

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH
marital
discord



Can this marriage survive?

As Christy dragged herself out of bed, her body felt heavy and her spirits were low. Jack was already off to work. Christy was heartsick with the memory of last night's fight. Had she really said those terrible things? Had Jack really looked at her with those cold eyes? Was their marriage ending?

At work, Jack struggled to concentrate. He knew that things weren't the greatest at home, but had not been prepared for last night's explosion. Christy had erupted in a startling and disturbing way, shattering the calm of their quiet home. What had set her off? He couldn't even remember. She spoke so loudly and harshly that he couldn't hear her words or catch her meaning.

Staring at the pages on his desk, he remembered their early days and the pleasure they took in each other. Then, their differences had seemed intriguing, even charming. They had both eagerly moved toward engagement and marriage. They had fun together and shared many goals and values. After a few years, their children had been born, right on schedule—Chloe, now seven, and Ben, three.

But their love and their passion had cooled. Certainly there had been sexual changes after Christy became pregnant and the kids were born. Jack had been disappointed at how her ardor had seemed to shift from him to the children. But he decided it wouldn't do any good to protest. He found himself more engaged at work; it was a way to manage sexual frustrations, and besides, he got more affirmation at work than he did at home.

Now he recalled one of Christy's complaints from the night before. "You love your work more than you do me or the kids," she had cried bitterly, saying he had

been absent when she needed him, and that she felt alone in raising their children. He said little, partly because he didn't know what to say, but mostly because he had no words to put to the deep emotions Christy's words stirred up in him.

At home, Christy sipped a cup of coffee and fingered a card that she kept in her Bible. A deacon at their church had once sent her a note saying she was thinking of and praying for her and her family. At the end of

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the card, the deacon had included her phone number with the words, "If you ever want a listening ear, give me a call." Tentatively Christy finally picked up the phone.

The deacon responded promptly to Christy's call, offering to meet with her and Jack for conversation and prayer. Christy and Jack accepted the church's offer to help with the cost of counseling, and soon they found themselves talking with a professional therapist.

In time, they learned about the negative patterns that had developed, in part because of the families in which they grew up, and in part because of the stresses of caring for young children while juggling their employment commitments. They learned to set aside sacred time for their marriage, to listen to and speak openly with each other, to handle disagreements differently, and to enjoy and take pleasure in each other once again.

Marriages can become strained . . .

The book of Genesis poetically describes the process of marriage by telling how people leave their parents and “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). But many couples find that marriage is hard work, and the steps of leaving one’s parents and uniting with one’s spouse can easily deteriorate into mistrust, blaming, and withdrawal.

The deeply held commitment “till death do us part” can be strained in the daily routines of homemaking, paid employment, and childcare. Current cultural values often undermine values of commitment, fidelity, self-giving love, and personal discipline. Divorce rates, which have averaged 50 percent for the last thirty years, reflect our culture’s lack of support for marriage.

There can be many reasons for marital discord:

- inadequate communication or conflict resolution skills
- personal struggles with mental health or addiction issues
- changes in family life such as when children enter or exit the family home
- differing expectations of men’s and women’s roles
- difficulty balancing work and family commitments
- chronic stresses such as special needs children or aging parents
- values and behaviors that each spouse brings from their original families.

Many couples experience a downward slide when they begin to blame each other for problems in the relationship. They may begin to use criticism that attacks the whole

person, rather than naming a specific behavior, which is kinder and more constructive. If this criticism becomes contemptuous or disrespectful, the other partner may stonewall or become defensive. By doing so, he or she may attempt to keep the hurt at bay and to block out other feelings as well.¹

Does this describe your marriage? Fortunately, there is hope. As it did for Christy and Jack, marital discord can point you to the need to seek positive change. Challenging as it may be to stay married or to rebuild a relationship that has become strained, help is available.

. . . but they can be restored to health

Pastors and church friends are there to help start you on a road to marital wholeness in the light of God’s unconditional love for all of us. Counseling often helps spouses learn to change unhelpful patterns that have developed, and to work at new ways of communi-

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cating and addressing conflict. Understanding the impact of your first families can help you make different choices in the family you have created.

Most importantly, claiming God’s grace in learning how to be gentle, truthful, and faithful can be a significant resource to you. Love and forgiveness become the precious oil that keeps the wheels of the marriage running smoothly.

¹ John Gottmann describes this dynamic based on his 30-plus years of research with married couples, reported in *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. See resources on page 10.

Marital relationships, the Bible, and the Christian story

The central story of the Bible is about God's coming to earth in Jesus, showing people how to experience and offer God's love. The kind of love that Jesus showed in his life and death is captured by the Greek word *agape*—the kind of love that gives and receives unconditionally, always seeking the best for the other person. This love doesn't simply spring up within us when we see an attractive person to whom we want to be close. God's enduring love comes to us as a gift.

But as followers of Jesus, we also grow in our ability to live in that kind of love. The love of God, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, is patient and kind, does not insist on its own way, and is not irritable or resentful. While we may be drawn to idealistic pictures of romantic love in our pop culture, we can count on God's promises to give us love in our hearts that is more enduring.

We are stretched by this love as we practice it in our daily lives, in the gritty routines of grouchy partners, demanding children, and overfull schedules. As we follow Jesus and allow ourselves to be shaped more and more into God's image, we can claim the qualities of love, steadfast presence, truth-telling, and endurance that we receive as God's children (Ephesians 4:31-32; 5:1-2).

When this love shines through our hearts and enlightens our homes, all are warmed by its glow. Our partner is supported to be the person God has called him or her to be. Our extended families and communities are blessed by a home that bears witness to mutually respectful, hospitable relationships.

Our children, especially, are more inclined to show *agape* love in their lives because they observe it early on in their parents' relation-

ship. Even their ways of relating to their peers today is affected by what they see at home.

Churches are places where people hear often of God's love and commit themselves to learning to be this kind of lover. The counseling office is another important place to learn how to listen to each other, communicate honestly and kindly, solve conflicts in mutually respectful and satisfying ways.

What research tells us about happily married spouses²

They reflect a ratio of five positive interactions for each negative interaction between themselves.

They see themselves as equal. More than three quarters of couples who view their relationship as being of equal partners (as opposed to hierarchical) are happily married. More than three quarters of people in hierarchical marriages—where leadership is not shared, or where one is considered to be above the other—are not happy with their marriages.

They know each other's "love language." Each knows the other's specific needs for words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, physical touch, and gifts. Misunderstandings arise when one person uses their preferred form of showing affection, not their spouse's.

They manage conflict discussions with humor and respect. One study found that among satisfied spouses, wives initiate conflict discussions with humor and low levels of intensity, while husbands allow themselves to be influenced by their wives and keep their emotions in check.

² Sources are Lynn H. Turner and Richard West's *Family Communications Sourcebook* and Gary Chapman's *The Five Love Languages*. See resource list on page 10.

Steps toward a wholesome relationship

You may have learned in pre-marital counseling that it's okay to seek help when you struggle in your marriage. If you're seeing the signs of marital discord in your relationship—blaming, lack of affection, withdrawal, unresolved conflicts, or power struggles—it might be difficult to admit you need help. You may think, “If my marriage needs help, then we're really in trouble!” The opposite is closer to the truth. If you know how to ask for help, there is a better chance that your marriage will stay or become strong and healthy.

Consider reaching out, knowing that others love you and want your marriage to succeed. Church friends or a pastor, caring family members, or professional counselors provide another perspective and can help you see past your blind spots.

What keeps marriages together

When asked to describe what they say and do to maintain “liking and solidarity” within their relationship, couples list honesty, listening, openness, physical and verbal affection, self-concept confirmation, sensitivity, and supportiveness. Similarly, couples who have been married at least thirty years list intimacy, sexual compatibility, commitment, and compatible religious orientation as those things that kept them married.³

Caution: If you are experiencing violence in your relationship, counseling is not appropriate or adequate. The violence must end, both of you must receive individual help, and the abuser must show a genuine change of heart and behavior before couple counseling is considered.

An experienced therapist can help you:

- think about and understand the needs and values that brought you together in the first place
- explore your family history, losses, wounds, and expectations that you each brought to the marriage
- express your needs, hurts, and willingness to work at the personal issues that are obstacles to harmony
- address any unhealthy communication patterns
- increase your expressions of affection and encouragement
- address power struggles
- learn how to set aside time to listen, play, and respond to each other's needs.

Counseling will help increase your sense of safety, support, and community as you establish trust, openness, and mutuality between you. This is especially important as you learn to forgive, renew your commitment, and find reconciliation—particularly if there has been deep wounding, such as that caused by an affair.

In addition to counseling, connecting to extended family, friends, and a church community who share your values and faith commitments go a long way toward providing a foundation on which to build a more permanent and sheltering marriage.

³ From research quoted in Linda Berg-Cross's *Couples Therapy*, (Haworth, 2001) 403-4.

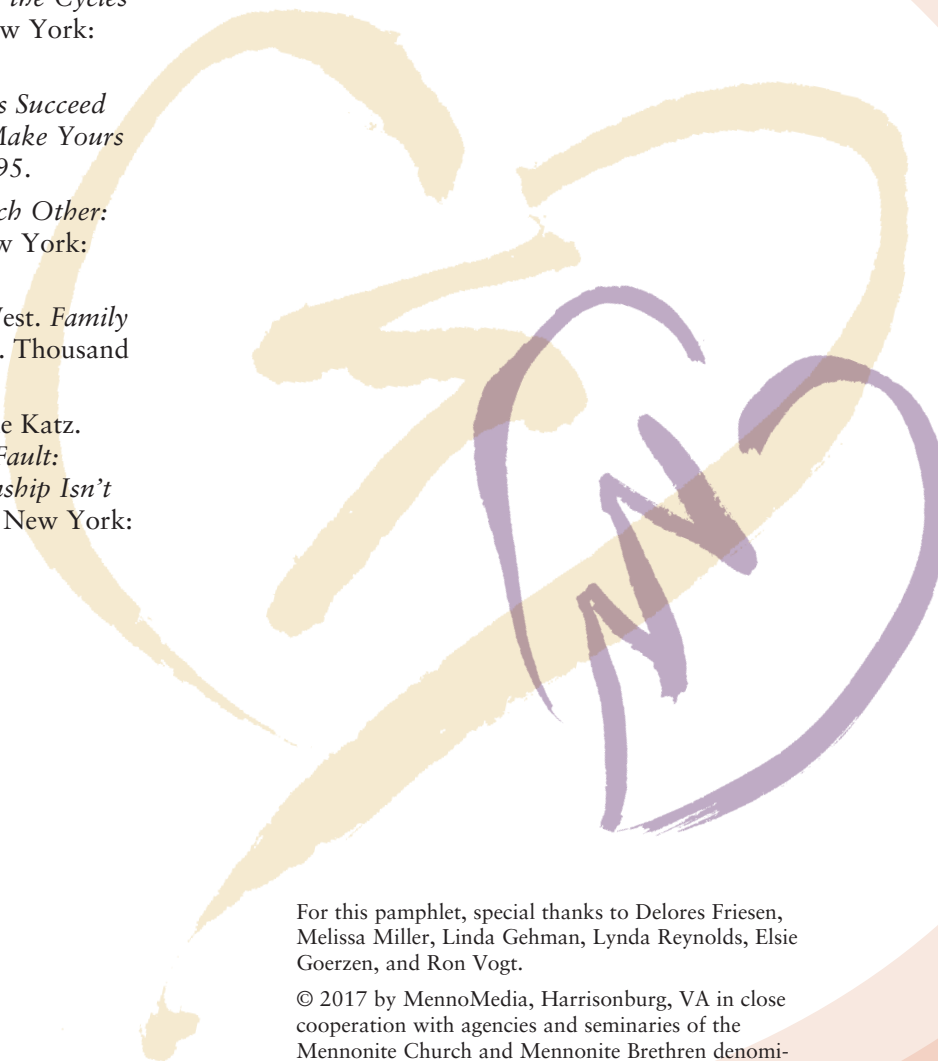
For further awareness

Books

- Chapman, Gary. *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2015.
- Dym, Barry and Michael L. Dym. *Couples: Exploring and Understanding the Cycles of Intimate Relationships*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- Gottmann, John. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Fireside, 1995.
- Pipher, Mary. *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008.
- Turner, Lynn H. and Richard West. *Family Communications Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006.
- Van Munching, Philip and Bernie Katz. *Actually, It Is Your Parents' Fault: Why Your Romantic Relationship Isn't Working, and How to Fix It*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

Website

www.fivelovelanguages.com
The Five Love Languages



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**Local resources for help with
marital discord:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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