

Eight Ideas for Protecting Your Marriage from Divorce

by Scott Stanley | @DecideOrSlide | March 12, 2015 9:58 am

What can couples do to avoid divorce? Hundreds of books, articles, workshops, and lectures have tackled that question. If there were a surefire way to “divorce-proof” a marriage, we would have found it by now. It doesn’t exist. But there are some things married couples can do to minimize their risk of divorce. In a recent piece[1], I gave advice to singles and dating couples about how to lower their future odds of marital breakdown. Now, I’m focusing on those already married.

Before I get to advice, I want to make three points clear. First, if your relationship is dangerous, focus on safety. My advice below is not designed for violent or abusive relationships. If you are in a dangerous relationship, get help. The National Domestic Violence Hotline[2] is 800-799-7233, and in most areas there are also local groups you can contact.

Second, don’t confuse having risk factors for divorce, like the ones I documented in my last post[3], with being certain to divorce. I will tell you a well-kept secret. Experts aren’t good at predicting the likelihood that a specific couple will divorce. Researchers are good at finding variables that are associated with risk in samples of people, but we are not good at predicting the future of a given couple. Higher risk is higher risk but it’s not destiny. Nor is lower risk.

Third, people who are truly at very low risk for divorce shouldn’t worry about it. If you and your spouse get along well, manage issues with respect, feel connected, and you are confident of a mutually high level of dedication, relax. Your risk is probably very low. Sure, things can go wrong and strain your relationship in ways no one foresees in the present. But if you seem to have a great marriage, you probably do. Just protect it and live your life.

What You Can Do to Avoid Divorce

There are two categories of advice below: To individuals and to couples. Spouses often have different opinions of the strengths and happiness of their marriages. Even if you have concerns, your partner may not. Further, you might realize that your partner is not interested in even talking about it. Hence, you might need to focus on what *you* can do and not what *the two of you* can do—at least for now. That leads me to a word of caution: Unless you have serious concerns, don’t make your efforts to strengthen your marriage something that undermines it. If your mate is not interested in doing something different right now, don’t blow that up into a big deal unless there really is a big problem.

As you will note, I have more advice below for couples than to individuals. The reason is that I think it’s harder to navigate what you may try, together, than what you can do on your own.

Just to You

1. *Do your part.* There is a lot an individual can do to strengthen a marriage. As my colleagues and I say in all our resources, “Do your part.” I won’t list a bunch of ideas here because there’s not really enough space

and that's what good books and resources[4] are for. But if you are concerned about your marriage, the sooner you start to turn things around within yourself, the better. There are plenty of ideas one person can pursue as an individual to keep a marriage on track. If you want to read about one of my favorite strategies for one person to act on, check this out[5].

To Both of You

If you are both willing to make changes, these ideas are for you.

2. *Talk*. Sit down and talk together about strengthening your marriage. Rather than trying to dig into deeper issues or past hurts, I'd focus on positive steps you could take as a couple to stay on the best path. I am certainly not against deeper talks about issues and history, but the better strategy for most couples is to focus on what you want to try, now, together, to boost and protect your marriage. If talking about how to nudge your relationship forward works well for the two of you, you could sit down and talk once a month about how to stay on course. If you have difficulty with conflict or there are deeper struggles where you do need to take things deeper, see some of the upcoming ideas.

3. *Read a good book (on marriage[6])*. Read a book or two on marriage and try out some ideas. Don't try to do a lot of things. Just find an idea or two that you both like and pursue those. Do something; don't try to do everything.

4. *Boost fun and friendship*. People get busy, life gets strained, and spouses get distant. My colleague Howard Markman has always emphasized how important it is to keep fun and friendship alive in a relationship. You can make that happen by following this simple advice that is in all of our books (e.g., here[7] and here[8]): 1) Make time for doing enjoyable things together. 2) Protect those times from conflict. For example, suppose you have carved out some time for going out on a date or taking a walk together. Have an understanding between you that issues and problems are off-limits during those times. Deal with issues in some other time and place and don't let hassles intrude on your opportunity to relax and be together.

5. *Consider a relationship education workshop*. Such workshops are widely available in some parts of the country. Some may be offered by religious organizations and others may be offered by community groups (who might have government funding to provide such services for free). Also, some relationship experts regularly do workshops for couples, for a fee. Search the web and ask around to see if anything is available in your area.

6. *If conflict runs high...* Learn to get it under control. If you need to, get help in how to manage issues more constructively. If you have children, this advice goes double. Children are negatively affected by exposure to conflict between their parents.¹ Don't fool yourself by saying you are "keeping it real" in front of the kids. Bunk. Sure, if you handle issues extremely well as a couple (e.g., with great listening, respect, and resolution), that may be good for children to see. But, in general, conflict between parents—especially with escalation and invalidation—is bad for children to be around. And it's not great for you, either.

One strategy to keep a lid on things is to learn to take time-outs as a couple. We talk about how in our books, but here's the skinny. Agree on a signal that you will both honor when things are getting heated. I mean a word or a sign that means to both of you, "let's cool it, now." Agree that when either of you signal for a time-out, you'll both do your best to honor it. Taking a time-out doesn't mean avoiding dealing with something important. It just means deciding not to slide (further) into nastiness in the moment. Some couples find it useful to agree on a typical amount of time to cool it before talking again about whatever lit things up. This

type of time-out is not like what you use with a young child. Neither of you are putting the other in the corner. This type of time-out is like a sports team that's losing control of the game and needs to take a break and get its act together.

7. *Don't shout "fire" in a crowded theater.* I'm not talking about flicks and popcorn. Rather, don't threaten divorce in the heat of frustrating arguments. I think a lot of couples say things that should not be said because they are in the heat of battle: "Why did we ever marry?" "Should we just split up?" "Why don't you just move out if you feel that way?" Sensitive questions to bring you closer together, right? If you do that and you want your marriage to work, stop it. You cannot nurture the desire to invest in your future if you keep reminding each other that there might not be one. Don't talk about divorce unless you really mean to talk about divorce. Again, learn to take a time-out.

8. *Get professional help.* Obviously, some people become deeply unhappy in their marriages. Yet one report I was involved with presented findings showing that many people who report being unhappy at one point but remain married rebound to a much better place within a few years.ⁱⁱ In another study I helped author, 34 percent of married respondents reported that, at some point in the past, they thought their marriage was in serious trouble and considered divorce. Of these folks, 92 percent reported that they were glad they were still together.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, some experts argue (from data) that those who become deeply maritally distressed are unlikely to get better on their own.^{iv} If you have sunk into chronic unhappiness in your marriage, think about getting help.

Most couples in serious trouble wait far too long to get professional help. If both of you know something is seriously amiss, seek help now. When both partners are motivated, a lot of good things can result from seeing a skilled counselor. If you want to pursue this, ask friends, clergy, or your doctor for recommendations. And if you do see someone, plan to talk together (just the two of you) after a couple of sessions about whether you think the person you are seeing can help the two of you. If not, try someone else. Not all counselors are right for all couples.

Hope

A few married couples almost never have any downs—only ups. But most couples with very good marriages have ups and downs. That's normal. One of the most important things you can do to avoid divorce is to hold reasonable expectations. You didn't marry someone who is perfect (only your mate did—smile). Expect joy and strains, maddening moments and laughter. Expect a real life.

i. Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. (1994). *Children and marital conflict*. New York: Guilford.; Grych, J., & Fincham, F. (1990). Marital conflict and children's adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 267-290.

ii. Waite, L. J., Browning, D., Doherty, W. J., Gallagher, M., Lou, Y., & Stanley, S. M. (2002). Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages[9]. New York: Institute for American Values.

iii. Johnson, C. A., Stanley, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Amato, P. A., Nock, S. L., Markman, H. J., & Dion, M. R. (2002). Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce[10] (S02096 OKDHS). Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

iv. Beach, S. R. H., & Fincham, F. D. (2003). Spontaneous remission of marital discord: A simmering debate with profound implications for Family Psychology[11]. *The Family Psychologist*, 19, 11-13.

Endnotes:

1. piece: <http://family-studies.org/how-to-lower-your-risk-of-divorce-advice-to-singles/>
2. The National Domestic Violence Hotline: <http://www.thehotline.org>
3. my last post: <http://family-studies.org/how-to-lower-your-risk-of-divorce-advice-to-singles/>
4. books and resources: <https://app.box.com/s/9bwznnljs9zlhyelk4bz13twu4s7m210>
5. check this out: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2015/03/doing-that-thing-you-do-redux.html>
6. *on marriage*: <https://app.box.com/s/9bwznnljs9zlhyelk4bz13twu4s7m210>
7. here: http://www.amazon.com/Fighting-Your-Marriage-Best-seller-Preventing/dp/0470485914/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1426026750&sr=1-1
8. here: http://www.amazon.com/Lasting-Promise-Christian-Fighting-Marriage/dp/1118672925/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1426026732&sr=1-2
9. Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages: http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/does_divorce_make_people_happy.pdf
10. Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce: http://www.okmarriage.org/downloads/media/survey_report.pdf
11. Spontaneous remission of marital discord: A simmering debate with profound implications for Family Psychology: <http://www.fincham.info/papers/Div%2043%20-%20Spontaneous%20Remission-%20Beach%20and%20Fincham%2011-08-02-final1.pdf>

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