

Staying together in a 'hopelessly unhappy' marriage

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Modern Marriage: The blog of the Marriage Foundation

November 25, 2014

It's almost exactly twenty years since my wife Kate invited me to a 'meeting' hosted by her vicar's wife. I had no idea what was coming.

She sat me down and told me we needed to talk. She talked about our eight year marriage and our two lovely girls, how we had a good social life and a lot of fun.

And then came the bolt from the blue. Life at home had fallen a long way short. Kate told me she was hopelessly unhappy because I wasn't the friend she'd hoped and needed me to be. If I didn't get my act together, our marriage would be over within a year.

Well, it took me several months to work out what on earth was going on. But to cut a long story short, I made some important changes that radically transformed our marriage. Here we are twenty years later, still married, deeply secure and content in our future together, and what most people would describe as 'happily married'. Those two lovely girls are now at university. The oldest is married. And we have four more teenagers at home who wouldn't have been here at all were it not for the changes that followed that 'meeting'. Both of us would readily admit that it has been far from plain sailing. More of a roller-coaster at times. But we're still here and our kids are OK so must be doing something right ...

All of this bubbles up because I've just read an article about marriage and divorce in today's *Telegraph* by Cristina Odone. It's a response to yesterday's front page story in the *Times* about the effect of divorce on children, and is clearly written by somebody who values marriage. But it also repeats a popular idea that really jars with me. Here's the offending comment:

No one would argue that husbands and wives should stay together in a hopelessly unhappy marriage. It's well meaning, it's understandable, and it shows compassion for the deep pain of a seemingly impossible situation. But it's also quite wrong. I would argue with it, for starters. . . .

For the kids, it's not your happiness or unhappiness that really matters. It's the much more obvious stuff, whether they see low or high levels of conflict. Arguments are fine. That's the real world. Abuse is not. So I'm not talking about the minority of relationships that are abusive. Nobody does well in these. I'm talking about the vast majority of separating couples who fall into the category of 'low conflict', drifting apart, the love has gone, occasional spats, possibly the silent treatment, but nothing too dramatic. Research shows that these 'low conflict' marriages that end in divorce are the ones that damage children most because the split doesn't make any sense. It's not obvious. Common sense shows that, to the children and to the outside world, 'low conflict' marriages are also the ones that really ought to be most salvageable.

For the adults, it's important to know that nobody is stuck forever in a hopeless and unhappy situation. A large scale US study in 2002 looked at what happened to 645 adults five years after reporting that they were unhappy in their marriage. Here's what they found:

- Three out of four unhappily married adults were married to someone who was happy with the marriage
- Three out of four divorces happened to adults who had been happily married five years previously
- Unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married.
- Two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later.

In other words, unhappiness is usually individual and temporary, divorce is no panacea, and there are ways through.

Kate and I are living proof that it is possible to find something unimaginably better around the corner. Twenty years ago, our marriage seemed ‘hopeless’ and ‘unhappy’ to Kate. But it was never hopeless to me or to our children.

Nor was it hopeless to the vicar’s wife who helped us get the problem out into the open.

Nor was it hopeless to the married couple, our wise friends, who then sat us down over dinner and helped us find a routemap. Without them on our side, we would have had no idea what to do next.

Nor was it hopeless to the brilliant counsellor who helped me with my own particular personal issues. (This was one-to-one counselling for me, rather than couple counselling for both of us). It isn’t for everyone but she helped me find my own next steps to putting my marriage back together.

Nor was it hopeless to the series of other older married couples who came across our path over the next few years who believed in us and gave us hope and support. They showed us that ups and downs are normal, even in the happiest and most stable marriages.

Twenty years ago Kate was gracious enough to give me a bit of time to sort ourselves out. I don’t think she ever believed the marriage she’d dreamed about was ever possible. I had no idea one way or the other. But all of these other people did. At the very least, they never felt or conveyed to us that hope was gone. Hope never is.

Most of my work today involves helping couples avoid getting into the mess in which Kate and I found ourselves. Our experience was utterly avoidable. So I tend to focus on what helps couples stay strong rather than trying to sort out what’s gone wrong.

A while ago, a couple rang to ask if I would see them. I agreed mainly because they live nearby. They came to see me feeling utterly hopeless. Rather shockingly, they’d just come from an appalling session with a so-called couples counsellor who had told them they’d be better off apart.

When they told me their story, I could see a rather different picture. I saw a real future for them. They had got themselves into a classic rut. There was no abuse. Silly arguments and quarrels, yes. Lots of misunderstandings and hurt, yes. But mostly their problem was disinterest with one another and lack of meaning in their marriage. Young children and work had made their life busy and their relationship dull and mundane. One of them had fallen out of love. The other was in despair, having lost hope. It took me as an outsider to show them that they could find love and purpose again. But they needed to begin to see each other differently. Everything flows from that.

A few weeks later, I had an email from the one who had been in despair, saying this: “I am finding it astounding what we have managed in such a short space of time. Our relationship is healing and growing but we don’t want to take anything for granted at the moment.”

This couple are still on the road towards their new and improved marriage. They have ups and downs which can be very scary. But they are now beginning to see that they have a future for their children and for themselves.

What if the only voice they ever heard was this irresponsible couple counsellor, spouting worldly wisdom that they would be better off apart? What if Kate and I hadn’t had those friends, those couples, who hadn’t sat us down, given us encouragement and shown us a practical way ahead? What if a couple are today reading a well-meaning article in the *Telegraph* that says there is no hope if your marriage is ‘hopelessly unhappy’?

That’s why my colleague Sir Paul Coleridge bandies around the phrase “mend it, don’t end it”. Perhaps more than anyone, as a high court judge, he’s seen how the consequences of family breakdown can be so awful for children and very often so utterly unnecessary for adults.

So next time, anyone tells you how “hopeless and unhappy” their marriage is, your job is to give them hope. There are no magic bullets and they may still not find a way through. But they definitely won’t make it unless they have friends like you on the outside who can help them see a future together.

If you’re struggling in your own marriage, or want to give some hope to friends of yours who are, then read this letter from me that should point you in the right direction.

If you’d like to read more of our “back from the brink” story, then try this article in the *Mail* (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2212024/The-day-I-resigned-marriage-Kate-gilded-lifestyle-beautiful-children-banker-husband-cold-distant-So-wrote-ultimatum-language-d-understand.html>), this interview in the *Independent* (<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/harry-benson-our-children-all-but-drove-us-apart-1972248.html>), a short snip in the *Telegraph* (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/9372596/Will-children-wreck-your-marriage.html>), and/or a super article in the *Mail* on Sunday (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/9372596/Will-children-wreck-your-marriage.html>) that also tells you how to beat the four bad habits that most commonly trash relationships