

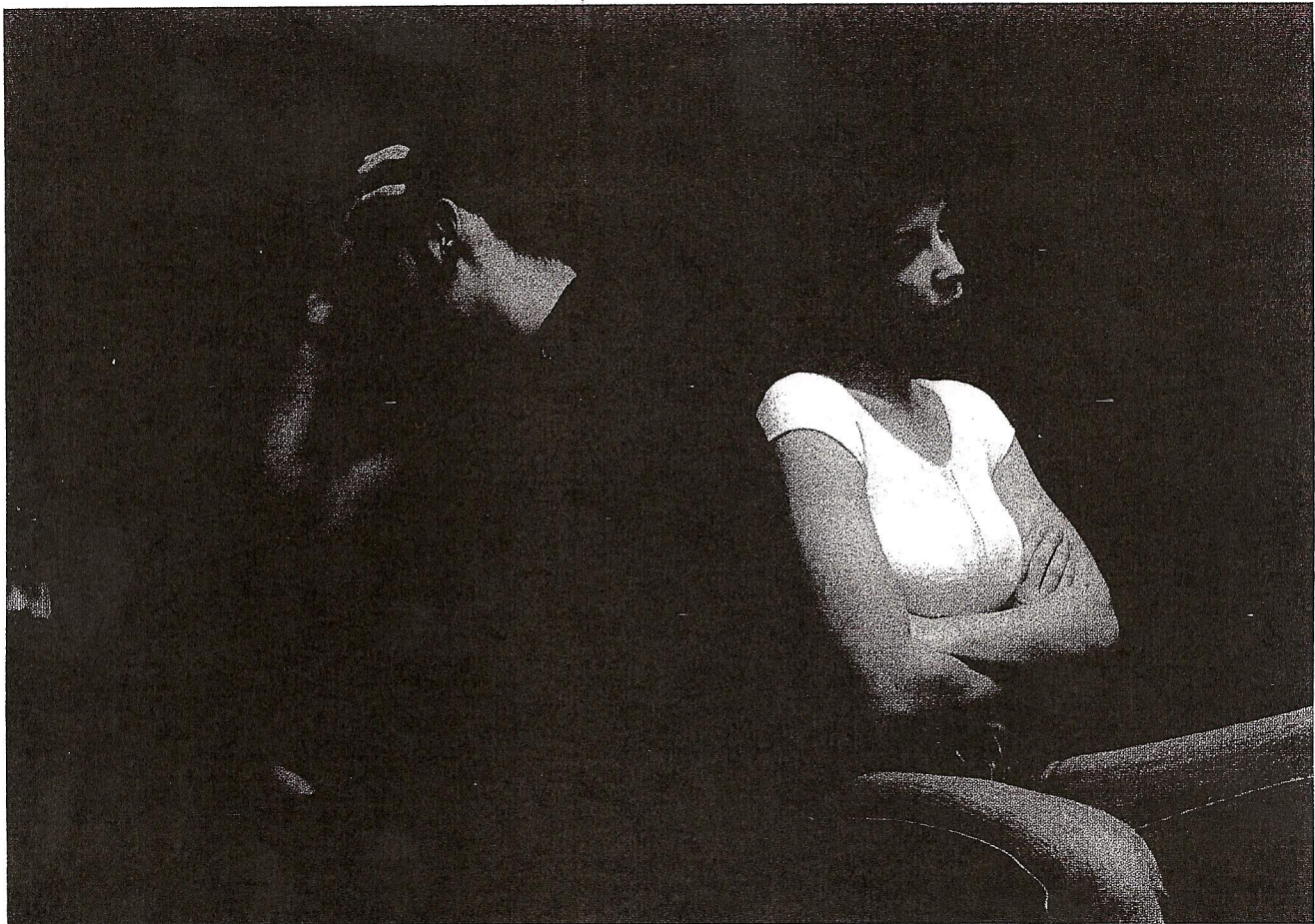
When Couples Wait Too Long

By Dr. Chris Miller

Disappointment is a normal part of marriage. Somewhere within the first few years of married life one or both partners go through what I call the "I didn't sign up for this syndrome." It results from experiencing your mate at some of their worst and most selfish points. Except for serious disappointments in character (cheating, stealing, abuse, or deceit) most marriages get through

these times of disappointment, and adjustments are made to accept one another's less-than-perfect habits. The focus of this article is a different kind of disappointment. It's a disappointment that ends in hopelessness, despair, and often, divorce. This type of breakdown doesn't happen overnight. It usually comes from years of erosion of the marital bond as seen in a

cycle of disappointment that may include anger, confrontation, denial, promises to try harder and, of course, broken promises. As a couple recycles this "dance" the "unhappy people" (I'll call them "UPs") keeps addressing an issue with their spouse, the "not-listening people," (or "NLPs"). Over time, both people feel hopeless, but for different reasons. UPs feel hopeless



because they believe they have valid issues, NLPs aren't listening and no change is occurring. NLPs feel hopeless because they believe they'll never be good enough for their spouses, and usually they don't believe they're doing anything worthy of such confrontation.

The stereotype of this dance is of a wife who repeatedly tells her husband of her unhappiness, her desire for change or a desire to get counseling and a husband who ignores her, minimizes the problem or mocks her for being critical, too sensitive, or nagging. While this stereotype is often reality, I have seen the roles in this dance done by both sexes. In this article I'll examine each role, the erosion that occurs and what is needed for restoration to occur.

Unhappy People

UPs often come into the marriage idealistic with unrealistic expectations of themselves, their spouse or marriage. I call this "magical thinking." They may believe:

- "I can fix them and get them to change."
- "Because my spouse loves me, they will always respond to my reasonable requests."
- "We'll always be able to sort through any problem that arises."
- "I know they have a history of excessive work, explosive anger, sexual promiscuity or overspending, but when we get married, they will change."

The disappointment sets in not only when expectations aren't met, but when spouses are unresponsive to the requests to address or get help for these problems. While promises may be made and initially kept to come home on time for dinner and to be with the family, quit an addiction, or to help with chores,

these promises are soon forgotten or finally broken due to justifiable "reasons." UPs may, at times, struggle with blaming themselves, believing their requests are selfish and they are the problem, resulting in their silence and accepting their chronically late, abusive, or addictive spouse. After time, more pain and serious thinking, they realize their requests are reasonable, and they again bring them up with their spouse and the problem is somehow put on the back burner. The cycle continues. As it does, UPs begin to change, but not in a good way.

UPs begin a spiral of deterioration that sets the stage for marital breakdown. While UPs may continue to plead with their spouses and even continue to invite them to counseling, UPs begin to grow in anger, resentment and even hate, resulting with UPs possibly resorting to threats, moving out of

the bedroom, or going to spend time with friends or family. If NLPs continue to ignore or downplay the actions of the UPs, the UPs may become desperate to stop the pain. Over time, UPs begin to emotionally detach, stop hoping and possibly move into despair. The chronic feelings of rejection, loneliness, and being unloved can at times feel too much to take. The pain of detaching and hopelessness is great but less than the pain of repeatedly baring your soul to and pleading with your spouse and again being responded to with mockery, hostility, being ignored, or another broken promise.

At this point UPs may plan on life alone in the house, having an affair or divorce. Their hearts have changed from detaching to an angry, hurting, and self-protective hardening. Their style with NLP spouses is changing too but often goes unnoticed.



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Non-Listening People

Strangely, it is common during this time for NLPs to be unaware of the changes occurring in their UP spouses. If NLPs do see some changes in their spouses, they are often dismissed, minimized or treated with contempt and blame ("What's their problem?"). Rarely do NLPs recognize that they play a key role in this unfolding drama. Blame, excuse-making, and ignoring the problems being lived out in front of them allow NLPs to rationalize the conflict and temporarily escape the crisis that is coming their way.

During their spouse's efforts to salvage the marriage, NLPs reveal an uncanny ability for denying and avoiding the reality that is upon them. They indulge themselves with hobbies, TV, work, friends or their children as means to deny the problem and avoid the truths their spouse is saying to them. They may refuse to listen and take action for several possible reasons. Some NLPs are simply self-absorbed people who refuse to step out of their own selfish worlds and see the perspectives and needs of another person. They may think their marriage is really OK and that their UP spouses are overreacting. Some men will dismiss their wives' pleadings with them by saying, "it's that time of month and she does this every month." Instead of listening to their spouse, they dismiss them. Some NLPs refuse to take their UP spouses seriously because they couldn't imagine they are failing so miserably in their marriage. After all, they are successful in other areas of life, how could they be failing at home? It's always easier to blame someone else than to listen and change. Some NLPs are simply lazy or are afraid of the changes that they may need to make. Others are afraid of conflict or the intense honesty that may be required of them to heal their marriage. Some extremely self-centered NLPs believe it's their spouse's job to adjust for them because the marriage revolves on them, the NLP. In their minds, they are the

center of their marital universe and to them, that's the way marriage should be. Finally, some NLPs are simply arrogant, believing, "I don't have a problem. You do. Get used to it and get over it."

Hurdles To Cross

When couples in the late stages of this dance enter the counseling office it's usually because UPs have given one last try and an ultimatum or some sort of shock treatment has been given. Recently an NLP spouse came into my office because they walked into their home and their UP spouse was sitting at the kitchen

Finally, both will need to forgive the other for their shortcomings throughout their marriage. After trust and respect are restored and genuine, long-term change is occurring, forgiveness will be the final step in healing. If one or both parties refuse forgiveness, they will most likely end up falling back into their old dance or a divorce.

table dividing their assets. It took that sort of shock treatment to get the NLP to begin paying attention. It is common at this stage that the UP is very hardened or hopeless, and the NLP is shocked that their marriage is at this point. The UP may have had months or years of internal struggles and detaching while the NLP is just beginning to get the picture. In some ways, the UP

has a lengthy and painful head-start in the process that is just starting for the NLP. The NLP may say, "I knew we had some problems but I didn't know it was this bad." The UP shouts, "I've been trying to address this for years and they've blown me off. I'm not even sure of what I want at this point." The two are at very different points in the process and the marriage is in crisis.

For restoration of the marriage to occur several hurdles will need to be crossed. First, since both parties have most likely hardened their hearts against their spouse to some degree, both will need to be willing to soften it as the dance changes. Just as it takes time for a heart to devolve from loving, to detaching, to hardness through lost hope and anger, so it takes time and work to soften such a heart.

Second, trust and respect will need to be won back by NLPs as they demonstrate over time that they are serious about changing. Their repeated broken promises in the past have created distrust with the UPs, and only through faithfulness and hard work of the NLPs can overcome that. Trust cannot and should not be given without genuine change on the part of NLPs. The UPs will need answers to questions such as the following:

- "Why did it take something like this to get your attention?"
- "Do I really matter to you?"
- "Why wouldn't you listen to me and take me seriously?"
- "Do you really love and want me or are you just afraid of divorce and all that would be lost in it?"

Third, both parties would need to be committed to a lengthy period of restoration. Often, UPs are burned out and tired of trying. Sometimes, NLPs say, "I'll just try harder. Isn't that good enough? Why must this take so long?" It's common for NLPs to be unaware of the damage done because of the long-term neglect of the marriage and their spouses. Seldom do both realize the work that lies ahead and the changes in the "dance" (on both parts) that must be made.

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the other for their shortcomings throughout their marriage. After trust and respect are restored and genuine, long-term change is occurring, forgiveness will be the final step in healing. If one or both parties refuse forgiveness, they will most likely end up falling back into their old dance or a divorce.


At this point two more comments need to be made. First, depending on the length and number of cycles couples experience, it is common for one (sometimes both) of the partners (often UPs) to have an affair. While this doesn't automatically signal the death of the marriage, restoration may be impossible due to adultery coupled with years of neglect.

Finally, whether an affair has occurred or not, restoration is possible. Denial, blame and running from the truth must be set aside for new ways of being married. I have seen many couples do the work needed for restoration and enjoy a happy and healthy marriage. They have a new story to tell and a new legacy to leave. The long, humbling path back to wellness laid the foundation for the rest of their lives and the lives of their children.

Dr. Chris Miller, counselor at Grace Counseling Services in Centennial, wrote "A Different Kind of Deadbeat Parent" in the November-December 2006 edition. He may be reached at 720-489-8555.

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