

Emotional plaque



*Jo Ann
Volk Lederman*

FAMILY MATTERS

Dear Jo Ann,

I've been married 35 years. The kids are grown. I just turned 58. I've been bored. My wife spends more time with her friends and the phone than with me.

How do I evaluate whether to stay in this marriage?

Steve

Dear Steve,

What you're feeling is, unfortunately, not at all uncommon in long term marriages. This situation did not happen in one day, and will not be solved in one day. But let me talk to you for a moment. My experience is that marriages such as yours can be revived to the degree that you are both willing to take note of your contribution to the marital malaise and do something about restoring good will.

It sounds as though layers of detachment and resentment have built up over the years. You do not say what your role has been in creating distance in your marriage. Have you had an affair? Has your business been a priority and not your wife? Have you detached as a consequence of some of her demeaning or critical behaviors, or the other way around?

A marriage of this length with children and potential grandchildren is worth saving. You are writing because you have not yet decided to divorce. Otherwise you would have already consulted with one of our town's very competent divorce lawyers. You have written to me.

Take yourself back to the time when you were both happy. What was different then? What happened? Has there been unhealed anger? Indifference? Neglect? If you have complicated matters by having a mistress, it will be harder to evaluate this objectively. Many men I have treated are torn apart at this juncture. While an affair may have started as a way to gain comfort and relief, demands from both women, to say nothing of your own internal values that you have been violating, can lead to extreme anxiety.

It has been my experience that in long term marriages uncovering the original foundation of love gives us a platform on which to build. We have to remove the many layers of plaque that have formed over the years, and supplant plaque with new, growth produc-

ing behaviors. It is sometimes easier to work when a marriage is active. Fighting is a way to stay attached, even if it is negative.

Your marriage appears to have fallen into a complacency, drifting without aggression. It sounds indifferent, empty, as though you are brother and sister. Do you still physically connect? Emotionally? Or are you just going through the motions of the day?

A marriage needs to be a place of comfort and relief, not a place of escalation or indifference. A marriage needs to be a place of mutual respect.

A marriage is a living organism. It needs nurturing every day. It needs empathy. It needs attention.

I have found that when each partner gives all that they can to make the other comfortable, it can and does revive their marriage. I teach techniques to stimulate that long dormant desire and ability. The process of getting back to a close bond is not impossible at all. It will require your focused attention and respect to achieve this goal. I imagine you are writing because you do not feel your detachment has value. Some couples develop plaque as a defense against pain. If that is the case, you must examine the painful issues, look at your own contributions, and cease and desist what harms the other. A marriage is not a place of pain. It is a beautiful, relieving organism that is alive and requires nurturing.

At any one time I treat a number of couples who have fallen into your same situation. As each week goes by and the couple find themselves cooperating again toward mutual goals, feelings become revived. It is touching to see, a re-ignition of sparks, a renewed empathy, or in some cases the development of adult empathy for the first time. Many young couples marry, deeply in love and lust. Over the years, creating a family, work issues, children's issues, the couple puts itself on the back burner. Now, I'm speaking of smart, professional people, whose goal is to create healthy, productive children. This sometimes comes at great cost. It is my firm belief that the marital couple needs to come first.

Rid your marriage of plaque. Examine the layers and gently remove them. "What started out as bright and shiny can be restored."

Jo Ann Lederman is executive director of South Miami Psychology Associates, specializing in marriage and family therapy, couples therapy, infertility issues, behavioral medicine and business consulting. For more information, call 305-666-8833 or address email to <JoAnnVolkLederman1@juno.com>.