

# Boomers

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## What Makes A Marriage "Unsalvagable?"

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**W**ith the rising divorce rates, this issue is arising more frequently than ever in marital therapy.

When I began doing therapy 20 years ago, I assumed that couples coming for counseling wanted to save their marriage — and most did. But increasingly, one or both partners in a distressed marriage want help deciding whether to remain in the marriage. Some enter counseling with their minds pretty well made up that the marriage is over, but want to respect the other spouse's request to have professional input. In such cases, the intervention quickly becomes divorce mediation rather than marital therapy.

With uncertain partners, the first question is whether the marriage can be saved. The most important things in evaluating a marriage involve motivation to save the marriage, lost feelings of love, absence of sexual relations, degree of avoidance, and excessive criticism and contempt.

Obviously, if one partner lacks motivation to restore the marriage, it can't be saved. Some people feel they never loved their partner, married for the wrong reasons, have changed so much that they have outgrown the marriage, or simply no longer want to be married. In this instance, referral to a divorce lawyer is in order.

A marriage is in trouble when a partner says that he or she has lost the feeling of love. Sometimes the person can identify a particular moment when the love feeling was lost, when it seemed to die. This moment often culminates a long period of conflict, disappointment and anger.

When love is weakened, the last straw that breaks its back can be another contemptuous remark or failure to satisfy some deep, previously expressed need for emotional



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support. One woman recalled the loss of love when she implored her husband for reassurance about whether things would be all right and he coldly sneered, "I don't know."

### Physical Barriers

Although some marriages continue without sexual intimacy, absence of sex often indicates the marriage is on its last legs. Physical affection and sexual intercourse are defining aspects of marital intimacy, so if these are lost, the relationship is severely impaired and may not last.

If a marriage is characterized by more avoidance than interaction, it is likely to fail.

Some people require less togetherness than others and can tolerate a husband who spends a lot of time watching sports or a wife who has many outside interests. But when couples are having almost no positive interactions, communication becomes rare, conflicts are not resolved but buried, the marriage has little hope of being salvaged. This is often seen in couples that live in separate cities for "professional reasons" and ultimately divorce.

The last danger signals are criticism and contempt. Healthy marriages can sustain constructive inputs, but excess criticism that feels like it constantly goes for the jugular and undermines self worth will erode the marriage. When negative comments are fired with an attitude of contempt and disrespect for the partners, the marriage may well be doomed.

How can couples keep their marriages intact with the psychological and financial demands of modern society?

Apparently, the answer to this question is "With great difficulty."

Given the modern divorce rate of 50% or more, couples must work hard to remain on the winning side of these percentages. Divorce seems to strike every other home on a typical American street.

Several psychological demands of modern society make marriage more challenging. First, people value individuality more than ever. Reading my parents' love letters from World War II showed a hard but decidedly simpler era. Decisions about marrying, having children, life goals and roles were more straightforward.

Today, we live in the age of individualism. Although more attention to individual needs has benefits, it makes it harder for two people to find enough common ground to live harmoniously in an intimate relationship.

### The Value of Acceptance

Listening to couples in marital counseling, I am often amazed by the complexity of two people attempting to define themselves as individuals within a marital relationship.

Today's couples need to refine their communication skills so they can unravel the complexity of their partner and get to know them well enough to truly understand them. Since people differ greatly, we need to have more tolerance of diversity, not just among races, but also within our marriages. Acceptance is a key to making an intimate union work.

When acceptance is the goal, we can stop controlling our partner, start listening to them, and get to know them as they really are — often very different from ourselves and of what we imagined them to be when we first married.

Second, in the modern era expectations for satisfaction have reached inflationary levels.

One explanation for the modern increase in depression is that heightened expectations of life result in greater disappointments and thus more depression. Similarly, if more is expected of love and marriage than in the past, more disappointment will yield more divorce.

Romantic love has always set expectations high. But today, people are bombarded with images that heighten further the pursuit of infatuation, passion, beauty, youth, and high levels of marital happiness, if not bliss.

Pursuit of happiness is a worthy goal, but we must temper the romantic model with a sober acceptance that happiness is more a function of frequent moderate positive experiences, not intense positive ones.

Similarly, lasting love is sustained as much by tenderness, trust, and support as by intensely passionate encounters, sexual or otherwise.

At the same time, some new expectations offer hope for improved marriages and quality of life. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the growing number of women who used to be more accepting, if not content, with men who were stable, brought home a paycheck and didn't have glaring faults.

With more women achieving financial independence, the expectations have increased.

Men are now expected more than ever to satisfy women's emotional and romantic needs. This trend challenges men to achieve more balance in their personal lives. It gives men the opportunity to shift some of their energy from work to wife, from chums to children and family life. Although any transition brings stress in the short run, the fact that more men are seeking to re-balance their lives should contribute to more successful marriages in the long run.

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