

Can you rescue your relationship?

Although some relationships are destructive and should be ended, there are others that can be saved. Maybe yours is one of them.

By DIANA SHEPHERD

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) released a study last year identifying the top five reasons people get divorced: financial difficulties, poor communication, lack of commitment, mid-life crisis or major change in priorities, and marital infidelity. They have also identified several other important reasons for marriage failure, such as physical abuse, substance abuse, or gambling.

The Warning Signs

These warning signs are all inter-related. Perhaps financial difficulties are causing problems in a marriage, and one spouse (the husband, in this example) refuses to talk about them, choosing to submerge himself in his work rather than deal with problems on the homefront. Now his wife feels abandoned, and perhaps she finds the support and attention she needs from another man and starts an affair. Of course, real-life relationships are rarely as simple as this example; every situation and couple is different.

Money woes

Most of us have problems with money -- no matter how much or how little of it we actually possess. We think and worry about it, but we very seldom do anything about it. Many divorcing couples report that financial problems caused the breakdown of their marriage. What these couples have probably failed to realize is that their money problems go much deeper than an inability to make and stick to a realistic budget: our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about money can cause a much wider rift between us than a household budget ever could.

To most people, money is more than just dollars and cents: it's a powerful symbol attached to our deepest needs and yearnings. To some, it symbolizes security: if you have "enough," you'll always have a roof above your head and food on your plate. To others, it might mean love: "if my partner lavishes expensive presents on me," they believe, "it means he or she must love me a lot." Still others equate money with control: those who have money can and will control the destinies of those who don't. It's easy to see how the failure to understand what money means to your spouse could drive a wedge between you.

Trish and Pete* met as undergraduates at Columbia University. They married shortly after Trish graduated -- Pete had changed majors halfway through, and was another year away from finishing -- and settled into a tiny basement apartment in Brooklyn. Trish found a job as a receptionist to support them while Pete finished school, then she intended to do graduate studies while Pete worked. But Pete changed majors again, and then he started a Masters program in Information Science: when he graduated, the couple agreed, he'd get a good job that would enable them to move out of their poky apartment and help cover Trish's tuition fees. Just before his graduation, however, Pete informed Trish that he really wanted to be a lawyer, and so had applied for and been accepted into law school. Trish responded by moving back in with her mother and filing for divorce.

"Pete loved the academic life so much he didn't care that we were living in a dark basement and eating macaroni and cheese three times a week," she says. "We had lived like that for seven years, and I simply couldn't stand to live that way any longer. Pete had already racked up more than \$50,000 in student loans, which kept me up at night worrying about how we would ever get out of debt. I don't think Pete lost a moment's sleep over his mounting debt-load. 'Don't worry, it'll work out' was all he said whenever I tried to talk about our finances." Pete was shocked when

Trish left him. He saw his debts as an investment in their future, which would be financially sound because of the groundwork he was laying. "Sure, we had debts, but we'd have been able to repay them after I started work as a lawyer," he says. "It's not like we were starving or homeless, but Trish always acted as though we were." From his perspective, things were just fine; from hers, they were in a state of emergency.

How could the same circumstances look so completely different to Trish and Pete? The answer probably lies somewhere in their pasts: they developed their attitudes about money from watching their parents manage -- or mismanage -- money; from growing up in the 1960s, Pete in Manhattan and Trish in Duluth, WI; and from their gender. In her book *Double-Income Families: Money Management for Working Couples* (Key Porter Books), author Lynne MacFarlane talks about "money personalities," and how they can make or break relationships. "Basically, we are all either savers or spenders or somewhere on the long gamut from miser to gambler," she notes. "Big Spenders find buying exciting and stimulating; Acquiring Consumers love to 'have'; Evenhanded Shoppers have a well-balanced view of money; Cautious Conservatives hate to waste money; and Skinflints are true penny-pinchers."

Pete and Trish had the misfortune of being at opposite ends of the money-personality spectrum without the skills or knowledge to communicate their thoughts and feelings about it. Like all of us, they wanted "the good life," but their ideas about what constituted a comfortable, fulfilling lifestyle -- and how to get it -- were very different.

Money Talks

If you're like most couples, you probably didn't have a frank talk about money before you got married. You may have had no idea what your partner's assets and liabilities were -- much less how he or she felt about his or her financial situation. If your finances are a mess, a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) or Chartered Financial Planner (CFP) can help you straighten them out. But if you want to keep money from ruining your marriage, you have to go further than that.

The first step is to ask yourself some questions about money: how you feel about it (scared, helpless, powerful); what your financial goals and dreams are (\$10,000 in the bank, maximum pension plan contribution, being debt-free); what material things are important to you (a house, a car, two vacations a year) and what you can live without (a house, a car, two vacations a year). Then you need to sit down with your spouse and have an honest discussion about money, sharing the thoughts and feelings each of you identified in the first step.

This is where communication skills come into play: money is always a touchy subject, and both of you will have to manage your participation in the conversation to avoid having it degenerate into a nasty fight. Avoid phrases such as "You always..." or "You never..." Absolute statements like these put all the blame on your partner, who will then retaliate -- by denying it, arguing with you, accusing you of something else, or perhaps just withdrawing into sullen silence. If you don't know how to discuss touchy subjects without fighting, don't waste time feeling bad about it. Most couples lack these skills, since they're not taught in school or at home. Perhaps now's the time to read a book or take a course on communication, or go for couple counseling to learn these skills.

Can we talk here?

How can you tell if your marriage can be saved? A good sign is that both spouses are willing to communicate -- to sit down and discuss problems without blame and finger-pointing. "Just the fact that they call a therapist rather than an attorney is a good sign," says Laurie Grand, a licensed marriage and family therapist based in Barrington, IL. Communication is one of the most important parts of a relationship, and it's also the first step towards resolving any conflicts. "Men and women are different, and we don't recognize what our different needs are," says Debra Burrell, a Manhattan-based counselor trained by Dr. John Gray, a psychologist and the author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (HarperPerennial, \$13) and most recently *Mars and*

Venus on a Date (HarperCollins, \$25). "We have unrealistically high expectations -- that if our partners really loved us, they'd be able to read our minds. Women panic when men don't communicate, and they make extraordinary efforts to get their partners to 'open up'. That's the worst thing she can do."

According to Burrell, when a woman is troubled, she wants to talk it out; when a man is troubled, he wants to go away and figure out a solution. "Women have to learn not to panic when their partner is quiet, and men have to learn how to listen without trying to solve their partner's problems. This can make a huge difference to the relationship."

Some conflicts can be solved, but if your marital troubles are deep-rooted, be prepared to work long and hard. The process may be frustrating and tiring, but if you're both working towards the common goal of staying together, your hard work will be rewarded. It can be useful for couples to continue marriage counseling during their separation, she adds, noting that it usually takes six months to a year of counseling for couples to decide whether their marriage is workable or not.

Communication experts such as Dr. John Gray and Dr. Deborah Tannen believe that men and women have such different conversational styles that confusion and misunderstandings are more or less inevitable. "Recognizing gender differences frees individuals from the burden of individual pathology," writes Tannen in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (Ballantine Books, \$12.50). "Many women and men feel dissatisfied with their close relationships and become even more frustrated when they try to talk things out." She admits that communication styles don't explain all the problems between men and women, and that relationships can be destroyed by "psychological problems, true failures of love and caring, genuine selfishness." But she also believes it's crucial to learn to speak each other's language -- much like an English speaker learning to speak French. "If we can sort out differences based on conversational style, we will be in a better position to confront real conflicts of interest -- and to find a shared language in which to negotiate them," she says.

Irreconcilable differences?

Every couple has the occasional disagreement, and everyone has at least one annoying habit, but these aren't reasons to break up. "Couples are incompatible by nature," says Dr. Harville Hendrix, author of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* (HarperPerennial, \$12). "Their personality traits are always complementary -- one person is aggressive, the other passive; one is more energetic than the other -- and this is what attracted them to each other." This incompatibility makes the romantic marriage a high liability, but it also creates the possibility of healing and growth. According to Hendrix, the incompatibility generates the energy that jump-starts the growth process -- if you know what to do with that energy.

But society tells us that incompatibility is grounds for divorce, that you should break up if you're struggling with the relationship. Dr. Hendrix disagrees. "It's never too late if there's an intervention that will enable people to get information: first of all, that most of the struggle is about our childhood ('unfinished business' with our parents reflected onto current relationships), and secondly, if you begin to explore each other's woundedness and defenses, your marriage can be saved," he says.

What's your commitment?

Some people like the idea of marriage, but not the work that's involved in keeping a relationship alive and healthy. "Some people are naive about the alternatives: they have an almost romantic view of divorce," says Jill Fein. "They don't realize that they're going to be the same person attracted to the same kind of people after their divorce."

Love and marriage are hard work. And here's a fact no one likes: even great marriages require hard work and constant nurturing. Your days won't consist of running across a field of flowers towards your spouse with a crescendo of romantic music in the background. You and your spouse have to actively participate in your marriage: to take time every day to have meaningful conversations with each other; to listen with the same intensity as when you were courting; to say "I love you" often; to touch, hug, and show affection; to tell each other how you feel about your marriage; and to talk about your goals for the marriage and your lives. "Marriage isn't just a ring and a piece of paper," says Barbara De Angelis, author of *How to Make Love All the Time and Are You the One for Me?* (both Dell Publishing, \$8.99) "It's not a noun but a verb. It's the way you treat each other each day."

Showing respect and love for each other through actions and words is very important in our hectic lives. Our days are full of stress, and everyone deals with it in his or her own way. Sometimes we can handle it; sometimes not. Work adds a lot to that pressure because it's such a large part of our lives -- and when we become preoccupied by our duties at the office, "quality time" with our spouse, children, and ourselves can fall by the wayside.

"Working differing hours and evenings and on weekends leads to the conclusion that the career has taken precedence over one's spouse," says Krantzler. If you're a workaholic, think about cutting your office hours from 80 hours per week to something more reasonable. Make regular dates with your partner -- even if it's just to eat dinner without the kids or to watch a video together while cuddling on the couch -- and keep these dates no matter what!

Sometimes spending too much time taking care of your own "needs" can cause problems. You (or your spouse) can get overly immersed in a hobby or recreation that you enjoy so much -- an interest not shared by your spouse and children -- that you cut your loved ones out of the loop. To deal with the lack of common ground, some couples try to lead separate lives or refuse to recognize the needs of their spouse -- actions that obviously don't help keep marriages together. According to Krantzler, excessive personal involvement with hobbies "excludes the chance to nourish the marriage," generating feelings of loneliness and estrangement.

There's no getting around it: life in the '90s is fast-paced and stressful. So where can the average couple fit in bonding time with each other when work, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and child-care duties seem to require more than 24 hours in a day? Eve and Tom, who decided to participate in a "Getting the Love You Want" weekend workshop, were delighted to discover that they could significantly improve their chances of marital success by devoting just 15 minutes a day exclusively to each other. "It's an intense, totally focussed 15 minutes," says Eve. "We break it down into three sessions: two are spent cuddling and talking in bed in the morning when we wake up and at night before we fall asleep; and the other is a phone call at the office to 'check-in' with each other." It's become a happy ritual for them -- one that keeps them connected when life's stresses threaten to pull them apart. Tom admits that their cuddling sessions have grown in length from five to about 20 minutes apiece because they enjoy them so much. "It's okay; we just set the alarm earlier these days," he says with a smile.

Walk your talk

Laurie Grand is encouraged if she sees a couple honoring each other's requests for behavior changes -- even something as small as promising to do the dishes once a week and then keeping that promise. Grand practices "solution focused brief therapy," which can have dramatic results in as few as three to six sessions. "In our first session, I ask couples a 'Miracle Question,' which is: 'If a miracle happened while you slept tonight and you woke up to find your life and relationship were exactly what you wanted, what would you be doing differently?'" she says. "Their answers point to what they really want, their goals."

Grand suggests asking yourself: "What are my goals?" "How do I want my life to be?" and "What do I want to be different?" Make a list of specific things you'd like your partner to do -- or to stop

doing -- and make a commitment to honor each other's requests. When Grand sees couples making requested behavior changes, she knows they're on the right track to a happy relationship: they're no longer focused on what's wrong and assessing blame, but on giving -- and getting -- what they really want.

Mid-life crisis

We all know what a stereotypical mid-life crisis is: the red sports car, an affair with a younger lover. It's usually associated with men, but women go through mid-life crises, too. As men and women reach middle age, they start to evaluate their lives, asking themselves: What have I done with my life? Why am I still working at this job I've hated for 20 years? What am I going to do now that I've been laid off? What am I going to do now that the kids are at college and/or married and on their own?

When people make a major change in their lives, it will inevitably affect their loved ones -- whether it's deciding to go back to school, travel around the world, have cosmetic surgery, or end a relationship. A mid-life crisis is usually a "workable" problem, says Debra Burrell. "Ask yourself: what is the real source of my desire to make radical changes in my life right now?" she advises. "You may find you're open to other ways to make your life fresh and exciting -- such as sharing adventures and hobbies with your spouse -- rather than looking for a new partner. "

Marital infidelity

"Believing something is wrong with a marriage because the romance has died often sends people searching outside the marriage to fill the void," says Michele Weiner-Davis, the author of *Divorce Busting* (Fireside, \$11). "The newness of the affair is likely to offer the kind of excitement that has been missing. This misleads the searcher into thinking that his or her spouse was the source of the problem after all. However, the real disillusionment comes when the fire of the affair inevitably fizzles out, a realization which often comes too late for the marriage."

"If we want passion to last, there has to be monogamy," asserts Dr. John Gray. "Some men say that they want open relationships, to be able to fool around, but there's no way they can do that and still have great passion with their wives. Give me a break! If you had great passion with your wife, you wouldn't need to fool around. It's as simple as that."

Unless you take steps to keep it alive, the romantic flame tends to go out. "When spouses grow very accustomed to each other, they can take each other for granted," says Weiner-Davis. "They stop flirting, stop giving compliments, and stop taking notice. Paramours, on the other hand, are good at doing these things. They make spouses feel attractive, sexual, and understood again."

"Once the affair is out in the open and each spouse is willing to share honestly about unmet needs, the couple can begin to identify areas needing improvement. Frequently, the affair is the jolt the marriage needed to get it out of automatic."

According to Dr. Patricia Love, author of *Hot Monogamy: Essential Steps to More Passionate, Intimate Lovemaking* (Penguin Books), most couples don't realize that the "burst of sexual passion that accompanies a new relationship is a time-limited phenomenon and that couples who want to sustain passion and intimacy consciously have to create it." In her research, she found that: "Couples simply assumed that if they weren't constantly aroused by each other, something was wrong with them: they were falling out of love; they were no longer attractive; they weren't cut out for monogamy; they were married to the wrong people." The good news she offers is that if you're willing to invest the time and effort, sex within the context of a long-term, monogamous relationship can become more exciting, passionate, and fulfilling as the years go by -- rather than fizzling out when the newness wears off.

The joy of reconciliation

After a seven-year marriage, Don and Alicia had grown apart -- or so they thought. Earlier in their relationship, they experienced a catastrophic event: the death of their child. How each of them dealt with tragedy -- and with each other -- caused serious problems in their relationship. "It took me longer to get over it than my husband," Alicia says. "Women need more support, and they don't feel they should have to ask their husbands to provide it."

She started feeling resentment towards Don, and their lines of communication broke down. Wanting to mend their relationship, they tried marriage counseling for six months, but "the only way to get him to go to counseling was threatening him with divorce," she says. They went once a week for about three months, but it didn't work. "He was in denial. He kept asking what was wrong with our marriage and didn't understand where my hostility came from," Alicia says.

The situation got worse. Living together proved to be too "tense" so Alicia moved out of the house and in with a friend. While Alicia considered this action a trial separation, Don considered it a permanent step -- "once you leave, you're gone" -- despite the fact that Alicia left behind most of her belongings when she moved out. "I was hoping to send the message that this wasn't permanent," she says.

"We didn't see each other for months, and I missed him terribly," Alicia recalls. Luck brought them together when they bumped into each other at a party, and decided to try reconciling. It still didn't work, however, because Don was still angry at Alicia for leaving. "He felt the need to punish me with words," she says. "We argued a lot. It was like being in a torture chamber for three months." Despite "duking it out" with each other, they still felt that there was hope for their marriage. "Pleasant memories constantly came to me," Alicia explains. "I came to realize what a wonderful man Don is, and how much we had in common in terms of attitudes, interests, and values."

Reconciling was a "natural progression" for them, and they eventually worked out their problems themselves. "Everything is in sync again," she happily reports. "We both have grown as a result of our trial separation." They thought about marriage counseling again, but Don didn't trust it because Alicia "left him" after their previous sessions. Alicia says that they learned a lot about communication during those sessions, however, and without counseling, she probably would have left for good. She also learned to be more independent in her thinking. "People get caught up in the 'we' aspect of relationships. It doesn't mean that we have to share everything -- including opinions," she says.

"People need to realize that marriage is hard work: it's not all romance. Don and I are now able to let go if we start arguing about something. Our arguments are a lot shorter than they were." Alicia feels their two-year separation was a "positive thing" in the end. Don and Alicia are both strongly committed to their marriage now, and "we're enjoying our life together," she says.

When it has to end

While every effort should be made to save your marriage, there are relationships that are beyond repair: for instance, when physical, emotional, alcohol, or drug abuse is present in the relationship. If the abuse is serious and/or chronic, you need to seek legal help in addition to therapy.

Not every irreparable marriage is the result of abuse. Some couples have problems that just can't be worked out, no matter how hard they try.

Yasmine had to face the reality that her husband Alex was gay. She started noticing trouble in her six-year marriage when their once-mutual goals slowly began fading away, and Alex began

withdrawing from their relationship. For example, he started refusing to join her on their regular weekend trips to their cottage, opting instead to go out on his own with his new friends -- social occasions that excluded Yasmine. "It was strange because we were always a very sociable couple, and had all the same friends," she says.

Alex initially denied that there were any problems with their relationship. Yasmine knew the relationship was in trouble, although she didn't know what the actual problem was. "You can sense when something is off with someone you spend so much time with," she says.

Yasmine and Alex tried to save their relationship through counseling, but although Alex still hadn't come to terms with being gay, he already knew that he couldn't experiment with his new life within the confines of a heterosexual relationship. Counseling couldn't save their marriage, but it did help the couple communicate better than they had before. "It gave us a forum to speak freely and have [our discussions] mediated. With a counselor there to interpret it for me, I was able to finally understand what he was going through," she recalls. To help herself cope with her separation, Yasmine also joined a divorce support group. "It was really useful in conjunction with therapy," she says. "The peer support was great because I was with other women who were recently separated. Now I have a whole new group of friends, and a support network after the group sessions ended."

Accept the challenge

If you believe your relationship is worth saving, you'll probably need help and support to do it: from a marriage counselor, therapist, or even one of the books listed in the "Recommended Reading" section (below). You and your spouse have grown as individuals since you made your commitment to each other, and your relationship has grown, too; if both of you are willing to nurture and care for it, you can end up with a rewarding relationship that's even stronger as a result of its brush with divorce.

Recommended Reading

Coming Apart: Why Relationships End & How to Live Through the Ending of Yours

by *Daphne Rose Kingma* (Conari Press, \$11.95) This book reveals why we choose the partners we do, and how to cope while parting ways. Based on her experience as a marriage and family therapist, Kingma offers stories about how couples dealt with the end of their relationships, and provides a "Diagnostic Coda," which outlines the signs and symptoms of a troubled relationship.

Create Your Own Love Story: The Art of Lasting Relationships

by *David McMillan, Ph.D.* (Beyond Words Publishing, \$21.95) Embracing the idea that people can gain practical skills to help nurture their marriages and make love last, this book is based on the "Sense of Community Theory." Dr. McMillan offers stories about successful, real-life marriages and relationship exercises for couples.

Divorce Busting: A Revolutionary and Rapid Program for Staying Together

by *Michele Weiner-Davis* (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, \$12) This upbeat, no-nonsense book provides many inspiring case studies. Weiner-Davis advocates "Solution-Oriented Brief Therapy" (a form of short-term therapy). The message? "Do more of what works and less of what doesn't."

Getting the Love You Want

by *Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.* (Harper Perennial, \$19) No ordinary self-help book, this remarkable volume offers an in-depth vision of love relationships. It's punctuated with sensitive case studies, personal accounts, and solution-based exercises for couples to try at home.

Hot Monogamy

by Dr. Patricia Love and Jo Robinson (Penguin Books, \$14.50) Red-hot love with your spouse? Absolutely! The authors help you get the creative juices flowing, as it were, with very frank and detailed suggestions for having more fun in bed, improving your sexual techniques, and creating lifelong romance and passion.

How to Heal a Painful Relationship (And If Necessary, How to Part as Friends)

by Bill Ferguson (Return to the Heart [call 713-520-5370], \$9.95) The major themes throughout this compassionate book are forgiveness (of yourself and your spouse) and letting go (of guilt and resentment). At the end of each chapter, the author, a former divorce attorney, provides a list of "actions to take" to try to save your relationship.

You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation

by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. (Ballantine Books, \$17.50) Want to know why your spouse seems to misinterpret almost everything you say? Dr. Tannen bridges the communication gap, showing how -- and why -- men's and women's conversational styles differ.