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WHEN TO CALL IT QUITS IN A MARRIAGE

Increasingly I hear married individuals say things like: *“I am in this marriage for the sake of the children”, or “I love him/her, let me give him/her a chance to change”*.

What I want to discuss in this article is controversial and might get me burned at stake. Contrary to religious edicts that marriage is an institution from God, or cultural injunctions that a person (especially when referring to women) must “hang in there.. life is like that” (Kgotlella, ngwanaka), I want to say: **If it doesn’t work, GET OUT!!!**

Here is why...

All people get married with good intentions. We are hard-wired by evolution to seek intimate companions (same or opposite sex) to take care of our dependency needs. Dependency needs are essential for communal survival, which makes people maintain closeness. Closeness is one of the ingredients that are essential for the survival of our species. The closeness provided by marriage is good for the couple’s mental and physical health. The joy gained from a happy marriage is good for the healthy emotional development of children who, in most cases, would be parents and spouses when they are adults.

Things do go wrong in marriage, though. There are myriad reasons why, which I will not explore here. However, I want to talk about the emotional pains that an unhappy marriage can bring.

Marriage is ranked 7th on the list of 42 major stressors that are known to contribute to psychological ill health (This is from Social Readjustment Scale designed by Holmes and Rahe which you will find reference to in most books on stress). This is primarily because marriage is - as my clients often hear me say - “a work in progress”. It is never perfect. There are always problems that a married couple have to navigate and (re)negotiate. When one hurdle is overcome, another appears. Not everyone succeeds in dealing with the trials and tribulations that marriage brings. Sometimes, often after years of bitter fights, marriage has to end and the couple have to go separate ways. Paradoxically some people stay married long after the marriage has ended as evinced in the opening paragraph of this article.

I am one of the professionals who believe that marriage has to end when certain litmus tests have been failed repeatedly. Here are two

of the litmus tests according to me:

LITMUS TEST 1: Do you experience emotional pain most of the time?

The cardinal rule here is **if it hurts you, then it is not good for you**. Marriage is supposed to make people feel fulfilled and happy to be with each other. If there is too much pain for too long it is no longer worthwhile. The danger about pain that most people miss is that pain can be addictive. By addictive I mean a person becomes numbed to their own pain. The pain starts feeling “normal” such that a person starts fearing how life would be in a painless relationship. This explains why some people leave one abusive relationship for another (see my article on Relationship Addiction below). For a person in this state, pain has become a sense of self and they cannot define themselves apart from their pain.

That is why, when I notice that a couple are hurting each other too much despite therapeutic interventions, I do not hesitate to recommend divorce. Although religious people (I am religious too) would cry SIN at the sound of that word, I do not think it is always a bad thing. Sometimes it is the best therapy, especially where children are involved. I have said to some couples in therapy who talk about staying for the sake of the children that **children are emotionally better adjusted living with one parent than with two parents who are at each other's throats**. Children in an adversarial marriage only inherit the bitterness and damaged personalities that they will take into their own marriages in future. So, for the sake of a health society in future, I will not hesitate to recommend that people call it quits before the painful journey is too far advanced to turn around. Getting out of a painful marriage quickly enough is a journey to healing.

LITMUS TEST 2: Is your spouse a repeat offender in spite of being forgiven repeatedly?

We have heard ad nauseam that **“nobody is perfect”**. I agree with that adage but would like to extend it with **“but everybody can change if they try hard enough”**. In any marriage the couple get accustomed to each other's ways and can end up taking each other for granted. It is this “taking for granted” that makes people blind to the effect they may have on their partner. When we fall in love for the first time we are not normal. We are at the mercy of a hormone known as oxytocin, which is also known as the love drug. Once we settle in a relationship the oxytocin levels recede and we fall back on our socialised selves (you could call it personality as well). As we get used to being in each other's space our defences give way and some of

our dark qualities begin to show. Dark qualities are tolerable up to a point. They are tolerable for as long as our partners accept that “that is the way she/he is”. Certain dark qualities are intolerable and have to be changed, for example, **lying, infidelity, financial recklessness, violence (you can add to the list).**

Whenever I come across misdemeanors that hurt the other spouse I highlight them and recommend to the offender that they must change. Anything that hurts your partner chips away at the most important ingredient in any marriage: **TRUST**. Mistrust is a product of repeat offences. Once a spouse does something that endangers trust, accepts responsibility for it and commits to making amends, then that relationship is on the road to recovery. A person who keeps repeating the same offence in spite of being forgiven is not worthy of love and deserves to be dropped like a hot coal. That is another recommendation I do not fear to make in therapy. I often caution people that past behavior is a predictor of future behavior. Anything that a person does once is likely to be repeated again and again.

This is more the case with repeat offences. This does not mean we are rigid beings incapable of change. Change is possible. What is required is for the offending person to make a commitment to change. Often it is not easy for us to change. A helping hand is necessary. That is why professions like mine exist. So, be aware of the things you do that hurt your partner and make a commitment to change. Flexibility in relationships is a healthy quality.

That is my take on this subject. These litmus tests are not exhaustive. I will probably expand on them as I grow in experience. You might have other litmus tests that you want to add to the list please feel free to do so. Please post your comments below.

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