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# Desperate Marriages

Thousands of couples are struggling in their marriages. Maybe you are one of them. You could write a book entitled *How to Be Married and Miserable*. Some of you have been married for five years and others for twenty-five years. You entered marriage with the same high hopes with which most of us said, “I do.” You never intended to be miserable; in fact, you dreamed that in marriage you would be supremely happy. Some of you were happy before you got married and anticipated that marriage would simply enhance your already exciting life. Others entered marriage with a deeply dysfunctional history. Your hope was that in marriage you would finally discover meaning and happiness.

In every case, a man and woman anticipated that marriage would be a road leading upward, that whatever life had been to that point, it would get better after marriage.

Your experience, though, has been that since the mountaintop celebration

of the wedding, the road has wound downward. There have been a few peaks of enjoyment and a few curves that offered a promising vista. But the vista later turned out to be a mirage; and the marital road again turned downward. For a long time, you have lived in the valley of pain, emptiness, and frustration. You live in a desperate marriage.

THINK ABOUT IT

How would you describe your marriage?

You probably really don't want to divorce. For many of you, religious beliefs discourage you from taking that exit. For others, the children strongly motivate you to keep your marriage together. Still others find enough moments of happiness or support to keep your hopes alive for a better marriage.

You sincerely hope that things will get better. Many of you feel that you have tried to deal with the issues that have kept you and your spouse from marital unity. Most are discouraged with the results. If you have gone for counseling, it has not been very productive. If you have read books, you have read them alone, wishing that your spouse could hear what the distant author is saying and be moved to change. Some of you have tried the calm, cool, straightforward method of gentle confrontation. Your spouse has responded with silence. In desperation some of you have tried yelling and screaming. Your pain has been so intense that you have actually lost control trying to express it. In some cases your loud cries for help have prompted your spouse to launch a counterattack. In other cases your spouse has simply withdrawn.

THINK ABOUT IT

What options have you pursued to strengthen your marriage? What helped the most?

The problems with which you and other married couples grapple cannot be solved by quiet parlor talk. Nor do the problems melt under the intense heat of pious platitudes. The problems, like cancer, eat away at the vitality of a marriage. The problems vary from couple to couple, but the intensity of the pain runs deep for all.

Through the pages of this book, I will take you

behind closed doors into the privacy of my counseling office and let you listen as husbands and wives share their painful situations. I also invite you to listen to what people tell me at the marriage seminars I lead across the country. (I have changed names and details to protect these people.) I urge you to believe that there is hope for your desperate marriage.

### FINDING LOVING SOLUTIONS

In this book I will talk about how to deal with a spouse who is irresponsible or a workaholic; a spouse who is controlling, uncommunicative; verbally, physically, or sexually abusive; unfaithful or depressed; a spouse who is an alcoholic or drug abuser. For all of these situations—and others—you can find loving solutions that may preserve your marriage and can make you feel good about yourself and your spouse.

I am under no illusion that I can provide a magic formula to bring healing to all such marriages. However, I do believe, based upon my own experience in counseling, research in the field, and sound moral principles, that there is hope for desperate marriages.

I believe that in every troubled marriage, one or both partners can take positive steps that have the potential for changing the emotional climate in a marriage. In due time spouses can find answers to their problems. For most couples, ultimate solutions will depend not only upon their own actions but also upon the support of the religious and therapeutic community in their city. But I will say it again: There is hope for lasting solutions in desperate marriages.

#### THINK ABOUT IT

Do you believe one person can take steps that can make a positive difference in a desperate marriage? Why or why not?

### EXPOSING THE MYTHS

If you have a desperate marriage, it's time to practice *reality living*. Reality living begins by identifying myths that have held you captive. Then it accepts

them for what they are — myths, not truths. You can break their bonds as you begin to base your actions upon truth rather than myth.

Reality living means that you take responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings, and actions. It requires you to appraise your life situation honestly and refuse to shift the blame for your unhappiness to others.

Look at the following four statements. Answer them honestly with *true* or *false*.

1. My environment determines my state of mind.
2. People cannot change.
3. In a desperate marriage, I have only two options — resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out of the marriage.
4. Some situations are hopeless — and my situation is one of these.

If you answered “true” to any of these statements, please read on. In fact, all four statements are false. Unfortunately, many people in desperate marriages base their lives upon these commonly held myths.

Those who accept any of the four myths above will act accordingly, so that their actions become a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution. Let’s look at the outcome of accepting and acting upon each of these myths.

**MYTH NUMBER ONE: *My environment determines my state of mind.***

The commonly held view of our day is that we are all victims of our environment. This myth is expressed in the following statements:

“If I grew up in a loving, supportive family, I will be a loving, supportive person.”

“If I grew up in a dysfunctional family, then I am destined to failure in relationships.”

“If I am married to an alcoholic husband, I will live a miserable life.”

“My emotional state depends on the actions of my spouse.”

This kind of approach to life renders anyone helpless in a hostile environment. It prompts feelings of hopelessness and often leads to depression.

In a desperate marriage, this victim mentality leads a spouse to conclude, “My life is miserable, and my only hope is the death of my spouse or divorce.” Many people daydream of both.

Your environment certainly affects who you are, but it does not control you. Rather than being a helpless victim, you can overcome an environment cluttered with obstacles, whether blindness (Helen Keller) or polio (Franklin Roosevelt) or an alcoholic parent, whose abuse has influenced your attitudes in marriage. Your environment may influence you, but it need not dictate or destroy your marriage and your life.

**MYTH NUMBER TWO: *People cannot change.*** This myth purports that once people reach adulthood, personality traits and behavior patterns are set in concrete. Those who believe this myth reason that if a spouse has demonstrated a certain behavior for a long period of time, he or she will continue to act this way.

A wife assumes that her husband, who was sexually active with multiple partners before marriage and sexually unfaithful after marriage, is addicted to this behavior and cannot change.

A husband assumes that his wife, who has been irresponsible in money management for the first fifteen years of marriage, will always be financially irresponsible.

If you accept this myth as truth, you will experience feelings of futility and hopelessness. The fact is, you can go to any library and find biographies of people—adults—who have made radical changes in their behavior patterns. Saint Augustine once lived for pleasure and thought his desires were inescapable. Charles Colson, the Watergate figure, repented and began an international agency to offer prisoners spiritual help.

People *can* and *do* change, and often the changes are dramatic.

**MYTH NUMBER THREE: *In a desperate marriage, I have only two options—resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out.*** Those who believe this myth limit their horizons to two equally devastating alternatives, and then become a prisoner of that choice. Thousands of people live in

self-made prisons because they believe this myth of limited choices.

Shannon and David believed this myth. For fifteen years they experienced misery and contemplated divorce, but as they left my office after six months of counseling, David said, “I used to leave your office with rage in my heart toward Shannon. Today I leave realizing what a wonderful wife I have.”

A smile spread across Shannon’s face as she spoke. “Dr. Chapman, I never dreamed that I could love him again and we could have the marriage we have.”

Obviously, Shannon and David broke the bonds of this myth. You can do the same. Do not let yourself believe that you have only two options in a desperate marriage. Don’t simply settle for misery or divorce.

**MYTH NUMBER FOUR: *Some situations are hopeless—and my situation is one of these.*** The person who accepts this myth reasons: *Perhaps there is hope for others, but my marriage is hopeless. The hurt is too deep. The damage is irreversible. There is no hope.* This kind of thinking leads to depression and sometimes suicide.

**DISMISS THE MYTHS**

Strengthen your marriage by dismissing these four common myths and telling yourself the truth.

- ▶ My environment does NOT determine my state of mind.
- ▶ People CAN change.
- ▶ In a desperate marriage, I do NOT have only two options—resigning myself to a life of misery or getting out.
- ▶ My situation is NOT hopeless.

I listened with tears as Lisa, a thirty-five-year-old mother, shared her story of watching her father murder her mother and then turn the gun on himself. Lisa was ten when she experienced this tragedy. No doubt her father felt his situation was hopeless.

You may have struggled in your marriage for years. You may feel that nothing you have tried has worked. You may even have had people tell you that your marriage is hopeless. Don’t let yourself believe that. Your marriage is not beyond hope.

This book will explore the nature of problems in desperate marriages and encourage you to dismiss these myths and take steps toward healing rather than sinking deeper into the misery of such relationships. But first, let’s look at what has become

a rather popular approach to such major marital problems, namely the exit marked divorce.

### LOOKING HONESTLY AT DIVORCE

Ours has been called the “Throwaway Society.” We buy our food in beautiful containers, which we then throw away. Our cars and household appliances quickly become obsolete. We give our furniture to the secondhand shop not because it is no longer functional, but because it is no longer in style. We even “throw away” unwanted pregnancies. We sustain business relationships only so long as they are profitable to the bottom line. Thus, it is no shock that our society has come to accept the concept of a “throwaway marriage.” If you are no longer happy with your spouse, and your relationship has run upon hard times, the easy thing is to abandon the relationship and start over.

I wish that I could recommend divorce as an option. When I listen to the deeply pained people in my office and at my seminars, my natural response is to cry, “Get out, get out, get out! Abandon the loser and get on with your life.” That would certainly be my approach if I had purchased bad stock. I would get out before the stock fell further. But a spouse is not stock. A spouse is a person—a person with emotions, personality, desires, and frustrations; a person to whom you were deeply attracted at one point in your life; a person for whom you had warm feelings and genuine care. So deeply were the two of you attracted to each other that you made a public commitment of your lives to each other “so long as we both shall live.” Now you have a history together. You may even have parented children together.

No one can walk away from a spouse as easily as he or she can sell bad stock. Indeed, talk to most adults who have chosen divorce as the answer, and

#### THINK ABOUT IT

Which of these four myths do you succumb to most easily? How long have you believed this myth?

#### THINK ABOUT IT

How have you wrestled with divorce in your marriage?



you will find the divorce was preceded by months of intense inner struggle, and that the whole ordeal is still viewed as a deeply painful experience.

Evelyn was sitting in my office two years after her divorce from Bill. “Our marriage was bad,” she said, “but our divorce is even worse. I still have all the responsibilities I had when we were married, and now I have less time and less money. When we were married, I worked part-time to help out with the bills. Now I have to work full-time, which gives me less time with the girls. When I am at home, I seem to be more irritable. I find myself snapping at the girls when they don’t respond immediately to my requests.”

Thousands of divorced moms can identify with Evelyn. Divorce doesn’t treat them fairly. The stresses of meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children seem overwhelming at times.

Not all who undergo divorce experience such hardship; yet all find the adjustments painful, even when they remarry.

Wayne was all smiles when he said to me, “I finally met the love of my life. We are going to get married in June. I’ve never been happier. She has two children, and I adore them. When I was going through my divorce, I never dreamed that I would be happy again. I believe now that I’m about to get my life back on track.”

Wayne had been divorced three years at the time of our conversation. However, six months after his marriage to Beverly, he was back in my office, complaining about his inability to get along with Beverly and her children.

“It’s like I’m an outsider,” he said. “She always puts the children before me. And when I seek to discipline the children, she takes their side and disagrees with me. I can’t spend a dime without her approval. I’ve never been so miserable in my life. How did I let myself get into this mess?” Wayne is experiencing the common struggles of establishing a “blended family.”

**THINK ABOUT IT**

If your parents divorced, how did you respond? If they did not divorce, what did you learn from their marriage?

And what about the children who watch their parents divorce? In her book, *Generation Ex*, author and child of multiple divorces Jen Abbas writes candidly:

As I entered adulthood anticipating my hard-earned independence, I was stunned to discover that my parents' divorces seemed to affect me *more* each year, not less. Even though I was successful academically and professionally, I found myself becoming more insecure each year about my emotional abilities. As I began to see my friends marry, I started to question my ability to successfully create and maintain intimate relationships, especially my own future marriage. I began to see how the marriages—and divorces—of my parents had influenced my relationships, especially when it came to trust. And when it came to love, I was paralyzed because what I wanted so desperately was that which I feared the most.<sup>1</sup>

Through the years I have counseled enough divorced persons to know that while divorce removes some pressures, it creates a host of others. I am not naive enough to suggest that divorce can be eliminated from the human landscape. I am saying, however, that divorce should be the last possible alternative. It should be preceded by every effort at reconciling differences, dealing with issues, and solving problems. Far too many couples in our society have opted for divorce too soon and at too great a price. I believe that many divorced couples could have reconciled if they had sought and found proper help. Thus, the focus of this book about desperate marriages is not on divorce but on something I believe offers far more hope. It's what I call "Reality Living."

Reality living, which begins by recognizing the myths and continues by rejecting those myths, ends up embracing the positive actions that one individual can take to stimulate constructive change in a relationship. In the next chapter I will give you the basic principles of this approach, and in the

following chapters I will show you how to apply these principles to various kinds of desperate marriages.

**NOTE**

1. Jen Abbas, *Generation Ex: Adult Children of Divorce and the Healing of Our Pain* (Little Rock, Ark.: Family Life, 2006), 1.