

QUESTION: My marriage is in trouble. We've been married for 20 years, and I'm just not happy anymore. I love my husband, but I'm not "in love" with him. It seems we've grown apart over the years, and now that our kids are graduating and leaving home, I'm afraid that will just get worse. I don't believe in divorce, but I find myself thinking about it more and more. Is there anything we can do to find happiness with each other again?

ANSWER: Whenever I hear people say what you are saying, I know I am with someone living in what counselors call a *low-intimacy marriage*. Let me explain what I mean.

The initial phase of a romantic relationship is that exciting time of "falling in love," a time of intense feelings of closeness and idealization of one's partner. It is a wonderful time, but its intensity blinds us to how difficult romantic relationships that evolve into marriage can become.

As the initial intensity of a relationship begins to fade, couples arrive at a crossroads. They might end the relationship, they might settle into a marriage that doesn't feel good, or they learn to build a mutually fulfilling marriage based on *emotional intimacy*.

Emotional intimacy is the fuel that keeps marriages running happily over the long haul. It is the ability to stay connected on an emotional level. To create and maintain this kind of intimacy, couples must be able to share their inner thoughts and feelings, to respect and accept each other as individuals, to enjoy each other's company and

continue to make each other feel important and special. This is a tall order, especially when the inevitable hurts and disappointments accumulate over the years. Emotional intimacy is that “in love” feeling that you are missing with your husband.

Perhaps you and your husband can use your newly emptied nest as an opportunity for reflection and renewal. Find a quiet time, or several quiet times, to discuss some of the following topics:

- Review your history together, from the time you first met to the present
- What has felt good/disappointing about the marriage over the years?
- What are each of you willing/able to change about *yourself* to make the marriage better?
- What makes each of you feel special and important to the other?
- What personal issues might each of you have that are effecting the marriage?
- What kind of marriage do you want from this point forward?

There are some important pitfalls to avoid as you do this:

- Avoid blaming and becoming defensive (if you see this happening, stop the conversation and return to it later)
- Don't dwell on past hurts (mention them and move on)
- Be patient: this kind of conversation is especially difficult for most men, who aren't used to talking about relationship issues
- Think of your issues as problems to be solved together; not subjects to be debated

I wish you well with this challenging task!

Questions may be sent to the Samaritan Counseling Center, 302 Cedar St., Niles, MI 49120, faxed to (269) 926-6780 or emailed to pbambrick@samcounseling.org. Glenn Chapman, executive director of the Center, answered today's question.

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