

DIVORCE AVOIDANCE HINTS: THINGS THAT CAN GO WRONG IN A MARRIAGE

COMPETING FOR THE CHILD'S LOYALTY/AFFECTION: This is a poisonous type of behavior which should be avoided for the sake of the child, the marriage, and society, although the surrounding conditions of society today assure that avoidance is something easier said than done. As the condition feeds upon itself and things get worse by a geometric progression, the parents say increasingly vicious things to one another in front of the child -- which they probably would never have said without an audience in the grandstand. Demonstration that one parent loves the child so much that he or she is willing to alienate and sacrifice a marriage partner for the child is perversely empowering and yet also very frightening to the child. To witness the destruction and dehumanization of a parent deprives a child of one of the major props holding up its sense of security. Yet the easy availability of divorce today and the perceived inevitability of custody fights leaves each parent wanting to ensure that the child's loyalty will stick with him or her when the marriage dissolves.

CHIVALRY: Males in Virginia are especially liable to the misconception that they can cure all social problems and serve society best by striving to play the old-fashioned gentleman in all things, even to a degree that defies logic. As the concept of the gentleman is informed by certain quaint notions dating from Medieval times, as articulated especially in Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine's games of courtly love, some Virginia gentlemen firmly believe that a lady must have her every whim catered to in all things, great and small. Believing that the only way to correct socially unacceptable behavior in a female is to set a better example, these men deal with a mate's inappropriate behavior, extreme selfishness, and illogical perceptions of the marital or parenting relationship simply by saying "Yes dear." Of course they hope that the wife will see the folly of her ways when it reaches a point of grotesque exaggeration, but with some wives that is not so. It is a vain hope that the wife will some day see the light and say "My God, look what I almost became! Nobody ought to live like this," and turn her behavior completely around. Thus the behavior that the husband was taught by his father and grandfather to believe is strong is only perceived as weakness and taken advantage of to redefine the thresholds of acceptable selfishness in a cumulative way. Better this poor dolt should have adopted the whining truculence of the assertiveness-course graduate and started arguing with his wife over the pettiest matters from the first day of the honeymoon. Behavioristically it makes more sense. Otherwise, in a marriage where a very giving person is teamed up with a very taking person there will just be a whole lot of taking going on. Unseemly scrapping over trifles is better than the cumulative process whereby his perverse idea of etiquette will turn out to have created a monster.

HAVING SOME MONEY OF YOUR OWN: Although at times it probably generates divorce for one spouse to build up funds that he or she won't share, one spouse's control of absolutely all the money in a family is usually a recipe for disaster. Marriage counselors often urge that each spouse should have at least some independent funds. Perhaps this will turn out to be a luxury that most families cannot afford as we move into a scarcity economy and saving money becomes impossible anyway. Generally, though, a spouse feels more secure in the marriage, more relaxed, and more able to be decent and friendly to the other, if he or she has some money to spend without having to answer to the other spouse. Also --

ONE SPOUSE KEEPING THE CHECKBOOK is generally an unhealthy situation. Often marriages gravitate toward a division of labor whereby one spouse writes all the checks and pays all the bills. It will be the spouse who has less distaste for this kind of work, and perhaps more of a taste for the power and control that it represents. The other spouse will become infantilized as a kept man or woman, given pocket money upon sufficiently humble request, but the empowered spouse exhibits no gratitude nor gratification for having the power of the purse. Instead she will resent the extra work it represents, which the other spouse does not offer to share. She will talk about it as an example not only of her partner's incompetence in worldly matters, but of his selfish laziness.

NOT KNOWING HOW TO FIGHT FAIR: It should be easy enough to curse and abuse a spouse over some point in dispute while still restricting the criticism to the act rather than the person, but in some marriages it never happens that way. Even pointing out your spouse's despicable deficiencies can be done without saying horrible things that can never be taken back, screaming obscenities that reverberate through the neighborhood, pitching a shrieking fit in front of your spouse's employees or co-workers, etc. -- but in some marriages there seems to be no inhibition against going overboard, no matter how slight the triggering event. Some spouses instinctively know how to take that crucial next step which will cause everything to spiral downward and they feel that every argument has to go that way. It is of course very difficult for one spouse to talk to the other about the rules of fair fighting, but sometimes an outsider such as a minister, marriage counselor or friend can do it. All married couples fight, but some of them know how to make up. However, there are certain unnecessarily cruel words and acts that cross some kind of line and become impossible to forgive. Most spouses know instinctively how to avoid these, but some either don't know, or think they can indulge themselves freely and still stay married. Both these types need education on the subject.

INFINITE MAGNIFICATION AND POLITICIZATION OF EVERY PETTY SLIGHT: Contrary to some married persons' cosmological assumptions, blame cannot be assigned for absolutely every historical event. Some things just happen. Yet some marriage partners will not accept this. They must construct elaborate theories of causation and blame which inevitably center in upon hateful resentment of the spouse. Perhaps this mode of analysis is bred into the person and cannot be changed, but it is also possible that an intelligent person can see the folly of taking a marriage in this direction.

Also, not every act in a marriage is a political act. Many thoughtless and inconsiderate delicts are committed during the course of married life which would normally be apologized for and the apology accepted, either with grace or with a gloating smugness, and the "crime" forgotten. But in some marriages this does not happen. Every act is part of a larger pattern of conspiratorial oppression and a sign of a fatal character flaw. People who think this way will not take yes for an answer. No apology is sufficiently abject for the cap left off the toothpaste, because it is but a symbol of all the larger issues. Once all these larger issues and illogical accusations are dragged in, the petty delict cannot be admitted and apologized for, because the spouse would be admitting a lot more than is true. Responding indignantly to unjustified charges, the spouse naturally turns it into a general fight, and things go downhill from there. Sometimes third-party advice can bring into such a marriage a sense of perspective.

BUYING INTO DEMEANING CHARACTERIZATIONS: A husband who has somehow come to believe that a wife to be lovable must be stupid, can do domineering and degrading things and not even seem to know what he is doing. If wife is too polite to rebel against this treatment early on, the result may be terrible. A wife may deal with this characterization by confirming it, and become infantile indeed. Childishness becomes increasingly irresponsible. The selfish behavior of a spoiled child in a grown woman can take the forms of promiscuity, public nudity, drunkenness, repeated homicidal attacks, and finally, aggressive litigation -- all resulting in horrendous damage to the parties' children. It is difficult to see where such mistaken ideas of how to conduct married life come from sometimes. We assume that one spouse's notion that a condescending attitude toward the other spouse is proper could only have come from his own parents' living patterns, but occasionally that cannot be the source. Perhaps it can be blamed on the baneful influence of bad television.

UNWISE ADULTERY: This is not the place for a general sermon for or against adultery, but it is more often than not destructive of a marriage. The exceptional situations are usually when there is tremendous guilt and true repentance on one side, combined with a mature and practical magnanimity on the other side, or there is some equality to the situation (both have minor affairs which they enjoy, get over with and decisively abandon for reasons of common sense or the good of the marriage), rather than an oppressive inequality. But the fact remains that most adulterers unerringly seek out the worst new partners and relationships. Far too often it seems that even a moment's calm and deliberate thought before tumbling into this particular adulterous affair would have prevented it. Certainly it is difficult for people who are crazy in love to reason clearly, but perhaps that is where the fear of God, the priest, hellfire and the pillory used to come in. Fear used to create at least some hesitancy and some interval for calm deliberation. Nowadays at least some foreknowledge of what a divorce itself can do to the kids should impose some caution as well. Another sobering truth observed by divorce attorneys -- but not by adulterers -- is that when the time for remarriage comes, the new significant other is usually no longer there.

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE: Considering the poisonous tripe that gets communicated these days -- at least when two spouses sit down to Communicate with a capital C -- it is perhaps just as well that people don't. But the problem is that Failure to Communicate is one of the primary things that spouses know to cite as an excuse for divorce today, and one that a lawyer or marriage counselor will be duty-bound to nod gravely at when it is invoked. (Of course wise old divorce lawyers instinctively know when "The problem in our marriage is lack of communication" really translates directly into something simpler like "I have a girl friend.") So spouses should not let it ever be said of them that they "refused to communicate." And certainly it is true that many husbands and wives are handicapped by an inability to have a serious discussion about anything intimate or painful or difficult that arises in the course of trying to get along in married life. Perhaps the non-communication handicap is an inability to discuss serious matters in any manner but the insulting and abusive, or tearfully self-righteous, mode that was learned from the parent of the same sex. In any event, serious marriage counseling gets into the business of teaching how to have a serious discussion without all out war each time.

THE MONOLITHIC MARRIAGE: One big mistake many young couples somehow make is to assume that their marriage is the whole world. When neither spouse is allowed to have any friends outside the marriage, and any attention paid to outside friendships is perceived as

evidence of disloyalty, and the parties must spend 100% of their free time with each other, the effect is nearly always poisonous. Seeing no one else, the spouses quickly grow sick of each other. Human beings have evolved over the eons into social creatures, and they must generally be part of the larger society in order to stay sane. The longer a spouse is restricted from having healthy social interaction with others of the same sex and the opposite sex, the more likely it is that much-resented secret relationships will develop. Sometimes the very secrecy encourages these relationships to turn into adulterous ones.

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