

Can Your Marriage Be Saved? The "I Don't Want A Divorce" Inventory

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

If your spouse unexpectedly tells you they want a divorce and you are confused because you thought you were happy, reconsider your thoughts. You may be shocked or stunned, but chances are that your spouse has been trying to tell you they are unhappy for quite some time. Your spouse may have been complaining or nagging about a lack of participation in household chores, "not going anywhere," a lack of conversation, annoying personality characteristics, or habitual behavior. Probably relieving but not indicative of a resolution, you felt relieved when complaints or requests for change stopped. Chances are, they gave up on the idea that something might change.

Many couples come into counseling as a "last ditch" effort, with one not believing that the marriage can evolve into a mutually fulfilling relationship. The spouse who wants to end the relationship may doubt the other's ability to maintain lasting change. It is not a conclusion they come to randomly. When a couple reaches the "I want a divorce!" stage, promises to change are repeatedly made and broken. Unhappy partners often try to save their marriage by settling for symbolic or token behavioral change when they want to be shown love in a meaningful way. So they fight over behavior that means something different to each of them. One partner believes they are arguing over not taking out the trash. To the other partner, not taking out the garbage shows disrespect and a lack of love.

If you fight to save your marriage when your spouse calls for divorce, you will not rescue it by arguing, pleading, guilt trips, or "taking out the trash." When one spouse has decided that divorce is the answer, they probably won't be as willing to "try" as you are now. They have "tried" in the past. If that is the case, it is up to you to change, regardless of what they are or are not doing. You know what they want from you. You could

be right if you make some conciliatory efforts and think your spouse is unwilling to meet you halfway. They are not trying to win you back. You are or are not trying to give your spouse what they need in the relationship. Half measures won't work. When I hear "too little, too late" I think they battle is probably lost.

If you are trying to wrangle your marriage from the jaws of defeat and you don't know what to do, try these:

- 1) Ask them what they want and need.
- 2) Bite your tongue while they are talking.
- 3) Don't defend.
- 4) Don't argue.
- 5) Don't remind them of when you did whatever.

If they don't tell you [again], ask yourself some of the questions below. These are behaviors, characteristics, and features of healthy, happy relationships. Not all of these items will be important to your spouse. Begin to problem-solve the shortfalls that you find here.

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How am I doing at meeting my spouse's emotional needs?

What are their emotional needs?

How often do I show affection?

Do I show affection the way they want to be shown?

Are you telling your spouse how you want to be shown affection?

Are you telling them that you appreciate the things they do?

Are you telling them they look attractive and that you are still attracted?

Do you give birthday and anniversary gifts?

Do you practice common courtesy?

Do you show admiration and respect?

How are you doing at meeting your partner's needs for physical intimacy?

How romantic are you?

How am I doing with communicating with my spouse?

Do you engage in conversations beyond the weather report, the kids' activities, or the weekly financial report?

Do you talk to your spouse about your day — the events and what you thought and felt?

Do you ask your spouse about their day, feelings, and events?

Do you listen when they start talking, or do your eyes glaze over?

Do you abstain from all violence (verbal, physical, sexual)?

How am I doing with being a partner to my spouse?

Do you engage in leisure activities, hobbies, sports, or joint tasks with your spouse?

Do you share household responsibilities and duties? If your spouse has been requesting help, do you offer it or respond cheerfully and without resentment?

Do you engage in the recreational activities that your spouse enjoys,

even if it is not your favorite? Do you complain or make the time spent not worth it to them?

Do you engage in family activities? Are you supportive of your spouse's engagement with their family of origin?

Are you financially responsible?

Do you communicate and problem-solve about money and finances? Does your spouse feel financially secure?

Do you work together to build a financial future? Do you talk about and plan how you will save/spend money?

Do you treat each other as a financial partner?

How am I doing with trustworthiness?

Are you open and honest with your spouse? Do you lie or tell half-truths?

Do you lie by omission, preferring not to tell the whole story for fear of conflict or not wanting to "mess with it?"

Does your spouse trust you to be honest and truthful?

Do you con or manipulate?

Is your word good? Do you do you say you are going to do?

Do you resent being accountable to another person for your behavior and decisions? Do you keep secrets or act like your business is none of the other person's business?

Can your spouse count on you to be there when they need you?

Do you provide emotional support even when you disagree with their perspective?

Are you completely faithful? Do you engage in inappropriate relationships/behavior with others that you know your spouse would not like?

Do you have destructive habits/addictions/compulsions?

Has your spouse complained about your drinking, drug use, pornography, gambling, compulsive spending, enabling adult children (or other compulsive behavior patterns)?

If you have been falling short on these things that most people identify as very important in a marriage, ask yourself what you would do if you were in your spouse's shoes. Chances are that you value these same things. If

you want to save your marriage, look at these questions closely. No one is perfect; most people could use some work on this list.

A Caveat And Another Thing to Consider

Sometimes when people find themselves on the receiving end of "I want a divorce!" they have been outstanding, caring, and supportive partners, even if not perfect. The decline and dissolution of a marriage usually takes both people, but sometimes when a spouse wants out of a marriage it is more about their issues than yours. Perhaps they want a different type of life. They may want to be free to pursue another relationship.

Spouses can grow apart for a variety of reasons. Frequently the things that partners started out wanting together change over time, and they end up desiring very different lives. Realistically, there may be nothing you can do to save your marriage. If, after assessing your potential contribution to the erosion of the relationship and the level of positive regard currently, you believe it is over, then your focus can appropriately change to taking care of yourself amid this life-changing experience.

Know that a divorce is not the end of your life and that you can survive it and thrive again. Self-assessment and questioning of "What happened?", "what went wrong?" is a normal part of getting through and getting over a divorce. Within every crisis exists a new opportunity. Despite being in the midst of an unwanted divorce, surviving, learning from the experience, and eventually finding happiness again is possible. A good counselor can guide you through the process. There are also divorce support groups at church and self-help books and websites. A book I often recommend for those going through a divorce is [Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends](#) by Bruce Fischer.

Be on the lookout for the symptoms of depression, and don't think you are immune to the pain that divorce causes. Get help to get through it. You may think you will always feel this way, but you won't. Ask for help and get a guide.



Gaining knowledge and understanding of broader relationship dynamics can offer valuable insights and fresh perspectives if you're questioning whether it's possible to save your marriage. Our Relationships page provides a wealth of resources to help you strengthen your bond, improve communication, and rekindle intimacy. Whether you want to enhance your connection or understand the root causes of conflict, these articles provide practical guidance for building a fulfilling and lasting relationship.

Go to WWW.PEGGYFERGUSON.COM/Relationships