

## A RELATIONSHIP IN THE ABYSS

Dear Dr. K.,

After seven years of marriage I have left my wife and what had become a loveless relationship filled only with arguments. Try as I might to make it work, nothing I did was right. She constantly criticized me in front of family and friends. During one argument, she even attacked me physically. I'm torn between going back to her (even though I know it won't work) and getting on with my life. How do I make the right decision?

Frank

Dear Frank,

More often than not, when someone with a problem says to me, "I'm so confused, I don't know what to do," I find that the person *does* know what to do but is fearful to move ahead. Confusion is a lot easier to deal with. First, you need to come to terms with the fact that there is no "right" decision here. I believe what you mean by "right" is a choice on your part that will allow you to come out of this relationship happy and contented. Since a variety of people are probably involved with what you decide (you, your spouse, family, perhaps friends, kids?) and each has a different agenda, that wish is not going to happen. Basically, if you want to please everyone (including yourself too), you have an impossible task ahead. I guess you already see that because you are frustrated and cannot make up your mind. Face it, you are not going to come through this without some pain.

In relationships that go sour like yours, it seems that it is always the 'good' persons that hurt the most. They have a difficult time because in spite of how badly they are treated, they are still good and usually blame themselves for the problem in the relationship.

"Maybe if I'm more patient or understanding," they think. Or they wonder things like, "Maybe if I say nothing" or "Maybe if I'm more open, then things will get better." Sometimes this works, but often it does not. Like you, they feel guilty because of how things are turning out. They feel as though they are the reason the relationship has failed. The irony of the situation is that because the good people are conscientious and responsible, they feel the need to stick with it. Yet, it is this very conscientiousness that is getting in the way.

Frequently, as it appears in your case, the other spouse is critical and demeaning. This only plays more into making one feel guiltier although I would bet you often wonder what you are feeling guilty about.

Assuming you have, as you wrote, done everything to make the marriage work, there is now one fundamental thing to look at: that is, how much responsibility your wife is willing to bear in this break up. Even if there are other reasons for discontent and unhappiness in a person such as depression or psychological baggage from the past, I would look for how much she wants to "make things right." I believe there is a big difference between the person who says, "I'm irritable, impatient and quick to

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judge. This isn't the way I want to be. What do I need to do to make things better," and the person who says, "If only he (or she) would do this or that, my life would be better. My happiness depends on you."

Sometimes I ask a spouse to be the "perfect" person and do everything that is reasonable that is asked of him or her. In these cases, it becomes clear very fast that the other demanding member of the twosome keeps raising the bar, wants more and more and cannot be satisfied. When even then he or she will not own up to the problem, it is very obvious the relationship is doomed.

You must look into your heart and affirm to yourself that you have done the best you can to make it work. Then, you must realize that you still can be a good and caring person while not pleasing everyone, especially your wife and probably others.

Part of being an adult is going ahead with unpleasant but what is ultimately the right decision.

Dr. K.