

# Monthly Tip



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## Is This Relationship Worth Saving?

Lisa and Paul, a young couple, found their way to me through a referral from a concerned relative. Their open smiles and warm enthusiasm greeted me as we introduced ourselves to one another in the waiting room. By the time they had settled in my office, their emotional tone shifted considerably. Their uneasiness was evident as they sat at opposite ends of my large sofa. Paul looked sad and Lisa looked anxious. Both looked as if they would have preferred to be anywhere else except in a psychologist's office.

After giving them some basic information around confidentiality and the therapy process, I began the session by asking each of the partners to answer my standard opening question,

"Tell me a bit about what brought you both here today? Lisa responded, "Our marriage is in trouble. We always seem to be fighting. We have been together for 7 years. While I want to stay in the marriage, I'm not sure that we're going to make it."

When answering the same question Paul responded by saying, "I agree. We have had problems for several years now and things just aren't getting any better. We have seen several counselors, off and on, and nothing seems to help. We try to talk but never get anywhere. Things always end up in an argument. I'm getting frustrated and am not sure that going over the same old things again and again is worth the effort.

I reflected that they often did not see eye to eye on things, and that both of them feel ambivalent about the likelihood of successfully resolving their difficulties. I then asked them what it was that they fought about. They glanced at one another and said in near in unison, "Everything!"

Next, I invited both parties to tell his or her own story. In the course of telling his story, Paul mentioned that he had been previously married for a short time, and has a child from that relationship. When asked why that marriage ended Paul answered, "We were both young. It was a mistake. Eventually we just drifted apart. It was no big deal." I asked who the first to leave the marriage emotionally was and he suggested that the decision to divorce had been mutual. Even when pressed, Paul did not provide further details. At this point Lisa nodded her head and interjected saying "I bet it was Paul who left first, he is closed off emotionally"

When it was her turn to talk, Lisa spoke at length about her own parents' long-term marital relationship. "In all of the years that Mom and Dad have been together, I've never seen them fight once." She thought her parents' relationship

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was nearly perfect. By comparison, she described her own marriage as being severely flawed. Lisa confided that she had difficulty telling her parents that her own marital relationship was in trouble for fear of their disapproval and criticism.

As they told their stories, Paul and Lisa proved to be intelligent and educated individuals. They were both likable and interesting people. Yet, as a couple, they were both very unhappy. At one time, Paul and Lisa had joined forces and through the years they were able to accomplish many significant things. Together they had successfully parented Paul's 9year old daughter, purchased a home, managed a household and supported one another in building successful careers. They found their way through numerous significant life changes that included serious illnesses, job changes and the death of Paul's mother. Despite the strengths in their relationship, it was apparent that their earlier intimacy and connection had eroded to breaking point.

Throughout the session I had to remind the couple about the ground rules for interactions in the session

- 1) Only one person may speak at a time.
- 2) Everyone has the right disagree with the other respectfully.
- 3) Feelings are neither right nor wrong - they just are.

Both seemed unable to resist interrupting one another in order to correct the details regarding what exactly happened and who said what. Both denied each others feelings and the validity of the others feelings about the events that were being reported. As they struggled to define "the problem", I noted several unhealthy patterns in the dynamics of this relationship. Clearly, this couple was in distress. Their willingness to talk about their marriage was commendable. Yet, the more they talked the worse things seemed to get. Something made it difficult for Paul and Lisa to talk with one another.

Overall, the two versions of the marital story were quite similar. Paul and Lisa agreed with one another's account of the basic events. Yet, when differences in opinions occurred, the tension between them escalated. It was clearly difficult for one to listen to the other without reacting defensively.

Near the end of the session each voiced frustration with how the session had gone. While admitting that they had been able to address more issues in this session than they had had in others, they believed that they had merely gone around in circles once more. Nothing had been resolved. Both Paul and Lisa were extremely unhappy about their shared situation and were unsure about the next step.

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This is where the value of working with an uninvolved third party comes into play. A trained psychologist serves as a neutral entity that can validate divergent opinions and perspectives. When I say neutral I mean that by being disinvested, a psychologist can acknowledge and/or challenge what either party is saying without taking sides. He or she is not a magistrate who listens to the details of a case and then pronounces a judgment as to who is right and who is wrong. Rather, a psychologist is more like a referee who ensures emotional safety for both the speaker and listener and makes sure that both parties have equal opportunity to give voice to their thoughts and feelings.

From my perspective, this session had been very valuable in helping me to understand the problematic dynamics of the couple's relationship. I learned about each person as an individual and about his or her shared history. Of greater importance, I was able to begin assessing the dynamics of their relationship by observing their interactions.

So, I asked Paul and Lisa if what I had just witnessed was a good example of how things went at home when they tried to talk about their relationship. As I expected, both agreed. They welcomed my offer to provide them with feedback from my observations.

First, I pointed out that both parties continually disagreed with the other about what behavior was problematic. Each was inclined to defend themselves by saying, "That's not a problem." At other times, each deflected responsibility for issues by saying, "That's your problem." Neither was inclined to validate their spouse's perspective or claim responsibility for the problem behaviors being identified. When this occurred, the person speaking seemed disinclined to continue trying to explain their point of view.

Second, when talking to me about the other, both were inclined to use labels: "Paul is crazy." "Lisa is neurotic." "Paul is insensitive" "Lisa is far too sensitive." "Paul is passive-aggressive." "Lisa is depressed." The effect of these comments was to raise the level of anger and frustration in the person being labeled.

Finally, when talking to one another, each used overgeneralizations such as. "You have always taken me for granted." "You never appreciated the things that I did for you." "You always compare me to your father." "Your mother never thought that I was good enough for you." These comments stalled conversation because they could not be affirmed or denied.

I concluded the session by acknowledging that Paul and Lisa had helped me to begin identifying several significant problems regarding the dynamics of their relationship. I expressed my willingness to help them work on these things as I saw them as do-able. Then I then asked them if they had a desire to schedule

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another appointment. They agreed to return.

Before they left I gave Paul and Lisa a homework assignment that they were to complete independently. I gave them three questions to consider:

- 1) What attracted you to each other
- 2) What are two talents or strengths that your partner has
- 3) What about your marriage is going well?
- 4) How will you know when your marriage is meeting your needs?

It is impossible to determine whether a marriage is worth saving until a couple assesses and understands what exactly is wrong. Prior to that point, no effective problem solving can be attempted. Suppose that one morning your car fails to start. In frustration your first inclination might be to sell the vehicle and purchase a new one. However, it would be foolish to make such a decision on the basis of your feelings of frustration. A rational approach would be to first identify the problem and then find out how much it will cost to make the necessary repairs. With that information in hand, you would also review what about the car is in good condition before making the decision to sell it. A few months ago you just put on a new set of tires and had it tuned-up. The engine and transmission should have a lot of good kilometers left in them. The exhaust system and the air conditioning are problem free. The paint job and the insides are like new. The sound system is great. Obviously, there are many factors to consider in making a final decision.

Unfortunately, there is no “magic wand” in the process of marital counselling. Determining whether a marriage is worth saving involves a thorough assessment and not just the clarification of one’s feelings. Make no mistake about it; this process usually involves hard work. Why bother? The answer is clear. To end a marriage in haste has long-term negative effects on everyone involved. I believe that it is not until an individual can say that they have tried absolutely everything that they could possibly do to save the marriage that they are emotionally free to leave. Otherwise, there are the certain to be feelings of guilt that will visit periodically. Admittedly, there are certain circumstances in which divorcing may be the best decision. Unanswered questions will exist if a decision is made prematurely without first ruling out all possibilities for making things work.

You may be surprised to hear me say that at this early point in counselling, I believed that Paul and Lisa’s marriage was worth saving. I say this without knowing anymore than I already did because they were only beginning to understand what was wrong. So far, their insight was limited to identifying their negative feelings about each other. Our job would be to define their relationship problems. Once Paul and Lisa could understand and agree on the problematic

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dynamics of their relationship, they could better devise a plan for making things better.

I have to admit a bias about marriages. I like to see them work if at all possible. As for Paul and Lisa, their decision to remain together for years in spite of their shared frustrations was a good indicator that they too cared about and valued their relationship. We were on the same page.