

# 1 REACH OUT



*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.*

*But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up*

*(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).*

Women who are suffering in difficult marriages often find themselves withdrawing from their normal routines and activities, from friends, and sometimes even from their families. Do you see yourself in any of the following reasons women isolate themselves?

- You're embarrassed, and you don't want anyone to know the truth about your marriage.
- Your life is so overwhelming that you don't have energy for outside interests.
- You think no one would understand what you're going through or why you put up with it.
- You've confided in someone before and have been hurt or disappointed by the response you've received.
- You're afraid to leave home for very long at a time, because there's no telling what your husband might do if you're not there to take care of things.
- Your husband doesn't want you to have friends or activities outside the home.

- Your husband tells you to keep your marriage problems private.
- You don't want to ruin your husband's reputation and have others think badly of him.
- You don't want to ruin your witness as a Christian.
- You're ashamed to admit how you react to the problems.

As tempting as it is to remain isolated and try to keep your problems to yourself, the truth is that isolation keeps you stuck in the same spot. It's imperative that you have a support system and a life outside your marriage.

## **Breaking Out of Isolation**

The first steps out of isolation may take you outside your comfort zone and may even be scary, but it's important for you to realize that you're not alone. There are many women whose marriages are not as difficult as yours, and there are many women whose marriages are much worse than yours. The reason you feel your situation is unique and that you're alone is because these women are keeping quiet about their problems too. It's essential that you find people who understand what's happening in your life so that they can support you. Yes, it will take courage to admit that you've been pretending and that your life is really not okay. But you must do it anyway. Admitting your faults, problems, and weaknesses to others is an important part of healing (James 5:13-16).

### **SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Family members and close friends may not always be the best people to offer you support, as it is difficult for them to remain neutral because they care so much about you. Often their comments will be "Don't put up with it! Leave him! I would never put up with that. You deserve better!" Reactions along these lines will end up leaving you feeling embarrassed because you *are* putting

up with it, haven't been able to set boundaries yet, and don't want to leave. Just remember: even though they mean well, it's a lot easier to tell someone to leave a marriage than it is to actually do so. Many persons eventually end up tolerating a situation they insisted they *wouldn't* tolerate.

So choose carefully how many details you tell about your marriage. Let your comfort level and your family's ability to handle it be your guide. Knowing a lot of detail about your husband could result in your family being unable to be civil to him, which could cause even more problems in your marriage.

Whether or not to tell his family and friends about his problems is another decision you'll have to make. Family allegiance is very strong, and his family may be unable to accept the truth and may blame you instead. If this happens, it can add to your isolation. Your husband's reaction to you telling his family may also add more stress to your marriage. Yet, there are times when it's necessary in order to deal proactively with what is happening in your home.

## **CHURCH SUPPORT**

Early in my marriage when I was in a lot of pain, I told my women's Bible study group about my marriage problems. The study group's pat advice was "Let Jesus be your husband." I felt guilty for failing to be satisfied with just Jesus and questioned whether I was even wrong to feel pain in my marriage. It was years before I dared say anything again. I have heard countless stories from women who have been told things like "Just keep praying and never give up," "Love your husband with the love of Christ," "Your suffering will work for good," or "You can't divorce, so make the best of it." Of course, you need to love him, continue to pray, and trust that God will work good from this, but the problem with these comments is that they leave you feeling guilty

about your normal struggles and feelings and without hope. Tracy expressed her frustration with well-intentioned ministry leaders by saying, “If one more Christian tells me to just love my husband, I’m going to scream. I’ll never again tell my problems to someone who hasn’t experienced what I’m experiencing.”

Suggestions like these are often misunderstood by women in difficult marriages to mean “Tolerate mistreatment and don’t hold him accountable for his behavior.” Proverbs 25:20 says, “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.” If you’re getting advice from well-meaning people who don’t understand the complexities of difficult marriages and it’s causing you to be even more miserable, you’re getting advice from the wrong people.

Pastors and church leaders vary in their ability to give support to women in difficult marriages. Some are knowledgeable about abuse, addictions, dysfunction, and so on; others are not. Always be willing to reach out to your church for support, but remember that you may need additional help to deal with your marriage, and you need to recognize the limitations of those you reach out to.

## **PROFESSIONAL HELP**

Counseling can give you helpful, professional insight into your problems. “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22). “Walk with the wise and become wise . . .” (Proverbs 13:20). There is definitely a time for getting wisdom from those who have special training.

Try to find a counselor who is experienced in dealing with your particular problem. For instance, if you’re dealing with abuse in your marriage, find a counselor who has insight into abusive relationships. If addiction is destroying your marital relationship, find a counselor who has a deep understanding of addiction. If your husband agrees to go to counseling with you and you are not

comfortable being honest about the marital problems with him in the room, ask for some time separately. If your husband refuses to go for counseling, don't hesitate to go alone.

Counselors use different approaches, so it's important you find a counselor who employs a style that works for you. Some focus on your past as a key to your present. Others focus on dealing with your situation today and finding practical solutions. Some counselors do more listening than others. Some counsel from a faith-based perspective; some don't. Non-Christian counselors can be helpful too, so don't rule them out if they are the only affordable ones for you. If you've had counseling that was not successful in the past, don't give up. Maybe you were with the wrong counselor. Maybe you weren't really ready to hear what the counselor told you. But regardless of your experience, keep trying.

Finding a good counselor may take some work. Ask your physician, people you know, and your church for referrals. Check to see if counseling is a covered benefit on your medical insurance. If it is, call the participating therapists and ask openly if they counsel from a faith-based perspective. If you don't have insurance coverage, ask the counselor if a sliding scale is available so you can afford to pay. And never hesitate to change counselors if the one you are seeing isn't helping you.

## **SUPPORT GROUPS**

Attending a support group can be a significant step in learning to value yourself and building a better life. One of the first things you'll say to yourself is *I'm not crazy! There are other women who have the same feelings and problems I have.*

You'll gain hope from other women who have been where you are and have improved their lives. You'll learn new ways to handle the day-to-day struggles you face. Even when you share

with them incidents and feelings that show your worst side, you'll feel accepted. You'll have someone to call when you need support between meetings. Others should not tell you what to do—they're simply there to share their own experiences and solutions while being empathetic to your struggles.

Many support groups are available, depending on the problems you are dealing with. They include twelve-step groups like Al-Anon (for families of alcoholics), Codependents Anonymous (for people in unhealthy relationships), Codependents of Sex Addicts (for the wives of sex addicts), Gam-Anon (for families of gamblers), and Nar-Anon Family Groups (for families of drug addicts). There are also Christian-based twelve-step programs such as Celebrate Recovery where they openly refer to Jesus Christ as their Higher Power. The thread that ties these programs together is the twelve steps and the support you'll receive. All twelve-step programs are based on anonymity and confidentiality. What you talk about in meetings is not disclosed to outsiders. If you don't know of such a program in your area, try calling larger churches and asking if they know of local Christian support groups, or you can go to the phone book or the Internet and call the local chapters of the twelve-step groups.

Not all churches and pastors support recovery programs or professional counseling. Some say you need only one step: salvation. But the truth is that most people need more support. Getting saved does not instantly remove all of life's problems. Just as it's not wrong to go to a medical doctor for physical problems, it's not wrong to go to support groups or counselors for help with emotional, spiritual, and marital problems.

Go to several meetings if necessary until you find one that's the size and personality mix that allows you to feel comfortable. Make the meeting a part of your normal schedule. Once your

family gets used to your being gone on a particular day or evening, you'll not be inclined to make excuses for not attending.

A note of warning: Don't stop attending your support group when your husband makes small changes. Husbands will sometimes make slight, temporary changes in the hope that their wives will give up reaching out. The wife, feeling relieved that the problem is on its way to being history, stops going—and then the problems reappear. The truth is, difficult marital problems like the ones you have don't disappear quickly or easily. Stick with your support group.

### **WHEN YOUR HUSBAND SAYS “NO”**

Your husband may attempt to talk you out of reaching out, thereby keeping you isolated. He may tell you that it's disloyal to talk about your problems. He may be angry and punitive toward you when you go. As long as your motive is pure—meaning it's not to discredit or destroy him out of anger or revenge—and you're doing it for the good of your marriage and family or to take care of yourself, it's not betrayal, and it's not wrong. Staying quiet to cover for him is not a good reason to keep silent. In fact, it's often the secrecy surrounding a difficult marriage that allows the unhealthy cycle to continue. The secrecy protects your spouse from facing the truth, suffering the consequences, and being accountable. Let your husband know that you're not attending your support group to talk about him but to get help for yourself so that you can be a better person, wife, and mother.

Some women struggle with having to lie to their husbands about where they are going, believing that God wouldn't want them to lie. If you cannot tell your husband the truth, that means you have a difficult marriage, and in order to get the strength to be truthful with him, you need to get support. God understands your not being able to be completely forthright. Tell your husband

that you're going to a class, a Bible study, or a women's meeting—those aren't dishonest explanations.

## **The Differences Between Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships**

Healthy marriages are composed of two individuals who are healthy, independent adults with the ability to give and receive love, respect and accept each other, resolve conflict, communicate directly and honestly, trust, and take responsibility for their own choices and actions. Both partners value the relationship and feel secure.

Difficult marriages are composed of two individuals who for multiple reasons cannot achieve a healthy relationship. There is poor communication, unresolved conflict, blame-placing, emotional reactivity, denial, distrust, resentment, hostility, disrespect, control, manipulation, contempt, judgment, rigidity, and a lack of boundaries. These kinds of marriages are often composed of one person who doesn't want to change and one person who wants change. Since you are reading this book, you are most likely the one who wants to have a better marriage.

Difficult marriages have complicated dynamics that involve many feelings and issues that are difficult to separate, yet the arguments frequently follow the same pattern. Paula experienced this when she again tried to talk to her husband about his rude treatment of her the night before. He shifted the argument and began telling her that she was overly sensitive and critical. Paula tried to defend herself and ended up getting angry and began attacking him. The problem—his rudeness—was never really discussed and certainly not resolved, and they both walked away feeling angry, unloved, and alienated. Paula recognized that it didn't matter what she brought up—this was the dance she and her husband



did whenever she brought up any issue. It is the reason she feels so stuck and hopeless. It is an unrelenting crazy-making cycle.

## Types of Difficult Marriages

You probably are well aware of what behavior is destroying your marriage. There are various addictions and behaviors, personality disorders, mental illnesses, physical illnesses, abuses, and other unhealthy relationship patterns that are common problems. Learn all you can about what you're dealing with. There are books, support groups, the Internet, counselors, and other resources that can help in your research. If you're not sure what you're up against, talk to a counselor to put a label on the problem. Most difficult marriages have more than one of these problems.

An addict is one who is obsessed with the use of a substance or activity in order to cope with painful emotions, whose using causes problems in one's life and relationships and who is unable to stop. It could be with alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, pornography, work, or anything used repeatedly to escape certain feelings and problems. King Solomon advised the avoidance of anything done to excess. "Listen, my son, and be wise, and set your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags" (Proverbs 23:19-21).

Addicts are self-centered, unable to empathize, emotionally immature, unreliable, resentful, dishonest, unreasonable, and blaming. These characteristics are often present even when the addict is not using his or her drug of choice, called the "dry drunk syndrome."

Until addicts are ready to face their addictions, they will adamantly deny reality, blaming their problems on someone else—most frequently a spouse.

**Drug and Alcohol Addiction.** A drug addict or alcoholic is someone who can't stop drinking or using drugs. He or she does not have to drink or use drugs every day to be addicted. In fact, many drug addicts and alcoholics are periodic users, using only on weekends or periodically for days at a time. They can be successful in business and do fairly well at holding their lives together, at least for a while. It doesn't matter if your spouse is an addict or just someone who abuses substances; if it bothers you, it is a problem.

**Sexual Addiction.** Sexual addiction refers to an excessive and obsessive focus on sex and can include homosexual and/or heterosexual fantasies and acting out. It can include looking at adult or child pornography, frequent masturbation, phone sex, participating in Internet sex chat rooms, prostitution, or involvement in many short- or long-term affairs. The sex addict usually fantasizes, acts out, and then is filled with shame over the behavior, which leads to covering it up and then acting out again. The cycle then repeats itself. Sex is a very powerful stimulant that leaves lasting mental images on the brain. The sex addict becomes hooked on the chemical stimulation associated with the stimulus. Sex addicts tend to be emotionally withdrawn in relationships, have difficulty with intimacy, and are unable to deal with feelings and conflict.

**Gambling.** Gambling is classified as an addiction due to the loss of control and the addictive nature of the behavior. The typical lying, denial, anger, blame, and unpredictability that result from an addiction accompany it. The gambler has difficulty stopping, even when all the money is gone. Many lose everything, including their families. As Solomon said, "Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense" (Proverbs 12:11).

**Workaholicism and Other Excesses.** The workaholic uses work to avoid dealing with emotional and relationship issues that

he or she finds uncomfortable. The workaholic has no time for family and is emotionally unavailable. His or her spouse takes on most of the household and child-rearing duties. Some men become addicted to a particular sport or a multitude of outside interests that keep them occupied. Workaholism or other excesses may sound simple compared to other problems, but the lack of emotional connection is very painful for the spouse.

**Abuse.** Physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, and verbal abuse are all demeaning and destructive. Physical abuse is easy to identify because you are being hit. Emotional and verbal abuse are harder to identify because the tactics used are not as obvious. They include name-calling, belittling, hostile anger, threatening, withdrawal, blaming, undermining, accusing, judging, minimizing, and punishing. Proverbs 14:17 says, “A quick-tempered person does foolish things, and the one who devises evil schemes is hated.” If you’re afraid of your husband, feeling confused, controlled, and constantly off balance, you may be in an abusive relationship. An abusive man believes he has the right to control his wife and demand subservience. The relationship is based on a “one-upmanship” in which he has all the power and the wife must submit. He uses abusive tactics to keep her acting in a way that feels comfortable to him. He often uses punishment to teach her a lesson when she challenges his authority. He skillfully blames her for his actions, and unfortunately, abuse victims tend to believe that it is their fault and will painstakingly try to figure out what they did wrong to set the abuser off. Sexual abuse occurs when a man forces his wife to do things sexually that she does not want to do. Spiritual abuse occurs when a man uses his spiritual authority or the Word of God to control his wife.

**Emotional Manipulation.** Emotional manipulation occurs when someone deliberately manipulates another person into feeling a certain way that can then be exploited. In other words, he

knows how to get to you. He makes you feel anger, guilt, fear, or pity so you will give in to what he wants. Another term for this is *emotional blackmail*. Proverbs 17:8 says, “A bribe is seen as a charm by the one who gives it; they think success will come at every turn.”

**Anger.** Anger is destructive when it is in excess or acted out in sinful ways. Proverbs 15:18 says, “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.” It’s difficult to feel safe and valued by an angry man. The anger comes out as irritability, annoyance, disrespect, disagreeability, hostility, yelling, shortness, and raging. The whole family walks on eggshells, not knowing what will set him off, because it can be anything.

Passive-aggressive anger, while subtle, is equally damaging. The passive-aggressive man does not admit he’s angry. Fearing dependency on his wife, he doesn’t view her as an equal partner. He mistakes conflict and criticism as an attack on him and readily defends himself. He’s unable to look at himself introspectively and see that he could be wrong. He does things out of resentment but denies he did them: being late, forgetting her requests, not showing up, doing something the wrong way, or doing what she asks him not to do—all purposefully. He may tell his wife that she’s in control of the relationship and responsible for everything, but in reality she has no control or power because he thwarts and outmaneuvers her at every turn.

**Spiritual Mismatching.** If your husband is either unsaved, hostile to your faith, or not walking closely with the Lord, you are in a spiritually mismatched marriage. This creates a difficult dynamic in which you may feel alone serving the Lord. Women experience disappointment, isolation, sadness, and numerous difficult decisions when their husbands don’t share their faith.

**Irresponsibility.** When a husband makes irresponsible decisions that result in harm financially, emotionally, spiritually, and

physically to himself and his family out of laziness, immaturity, or a lack of discernment, it can be devastating. It's difficult to know when to allow a husband to experience failure in the hopes he will change and when to take over to prevent more damage.

**General Dysfunction.** If your spouse is disagreeable and unable or unwilling to discuss issues, resolve conflicts, admit when he is wrong, cooperate with you, be close to you, or listen to your concerns, you're in an unhealthy relationship pattern, and your marriage is difficult. This also includes the marital difficulties couples have when they have different cultures, values, goals, personalities, and beliefs. And then don't forget the normal differences between men and women that add additional stresses to a relationship.

People tend to bring the unhealthy dynamics of their families of origin into their marriages and recreate similar patterns and drama. Although these patterns vary in the degree of severity, the dysfunction will not go away until you and your partner learn healthy relationship skills.

**Physical Problems.** Chronic or permanent physical illness causes stress and imbalance in a marriage. It can be difficult to draw lines regarding responsibilities and emotional reactions like anger and moodiness when an underlying physical problem is present. If your husband uses an illness as an excuse to avoid responsibilities or to mistreat family members, it's important that you hold him accountable for getting help.

**Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.** Adults with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may have difficulty following through, listening, being responsible, and controlling impulses and emotions. It may seem that the kind thing to do is to take over his responsibilities, especially when your husband excuses his action or inaction on his problems, but he needs to take responsibility for managing his ADHD.

**Mental Illness.** Mental illness can cause grave difficulties in a marriage. One of the most common mental illnesses is bipolar disorder. A person suffering from this condition experiences periods of extreme depression and mania. You will notice mood changes and feel as if you are living with two different people. Although most bipolar disorder sufferers have highs, some have mostly depression. Drugs or alcohol are often used to mask highs and lows to help the individual feel more normal. People who suffer from major depressive disorder suffer debilitating depression with hopelessness, deep sadness, excessive guilt, lack of motivation, inability to experience pleasure, and even suicidal thoughts.

Narcissism is a form of self-centeredness that's common in addicts, alcoholics, and abusive men. However, a severe form is diagnosed as narcissistic personality disorder and is characterized by an exaggerated self-image, a feeling of being special, expectations of special treatment, a need to be admired, a tendency to use people, an inability to be empathetic, and an arrogant attitude. Your feelings, opinions, and needs will be unimportant, and you may feel as if you don't even exist in the marriage.

Other common mental illnesses include obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder, adult antisocial personality disorder (formerly sociopath), and dementia. The difficulty with mental illness is the same as with physical illness: how much bad behavior do you excuse? It's easy to say that a person cannot help being ill and to excuse too much.

It's not your job to diagnose whether or not your husband suffers from a mental illness. A qualified psychologist or medical doctor will have to do that. The good news is that medication can control many mental illnesses, and help is available. Keep in mind that even though mental illness is not something your husband has a choice about, you must still protect yourself and your chil-

dren and maintain a decent quality of life by asking your husband to get the help he needs.

## The Roller Coaster

Difficult marriages are often referred to as roller-coaster rides because things change so quickly, and the highs and lows are extreme. There are periods when the ride is smooth, but you know that another bumpy period is waiting just around the corner.

Lauren knows this all too well. She is married to a man who goes through periods of extreme negativity, volatility, and resentment, mistreating everyone in the home. At other times, he's a good dad, husband, and provider, and they have fun together. Lauren hates it when he gets into these dark moods triggered by seemingly small things—sometimes lasting for weeks at a time. Each time their relationship returns to normal and all is well, she believes the worst is behind them. It always shocks her when the dark mood starts again. Lauren doesn't know which side of her husband is real—the good guy or the bad guy.

The truth is, both sides of her husband are real. When Lauren accepts that and reconciles herself to that fact, she'll be less surprised when the bad times come, and she'll be able to deal with her husband more effectively by making choices that protect her and her children.

It's the not knowing when things will blow up again that keeps you in a constant state of insecurity and nervousness and causes you to be unable to enjoy the good times. Or it could be that you *don't have* any good times, because your problems never go away. Regardless, your first step is to understand the problem as well as you can so that you can decide how to deal with it.