

## Chapter 15

# Do We Need Professional Help?



There are at least two ways to tell that things have deteriorated in your relationship. The first is the speed at which full-blown conflict emerges. Arguments can go from 0 to 100 in minutes, if not seconds. To see how this pattern can quickly play out, read the dialogue from a scene in the movie, “The Details” (photo above). The argument took less than 1½ minutes to go from being calm to a full-blown screaming match. Here is the dialogue:

**Wife:** You know I really don't feel like talking about this five nights a week. [soft tone]

**Husband:** I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bore you. [calm voice]

We should have re-landscaped without sod like I keep telling you. [soft tone]

You know, 1,500 square feet of grass and a new irrigation system was expensive. You just don't throw it away.

Please don't use that tone with me. [slamming book closed]

I didn't use any tone with you.

OK don't deny using a tone when you use a tone. I'm not crazy. I know what I just heard. [slightly raising voice, being more animated]

I didn't call you crazy.

But you implied it though, didn't you? As if I am not sane enough to judge your tone of voice. [change of body position, facing him now]

Maybe you are crazy.

Oh, Oh, right. Oh, oh now the truth comes out. Well, you want to know the truth? [raising voice]

Yeah, sure. I love the truth. [raising voice]

The truth is you are the crazy one. OK. With these g-ddamn raccoons you are acting like a complete f-ing deranged moron. [raising voice, more animated, cursing]

Now I am acting like a f-ing deranged moron? [raising voice, more animated, cursing]

Keep your f-ing voice down. [voice raised]

You keep your f-ing voice down. [voice raised]

Don't you dare wake up Miles. [voice raised, cursing]

This is it. This is perfect. This is just what you want isn't it? [loud, very upset]

What is what I want?

You want me to get crazy so you can remind me of how crazy I got.

Mission accomplished.

when you make me apologize to you.

[More conversation – screaming]

[More conversation] [screaming]

What?

And of course I am the crazy one and of course you have no f-ing responsibility at all. [yelling, cursing]

[An expletive statement] [screaming, cursing]

[An expletive statement that tops her expletive statement].

Scene Ends 1 min. 20 sec. later

If your cycles of conflict have a well-worn path, your arguments may accelerate as rapidly as in the scene above. If such is the case, you may need outside help.

If you are not sure, what is described below holds even more weight.

# Stages of Unresolved Conflict



A second way to decide if you need the services of a professional is to determine the nature of the conflict you and your spouse are having. Where do your interactions fall within the stages of marital conflict described below?

## Stage 1



### There's an Uncomfortable Feeling

Something doesn't feel right with your spouse. You may not put your finger on it, but you feel ill at ease.

## Stage 2



### A Problem Emerges

An identifiable problem has emerged and dealing with it is the focus. You are each civil and respectful as you share your perspectives. You propose solutions and, most, if not all the time, resolve the issues.

## Stage 3



### Disagreements Increase

If we don't resolve the issue, the conversation will shift from finding the

best solution to debating who's right and wrong. Dissatisfaction and hurt feelings mount. Your spouse hinders the attempt to have your needs met. This includes the need to feel more secure in the marriage. If each of you tries to see the other's point of view, the conversation will be constructive. On the other hand, if you do not resolve the matter, the conversation can deteriorate and put a strain on the relationship.

#### Stage 4



#### **Attitude Hardens**

Positive feelings wane. Other issues may emerge or re-emerge and make matters worse. The two of you communicate less to each other and more about each other with those who sympathize with you (i.e. other family members or friends). This will probably increase the polarization both of you are feeling. And while there may not be an intent to hurt your spouse, this may still be the outcome. Since the immediate goal is to win the argument, there is less concern about how this affects the other.

As one spouse seeks to win, the other spouse feels disrespected and unloved. One spouse explained her experience this way: “and when sex didn't work, we argued about sex, and then we argued about our arguments,

and then we began to layer resentment on top of resentment.”

*If you are both committed to making the marriage, it makes sense to see a marriage counselor by this stage.*

## Stage 5



## Personal Attacks Intensify

You now feel alienated from one another as an emotional barrier goes up. Original issues become secondary. At this stage, the problem in the marriage is no longer identified as “communication” or some other issue. Your husband/wife is the problem. An adversarial “me versus you” mentality sets in. Negative emotions take root. Selective perception fuels negative stereotyping. Your spouse can more easily be “written-off” as \_\_\_ (fill in the blank).

You view the other through an increasingly narrow filter of suspicion, exaggeration, and misperception. You justify your own less than ideal behavior as reactions to your partner or circumstances. By contrast, you attribute your partner’s actions to his or her internal deficiencies, such as character, competency, or spirituality.

Admission of having exercised poor judgment or having made a mistake becomes increasingly unlikely. Such an acknowledgement in this charged environment would likely

open oneself to embarrassment, further criticism, and reprisal. Communication breaks down as you verbally attack each other. Researchers have found that by this stage, direct head-to-head confrontations are counterproductive.

*If you both want to make the marriage work, it is a good idea to consult a marriage counselor at this stage.*

## Stage 6



### My “Face” to Save

Others view the term “face” as how a person is perceived. As long as others view you as respectable and trustworthy, all is well. However, when your spouse questions your image, you can expect the conflict to escalate even further. It is like one spouse saying to the other, “I know you better than anyone else on the face of the earth and I can’t stand you!” To have one’s image challenged is to be attacked on a very personal level.

The attacker seeks to “unmask” the other spouse’s true (and despicable) identity. With this new perspective, words or actions that originally were perceived in a positive light are now viewed as part of a larger, deceitful strategy. False motives are attributed throughout.

The conflict is no longer understood in terms of shades of gray. They are understood in terms of black and white and a battle of good versus evil. To “save face” against such an attack on one’s identity, your spouse will respond with an equally ferocious assault of their own. A torrent of negative descriptions will be unleashed, attempting to undercut and discredit their husband or wife. They will label the other as unreasonable, immoral, untrustworthy, mentally unbalanced, and the like.

This conclusion then justifies almost any action against their partner, exacerbating the cycle of conflict to dangerous levels.

*If you are both committed to making the marriage, it makes absolute sense to see a marriage counselor at this stage. Don't wait a second longer!*

## Stage 7



## The Road to Divorce

Couples become locked in an all-or-nothing battle. The relationship has become unbearable. The perceived solution is to drive your husband or wife out of the home or leave. Or, the conflict may be so intractable and irrational that one or both of you would rather suffer loss than let the other “win.”



As one individual soberly described it, “together into the abyss they go.” Tragically, if there are children involved, you take them with you, causing them long-term emotional damage.

*It's probably too late to see a marriage counselor at this stage.*

## Stage 8



## After the Divorce

Divorce does not mean that the relationship is over. If children are involved, you will interact with your ex regularly for years. Issues relating to co-parenting may become the new battlefield. You may benefit from the help a marriage mediator can provide to agree on how the two of you can peacefully relate to each other for the sake of your children.

## Summary

Two intensifying processes take place over time. It begins with (1) an increasing frustration over some issue that is not being resolved, including not having one's needs met. As a result, (2) there is an increasingly negative perception of your spouse. “You are the problem in this your marriage.”

As you can see from the various stages of conflict, there comes the point when trying to resolve marital conflict on your own is

counterproductive. So don't wait to act. The sooner you work on resolving your conflict, the better!

Don't be like the man who wrote to me near the end of his marriage, "I wish we had seen you much sooner."

If your marriage is spiraling out of control and you cannot repair the damage on your own, don't put off seeing a professional. An effective marriage counselor can help you address your issues so the two of you can experience peace.



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