

## How long should I wait for my spouse to change?

"Change" is quite a catch-phrase these days. While we all want change, it seems that waiting for change is becoming more and more difficult for each of us. It is not uncommon for someone who is seeking change in their marriage to come in after their second or third therapy session and resign their marriage (and marriage counseling) due to the lack of prompt progress. A marriage could struggle for 5, 10, or 20 years, and either husband or wife or both have the mistaken belief that a fix should happen in a couple of weeks. Resetting their expectations is one of my early priorities in counseling if both partners are going to commit to the healing process for a broken marriage.

There are some wonderful video teachings on how to make your marriage better. They give great step by step actions that in theory should help your spouse not only tolerate you better, but in fact love you more--even be more forgiving of your past. While I agree with most of these teachings, there is a problem with over-simplifying relationships. The fact is that you could do all the right relationship things. However, if you are not willing to wait for your spouse to change, you will become impatient and give up--becoming bitter that your spouse didn't do what he/she was supposed to do. Love takes time. Change through love takes even longer. Being the right husband or wife takes a lifetime commitment. If you feel entitled to your spouse's change, resentment, and later bitterness, sets in. This in turn will damage you and then your relationship.

On the flipside, your spouse might be doing many things right, and you find yourself still unhappy, still intolerant, still demanding or withdrawn. It's time for you to look inwards. Ask yourself not what your spouse's problem is, but what your problem is. This also requires a steady commitment to your marriage. Never leave a marriage to a good person because you are unhappy. You will only perpetuate your unhappiness in your next relationship and leave your family in traumatic pieces. The thing to do here is seek help finding what is in need of treatment in you. This might be spiritual, emotional, or even physical (there are medical illnesses that have psychological symptoms) maladies.

Our thoughts and feelings do change, and when they do we experience a wonderful sense of freedom. Today I visited with a nutritionist who was counseling me on healthy weight loss (yes, I admit it). She emphasized this point by telling me that too much weight loss too quickly becomes too difficult to maintain. Slow intentional progress, on the other hand, often becomes permanent change.

An example is the need to alter the process of conflict between a husband and wife. We all have conflict in our marriage. How we conduct that conflict becomes hurtful or helpful. Past relationships, past hurts, styles of expression, outside stressors, defensiveness and much more all influence this conflict profoundly. For change to last, most, if not all, of these influences must be addressed with the struggling couple. It is, however, not realistic to address all of them immediately.

I try and look for small steps that both partners can take that can prevent further hurting and allow each to begin to develop skills to use when we get to the big stuff (i.e. forgiveness). An example is the advice Gary Smalley gives in many of his workshops--no escalating, no withdrawing and no belittling or demeaning talk. As you can imagine, this advice, although simple, is not easy. Therefore there is a need for patience as both spouses develop these practices with each other.

If both husband and wife resist the myth that change happens after following a simple recipe (step one, step two, step three and all will be better in the morning), and understand that change is complex yet fulfilling and time intensive, then they will avoid much of the discouraging expectations that sabotage marriage recovery.