

"Letting Go of Resentment in Marriage"

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Marci was reticent to come to counseling and struggled to even want to try to save her marriage. Her husband justified his behavior with other women by insisting that he was just being friendly and trying to be helpful to people, and that she was overreacting. The pain, hurt and betrayal she had been feeling throughout their marriage had grown so deep that the anger and resentment seemed too much to overcome.

One of the challenges in marriage is dealing with the accumulating resentment by two imperfect people who are simply trying to build an intimate relationship. The variety of circumstances where resentment can accumulate in marriage is endless.

I often hear couples say "she just can't get over what happened" or "he never lets me forget what I've done." Addressing resentments can pave the way for forgiveness to ultimately find a home in our heart, and lead to healing and happiness again.

Letting go of resentment is often a necessary step before other efforts at strengthening or saving a marriage can be helpful. One wife told me not to assign more housework to her husband or to suggest they go on date night more often, because what she really wanted if she were to stay in this marriage was for her husband to forgive and forget the pain she had unwittingly caused him.

Below are some exercises to help you process and let go of any resentment you may be harboring in your marriage. This can lead to the peace and joy that healing and forgiveness can bring.

#1 -- Identify Resentments

Write out a list of any resentments you feel toward your spouse. This may include anger, frustrations or resentments. This helps you to clarify what exactly you are upset or frustrated about and gives you a chance to be fully heard at least by yourself and God on each issue.

If you can, also create a list of any resentments you think your spouse may have toward you. Identifying a list of things that frustrate you about yourself rounds out this exercise to address every angle. Your writings would contain the following three lists:

1. A list of resentments/frustrations/anger toward your spouse
2. A list of resentments /frustrations/anger your spouse may have toward you
3. A list of resentments/shame/guilt you may have toward/about yourself

#2 -- Ask Yourself - "Are you Ready to Let It Go?"

You may need to decide if you are ready or willing to let these resentments go. This may be something you decide based upon whether the cost is getting too high to keep carrying them, or maybe you're ready to let go for the peace that inevitably follows.

A helpful exercise in determining if you are ready to let it go is to do the "Mirror Exercise" by Louise Hay where you look yourself in the eye in a mirror and say as many times as you can, "I am willing to let this go. I am willing to change." Notice your internal response and go from there.

#3 -- Surrender Your Resentments

If you can stomach the thought of letting go of your anger, frustrations, resentments then say and/or write the following "Surrender Prayer" over the lot or over each resentment individually:

Dear Heavenly Father,

- *I humbly acknowledge my utter powerlessness over _____(these resentments)_____.*
- *I surrender this to Thee and let it go.*
- *I am choosing to forgive myself 'cuz I know I'm doing the best I can given my*

powerlessness and my human imperfection.

- *Dear God, please help me to let go and forgive _____, so that I may have peace...according to Thy will.*

#4 -- Share Your Resentments

In doing these exercises you may come to realize that you might be angry about something your spouse may not even be fully aware of, or maybe he/she may not fully understand the importance of it to you.

Many resentments will just dissolve after you've been allowed to acknowledge them. There may be some that would be helpful for you to share with your spouse to be sure they understand some of your frustrations and pain. It can be helpful to do this in writing. Write a letter to them sharing some of the resentments you think would be helpful for them to hear. Written communication tends to be easier for people to receive without being as defensive.

This letter/list is usually best received when it's been thought through and when your heart is already in a softened state versus sharing the first raw draft of your resentments toward them.

#5 -- Start a Gratitude List on Your Spouse

Start compiling a written list of at least three things every day that you like, love or appreciate about your spouse. It will help you begin to change the way you see him/her, and help you train your brain to look for the good instead of the not-so-good in them. This can also help balance out the anger and resentments you have been feeling.

#6 -- Help Your Spouse to Love You More Effectively

Most spouses want to love each other effectively, and the "offending spouse" often wants to do anything they can to help their spouse forgive them. One way to do this is to be sure you have shared the top three things that make you feel loved. These are the keys to your heart. It's much easier for your spouse to help heal your hurt and pain when they know how to demonstrate their love to you most effectively.

It's like the wife I mentioned above doesn't want her husband to do more dishes, because what she really wants is for him to let go of the pain she has caused him. And for him to let go of his resentments may not be about her having the house clean and dinner ready, but maybe about her regularly apologizing and acknowledging his pain.

If you too are striving to love your spouse in the specific ways they most feel loved, then the cycle of loving behavior between you both can more easily override the previous negative downward spiral of accumulating anger and resentment.

What we know is that a spouse who is feeling hurt, unloved or neglected is a spouse who will inevitably reach out and hurt back. Hurt people, hurt people. So, loving each other and keeping both of your love buckets filled is a good way to keep both of you from doing or saying things create more hurt and resentment in each other.

Remember that the only person you can directly change is yourself, so your efforts are always going to be best spent on changing you. The good news is that changing you is the best way to entice your spouse to change him/herself. In fact, it's encouraging to know that because in marriage you are a human relational system, it's pretty impossible to change yourself for the better and not have it create a positive effect on your spouse as well.

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