

# SHOULD YOU STAY TOGETHER?

Four Options For Resolving A Rocky Relationship *By Gemma B. Allen*

Not every marriage is made in heaven, and not every divorce has to be.

The age old dilemma is, can or should this marriage be saved? In a troubled relationship you really only have two options: stay or leave. If you choose to stay, you can take steps to change the partnership.

**When to stay.** You have to carefully weigh the pros and cons, the same way you make any other life-changing decision. The only problem is when you're doing it in a committed partnership, there are both tangibles and intangibles to be considered. For instance, if you "stay for sake of the children," you may never really know if that was the best decision.

Sometimes if you stick it out through a bad period, you'll end up happier than people who opted out. Some issues, however, can be very difficult to get through, for example, drug addiction, alcoholism and sex addictions. The recidivism rate for those addictions is high, and even if one partner gives up the addiction, they may resent having to give up something he or she really craves. Addictive personalities sometimes substitute an old addiction with a new "hobby," which can lead to a new crowd of friends – and new challenges for the relationship.

If the positive outweighs the negative, or even if the balance is closer to 60 percent con, 40 percent pro, you have a hard decision. There is no doubt that both parties suffer an economic loss — marriage is generally a good "business," and the best investment most people make in their lifetime. There is no doubt that children prefer their parents stay together, even if the adults find the relationship difficult and challenging.

**When to leave.** There is also no doubt that there are things divorce can accomplish. If you need those things a divorce can do, such as legal, economic or physical protection from an unreasonable or otherwise uncontrollable spouse, then your decision is made.

There's one sure reason to leave and that's physical abuse. Women often will tolerate it because they rely on the partner's financial support, do not know how else to protect the children, or they simply don't want to confront the abuse. They may even believe the abuse was their fault. But they will tolerate the intolerable, be it mental or physical abuse, until

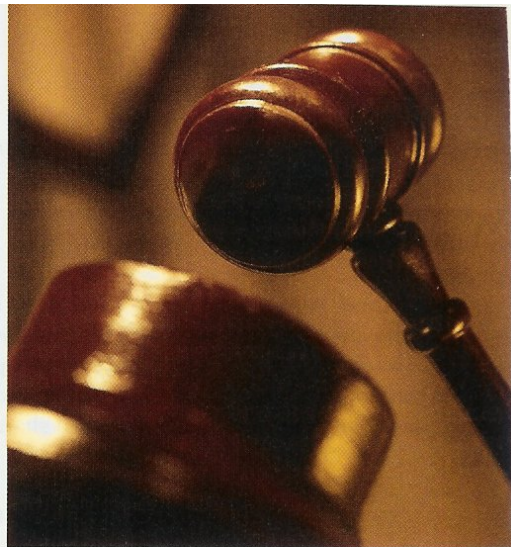
one day something just snaps. They realize they probably stayed "too long," nothing will change and when that happens, they're gone, they leave, they are "out."

If the problems in a relationship are less destructive and more ordinary, the secret is to try to never reach that point of "no return." Fighting is what burns out the flame of love. Wise people know you don't have to fight about everything — even if you are right. You don't have to win every battle in a relationship, because that can lead to you and your spouse losing the relationship. What divorce attorneys see is that good relationships have a reservoir of good will. The reservoir is drained by disagreements and it needs to be constantly refilled. If it is allowed to run dry and stay dry, one partner or the other will run away.

**Change yourself.** If you change your own behavior, you'll necessarily change the reaction you're getting. You have to make a personal decision about what really matters, what's worth fighting for. It's better if couples come at issues more from friendship than power. "Will you help me?" with an addiction, spending pattern or serious disagreement are words that evoke a better response than do the accusations "you have a problem" and "you have to change." Changing your reactions to your spouse are decisions you make if you decide you'd rather stay than go.

One of our potential new clients was an urban indoor spa kind of girl. She married a rugged outdoorsman. Neither one of them was "happy." One day after some counseling and introspection, she simply decided to stop "hating" his hunting and fishing hobbies and join him — at least occasionally. He so appreciated her company that he, in turn, began booking his outdoor excursions only in areas adjacent to a spa or resort where they would spend the last night. Needless to say she never became our client, and she dropped me a note later saying her life had actually become more adventurous.

**Negotiating for change in the relationship.** If you can't do it yourself, get some help! Neither party has to be psychologically disturbed for a couple to benefit from some counseling. It really helps to verbalize seemingly insurmountable problems in front of a third party. A good counselor has the gift to spot the



dynamics in a relationship the way the rest of us spot colors. They can get to the heart of the matter after one or two sessions.

An experienced counselor can help you navigate the troubled waters and work as a couple to help you determine what to do. But whom you choose for that help is critical. For the sake of the marriage, find an experienced marriage counselor rather than a personal therapist. A therapist's job is to make you healthier and happier — the marriage is not their "client." Sometimes a couple will work with a marriage counselor while one or both of the partners seek individual therapy, and that's fine.

**Where to look.** To find a qualified professional, do research online, ask trusted friends, or even a divorce lawyer. If possible, check out references and go as a couple to meet those who were referred to see if you're comfortable with them.

**Beginnings and Endings.** Sadly, there aren't as many role models for long-term happy fulfilling marriages as there used to be. My belief is that the best approach to ensuring a happy marriage is premarital education where the main issues in a relationship are discussed (money, sex, where to spend the holidays, religion, friendships outside the marriage, etc.). Significant decisions should be made before you walk down the aisle, along with mastering the art of disagreeing in a respectful manner. Do this, and you'll make the marital journey much easier.

Our society leaves couples stranded at the altar. Pre-marital education would help but so can marriage counseling if both partners are willing to approach it with open hearts and minds. Even if counseling "fails," you and your spouse might at least understand what went wrong and the divorce has a better chance of being amicable. ■

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