderness that few of us can express? Thank you, please, excuse me, I appreciate you -- all of these words are important when spoken at the right time.<sup>15</sup> Also, don't be gross at home. Most family members know what this means. Your spouse should be the most respected person in your life. Don't do anything in your spouse's presence you would not do in public. Your marriage may not be on the rocks if you use poor manners at the dinner table, but it will definitely improve if you don't. This includes doing little things to serve each other. When we start taking each other for granted, we lose the newness of our marriage. In *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw used Eliza to coin the aphorism:

The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated.<sup>16</sup>

8. Marriage Becomes Boring. Once a lady saw me regarding a divorce. After 15 minutes of rambling, she suddenly stopped, held back the tears, and said:

My marriage has lost all the fun. There is no humor any more.  
We simply have a business relationship.

This happens a lot. Be creative. Being unpredictable and exciting is essential.

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<sup>15</sup> Curtis 10.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, George B., *Pygmalion* (Act V) 1912, from *England in Literature* (Ch. 10, p. 701), Scott, Foresman and Company (1963).

9. Lack of Intimate Conversation. The term "intimacy" in its broadest sense involves the unfettered exchange of ideas. Humans, by design, have to communicate. This involves listening more than talking. It involves feelings more than words. A wise friend of mine once said, "Feelings are facts." If your spouse says there is a problem, then there *is* a problem, whether *you* think so or not. Ignoring, discounting, or denying your partner's feelings is a sure way of ruining the marriage. One couple learned to understand how to express their intimate feelings better at a seminar by studying a sheet of over 70 circle/smiley faces portraying dozens of different emotions.<sup>17</sup> This can be of great assistance in teaching us to pinpoint and verbalize accurate feelings in communicating.

10. Dishonesty. Do you find yourself not trusting your spouse enough to put your money into joint accounts? Have you made a purchase that you do not feel comfortable telling your spouse about? Have you lied to your spouse to hide something you did not want them to know? If you answered yes to any of these questions, there may be a problem in the level of honesty in your relationship. These, and other acts of dishonesty between spouses, may seem little, but seriously erode the trust necessary in the relationship. Married partners must be one. If you cannot be "honest to the core," then find out why and fix it.

11. Control. Healthy marriage partners are those who can walk that fine line of yearning to be together while maintaining their individuality. It is wanting never to be apart, but allowing each other the freedom to grow independently. It is being one and yet being an individual. It is the ability to be who we are without compulsion. Marriage partners in trouble often have the feeling of being smothered or controlled by their spouse. It is the most common word used to describe the other spouse in initial consultations. If we truly cherish the principle of freedom, and have been willing to endure national and international conflicts to keep it, then should we not just as diligently preserve the same

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.udallshumway.com/smiley-face-feelings-guide/>

for our loved ones?

12. Developing Psychological Illnesses. Migraine headaches, shaking, sudden loss of weight, no appetite, stomach upset, overeating, overuse of medications, cowering, loss of voice, and other similar maladies are often physical manifestations of psychological and emotional illnesses. Certainly, not all are caused by the stresses in marriage. But generally, most divorcing couples experience at least some of these at the time of separation. Don't ignore them. Our bodies often send messages clearer than our words.

13. Involvement with a Member of the Opposite Sex. In today's world it is impossible for either a husband or a wife not to have to deal regularly with members of the opposite sex. But, there is a problem when we feel emotionally closer to someone other than our spouse. Sharing intimate thoughts and feelings with another that we should be sharing with our spouse is wrong. Of course, sexual intimacy with someone other than a spouse is prohibited. But few ever get to that point until long after the emotional engagement has already occurred. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a poor relationship at home is the cause or the effect of the problem. One spouse blames the other for infidelity. The other contends the poor marital relationship came first. Regardless, if you or your spouse sense even the beginnings of intimacy with a member of the opposite sex, pay attention. Pornography is not just a good old red-blooded American male pastime. It is an improper relationship with a member of the opposite sex for married partners. Avoid pornography at all costs. Marriage after marriage has been damaged or destroyed from this practice, let alone the addictive and resultant harm to the user. Remember, as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. You have the power to control your thoughts and be completely loyal to your spouse both mentally and physically!

14. Stubborn Silence. A couple once admitted they went two weeks without speaking because they allowed their hurt feelings to become more important than their relationship. Sometimes a little break during a heated discussion is important to allow

hostilities to diminish. But long periods of silence are irreparable. We should be persistent in helping our spouses talk through their problems within minutes after they occur. Never go to sleep with a problem hanging. Lingering causes festering and makes the problem worse. It's just the same as letting a minor sore worsen to the stage of infection.

15. Lack of Spiritual Interaction. One never meets a spouse seeking a divorce who is praying with their partner. Failure to pray, assist in church assignments, read the scriptures and attend church together are often the first things to go when couples get into trouble. Some live this way for years and just survive as best they can. But healthy marriages have learned that successful human relationships generally have spiritual roots.<sup>18</sup>

These, then, are 15 of the more common symptoms of an unhealthy marriage. Once we recognize any of them what do we do? What is the prescription for treatment? The answer is simple -- anything it takes to fix it! Don't ignore it. Marital illness is like cancer. Before you realize it the disease will have spread and your spouse may be gone. Stop the offensive behaviors. If the symptoms persist or seem overwhelming, get help.

- Talk openly together.
- Pray.
- Read an article or book together.
- Take a marriage class.
- Speak with a trustworthy couple who can help.
- Attend a marriage enrichment seminar.
- Get a covenant marriage license.
- Seek spiritual guidance through the church.
- Go to a good marriage counselor to build healthy marriage skills.

Some spouses shy away from professional help thinking that it is a sign of weakness or embarrassment. Some think they know everything and don't need it. Don't let your stubbornness get in the way of saving your marriage. If you had a broken arm, would you hesitate to see a doctor to have it casted? Relationship illnesses are no less serious. Sometimes it takes outside professional help to find a workable solution.

It is true that this subject raises a voice of warning. But, clearly, recurring statistics

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<sup>18</sup> Covey, Stephen R., *Spiritual Roots of Human Relations* (1970).

bear out that the institution of marriage is in deep trouble. Don't be lulled into a sense of simply taking a test or counting how many of the symptoms fit your relationship and then stop. It is imperative to have marriage partners realize that their marriage is the most important thing in their life. If you want to see real pain, lose your spouse! Everybody just needs to work through the issues. There is hope even for marriages that may really be struggling. If spouses with marriages in trouble would seek help earlier, many of them would not end in divorce. Even better, they would experience the full joy that marriage was designed to offer.

In summary, a poet expresses these thoughts most beautifully in *Love is a Fire*:

Love is a fire that grows a spark  
Into a light that illuminates the dark  
Love is a fire with heat unfold  
That turns to warmth the bitterest cold.

Love is a fire that flames in the heart  
But love is a fire that two must start  
Love is a fire that will burn without end  
But love is a fire that two must tend.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Armour, Richard W., "Love is a Fire," from *Yours for the Asking, A Book of Light Verse*, B. Humphries, Inc. (1942).