

How to Have a Terrible Marriage

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Abstract: Having spent hundreds of hours working with couples, I've seen enough terrible marriages to test my faith in the institution. But marriage is *good* because God made it. The problem is that men and women do their marriages so poorly that the relationship sometimes never has a chance. This article supplies some preventive medicine (and hopefully some therapy too) by looking at marriage issues in reverse. The premise is simple: if we understand how marriages become terrible, we can avoid those dynamics and have a good one instead.

Do you know someone with a really terrible marriage? Perhaps you have one yourself. In our society the joy of a wedding day has a way of turning into tears, the taste of wedding cake becomes that of ashes. About a million American marriages end in divorce annually. Twenty percent of our adult population has already been married more than once. These statistics do not begin to count the millions who stay married and suffer emotional agony for the rest of their lives.

We can gain some insight into this problem by asking a question: *If I were setting out to have a terrible marriage, how would I do it?* There are three ways in which almost anyone can ruin a relationship with almost anyone else:

- *Marry someone terrible*

We try to avoid marrying the wrong person with an information gathering process called dating. Unfortunately, courtships often conceal more than they reveal about the person we are considering as a life partner. During dating we are on our best behavior, wear our nicest clothing, and generally conform to the standards we feel our partner would

like us to maintain. This leads many people to conclude that their married life together will be simply an extension of courtship.

Anyone who is married knows that this is not the case. The moment you tie the knot you discover that the person you married is quite different from the person you dated. The letdown that follows leads many to such despair that they give up on the relationship before allowing the two-to-five years that it takes a newly married couple to adjust to each other.

Others are not so fortunate: they really do marry someone terrible. The reasons are many, but the most important is probably a lack of self-respect. If I don't feel like I'm worth much, I will marry the first person that comes along regardless of whether he or she would be an appropriate life partner.

Women sometimes marry someone terrible thinking they can change him with the power of their love. This has been tried millions of times and has never worked--not once. Tragically, research on domestic violence finds that most victims of spouse abuse were abused during dating but married the abuser anyway.

- *Bring terrible assumptions into your marriage*

The most common terrible assumption is that my partner owes me happiness. Our generation like no other before it looks to family relationships as a source of personal fulfillment. When those relationships fail to provide the degree of satisfaction we expect, the temptation is to pull the plug.

There is only one person responsible for my happiness: *me*. Asking someone else to make me happy is to ask him or her to do the impossible. Happy marriages are the result of happy people who chose to spend their lives together. My job is to be the best person I can be so that I can contribute that person to my spouse.

Another really terrible assumption is that my new partner and I have "so much in common." While it's true that you have some areas of agreement, it is even truer that men and women are very different. Men tend to approach life as a series of tasks to be accomplished and derive pleasure from reaching specific goals, be it cutting the grass or receiving a promotion. Women tend to approach life as a set of relationships to be developed and derive pleasure from the warmth and strength of these bonds, be they marriage to a man or friendship with other women. In a large survey conducted by the *Ladies Home Journal* thousands of women are asked: "What do you love most about your husband?" Their No. 1 answer was that they loved their husband's love for them!

Those who assume that they must be fundamentally the same as their spouse to have a good marriage are doomed to a terrible time. These differences will remain for a lifetime! The question is not whether they will exist, but what can be done with them.

- *Do terrible things to each other*

Even the best relationships are very fragile and require a great deal of work to maintain. A good marriage is not a spontaneous explosion of romance; it is the product of plain hard work.

There are a number of things that a wife can do that can derail even a smoothly running home. For example, she can:

- Undermine her husband in public to punish him for his private transgressions.

- Fantasize about what life would be like with another man.

- Demand from her husband the years of love and affection she didn't receive from her father.

- Use sex as an incentive or a sanction to control a husband's behavior.

Husbands are just as guilty of doing terrible things to their wives. Here are just a few examples:

- Using force to accomplish what you have failed to accomplish with love.

- Never helping with any form of childcare lest it start a dangerous trend.

- Criticizing your wife's appearance, especially when she is trying to improve it.

- Spending as little time alone with your wife as possible and then telling her you don't understand why she's cold toward you.

No one has to have a terrible marriage. The place to begin is by making Jesus Christ the Lord of your life and your home. If you are single, he can give you the self-respect that makes it worth waiting for a good marriage partner. If you're married, he has the power to make both you and your spouse into new creations, that is into the kind of people who can make the adjustments and commitments necessary for a healthy home life.

A second way to avoid a terrible relationship is to pray together each day. Sixty seconds spent talking to the Lord together daily builds a lifetime spiritual bond between a man and a woman. Also, it is very hard to stay angry with someone with whom you pray regularly!

A third key to a healthy marriage is to recognize and accept the differences between you. These differences will become either wonderful points of contact or dreadful points of contention between you and your mate. Talking through these issues is a non-threatening way and negotiating small settlements in each area helps to develop emotional intimacy instead of destroying it with constant disagreement.

Finally, if your marriage is in trouble: get help! Estimates are that 85 percent of people seeking a divorce never ask for any form of professional assistance. If you were ill would you go to the morgue and check in without even consulting a physician? In the same sense many give up on their relationship without asking for outside help. Among those who do seek help success rates are quite high, especially when the principles of the Scriptures are followed.

Don't settle for a terrible marriage! Put your life and your home in the hands of a loving God. He cares so much more for our families than we ever could and He knows how to turn the terrible into the terrific!