

William J. Doherty (2001). *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. Chapter 7. New York: Guilford Press.

PREVENTING UNNECESSARY DIVORCE

Up till now, we have been focusing on forces that pull couples apart in our modern world: the natural drift of intimate relationships, the consumer culture, children who own us, time that gets away from us, and family and friends who take sides. Here I want to talk about how to take back your marriage when these and other forces have gotten the best of you and are moving you towards an unnecessary divorce. Then the rest of the chapters in this book will lay out ways to build, or rebuild, your marriage.

I will now describe the two main paths that couples take towards unnecessary divorce, and show you how to avoid those paths and get off them if you find yourself there. The first path is the slow way of small choices that eventually bring down a marriage. The second path is the fast track. In either case, with wisdom, courage, and support, you have a good shot at turning your marriage around. An unnecessary divorce is one of the great tragedies of adult life, and all road towards it are agonizing.

SMALL CHOICES, BIG LOSSES

You can bring down almost any good marriage within 12-24 months. You start with focusing on what you are not getting out of the relationship and how your partner fails to live up to your expectations. Following is a game plan you can follow; I have seen it work many times. The sad part is that the one who initiates it does not realize, until it feels too late, that this is a marital failure path. It's a slow, steady path without markers that say "Stop, Turn Around." I will frame the story from the wife's point of

view, because women initiate two-thirds of divorces, but with some modifications it could be a husband's story as well. It's a composite of many couples I have worked with.

Your husband is not particularly good at supporting you emotionally. He loves you, is a good father, and is rarely mean to you, but doesn't know what to do with you when you are emotionally upset about something in your life. He doesn't listen long enough, or he tries to fix your feelings by giving you unwelcome advice. Maybe he gets exasperated after a while and suggests that you should stop worrying so much. In other words, he acts like lots of men who were never raised to have long, empathetic, give and take conversations.

At some point in the marriage, you begin to focus more on your husband's deficiencies as a supportive confidant. Why now? Maybe you are more stressed these days, or you are aware of a gradual drifting apart emotionally in your marriage, or you realize that a good friend's husband does a better job. A dangerous reason is that you have a new male friend who really listens to you but whom you do not talk to your husband about. Being a secret confidant over a latte is far easier than being an open confidant in a full time relationship that comes with a house and kids.

Whatever the reason you are especially bothered right now, it's probably not because your husband has changed stripes. He never was particularly adept at the kind of supportive listening and responsiveness that you would like. And you married him anyway, because he has lots of other good qualities, and you have been pretty happy together. If there is a gradual decline in emotional closeness in your marriage, especially after the kids came, you are probably as responsible for it as your husband is.

For whatever reason, you now begin to obsess about what you are missing because of your husband's deficiencies. Aren't you entitled to more support? Isn't it appalling that he can't give you what you need and deserve? Why is it that you can talk to your friends but not to your very own husband? Don't you do a far better job of supporting him? The books you are reading about marriage point to something much better. It's completely unfair! How can you be expected to live this way? You have to change him.

The next step can take two different paths. First, begin to criticize him for how he responds to you; tell him he doesn't know how to communicate, and that he thinks only of himself. This will likely elicit defensiveness and counterattack from your husband, which will prove that he is an emotional dolt and not willing or able to "be there" for you emotionally. Marital Researchers such as John Gottman have documented how these negative conflict patterns propel couples towards divorce. (For advice on effective problem solving skills in marriage, see his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, and Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, Susan Blumberg's book *Fighting for Your Marriage*.)

If you have these battles often enough, over enough period of time, you or your husband might start to use the "d" word (divorce) in your fights. You bring it up, or he does, to get the other's attention, not because either of you really means it. But the possibility of divorce has now entered your communication for the first time. Even if it's not on the table, it slithers and hisses around on the floor like a snake no one wants to notice.

You can take a second path on its own, or after failing at the first path. Here you withdraw from your marriage by not sharing your feelings about anything important. Chances are, your husband will think that you are not troubled about anything these days, and will not notice, for a time at least, that you are not being open. You withdraw sexually, without giving a reason—which your husband certainly notices. You enter an emotional shell. After marinating there for a while, you will see yourself as the victim of an empty marriage that is cutting off your emotional air supply. You do not notice that you had a big role in putting yourself in the shell.

Having begun 12-24 months ago with a common and non-fatal problem with your marriage, you are now at the point of deciding to separate and divorce. The internal emotional logic at this time is compelling: you are living either in a high-conflict, stressful marriage or in a lonely, empty marriage (or maybe cycling through the two). You get support from your friends and maybe a therapist (here they are again), who agree that you are miserable and need to move on. As you process the history of your failed marriage, you now believe that it was fatally flawed from the beginning. The two of you were not right for each other; you were on a rebound from another relationship; he did not have the capacity to grow that you did, and so on. (Divorce researchers have demonstrated how we revise our stories about the history of the marriage to fit our current desire to end it.) Your husband by now is not talking to you anymore—or shouting when he does talk—and is as clueless as you are about how to save the marriage. He is still hoping that things will work, but you are not.

Research on the divorce process shows that before announcing the divorce, you will likely make an escape plan. You have checked out your financial situation and your

housing needs. You have consulted with divorced friends, who, along with your therapist, assure you that the kids will be fine if you do what you need to do for yourself. ("Kids are resilient" is the standard line.) You may be actively fantasizing about better romantic partners, and you may be turning to one for platonic support—or more. When you finally drop the bomb on your husband, he is surprised and shocked. He says he didn't see it coming, and you are amazed. You agree to go to marriage counseling, but your heart is not in it. You are relieved that the therapist concurs that your marriage cannot be saved. People in your life who see it otherwise either don't understand or are laying a guilt trip on you. You have embarked on the divorce phase of a journey you started unwittingly a year or two before. If you are lucky, you will not repeat the scenario in your next marriage, but chances are good that you will, especially under the stress of stepchildren. Second divorces come much more quickly, on average, than first divorces, especially when we haven't learned from the first one.

Notice how the wife (as I said, it could be a husband too) focused nearly exclusively on her husband's deficiencies, not on her own. This is the consumer mindset: I am not getting my marital needs met, so there must be a problem with your marital performance. I see more people nowadays whose only admission of responsibility for marriage problems is that they chose the wrong person, or maybe put up with that person's failings for too long. If my car does not perform well, it's not my fault; it's the manufacturer's. Never mind that I drive it too hard and don't change the oil.

How could the wife have handled the situation as an active citizen of her marriage, someone who is responsible for building and repairing the relationship, and not

as a consumer of the marital lifestyle? She could have recognized her wish for more empathetic support from her husband as a “desire” and not a core “need.” She would then approach the issue with less sense of entitlement and victimization. She could try letting her husband know what kinds of responses she finds helpful, without criticizing him. She could suggest that the two of them take a course in marital communication, so that she could get out of the role of being his coach in marital communication. She could suggest a couple of sessions with a marital therapist to tune up their couple communication.

She could also just accept that emotional empathy is not her husband’s strong suit, and may never be. She can ask him to just hold her when she is blue or upset, and then talk through all her feelings with a good friend. Everyone has some needs that do not get met in marriage. This is not tragic unless we make it that way; it is just life. I remember the moment when Susan stopped dragging her husband into therapy every two years to get him to open up with his feelings. During a therapy session, he tearfully told her that he didn't think he was built emotionally the way she wanted him to be, and he was sad that he could not be a better husband for her. Susan understood for the first time that his non-emotional way of living did not reflect on his love for her. And ironically, this made it easier for him to be a bit more open with his feelings, as he had been in this counseling session.

Harry, another client, had been preoccupied with his wife's lack of interest in sex. He took this very personally and would get angry at her. It's the kind of struggle that can blow up a marriage over time. When it came out in therapy that his wife had been sexually abused as a child, and was having trouble being touched sexually, Harry

successfully worked on accepting her as she was. With the control struggle diminished, and the threat to the marriage taken away, they both relaxed and slowly rebuilt a physical relationship.

Alexis, age 54 and married for 30 years, avoided an unnecessary divorce by means of what she called "an attitude adjustment." Her husband Ron took early retirement at age 55 from his company and decided to just hang out at home, puttering in his hobbies. Alexis kept working. She had expected that Ron would find another job, and found herself increasingly annoyed and disappointed that he "sits on his butt all day." He did pick up more of the housework when she asked him to, but it did not seem right to Alexis that her previously productive husband was a homebody. When she suggested he get a job, he became defensive, pointing out that his pension was bringing in more than his share of the family income. She retorted that they could not afford to live in their current house on their combined income. He agreed, but would not get a job to keep the house, which he claimed was too big for them now anyway, with their kids grown and gone. So they moved to a smaller house, to Alexis's disappointment.

After simmering for more than a year, Alexis had a hard conversation with herself, as she put it. She told herself that she could either continue to work herself up about Ron's lifestyle or she could accept it. Ron was sick of the world of paid work, and was not going to return to it. They had enough money to live a middle class lifestyle. She was working a job she enjoyed and was not ready to retire. Ron had relieved some of her load of housework and household management, and he did projects for their grown kids and their young families. Alexis saw that the heart of her irritation was the idea of an able bodied man occupying the house all day and not seeking employment, leaving her

the only paid worker in the household. But she did not want a divorce and realized that she could be working herself up to one. So she decided to stop feeling so sorry for herself and so frustrated with Ron. She still wished he would get a job and not sit around so much, but with an "attitude adjustment" she started to manage her disappointment with more equanimity and began to enjoy his company again for the first time since he retired.

Alexis and Ron's story is not out of the textbook on marital problem solving, where spouses are taught to air their feelings and wants, and then reach a compromise that works for both of them. Sometimes it goes that way in marriage, but other times one spouse cannot or will not make the changes the other wants or needs. In a culture of personal entitlement and frequent divorce, this is often the moment of decision about beginning the road to divorce or staying off that road. The actual decision to divorce may be years later, but we set ourselves in motion at a much earlier stage. Even if we start that journey, we can decide, like Alexis, to switch paths when we realize where we are heading.

What helped Alexis and many other spouses to avoid an unnecessary divorce was a stark look at where they are headed if they continue on the path of resentment about not getting their needs and expectations met. In other words, they realize that the small choices to emphasize the problems in the marriage are building up to a big decision on whether to stay married or get divorced. An analogy would be what we now know about cancer: a full blown cancer occurs only at the end of a series of steps that go awry, like a succession of switches that each turn "on" instead of "off." Many divorces come after dozens of small decisions to emphasize the bad and downplay the good about the marriage or the spouse, to avoid looking at one's own flaws, and to focus on better

options with another mate instead of learning to live better with the mate you have.

Again, I am not referring to situations of abuse and chronic infidelity, which should not be tolerated. I am referring to the softer problems that turn hard by how we deal with them. By ratcheting up our own disappointments, we can turn our mate into someone we want to leave. By accepting our mate's limitations, and realizing that our own flaws are usually of the same caliber, we can get on with the work of getting our canoe back upstream.

THE FAST TRACK TO AN UNNECESSARY DIVORCE

Most of my examples have been with established marriages of some duration. With new marriages without kids, unnecessary divorces can take the fast track, and it call for quick work to pull back them from the cliff. The most vulnerable years of marriage are the first two. Sometimes even before the couple are adjusted to each other, it's over. Here is Mary Sue and Josh's story.

Not long after their honeymoon, Mary Sue is upset that Josh is hanging around too much with his old friends and not spending enough free time with her. He stops by at his favorite bar after work for an hour or so, a habit that inflames her. When she confronts him, he doesn't want to talk about it, except to claim that she is being too possessive. Her friends agree with her completely. His friends say that he is hen pecked. They still have a lot of love and good will for each other, but are wondering whether they should have gotten married or continued to live together. They didn't have such bad arguments then. Mary Sue wonders if she pushed Josh too hard to get married, but he had not wanted to lose her. Both are from divorced families and are nervous about what marital commitment means.

This is a couple in need of a community of friends and supporters to help them adjust to marriage. But like most couples in the land, they are on their own, struggling with what it means to be married and not having particularly good skills for tackling their problems. Shockingly, one day during a fight Josh blurts out, “Maybe we should just get a divorce.” Taken aback but angry, Mary Sue retorts, “Maybe we should.” Neither of them wants this, but neither of them will take it back. One of Mary Sue’s divorced friends later warns her that Josh could be taking all the money out of their bank account, and that she had better protect her interests. So she talks to a divorce lawyer, who starts the legal process and files papers on a stunned Josh. In Ramsey County, Minnesota, where this couple lives, it is possible to get a divorce in one week, from first visit to a lawyer until the final decree, if you do not have children and no one contests the terms. Usually it takes longer because of the court docket, but it has been done within one week. Josh and Mary Sue pack up and move on with their lives, with little understanding of what happened.

Josh and Mary Sue needed time and help to grow into the responsibilities of marriage, but they pulled the trigger of divorce too fast for them to learn together. What they needed was a rapid response from their family and friends, and perhaps their faith community. More mature adults could tell them emphatically that they were faced with growing up and becoming married adults, and that their problems were common--and manageable with time and patience. One immediate step would have been for them to get into marital therapy with a therapist who was willing support their efforts to mature individually and adapt to being married.

Marsha and Jeff were more mature, but faced an immediate set of crises when Marsha's mother and father died in an accident. She was devastated and Jeff did not know how to react to her grief and distress. She felt disappointed and abandoned by Jeff. In her despair, she thought that divorce was the only alternative to staying with a man who could not support her. Fortunately, this couple got help from a therapist who supported Marsha and the marriage, and they emerged stronger. The key step was Marsha's realization that Jeff didn't know how to support her. It wasn't that he didn't care. She also realized that she did not have to turn only to Jeff for support; she could lean on her friends too. Her feelings of betrayal melted away, and she could justify staying in the marriage and finding ways to improve it. For his part, Jeff did work on connecting with Marsha, and at least not moving away from her when she was upset. Marsha and Jeff were nearly an early casualty of our "return this lemon to the dealer" mentality towards marriage and divorce. Thank goodness they found the right therapist. And how sad that they did not have a larger community to help them through their crisis.

We are getting smarter in this country about helping new parents adjust to having a baby in their midst. There are visiting home nurses and low cost parent education services available. There are scheduled doctor visits. Families at risk get more intensive services. But for new marriages, we offer little after the big sendoff at the wedding. No one can know if Josh and Mary Sue could have achieved a long term marriage, but it is clear that their divorce now was premature and unnecessary because, unlike Marsha and Jeff, they did not seek help and did not give each other more time. Their marriage lasted less than a year.

TAKING YOUR MARRIAGE BACK FROM AN UNNECESSARY DIVORCE

When there is an unnecessary divorce, there has usually been a failure of leadership in the couple. In the case of Josh and Mary Sue, neither of them really wanted the divorce, but neither would speak up to stop it. Each was hoping the other would call it off. In other cases, spouses either complain frequently about a problem, but do little more than nag and occasionally rage about it. They argue about who is more at fault. No one steps forward to say that the marriage is in trouble, and that they had both better do something to preserve it.

Surveys in the United States and Australia have shown that forty percent or more of divorced people regret their divorce, and that the great majority of divorced people believe that one or the other of them could have worked much harder to save the marriage. Researchers also tell us that generally there is a “leaver” and a “leavee” (the one left) in a divorce. Rarely are both parties on the same page at the same time. In unnecessary divorces, both may carry the responsibility for lack of leadership. The leaver generally does not openly disclose his or her level of dissatisfaction, in order to not rock the boat and out of a sense that nothing can be changed. The leavee generally prefers to keep his or head firmly in the sand, for the same reasons. It’s hard to live daily in marital crisis, and so, outside of arguments that burst forth occasionally, most of us keep quiet about worries about our marriage. But this means that no one is naming the problem in the marriage and no one is stepping up to the plate for the relationship. Two consumers, no leaders.

What do I mean by leadership for the marriage? It's different from fighting for your own needs, although that can be a form of leadership too. It's fighting for your marriage, for the "us." As my colleague Terry Hargrave expresses it, every marriage has a you, a me, and an us. Most struggles between spouses are over the you and me—who gets their way more, who gets their needs met better. In consumer marriage, advocating for me is what I am supposed to do. Lots of books on marriage focus on this. The idea is that if you advocate for your needs and I advocate for my needs, and if we both are skilled at this communication, all will be well. As I have said before, self-advocacy is important in marriage, but it is not enough. Ultimately, when our canoe hits the sandbar and gets stuck, one of us may have to push harder for the sake of both of us, for the sake of the marriage. This is marital leadership.

In the best marriages, both people are leaders, although sometimes at different times. What I want to convey, though, is that each spouse is personally responsible for finding a way back from the precipice when the marriage is threatened. If your mate is demoralized, as is often the case when the marriage is on the rocks, then step forward yourself to take the initiative. If you wait for a joint initiative, it may never come. If your partner temporarily drops an oar, you've got to steer by yourself for a while.

When Monica, the wife whose husband had the affair and wanted a divorce (I discussed them in the last chapter), faced an emotionally unraveling husband and undermining therapist, she asserted herself and said, "Slow down. I am not leaving this marriage. I will keep the communication lines open with my husband. I will let him know I am terribly hurt but still want to save our marriage. I will not dump all my anger

on him right now, because that would not be constructive. I will find a better therapist." This is courageous marital leadership.

Art had messed up his marriage by repeatedly lying to his wife about his use of the family credit card for making pornographic phone calls. He got into individual therapy and I saw the couple for marital therapy. The issue was deeper than pornography and lying, of course. Angela, his wife, saw these as examples of his long term irresponsibility in the marriage, where she felt like the only adult. She herself could be volatile in her anger, and did not see side of the problems very well. One day, in a rageful moment after an argument, she announced that the marriage was over and that Art was to move out. (They had two school aged children.) I saw them for an emergency therapy session. Calmer now, Angela was still determined to end the marriage. She was tired of the work and saw little promise of change, she said.

Art, for the first time, stepped forward with confidence. He said that he would not move out because he believed their marriage was salvageable, that he was straightening himself out, that the children needed the an intact family, and that Angela was making a bad decision that he would not cooperate with. Angela repeated her insistence that Art leave by the end of the week, and he said he repeated that would not go but would stay and show her that he could be a responsible, loving husband. (He knew that it would take weeks before Angela could legally get him to leave, since there had been no abuse in the marriage.) A month later, Angela changed her mind. They had moved back from the edge of divorce, in part, because Art exercised leadership for the marriage, perhaps for the first time in their life together. They went on to repair their marriage.

Here are some ways to take a stand for your marriage when it is threatened, either in the early stages of breakdown or in the more threatening stage of near divorce.

- Speak about the good of your marriage, not just about your own good. . Instead of just saying, “I need you to listen more to me, and you are not doing it,” you can add, “I’m sure that it’s hard for you that I am so upset with you about this. This is not good for our marriage.”.
- Decide you are going to work on personal, unilateral change for the sake of your marriage. Some couples divorce because they get into a standoff about who is going to change first. Should the pursuer stop pursuing first, or should the distancer stop distancing first? Someone has to start, preferably telling the other what you are doing and why, so that they know what is happening. My colleague Michele Weiner-Davis’s book Divorce Busting is the best guide I have seen to making personal changes to salvage a marriage.
- Ask yourself about whether you are expecting your mate to meet all your needs and whether you can accept the fact that some needs you will have to meet elsewhere. I am not referring here to your need for personal safety and freedom from emotional abuse, but to the long list of personal needs that no one human being can meet for us.
- If you are very angry or frustrated with your spouse over an ongoing problem, ask yourself if this is a "marriage breaker" if nothing changes. A spouse's repeated affairs might be in that category, or an ongoing chain of hostile and demeaning behavior towards your children in a remarriage. But if, as is mostly likely the case, the problem is not one that you would leave over, even if it is not resolved, then say so. Let your spouse know that this problem does not shake your commitment to the

marriage, but is nevertheless causing you pain and you want to resolve it. The advantages of this kind of clarity are twofold: it clears up any doubt your spouse might have about your intentions, and it may help your spouse not get his or her back against the wall during the argument.

- If your spouse uses the “d” word (divorce) in an argument, say clearly that you do not want to divorce, that you want divorce off the table, and that you will do anything to make your marriage work. Ask for an agreement that neither of you will use that word in an argument because it overwhelms the conversation and can create a momentum of its own.
- Insist that the two of you get help together. This can be in the form of marriage education classes to learn how to communicate better or marital therapy with a therapist who will support your marriage. Don’t accept “no” from your spouse about this. Not seeking help for a failing marriage is a form of irresponsibility akin to not seeking medical attention when a family member is seriously ill. Ultimately, if your mate refuses to go, seek help yourself with someone who will help your marriage, and keep inviting your spouse.
- If your spouse asks you to move out, and you want to salvage the marriage and genuinely change yourself to do so, refuse to move. Say that you are determined to save the marriage and will not cooperate in ending it. But if you have been abusive or your spouse is afraid of you, you should move out when asked, and continue to work on the marriage from a distance.
- Even if you are separated, you can keep working on the marriage by working on yourself. Use the separation as a wake up call to become a better person and the

person your marriage needs. I remember a wife who was determined to be a healthier, more assertive person after her husband left; she actually concurred with his complaints about the person she had become. He was amazed by her changes, intrigued by who she was becoming, and moved back in.

To avoid an unnecessary divorce, it is not enough to start with a loving commitment, or even with a religiously grounded commitment. With half of new marriages ending in divorce, many divorces occur to people who start with heartfelt commitment, backed by religious convictions. The battlefields of divorce are strewn with the carcasses of couples who started out with love, commitment, and good intentions. As stresses and dissatisfactions mount, they need marital leadership to stay afloat.

Marital leadership is more important today because the external sources of glue for marriage are no longer as strong. It used to be that social pressure would keep people together long enough to work out their problems, or at least not to leave for the soft reasons. (Social pressure kept some destructive marriages together too.) Religions that condemn divorce, or set a very high bar for justifying it, used to provide an external source of glue for troubled couples. In tight knit communities, the town elders might intervene if a couple showed public signs of distress and instability. Nowadays, therapists are supposed to help but, as we have discussed, cannot necessarily be counted on. And family members and friends are often skittish about intervening into your "privacy."

We've got to change this isolation of couples in crisis, but in the meantime, the leadership to avoid an unnecessary divorce usually must come from within the marriage. It's down to you and your mate to muster all your courage, wisdom, and agility to dodge

that lethal bullet and start taking back your marriage. Stopping the steps to divorce is just the beginning of recovery, like retrieving your boat from the rocks. You still have to do the hard work of rowing, which means being committed no-matter-what and intentional about your ways of connecting, and finding a community of people who care about your marriage. That's where we are heading with the rest of this book.