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Marriage Burnout

by Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

Dave and Nancy are working professionals who have been married 25 years. They have three children--one a senior in high school, one a junior in college and one in the work force. Dave is a high school teacher and Nancy works for a local attorney. They describe themselves as having had "a very good life together."

Dave teaches school and coaches sports. He sees teaching as his calling in life and feels he is doing something important and significant. But times have changed--and with them, students and schools. Dave often feels disillusioned with his work and looks forward to a new job, or even retirement. As a result his marriage has recently become more important in his life.

Today however, her marriage is a somewhat lower priority for Nancy. She started her career in her mid-30s after the children were in junior high school. She got her professional training to be a legal secretary and now manages a law firm. Her intelligence, maturity and enthusiasm helped her get the job and achieve success. She loves her work, is excited about her career, and is grateful to prove herself and work to her potential. Her marriage is important, but not more important than her work.

Nancy expects their marriage to provide support and offer individual growth. She wants Dave to support her career the way she supported his while the children were growing up. Neither holds any hope that things will improve. And, neither is seriously considering divorce. Yet, they feel trapped, disillusioned, resentful, and sometimes hopeless. They show the characteristics of a marriage in jeopardy.

When does marriage burnout occur?

While Dave and Nancy's problems may be caused by different stresses, they are characteristic of couples in their 40s and 50s. One research study shows that older men become as interested in giving and receiving love as in making conquests or acquiring power; as interested in personal relationships as in professional successes.

Another study suggests that this period is a woman's prime of life and they most often describe their lives as "first rate" and feel confident, involved and secure.

Women, particularly if they have stayed home to raise children, view the middle years as their last

opportunity, and want to pursue the dream of achievement. Men often become painfully aware of their own mortality and start to examine their lives. Those who have attained their career goal ask, "Is this it? If it is, how come it's not making me happy"?

The result is often a marriage role reversal. The husband, tired of work, comes home for solace only to find his wife eager for professional success.

"For years you complained that I wasn't home enough," he says. "Now when I finally do come home, you're not there."

Her response is "I supported your career before, why can't you support mine now?"

Both feel they've poured more into the marriage than they've gotten back and that their most important needs aren't being met.

While a marital power shift is typical of working couples in mid-life and of couples after retirement, other hazards can afflict all age groups. Some newlyweds become disenchanted because married life isn't at all like the fairy tale they imagined. People who lose it at work sometimes put increasing demands and pressures on their spouses at home. Still other marriages are threatened as a result of accumulating stresses, boredom, petty annoyances and minor dissatisfactions.

What is marriage burnout?

Marriage burnout is a painful state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion which afflicts people who expect their marriage to give meaning to their lives. It occurs when they finally realize that, despite all their efforts, their marriage does not and will not do that. The problem, then, combines unrealistic expectations of a spouse and marriage with the stresses and realities of life.

If nothing is done to stop the process, things will go from bad to worse. Periods of discontent, once rare, become more and more frequent; mild feelings of dissatisfaction grow into a smoldering fury. You feel physically and emotionally exhausted. At night, you may think of the offenses your spouse has committed, either real or imagined, and you feel miserable.

What prevents burnout?

1. Emphasize the positive. Focus more on what you like about each other than on what you don't like. Remember what a wonderful person your spouse is and what a wonderful marriage you have. Don't spend your married years training yourself to notice only the things you dislike. Think how much happier you would be if you put the same energy into a "love book."
2. Express appreciation. Husbands and wives must show their appreciation. Say "I love you", or "I like what you did so much", or "Thank you for ...". Why do so many couples not do it? Why are we better at praising others than at complimenting our spouse? Why is it we fail to say nice things but seldom neglect to voice our criticism and anger?

One reason often given is that he or she "Knows how I feel." You can never compliment or express genuine appreciation enough. Practice makes perfect!

3. Take time to talk. Happily married couples say they talk to each other "all the time" about everything. Burned-out couples have a long list of taboo subjects and consequently have brief conversations limited

to such topics as when dinner will be ready. This lack of communication is not only symptomatic of a floundering marriage, it hastens it. Spend 20 minutes a day talking in a relaxed way.

Devote most of your conversation to pleasant things. Then schedule time to talk about what's bothering you. Start sentences with "I", not "You." Discuss feelings and needs, not about judgments and criticisms. When in doubt about whether to say what's on your mind, consider how you would feel if your spouse said that to you. If there is tension between you, write your concerns in a letter to your spouse.

4. Talk to your spouse, not your best friend or child. Happily married couples can discuss any problem that comes up. People in troubled marriages are more likely to confide in close friends, which is quite tempting because your friend is likely to take your side and sympathize with you. But a friend can seldom do more than speculate as to why your spouse behaved so "unreasonable" and "inconsistently." Only by talking openly to each other can you ever hope to resolve your problems.

By working together, instead of venting your anger or frustration elsewhere, you and your spouse will learn more about each other--as well as yourselves. Not probing into your problems only leads to more tension and the erosion of intimacy. Discussing problems constructively leads to true, even deeper intimacy.

5. Increase the variety in your marriage. To make marriage more exciting, do routine things differently now and then. Whether it's when and where to have sex, or what to do on weekends, or where to go on vacation, decide together how to break from your routine. What matters is that you both find what you do is exciting and pleasurable.

6. Balance your "roots" and your "wings." Roots symbolize security, commitment and trust, the feeling that your spouse knows you with all your faults and virtues--and loves you just the way you are. Wings symbolize the excitement of personal and spiritual growth, the feeling that each of you has the opportunity to get the most out of yourself and your life.

Marriage burnout, while painful, can give a couple the chance to examine their marriage and provide a trigger for growth. The couple who learns to cope with it often emerges with an even better, richer, more exciting marriage.

THE MARRIAGE BURNOUT TEST

How often during the past month did you feel any of the following about your marriage? Write the number that best describes the frequency of each using the numbered scale below.

Never = 1

Often = 4

Once = 2

Most of the time = 5

A couple of times = 3

Always = 6

_____ Tired

_____ Hopeless

_____ Depressed

_____ Helpless

_____ Run down

_____ Anxious
_____ Trapped
_____ Worthless
_____ Disillusioned, resentful
_____ I can't take it anymore

TOTAL _____

Add the numbers you wrote and divide the total by 10. This is your Marriage Burnout Score.

SCORING:

1. Your marriage is in excellent shape.
 2. Your marriage is in good shape.
 3. There is a problem lurking.
 4. You've reached burnout.
 5. You need help now.
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