

Marriage in Crisis

Article 2: First Aid for Marriages

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The situation was so bad my eyebrows raised involuntarily. Everyone knew they had a terrible marriage. But the wife's words detailed precisely how bad: "Just the sound of his voice makes me literally start to vomit." Just as shocking as her words was the claim of this couple to be Christian.

But couple's with shocking stories are not unusual, in fact, they are becoming quite the norm. The subject of marital misery and failure is popular material for laughs with celebrities on TV, and tragically for that matter, with even leaders in church. And we may be hesitant to admit that neglect of marriage is just as big in society as it is in church. Of course, neglect spells problems, often seemingly insurmountable problems, for which seem to be no hope. But in God's world there is always hope, because with God, miracles are always possible. Too many today have forgotten hope, miracles, and God, ironically even those of the so-called faith.

At the same time we must be realistic. The scale of neglect when it comes to heart and home in Japan is staggering. Marriages and homes will certainly continue to crumble at crisis proportions. So what can be done?

In the US, the highest divorce rate of any career group is the military. Marriages of those in the military are under immense stress. Military families are often face the stress of death and danger. Military life also means constant moves and long-term separations. Men may be away from home for six months or more. Finances can be tough as pay is poor in the lower ranks, so much so that servicemen qualify for government food aid tickets. And often they are unappreciated (like in Okinawa) where the media concentrates on the occasional crime instead of the national protection and stability their presence guarantees.

I have seen the tough lot for military marriages first hand on numerous bases. Chaplains on base are overwhelmed with the need. Once, when I arrived to do a conference the chaplain meeting me at the airport was talking down an airman from committing suicide via mobile. The man's wife had just

left him. That weekend I met with base commanders and chaplains who were bewildered with the problem of suicide on base, and most suicide attempts were related to problems at home. One chaplain explained their method of intervention with couples honestly, “We are just aiming at damage-control.”

In military intervention, damage-control is a last resort. To initiate damage control means a high casualty rate is certain, huge numbers will be lost, and so the focus becomes how to hem the catastrophe in to prevent massive destruction. It is a realistic approach, but also a gut wrenching approach. How many can we save? 8 out of 10? 5 out of 10? Less? Damage control—likely the very approach to marital-intervention needed in Japan today. It’s a dark view, but it’s a realistic view for as was mentioned before, not only do we face a new record for divorce every year, not only has divorce nearly double in the last ten years, not only are almost 40% of marriages ending in divorce, but marital dissatisfaction is off the charts—things are really just gaining momentum. So the question becomes, how can we help the most, how can we offer hope to the greatest number?

People often try to label me as a marriage counselor. They like to envision that I sit in a room with a couple and do therapy with them. The truth is I rarely do such and almost never meet more than once. I guess you would say I subscribe to ultra-brief therapy, for that matter usually so did Jesus. From my understanding, Japan’s therapeutic community seems to be dominated by the psychotherapeutic model of therapy. A model that takes a lot of time and does a lot of digging, sort of like emotional-archeology; digging up sorting and examining the bones and debris of the past to understand the present. That’s all well and good, but in a crisis, when the situation demands damage control it’s impractical, there isn’t enough time for all that. For that matter, when any couple who has neglected problems too long, and are on the verge of collapse (perhaps one has already filled out the divorce form), they need a change fast, they need hope now, not three months down the road.

So we have two questions: How can we give help to the most, and how can we give help now? Though the answer may sound simple I am a firm believer that best approach is to: Disrupt the negative system with positive stuff as quickly as possible. So what is a system? By system we refer to the pattern of

interaction in a relationship. Negative systems are where one or more people are unhappy and emotionally unhealthy. In a negative system one person does something negative and the other reacts negatively, thus the first person will do something negative again. Little kids do it. One child hits another, that child hits back, so the first hits even harder, or maybe both children creatively plan revenge later. Kids do it, adults do it. A husband neglects his wife, so she nags, so he avoids her more, and she has more fuel for nagging. A wife neglects her husband, so he becomes bitter toward her, and they avoid talking, which means more neglect. These are negative systems. And as the system swirls downward each person feels more negative, more distant, more against the other. One bad act reinforces another. Sure it's only natural we reason, but then we were not called to live natural lives. Let's face it, a marital problem is a sin problem, it is a spiritual problem. People contemplating divorce often think they need a new spouse, but most likely what they need is a new marriage with the same spouse, and that without a doubt means a personal spiritual change.

Early in this article we noted that to give hope and bring change quick, psychotherapy is not the best choice, thus systems therapy is now dominating the West. Systems therapy is about making some strategic change in the negative system that upsets the system and opens the door for a new system, an altogether new marriage. Be sure to get your perspective straight: You can never change your spouse (that is God's job) but you can change the system by refusing to perpetuate it.

There are scores of great ways to initiate change in a system. But there are few ministers I have met that employ them. Here are three that I use regularly, three that can reverse a bad situation overnight. If a person can commit to this regimen for even one week (much less than Jesus' seventy times seven) it would be amazing if they don't notice a big change and a significant increase in hope.

1. See your spouse with the eyes of Christ. In order to do this, observe them while they sleep or view a picture of them. Then ask Him to give you His perspective. You will begin to see them very differently than you have, you will notice good things in them that you failed to recognize, your

bitterness will begin to turn to mercy and goodwill. You may even find yourself uttering the words “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” in the same way Jesus did toward His crucifiers. Your spouse is not your enemy, the real enemy has been blinding you and causing you to focus on lies, Jesus will reveal this.

2. Pray for your spouse. Not that they will change, but for their good, for their real needs to be met, for them to long for God, for them to be blessed greatly by God. I once gave counsel to a “Christian” couple who were set on destroying each other’s lives. They had multiple problems but all could be traced to a spiritual problem. I sensed that if the husband would open to God, the system would be destabilized, and most everything else would clear up. So I asked him “Do you ever pray for your wife?” His response exposed the seriousness of his spiritual problem “Yeah I pray for her. I pray she goes to hell!” If we can’t pray for the good of our spouse, then the real problem is obvious. Prayer, basically is not about changing God, others, or our world, it’s about changing us. Prayer makes us into God’s channels to touch others and bless our world: A major disruption to any negative system.
3. Do something kind. I have ministered to hundreds if not thousands of couples from Hokkaido to Okinawa and have noticed a very simple difference between what miserable couples are doing, and what vibrant couples are doing. Every day the miserable couples do one thing to each other, every day the vibrant couples also do something to each other. The miserable-club does something unkind while the happy-club does the opposite. Kindness includes words and actions that convey “I like you.” “I value your thought and feelings.” “I am on your side.” In little ways happy couples keep kindness flowing like a refreshing stream in their marriage. It waters their garden. It makes flowers bloom. It makes a place they both want to be. I have seen men at marriage conferences give flowers to their wife and see tears of happiness wash away a multitude of neglect. I have seen spouses write each other love letters and notice their entire world change overnight.

Some couples never get out the rut. They keep rehearsing the junk of their

old system that is obviously not working. I know of one unhappy couple where the husband stubbornly ate at the table on hot days without a shirt. The wife hated it, and pestered him to put on a shirt at meals. She nagged, and he resisted, and she nagged for forty years. It never changed. One day she realized nagging didn't work (about time!). So she changed her part of the system. When her husband came to the table without a shirt, she stepped out of the room and got completely naked, then came and sat down at the meal. Her husband took one look, put his shirt on and never ate a meal shirtless again. Now I'm not sure if you could call this granny's taking off her clothes at meal time "kindness," but it did work. It changed a forty year old negative system. So I might add to doing something kind, do something different, maybe even shocking.

One thing is clear, in this day and age—hope is in a shortage—the world has none and legions sit in church week after week and go away empty handed. Great numbers of homes will doubtless be lost, but if we can inject hope quickly into as many as possible on this gloomy battlefield, we may begin to break old systems, and miracles will abound.